Authorgraph: Kevin Crossley-Holland
Windows into illustration: Britta Teckentrup

Plus Reading for Pleasure, Seeing Sense with Jake Hope, Tom Palmer and Onjali Q Raúf

and Fiona Waters on poetry
Hello and welcome to the 244th issue of *Books for Keeps*, another bumper edition. This issue’s review pages in particular are more than usually packed. After six months in which publishers have puzzled over how best to manage their schedules, 600 new books were published on Thursday 4 September alone. Certainly our office has been flooded with new books for children and young readers by established authors, rising stars and extremely talented debut writers and illustrators. Alongside fiction, non-fiction continues to thrive as does poetry for children. In the recent online award ceremony for the *Branford Boase Award* which highlights the most promising new authors, founder and chair of the judges Julia Eccleshare talked about the importance of new stories, because these stories and books probe what is going on in society now, helping young readers come to understand their world. This year’s *Branford Boase Award* winner, *Beamouth* by Liz Hyder, is a book about ‘re’volushun’ that though set in an imagined world has a great deal to say about the way we live now, and as Hyder said at the same event, she wants her readers to feel ‘angry but empowered.’ Other books on the shortlist, including *The Space We’re In* by Katya Balen, highly commended by the judges, *and The Million Pieces of Neena Gill* by Emma Smith-Barton, deal with serious issues but each of these seven books are informed by and reflect on contemporary society. The results of a recent survey by *UKLA* on what literature is being taught in years 7 – 9 therefore is deeply concerning. The report’s authors found that ‘the ‘diet’ of literature experienced by these [pupils] is generally limited and does not exhibit the diversity that we might hope for, considering the wealth of literature available.’ When so many outstanding new books are being published, it’s sad that by Year 9, the researchers found only three texts published in the last 30 years were being taught, with the rest being over 60 years old. You can find the full report at ukla.org/funded_projects/what-literature-texts-are-being-taught-in-years-7-to-9/.

*Books for Keeps* will continue to highlight new books and new writers, as it has done for the last forty years. In our last editorial we announced our plans to ensure the future of the magazine, launching a funding appeal to raise the £10,000 necessary to create a new website and preserve the archive.

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed so far and helped us raise over £4,000. Thank you in particular to authors Anne Fine, Frank Cottrell-Boyce, SF Said, Kate Wakeling, Pippa Goodhart, Tony Bradman, Matt Brown, Elen Caldecott; to publishers Walker Books, Scallywag Press, Book Island, Child’s Play and Klaus Flugge. Thank you too to all those who have made contributions, we very much appreciate it.

Please do spread the word and 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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Managing Editor: Andrea Reece
Editorial advisor: Ferelith Hordon
Assistant Editor: Eloise Delamere
Editorial assistant: Alexia Counsell
Design: Louise Millar

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

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**FOR BOOKS FOR KEEPS CELEBRATING 40 YEARS**

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Would there be a poem about a pangolin?

I Am the Seed that Grew the Tree, a collection of nature poems published in association with the National Trust and illustrated by Frann Preston-Gannon was one of the most spectacular anthologies of 2019. This year Nosy Crow will publish an equally beautiful companion, Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright, animal poems illustrated by Britta Teckentrup. Editor Fiona Waters describes the joys and challenges of choosing an animal poem for every day of the year.

In my experience children light up with poetry and are keen to write their own so we should ensure only the very best is offered to them. This new commission from Nosy Crow therefore turned into a huge search through my very extensive poetry book collection, not just books of poetry written for children, but all my poetry books. After all, a good poem is a good poem, never mind for whom it might have been written originally, so I always cast my net very wide when compiling anthologies. All children lack is experience, they have the same emotions and the same feelings as adults and a challenging poem, especially when shared and read aloud, is always worth sharing.

I am sure you didn’t miss the reference to books. I don’t go online to find poems. My very large library of books is the main tool I use when compiling an anthology. I know where to look. Poetry is a constant in my life and I discover new poets, and indeed old poets I didn’t know, all the time. Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright was put together by reading through hundreds and hundreds of books, sometimes without sight of a single animal, at other times being astonished by what I uncovered. Vividly coloured mini post-it notes were inserted in the relevant pages until some books were positively bristling with their neon alerts. To get to a year’s worth of 366 poems, I and the Nosy Crow team made a longlist of 700 to 800 poems. Some rejections were easy – too many giraffes already – some were ‘just not good enough’ – but others were painful for me. I fought my corner, battalions of pleas and words at the ready, – some were ‘just not good enough’ – but others were painful for me. I fought my corner, battalions of pleas and words at the ready, but in reality it was all very civilised and no anthologist was hurt in the making of this book. And who knows, there might always be another collection for on the way as a bonus I made new discoveries and secreted those away.

It seemed very important to me both to give new poets a space, and forgotten poets time back in the limelight and most of all that the voices should be every bit as diverse as the worldwide collection of animals. Some poets were a given – Ted Hughes, Liz Brownlee, George Szirtes, Faustina Charles, Judith Nichols, John Rice, Grace Nichols, Valerie Worth, John Agard and the simple but elegant Haikus from old Japan, the infinitely wise truths of the Native Americans. And then the unexpected just to make the reader sit up – but all the poets are there because of the beauty of their words and the images they create in the mind’s eye.

I always make things harder for myself when compiling a collection by trying not to use a poem I’ve anthologised before. There are some exceptions naturally: if I am doing a themed collection then it would be foolish to exclude the obvious. But the most disappointing thing on picking up a new anthology is to find you know all the poems already, the same tired, over-used, unadventurous, safe selections. A new collection should be an exciting voyage of discovery with just enough of the familiar to make the reader feel at home.

So yes, there was a poem about a pangolin! And there are poems about yaks and anteaters and Scottish wildcats and spoonbills – the list is wonderfully endless. The commission turned into a world-wide poetry quest for creatures well known – of course there were many, many poems about elephants and kangaroos and lions – but we also wanted the shy; the enormous and the tiny; the vividly coloured and the expertly camouflaged; those in the air, in the trees, on the ground and under the oceans; 366 poems encompassing the entire animal kingdom in all its infinite variety.

It is impossible to talk about this book without mention of the artist, Britta Teckentrup. Britta has made Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright into a thing of great and stunning beauty, I cried when I first saw a finished copy. The visual images chimed so much with what I had seen in my imagination when choosing the poems. All is here, gentle laughter, awe at great majesty, heart stopping beauty and a shiver at the unlovely. We cannot thank her enough.

A small postscript. In the interests of scrupulous honesty, I did have to go online to find the snow leopards . . .

Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright is published by Nosy Crow, 978-1788005678, £25 hbk

Fiona Waters is a highly regarded anthologist with over 100 books to her name. Her anthology Why Does Mum Always Iron a Crease in My Jeans won the CLPE Poetry Prize.
As part of the celebrations for our 40th anniversary, we are revising our long-running Ten of the Best feature and asking six leading children’s authors to choose the books they consider essential reading. Our thanks to Geraldine McCaughrean for this selection.

Memory isn’t what it was. While I was thinking this out, plots surfaced without their titles, titles with little of their plots and books without their authors’ names. I may spend the rest of the year recalling more momentous titles, but for now... (Note the unplanned, recurring theme of parent/child relationships.)

First, The Silver Branch by Rosemary Sutcliffe – sequel to Eagle of the Ninth already mentioned in this series. The Roman standard – wingless now – is found by the next generation and carried into battle once more. It was a school prize that confirmed my love of historical fiction. And Sutcliffe doesn’t date.

One of the greatest virtues any book can have, surely, is to make a young reader feel included, valued, at ease with themselves rather than fretful or ill-fitting. Hilary Mackay has a knack of embracing the reader and taking them, and her characters, somewhere ... warm. Her Casson series about Saffy, Indigo, Rose and Caddy leaves not only them but the reader feeling loved. The children are not without their problems – loneliness, envy, parent trouble, love...but there’s always an enlightening resolution at the end of the tunnel. When Saffy’s Angel was up for an award, each mention of it made every judge around the table involuntarily smile. What more could you wish from a book?

Love that Dog by Sharon Creech is a must for any child who thinks they don’t ‘get’ poetry. It overlays an existing poem (Love that Boy) with one boy’s need to exorcise an aching sorrow. It’s a salute to teachers and poets alike. I’ve tried reading it aloud in schools, but it makes me cry every time, and an abiding rule of poetry is not to read it when your nose is running.

Staying with poetry, one book a reader can return to over and over, at any age, is Shel Silverstein’s Where the Sidewalk Ends. It’s a book that children won’t ‘leave behind’ as they get older. Hugely entertaining, witty and wise.

How to choose between Framed and Millions by Frank Cottrell Boyce? Funny, uniquely inventive and unputdownable, with great plots. I suppose the Saints (God bless ’em) tip the balance in favour of Millions. Never has religion sounded less pompous or other-worldly. Brothers Damian and Anthony are blessed with huge, unexpected wealth gifted from above (by the train robbers who nicked it). Against the clock they must try to spend the money. It sparks avarice in one, charity in the other, and danger in the shape of the irate robbers. Over all hangs the loss of a mother. So, much more than a headlong adventure: an excursion into economics, bereavement, virtue, capitalism and a whole covey of helpful, chatty saints. And, of course, the father-son relationship.

I came to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s The Little Prince in French, as a teenager, at a time I unaccountably wanted to be a pilot. I just wish I’d met it earlier. It either translates very well or its quirky simplicity is universal: it pleases young and old everywhere. Its wistful weirdness needs no ‘explaining’ to young readers. ... and since Saint-Exupéry’s final crash site was never found, I maintain he just flew into the night and followed the scent of roses to an asteroid of his choosing.

Ahead of all Roald Dahl’s bonkers, bouncy books, I would put forward Danny the Champion of the World – the most ‘realistic’. Danny and his Dad manage pretty well in their gypsy caravan, until Dad is injured and the local landowner gets nasty. Revenge is sweet and anarchic. The relationship between father and son is everything a father aspires to and a son (or daughter) hopes for. I read, online, a ‘warning’ about questionable content: poaching. Good grief. What a splendid chance for young minds to wrestle with the dilemma of adult moral turpitude.
In Louis Sachar's *Holes*, the desert setting of the juvenile correction facility is vivid and oppressive. Feel the heat, feel the desolation, and rage inwardly against the injustice, past and present, that have beset Stanley Yelnats’ family. Stanley’s rescue of his friend Zero has the reader exulting in the triumph of innocence over evil. The spare, perfect text makes every word count, and it grips the reader so tight, they too are incarcerated until The End releases them.

William Nicholson's *Wind on Fire* trilogy is right up there with Philip Reeve's comparable *Mortal Engines* but Reeves' *Hungry City Chronicles* may have more characters for children to identify with, more twists, turns and offshoots to keep them coming back for more. Wheeled cities, large and small, roam the futuristic landscape, eating up lesser towns. The heroes Hester and Tom are pitted against big adversaries: callous self-interest, pitiless slaughter, impossible odds, scars physical and mental... A juggernaut of an endeavour.

In Janet & Allan Ahlberg's *Jeremiah in the Dark Woods*, Jeremiah sets off to catch the thief who stole Grandma's tarts, and meets a string of oddities along the way. My daughter and I enjoyed it so much that I was moved to write this. Many years on, I can’t remember precise reasons, but it clearly shone for us.

Given paper's origins, in felled and pulped arboreal things, I always found an irony in paper books concerning trees. But haunted by an insistent child clear from the margins deep into the wild heart of this one book, we stood and trembled both, as the story shook, and we snatched at the tilting, turning leaves that curled around us from the book-spine's eaves. We looked around and found, like birds, on every branching sentence, singing words! Such perfect spacing, perfect placing, root to crown, that we lay and gasped beneath a spire of sounds as the spinning seeds of Story tumbled down.

One last extra, long gone: *The Voyages of the Limping Flamingo* written and illustrated by Neil Jones – my brother – and published when he was 14. Submitted bound using a cornflakes box, it was accepted on the grounds that the Harraps Editor’s children had fallen off the bed laughing as they read it. Children still would. It was brilliant. I became a writer out of envy and hero-worship.

Books mentioned:
- **The Silver Branch**, Rosemary Sutcliff, OUP, 978-0192755056, £8.99 pbk
- **Saffy’s Angel**, Hilary McKay, Hodder Children’s Books, 978-0340989043, £6.99 pbk
- **Love That Dog**, Sharon Creech, Bloomsbury, 978-0747557494, £6.99 pbk
- **Where the Sidewalk Ends**, Shel Silverstein, Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, 978-0714530956, £9.99
- **Framed**, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Macmillan Children’s Books, 978-1529008784, £7.99 pbk
- **Millions**, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Macmillan Children’s Books, 978-1529008760, £7.99 pbk
- **The Little Prince**, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Egmont, 978-1405216341, £12.99 hbk
- **Danny the Champion of the World**, Roald Dahl, Puffin, 978-0141365411, £6.99 pbk
- **Holes**, Louis Sachar, Bloomsbury, 978-1408865231, £6.99 pbk
- **Mortal Engines**, Philip Reeve, Scholastic, 978-1407189147, £7.99 pbk
- **Jeremiah in the Dark Woods**, Janet and Allan Ahlberg, Puffin, 978-0141304960, £6.99 pbk

Geraldine McCaughrean has won the Carnegie Medal (twice), the Whitbread Children’s Book Award (three times), the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize, the Smarties Bronze Award (four times) and the Blue Peter Book of the Year Award. *The Supreme Lie*, a timely new novel set in a world paralysed by natural disaster and dangerous politics, will be published by Usborne Publishing in April 2021.
Britta Teckentrup’s career as a children’s book illustrator started at her St Martin’s School of Art degree show when she was approached by a publisher and asked to illustrate a children’s book. This was back in 1994 when Britta’s intention was to become a fine artist. She did a Masters at the Royal College of Art and for many years saw her books and her fine art as two separate areas of her life. She still continues with both and following publication of books including Under the Same Sky, which was shortlisted for the Kate Greenaway Medal, is recognised as one of our leading picture book illustrators. Here she describes illustrating The House by the Lake, a picture-book adaptation of Thomas Harding’s Costa-shortlisted biography.

When my agent showed me Thomas Harding’s text for The House by the Lake in the summer of 2018, I just knew that I had to illustrate it.

In his book Thomas tells the remarkable true story of a little wooden summer house built on the shores of a lake on the outskirts of Berlin throughout the course of a century. The house played host to a loving Jewish family, a renowned Nazi composer, wartime refugees and a Stasi informant; in that time, a world war came and went, and the Berlin Wall was built through the garden of the house. The ‘loving Jewish family’ was Thomas Harding’s great-grandfather and his family who had built the house nearly a hundred years ago.

When the Nazis rose to power the family had to flee Germany and abandon the house. Thomas Harding first visited the house with his Grandmother Elsie; the house had been her soul place where she had spent many joyous, happy years when she was young. When Thomas returned to Berlin in 2013 and found the house abandoned and derelict, he felt that he had to do something to bring it back to what it once was and started to piece together the extraordinary stories of the four different families who had lived in the house.
With the help of his family and the local community he restored the house to its former glory and it is now a centre of reconciliation and education.

I am very grateful that I was asked to illustrate the book. It does mean a lot to me being German...

I live in Berlin and in the late summer of 2018 Thomas and I visited the lake house together. It was just in the process of being restored and it was very hard for me to imagine what it had once looked like. But Thomas filled the empty rooms with stories and the house became alive. Images started to form in my head. I never saw the fully renovated house until I had actually finished illustrating the book and had to rely heavily on Thomas Harding's archive films and images and the photographs I took on that day.

The story is told from the perspective of the house and I began illustrating the house from every angle ... trying to understand the many changes it had been through over the course of a century. I also wanted to preserve the memory of the people that lived in the house by staying as close to the archive photographs as possible. Thomas Harding's text beautifully combines lightness and dark, the beautiful and the harrowing the house has lived through and I tried to reflect that in my artwork.

**The House by the Lake: The Story of a Home and a Hundred Years of History** by Thomas Harding illustrated by Britta Teckentrup is published by Walker Studio, 978-1406385557, £12.99 hbk

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“What you leave behind won’t leave your mind. But home is where you find it. Home is where you find it.”

A personal and uniquely affecting collection of poems on migration and displacement by two former Children's Laureates.

**On the Move**

Poems About Migration

**Michael Rosen**

with drawings by **Quentin Blake**

Publishing with Walker Books on October 1st
Kevin Crossley-Holland is an award-winning novelist, poet and storyteller, an expert in traditional tales and an acclaimed writer of historical fiction and retellings of legends and myths. He won the Carnegie Medal with his novella Storm in 1985, and the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize in 2001 with The Seeing Stone, the first volume of his Arthur trilogy. His recent work includes Between Worlds, retellings of British and Irish folktales, and Norse Myths, illustrated by Jeffrey Alan Love. His latest book, a second volume of Norse tales, Stories from Across the Rainbow Bridge, has just been published by Walker.

As Gatty, one of your most memorable heroines, points out, ‘…inside our story…there are bits and pieces of all kinds of other stories.’ What’s the first story you can remember being shaped by?

