

BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.248

the children's book magazine online

May 2021

Rod Campbell
Authorgraph interview

Peter Brown
Windows into Illustration

Plus **Hilary McKay, Geraldine McCaughrean**
and a new look inside the wardrobe



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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **The Swallows' Flight** by **Hilary McKay**, cover illustration for Dawn Cooper. Thanks to **Macmillan Children's Books** for their help with this May cover.



Guest Editorial:

Patrice Lawrence



Patrice Lawrence introduces the **All Stories project, a mentorship programme for under-represented writers unable to pay for editorial support.**

When I was four, my mum bought me three hardback tomes called **The Wonderful Worlds of Disney**. They were green with different-coloured spines. One volume was full of stories about nature; another about geography. My favourite was the one with the red spine, **Fantasyland**, which was really one massive plug for Disney cartoons. One evening my mum had some friends around. The next day, we realised that my book was gone.

Almost fifty years later, my mother and I are still outraged that such villainy occurred. Some miscreant stole my stories! But it's also a reminder to me about my childhood relationship with books and stories. I loved books. I loved reading. But every story I so eagerly absorbed reinforced the idea that people that looked like me could not be in books, let alone write one. I cannot remember a single person of colour in that hefty Disney book. When we did appear in books, it was often a racist caricature – Hugh Lofting's illustrations for the first editions of the **Doctor Doolittle** series or Helen Bannerman's **Little Black Sambo**. And yes, I read both of those as a child.

From the moment we are born, we are learning the values of our society. The stories we hear – and the lens that they are filtered through – shape our sense of identity and the worth placed on it. Who are the s/heroes? Who are the villains? Who do we see? Who's absent? How are words used to describe different types of people? I have spent many hours considering those questions, both as a writer and as a working class person of colour. This is why I'm so proud to be the patron of the inaugural **All Stories** project established by writer and editor Catherine Coe.

Even in London, I was sometimes the only Black person at mainstream publishing events (unless there were caterers). I'd also supposed that there weren't many others in the room whose stepdad was a hospital porter. Yes, the demographic of

publishing needs to change, but honestly, do we have time to wait? The new generation of children and carers need a world that's bursting with stories, just like I did, stories that whether explicitly or subtly, challenge stereotypical representation.

All Stories acknowledges that diversifying children's writing isn't simply a matter of putting a call out for writers, expecting them to be publishing-ready. We are lucky now. There are many ways to bring stories out into the open. Kandace Chimbiri and Zanib Mian set up their own publishing companies and were subsequently published by traditional children's publishers. However, many writers do not have the resources to explore alternatives to traditional publishing, or indeed to apply to writing academies or for MAs. Being a good writer isn't enough. To gain agent representation and a place in the acquisitions meeting, you need so much more.

All Stories provides this. It is the place where talent meets publishing experience – 21 expert editors to guide writers through the challenges to publication. Writers not only learn how to create the best possible story, but are prepared and informed about what happens next. I can only applaud Catherine's tenacity for holding on to her vision even when funding seemed unlikely, because I am often asked by emerging writers about mentoring. It is at the heart of **All Stories** and, in a couple of years' time, I'll be eagerly updating my Twitter feed and smiling as those new stories start their journey from writer to publisher to the hands of children and young people.

 **All Stories**
www.allstories.org.uk

Books for Keeps

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teachers'
reading
challenge



The red thread of reading for pleasure: determinedly sharing the joy

by **Teresa Cremin**

In this, my final article on the red thread of reading for pleasure, I want to inspire a new wave of relentless determination to entice all teachers to read children's books and share their delight in them. We know that teachers' knowledge of children's literature and other texts is not an optional extra, it is foundational. But I fear that as readers of **Book for Keeps**, as members of library and publishing circles, of book clubs and the Twitter kids' books community, we are living in an echo chamber. We delight in sharing and receiving book recommendations, in meeting authors, in reading and being part of a book loving collective. But what about all those teachers who are far less engaged?

The challenge

Only last week a practitioner wrote in a zoom chat line– 'Are you seriously asking me to read kids' books– I just don't have the time'. Whilst many teachers offered encouragement, I doubt their words, or my keynote, made any difference. Years ago, our research revealed that teachers' repertoires desperately needed expansion (Cremin et al, 2009). Primary practitioners' knowledge of children's texts was scant (24% couldn't name a picture fiction creator and 22% a poet!) They relied upon books from childhood and a narrow canon of 'celebrity authors' – in particular Dahl dependency was rife. Secondary teachers' knowledge of authors was also limited, dominated by Dahl, Morpurgo, Rowling and Donaldson (Clark and Teravainen, 2015).

Worryingly, a recent lockdown survey revealed the same trend, with almost the same list of popular writers receiving by far the highest number of mentions (CLPE, 2021). Dahl was the most frequently cited author that these teachers' reported reading aloud during this time. In countless school improvement projects too, I continue to find practitioners' knowledge of children's texts remains a cause for concern.

However, it isn't easy for classroom teachers to find the time to expand their reading repertoires, especially as reading in schools is often conceived as a matter of proficiency, a skill to be taught and tested. Moreover, despite the inclusion of reading for pleasure in the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014), there is no requirement for teachers to develop this essential aspect of their subject knowledge, either in teacher training or through professional development.

The consequence

Yet unless practitioners have a wide and deep knowledge of children's literature and other texts, and a working knowledge of the children as readers, they are not well positioned to instil a love

of reading and enable the will to influence the skill. In our school improvement work we regularly find that children's favourite authors mirror the restricted range known to staff. Limited professional repertoires constrain children's experience of diverse texts, of texts that reflect their young lives, that explore current issues and are written by #ownvoice and new writers. Frequently, the baseline audits of staff knowledge reveal significant gaps; in September 2020 for instance, one head teacher found only 3 of the 41 books named by the staff were published after 2004! In another, as the English leader noted: 'Staff themselves were shocked by their own answers [to the baseline audit] and acknowledged that their choices reflected books from their own childhood, from their own children's childhood or from texts taught in school. Not many teachers had read a children's book (outside of the classroom) for a long time.'

Children need role models who voice their passion and pleasure in reading. Knowledge of children's literature and of individual children as readers is the cornerstone on which interactive and reciprocal communities of readers are built. So as a profession we surely need to pay increased attention to those staff members, teachers and teaching assistants who are less than keen readers. They may have less time, lockdown may have disturbed their reading practices, and they may have forgotten, or never yet experienced, the affective, social and relational satisfactions of being a reader.

Ways forward to tempt and engage staff

We cannot make teachers (or children) find reading satisfying or demand they enjoy themselves, but we can entice, tempt, and invite them into the imaginative, informative and engaging world of reading, and share our own pleasures and experiences as readers. Multiple possibilities beckon.

Making it personal and affective

In order to draw staff into the reading community, it is vital to get to know more about their interests and lives beyond school. Armed with knowledge about their hobbies, fascinations, a forthcoming wedding and so forth you can tailor your **text recommendations** to tempt your colleagues, perhaps gifting these wrapped up as a half-term treat. Additionally, inviting staff to create their **reading histories** (texts and contexts) or bring in books from childhood will trigger memories and informal conversations about their reading lives. Affective engagement underpins reading for pleasure, so let's tap into this and take time in staff meetings to revisit memories of bedtime stories or of books that moved us. Displaying these can also help.



Reading aloud potent picture fiction will further surface personal resonances and connections. Let the power of the narrative and the images do the work, just offer space for small group chat, and have a stash of other books by the same author/illustrator, or on the same theme, ready to loan your colleagues.

Making it volitional

Volition and agency are key to enticing readers of whatever age. Many staff will be reading aloud a class book from the school's reading spine, but if they didn't choose it, this is really required reading, not choice-led volitional reading. You'll want to nurture their intrinsic motivation to read, as this is more closely associated with recreational reading than extrinsic motivation, so why not offer a choice of texts from [last year's award winners](#) or a budget for books that each teacher can spend with their class. In one school last year, reading 20 children's books was set as a performance management target for all staff. Surprisingly, this didn't backfire on the senior leadership team, perhaps because choice was central, time was set aside to read and share in staff meetings and new stock was ordered based on teachers' recommendations. Offering challenges can also help, such as reading to your ankle or knee in books, or joining the [Teachers' Reading Challenge](#).

Making it social

Reading is both solitary and social and always dependent on text and context. So, plan opportunities for staff to share their reading lives and practices with each other and the children. By reading aloud at the start of every briefing meeting or in regular reading assemblies, you'll be building a set of **staff books in common**, read for the sole purpose of shared enjoyment. These represent a rich resource for conversation, emotional and social connections and for spinning webs of reader relationships. Creating a **staff bookshelf** with some of the very best children's literature, non-fiction, magazines and

comics can also trigger book chat, especially if staff leave post-it-note reviews for each other inside.

Many staff teams explore **what counts as reading** in their lives and share these prior to exploring the same question with children. Reading rivers, 24 hour reads and [reading treasure hunts](#) can all help to highlight diversity and the social nature of everyday reading, as well as our personal purposes and preferences as readers.

Making the benefits explicit

Some staff may be unaware of the **significant academic benefits** that accrue to childhood readers. Focusing on this in a staff meeting or creating simple **posters with research evidence** can help. These could show for example, that recreational reading contributes to increased comprehension and attainment in literacy (Tavsancil, et al., 2019), higher mathematics scores (Sullivan and Brown, 2015), enriched narrative writing (Senechal, 2019) and a wider vocabulary (McQuillan et al, 2019). Highlighting the **social and emotional benefits** that support children's wellbeing is also important; reading (and being read to) can be calming, offering a safe space for relaxation and escapism, as well as a sense of belonging that is so important (and not only in the context of the pandemic).

In conclusion

Understanding that reading is affective, volitional, and social is a challenge in an accountability culture which frames reading in education as an individual act of proficiency. But with determination it is possible to rekindle staff engagement and enhance each member's personal and professional awareness of what it means to be a reader. It's not only a professional, moral, and social responsibility to keep up to date with children's texts, it's also a deep source of satisfaction, and by tempting more staff to read and share the red thread of reading for pleasure, you'll be nurturing the desire and delight of younger readers too.



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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!

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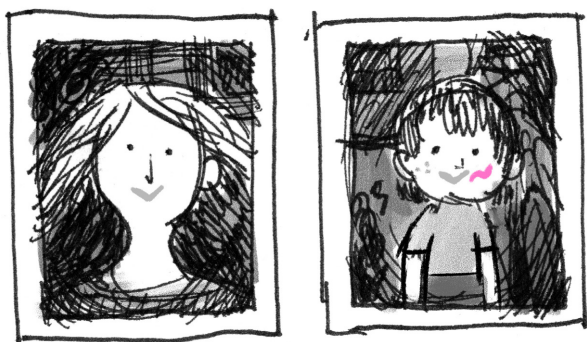


www.researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure# @OpenUni_RfP

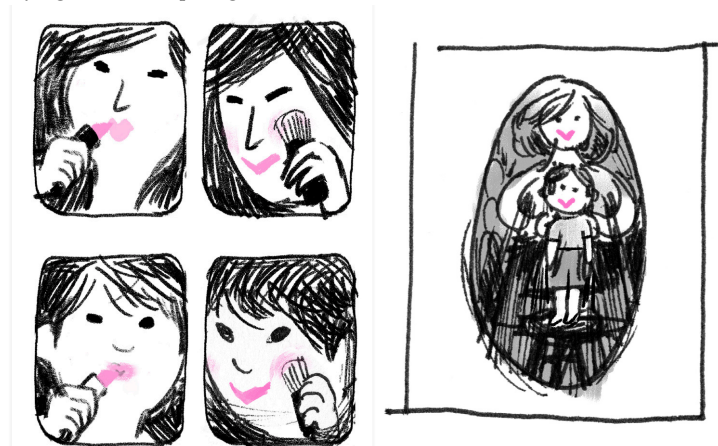
Windows into illustration: Peter Brown

US author illustration Peter Brown is best known in this country for his young fiction **The Wild Robot** and picture books **Mr Tiger Goes Wild** and **My Teacher is a Monster**. Clever and stylish his books celebrate individuality and self-expression deftly and with immense amounts of humour. Here he explains the inspiration for his new picture book **Fred Gets Dressed**, and the technique used in its creation.