I suppose that most of us can remember bits and pieces of stories, rather than hearing or reading them whole. In my case, it was certainly hearing – sleeping in my bunk bed, in the top half, with my sister Sally in the bottom half, and my father coming with his Welsh harp, sitting by our bunk beds, and singing and saying folktales to us, above all the Celtic folktales that he especially loved. And I think it was the stories of transformations that got me by the throat, and that I kept asking him to tell me again – the tale of the seal-woman who is captured by a fisherman and comes to land and bears children by him and is caught in a desperate quandary when she is empowered to go back to sea again… I think that those stories of transformation were the ones that first began to speak to me.

[As a child], I read very little. The first book I did read, hook line and sinker, and revisited so often that it came off its hinges – and became unhinged – was Our Island Story by H.E. Marshall. Terrible, chauvinistic stories, tremendously well told. And that was the first book I decided to write – a history of England, which I began when I was nine. Before I decided it was a dead loss, I wrote 77 pages.

Your second volume of Norse tales, Stories from Across the Rainbow Bridge, has just been published - and you’ve retold the Norse myths at other times too. What’s the appeal of these particular stories for you – their perennial pull?

I think I’ve become more aware, now, than when I first engaged with the Norse myths in the 1980s, of the moral ambiguity of the myths; and certainly more aware of their apocalyptic nature, so that they sing in tune with many of the thoughts and fears that we all have about the way that the world is rushing to its end, and we’re doing precious little to prevent it. They also have a splendid scam of wit, and some extremely well-defined characters, whom we follow through a series of adventures. But it has its master card in the shape of Loki, the trickster, who is like yeast; without him, the stories wouldn’t really develop, and start, middle and end would be much of a muchness. He has his transition, another transformation, from a sort of tease to the architect of the evil that has the globe crumbling – and he is the figure who promotes and enables change within those stories. It’s a tremendous body of material, and it’s been thrilling to revisit it. And I certainly don’t mean to stop yet – unless Time stops me.

Jeffrey Alan Love’s stark illustrations combine so harmoniously with your text, both in Rainbow Bridge and in the first book – and you’ve had a lot of other brilliant illustrators over the years. What do you think illustration can lend a book?

What Sendak wrote is that illustration should be ‘an expansion of the text. It’s your version of the text as an illustrator, your interpretation. It’s why you are an active partner in the book, and not a mere echo of the author.’ And Richard Strauss, or his librettist, said something like ‘Ton und Wort sind Bruder und Schwester’ – ‘Brother and sister
are word and music’. Are word and image brother and sister? Yes, in a sense – but brother and sister don’t always agree, and they can often offer a varying approach to something (although kids, of course, are the first to pick up if there’s an actual discrepancy between the two disciplines.)

What I love best is when there’s a bouncing of the ball between the two artists, as with Jane Ray [with whom Crossley-Holland collaborated on *Heartsong*]. We each made a journey to Venice, and we fed each other bits and pieces, images and paragraphs – and so the whole time we were exalting one another, moderating one another, qualifying. It was lovely, a real collaboration.

As well as Norse tales, you’re preoccupied with British folktales. Selkies and green children, wild men, shapeshifters who live between one form and another, liminal creatures … Why, again, do you think we return to these stories? What keeps them green, for us and for you?

It’s perhaps the dichotomy of being between having a very powerful sense of home – which has exercised me more than ever, during these strange seasons – and what ‘home’ consists of, what ‘belonging’ consists of. Is it people, place, memory? We’re caught up at the minute at a time when there have never been so many people on the go, and lost – notably, of course, refugees, but an extraordinary movement of people. And an extraordinary awareness of the movement of people, voluntary or enforced, at other times – like slaves being driven out of Africa. So the whole area of belonging, boundaries – it’s something that’s in the air, the whole time, for all of us. And I love engaging with that area, because it’s part of our story, as inhabitants in England. I think too that one thing many people have done during this virus, apart from tend their gardens, is to become more interested in relationships, more interested in their place, their community. “Who am I? How do I belong here?”

Would you say that it’s Norfolk and East Anglia that have inspired you most, geographically speaking?

I would. I would. It’s a place constantly in flux and so land and ocean are at one another the whole time … You have only to wander out into any of the fields around here, knowing something of the old field names, to pick up bits of pot, if you’re lucky an old coin; someone a couple of years ago found a wonderful Anglo-Saxon ninth century belt-buckle. The stories are here, around us, at our feet, in the air; the salt-marsh, like all empty places, becomes a theatre for stories, and superstitions; the black dog Shuck, who is called Hooter in Warwickshire and Striker in north Lancashire – he’s not peculiar to Norfolk, but everyone here knows about Shuck, and knows to beware of him. It’s suffused, lively with stories.

**Particularly when you write historical fiction, you have a unique combination of soaring poetry and visceral, down-to-earth realism. Is it difficult to decide how much detail is appropriate for young readers?**

It was Edith Nesbit, I think, who said that the only way to be a good writer for children was to remember what you thought and felt and what your interests and dislikes and so on were when you were a child. I think you must not lose touch with that, and that’s something I’ve always been pretty good at – I’ve felt my own childhood, I’ve been in touch with my own childhood very vividly and continuously. On the other hand, society changes, and I have to recognise the world that children are living in now; as opposed to the world that I grew up in. One of the things that genuinely exercises me is whether I’m sufficiently in touch with kids now – not only the way they speak and think, but the society they’re growing up in, to offer a subtle, artful account of the story I want to tell, that is au courant with where children are now. At about-to-be-eighty, is the stamina, the imaginative energy still there?

**You’re working on a new piece of historical fiction at the moment – can you tell me a bit about that?**

It’s called *Kata and Tor*, and it will be set during the weeks leading up to the battle of Stamford Bridge. It will be part love-story – but not too much love! – between a Viking boy who is the illegitimate son of Harald Hardrada, and a Yorkshire girl. It’s sort of half-sister, half-brother to my two Viking novels, *Bracelet of Bones* and *Scramasax*, but it’s a standalone novel. I’m longing to get on to the North York moors and see when Hardrada turned his back on the delights of Scarborough and Bridlington and forged his way across to York. Very often it’s the land, the truth in the lie of the land, that gives me a hell of a kick. And I love writing about the relationship between place and people.

And you’re also revisited Arthurian legend again – this time the territory of Arthur’s childhood and early youth. What drew you back to Arthur?

[In the Arthur trilogy], the legends that I chose were expressly to anticipate or recollect aspects of Arthur de Caldicot’s life; and quite often I just told bits and pieces of them, or told them very briefly. So I asked myself, after all…he was the Pan-European hero – but what are the story steps of Arthur? And I devised a very simple structure by which Arthur moves from being the first amongst equals in a brotherhood, to the rituals and rapid of romantic love, to the always uncertain and unpredictable presence of magic, to spiritual love, and so on. I devised that structure, and I preceded it with a much fuller account of Arthur’s childhood in the borders of Devon and Cornwall, when I really just let go, and let it flow. I think they’re perhaps quite good, those first two chapters, although you never know… And it’s called *Arthur, The Always King*.

**Stories from Across the Rainbow Bridge**, by Kevin Crossley-Holland, illustrated by Jeffrey Alan Love, is published by Walker Books, 978-1406391763, £16.99 hbk

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**Imogen Russell Williams** is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children’s literature and YA.
Visual literacy offers readers the opportunity to literally see themselves reflected in the visual texts that they encounter. This can be enormously empowering, showing that reading is inclusive and embraces a wide range of life experiences and backgrounds, affirming many different identities. For professionals working with books, whether in schools, libraries or bookshops, this means attention should be paid to ensure that representation in their book stock is not outmoded or problematic. Just as society shifts and progresses over time, so too does our understanding of what it means to be inclusive and how best to achieve this.

Despite the immediacy that visual representation allows, as part of an overall collection, the inclusivity and authenticity of what is being represented can be easy to overlook.

Encountering a wide range of characters with varying backgrounds and lifestyles can be an effective means for helping to normalise situations and increase exposure to a broad range of experiences from an early age. Illustrations within the books we read are able to convey subtle messages that can enrich and at times challenge societal conventions, taking an active role without this needing to be part of the main narrative of the story and thereby feeling didactic.

An example of this might include two characters of the same sex holding hands whilst taking a child to school; the inclusion of children wearing glasses, hearing aids or other support equipment in classroom scenes; or a range of different cultures being represented.

Here I explore different facets of diversity and lived experience and how these can be represented visually in books that are respectful, contemporary and authentic, helping to ensure that books are inclusive and reflect the society they are part of.

Cultural diversity

Signifiers of different cultures can be embedded into visual narratives in a variety of ways. Broadly, this may include skin-tone, hair-colour and hair type but can also be referenced through subtle details, such as the foods that characters are depicted as eating, the clothes that they wear, or the environment they are located within.

In appraising visual representation in books, it is important to look out for caricatures, where physical attributes are exaggerated in ways that perpetuate stereotypes and to consider when the book was published as books from a certain age are likely to depict a view of people which is influenced by the politics of the day. An example of this is *Tintin in the Congo*, a graphic novel featuring the eponymous boy journalist, and written and illustrated by Hergé. The depiction of the people and landscape of the Congo in this graphic novel drew upon limited source material, much of this steeped in colonial viewpoints. This is reflected in the style of illustration which led to criticism of the book’s publication in colour in the UK in 2005. Discussion ensued about whether the book should be removed from sale or whether it represented an important part of societal history and progress. There is a danger that wiping out books of this kind leads to making history anodyne, but equally it’s important to contextualise these limited and outdated portrayals through raising awareness of the visual representations of culture that counter these stereotypes. If outdated representation constitutes the only opportunity for readers to encounter particular cultures, it risks perpetuating stereotypes.
Likewise, when choosing core titles for a collection, it is important to consider the effects of colonisation that often impacts upon canonical titles. There has been significant work into decolonisation of the classroom, which has extended to collections in the library. Creating an inclusive collection in the library is key to ensuring a representative and wide-reaching base for all readers. Thinking around who the primary audience of the collection is perceived to be and considering the types of world view represented by the books is an important starting point in this. Cultural influences can affect an illustrator or artist’s artwork and when executed successfully can lend a sense of authenticity to the visuals created, as well as providing access to styles and techniques from other countries and cultures.

Illustrator Poonam Mistry (2019) discusses some of the influences behind her work: ‘My artwork is greatly influenced by Indian folk art and textiles but also other forms of traditional art celebrated around the world. As my style is heavily decorative, it’s important that the image itself remains simple and encapsulates what the text is trying to say in its basic form. Each layer of pattern is almost a piece of thread and together they weave and entwine to create a tapestry of different elements and images that feels unified and one. The patterns I draw often curve and adjust to the shape of animals and organic forms to help create movement and fluidity. For me, it is important that my style reflects my heritage and roots. It helps to give the reader an idea of who is behind the pictures.’

A powerful way to help curate a representative collection – where selection processes enable this – is to work with a consultative group of young people trying to ensure that this comprises of individuals with a range of lived experience. As visual narratives are often more immediate, this can be an effective way both of giving voice to young people and visibility to underrepresented groups.

Seeing sense: visual literacy as a tool for libraries, learning and reader development, by Jake Hope is published by Facet Publishing, 9781783304417, £39.95.

Jake Hope is chair of the working party for Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals. He is a children’s book and reading development consultant.

Exploring the role of visual literacy as a tool for promoting reading!

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The red thread of reading for pleasure: looking back to learn

By Teresa Cremin

For readers of Books for Keeps, the affective power of reading has probably been experienced since childhood. No doubt you recall particular texts and contexts which supported you on your early journey as a reader. The red thread of reading for pleasure – choosing to read for recreational purposes – weaves its way from the past to the present, connecting us both to ourselves and others.

In this first of a trio of articles on the red thread, I invite you to join me as I revisit my early journey as a reader. By travelling alongside me, I hope that connections and resonances with your own reading life will surface. Others’ personal narratives can prompt reflection, rekindle satisfactions and help us make sense of experience. In reflecting on our reading histories, individually and collaboratively, let’s see what we can remember and what we might learn about supporting younger readers too.

Reading at home

My first memories are rather limited; my parents didn’t read to us, yet books were always around, particularly fiction. I do recall reading and re-reading the relatively sparse collection we had at home, including my beloved Mr and Mrs Bears’ Visit (Sendak), Everything is Somewhere (Vasiliiu) and The Family from One End Street (Garnett). I also recollect trips to Banstead library and devouring Jackie, Tammy and Mandy magazines. My mother frowned upon such texts, but I delighted in them, exchanging them eagerly with friends and chatting about the black and white photo-stories, with titles such as such as ‘Dear Diary’ and ‘If Dreams come true’. Returning from the corner shop with Dad on Saturday mornings, I’d rush to my bedroom with the latest 5p issue, shut the door and speed read the next instalment in the hope of relationship advice and that longed for teenage kiss!

Years later I happened upon some reprinted copies of these (free with the Observer) and literally felt a visceral sense of joy and re-connection. I re-read them several times, thrilled by the pin-ups of Slade and a doe-eyed David Essex. The flowing floral midi-dresses and railway-earrings of the pin-ups, reminded me of discos in Kingswood community hall with us girls dancing around a lone handbag and re-doing our make-up in the freezing toilets! Encountering these magazines as an adult, my past came back to meet me with a wry smile and a deep sense of adolescent angst. Needless to say, I have kept these jewels of yesteryear, and wasn’t surprised recently when, during our OU book blether series (#OURPBookBlether), we witnessed an emotional outpouring from teachers sharing their favourite childhood magazines and comics. Memories flooded Twitter and unsurprisingly we tuned. These vignettes reveal the powerful ‘affective traces’ (Waller, 2019) that childhood texts retain for readers, and remind us of the value of creating secure affinity spaces in school. Such spaces enable readers to connect personally and affectively and are evoked by an ethos and culture of informal and unassessed book talk – reader to reader, regardless of age. They are also enriched by the togetherness of reading aloud, although much depends upon the text and context.

Reading on holiday

As we all know, reading is both a social and a solitary practice. The latter was particularly evident on our annual family holidays in a croft in the Scottish Highlands where my dad fished with my brother, while my mother and sister went bird watching. Personally, I read. Alone in the bracken (with a meat pie or sausage roll and the promise not to move until they returned), I’d go on adventures far more exciting to me than my siblings’ literal realities. I loved the alone-ness, the peace, privacy, and time to immerse myself completely. The nearest town, Ullapool, was an hour away, so whilst I always took new books, I was obliged to re-read those which remained there. Characters from books by Babbitt, Byars, Cooper, Garner, le Guin, and many more became my constant companions. Maybe I drew comfort from the steadfastness of these texts, the predictability of the cast of characters to whose worlds I returned each year. Perhaps this normalised re-reading for me and showed me that as readers we bring fresh memories, thoughts and feelings to each encounter. Reading there was not only an affective experience, but a physical and highly situated one – reading in the bracken or by the fire with a cocoa as the rain battered the windows contributed significantly to the experience.

Looking back, do you recall any particularly salient places as a young reader? Context counts in our early text encounters and shapes our experience of reading, as memoirs of childhood reading often show (e.g. Mangan, 2018). In school therefore, creating ‘comfy’ reading spaces where readers can become engrossed in the text is not an additional extra, but each reader’s right. It may involve developing child-made dens, book nooks or outdoor crannies. What matters most though is not the aesthetics of the space, but the comfort and concentration enabled, alongside opportunities for conversation and connection.

Reading at school and university

My memory of being a reader at school is not that strong. Were we to read to? I know not. Did we have reading time? I know not. I do remember in secondary school reading Joan Lingard’s Kevin and Sadie stories about love during the Irish troubles which were being played out at the time. As Mackey highlights, ‘we read our own worlds into the words of our books, and these worlds will not be subtracted from the understanding we develop from the texts’ (2016, p. 263). I found pleasure in poetry too, in part fed by the rhythms of church psalms and hymns, Gang show songs and 70’s lyrics, many of which were re-read and re-sung. But as A levels came to dominate my world, I stepped back from choosing to read in order to study. No one from my family had ever attended university, I wanted to break the mould. My leisure reading was sacrificed.

At Bristol, I read psychology and papered my room with the verses of Plath, McGough, Heaney, Mitchell and others whose voices I wanted to possess, but made no time for fiction, even on holidays. The habit had gone, dusted down perhaps as a passing childhood passion. I think I saw myself back then as an apparently ‘learned’ student reader of social anthropology and child development. Did studying distance you too from your former reading self or did you power through? If so, what helped I wonder. Friends – a reading
network - your ingrained habit - a penchant for a particular genre? In school this autumn, with the pressure to ensure academic ‘catch up’ and the persistent backwash of assessment, supporting students as volitional readers may prove challenging, but it is essential and potentially transformative.

**Reading in teacher education**

Fortunately for me, Morag Styles, my PGCE English tutor at Cambridge was inspirational. A passionate reader herself, she read to us and introduced us to stunning texts and authors, many of whom we met. It was like coming home, with new friends to meet and new places to adventure in. That year rekindled my love of literature and reshaped my whole career as a teacher, teacher educator and researcher, but that’s another story…

This autumn over 30,000 students started initial teacher education courses. Some of them will never have experienced the affective power of reading, still others may, like me, have drifted away from recreational reading. It is critical therefore that ways are found to encourage them as readers and as Reading Teachers (teachers who read and readers who teach and who explore the synergies therein). Teacher trainers do an ace job, but it’s tough with just 9 months on a PGCE for example. Teachers’ repertoires of children’s texts represent the cornerstone on which effective reading for pleasure pedagogy is built (Cremin et al., 2014), and their identities as readers influence the identity positions they make available to children (Kucirkova and Cremin, 2020). That’s why I’m delighted the Reading Agency partnered with the Open University to develop the Teachers’ Reading Challenge. This involves setting your own reading target, rich recommendations, curated reviews, space to blether and much more! The take-up has been phenomenal and it’s open until October 31st so do join us. Perhaps like me, you’ll choose to re-read a text from your childhood, and go back to learn about being a reader through revisiting your own reading history and let the red thread of reading for pleasure guide your way.

References


*Professor Teresa Cremin is a Professor of Education (Literacy) at The Open University in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies.*

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**Reading for pleasure**

If you want support to nurture readers, then visit the Open University’s research-informed practitioner website. It’s packed with ideas, resources, audits, videos and PowerPoints! FREE! Do sign up to the monthly newsletter to receive updates.

www.researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure#  @OpenUni_RfP

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Beneath the Secret Garden: 
The Other Side of the Story

In the latest in their series examining BAME representations in children’s literature, Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O’Connor delve into historical fiction.

During the height of the British Empire, writers like W. H. G. Kingston, W. E. Johns, Bessie Marchant and G. A. Henty all wrote for young (white) British readers about young white British characters who found wealth, success, and even fame by dominating and exploiting the land and people of the colonies. Henty, who wrote nearly eighty novels for young people, often followed a formula with his novels in which a British young person (usually a boy) went to a colonial outpost and joined military operations against the “natives”; during the course of the book, the British character generally was introduced to a famous real-life figure: George Washington, Robert Clive, or Horatio Herbert Kitchener are just some of the examples. The famous figure approves of the character’s fighting skill and willingness to suppress “native” unrest through any and all means to uphold the British (class and racial) hierarchy. These books, extremely popular in their time, are still in print and available online today and are marketed to homeschoolers in both the UK and the US as patriotic and easily-digested history. They remind us that whilst many contemporary commentators note the absence of Black and Asian people in British children’s books, there was an earlier era where people of colour were very much present but served as a back-drop to the tales that glorified the British Empire.

Historical fiction aimed at children, and often relating to National Curriculum History topics, appears to be growing in popularity. There is a challenge to make the children’s novel – often personal and intimate – speak to broader social concerns such that it is engrossing and at the same time expands the reader’s historical understanding.

History, it is often said, is written by the winners. More and more now, however, history is being written by the survivors – including those whose ancestors fomented that “native unrest” against the Empire. Alex Wheatle’s Cane Warriors (Andersen 2020) is one such novel that in many ways, takes the traditional format of the 19th century boys’ adventure story and uses it to ask questions about the historical past. Moa, the 14-year-old main character, is an enslaved Jamaican who gets caught up in Tacky’s Rebellion, one of the most significant anti-European rebellions of enslaved Africans in the 18th century Caribbean. Like Henty’s novels, Cane Warriors has Moa meeting the real-life figure of Tacky, and becoming part of his military operation against the British. Moa kills white people in this novel, just as the boy heroes in Henty’s novels often kill Africans, Indians and Native Americans. But whereas Henty’s characters fight to secure land and resources, Wheatle’s characters are fighting for survival. The incident that opens the novel is the death of a storyteller, Miss Pam, that triggers the uprising on Moa’s plantation. Moa fights because of her death, as well as to protect his family from harm and the women of the plantation from rape. Moa lives in a violent world created by the British, and he reacts to it with violence.

Catherine Johnson’s Queen of Freedom (Pushkin 2020) tells the story of Nanny of the Maroons, who, in 1760, was declared a national hero in Jamaica. Nanny lead the Windward Maroons in guerrilla warfare against the system of slavery that was enforced by British Colonial rule. The book contains illustrations from Amerigo Pinelli and focuses on the latter stages of Nanny’s life. Historical fiction written from the point of view of those who resisted chattel slavery and colonial oppression is all-too-rare in British children’s fiction. Dan Lyndon-Cohen’s Resistance and Abolition in his excellent Black History series (Franklin Watts 2010) would be an excellent non-fiction accompaniment to Johnson’s fictionalised biography. Johnson does not shy away from the brutal dehumanisation that characterised slavery in the British Empire, or the violence involved in resisting it.

Another kind of violence suggested by the British Empire is the violent erasure of Black and Asian Britons from British history, and this too has been corrected by recent historical fiction. Scholastic’s Voices series depicts ordinary Black and Asian Britons throughout British history, including Roman times (Leila Rasheed’s Empire’s End), the Tudor period (Patrice Lawrence’s Diver’s Daughter), the Victorian period (E. L. Norry’s Son of the Circus) and World War II (Bali Rai’s Now or Never). Not coincidentally, these are periods of time covered in Britain’s national history curriculum for key stage two; traditionally, nonfiction history materials ignored Black and Asian Britons and their contribution to and participation in historical events. The movement by several historians, librarians, and teachers (Black and white) beginning in the 1980s to get Mary Seacole, the Jamaican Crimean War-era nurse, into the curriculum, raised awareness of the absence of many British communities in history. While many history textbooks have made an effort to include the heroic Briton of colour depictions of ordinary Britons are still almost entirely white. Scholastic’s series makes Black and Asian Britons visible throughout history.

In similar fashion, Sita Brahmacchari’s recent When Secrets Set Sail indicates the importance of revealing the unseen figures that haunt Britain’s past. Whilst not historical fiction in the usual sense, When Secrets Set Sail is a contemporary ghost story that invites the reader to consider the how the past shapes our present. Brahmacchari weaves together the Windrush scandal with an altogether undiscovered scandal: that of abandoned Indian Ayahs and East Asian Ammas in Britain of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. In a recent interview, Brahmacchari notes that the Ayahs’
stories have stayed in the margins, citing *The Secret Garden* as one such example amongst classic British children’s literature. Brahmachari has spoken also of the challenge of capturing the voice of those whose voices were not recorded. The story is a story of excavation – not merely adapting existing narratives for a modern, young audience.

Sufiya Ahmed’s *Noor-Un-Nissa Inayat Khan* (Scholastic 2020) is written in the first person and covers Noor’s childhood in France, her early career as a children’s author (her version of *Jatarka Tales* is still in print), and her work in France as part of the Special Operations Executive during the second World War. The daughter of an Indian Muslim who is said to have introduced Sufism to the Western world and a white American woman whose half-brother was a pioneering American yogi, Noor defies easy categorisation. She was born in Moscow, grew up in Paris and moved to London. She supported Indian independence and was influenced by her father’s pacifism. She fought for the British against Nazi Germany. Ahmed’s narrative balances the thriller element of Khan’s story with the horror of the war and her eventual execution at Dachau with great sensitivity.

Beyond Britain, Catherine Johnson’s *To Liberty: The Adventures of Thomas Alexandre Dumas* provides a fascinating biography of the man who was the most senior Black soldier in any army in Europe as well as the father of Alexandre Dumas the writer. Johnson’s ability to write compellingly whilst basing her narrative on thorough research has marked her out as one of the finest current writers for children and young adults. *Children of the Benin Kingdom* (Dinosaur Books 2020) is a work of fiction set in the Edo Kingdom of Benin in the 12th century roughly seven hundred years prior to its annexation by the British Empire. A fast-paced adventure story of Ada’s quest to understand her true identity, Dinah Oriji’s debut novel includes a detailed appendix that provides the reader with further information about the ancient Kingdom of Benin and West African culture and traditions.

Candy Gourlay’s *Bone Talk* (2018) is a critically-acclaimed work of fiction set at the time of the colonial encounter between American soldiers and indigenous Filipinos from the point of view of Samkad, a young Filipino boy. Gourlay’s *Ferdinand Magellan* (2020), part of the *First Names* series from David Fickling Books, goes some way to challenging the hero narratives employed to write about European explorers traditionally published in Britain. From the book’s cover we see that the account offered is multi-perspectival. “I’m the first person to discover these islands!” Magellan announces. “Oi! We’ve lived here for centuries!” responds a smaller drawn figure. We might nevertheless perceive that the decision to publish this history under the title *Ferdinand Magellan* gives greater weight to ‘Ferdinand’s’ perspective – indeed the alternative perspectives in the book are often in the comic-style illustrations provided by Tom Knight, reminiscent of the *Horrible Histories* series, rather than the main text. A key illustration of Magellan’s men invading Mactan (p129), is drawn from their point of view, which has the effect of making the local population, not the invaders, appear to be the aggressors. However it is important to note that in the Epilogue it is stated in bold, that ‘the locals were robbed’ and thus “[t]o them the Age of Exploration is the Age of Exploitation.” Given that as recently as 2019 a children’s book published by Laurence-King presented Magellan as ‘steely’ and his actions as uncontroversially heroic, Gourlay’s book destabilises the notion of an uncontested Eurocentric narrative and as such signifies a break from convention. It comes at an important moment for education and publishing and invites questions as to how to most effectively contextualise historical figures so as to teach a history oriented towards truth rather than glorification.

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*Noor-Un-Nissa Inayat Khan*, Sufiya Ahmed, Scholastic, 978-0702300059, £6.99 pbk
Tom Palmer knew that writing his latest book, After the War, would be a challenge, but it was only when he spoke to him the week it went to print, that he could admit how draining the experience had been: ‘I was hammered at the end. Shattered. But it was worth it, and it needed doing.’

After the War tells the true story of the Windermere boys, a group of over 300 refugee children who survived the concentration camps of WWII and were relocated to Cumbria. Palmer gives a voice to three characters - Yossi, and his friends Leo and Mordechai, who are haunted by the terrible events they experienced, but try to find hope for the future in the beautiful surroundings of Windermere.

Palmer didn’t think he could achieve the task of writing about Holocaust survivors, explaining that it was his wife’s idea after she heard a BBC Radio 4 programme about the Lake District Holocaust Project (LDHP); ‘along with my editor, I had two strong persuasive people giving me the confidence to do it.’

Palmer’s initial research showed how traumatic the Holocaust survivors’ experiences were, and under the guidance of Trevor Avery at the LDHP, Palmer began to see the importance of writing the story, and the responsibility of getting it right: ‘How could I possibly imagine putting myself in the position of a child in Auschwitz and seeing all those things they saw? But having Trevor and the children of survivors read and okay it, was hugely important. Truth is imperative when writing about the Holocaust: ‘Every scene, every detail had to have a historical source. There were one or two big scenes I deleted because Trevor told me there was no memory that I could link them to, nobody had actually said those things happened. And although plausible, that wasn’t enough.’

With some survivors still alive, there is a living memory of the history, but Palmer said that almost made his story harder to write: ‘I think the further back you go, the easier. I’ve written Iron Age stories and you can pretty much do what you want with the period.’

There was also the issue of presenting distressing detail in a way that could move and yet not traumatising Palmer’s readership of 8-12-year olds. So, as he always does with his books, he tested it during the writing process.

‘I went with Trevor Avery to Grasmere School, and we asked the children what they thought. The book made a massive impression on them. They didn’t want melodrama. They wanted to know exactly what happened and why. They wanted to know what a Death March was, why there were ghettos, what happened to children, and not to shy away from it. The look on their faces when they were asking for the bare truth made me realise that it was my duty to give them that.’

‘Talking to Trevor Avery, and the Windermere boys themselves was so important, but so is talking to the reader.’

Palmer uses this method with all his historical fiction, researching and immersing himself in the period and then testing early drafts on his readership. For D-Day Dog, he accompanied a school trip to Normandy;

‘Children are very honest. They comment where the story is boring, and they pick up on certain details or characters, and you can use that to make the story rich for that age group.’

This time he travelled to Auschwitz and Theresienstadt, and will use his experiences for his educational school visits. He was particularly affected by seeing the vibrant thriving culture that used to exist in the Jewish quarters of cities such as Krakow:

‘There are several wonderful Jewish quarters all over Europe, and many are now empty, and the raw emotion of that catches you off guard. Going there is important. It gives the background of seeing what was there – glimmers of the voices in poetry, music, pictures. These all help to frame a narrative.’

One particular piece of research for After the War was a photograph on the LDHP website of three boys with their arms around each other, one of whom was wearing a pilot’s hat: ‘That was the starting point for my characters. I based them on three survivors I met and watched video footage of, and then I changed the names and brought in dozens of other experiences and made my three composite characters.’

In fiction, children can experience events through the characters’ eyes, and not at a removed distance. By accessing the story, they can learn historical fact: ‘They’re much more likely to engage emotionally, to feel empathy, and therefore understand the facts of the period, through a character.’

The book is incredibly moving, at times bringing the reader to tears, both in sorrow for what’s passed, but also in hope for the future.

Palmer’s own connection with reading started with sport, a topic which often appears in his fiction. One scene in After the War features a football game, and encapsulates a particularly difficult incident in the survivors’ lives, but also shows the influence on the boys of sports coach Jock Lawrence.

‘My Mum encouraged me to read using football in newspapers and magazines, building up my reading stamina. I hated reading as a kid, but I’d read every page of Ceefax to do with sport.’

Reluctant readers today have many more opportunities than waiting for the slow flip of the Ceefax pages, one of which is the Conkers range of Barrington Stoke books that After the War belongs to (books for 8-12-year olds featuring dyslexia-friendly font in a super-readable format for all readers, reluctant or fluent).

After the War follows Palmer’s best-selling and award-winning Armistice Runner and D-Day Dog. It may have been Palmer’s hardest writing experience yet, but when we spoke, he was already compiling a notebook with his next lot of research.

‘That’s how it starts, an accumulation of research, and then you sort of strike upon something.’

After the War will certainly strike a chord – it’s devastatingly moving and masssively important, and crucially, fantastically accessible.

After the War is published by Barrington Stoke, 978-1781129487, £6.99 pbk

Clare Zinkin is a children’s book consultant, writer and editor.
I wish I’d written...

**Julia Green** chooses a brave and unusual story.

As a child, I read and loved all the books by Lucy Boston. I longed to live in an ancient house like Green Knowe, with its mysterious garden and exciting river and the children who come and go. I’ve re-read Lucy Boston’s stories and marvel at the way she wrote so powerfully about the natural world and about children: ‘to them, nothing is ordinary.’

**A Stranger at Green Knowe** begins not at the house but in the tropical rain forest in the Congo. ‘Imagine a tropical forest so vast...’ We experience the loving, protective family of gorillas and the wild beauty of the forest through the perspective of the baby gorilla, and so we feel acutely the terror and devastation when his parents are shot and he and his sister are captured and caged. Hanno, as he comes to be called, is exiled from his Eden forever.

‘He sat with his face pressed to the wire listening and longing, but he never heard his own language again or smelled the comfortable family aura. Such loneliness was not to be endured.’

In Part 2, Hanno is older, living in a tiny cage at London Zoo. He is visited by Ping, an orphan refugee, also an exile far from his forest home. Ping is changed forever by this encounter: ‘The world contained something so wonderful to him that everything was altered.’ Boston moves her story along at great pace, and audaciously, too – cutting to where she needs to go next without lengthy explanation. In Part 3, Ping is staying at Green Knowe for the summer, Hanno has escaped from the zoo, and they meet again, deep in the bamboo thicket in the grounds of the house. What follows is beautifully and dramatically described. Events unfold to their inevitable and tragic conclusion, but there’s hope for Ping’s future, if not for Hanno’s. This brave and unusual story was first published in 1961; it won the Carnegie Medal. And it still has huge imaginative and emotional power, enhanced by Peter Boston’s beautiful, delicate illustrations. A book like this stays with its readers forever.

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**Good Reads**

**Good Reads** in which pupils at a school write about the books they have been enjoying, is one of the longest running and most popular **Books for Keeps** features. During the pandemic it has been difficult to commission young reviewers, so we are very grateful to Jon Biddle, teacher, coordinator of the national Patron of Reading initiative and an EmpathyLab advisor, for supplying these reviews, written by his daughters. Thank you too to Leah and Anna. Unsurprisingly, there’s a strong empathy focus to the reviews.

**Jelly**

Jo Cotterill, Piccadilly Press, 978-1848126732, £6.99 pbk

Jelly is an empathetic book about a girl whose nickname is Jelly. She is a kind, thoughtful and lively person but only in secret. When she is around other people, she is unsure of herself because of her weight. Her solution is to laugh it off but as the book goes on she realises that this is not the best idea. Her mum doesn’t know that she is faking her emotions because she has her own problems, finding someone who is polite and respects her. Her mum eventually finds a boyfriend who brings out the best in her, but can he help Jelly show her true self? I thought this book was good because it dealt with the issue of self-esteem and being true to yourself. Jo Cotterill always writes books about realistic characters who face challenges in their lives that children will be able to relate to and this is one of my favourites.

Anna, aged 8

**The Space We’re In**

Katy Balen, illus Laura Carlin, Bloomsbury Children’s Books, 978-1526601940, £10.99 hbk

The Space We’re In is the story of a ten-year-old boy called Frank. He has a brother, Max, who is autistic and finds it very difficult to talk to his family. He also struggles with being independent. His family do all they can to support him but, because he’s only five-years-old, he doesn’t really understand. The family are then hit by an almighty tragedy. This book describes their problems and how they try to overcome them.