One day, when I was a little boy, I sneaked into my parents' bedroom and began rummaging through my mother's makeup drawer. I loved my mum, and I loved making art, so it makes sense that I was curious about the 'paint' she put on her face. But I didn't know what to do with makeup, and when my mother found me, her makeup was smeared across my cheek.



Her reaction spoke volumes. She just calmly cleaned my cheek, and then showed me how to put on makeup, and we had a fantastic time trying on makeup, together.



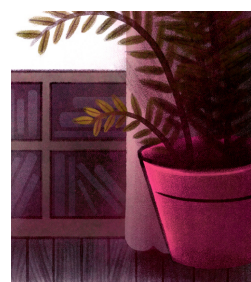
That lovely moment was the inspiration for my new picture book, **Fred Gets Dressed**. At first, I thought I'd simply retell that true story, but as my ideas developed, I decided to change the story in four important ways. 1) I named the boy character Fred, instead of Peter, which helped me let go of my own experience and focus



on the needs of the story. 2) In addition to trying on his mother's makeup, Fred also dresses up in her clothing and jewellery. 3) Since the story is all about Fred getting dressed, it made sense for him to start off completely undressed. 4) I included Fred's father in a minor but important role.



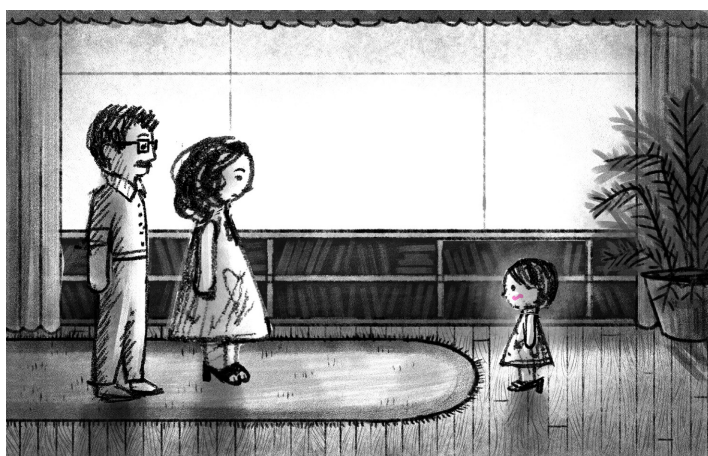
Fred's home is a loving, nurturing place, filled with plants, books, rugs, art, and a family dog. I painted the illustrations digitally, and used only four colours: pink, green, black and white. By overlapping those colours and changing their transparency, I was able to get a surprising variety of colour and texture that creates a sense of warmth throughout the book.



The only hint of tension in **Fred Gets Dressed** comes when Fred's parents walk into their room to find him dressed up like his mother.

I subtly heightened the tension by using the book gutter to separate the characters. This creates a physical, tangible distance between them, but is there any emotional distance? I didn't want to tell readers what to think, so I made this a wordless spread, and readers can only wonder what's going on inside each of the characters. However, the characters don't give much away because I illustrated them with no expressions or body language. This scene is like a blank canvas upon which readers can project their own feelings. Some readers might see nothing unusual here and feel no tension at all. Other readers might feel slightly uncomfortable at the sight of a boy in a dress. My hope is that by following Fred, step-by-step, on his little journey, all readers will feel a sense of understanding and connection with him. Empathy is the focus of most of my books, these days, and this book is no exception.

I like the idea that readers might linger on this illustration, briefly examining whatever feelings it stirs up. And then, when they're ready, they can simply turn the page to see what happens next.



Fred Gets Dressed is published by Templar Books,
978-1787419506, £6.99 pbk



Authorgraph

No.248

Rod Campbell
interviewed by
Clive Barnes

Rod Campbell and I are pretty much of the same vintage. We can both remember when the books with which he has made his publishing career were very hard to find. Board books for the youngest children, with or without flaps, are now a staple of children's publishers' lists and have their own sections in bookshops and libraries. But, forty years ago, few publishers had thought this audience was worth addressing or had explored the technology to produce the simple sturdy interactive books we now expect to share with our children and grandchildren.

Rod came upon what was to become his career 'almost by accident'. He studied organic chemistry for many years: 'I was supposed to be a bright child and go to university and all that'. But actually he wanted to paint and, once he'd satisfied expectations of his academic prowess with a doctorate, he spent ten years doing odd jobs and concentrating on painting 'hard edge abstracts'. He did sell some paintings then and he continues to paint now but his life changed course when someone with a sister in publishing saw a drawing of a toy that he had done and thought his style might suit children's books.

He found himself with Blackie, a venerable Scottish publisher, and began illustrating early concept books: 'tiny, insignificant, little paperbacks, with very little text: bigger, biggest, smaller, smallest, that sort of thing.' He enjoyed the work and the people. 'I was gradually drawn in and I realised that I had ideas'. He feels he was very much learning to illustrate as he went along, 'in public, you might say'. He then came across Eric Hill's **Where's Spot?** published in 1980. Pop up books for older children had been around at least since Victorian times and had seen something of a revival, particularly with Jan Pienkowski's **Haunted House**, published the year before Spot. These books for older children were sophisticated and somewhat fragile pieces of paper engineering but it was the potential of Hill's use of the humble and robust flap that intrigued Rod. He began work on his first flap book. This was published two

years later as **Dear Zoo**. It has been in print ever since and is now recognised as a classic of its kind.

Rod remembers that **Dear Zoo** 'developed in my mind surprisingly quickly. It has never been that quick since'. Rod sees his books as a bridge between toys and books, engaging younger children through physical interaction and introducing them not only to how a book works but also to the conventions of story and text. **Dear Zoo** exemplifies a number of principles that Rod has tried to apply to all his subsequent work. He places most importance on a story's resolution, aiming for an ending that is either calm and quiet, 'like the end of a busy day', or is gently upbeat.

While a story needs to be simple – and he typically uses repetition both as a plot device and within the text – it also needs to respect the child's level of understanding. What struck him most reading Dorothy Butler's **Books for Babies** (1980) was her insight that children bring their existing experience along with their curiosity to their reading. Humour is key to all of Rod's work, not only in his style of illustration, but in the story. Sometimes, author, carer and child seem to be sharing a joke. As he remarks of **Dear Zoo**, 'The logic appeals. Children are sensible enough to know that most of the animals will not fit in the house and will be difficult to look after. And then the perfect pet arrives'.

Rod describes himself as a maker of books, rather than an author or illustrator: Perhaps as a development of his interest in the book as a physical object, he quickly became involved in the publishing process itself, and, perhaps uniquely in the children's book world, became his own publisher. His name first appeared on the books alongside Blackie in 1987, and in 1989 he founded his own imprint, **Campbell Books**. 'Maybe it's because I'm quite proprietorial, but I'd learnt a lot about book production with Blackie, so I started doing a list and asked other authors and illustrators to do something for me, as well as publishing my own books.'

Starting with just himself and an assistant, Rod soon had a success on his hands. The 'books for babies' movement, starting from small beginnings in the early 1980s was, ten years later, fully into its stride and **Bookstart**, aiming to gift board books to every young family, was only a few years away. Rod sees this as result not only of changes in attitude to young children and books but also of the expanding technological opportunities in book production: 'Now with books you can do things that you couldn't do years ago: the card that's available, changing formats, thicker pages, holes, flaps and tabs – more ways of engaging the child'. **Campbell Books** thrived as an independent for six years and then Rod sold it to Macmillan. It was the right move for him. 'I felt I was turning into a businessman, which is not what I wanted. Also, it needed to expand, and I didn't feel I wanted to do that'. He took the opportunity to move to Paris for twelve years, practising his French.

Campbell Books still exist as an imprint within Macmillan Books, and Rod, returned to London, no longer has a role in it, although he continues to produce his own books for Macmillan. He feels flattered that Macmillan have kept his books in print, although, having done everything himself before, he admits to initially finding it difficult to accept that even small changes from his originals might be necessary for new editions. Other challenges have emerged and two of his stories have taken on new forms thanks to the children's theatre movement. A play of **Dear Santa** has been touring at Christmas for fifteen years and **Dear Zoo** went on tour in 2018. It was stopped in its second year by the pandemic, but will surely be back. Rod wrote

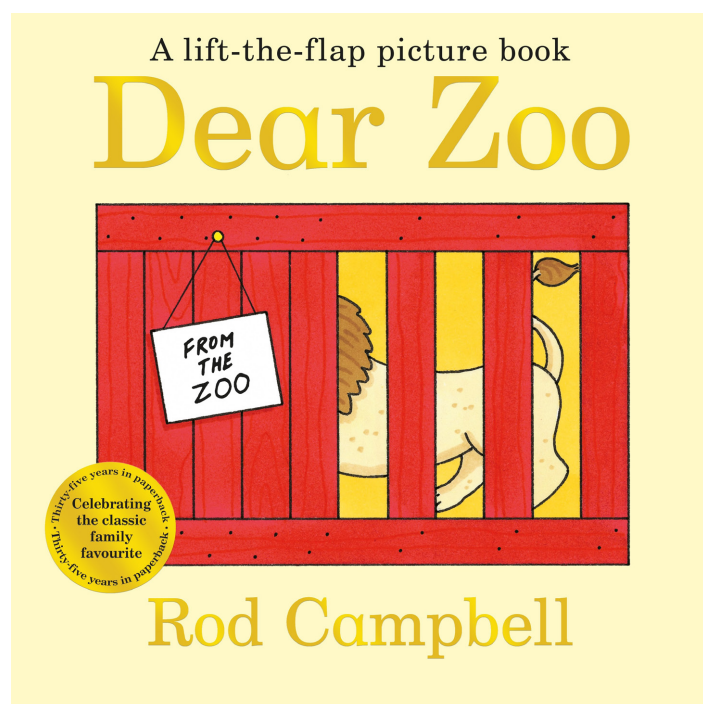




Photo: Francesca Stenhouse

the scripts for both productions and, while **Dear Zoo** and the rest of his back catalogue continue to find new small readers, he also has a new flap book to add to Macmillan's list.

Look After Us arose from an enquiry that Macmillan received about using **Dear Zoo** as part of a conservation campaign. Rod didn't feel that **Dear Zoo** quite fitted the bill and he set himself the task of making a book that might address animal conservation for young children. He liked the challenge of introducing a complex subject to young children. Rather than arriving mysteriously in a crate, the animals on each page are initially nowhere to be found, 'because we need to look after them better'. The front of each flap shows only an empty habitat – savannah for lions, desert for camels, jungle for orangutans and so on. The animals are revealed, of course, when the flaps are lifted. True to his policy of an upbeat ending, the end papers open out to reveal happy whales, 'because kind people are looking after them really well'.

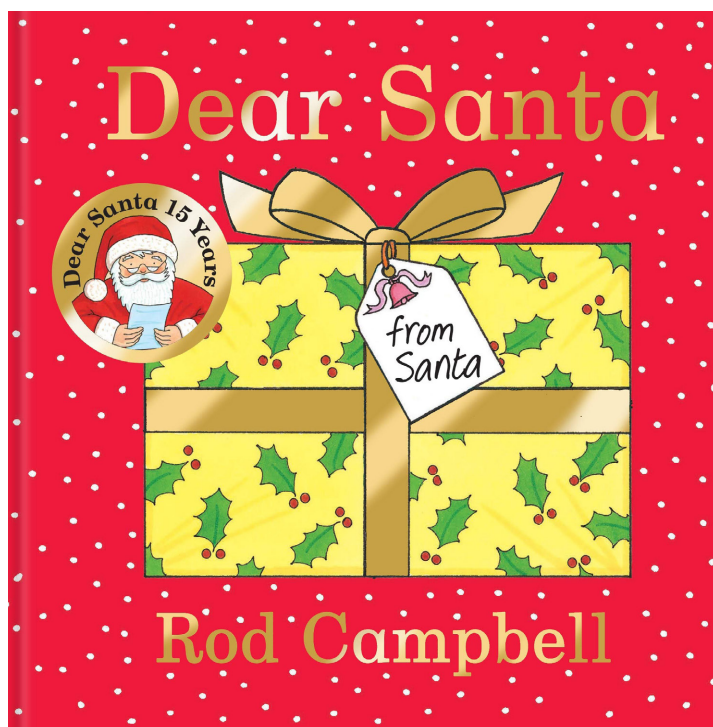
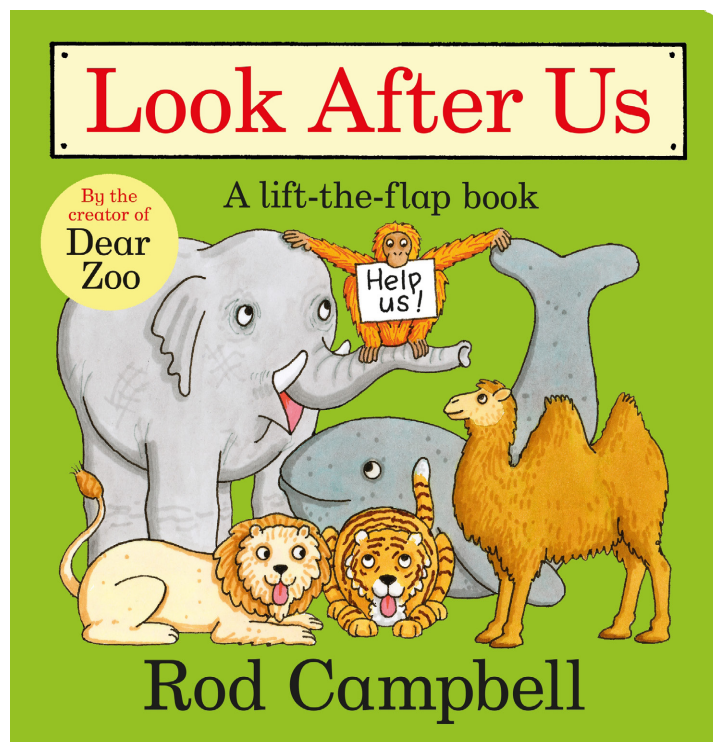
Rod says that he feels immensely grateful for his long career. 'It's astonishing really. I do what I do as best I can and it's just happened. When I did school visits it was always a great pleasure to connect with the children and to share their enthusiasm, spontaneity and honesty. The other thing is meeting parents, them telling me how much their child enjoys, say, **Dear Zoo**, and then saying, of course, I loved it too. It's a bit overwhelming'.

Books mentioned, all published by Macmillan Children's Books

Dear Zoo, 978-0230747722, £6.99

Look After Us, 978-1529045741, £6.99

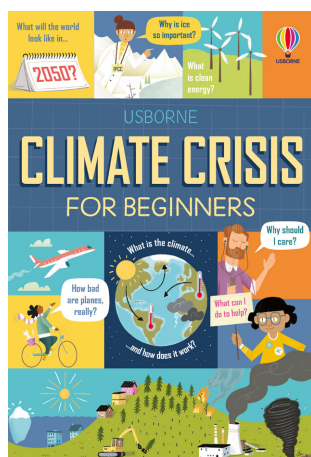
Dear Santa, 978-1529050714, £6.99



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

Ten of the Best Books books for young environmental activists

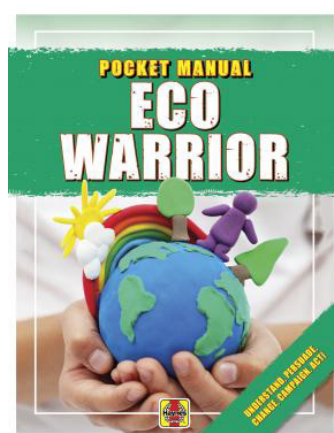
Way back in 1991, **Books for Keeps** published its very own **Green Guide to Children's Books**. Edited by Richard Hill and with an introduction from Jonathon Porritt it is now long O/P. Sadly the need for books to introduce children to green issues and environmental action is greater than ever. Selected by the **BfK** editorial team, here's a list of ten of the best recent books in this vital area.



Climate Crisis for Beginners

Andy Prentice and Eddie Reynolds, Usborne, 978-1474979863, £9.99 hbk

Full of clearly presented facts and figures, plus useful advice on ways they can make a difference, this is an excellent introduction to the climate crisis for young readers. The language is simple and backed up throughout by illustrations making complex issues easy to understand and digest. The book explains the basics; talks about what we need to do, and why we're not doing it faster; and finishes by listing things individuals can do now to make a difference, no matter their age. The conclusion reassures readers that having read the book, they will have the tools to imagine the future they want as well as ideas about how to get it.

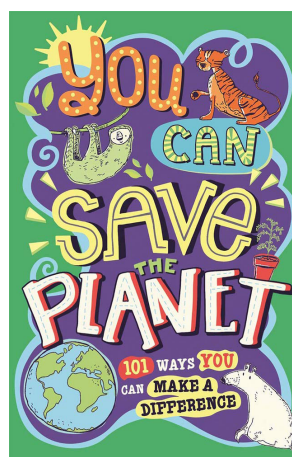


Eco Warrior: Understand, Persuade, Change, Campaign, Act!

Catherine Barr, J H Hayne & Co, 978-1785217258, £6.99 pbk

Author Catherine Barr worked at Greenpeace in the late 80s and her passion for protecting the natural world has endured. Designed to encourage young people to get involved in big issues, this pocket sized guide shows how they can make a real difference to the world. With sections on food production, biodiversity and plastic, it's full

of useful information, while other sections introduce campaigners who have successfully made a difference, and challenge readers to check the evidence before accepting something as fact. With colour photographs throughout, it's attractive as well as informative and you can feel the urgency of the message throughout.



You Can Save The Planet: 101 Ways You Can Make a Difference

J.A. Wines, Clive Gifford, Sarah Horne, Buster Books, 978-1780556604, £6.99 pbk

This little volume is just the right size to fit into a pocket or backpack and one to carry at all times as it's packed with handy advice on ways to be more green. Chapters include 'Do You Live in a Green House?', 'Shopping for the Planet' and 'Stop Polluting the Planet' and after describing the impact of the ways of life we all take for granted, they list things we can easily do to make a difference. These 'over to you' sections are practical, do-able and empowering. There's a list of websites to visit at the end to find out more, as well as Planet Pledges to sign – one for the reader, one for the reader's family. .



Plastic Sucks

Dougie Poynter, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529019377, £9.99 pbk

This book's dedication to Sir David Attenborough – *'the most awesome human who has ever lived'* – sets the tone for this book; author, former McFly and Busted member Dougie Poynter keeping the tone friendly and real, while focussing on the big issues, and what we need to do about them. There's no talking down to readers and he invites contributions from a range of scientist and campaigners, who all show that taking action is far more doable than we think. The book clearly lays out the huge problems our planet is facing from plastic while showing how changing our behaviour can really make a difference, and still allow us to live fun and happy lives.

10



How You Can Save the Planet

Hendrikus van Hensbergen, Puffin, 978-0241453049, £7.99 pbk

Hendrikus van Hensbergen is CEO of young environmental charity, **Action for Conservation**, which he founded after realising that no charities in the UK existed with the sole purpose of engaging young people in environmental action. Like his charity, his book speaks directly to young people and lets them know that, no matter how powerless and anxious they might feel, they're not alone. It tells the stories of other young

people around the world who took matters into their own hands, made a difference and actually changed things for the better. Part manifesto, part operations manual, it's full of hope and inspiration.



Greta's Story: The Schoolgirl who Went on Strike to Save the Planet

Valentina Camerini, illus Veronica Carratello, translation Moreno Giovannoni, Simon & Schuster, 9781471190650, £6.99

From one set of inspiring young people to the one who has done most to put young peoples' voices at the heart of efforts to protect our planet. This book tells Greta Thunberg's story, explaining how a wary, quiet girl from Sweden found the courage and determination to stand up for what she

knows is crucial to the future of every one of us. Her story is unique, but it demonstrates again how together we can all make a difference, and work towards the future we want. In addition to Greta's story, there's a chapter explaining the science of global warming, notes on what we can do as individuals and suggestions for further reading.

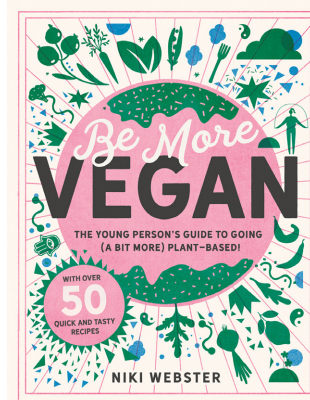


Hope Jones Saves the World

Josh Lacey, Andersen Press, 978-1783449279, £6.99

Fictional characters can do just as much to inspire readers into action, take Hope Jones for example. Like many ten-year olds she worries about the state of the environment, and about plastic pollution in particular. Her dad is always saying if you want something done, you have to do it yourself, so she sets about doing what she can. Her adventures are recounted via her lively blog and we get a ringside view of her peaceful protest

outside the local supermarket, interactions with local businesses, and conversations with neighbours, friends and parents of friends. As her campaign reaches more and more people, Hope realises that we can all make a difference, if we're determined enough.



Be More Vegan

Niki Webster, Welbeck Publishing, 978-1783125692, £14.99 hbk

In the second book in the Hope Jones series, young Hope decides to turn vegan and this book could have been a real help. It's full of tasty, faff-free vegan recipes, which are easy to follow, easy to make and certain to be a hit with everyone in the family, even dyed-in-the-wool carnivores. More than just a recipe book though, it's also full of equally useful and appealing information

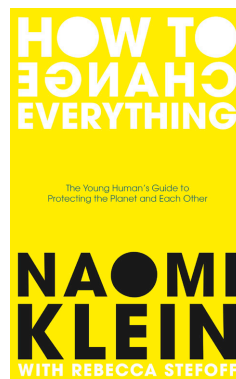
on the whys of being vegan. Niki Webster explains it all in a way that feels friendly and do-able, making sure to answer FAQs on getting enough protein and vitamins as well as on the best vegan substitutes, and laying out clearly, but with a sense of passion, why veganism is about more than just food and diet.



Be the Change Poems to Help You Save the World

Liz Brownlee, Matt Goodfellow, Roger Stevens, Macmillan Children's Books, 9781529018943, £5.99

Poetry has the power to change the world too and this might be the book to do it. Alongside poems on the many threats to the environment and the natural world are poems that pose 'tricky questions' about how we choose to live. There are poems to make children laugh, to inspire and inform them; above all here are poems that will provoke a reaction. It might be something practical, like deciding to change the contents of your lunchbox, or it might mean making a change to the way you understand the world. It ends with Liz Brownlee's quiet but powerful poem 'Snow', a beautiful example of how the smallest things can effect change.



How to Change Everything

Naomi Klein with Rebecca Stefoff, Puffin, 978-0241492918, £12.99 hbk

It's possible to build a better future, says this book, if we're willing to change everything. The book poses three crucial questions: where are we now? How did we get here? What happens next? In tackling these it details well-known facts but also looks at some of the realities about climate change that we tend to ignore such as its disproportionate impact on poor communities and communities of colour.