Anna, aged 8

**Roller Girl**

Victoria Jamieson, Puffin, 978-0141378992, £7.99 pbk

This book is about a determined girl called Astrid who goes to watch a roller-skating competition with her best friend. She is inspired to start skating herself and a perfect opportunity comes up, a skating camp over the summer holidays. She is desperate to go along with her best friend and books a place without asking if her friend wants to take part. Sadly, her best friend has already decided to go to a different summer camp, along with Astrid’s worst enemy. Anyone who has had friendship issues will understand and love this brilliant graphic novel. I enjoyed it so much that I read it all in one go. It would be a great story for a child in Year Four or Five to read, especially someone who feels that they are left out of things by their friends.

Anna, aged 8

**Two Sides**


This book is very good because it talks about friendship issues and solving problems together. It is about two girls with very different personalities. One is bubbly and talkative, and the other is quiet and shy. One of the friends forgets something that the other one lent to her. They break friends and the shy one doesn’t make another friend but the other one makes friends again. This book is hard-hitting. The first thing I did when I finished this wonderful book was read it again!

Anna, aged 8

Find out more about EmpathyLab

www.empathylab.uk
Obituary: Wendy Cooling
3 October 1941 - 21 June 2020

Wendy Cooling remembered by her friend and former colleague Anne Sarrag

Many readers will know that Wendy Cooling, pioneering children’s book dabbler (her words), and founder of Bookstart, passed away in June aged 78 after a short illness. There are few more beloved people in the world of children’s books than Wendy, and she will be greatly missed.

‘If you can read,’ said Wendy, ‘you can do anything. Reading is a resource for life.’

In 2006, she received the Eleanor Farjeon Award and in 2009, she was awarded the MBE for Services to Children’s Literature. Her most well recognised legacy is Bookstart, which she pioneered 28 years ago, which gets books into the hands of over 2 million babies and toddlers in the UK every year, and inspired equivalent programmes throughout the world. Alexandra Strick, a friend and colleague for 25 years, joined BookTrust when Bookstart was ‘just a word on the job description. Wendy came up with the idea and she kept on with it. She was instrumental in getting people aboard. She was convincing and articulate, so persuasive, a storyteller at heart.’

After leaving Booktrust in 1993, Wendy remained as adviser to Bookstart as she embarked on a freelance career lasting over 25 years during which she delivered unforgettable inspiring book-talks at conferences making the concept of linking literacy with reading for pleasure accessible for teachers – and with a focus for reaching families who would benefit most. Lasting friendships with publishers and authors were made as she became a successful anthologist, and in-demand consultant (she preferred ‘book dabbler’), all whilst giving her time generously to organisations who shared her vision.

Charlie Rose explained that Wendy was instrumental in helping raise awareness of the literacy needs of children in local authority care: ‘she was one of the driving forces behind The Reading Roadshows – a national initiative – run by the National Literacy Association and the Who Cares? Trust (1999-2009) for foster carers and looked-after children.’

Wendy was passionate about inclusion in all its guises, she re-ignited UK IBBY www.ibby.org.uk whilst at Booktrust, chairing it for several years; she was also a patron of Outside In World www.outsideinworld.org.uk a UK charity dedicated to promoting world literature, enabling children to broaden their reading experience and explore different cultures through books. In 2013 Wendy was asked to be a judge for the inaugural Little Rebels Children’s Book Award, intended to recognise children’s fiction which challenges stereotypes and advocates for a more peaceful and fairer world and awarded by the Alliance of Radical Booksellers in conjunction with Letterbox Library. Fen Coles of Letterbox Library reflects: ‘Wendy believed fervently not just in quality children’s literature but in all children having access to it; she was in the institution of the children’s book world but she wasn’t by any means institutionalised by it. We will miss her breadth of experience, her guidance, her clarity and her heel-kicking sprightliness.’ Malorie Blackman writes: ‘Wendy was passionate about putting books in the hands of all our children. Meeting her made me feel I could have a place and a space as an author in the world of children’s books.’

Wendy never took a hierarchical approach: she was friendly and approachable, always taking an interest in new and younger people entering the sector. Now, decades later there are leaders in publishing, libraries and charities who benefited from her informal ‘mentoring’ and friendship, including Jonathan Douglas, CEO National literacy Trust: ‘I fell under the spell of Wendy as a young children’s librarian. Her campaigning spirit ignited two National Years of Reading, and countless projects. But I’m personally indebted to Wendy Cooling for the infectious enthusiasm which changed a 25 year-old librarian’s life and for a unique and enduring friendship.’

Leslie Sims, Trustee of Libraries Connected and member of Wendy’s inaugural Bookstart steering group, recalls Wendy was often the most popular speaker at YLG and ASCEL conferences: ‘more than once she just stood up and talked about books she loved – sometimes because another speaker had not arrived – you could hear a pin drop. I was a better children’s librarian for the times I spent listening to her.’

In 2009 Wendy was awarded YLG honorary membership. Author Justin Somper worked at Puffin Books becoming friends with Wendy, and recognises her powerful legacy: ‘She was ceaselessly generous with her time and did more to break down barriers and democratise children’s access to reading than anyone since Kaye Webb.’

I met Wendy in 1989 as I was leaving BookTrust and she was joining! We instantly clicked so I stayed on to run Children’s Book Week until she configured her team. We remained close friends, and her opinions always mattered.

Wendy’s passion for travel is legendary. For over ten years she was involved in the Bookaroo Festival of Children’s Literature in Delhi, India www.bookaroo.in. Teachers and librarians who shared conversations with her or attended her talks always went away with many new ideas. Swati Roy and M Venkatesh, Festival Directors at Bookaroo, describe Wendy as ‘an indefatigable defender of books and reading.’

In 2004 Orchard Books published With Love, an anthology curated by Wendy as a fundraiser for Bookstart. In it, Wendy wrote: ‘I think I was born with a passion for books and I’ve been lucky enough to spend my working life sharing this with children – and adults too! This collection introduces families to the very best authors and illustrators of today – and reflects my belief that a book can be shared with a baby right from the start.’

The last words go to Tony Ross: ‘I think we all have memories of Wendy, all good. She is a great loss to publishing, she seemed to fill the same space as a dozen of the rest of us. It is such a surprise, whenever I met her, I was left breathless by her ENERGY! Every time I met her, she was either returning from a distant trip, or embarking on one. When we met, I always felt idle in comparison. The world changes, but sometimes not for the better. It was better when she was with us.’

A celebratory event to remember Wendy Cooling’s life and achievements will be arranged with her family once the restrictions have lifted later this year. Meanwhile, there will no doubt be ideas starting to emerge for various ways to continue to remember Wendy and celebrate her impact, if you have any thoughts, memories or ideas to share please email us thebookdabbler@gmail.com
Seeing sense: visual literacy as a tool for libraries, learning and reader development

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Jake Hope, Facet Publishing, 9781783304417, £39.95 (CILIP members £31.96)

Jake Hope explores a variety of ways of thinking about visual literacy in the context of children's books and libraries in this useful toolkit for librarians, published by CILIP. The reader will be left in no doubt about the power of the visual environment, and of picture books in particular, to enhance and enrich our lives. The book is divided into sections exploring visual literacy, reading, the importance of visual representation and inclusion, alongside a consideration of aspects of the publishing world, the role of illustration prizes and awards and the creation of visually rich learning environments. There are examples of good practice and case studies throughout. The strongest sections are the many interviews that Jake has carried out with practitioners in the field of children's literature, particularly those concerned with illustration and book production. It is fascinating to hear an illustrator's thought processes and the ideas behind the books, and also to hear from agents, designers and publishers about the intricacies of developing a publishing idea and taking it to fruition. The list of interviews is included in the book and is a useful resource for those looking for good children's illustrators. I particularly enjoyed Steve Jenkins' comment about his 'light bulb' moment for his wonderful Actual Size – his observation that every adult and child measured their hands against the cast of a gorilla's hand on a visit to San Diego zoo. Jake's informal writing style, use of first names and the present tense creates a sense of intimacy and of networking. The book is packaged between a foreword by Philip Pullman and an afterword by Nick Sharratt, further adding to the sense of being in touch with the names in the current children's book world.

The book outlines the history of visual literacy and the need for librarians and others to be aware of the importance of the visual in helping children to understand the world around them. Much of the information in the book has come from children who are already aware of the visual world around them. The book is divided into sections exploring the importance of visual literacy and the need for librarians and others to be aware of the importance of the visual in helping children to understand the world around them. The great majority of children will have access to picture books and these can provide an early starting point for developing children's visual awareness, alongside and indeed as part of the pleasure of reading. Some of the language and technical terminology needed for these discussions, the 'book talk', that can be developed between adults and children is given, drawing on art history and illustration terminology. As Philip Pullman says in his introduction, commenting on the importance of visual literacy and the sadly very negative associations currently to be found about media studies: 'No visual literacy, no democracy: it's as simple as that'. There is a strong history of pedagogical thinking and practical teaching guidelines on this important area in both media studies and children's literature research (not all identified in the references in this book), which readers need to be aware of if they are going to work on this further. Nevertheless this book will provide an introduction for those new to the field.

Of great importance, particularly in the current context, is the chapter exploring the importance of visual representation and inclusion. This could be developed in far more depth, indeed it could be the subject of a book on its own, and certainly could have referenced a broader range of research. However, it will provide an important starting point for more structured and analytical thinking on the content of library collections.

The section on prizes and awards provides an overview of illustration awards and suggests ideas and ways of using these for promotion work and to support reader development in libraries. Similarly the practical suggestions on library designs and activities, carefully selected from around the world, are good source material.

The book has a delightful cover illustration by Olivia Lomenach Gill.

PD

Reviews

Books About Children’s Books

SEEING SENSE

JAKE HOPE

Visual literacy as a tool for libraries, learning and reader development

Reviews in this issue

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. Pam Dix is a former librarian and chair of Ilby UK. Stuart Dyer is headteacher 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

Pam Dix

Ibby UK.

Ferelith Hordon is a former children’s librarian and editor of Books for Keeps. Carey Fluker Hunt is a freelance education consultant and blogs at www.healthybooks.org.uk. Elizabeth Schlenther is the compiler of Books for Keeps. Sue Roe is a children’s librarian, Elizabeth Schlennter is the compiler of www.healthybooks.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. Andrea Reece is Managing Editor of Books for Keeps. Sue Roe is a children’s librarian.

Val Randall is Head of English and Literacy Co-ordinator at a Pupil Referral Unit. Andrew Reece is Managing Editor of www.healthybooks.org.uk. Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

Sue Roe

Pre-School/Nursery/Infant

It is a pleasure to welcome the Bear family back as Jill Murphy with a deft touch and engagingly effective use of language and technical terminology portrays the events of ‘just one of those days’. Events every family will recognise allowing young listeners to feel engaged and adults to enjoy a situation all too familiar but here safe within the covers of a book. It is the very ordinariness that makes the whole so attractive. This is the sort of story that children enjoy – a tale of the everyday. Here Jill Murphy’s storytelling is pitch perfect, no exaggeration or forced laughs. This is a comfortable and comforting read – as cosy and comfy as Baby Bear’s pyjamas – but never boring. Then there are Jill Murphy’s illustrations, the perfect

Jill Murphy’s storytelling is pitch perfect, no exaggeration or forced laughs. This is a comfortable and comforting read – as cosy and comfy as Baby Bear’s pyjamas – but never boring. Then there are Jill Murphy’s illustrations, the perfect

Books for Keeps

Just One of Those Days

Jill Murphy, Macmillan, 40pp, 978152902370, £12.99 hbk

‘It was just one of those days’, says Mr Bear (perhaps ruthfully) reflecting on the day that has just gone by. And it certainly was, as the Bear family face the challenge of a morning that follows a long night. So they wake late and from that moment on the day is filled with minor, irritating catastrophes – the coffee gets spilt, Someone Else gets the Tyrannosaurus to play with ... nothing is quite right. But even days that are off kilter will end – and a pizza take away, a surprise – and an early night with bedtime story will restore the equilibrium.

Under 5s

Just One of Those Days

Jill Murphy
accompaniment, both enhancing and extending the text. Her bold colours are never harsh but rather satisfying in their own right. Her eye for detail comes across on the faces of her loveable characters convey the feelings exactly without resorting to cartoonish reactions. Wherever he finds himself in a new full-page illustrations, there are also the delicate pen and ink vignettes interspersed through the text bringing details into focus. This family may be bears (with a close affinity to the Teddy at the end of the bed perhaps), but it is a family that steps off the page. A joy. FH

Found You

Devon Holzwarth, Alison Green
Bun, 24pp, 978 1 407196 27 5, £6.99 pbk

Sam is lonely. Having come from a faraway country where he had many friends, he now moans that no one in the new place where he knows no one. Not only that, but the people he meets don’t seem friendly. He teaches himself how to juggle because he can do that by himself. Mum is concerned, but in the park one day a little bird bumps into him accidentally on purpose, and they strike up a friendship of sorts. The little bird has lost her friends and wants Sam to help her find them. In the process, he meets a raft of the.sorts of people and things he had seemed unfriendly before and discovers them to be smiley and quite different. Ultimately, he meets a girl from a school who asks him to play with her, and we know he is on his way to feeling more at home. The bird, whose job it is to find lonely people and help them make friends, is the symbol of how we should all treat strangers in our midst. Gentle illustrations of the strangeness of the new place are undercut by the subtle reminders that someone is there with him, a place to live in everything from a grand stately home to a ‘cosy caravan’. Hannah has two mums, Lily has two houses. Families come in all kinds and colours, but it is Jamie’s own foster parents, but it is Jamie’s own family that she loves best: her granny and grandpops. There is a funny little twist at the end, which is fun. The pictures of family togetherness abound in the humorous pictures, with lots of tiny labels on various things in each picture. "I am going to answer for 'Frank' and the cat 'grumpy cat' – will appeal greatly and will be pointed out each time the book is read. It’s a good introduction children that each family is different and that is the way life should be. ES

The Diddle That Dummed

Kes Gray, ill. Fred Blunt, Hodder Children’s Books, 52pp, 978 1 444 95368 8, £6.99 pbk

This tale of musical mayhem is a welcome addition to Kes Gray’s ever-expanding range of laugh-out-loud funny picture books. Flinty Bo Diddle is writing a tune for his fiddle and all is proceeding well until one of his diddles goes ‘dum’. Despite Flinty’s best efforts at re-arranging the tune the diddle that does it to him, free of charge. And when you smile, of course, the whole world smiles along with you….

Shy Ones

Simona Ciraolo, Flying Eye Books, 24pp, 978 1 912497 55 5, £11.99 hbk

Maurice is an extremely shy flatback octopus that keeps himself tucked behind his desk at school and among the seaweed in the playground. “Unless you were looking for him, you wouldn’t know he’s missing,” we read. However Maurice is not the boring creature we might imagine him to be. Not at all: he has a passion for solo dancing, at the Deep Blue Dance Hall to exact. One day the little octopus receives an invitation to a fancy dress party and despite it not being something he can do that by himself, he accepts; albeit, having donned a body-covering disguise. A disguise somewhat similar to that of, we then discover, the book’s narrator. From small beginnings a firm friendship ensues and we meet the narrator in person (or rather, in fish) on the final endpaper.

Those with a fine eye for detail will perhaps have already spotted – pardon the pun - this shy friend hiding in plain sight on a number of occasions. The illustrations of the boy both in the top of the book will have fun going back and finding her hiding places in Simona Ciraolo’s gently humorous aquatic scenes that are full of fun details and sea creatures glowing bright. Whether or not they tend towards Maurice’s shy disposition, this story is great fun to share with young humans. JB

The Smile Shop


Some of the best things in life cannot be bought. From ‘what should I share?’ to ‘what should I keep?’, this book touches on friendship and family. A little boy has saved all his pocket money for a special shopping trip and he’s very excited. Off to buy something for himself for the very first time, the boy goes to the market where he wanders round the stalls to discover the best things to buy. The apples look tasty, but the model boat is probably expensive. What about a hat? Or a book? The possibilities seem endless, and decisions difficult to make.

And then – disaster! A skateboarder crashes into the boy and almost ruins his money. It disappears into a drain. Only one coin is left, and it’s not enough to buy a single thing. Suddenly, before our eyes, the world is coloured of colour – until the boy discovers a shop with photos on the wall. It’s called SMILED, so he goes in. ‘I’m in need of a little money,’ the boy says to the smartly-dressed man behind the counter. ‘Could I buy a smile, please? A little one, perhaps? But it seems that smiles cannot be bought or sold. They can be only exchanged and shared – as the proprietor demonstrates, when he takes the boy’s photo and presents it to him, free of charge. And when you smile, of course, the whole world smiles along with you….