With chapters on Hurricane Katrina, Indigenous people's initiatives for change, and lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic, Klein and Stefoff make a very solid case for changing everything and offer practical and realistic steps for doing so. Urgent, hard-hitting and serious, it shows young people what they're capable of.

Up with the Skylarks:

an interview with Hilary McKay

Hilary McKay is the author of more than thirty books for children, including the **Exiles** trilogy, the **Casson Family** series, and **The Skylarks' War** and its sequel **The Swallows' Flight**. Winner of the **Guardian Children's Fiction Prize**, the **Nestle Smarties Gold Award** and the **Costa Children's Book Award**, she is renowned for her deft characterisation, wry humour, eccentric families, and vivid depiction of the natural world. **Imogen Russell Williams** interviewed Hilary for this issue of Books for Keeps.



Many of your young protagonists engage deeply with books. What did you read yourself as a child that stayed with you and shaped your ways of thinking?

Enid Blyton got me to be a fluent reader. I read all through them, and then it seemed like I could read *anything* – and I did! We didn't have many books at home, but we did have a constant supply from the library. I read Joan Aiken, [Gavin Maxwell's] **Ring of Bright Water**, **The Hobbit**, all the Arthur Ransomes – I read across fantasy, a lot of natural history, Gerald Durrell and things like that. I liked history, too. I can't think of much I *didn't* read.

The power of place is strongly present in your work, especially places where your heroes spend joyous holidays, like the Cornish coast for the Skylarks and the Exiles. Did you have places like those when you were growing up?

No, I didn't. We lived in Boston, Lincolnshire, which was a nice little town, I suppose, looking back on it, but we were bored stiff – the countryside was very flat and mechanised, 70s, 80s agriculture. We did have a beautiful salt marsh, and we used to go down there, but

I didn't really see countryside at all until I was thirteen or fourteen. We didn't have a car; we were quite poor, and we didn't go anywhere much. We'd go to the seaside, and my dad loved London, so we used to go to London. But I didn't see hills and greenness until I was quite a lot older, and then I realised that what I'd been reading about was true.

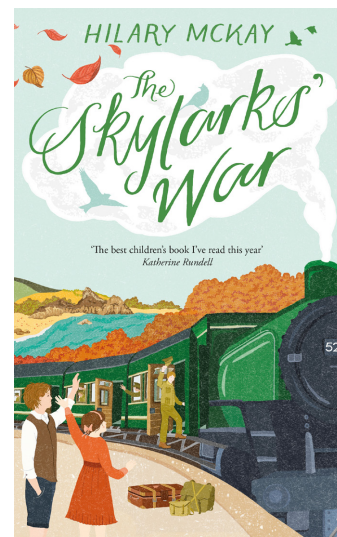
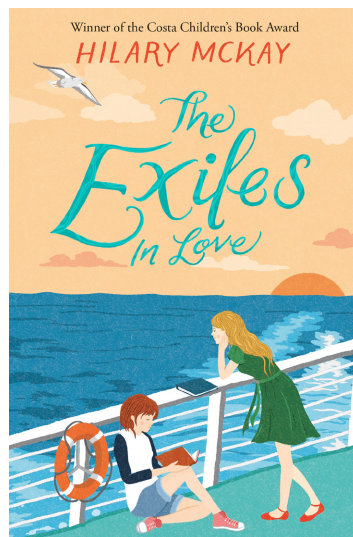
Your Costa-winning book **The Skylarks' War** follows three love-starved children into the heartbreak of the First World War. The sequel, **The Swallows' Flight**, follows two German boys and two English girls as the shadows of the Second World War descend... What drew you back into the Skylarks' world?

It was a financial decision. But also I liked the characters, and a lot of people said 'What happened next?' So the obvious thing to do was to move on to the Second World War. But I never intended to write a sequel. If I had, I wouldn't have given the characters so many children. I ended up with 26 main characters and a dog! My editor Venetia Gosling drew me a huge family tree, and she told me the story of her granny on a farm in Kent, during the Second World War, the Battle of Britain. She was a very young girl, alone on the farm, and a dogfight was happening, and an airman came out of his plane, and Venetia's granny ran to rescue him, and he survived. I used that story as the basis of **The Swallows' Flight**.

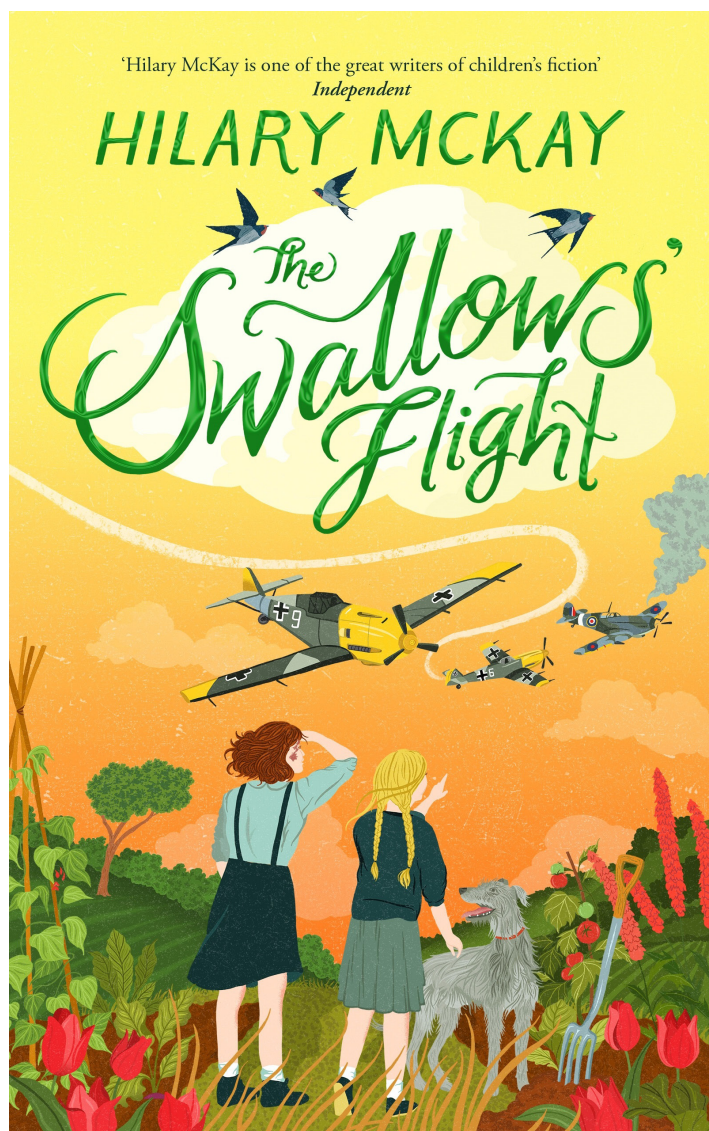
What sort of research did you do?

You know **Emil and the Detectives** [by Erich Kästner]? There's a tour in Berlin where they take you round all those old streets, and I wanted to go, because I used that book for my German boys – I used their speech patterns to make it sound like my boys were speaking in a different language. I didn't get to go, but I spent a lot of time in the British Library, so that after lockdown there were people there I could contact, and they were brilliant. They sent me street maps of old Berlin; they sent me three papers on the historic price of rubies, when I'd only asked one question! I didn't get to the [Imperial War] museum at Duxford, where there's a plane I wanted to see, to see how you climbed into the cockpit, but we did it from photographs, so that worked out. I found stuff on the internet – you can get old film of dogfights, or what a machine-gun sounds like in the sky. And I did get to the V&A before it closed – that was useful, for swimming costumes and what people were wearing. But then I made a big mistake. I usually dress people in the second draft – and I forgot to dress them! Still, nobody's said anything about the fact they're all naked. But I expect they will...

Something I admire in your work is the balance between joyful and down-to-earth, even cruel elements. In **The Swallows' Flight**, for instance, Ruby is outraged to find her brother drowning kittens – but it's clearly just a matter of awful necessity for the time. Do you ever struggle with that balance?



No, I find that's everyday life. I live deep in the countryside – I see things that you and I would call cruel most days. We have grouse moors up the road from us; they'll be on fire within a week because they're burning off the heather. I wholly don't agree with a lot of things that go on, but they do go on, and they surround children. In those days, kittens were drowned; no working-class family could afford to go to the vet's to get rid of an unwanted litter; now they're abandoned, but the same sort of thing is happening. And I don't think you can pretend it isn't; you can't really have a lovely Enid Blyton world when it's convenient...I think kids do realise life is pretty dark as well as light.



How important is it to you to involve the natural world in your books?

The best thing in my life, and has been since I can remember, has been the natural world. We lived in a very small circuit, maybe a three-mile radius, but we still got to the riverbanks, and the marshes, and my dad's allotment. We still looked after the birds and the hedgehogs. When I was lonely at school, I used to take myself back to them – there was a tree I was particularly fond of...I was a bit of a fish out of water at school, because we didn't have a television, and we were brought up very oddly...so I retreated into natural history. I used to volunteer on a nature reserve, and learnt quite a lot of science, because they would just let you stay there all summer if you would sleep in their camp beds and record the species – and it got me to St Andrews' university to study Botany and Zoology. It really has shaped my life. So you see it's always been a part of me, and if I missed it out, it would be like missing out a colour; as though I only wrote about green and red things and missed out blue and yellow.

Your **Exiles** trilogy, about the wonderfully chaotic Conroy sisters, was first published in the 1990s, and is now being re-issued. You grew up the oldest of four sisters. How much of your own experience did you draw on in writing the Conroy girls?

When **The Exiles** was originally published, I was as green as grass – I wrote it about myself and my sisters. I didn't even change their names. Chris Kloet, my editor, said 'You ought to change your sisters' names,' which I did; but I remember my sister Robin shouting 'You didn't change my birthday! You can still tell it's me! I'll sue you if you ever write another book!' I wrote their characters, I used their birthdays; I had a sister who kept a diary [of the food she ate], and she doesn't like that to be remembered now, but I put it in. And we did fish in a bucket; we did that for hours, it was a family hobby. My dad would give us two sticks and some string and a bucket of water and we just sat there. No television, you see, and we hadn't learned to read, so what else can you do? Do you know, this lockdown, I would have fished in a bucket if I'd thought of it.

Books mentioned, all published by Macmillan Children's Books

The Swallows' Flight, 978-1529033335, £12.99 hbk

The Skylarks' War, 978-1509894963, £7.99pbk

The Exiles, 978-1529011562, £6.99 pbk

The Exiles at Home, 978-1529011586, £6.99 pbk

The Exiles in Love, 978-1529011616, £6.99 pbk



Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children's literature and YA.

Beyond the Secret Garden: Powerful Politics: The Right to Speak Up in British Children's Books

In the latest in their **Beyond the Secret Garden** series, Karen Sands-O'Connor and Darren Chetty examine children's books dealing with protest and politics.

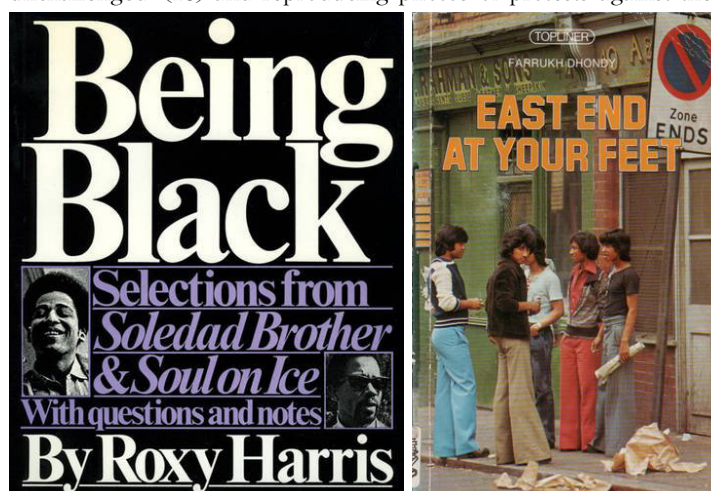
In 1979, Des Wilson wrote a book for young people on politics entitled **So You Want to Be Prime Minister: An Introduction to British Politics Today** (Peacock). In it, he argued 'we should all become politically aware and knowledgeable, and should at least use our democratic rights' (210). In the chapter 'We the Voters', Wilson comments 'Another, and particularly sad, influence on British elections in recent years has been the question of race' (48). Wilson goes on to discuss the Smethwick campaign of 1964 (though he did not mention the infamous campaign slogan of this election); Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech; and Margaret Thatcher's 1978 *Panorama* appearance before concluding, 'It is a sad fact that in a country that prides itself on tolerance, prejudice on race cannot be ruled out as a factor that can swing votes in some parts of the country. It is also a sad fact that there are politicians who will take advantage of this' (50). Racism is depicted negatively, but without describing the effects of racism on actual Black and Asian people in the country. Wilson argues that everyone should become involved in politics, but his rhetoric suggests that it is white British people that have the real political power.

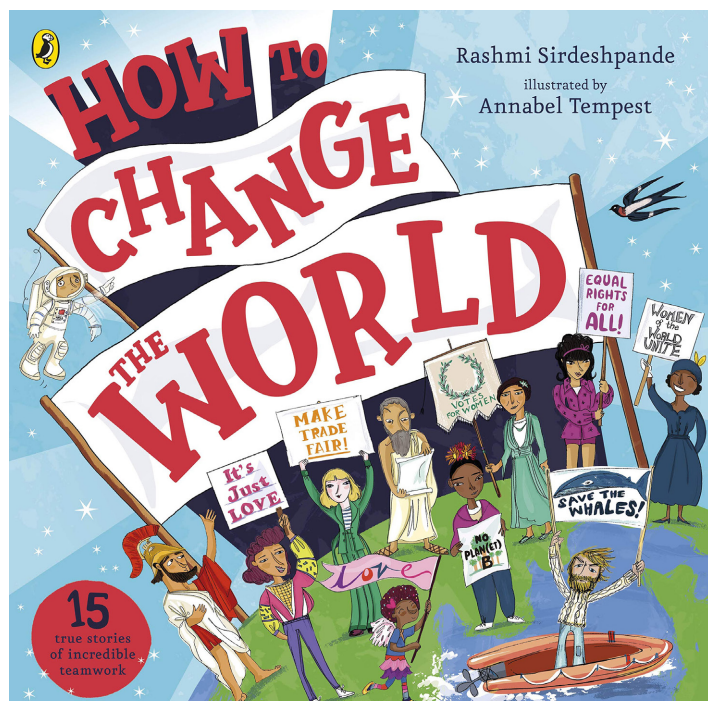
In fact, many of the earliest writers to discuss Black and Asian voices in politics were themselves members of radical political parties, including the British Communist Party and the British Black Panthers (which, unlike the American Black Panthers, included many members from Asian backgrounds). Most of these writers were reacting to a racist British society. Roxy Harris published extracts from George Jackson's **Soledad Brother** and Eldridge Cleaver's **Soul on Ice**, books dealing with Black Power and the Black Panther movement, in a book called **Being Black** (New Beacon 1981). Harris included discussion questions for each extract to 'help black people, young and not so young, to sort out for themselves where they stand on many of the crucial political, social, economic and cultural issues that they face' (5). Similarly, A. Sivanandan, the director of the Institute of Race Relations, published a series of four illustrated books on British racism that directed readers to consider the institutional and state causes of racism. The last of these, **The Fight Against Racism** (IRR 1986) included a list of Black deaths in police custody and prison, noting that 'No death in police custody has been allowed to go unchallenged' (28) and reproducing photos of protests against the

police. Former Black Panther Farrukh Dhondy published fiction that exposed the limitations of white British commitment to anti-racism in the short stories 'KBW' (**East End at Your Feet** Macmillan 1976), 'Come to Mecca' (**Come to Mecca and Other Stories** Macmillan 1978), and in the novel **The Siege of Babylon** (Macmillan 1978). Dhondy's novel, based on the Spaghetti House Siege of 1975, also explored what would push Black Britons into radical politics; at one point in the novel 'Three hundred police with horses, vans and batons, have stopped a crowd of about a hundred young black people marching' in protest (80-1). Poverty, racism, unemployment, lack of access to education and police oppression pushed young Black and Asian people to become political in the 1970s and 1980s.

More recently, the six books in the **Black History** series by Dan Lyndon (Franklin Watts 2010) offer an excellent introduction to the topic for teachers and Key Stage 2-aged children in particular. Two of the books in the series, **Resistance and Abolition** and **Civil Rights and Equality** explore protests in Africa, the Caribbean, the USA and the UK. In the first of these two books alone, there are sections on The Amistad, Nat Turner, Nanny of the Maroons, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Katherine Auker, Olaudah Equiano, and Elizabeth Heyrick.

RUBY BRIDGES THIS IS YOUR TIME



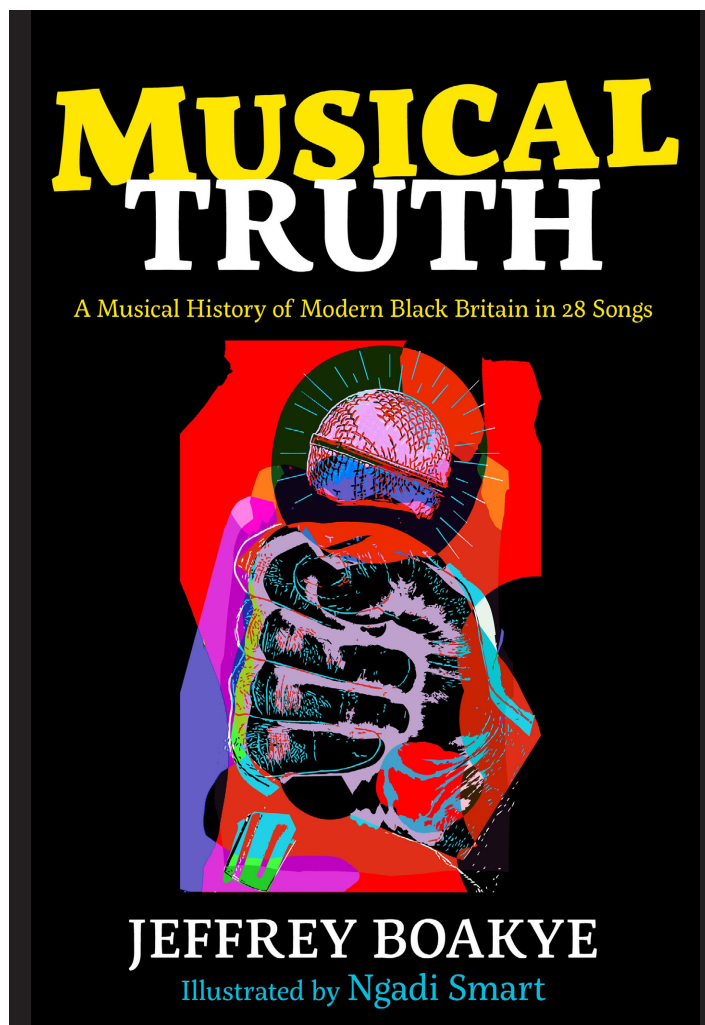


Whilst it is fair to say that teaching about protest against racism in British schools has often neglected Britain in favour of the USA, it is also the case that experience of children has been neglected in favour of a focus on leaders. In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges became the first black child to integrate an all-white elementary school in New Orleans. In **This Is Your Time** (Pushkin Press, 2021) Bridges writes a letter to today's youth, that is at once beautiful and powerful. The book's cover is a detail from Norman Rockwell's iconic painting *The Problem We All Live With* showing Bridges being escorted by US Marshalls against a backdrop of racist graffiti. Bridges offers a personal account, paying tribute to her father, and Barbara Henry, her white teacher; 'For the entire year she sat alone with me in that classroom and taught me everything I needed to know' (16). She places her story in a broader political context and makes links with contemporary protest against racism in the USA. The effect is to offer young readers a sense of hope grounded in realism; 'The first steps toward change are never easy.'

How To Change The World by Rashmi Sirdeshpande, (Puffin 2020) is described as a book about 'real-life stories of the incredible things humans can do when we work together'. The book offers double-page accounts of collective endeavours (illustrated in a lively style by Annabelle Tempest), including protest from around the world, including the match-workers strike in Bow, London, a variety of campaigns for votes for women, the Montgomery bus boycott, the start of fairer trade, the end of slavery in the British Empire, the tree planters of Piplantri in India, the fight for marriage equality, and environmental protests.

In his forthcoming book **Musical Truth** Jeffrey Boakye, (Faber, 2021, illustrated by Ngadi Smart) explores the breadth of experiences in over 50 years of Black British History, through 28 songs – a format Boakye employed to great effect in his study of Grime music, **Hold Tight** (Influx, 2017). Boakye is careful to not limit Black British history to responses to racism; joy and celebration are core to the book, but **Musical Truth** explores how the relationship between celebration and protest too. This is perhaps most obvious in the work of journalist and activist Claudia Jones who played a key role in establishing the Notting Hill Carnival.

Elsewhere, the Black British Panthers, the Bristol Bus Boycott, responses to Operation Swamp 81, the racist murder of Steven Lawrence, UK Black Pride, the 2010 student protests, the toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol are all discussed. At a time when antiracists are under attack from some quarters of the political establishment and accused of indoctrinating children, Boakye offers



young readers (Key Stage 2 and upwards) an introduction to a history to which they are often not granted access, commenting at one point that, '[t]here are no easy answers here but we need to keep asking the difficult questions' (83).

Books mentioned

Being Black, Roxy Harris, O/P

East End at Your Feet, Farrukh Dhondy, O/P

Come to Mecca and Other Stories, Farrukh Dhondy, O/P

The Siege of Babylon, Farrukh Dhondy, O/P

This is Your Time, Ruby Bridges, Pushkin Press, 978-1911590590, £8.99 pbk

Musical Truth, Jeffrey Boakye, illus Ngadi Smart, Faber, 978-0571366484, £12.99 hbk

How to Change the World, Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illus Annabel Tempest, Puffin, 978-0241410349, £6.99 pbk

Black History series, Dan Lyndon, Franklin Watts, £8.99 pbk



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



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

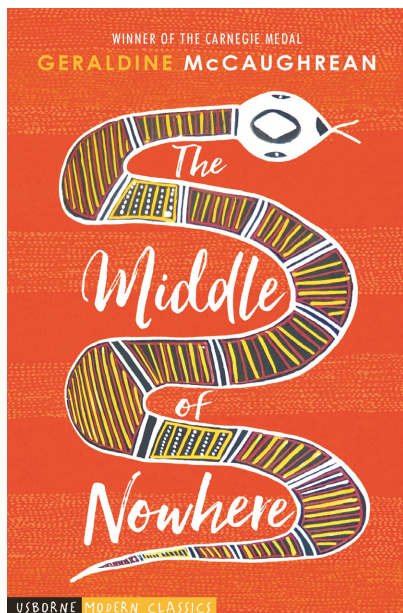
Geraldine McCaughrean: A Writer Supreme

Nicholas Tucker reviews the career and work of an extraordinary writer.