Under 5s Pre-School/Nursery/Infant continued

Rob Ramsden, Scallywag Press, 52pp, 978 1 912650 21 6, £12.99 hbk

This is the third in the terrific In the Garden series of nature stories featuring a small boy and girl. In this book they plant a seed to grow a pumpkin for Halloween and anxiously watch for signs of growth. Things go well initially with root and shoot emerging, but before long the children start to get1 impatient. Will its fruit be ripe and ready in time for the celebration? Youngsters, like the two characters, can follow the squash’s growth as the book is read aloud. When there’s an abundance of flowers and bees, butterflies and other insects visit the vine’s bright yellow blooms. The book is written in rhyming prose, and after each stage of the development of the squash, there is a summary of what has happened each week, almost all the flowers die off, but at the base of one female flower, the children spy a small green swelling.
5 - 8 Infant/Junior

Ed’s Choice

Luna Loves Art

Joseph Coelho and Fiona Lumbers, 32pp, Andersen Press, 9781786958661, £12.99 hbk

Luna greets us with her irrepressible smile and equally irrepressible hair. Excitement radiates from her – she is going with her class on a school trip. In fact everyone is, looking forward to it – except Finn. Luna makes the effort but is clearly something wrong. ‘Maybe he needs a friend’ says Mum. So Luna takes Hare’s effort and it is the class encounter Douanier Rousseau’s Surprised that Finn is able to express what he is really feeling, while Family Group by Henry Moore unlocks a bit more. Soon Finn is able to enjoy the outing with his new friend Luna.

This is a subtle story that does not just introduce a young audience to some of the most iconic works of modern and contemporary art (Louise Bourgeois’ great metal spider towers over the children, Van Gogh’s Sunflowers spill out of their frame), it is also about the stories even children hide. We see Luna getting ready with her Dad who drops her off at the school gates. We learn that her Mum is a parent helper. And what about Finn? Coelho does not describe his background clearly placed on each page inviting recognising the real work; not least this will intrigue not overwhelm readers to appreciate the natural world.

Clean Up!

Nathan Bryon, ill. Dapo Adeola, Puffin, 32pp, 978 0 241 34589 4

What more timely a book to inspire us all, from tinies to grandparents! The message comes loud and clear: ‘When you work as a team, you can change the world.’ Little Rocket is full of excitement as her family sets off on holiday, visiting her Jamaican grandparents. The family arrives at their animal sanctuary and whale watching tours, and Rocket is fascinated by all the creatures her grandparents are nursing back to health. She listens attentively as Grampy tells her they never touch wild animals unless they need to be rescued or cared for. A following spread shows a beach devoid of humans but littered with plastics. Hooray for Rocket! Next day she is fired up, and goes to the local swing, telling visitors that almost half the rubbish in the sea comes from careless people. She states that there are 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic in the ocean! Soon lots of new friends join in, collecting plastic from every corner of the beach. A clean up crew. For everyone on the island wants to save the sealife and bring back the whales. The book closes with three simple ways each and every one of us can help clear up the world’s seas and beaches, here and everywhere. This inspirational story is illustrated throughout with humorous yet thoughtful depictions of Rocket and her extended family. Adeola’s pictures are full of movement and purpose, and his Rocket becomes an enduring character. Readers will want to follow big bro’s participation through the story, humorously depicted! Children will relate to the fact that they, like Rocket, can make a difference. It starts with just the determination to make that difference. A splendid, inspirational book. GB

Duck and Penguin Do NOT Like Sleepovers

Julia Woolf, Andersen Press, 24pp, 978 1 78549 917 0, £12.99 hbk

Betty and Maud are terribly excited. There is to be a sleepover in the garden in a ‘teeny weeny tiny tent’, but what if the toys come out of the dark? Do they hate the idea of the tent, or do they hate the idea of each other? Is there something creeping out in the dark. What will happen? Will the girls find their toys in time? Imaginative illustrations are beautifully produced, and the text is warm and inviting. This is a really well crafted story, but I did wonder in the end if Duck and Penguin had learned any lessons from their scare and if they were safer as a team. (Big bad owl, appears on every page, his nose and eyes focused solely on his phone…} When Rocket finds a baby turtle trapped in plastic, she is saddened and inspired. {Big bro Jamal shows a beach devoid of humans but littered with plastics. Hooray for Rocket! Next day she is fired up, and goes to the local swing, telling visitors that almost half the rubbish in the sea comes from careless people. She states that there are 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic in the ocean!}

Lap, Hare, Leap

Dom Conlon, illus Anastasia Ilesou, Graffeg, 32pp, 978-1-9131-3492-1, £7.99, pbk

‘Dip-dwelling grass-grazer, beautiful Hare ask why she’s standing, at what she hears….’

There’s a fox stalking Hare, but he’ll have to be very fast to catch her. Hare’s long ears ‘rise like hands in class’ and ‘quick as a sniff, she’s a firm-footed lea-leaper’ bounding effortlessly from her natural grassy habitat to less familiar landscapes. On her first jump, Hare lands in the American desert where she meets a ‘black-tailed scrub-scrambler’ called Jackrabbit, who’s a distant cousin. But there’s no time to play – a coyote is prowling, so Hare leaps onto a snowy mountain slope where Arctic Hare is peeping from a ‘fur-warm hole’. Will our ‘fire-eyed moon-jumper’ be safe here? Will the Snowy Owl force Hare to make another jump? It will. With every leap, children are introduced to new animals and habitats, but danger follows Hare from one page to the next. In this story, if she does reach home safely – but real Hares need protecting, and information about the Hare Preservation Trust is provided on the final spread, together with some interesting facts and figures and a glossary.

Dom Conlon is a poet who knows how to make a picturebook text sing. Read it aloud to enjoy the rhythms and sounds – there are mini-kennings to be explored, and plenty of intriguing words and images. Anastasia Ilesou’s dramatic artwork presents Hare’s experiences in close-up and from unusual angles. Landscapes and vegetation are identically depicted, but Hare’s experience there is varied, with an eye for form and colour rather than aiming for the hyper-real, and the resulting artwork feels invtigingly immersive. Gorgeous endpapers reminiscent of medieval tapestries dotted with hares, foxes and meadow flowers border a series of narrative spreads, where readers are invited to experience Hare’s surroundings and join her in keeping watch for predators. This quietly impressive book is well worth sharing and will encourage readers to appreciate the natural world. It may inspire the writing of new poems, too. CFH

When you work as a team, you can change the world.”

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Meesha Makes Friends

Julia Donaldson, ill. Anna Currey, Macmillan, 32pp, 978 1 5098 4360 2, £12.99 hbk

Yet another captivating tale from Donaldson, with a magical genie in a teapot and a farmyard full of noisy fun. Children just love chanting the rhyming title over and over, from a whisper to a SHOUT. Old Macdonald had a farm... a farmhouse, a cupboard... and a teapot. And in that teapot lived a teeny weeny blue genie. The farmer is asked by the genie if he would like a wish granted. The genie puffs himself up, saying, ‘ABC and XYZ, gobbledegook and garlic bread.’ And the wished-for bright red tractor appears! The wishes continue, each with a charmingly hypnotic rhyme from the genie. ‘ABC and XYZ, cauliflower cheese and macaroni spreaded,’ ‘ABC and XYZ, gooseberry green and raspberry red!’ All enormous fun, as the characters and wishes from the original farmyard rhyme are remade by Macdonald cover the pages. Each new wish creates a new scenario, and oh what a noise is made by each and every character.... We watch as we see the blue genie getting smaller and smaller, finding the incredible noises just too much. When a wished-for wish is granted, the cat then wishes to be Supercat, and each of the new characters wishes to be their superhero version. Chaos! So much as mice, cat, Julia, Old Mrs Macdonald - and baby - all whiz through the air, bounding and crashing into each other. Poor genie cannot manage to grant any longer and wishes they’d all go away. He forgets that he is only allowed to grant wishes for other people. How the tale is brought to an end is very satisfying. ‘ABC and XYZ, broccoli broth and breakfast in bed!’ shouts the GREEN genie, and the two jump into the teapot which sails away. Landing on a beautiful, deserted beach, the only sound being the gentle lapping of waves, the two genies climb deep inside the teapot and fall asleep. ‘Sorry,’ says Julia, ‘Please don’t disturb them if ever you find that teapot on a beach. Think very hard to make just one wish. What will that wish be?’

In this enchanting tale of fun and frolics, as readers we are grateful for that beautifully peaceful quiet conclusion! Another big hit for Julia, and well supported again by Anna Currey. There is much movement in her brightly coloured, humorous illustrations. As readers we have high expectations of each new title from Julia. Expectations are realized, for here it is, a book of orchestrated exuberance! GB
there? When you’re as adaptable and determined as she is, life really can take you anywhere!

Imaginatively evoking the sights, sounds and textures of inter-war Paris from an unusual viewpoint, this quirky book has much to offer. Intriguing vocabulary is employed throughout, from the snippets lying on the atelier floor to caterwauling in the catacombs, and although the bare bones of the story are accessible to younger children, there’s plenty to interest older readers, too. Piet Grobler’s illustrations add more than a dash of squalor and madness to the experience: his cats were born fighting over fish-heads, and their expressive fluidity and joie-de-vivre is matched by a potential for capricious disorder that unnerves as much as it pleases.

Disruptive characters are far from being the cute little kittens of many storybooks. They are ‘dancing far from being the cute little kittens of many storybooks. They are ‘dancing over fish-heads, and their expressive fluidity and joie-de-vivre is matched by a potential for capricious disorder that unnerves as much as it pleases.

Paris Cat draws on factual information about two of the most celebrated performers in the city at this time, and short biographies of Edith Piaf and Josephine Baker are included for those who want to know more. An appealing collage map of the city featuring the locations of Cat’s favourite ‘poissonsieries’ alongside the more usual landmarks is also included. CFH

Octopus Shocktopus

Peter Bently, ill. Steven Lenton, Nosy Crow 32pp, 9781787880026 £6.99 pbk

This is a lovely story and a perfect, pertinent one for 2020 about accepting differences, being wonderful, and kind to one and all.

It’s a quirky, pretty bonkers idea that an octopus would understand on anybody’s roof but if one were to I would quite like this one as it is fluorescent orange!

The story is told in rhyme so it would be great to enjoy together but also makes it a good one to read by yourself as there are lots of supportive word clues from rhyme and obviously the illustrations help along the way too.

It begins with an octopus landing on a house and a neighbour clearly stating ‘An octopus does NOT belong.’ So the neighbours calls the fire brigade to get rid of the octopus resulting in some sad pictures of the octopus being roundabouted by water jets but still hanging on for dear life with its tentacles. However, everyone soon realises that the octopus has many skills, not least plenty of tentacles which are much better than two arms. The octopus rescues a teddy that gets stuck down the loo, it can play football, provide washing lines and then be a beautiful Christmas Octopus with lights. Soon people come for miles to see the marvellous octopus-even the neighbour changes her mind.

But then one day the octopus just goes away out of the blue. There’s a great surprise at the end so I won’t spoil it.

Steven Lenton’s illustrations are very appealing. The luminous octopus really works with the background of the story being told featuring through too. It’s a book about Gertie, the littlest yak who lives with big yaks and they all wear super cool hats, Gertie wants to grow up so that she’s not the smallest yak anymore and is in quite a hurry to do it. She believes that it will be much better and she will be more capable when she is older. So it’s a great book for lots of PSHE and a lovely one for parents who will understand Mummy yak reassuring; saying she’s got plenty of time to do all those things and to grow up slowly. It’s also a book about celebrating individual talents and realising we all have special skills to offer.

In order to grow up Gertie devises a ‘growing up’ plan. The rhyme really comes into its own on the pages although it is lively and engaging through the whole book. It just works really sweetly with the little pictures of Gertie eating veg, hopping, skipping and all endeavouring to grow up more quickly. My favourite page is her sitting on top of a pile of books.... and she reads lots of books to make her thoughts grow (because grown ups have big things to think and to know).”

Kate Hindley’s illustrations are quirky and lively - they really bring the pages to life. The layout has a range of sizes to the pictures which makes is visually appealing too. It’s a really sweet story where Gertie, of course, comes to realise that there are good things about being small when she is called upon as the only one able to reach the moonbeam.

The woolly hats with their dangly foliage on her pillow…

Kate Hindley’s illustrations are quirky and lively - they really bring the pages to life. The layout has a range of sizes to the pictures which makes is visually appealing too. It’s a really sweet story where Gertie, of course, comes to realise that there are good things about being small when she is called upon as the only one able to reach the moonbeam.

The woolly hats with their dangly decorations just really add to the feel of the book which is a fun and feel good all round read.

Teatime Around the World


Teatime Around the World is an accessible and attractive celebration of tea drinking and the rituals and ceremonies associated with it throughout the world. From the opening rhyme: ‘If you’re tea for two’, the poetic, lighthearted text steers the reader through the book supported by the very attractive illustrations.

Readers are taken on a virtual world tour of tea drinking: from Tibet to spicy sorrel in the Caribbean. Ceremonies and traditions around tea are explored, we meet the chai wallahs (street sellers) and here retells the local myth of the appearance every seven years of Hy Brasil (nothing to do with Brazil: Hy means Island, and the name may come from the old Irish Ul Bresal) in Galway Bay.

Red hairred Fia looked out of her window one night, and longed to see the island. She crept out of bed and went down to the quay, and feeling magical pull, mooned on a moonbeam, hopping from star to star, and reached Hy Brasil. Magical creatures strode down the rode on the winged glided butterfly. All this is beautifully illustrated by Nicola Bendallini. Foy boys and girls fia d on a dance, and ‘a boy with eyes like summer puddles’ hold him up under the onslaught of stars, and stardust tickled her nose … She saw the town below, and again stepped on a moonbeam to return home.

Looking back, she watched Hy Brasil as it ‘slowly, so slowly, slipped beneath the sea’. The reader may indeed wonder whether it was a dream, but there are tendrils of foliage on her pillow…

This book was commissioned as part of the Galway 2020, City of Culture programme, and every child starting primary school in Galway in September 2020 has been given a copy. It has also inspired a song written by Galway musician Anna Mullarkey, but events have, of course, been curtailed. The language is lyrical and lovely and this will be good to read aloud and share.

Never Show a T-Rex a Book

Rashmi Sirdeshpande, ill. Diane Ewen, Puffin, 32pp, 978 0 241 39266-9, £6.99 pbk

This book should be shared by all children everywhere! It is a powerhouse of superlative attention to detail, delight all readers, and will show the endless possibilities in the world of the imagination. ‘What would happen if you showed a T-Rex a book? Well, she won’t know what to do with it, will she?’ But teach that dinosaur to read, and the world indeed becomes her oyster. She can travel far and wide, through time and space, and become very, VERY clever! She might tire of being a dinosaur and may become an artist, a doctor, architect, computer scientist or an astronaut… even become Prime Minister! Oh yes, and in this last role, she would have libraries everywhere! And she would want all her friends to learn to read too. Then what would happen? Can you imagine? The child that begins this begins the adventure by a washed away spider, his eight legs too wobbly to hold him up under the onslaught of water as it sloshes down the pipes. Spider emerges from his pipe, and once bounced out of an overflow, they encounter in turn a duck, a fish, and a frog. With his back legs, the spider bounces the pea and spider go plipperty plop as they bounce on the water, unable to stop. Boris the dog is at hand who inadvertently takes the pea back to

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the kitchen, where the pea bounces and pings and dings around until last he lands in the sink with a PLOP. Out comes the plug, and he shoots round the bend and down into the drain.... **WEE!** Cheers the pea. It’s all started again! This book has the magic ingredient that demands a child shouts ‘AGAIN! AGAIN!’ once the tale in the illustrations, and an inevitable ending to the tale is the demand to read it again! Lots of fun for reader and child alike. **GB**

**The Wild Way Home**

Sophie Kirtley, Bloomsbury, 256pp, 978-1526616289, £6.99 pbk

Fans of *Stig of the Dump* or *Hornbook* series will very much enjoy Sophie Kirtley’s vivid, exciting and heart-warming Stone Age timeslip story. Charlie is confused and upset by the arrival of a new baby brother, particularly by the news that baby Dara is poorly and in intensive care. Running away into nearby woods, Charlie finds a boy, hurt and on the point of drowning in the river. From then, things become very strange as Charlie realises that somehow she – or he, it could be either and we’re never told – has slipped back in time to the Stone Age. After a shaky start, not helped by the obvious problems of communication and understanding, the two children connect, and it emerges that they have quite a lot in common. The boy, Harby as Charlie calls him, also has a new baby sibling, who needs special and immediate care and attention. As they embark on a search for baby Mothga, they must confront wolves and other dangers of the forest, before finally finding her. By making Mothga safe, and helping Harby – or Hartboy as he’s really called – Charlie can find a way home.

There’s a beautiful sense of nature, both in the stone age scenes and the modern day ones, and I very much liked the descriptions of stone age life too. We’re not overwhelmed with detail but those details that are there – roasting of hazelnuts, strips of meat cooking over a fire, handprint paintings on a cave wall – feel all the more powerful and effective because of it. The mechanics of the timeslip are expertly done too so that they never interrupt the storytelling, and Kirtley portrays the emotional truths of her story with equal skill, making Charlie’s sense of loss, love and home as vivid and affecting as the encounters with wolves. This is Sophie Kirtley’s debut novel and very impressive.

**The Midnight Swan**

Catherine Fisher, Firefly, 192pp, 978-1 91310 237 1, £6.99 pbk

Catherine Fisher writes with a poet’s love and respect for language. This story, the last in her *Clockwork Crow* trilogy, is slight in plot but rich in atmosphere. Set in a version of Wales in some interconnecting world not too far past where magic still runs deep, Sera, a young but resourceful girl orphan, has been taken into the local big business – *Daggerwing* – by Skypirate captain Mair and her equally easy-going ex-army husband, Servants abound, with tenants warmly invited each year to a Midsummer Ball.

When human characters need advice. Taking all this on board is made not just easy but also a real pleasure due to Fisher’s mastery of simple but memorable prose. comparatively short this story feels much longer because no reader would ever wish to hurry through this cornucopia of images magically coming to life in simple, magical ways. And when something more earthy is required, there is always the Crow with his boastings, self-deception and general tetchiness. Previous installments in this trilogy have already won prizes; this title deserves one too. **NT**

**Sofia the Dreamer and her Magical Afro**

Jessica Wilson, illus Tom Rawles, 32pp, Tallawah Publishing, 9781527259096, £8.99 pbk

Every Sunday, Sofia’s mother does her hair – maybe styling it in twists, or perhaps into a glorious afro or cornrows. As she does this, Sofia finds herself drifting off to find herself somewhere else – an Ethiopian field full of corn, to meet people who open the door to her history represented in these hair styles; they all mean something and should be worn with pride. Even more important, as Sofia realises, creating these styles is an act of love.

Tom Rawles’ bold, hyper-realistic images capture both the characters that people the pages and Sofia’s dreaming, as well bringing their backgrounds to vivid life. They are powerful images for a powerful message, full of colour, vibrant, presentating real people. Jessica Wilson’s text is as positive as the images that accompany it. It does not shout, rather she leads her young readers on a journey. This journey gently, positively and imaginatively offers an insight into histories that illustrate the huge hurt and power of hair and should be recognised and celebrated, for ‘Knowing your history is important’ – it opens the door to respect, a sense of unity and confidence – and flowing through it a love that is a gift. This is a welcome addition to any classroom in any school, Sofia is a very real, recognisable girl and her dreams could give rise to further exploration and discussion both within classrooms and homes. Here is an excellent introduction for all children to the rich culture of our world today.

**The Wizards of Once. Never and Forever**

Cressida Cowell, Hodder, 361pp, 978-1 4449 5640 5, £12.99

Cressida Cowell is a phenomenon, producing volume after volume of fantasy adventure stories without ever losing quality or zest. She also has a flair for writing in wild but which with cartoonish figures sometimes taking up whole pages or else cropping up mid paragraph. This current title is the last volume in her *Wizards of Once* quartet, describing the struggles of young Xar and Wish as they seek to restore their troubled land the wildwoods to its former peaceful and prosperous state. Their bitterly divided parents are no help in this, so they are forced to seek many others, including an animated spoon, firmly on their side. Danger is provided by assorted witches and villains such as Brutal the Heartless, but there is always a way out even when the existing odds would strongly suggest otherwise.

This story begins somewhat statically with some preliminary explanations of what has gone before but after that things really let rip at a pace never less than hectic. Extreme violence while often threatened is nearly always avoided in favour of last minute rescues. Characters are more human than heroic, all the main characters are in fact not possessing a fragile dignity that never quite succeeds in covering up their faults however hard they try. The only exception is Looker, Xar’s older brother, happy to exhibit his essential selfishness until the very end. At this point it gradually becomes clear that all the main characters are in fact junior players in the future court of King Arthur. But the unhappiness and division that is now bound to follow as they get older is not part of this jolly story’s remit. Readers can simply sit back and enjoy rollicking fun from an author-illustrator working at top form as well as high speed. The perfect choice as the current *Children’s Laureate* in 2019, her tenure has now been extended to June 2022. Children are lucky to have her, and so are we. **NT**

**Sky Pirates Echo Quickthorn and the Great Beyond**

Alex English, illus Mark Chambers, Simon and Schuster, 978-1471190773, £6.99 pbk

There’s a lot to be said for proper, honest-to-goodness children’s adventure stories, and all of it can be said about *Sky Pirates*. Eleven-year-old Echo Quickthorn is an orphan and a ward of thoroughly unlikeable King Alfons of Lockport. Lockport himself is positioned on the edge of the Barrens and its inhabitants believe that beyond the Barrens is nothing, just cloud, mist and a very big drop. Why King Alfons is so eager to promulgate this belief is one of the mysteries of the book and it’s part of Echo’s destiny to disprove this piece by piece. Unlike his British Prince Horace, the only other child she’s allowed to be friends with, Echo dreams of escape so the unexpected arrival of a hot air balloon containing an eccentric explorer Professor Daggerwing provides exactly the opportunity she’s longed for. Before you can say, ‘Hi there, right echo’ has rescued the professor from Lockport’s dungeons and is sailing
uncomfortable with this aspect of the book. But for many readers, Ralphs’ lively and respectful approach to a complex subject will be welcomed. As he points out, “fewer people believe in magic these days” but it “still has a powerful hold on our imaginations.” Season of the Witch is particularly recommended at Halloween (to provide depth, breadth and context) but will fascinate young readers all year round. CPH

**Season of the Witch**


Season of the Witch is a lively and well-rounded account of the role of magic in different cultures throughout history, from Ancient Mesopotamia to the present day. Narrative retellings of myths and folktales feature alongside historical and anthropological information, together with an exploration of superstition and belief. From the Egyptian Book of the Dead and Baba Yaga via Japanese Hannya masks and Vodou to Gerald Gardner, founder of modern-day Wicca, the content is diverse, engaging and considered. Tamarit’s illustrations have a ‘groovy Seventies’ aesthetic that will appeal to both boys and older primary-age children, and Ralphs’ text is well-pitched for his target audience. Magical beliefs are discussed throughout in an informative context. Occasionally the boundary between reality and fiction becomes a little blurred, and some families may be off with him in his hot air balloon on the trail of truth, adventure and — she hopes — her long-lost mother. Horace of course is caught up too and the relationship between these two motherless children (the queen died when he was five) is one of the many enjoyable aspects of this story. The children’s adventures bring them new experiences and new friends but into danger too – there’s an unforgettable encounter with man-eating plants, and a surprising run-in with those eponymous pirates. Echo is a truly sympathetic character, her adventures unfold at a delightful pace and are livened with humour as well as those moments of real peril, while Alfons is most definitely a villain when he was five) is one of the many motherless children (the queen died

**The Virus**


Written in poppy, bouncy rhyme that asks to be read aloud, Laura Dockrill’s book opens with a warning: this is a cautionary tale and ‘rather strange and sort of greedy’. Gus certainly seems to be setting himself up for a fall, arguing with everyone, kids and grown-ups alike, and constantly leaning back on his char no matter how many times he’s told not to. Sure enough, the inevitable happens. Gus topples backwards and cracks his head open. It’s at this point that the story begins to open up into something much more interesting and profound than it originally seemed. Gus’s dreams, imagination and memories leak out through the crack that’s opened up in his head. It’s a genuinely disconcerting image but the dark is lightened — literally in the illustrations – by the arrival of a golden butterfly, his very own ‘brain butterfly’ in fact. Together they will recover all of Gus’s memories, even those that frighten him or make him sad, and that’s where they find the cause of his anger, the anger that has made him so intractable. The story is one of grief, loss but ultimately recovery as Gus can finally talk to his dad and grandmother about the secret he’s kept locked inside himself. Despite the weight of issues being discussed, the verse retains its spark, offering reassurance and pointing the way to a brighter future for Gus and anyone facing the loss he’s experienced. Gwen Millward’s illustrations are equally accessible and emotionally true and it’s a book that will prompt young readers to examine their own feelings and fears, and to understand why anger can be a response sadness or anxiety.

**Question Everything!**

Susan Martineau and Vicky Barker, h small publishing, 32pp, 9781912909535, £5.99 pbk

This is a well thought out, interesting book which will encourage children to ask questions and thus for themselves about the information they encounter. Each double page spread covers a different aspect of the theme, for example showing how a news story can be written in different ways and how scary headlines might sensationalize an event. Key concepts such as the difference between facts and speculation and bias are clarified and how to spot different types of fake news. Each page offers examples, poses questions and readers.

Key words such as ‘disinformation’, ‘endorse’ and corroborate are highlighted and there is also a glossary included at the back of the book.

**Invisible Nature: a secret world beyond our senses**

Catherine Barr, ill. Anne Wilson, Otter-Barry, 40pp, 978-1-9105967-1-1, £12.99 hbk

If children have ever wondered how dolphins find friends, how bats home in on their victims, or how spectacular bears find food many miles away, this is the book that will explain. Animals use light, scent, sound and forces beyond our human senses to survive, but many of the techniques they use can also be used in the human world. Catherine Barr explains that, for example, microwaves were produced even as far back as the Big Bang, when the universe was created, and of course microwaves are useful in all sorts of ways, not just for cooking. Space cameras use them to take pictures through clouds, and in hospitals, Radiotherapy uses microwaves to attempt to kill cancerous cells.

Animals use ultraviolet light: certain lichens and flowers glow in their vision, bees and butterflies see UV colour and patterns in flowers and on each other, and salmon can spot certain types of fish when they see the glow. We use ultraviolet light in lightbulbs, for killing germs in food, and in reflective ‘hi-vis’ clothing. Infrared light, which we can’t see, is used in cameras, electric waves, ultra- and infra- sound— all have their uses in the animal kingdom and also in our world.
**8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued**

The book is laid out so that we see how something works in the natural world, and then the next double page spread explores how it is presented in the human world. The text is in bite-sized chunks, and well-illustrated by Anne Wilson in a clear, colourful and graphic style. A little cartoon person leads us through each topic, and there is a useful Glossary. This will be useful for browsing and for finding out all sorts of interesting facts.

**Zombierella Fairy Tales Gone Bad**

Joseph Coelho, illus Freya Hartas, 196pp, Walker Books, 9781406389661, £7.99 pbk

There are some very strange books in this library. Books that have got moudly, gone so bad their stories have changed. And here is one. You are expecting Cinderella but you are going to get Zombierella – a tale to make you shiver. Cinderella in her desire to go to the ball with her three Fake sisters slips on the stairs and instead of a Fairy Godmother meets Death. But even Death may grant wishes. So Zombierella (as she now is) does meet her Prince – a Prince that is because the story is illustrated to capture dark humour and gruesome detail. The text is fast-paced and engaging, the mix of wit, bad behaviour and scathing descriptions will delight young readers and the enticing cover and lively illustrations contribute greatly to the book’s appeal. Amidst these horrors and, inimitably, the story has a strong moral core as vain, selfish Ebenzer and rude, challenging Bethany grow and change and learn to help each other. This enticing debut should appeal to all young readers who enjoy macabre humour, gruesome details, larger than life characters and a graphic style. A little cartoon person in a clear, colourful and lively characters contribute.

**A Mummy Ate My Homework**

Thiago de Moraes, Scholastic, 259pp, 978 1 4711 191096, £12.99 hbk

Henry is delighted to be given an extra tricky equation to solve on his first day back at school. But as he finishes his calculation a black tornado swallow’s him up and he is transported back in time to Ancient Egypt and the court of Seti 1. Henry isn’t a natural fit with the harsh lifestyle of the Ancient Greeks. There are some very strange pets (notably a baboon and a crocodile) and even stranger food. Henry hates the onions for breakfast, the camel and chariot rides and the spear throwing classes, not to mention that his invented princess makes friends and learns to fit in. When he and a group of Egyptian classmates are sent for a survival test in the jungle and an emergency ensues, his navigation skills and creativity save the day. But will he ever get back to the twenty first century?

This is an amusing, intriguing illustrated time slip adventure story packed with information about Ancient Egypt. Mathematics combines with astrology as the trigger for time travel in this story, an ingenious ploy. The back of the book includes extra information about life at the time of Pharaohs, first in the form of a survival guide – including how to write your name in hieroglyphics.

**InvestiGators**

John Patrick Green, First Second, 1996pp, 978 1 5290 5436 1, £9.99 hbk

As the book opens, we meet Mango and Brash, two crime busting alligators or ‘InvestiGators.’ There follows a complex surreal story or overlapping stories in which the pair investigate the disappearance of Chef Gustavo, try to discover who has been stealing his secret recipes, find out about the strange happenings at the factory in town, and why the sinistest figure in the mac really is.

InvestiGators is a substantial and literally quite weighty graphic novel with thirteen chapters in full colour. The book is also packed with word play and puns, humour, gruesome details, larger than life characters and a graphic style. An energetic style applied to a new story...even if they don’t like shoes!

**The Beast and the Bethany**

Jack Meggitt-Phillips, illus Isabelle Follath, Egmont, 250pp, 978 1 4052 9962 6, £6.99 pbk

Ebenzer Tweezer has the looks of a young Walter White, but he is actually 511 years old and owes his youthful appearance and pampered lifestyle to a Dorian Gray-style deal with the Devil. But he is very envious of his mansion. This beast, a huge blob of a creature with three black eyes, two black tongues and a large drooling mouth, has an increasingly voracious appetite. To Ebenzer’s dismay, the beast is no longer satisfied with such delights as exotic pets, historic statues and the odd cactus and instead demands a juicy child to eat in exchange for the potion that keeps Ebenzer young. Enter Bethany, an orphan with attitude, who proves more than a match for Ebenzer, but can they outwit the beast together.

This entertaining debut novel has overlap with the story of a fictitious boy with dark humour and gruesome detail. The text is fast-paced and engaging, the mix of wit, bad behaviour and scathing descriptions will delight young readers and the enticing cover and lively illustrations contribute greatly to the book’s appeal. Amidst these horrors and, inimitably, the story has a strong moral core as vain, selfish Ebenzer and rude, challenging Bethany grow and change and learn to help each other. This enticing debut should appeal to all young readers who enjoy macabre humour, gruesome details, larger than life characters and a graphic style. A little cartoon person in a clear, colourful and lively characters contribute.

**Shoe Wars**

Liz Pichon. Ill. Liz Pichon, Scholastic, 430pp, 9781407191096, £12.99 hbk

This comedy adventure is a new one of the annoying friends in the humonous popular Tom Gates series, Liz Pichon. Fans will be delighted to see her chaotic and energetic style applied to a new story...even if they don’t like shoes! Izzy Foot and his children, Ruby and Bear, live in Shoetown, where everyone is completely dotty about shoes. There are shoes with googly eyes and spiky teeth, shoes with cameras in the sole and even shoes that make their own music, and Izzy and his friends are in charge of inventing the new styles. But there is one invention that nobody seems to like as cup mas at all until the graduation is enough to start a shoe war.

Shoetown is totally dominated by Wenda Weeny, owner of the biggest factory in town, and mother to the world’s least likeable little boy, Walter. Wendy can’t bear the sight of anybody but her winning the Golden Shoe Awards, and she needs those flying shoes to win. This spells big trouble for the family, and Ruby and Bear have a racing against time to save their inventor dad from Wendy and her minions, who include a pair of ferocious guard dogs (Left and Right) and a creepy, creepy plant. At more than 400 pages, it is a weighty book for young readers, but that is because the story is illustrated and told in such a generous manner.

The story never rushes past pieces of time and space so that every ounce of comedy is squeezed out (few characters get to share their dungearee collection with their readers!). What really takes up so many pages, though, is the simply enormous number of cartoon illustrations. They seem to explode out of almost every other paragraph. From tiny portraits highlighting the raising of an eyebrow, to full-page spreads detailing entire towns, Pichon spoils her readers with so many doodles that you can almost read the story without the words.

**Pizzazz**

Sophy Henn, illus Sophy Henn, Simon & Schuster, 204pp, 978-1-4711-9398-9  £6.99 pbk

Pizzazz is indeed the name of the protagonist of this book, and she is, like all the members of her extended family, a super-hero. She is reluctant to reveal her special power until the very end of the story, but rails against always having to wear the same outfit, with a cape that often gets in the way, having to leap off and save people at very short notice, which is not always convenient, e.g. at mealtimes, and, although she does already take her turn at loading the dishwasher, she seldom gets the chance to be, well, just NORMAL.

The reader might sympathise, but want to find out what happens, anyway. The family has just moved house to be nearer Granny and Grandad, who have retired from being super-heroes, and she and her younger sister, Red Dragon, who can breathe fire and is irritatingly good at everything she does, have started at a new school, Pizzazz really misses her old friends Sue and Tom, and finds that everyone at the new school is in freindsip groups alignding and no one, particularly three girls she calls ‘The Populants’, wants to include her. She and her boyfriend has sometimes to rush off when a baddy is-threatening the safety of the planet in various inventive ways, like Harry the Slime twister who also eats anything that is blue (“and yes, there are that many ‘o’s”).

In an attempt at normality, Pizzazz tries and fails to become a school councilor (but, alas annoyingly but is given the consolation of becoming Eco Monitor, which, for someone who often has to Save The Planet, seems like a good idea, but not the same sort of saving at all, as she discovers when she decides to try and stop the nearby park being turned
The world of the forest is filled with adventure and danger. When Riley discovers an unknown creature in the forest, he is drawn into a world of mystery and excitement. With the help of his loyal dog, Shark, Riley embarks on a journey to uncover the truth about the strange creature and the dangers it poses to the forest and its inhabitants. Along the way, Riley learns to overcome his fears and stand up for what is right, demonstrating the importance of friendship and courage.