'When Geraldine is on form she can knock the socks off all the rest of us.' Thus a very distinguished children's author talking to me about this brilliant and prolific author. I have quoted this remark before in **Books for Keeps** when writing about Geraldine seven years ago. But it remains just as true today. Geraldine McCaughrean is indeed an extraordinary writer. It maddens me when well-read friends have still never got round to her, leading me to suspect that sometimes it is uncertainty about how to pronounce her name ('Muh-cork-run') that has led to her not being as well-known as she deserves.

Geraldine was born in 1951, which means she will be seventy this June, although meeting her you would think she was much younger. She has written up to 170 books, plays and retellings of myth and fairy stories, including that most unread and difficult of all British classic texts, Spenser's **Faerie Queen**. The daughter of a fireman father and school teacher mother, shy and self-effacing, she showed no particular talent at school nor when training to be a teacher. But then the writing started, and if anyone ever doubts that great authors are born not made, Geraldine is a case in point. From nowhere a new, hugely ambitious writer suddenly appeared, as it appeared almost effortlessly able to travel in time to whatever historical era interested her and in space to whichever part of the world she wanted to write about. Never over-burdening herself with research, sometimes discarding her notes altogether when they risked getting in the way of her imagination, she also created characters so utterly convincing it was as if to know them in real life.

She remains a traditional children's author in the sense that she has no time for ultimately depressive fiction aimed at the young. As she told me herself, 'I would never write a story that ended without a sense of hope.' But because readers sense that this is always going to be the case, this also enables Geraldine to explore extreme darkness before her characters end up safely. Her heroes and heroines are not perfect and usually have much to learn as their story progresses. But her villains, and the time and circumstances in which they operate, can be very black indeed.



To take one example, her 1996 novel **Plundering Paradise** was often described at the time as 'swashbuckling': that tired term so regularly in use when it comes to any tale involving pirates. But it is in fact a desperately tense adventure story, at times bearing comparison with Richard Hughes's **A High Wind in Jamaica**. Her pirates are horrible inadequates, happy to trade a thirteen-year-old girl to the highest bidder. Her three youthful heroes are caught between believing they should follow the traditional Christian orthodoxies they



have learned in Britain while also having to come to terms and seeing the value of the new belief systems they now experience in Madagascar. The Bible is much invoked, but what it has to say is never the end of the matter. Elsewhere, obtuse colonialist attitudes are revealed for what they are.

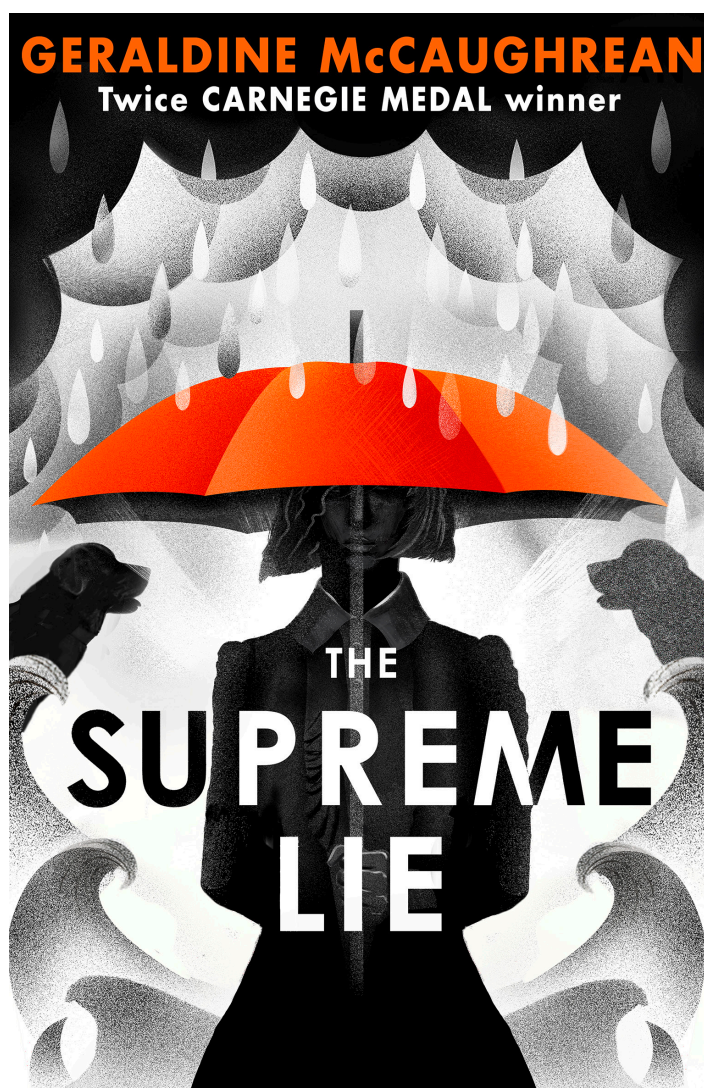
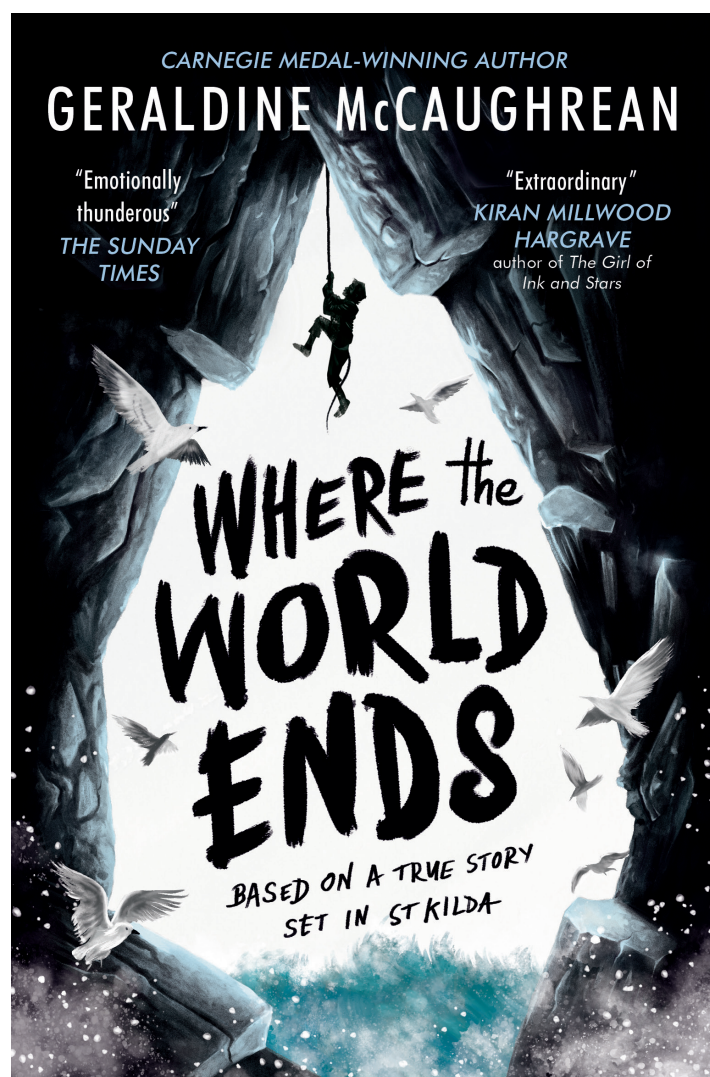
There is no spare in Geraldine's writing. Every word counts, because it is never quite certain what the next one is going to be. Dazzling new metaphors are coined and familiar ones twisted into new meanings and resonances. The supernatural might suddenly start playing a part. There may be a dive into unfamiliar period detail. The unexpected often happens, throwing everything into doubt and confusion. The only certainty is that there will never be any certainty, except perhaps for the final positive resolution.

Her latest novel **The Supreme Lie**, published this April, is a story of political treachery, where corrupt leaders systematically deceive their followers while enriching themselves. Set in an imaginary country not so different from Myanmar and what is happening there at the moment, this is powerful stuff. But Geraldine is a writer supremely gifted in bringing to life actual geographical and historical settings and the multi-various ways that their human inhabitants once used to pass their times. Opting for fantasy-land, however topical in its references, does not, at least for me, bring out the same power of dazzling realism found in her depictions of Australia in **The Middle of Nowhere**, ancient Japan in **The Kite Runner**, or the American West in **Stop the Train**. In the same way, setting a novel in an uncertain period in time deprives readers of the excitement and

wonder created by her expert re-imagining of what once might have really happened. Her descriptions of the British Middle Ages in **A Little Lower than the Angels**, her first novel, are as convincingly realistic as it is possible to be.

Other favourites come to mind. The twelve stories for the price of one in **A Pack of Lies**, the Carnegie Medal winning novel that proved that there is quite literally no end to the powers of Geraldine's imagination. **Not the End of the World** offers a brilliantly dark re-examination of the story of Noah's Flood, with God finally shown as having a lot to answer for. Every adult reader I have recommended this book to, and there have been several, have all returned demanding other titles. **The White Darkness**, partially set in Antarctica, manages to be wickedly funny as well as diabolically clever, featuring one of the most plausibly awful villains in all children's literature. More recently **Where the World Ends**, set on a remote island off the West coast of Scotland, painted yet another unforgettable picture of humans up against nature, human and physical, in the attempt to say alive against all the odds. This also won the **Carnegie Medal**, and well before that there have been numbers of other prizes too.

Geraldine was once advised by her mother to 'Never boil your cabbage twice,' advice she has certainly taken to heart as a writer. Has there ever been a novelist, children's or otherwise, who has chosen such a diverse range of setting and characters? Series are not for her, and this restlessness of her imagination may be one reason she has never had a massive readership with young readers seeking another dose of the same. But another likely explanation for her lack of a mass readership may lie with the novels themselves. For they can be demanding. Any suggestion of a pat, predictable narrative always disappears after the first chapter or so. If there are larger questions arising from the text, they will be discussed, not avoided.



Children's literature has always operated as a broad church, and there should, indeed must, always be room made for top of the range novels along with everything else. But it is a shame that so many good books from the recent past, including many by Geraldine, have now slipped away from library shelves and otherwise can only be found as second-hand copies. We should be more carefully conserving of our greatest writers. And this is what she most certainly is. Not to have read her is to miss out on an experience like no other I can currently think of in all children's literature and even beyond.

The Supreme Lie, Usborne, 978-1474970686, £8.99 pbk

The Middle of Nowhere, Usborne, 978-1409570516, £6.99 pbk

The Kite Runner, OUP, 978-0192769596, £6.99 pbk

Stop the Train, OUP, 978-0192718815, £6.99 pbk

A Little Lower than the Angels, OUP, 978-0192752901, £6.99 pbk

A Pack of Lies, OUP, 978-0192752031, £6.99 pbk

Not the End of the World, OUP, 978-0192754325, £6.99 pbk

The White Darkness, OUP, 978-0192726186, £7.99 pbk

Where the World Ends, Usborne, 978-1474943437, £6.99 pbk

Plundering Paradise, OUP, 978-0192719942, O/P



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

‘The more doors you go out of, the farther you go in’

In her book **From Spare Oom to War Drobe**, writer and lifelong Narnian **Katherine Langrish** explores all that she drew from C.S. Lewis’s books as a child, and reflects on the stories’ tapestries of allusions. In this extract, she discusses his fascination with old, rambling houses to: In this extract, she discusses how his fascination with old, rambling houses shapes the **Narnia** stories.

At the beginning of **The Pilgrim’s Progress**, John Bunyan explains how he came to write the book. While engaged upon a different work about the spiritual life, Bunyan ‘fell into an allegory’ and saw how he could represent it as the physical journey of the Saints to Glory. Ideas began to multiply in his head ‘like sparks that from the coals of fire did fly’. In an essay on Bunyan, Lewis suggests that in this coalescence of adventurous quest and spiritual journey we can see Bunyan’s earnest Christianity coming together with his boyhood delight in old wives’ tales and chivalric romances: ‘The one fitted the other like a glove,’ he remarks. ‘Now, as never before, the whole man was engaged.’

Now, as never before, the whole man was engaged – Lewis might be talking about himself. The Narnia books are a fusion of his life-long love of literature, his Christian faith and the experiences of his own childhood: the latter most obviously in **The Magician’s Nephew**, where Digory’s wish to save his sick mother derives its poignancy from the death of Lewis’s own mother in his early boyhood. There is even more to it than this. In **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe** the Professor’s big house, full of book-rooms and passages and unexpected places, sounds a lot like Lewis’s childhood home Leeborough House, or ‘Little Lea’, a big house on the outskirts of the city of Belfast to which his family moved in 1905 when he was only seven and before his mother fell ill. In **Surprised By Joy** he describes it with love:

The New House is almost a major character in my story. I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tiles. Also, of endless books.



‘Little Lea’, Belfast. C.S. Lewis’s childhood home



The New House is a major character in Lewis’s stories. An imagery of labyrinthine houses, passages, secret rooms and doorways into Elsewhere recurs throughout the Narnia series. I will look at these in detail later, but here are some examples: the attics of **The Magician’s Nephew**, and the palace-city of Charn; the Professor’s house and the wardrobe itself in **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**, which ‘contains’ the whole land of Narnia; there’s Aravis and her friend Lasaraleen losing themselves in the dangerous maze of the Old Palace of Tashbaan, and the Pevensie children exploring the ruins of Cair Paravel in **Prince Caspian** and discovering the treasure chamber; there’s Lucy tiptoeing along the creepy, sunlit passages of the Magician’s House in **The Voyage of the Dawn Treader** – the City Ruinous and the Dark Castle of Underland in **The Silver Chair** – and the stable in **The Last Battle**, arguably the last and greatest doorway of all.

Not coincidentally, I think the triumphal cry from the end of **The Last Battle** – ‘Farther up and farther in!’ – is consciously or unconsciously borrowed from George MacDonald’s adult fantasy novel **Lilith** (1895), another book set in a vast, rambling house with portals to other dimensions. In Chapter 3, the protagonist Mr Vane rushes after the figure of a mysterious Mr Raven, chasing him up many stairs into unfamiliar attic regions and a garret furnished only with a mirror. Vane stumbles through the frame into a wild, visionary landscape, and is told by Mr Raven that he has come into this strange land through a door.

‘I never saw any door,’ I persisted.

‘Of course not!’ he returned; ‘all the doors you had yet seen – and you haven’t seen many – were doors in; here you came upon a door out. The strange thing to you,’ he went on thoughtfully, ‘will be, that the more doors you go out of, the farther you get in.’

'The more doors you go out of, the farther you go in' is almost certainly what Lewis also means us to understand: an exit from the narrowness of selfhood which paradoxically leads to an expansion and enrichment of apprehension. This imagery of an 'endless' house isn't restricted to Narnia. It comes from somewhere deep, turning up in Lewis's Christian apologetics as well, and even in his literary criticism. 'In my Father's house there are many rooms,' said Jesus (John, 14:2). In the preface to **Mere Christianity**, Lewis describes the basic Christian faith as a hallway, out of which doors open into different rooms representing different denominations: 'The hall is a place to wait, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.' In its function, this hall sounds surprisingly like the Wood Between the Worlds – another 'in-between' place that opens into many dimensions: a place of potential, not a place to stay.

In his memoir **Memories, Dreams, Reflections**, Carl Jung records a personal dream of exploring an ancient house. It began somewhere on an upper floor, in a richly furnished rococo-style salon hung with fine old pictures. Going downstairs, he found the ground floor furnished in an older, medieval style with a red brick floor. Everything seemed 'rather dark.' Exploring room after room, he came across a heavy old door and behind it, a stone staircase leading further down into an even more ancient, vaulted room:

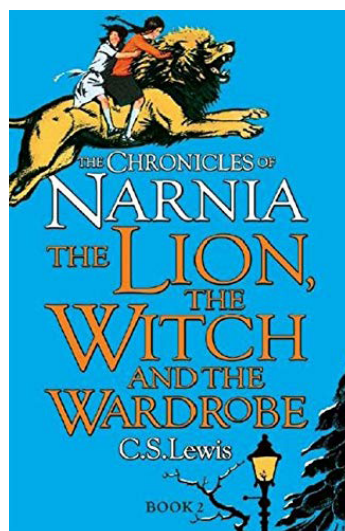
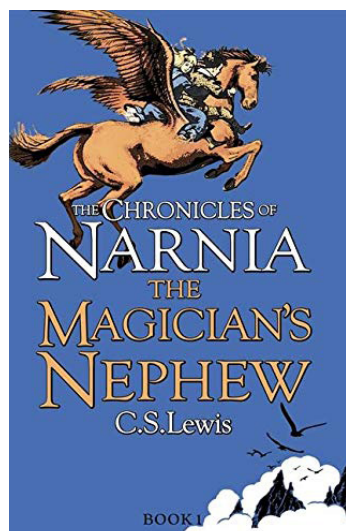
My interest was now intense. I looked more closely at the floor. It was of stone slabs, and in one of these I discovered a ring. When I pulled it, the stone slab lifted and again I saw a doorway of narrow stone steps. These too, I descended and entered a low cave cut into the rock [where] I discovered two human skulls, obviously very old...

The story that follows this is worth repeating. Jung recounts how he took the dream to Freud and asked for his opinion of its meaning. Focussing almost entirely on the two skulls, Freud decided they must represent a death-wish – an interpretation which the newly and happily married Jung felt was quite wrong. He had his own ideas about the meaning of the dream, but fearing to offend Freud and damage their friendship he pretended to agree and told Freud the death-wish must be directed at his new wife and sister-in-law. Freud seemed 'greatly relieved' by this admission, Jung comments with a twinkle.

Jung's own interpretation was that the house was 'a kind of image of the psyche', and that in descending through the various levels he was descending from the conscious mind into the unconscious.

The ground floor stood for the first level of the unconscious. The deeper I went, the more alien and the darker the scene became. In the cave, I discovered remains of a primitive culture, that is, the world of the primitive man within myself – a world which can scarcely be reached or illuminated by consciousness.

Building upon this reading, Jung later came to form his theories of the collective unconscious and of 'archetypes' or symbols common to the human mind.



FROM SPARE OOM TO WAR DROBE



TRAVELS IN NARNIA WITH MY
NINE YEAR-OLD SELF

KATHERINE
LANGRISH

'The best book ever about why we love Narnia.' FRANCIS SPUFFORD

Writing with a touch of humour, Lewis acknowledged the emotional and poetic power of Jung's theory of archetypes. Even if it should turn out to be poor science, he commented, it was still 'excellent poetry' of a mythic character. The concept of the archetype as something old, meaningful, hidden, deeply buried but gradually coming to light made him feel like 'Schliemann digging up what he believed to be the very bones of Agamemnon, king of men' – or 'my own self, hoping, as a child, for that forgotten, that undiscovered room.'

Maybe most children hope to find a hidden room: still, in expressing this desire, here is Lewis returning again to the same potent image. If Jung and Freud could disagree over the interpretation of Jung's dream, perhaps there's a chance for me to speculate that for Lewis the archetypal house symbolised the security of his childhood before his mother's death. After that event, Little Lea became gradually intolerable to him. While his father was dying he described it in a letter as a place where he had never experienced freedom – yet he added, 'I have never been able to resist the retrogressive influence of this house which always plunges me back into the pleasures and pains of a boy.'

*'Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows...'*

The house which sheltered the happiness of Lewis's early childhood had long vanished into that land of lost content, the far country of the past: but in imagination he was a constant visitor, exploring passages and tiptoeing into rooms, searching for the doorway through which he might pass into joy.

From Spare Oom to War Drobe by Katherine Langrish is published by Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 978-1913657079, £16.99 hbk.

I wish I'd written...



Cath Howe's latest book, **How to Be Me**, is published by Nosy Crow, 978-1788005975, £6.99 pbk

Cath Howe chooses a book that vividly depicts the human capacity to endure.

The book I wish I'd written is **The Garbage King** by Elizabeth Laird. Set in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, it is the story of two boys, one from a background of affluence and the other left destitute by the death of his mother. Their destinies collide when they meet in an urban graveyard and become unlikely allies. As the story develops, they learn from each other.

From the outset, the reader becomes hugely invested in both characters in this pacey and exciting plot. Through the dual perspectives, the author creates points of tension where we really feel the risks to the safety of both characters and respond with empathy to the limited choices they face.

Elizabeth Laird says Addis Ababa is her favourite city in the world. Her great skill is in bringing the place so vividly alive for a reader who may never go there. There is a wild spirit in all her books tethered to an honest depiction of complex challenges in young people's lives. Life on the street is rendered with an unflinching eye for the struggles these boys face simply to survive.

She depicts our human capacity to endure so vividly that I will always reread this story myself and recommend it to young readers.



The Garbage King by Elizabeth Laird is published by Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1509802951, £6.99 pbk.

BfK reviews

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant

Storm Dragon

★★★★★

Dianna Hofmeyr, ill. Carol Thompson, Otter-Barry Books, 28pp
978 1 9130 7496 8, £12.99 hbk

Wonderfully wild, mixed media illustrations and a rumbustious telling full of invitingly join-in-able words, seamlessly combine to create a terrific intergenerational celebration of imaginative play set against roaring winds and pouring rain.

We see two intrepid adventurers – a Grandpa unsuitably clad only in shorts, sweater and flip flops and his grandchild who at least has boots – undertaking a stamping stomping, clattering, splattering wild romp on the seashore as they follow the footprints in their search for storm dragons. They board a 'pirate ship', weigh the anchor, look through the spyglass and ... AHHH! The chase is on. They find dragon jewels and even a dragon baby but will they find that dragon mummy, or will the dragon find them before they reach the safety of their own front door once more? Indeed what or who is the real storm dragon?

If you're after a cracking read aloud picture book to set the scene and inspire some exuberant outdoor play of the creative kind – rain or shine – then look no further: this book is the perfect starting point. From front endpapers to back endpapers, it's simply superb. **JB**

Goodnight Veggies

★★★★★

Diana Murray, ill. Zachariah OHora, Andersen Press Ltd, 32pp
978 1 83913 043 4, £6.99, pbk

Here the illustrator works closely to the text, beginning on the front cover where we see snoozing carrot, perky beetroot and our narrator, the smiley worm, all beneath a moonlit, star spangled sky. The worm is quite enchanting, wriggling his way from page to page with his baseball cap, his one shoe and perpetual smile. It is sunset, and the veggie garden is being watered as the sun sinks. Their long day of growing is drawing to a close; the cuddly cauliflowers, droopy pods of peas and baby carrots settle for the night. There is rhubarb, reading stories to worn out broccoli, and the beetroots are simply ... beat! The cabbages nod their leafy, sleepy heads, radishes doze in cosy garden beds. Meantime, worm slithers under and over ground, taking in all the sleepy veggies 'for nothing's more exhausting than growing day and night.' The charming bond between text and pictures continues throughout as night draws in. The story ends with worm tucked up in his own little bed, in the soil below the sleeping beetroots. His cap is on the hat stand, his single shoe at the foot of his bed, family photos hang on the wall. This garden has been created on a rooftop, along with solar panels and

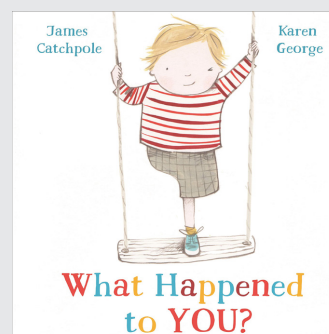
raised beds for the veg. Will children spot the robin, mentioned in the text at the beginning...with wriggly worm in its beak, supper for its chicks? Perfect for a bedtime read. **GB**

What Happened to You?