The story is both thrilling and thought-provoking, with lessons about perseverance and the power of determination. The characters are well-developed and relatable, and the pacing is just right to keep readers engaged from beginning to end.

This is a heartwarming tale that will appeal to children and adults alike, offering a mix of adventure, comedy, and valuable life lessons. It is a great choice for families looking for a heartwarming and entertaining story that will leave them laughing and feeling uplifted.
**The Invisible Boy**


This tremendous book walks the fine line between didacticism and entertainment with absolute precision, illuminating the issue of modern slavery with urgency and clarity. 13 year old Nadia Quick’s only ambition is to herself that he fitted the mould she on all his activities in order to prove to herself that he fitted the mould she had cast him into. Similarly, when a mysterious boy-Eli rescues her beloved dog from drowning in a flooded stream then vanishes without trace she gives him the title of Invisible Boy and dubs him a superhero. The irony of his Nadia-given identity is made clear later as I did – that at this point they need to mirror the revelations. No spoilers...

**How Jack Lost Time**

Stephanie Lapointe, ill. Delphine Carlier, Crow's Nest, Pushkin Children’s Books, 100pp. 978 1 7716 4757 1, £14.99 hbk.

With the splitting of decisions and their consequences, we first meet captain Jack as a solitary soul who spends his entire life aboard his boat, lacking for nothing save human company. He has his plants, his books and a pipe for night-time loneliness.It wasn’t always thus however. Time was Jack not the crazy captain who throws back into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned back into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account similarly consumed with a quest: to find the ancient whale that years ago, had swallowed his son Julos when the father and son were at sea together. Now Jack has turned into the sea any fish that get caught in his nets. Crazzy? Far from it. Jack is consumed by grief and on that account Similarly...
she has in store for us. Our view of Clara, her friends, her uncle up the hill – all shift dramatically as facts emerge. A gentle story of rural life on a Caribbean island is suddenly taut with uncertainty.

Happily, the story evolves into one of healing; not only for Clara, but for her parents, her uncle, for old and young throughout the community. Pushkin’s declared aim is ‘to share tales from different cultures and unpacking its different levels, it offers an unusual, thoughtful read. GF

Small Town Hero

Patrick Neate, Andersen Press, 272pp, 9781787449675, £7.99, pbk

Children’s books are best when they tell you. This is an excellent read that unpacks the many worlds or multiverse theory only comes to light after his father’s funeral, and leads him down a path of self-discovery as well as familial discovery.

Gabe’s voice is startlingly modern, fresh and outspoken, reaching directly to the reader. Danger and sucking them in with as much power as a black hole. His interests include football and gaming, and navigating the normal teenage world of social media, friendship and limitations imposed by the adults in his world(s). He is, in fact, so authentic, exploring his feelings and how he deals with them at the same time constantly trying to decipher the emotions of the adults around him, that any doubts about the scientific theories that underpin the plot are swiftly eliminated, and the reader is compelled to believe that not only does Gabe’s favourite video game, Small Town Hero, exist, but does the idea of a multi-universe. The non-linear timeframe takes a little thought directly to the target audience and familial discovery.

The Ten Riddles of Eartha

Hana Tooke, illus Ayesh'a L. Rubio Puffin, 400pp, 978-0241417461, £12.99 pbk

The Little Tulip Orphanage in Amsterdam has strict rules for baby abandonment. All of them are broken by the five babies abandoned there in 1880, none of whom are wrapped in a cotton blanket, placed in a wicker basket or deposited on the topmost step; it’s no wonder that the five, designated rebels, become firm friends. Fast forward twelve years and, despite the best efforts of their grumpy matron Elina Gassbeek (who thinks she has ‘the brutal sneer of a gargoyl’), Lotta, Egg, Fenna, Sem and Milou are still living in the grim orphanage, unadopted and seemingly unadoptable. Enter Meneer Rotman, merchant and ship-owner, who declares himself willing to adopt them all. Four of the orphans are filled with hope, but Milou, the leader of their little group, has real misgivings. His strange fifth sense alert to something deeply sinister about the man. She’s proved right, and the five flee that night, their one hope to find Milou’s family who may be puppeteers.

After this irresistible opening, the story continues as the children make their way into the world alone, ending up in a gorgeous windmill, that also has its own, fully equipped puppet theatre. There are adventures galore – they face more dangerous encounters with the wicked Rotman, dices with death and vicious dogs, and receive help from unexpected quarters. No matter how difficult the challenges they face, this strange little family sticks together, pooling their various talents and always buoyed by the hope of finding a place they can call home. Puppet shows play a crucial part in the climax, and in many ways the whole story is a wonderful bit of guignol, with larger than life villains and hints of the supernatural, while 19th century Amsterdam provides spectacular backdrops. For readers who do not already know the story of Macbeth. There is a great deal of intrigue to enjoy as the story unfolds, and children will recognise the friendship-fallouts and resulting chaos that Macbeth’s teammates suffer. Moreover, the football scenes are dramatically described and include the types of unsavoury foul play that would normally be omitted from children’s stories.

Children simply looking for a fun story about football will be surprised by the twists and turns in the story of Macbeth United and will question why the main character is willing to go to such extreme lengths just to be the captain. The book is a very good way to encourage readers to try something a little different and is an enjoyably original way of sharing Shakespeare’s work with children. SD

The Unadoptables

Loris Owen, Firefly Press, 352pp, 9781913102319, £6.99 pbk

Kip Bramley receives a very cryptic message that invites him to try and solve a riddle; this in turn brings an invitation to become a student at Quicksmiths College of Strange Energy. The school is full of wonderfully eccentric staff and students and Kip feels far more at home there than he did at his previous school. He and his new friends Albert, Leela and Timmi soon find themselves embroiled in an adventure. The founder of the school Eartha Quicksmith, who lived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth 1, has left a message in which she reveals that the Earth will face a tremendous danger unless someone can control a sequence of 10 hidden riddles and find her “Ark of Ideas”; however there are only 10 days in which to solve all the challenges. Everyone at the school is determined to find the treasure and Kip desperately wants to succeed as it might be a way to help his mother, who has been in a care home after being struck by lightning a few years previously. The problem is that not everyone has good intentions and the group of friends find themselves up against a dark and threatening opponent as they undertake their task. The question of whether they will succeed has us sitting on the edge of our seats as the adventure unfolds at a tremendous speed.

This is a real roller coaster of a ride, where people are not always what they appear to be and where having good friends becomes more important than Kip has ever realized. At the heart of the story is Kip’s desire to help his mother and bring his family back to the way it was when he was a small child. At Quicksmiths he finds a world where science and magic seem to combine and he hopes that he can channel his ‘strange energy’ into a way to help his family. The story seems to be a mix of Hogwarts and Back to the Future, with hoverboards called Skimmis and wonderful pets such as the Mow and Kip’s own Pinky (possibly a hamster of gerbil). There is a lot of humour, masses of puzzles and a mystery that they just have to solve. I am looking forward to the next adventure for this group of heroes and also to finding out more of the secrets at Quicksmiths. MP

The Children of Swallow Fell

Julia Green, OUP, 978-0192771582, 256pp, £6.99 pbk

Julia Green’s new novel will resonate with readers in ways she can’t have imagined when it was first published. Let me explain. Isabella lives in Italy with her parents, a normal life full of ordinary happiness, often shared with her best friend, Manuals. But it changes suddenly and forever when bombs explode in her city. ‘They’ – we never know who – are targeting transport hubs, bridges, historic monuments, wiping out the...
past’, Isabella and her father leave the next day to head for her grandparents’ home in the north of England. Her mother, and big sister will follow.

England too is suffering. A strange sickness has killed many of the population, food is scarce, power supplies unreliable, and those left alive are suspicious of strangers. Isabella’s grandparents are long gone but their house is still there in a remote and beautiful valley. When her father sets off to find food and a means to contact her mother, Isabella stays on her own, living on their supplies until she meets two other children, also living alone and hiding out in an old barn. Rowan and Keida show her what to eat, what to grow, share eggs from their hens. Their friendship sustains her, but just as important is the natural world and the beauty of her surroundings. It’s surely no coincidence that the title of the book brings to mind Swallows and Amazons, and the story reminds us too of other classic children’s novels in which nature is a force that heals and restores. After the terror of the bombing, and fears for her family, Isabella develops a sense of calm and hope, something readers will absorb even as we experience life during a pandemic. Beautifully told, this adventure story does more than keep the pages turning, though it will certainly do that. It vividly demonstrates to readers the beauty and importance of nature and how connecting with it is our real hope for the future. MMa

Read our Q&A interview with Julia Green

Moonchild Voyage of the Lost and Found

Aisha Bushby, illus Rachael Dean, Egmont, 978-1-4052-29521, 288pp, £6.99 pbk

Aisha Bushby’s debut, A Pocketful of Stars, is shortlisted for the Branford Boase Award and impressed Books for Keeps. That story was set in the real world but also featured magic, enabling its protagonist to travel back in time and far away. Moonchild returns to the themes of family, love and loss explored there but is set completely in a fantasy world, one of deserts, souks and tropical seas, beautifully and very evocatively described. Twelve-year-old Amira lives on a dhow, sailed by her two mothers and shared with chickens, a dog, some very pregnant goats and Namur, her jinn, who is a cat. Her story begins when her mothers rescued her from an enchanted island and this part of the story is written in the third person. This is a book about the importance and magic of stories, one in which storytelling opens the way to adventure and magic.

If storytelling is one part of magic, then emotions are another. Amira is defined by anger, while Leo, the friend who joins her on the quest that drives this plot, is full of fear and anxiety. Along with everyone else in this world, they must learn to acknowledge their feelings in order to live out the stories of their lives. The thread about the importance of acknowledging emotion is perhaps not teased out quite as fully as it needs to be, but the beauty of the story – and of the stories within the story – is irresistible. Equally appealing are the regular interjections from a mysterious narrator – who exactly that is will be revealed in the concluding pages.

Readers will be enchanted and will finish the book dreaming of adventures under sultry night skies and of having a jinn of their own to share them with. Aisha Bushby is talented author with a distinct voice and I’m looking forward to the next books in this series. One last note, there are illustrations throughout including double page spreads by Rachael Dean, an unusual treat in a book for this age group. LS

Read our Q&A interview with Aisha Bushby

Dragon Mountain

Katie & Kevin Tsang, Simon & Schuster, 360pp, 978-1-4711-93071, £7.99 pbk

Billy Chan is twelve. He lives in Southern California and wants to spend his summer surfing. The last thing he wants to do is attend a Chinese language course in the middle of nowhere in China. But he has no choice. In China he meets friends: Dylan O’Donnell, Charlotte Bell and Lingfei. It transpires that their visit to China is not just to improve their skill in Mandarin. It has a very different purpose. In this high fantasy adventure Billy and his three new friends learn that they must save their own world and also the mystical dragon world from destruction. Can they do it? And if so what cost?

Any reader who enjoys dragons will find this book congenial. The authors have used Chinese mythology to create a ceremony known as Bonding. Dragons must be bonded with their humans if their full powers are to be released. Bonding creates a link between the human and the dragon which is similar to the link between humans and their daemons in the Philip Pullman series. The link between humans and dragons lies at the heart of the narrative of the Tsangs. RB

My Story: Noor-Un-Nissa Inayat Khan

Sufiya Ahmed, Scholastic, 208pp, 978 0 702 30009, £6.99, pbk

This book tells the true story of Noor Inayat Khan, who was recruited as a secret agent by the Special Operations Executive (SOE) during World War Two to help the Indian and her heritage, Noor was educated in Paris before escaping to Britain with her family when France fell. Keen to help with the fight to free France, she was pleased to be recruited to work in occupied France because of her fluent French and was trained as a wireless operator. Eventually betrayed, captured and executed, Noor has been remembered posthumously as a hero. This reviewer must cite one criticism of an otherwise laudable book. The profiles are too short. They have been cut short to get more cases covered. Fewer but better biographies would have made a better job of describing some less well-known persons. And what is omitted is the darker side of lives marked by disability. Such sombre issues are sometimes hinted at, but not properly covered. Nevertheless this is a useful and innovative book. RB

Dark Blue Rising

Teri Terry, Hachette, 390pp, 978-1-4449-5710-5, £7.99, pbk

This is the first part of The Circle trilogy, with 16 year old Tabby at the centre of the narrative. She and Cate-who she believes to be her mother-lead a transient life, living a list of important dates at the back of the book. Her below is the book helps to highlight the role of women and individuals of BAME heritage in active service during the World Wars, bringing their often untold or uncelebrated stories to life. SMc

I Am Not a Label

Cerrie Burnell (author), Lauren Baldo (illus.), Wide Eyed, 64pp, 978-0-7112-4714-4, £14.99 hbk

This book is a large format hardback volume. It collects profiles of people from different countries, in different fields of activity and from different time periods. All these people are outstanding practitioners or leaders in one field or another, and all have different disabilities, both physical and mental, which are held for their needs. Beethoven for example was so deaf that he could not hear a performance of his last quartets. But he sensed the vibrations of the music through his body and thus produced some of his most haunting work. Stephen Hawking, who discovered many of the secrets of the universe and in particular about black holes, had motor neuron disease. He used a wheelchair and a voice synthesiser. At the age of twenty he was told he had two years left to live. He survived until the age of seventy six. Frida Kahlo’s painting is celebrated, despite having to spend much of her time in bed as a result first of polio and later of a spinal injury incurred in a motor accident.

34 such people are celebrated. Each has their own page and a page abbreviated biography in which that person’s impairment is not the first thing mentioned. Instead that person’s contribution and vision is the first thing mentioned. Each profile also includes a bright half page illustration. The illustrator also includes in some portraits a mobility aid if one is used. The priorities asserted in these profiles are rare and distinctive.

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No.244 September 2020
hand to mouth and Cate has instilled in Tabby a fear of authority in all its manifestations. When Cate is arrested and imprisoned for Tabby’s abduction at the age of 3 and she is returned to her real parents she has to come to terms with her feelings of alienation at their wealth and privilege and sort through the bewildering array of emotions her separation from Cate has generated. A further quandary is the meaning of Cate’s final words: ‘Beware The Circle.’

Tabby has always been compellingly drawn to the sea, needing to swim in it in order to feel whole. When her swimming talents are spotted she is invited to attend a summer school, where she hopes she can trust. She also hopes she can trust the circle tattoo which Cate had on her leg intertwined in its design.

Events gradually become darker and Tabby’s initial enthusiasm is supplanted by unease, then fear. The narrative moves along at a swift pace but this is in keeping with the Penrose Clinic—the one her parents use—around the complex and notices the circle tattoo which Cate had on her leg intertwined in its design.

The story opens with 16-year-old Amal, a gifted artist and poet, on trial for the murder of Yusef Salaam was a teenager who was 13 when he was wrongfully convicted of the murder of his best friend, Stuyvesant High School student Yusef Salaam. He was released in 2002, after more than 8 years in prison, when the true killer confessed.

The story begins in the year 511 A.D. with Merdyn being banished from the kingdom because of black magic, but he sends Tabby down into the ‘river of time’, not the ‘river of purgatory’ as his punishment; meaning that he finds himself in a 21st century shopping centre built on the spot where his trial had been held. He is obviously totally confused by what he sees and ends up being chased by two security guards. Luckily, he is saved by a young girl called Rose, who takes him home with her, but after several mishaps (including washing in the toilet basin) he ends up living in the garden shed. Rose is trying to keep her family together and hopes that winning a talent contest will help, unfortunately she is not a very good singer, so the odds are against her; she asks Merdyn for a spell to help her in return for aiding him in his attempts to get home. The whole situation is confused when Jerabo appears on the scene and tries to get rid of Merdyn, with the ensuing plot being full of laughs and fast action.

The loveable rogue of a central character, Merdyn the Wild, makes me think of the eponymous Catweazle, who was in a well-known TV series of the 1970s. He is someone who is totally adrift in the world that he finds himself in and even the basics of life are a total mystery to him. In many ways this is a reflection of what happens when people move home even in our modern world. We are made to think about the way that society has evolved and the expectations that we have; meaning that we need to consider how we support people with differing cultures to become used to a new cultural norm. The setting of this story is in Basingstoke, a small town just off the M3 and for someone who has lived there it bears a remarkable resemblance to Basingstoke, complete with bypasses and roundabouts. This is a reflection of the tongue in cheek humour that gives this story which will appeal to the adult reader as well as the intended audience. I loved the characters and the fun in this book and hope that we will see more work from this author, who is more widely known as an actor. MP

### Punching the Air

**10 – 14 Middle/Secondary continued**

**Happy, Healthy Minds**

The School of Life, illus Lizzie Stewart, 176pp, £18.00 hdbk

This nicely produced book about keeping one’s mind healthy provides a great deal of information and good coping strategies on lots of different emotional topics, such as problems with parents, feeling misunderstood, anger, anxiety, using screens well, bullies, confidence, patience, school, friends, and nature as a healing force. It also covers information about the adult world, thinking about jobs for the future and the necessity of one day living separate from your family. There is some well written fact and clear, and the pictures and diagrams, etc. very nicely done; however, I have one caveat. There is a great deal of text, and your children, who would get lots out of the book, may well find it all overwhelming. Even some 10 year olds might balk at first glance. It certainly overloads the young reader, some of which are quite new to me, and the style is friendly and approachable. Using it with a parent or carer could well be the answer to those who find it text over-long. An impressive production, useful in helping children’s emotional health.

**ES**

**The Wizard in My Shed**

Simon Farnaby, ill. Claire Powell, Hodder, 38pp, 9781444957671, £12.99 hbk

The story begins in the year 511 A.D. with Merdyn being banished from the kingdom because of black magic, but he sends Tabby down into the ‘river of time’, not the ‘river of purgatory’ as his punishment; meaning that he finds himself in a 21st century shopping centre built on the spot where his trial had been held. He is obviously totally confused by what he sees and ends up being chased by two security guards. Luckily, he is saved by a young girl called Rose, who takes him home with her, but after several mishaps (including washing in the toilet basin) he ends up living in the garden shed. Rose is trying to keep her family together and hopes that winning a talent contest will help, unfortunately she is not a very good singer, so the odds are against her; she asks Merdyn for a spell to help her in return for aiding him in his attempts to get home. The whole situation is confused when Jerabo appears on the scene and tries to get rid of Merdyn, with the ensuing plot being full of laughs and fast action.

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**14+ Secondary/Adult**

**Punching the Air**

Ibi Zobi and Yusef Salaam, HarperCollins 392pp, 9780008122111, £7.99 pbk

Yusef Salaam was a teenager when he was one of the five people wrongfully convicted of the murder of the Central Park jogger. This story is in part inspired by that incident. Written in free verse this is an extraordinarily powerful account of systemic racism in the American criminal justice system and how one mistake by a young black boy results in a conviction.

**The free verse is the prefect medium to convey this raw and emotional story giving it an energy and intensity that is utterly compelling. The visual layout is excellent too. I have seldom read such an immediate and passionate account of prejudice and how racism is so endemic in the everyday lives of so many people. Even the 13th Amendment states that imprisonment is a form of legal slavery.**

**Every YA reader needs to hear this story – it is too important to miss. JC I, Ada**

Julia Gray, Andersen, 326pp, 9781839130076, £7.99, pbk.

The striking face of Ada Lovelace taken from a portrait, staring at the reader from the cover of this fictional story of her early life until her marriage. Ada Lovelace was the daughter of Lord Byron but her mother left the poet when she was six weeks old fearing for her life. However, Lord Byron did not tell her daughter about her father and Ada spends most of early years trying to find out about the man who is a prefect TV star of the 1970s. He is someone who is totally adrift in the world that he finds himself in and even the basics of life are a total mystery to him. In many ways this is a reflection of what happens when people move home even in our modern world. We are made to think about the way that society has evolved and the expectations that we have; meaning that we need to consider how we support people with differing cultures to become used to a new cultural norm. The setting of this story is in Basingstoke, a small town just off the M3 and for someone who has lived there it bears a remarkable resemblance to Basingstoke, complete with bypasses and roundabouts. This is a reflection of the tongue in cheek humour that gives this story which will appeal to the adult reader as well as the intended audience. I loved the characters and the fun in this book and hope that we will see more work from this author, who is more widely known as an actor. MP

**2020**
The Girl Who Became a Tree

Ada, and maybe pursue science and/ or a career related to her father Lord Byron, whose poems so well that she becomes a long-time admirer, to learn more about her father and to witness their legacy. A book to inspire and enrich, to learn more about the lives of the central characters, and to observe how they develop and affect each other.

Maggie Tokuda-Hall, Walker, 416pp, 9781463595011, £7.99 pbk

This story is set in a world that has links to our past. There is all powerful government, there is modern technology, and there are memories and works her way through isolation and the stages of grief to reconnect with family and friends.

The author skillfully re-works the legend of Daphne as Daphne turned into a tree by her river-god father to avoid the attentions of Apollo, into a bleak and emotional YA story of loss and longing, and full of powerful imagery. Free verse and form poems combine to present themes of death, loss, hope and renewal and the dark, spiky black and white illustrations enhance the atmosphere of fear and dislocation. This is a thought-provoking book which merges fantasy and reality, the mythical with the modern, urban and forest landscapes. It is an emotional and complex read, but those older readers who enter the forest with Daphne will be rewarded and the darkness inside will emerge with her into a more hopeful world.

Wrecked

Louisa Reid, Guppy Books, 376pp 978-1-915101-367 £7.99 pbk

Following the critically acclaimed Gloves Off which tackled bullying, boxing and body image in verse form, Louisa Reid now writes in similar form about a car crash in which the other driver, mother and nurse Stephanie White, was killed outright. Joe and Imogen were in the other car, but which of them was driving?

This form runs between the court case and the back story, explaining how Joe and Imogen got together and a lot about their relationship, including its impact on Joe’s life at school and at home. His love for Imogen, (or Immie), means that he is torn between staying with her if she teams up for a big match, and his grades slide. Imogen is not an attractive character- she doesn’t see the point of school, is rude to teachers, and is a bad influence on Joe, but he cannot see that. His friends are concerned, but also have their own relationship issues. His Dad is dying of an unspecified illness, but both his parents have high hopes that Joe will go to college and have a good career. It looks as if that may not happen after all, as Joe seems to be heading for prison. The fact that he had been working in a garage after help make ends meet, but stole and crashed the car he was working on, does not endear him to the jury. The barrister is eloquent, the jury mostly bored, and this is all very described. The tension mounts as the witnesses are not always helpful, Joe’s Dad dies, and he has to face up to the possible consequences of his actions.

Louisa Reid has written other books about people who are different in some way, and Gloves Off was her first in verse form. This one included some examples of texting between Joe, Immie and their friends, which seems almost obligatory in YA books. This, her second in verse is indeed excellent writing, but perhaps too long – your reviewer confesses skipping to the end, and a teen reader may also lose patience.

The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea

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together along with Rudy’s best friend Tyler, happily working out his apprenticeship at the welcoming veggie cafe, Kale and Heartly. Face to face, the girls are wary of each other. Different homes, clothes, schools – and there are differences of ethnicity; Rudy’s family is black, Clem’s white. What is there to share? But once they decide to collaborate, with Rudy stencilling Clementine’s verse onto her painting, that caution dissolves. Words and images fuse to reflect heartfelt beliefs – the need to learn from setbacks, to be resilient, to keep climbing towards your dreams; and, looking beyond themselves, they create a piece to add fresh voices to the shout against plastics choking the oceans. They talk, and talk; about everything from their creative processes to dealing with the crass middle-aged men invading their homes. In fact, there’s so much to talk about that the pace of the novel can seem as unhurried as a real-time conversation, though the use of the storytelling present tense makes for engaging immediacy. There’s humour too – embedded in credible adolescent chat rather than the contrived – and the longing for freedom, serve to add to the reader’s scepticism as their pathways to adulthood. The girls’ excited idealism may risk a reader’s bridle to allow them a slightly more sceptical view of the world, but overall they are refreshingly enjoyable to read, with Green’s trademark gay eye and perceptive understanding of the prejudices and obstacles that gay and Muslim people face. And of course, it’s for difficult times that we need such books. How much a reader will stick to the book will depend on their readiness – and their capacity – to deal with the harsh realities of contemporary life that are inevitably distilled in a novel. This is Ahmadi’s third novel and, he says, it is ‘my most personal book; it is the kind of story I’ve always been afraid to write’. At one level, it ‘complies with the narratives you expect from gay people and Muslim people’ in America. But beneath this narrative lies the struggle of a Muslim family to transcend the fears and the guilt driven by their love for a son: meanwhile, that son finds that a summer far from home offers so many overwhelming excitements that he’s able to escape confirming his identity as a gay man. A family relocation means that Amir starts his senior year at a new high school, where he meets Jackson Preacher, a blond, popular football jock – Amir’s seeming antithesis in culture and personality. The two dare to respond to a mutual attraction; instead of the electric, sensitive and revealing. Until they’re caught on camera kissing in Jackson’s car by a classmate who blackmails Amir to the tune of $4000. Pay up by Graduation Day, or the family gets to see the photograph. Amir cuts and runs, telling no-one. He takes a flight to Rome, and with a rapidity that might challenge a reader’s belief, within a day or two he is very much at home in a group of gay friends and the breathtaking enjoyment of unfamiliar food, wine and all-night parties. All this set against the culture and architecture of the Eternal City, from cafes and clubs and music to a moment of epiphany in the Sistine Chapel. ‘Holy shit,’ says Amir, as he gazes up at ‘God and Adam, heavenly homies, with their hands reaching out, fingers barely touching’. Amir’s Roman adventures are punctuated by short chatty phonecalls, trying to look forward in time to his return to the States. His mother, father and younger sister, we learn, have tracked him down in Italy, there’s been a family row on the flight home, and now they are being interrogated separately at the airport by Customs officers wary of any Muslim traveller. Each of those chapters reflects the different perspective of a member of Amir’s family. Readers might think Amir’s pursuit of pleasure and self-knowledge in Rome becomes repetitive. His new friends seem to find their own sexuality endlessly interesting. This ‘most personal’ book is, however, informed by Amir’s explicit and honest descriptions, even though he is often confused by the intensity of it all. Just about everyone Amir meets in Italy – and most of Amir’s naivity, Ahmadi allows him to recognise cracks and tensions – a selflessness - within the group; and at the same time, the circumstances of the family life he has left behind in the States, and the hurt he must have caused. The intoxication of his Italian friends, amid the stillness of the mists of the group, his fellow Iranian Jahan – whom Amir has seen as a mentor – has his limitations, which Amir comes to understand. Their responses to the questions of the Customs officials serve as a kind of self-therapy for the family, enabling Amir, his younger sister and parents to see the new life they need to develop together. As so often with YA books exploring change and growth, the novel’s appeal will depend on what preoccupations and experiences each reader brings to the text. Loveless


Georgia Warr is aged eighteen. She has self-harmed her life away, and leaves the Museum, they are invited to record a reaction. Rudy draws an image of the two of them joined in ‘a double-faced head’; Clementine adds the words, ‘Unity in Diversity’. GF

Heartbreak Boys

Simon James Green, Scholastic, 448 pp, 978-140717577, £7.99 pb

Faking it for social media is the name of the game in this sweet gay rom-com road trip novel. Jack and Nate have both been dumped at the end of their senior year; their dreams and their exes are off to start an amazing new relationship together. So, Jack and Nate decide to create a ‘highlights reel’ of their equally outstanding summer on Insta, showing the world they’re winning. However, fabricating a super summer out of a series of dismal campsites isn’t easy, and before long all the trops of a British summer road trip, (as well as those in a reluctant romance), are being rolled out: an airport dash, failure to get over an ex, lack of beds, and more. The banter between Jack and Nate’s distinctive personalities is funny and authentic, and the circumstances they find themselves in are varied and amusing, from a vegan farm to a military training area. Told in alternating first person perspectives, the distinctiveness of their personalities falters a little in their voices, and it’s both helpful and necessary to have nine or ten voices for each of the brothers. And of course, it is difficult for any author to write two alternating first person accounts without the reader wondering one, and Nate is a much more sympathetic, if grumpier, character. There’s a predictableness to the initial reluctance, and then coming together, of the protagonists, so the story is more about the telling than the ending, but it is entertaining. Despite the somewhat mishandling of many of the secondary characters, Green is good at drawing attention to identity and social media pitfalls, as well as exploring real teen angst. The unfortunate difficulty though is that the book is so clearly set in the summer of 2020. The year is mentioned several times in this edition, and in one scene it is a pivotal joke, and because it was written pre 2020, the story lives in a universe in which Covid never happened. This is a slight distraction but shouldn’t put readers off – the novel is a fun road-trip read, with Green’s trademark gay teen insights and sparkling humour, and deserves merit for the ease with which it fully embraces finding and owning one’s identity. CZ

The Rules

Tracy Darrton, Stripes Publishing, 192pp, 978-1789852140, £7.99 pb

Amber Fitzpatrick is aged seventeen. She is in foster care and boarding school. When her mother died the authorities put her in foster care, and boarding school. Her life is on hold, and she learns that her father has left behind in the States, and the hurt he must have caused. The intoxication of his Italian friends, amid the stillness of the mists of the group, his fellow Iranian Jahan – whom Amir has seen as a mentor – has his limitations, which Amir comes to understand. Their responses to the questions of the Customs officials serve as a kind of self-therapy for the family, enabling Amir, his younger sister and parents to see the new life they need to develop together. As so often with YA books exploring change and growth, the novel’s appeal will depend on what preoccupations and experiences each reader brings to the text. GF

14+ Secondary/Adult continued
Go To the Wild Sky for drama and puzzlement

Brian Alderson discusses Ivan Southall’s story of survival and possible salvation, To the Wild Sky.

Not all that long ago

a lady acquaintance, much involved with children’s books, mentioned that she had been invited to Australia to visit the Museum at Dromkeen and generally chew the rag. ‘Can you get news on the fate of Ivan Southall?’ I asked, to which the reply came: ‘Who’s he?’

Well, I know he died a dozen years ago,

but wondered how his reputation fared in his native land in this new century, and I wonder now if he is as forgotten there as he is here. For he was a writer of somewhat controversial eminence in the ‘golden 60s and 70s’ of the last century (the first Australian to win the Carnegie Medal) and a unique specialist in disaster: floods, bush fires, and, in the inexplicable Finn’s Folly, a caste of troubled characters, including one severely mentally disabled child, who engage in a Totentanz where, on a foggy night, a car crashes into an overturned lorry full of drums of cyanide.

To the Wild Sky

is among the variants of Southall catastrophe, a bleak reading of the child survival theme that we encountered in Walkabout (BfK 243) where a plane crash deposited two American children in the middle of an Australian desert. On this occasion the participants are six local schoolfriends, one of whom has invited the others to what looks like being an ostentatious birthday party on his parents’ sheep farm three hundred miles up west of the River Darling.

We meet them serially

as they join the taxi that is to take them to the airstrip for the flight north: Gerald, the birthday child, Bruce and Jan, twins, Colin and his younger brother, Mark, too ‘wild and thoughtless’ for the occasion, and the beautiful Carol. The little plane they fly in belongs to Gerald’s father, who has let him sit at the controls occasionally, but it only has five passenger seats so Colin, in his best suit, has to sit on the floor. The pilot, Jim, is an employee of the family, not in belongs to Gerald’s father, who has let him sit at the controls occasionally, but it only has five passenger seats so Colin, in his best suit, has to sit on the floor. The pilot, Jim, is an employee of the family, not in.

It’s only to be expected

that Jan and Colin should be sick (he in his best suit) only a few minutes into the flight and, since Southall is telling the story, that soon after, a hundred miles or so on, Jim should suffer an instant and fatal heart attack. What hope there is for the passengers thus rests on Gerald, clambering into the pilot’s seat and attempting to use his very slender knowledge to keep the plane aloft. Southall (who had been a decorated pilot during the War) gives a thrilling insight into both the technology of what confronts Gerald and his own thinking as he traverses a desperate learning curve on how to steer, let alone land the machine. For much of the time decisions based on a view of the landscape have been impossible because of low cloud and eventually, with fuel getting low and night falling, he brings the plane down in the sea on the littoral of what turns out to be an uninhabited island.

It is here

that, where the ignorant children of Walkabout are saved by their encounter with the Aborigine boy, the children of the bourgeois Australian suburbs have to try to figure out themselves where they are and what may be necessary for their survival.1 They spend a night of exhausted sleep after the trauma of the flight and the landing, but the next day any sort of rational planning is dominated by the realisation that no one knows their pilot had died or where they might be so that their future rests with themselves alone. (An investigation along the beach and the pooling of snippets of knowledge leads them to determine that, because of a powerful tail-wind in the flight, they have ended up on the island of Molineaux in the Gulf of Carpentaria, a wilderness if ever there was one.)

At the same time

there is much bickering over the need to bury poor Jim and to escape the island (idiottiocly by building a raft). It seems to escape them, as it doesn’t escape the reader, that the immediate need is to establish a source of fresh water and a mode of foraging for daily breakfast and dinner for six. The American children of Walkabout came by a hard-won resilience and learned to live off the land and eventually make their way to what may be a return to the life they knew. Here though the learning has yet to be done and Southall’s account is culpable of implying a doomed future for his largely incompetent castaways who do not have time to do it.

However,

as you turn the last pages he offers glimpses of a possible salvation. As evening falls on the island a flight of ducks passes inland, confirming the presence of fresh water. Girl Guide Jan, proponent of the foolish raft idea, finally succeeds in the famous scouting procedure to making a fire by ‘rubbing two sticks together’. And golden-haired Carol, who has guarded within herself the knowledge that her great-grandmother was a black Aboriginal, calls upon what fragment of native instinct is within her to find sustenance in the fruits of the earth. A possibility – but Southall leaves his readers to bet on its likelihood.

To The Wild Sky by Ivan Southall is available from Text Publishing, 978-1922147868, £8.99 pbk.

1. Voice from today: “Vy din’t vey takes veir i-fones wiv vem?”