★★★★★

James Catchpole, ill. Karen George, Faber, 32pp, 978 0 571 35831 1, £6.99 pbk

Joe is playing his favourite game of pirates, sharks and crocodiles in the park when several children he hasn't met before turn up. A little girl shouts, 'You've only got one leg!' 'Yup', says Joe. And then all the children start asking questions, which Joe doesn't want to answer, like – what happened? – where's your leg? – perhaps it fell off – was it a lion? – maybe a thousand lions? – did it fall off in the toilet?! No, no, and no, Joe shouts. It becomes clear, both from his facial expression and his silence, that he doesn't want to talk about it. The children finally twig to this, and the first little girl begins to join his game as though nothing has happened. James Catchpole is missing a leg himself, and he understands only too well that questions like this are not only boring, but intrusive and difficult to handle. This theme – about how people with disabilities dislike being queried about their disabilities – is particularly apt in a children's book, both because



it is often children who are prone to asking such and because it shows a lack of empathy with others. It is also very unusual in a picture book! The story comes along at a great time for use in both classroom and home, and the text, together with excellent illustrations, make the point clearly, but with humour and fun. **ES**

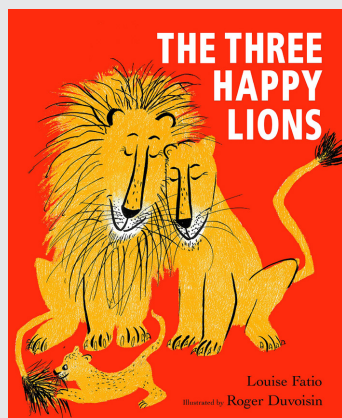
The Three Happy Lions

★★★★★

Louise Fatio, illus Roger Duvoisin, Scallywag Press, 32pp,
978-1912650712, £12.99 hbk

The Happy Lion introduced in the book of the same name, has even more reason to be happy in this story. He has a partner he loves, and now they have a cub. The cub, named François after their best friend the keeper's son, is admired by all, 'Comme il est

Under 5s Pre – School/Nursery/Infant continued



joli, le petit lion! exclaim the children. But for the first time in his life, the Happy Lion is worried – what job will his son do that will keep him happy when he grows up. It's a worry all parents will understand. The Lioness is more relaxed, he can be a pet, or work in a circus. François tries both with limited success, returning home to the friendly zoo where he shares his real career ambition with his parents. He wants to be a gardener. Sure enough, he's soon helping his namesake, the other François, who is now working in the zoo gardens and the two make the park more beautiful than it had ever been. As a story about family love, job satisfaction and being true to yourself, it can't be beaten. The bold colours of Duvoisin's mid-century artwork are as striking and as engaging as they were on their first publication, and his sense of movement and composition is second to none. Louise Fatio's text too is full of warmth and humour and its sprinkling of French phrases charming – a lovely opportunity for the very young to experience another language (there are teacher notes around this on the publisher website). **LS**

How Can You Lose An Elephant?

★★★★

Jan Fearnley, Simon & Schuster, 9781471191688, 32pp, £6.99 pbk
Oscar is a brave and funny boy, but he is also a boy who manages to lose everything, his boots, his scooter, his flippers, even clothes. But one day at the park he finds an elephant, Hugo, who never forgets anything. The pair become inseparable friends and Hugo even helps Oscar to start remembering things. But one day Oscar loses something especially important...his temper. Oscar has a tantrum when playing with Hugo and nearly loses his best friend until he remembers all the happy times they have shared and makes amends.

Jan Fearnley has created another appealing, funny, and lively picture book with quirky characters, a satisfying plot, and an important, reassuring message about friendship, falling out and making up. The illustrations are full of character, movement, and humour

with so many brilliant, eye-catching tiny details on every spread that children will love poring over this delightful book and discovering something new every time. **SR**

The Forgettery

★★★★

Rachel Ip, ill. Laura Hughes, Egmont, 302p, 978 1 4052 9476 8, £6.99 pbk

A magical story about memory and forgetfulness and the special relationship of a little girl and her Granny. Amelia and her Granny are very close and do everything together, but sometimes they forget things, Amelia because she daydreams and likes to explore and Granny because she has lost many of her old memories. On a walk in a beautiful wood, they come across the 'Forgettery' and decide to find out what it is. Inside, the magic begins! This is a place where everyone's memories are stored; each person has his own special room, and soon the Memory Keeper is taking them up in a balloon to find Granny's room, where Granny finds 'moments of delight...fluttering in the room like butterflies.' After choosing the special ones to take away in a jar, they go to see Amelia's room, much smaller and with different kinds of memories – pleasures and thank yous she has forgotten, and a box of 'ouches, bumps and grazes'.

The Forgettery is a wonderful place, full of busyness and people retrieving all sorts of special things they have forgotten. And when Granny and Amelia leave, they slide down a long slide to go home. The pictures are highly imaginative and purely magical. At home, Amelia begins to take pictures of all the things they do together, and she and Granny make a book of all these memories which they can use to remember. There is an indication that Granny may be close to death in the last picture when she and Amelia tell each other that they will always love each other, and we feel the happy memories will continue for both. This is a sunny and lovable approach to a difficult subject and will provide a good way of helping young children accept the fact that a grandparent is no longer quite the same. **ES**

Ten Little Dogs

★★★★

Ruth Brown, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 9781912650538 £12.99 hbk

Join ten little dogs as they bounce, race, tumble and play across the pages. They certainly start with the full number but one by one they meet obstacles and are left behind, until, yes there is only one - but you cannot keep such a group of irrepressible characters out of the action – and where will they be? Why in the park.

This is an attractive take on a familiar trope – the count down from 10 to 1. It has been used innumerable

times and here it is as fresh as ever. This is very much due to Ruth Brown's expertise as a picture book creator. Her jaunty rhyme carries the reader across the double spreads to turn the page while her puppies are recognisable in their actions and behaviours; they are indeed mischievous puppies. Her artwork is as accessible and as joyous as ever. Whatever their antics these are no cartoon characters but very real little animals - those in the know would be able to identify breeds – and the inevitable mutt. The colour saturated spreads are a feast for the eyes while her energetic lines imbue her doggy characters with an exuberance that is infectious. Ruth Brown's realistic style ensures that her young audience will relate to the images with ease, making this an extremely enjoyable and satisfying reading experience for both adult and child. **FH**

The Roller-Coaster Ride

★★★★

David Broadbent, Child's Play, 32pp, 9781786285607, £6.99 pbk

Vincent and his Grandma are travelling on a purple bus to visit the amusement park at the beach. They spend the journey talking about all the amazing rides they will go on and Vincent is especially looking forward to the big roller-coaster. But they arrive to discover that Funland is closed for repairs and plans and expectations must be changed. At first Vincent is disappointed but with Gran's encouragement, a super deluxe ice cream and the discovery of a playground Vincent can see the bright side and enjoy his day out.

This simple story will take young readers on a journey of anticipation and excitement with Vincent and will help them to understand that things do not always go to plan and that expectations can be changed, and disappointment can be overcome with positivity and adaptability. The illustrations are vivid and lively and, from the endpapers to the purple bus and the imagined rides, will take young readers on a journey of their own. The book is particularly notable for its inclusive depiction of a character with an upper limb difference who thoroughly enjoys all the activities on his day out. This is a positive picture book in many ways. **SR**

Dig! Dig! Dig!

★★★★

Wenda Shurety, ill. Andrea Stegmaier, Storyhouse, 32pp, 978 1916281813, £6.99, pbk

This story builds on the idea, which all young children have at some stage, that if you dig a hole as deep as you can, you might eventually reach the other side of the world!

Jake is bored with his life indoors – wonderfully depicted in the gloomy palette of the first few spreads – and dreams of a life far away where people could be living upside down. In a bid to reach this place, he starts to dig a hole in his garden and is steadily joined by a host of friends

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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

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

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

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

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

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Stuart Dyer is headteacher of a primary school in East Devon.

Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.

Geoff Fox is former Co-Editor (UK) of **Children's Literature in Education**, but continues to work on the board and as an occasional teller of traditional tales. **Sarah Gallagher** is a headteacher and director of **Storyshack.org** www.storyshack.org

Ferelith Hordon is a former children's librarian and editor of **Books for Keeps** **Carey Fluker Hunt** is a writer and children's book consultant.

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

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

who want to help and share in Jake's quest. The final reveal, once the team have finished their digging, provides a wonderfully pleasing conclusion.

This is a story that celebrates the power of friendship and cooperation. Accompanying the growing group of friends who help Jake dig the hole are various creatures, who appear and lend a hand as the hole deepens. These include multiple mice, and a rather bemused cat, which children will love to spot as the pages unfold. Jake's determination to pursue his dream, and the hard work and fun he has to achieve his goal, are topics for children to talk about which will naturally flow from reading the story.

There is so much to pore over in the bold and colourful illustrations which accompany the adventure. Youngsters will have fun comparing the endpapers where some objects have moved or appear in a different perspective. Two of the double page spreads have illustrations which require you to physically shift how you hold the book – another great way to emphasise the steadily deepening hole. Jake's initial daydreaming of a life down under is reflected in the upturned toys and people who apparently walk their dogs while standing on their hands. These elements are clever ways which ensure children will become fully immersed in the story.

This is a striking picture book which is likely to become a firm favourite. **EC**

The Best Worst Day Ever

★★★★

Sophy Henn, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 1 4711 9422 1, £6.99 pbk
Arthur is having a terrible day. We don't know why this is, but his family are all getting the brunt of his stomping, huffing and roaring temper tantrum, so he decides he must run away. Taking his little suitcase, he runs 'very nearly to the end of the garden'. Hunger intervenes, so he decides to go home, but what is this? A giant forest has appeared between him and the back door, and this he must go through. Still feeling very cross, he starts out nervously. Strange noises turn out to be a bear, an elephant, and a lion, all of whom are terribly cross too, and while they start out stomping and huffing and roaring, they all find that dancing, playing music, and singing are lots more fun. By the time they get through the forest, they are all happy again, and Arthur finds that his family haven't even realised he's been gone. A lovely tale about a child who learns the positives out of life are much better than the negatives ever can be. The artwork is super, flat coloured backgrounds with figures with black eyes and mouths, to indicate the blackness of temper. Great fun and very imaginative, with a good moral. **ES**

Where is the Dragon?

★★★★

Written and ill. Leo Timmers, trans. James Brown, Gecko Press 40pp, 978-1-776573-11-0, £11.99 hbk

Young readers will delight in being more clued-up than the hapless protagonists in this cleverly-constructed tale of a night-time dragon-hunt that doesn't go to plan. Illustrated in the bold, bright style for which Leo Timmers is renowned, this picturebook uses light and shade to conceal and reveal in a series of imaginative encounters that are full of humour and suspense.

With an ermine-cuffed gesture, a terrified king commands three of his trustiest knights to save the realm, and we can almost hear their armour clinking as they scurry down the steps. Two are armed to the teeth, but the smallest carries nothing but a candle – the only source of light for most of this story, allowing Timmers to play with our perceptions via the ambiguity of shapes silhouetted against a star-filled sky.

Will the knights locate the dragon? They don't know what they're looking for, but the King has given them a general idea, and the information isn't reassuring. The explorers encounter a series of dragon-shaped silhouettes. On each occasion Knights One and Two panic their way into weapon-induced pratfalls, but Knight Three remains unmoved – probably because he's the only one who can actually see what's going on.

When a 'stabbing tail' turns out to be a snoozing soldier, the knights decide enough is enough and head for home – thereby missing a jet of fire streaming from the mouth of a large, airborne dragon. Will it find its way to the palace? The finest (and funniest) gap between words and pictures is explored on the final page, in appropriate fashion for a book that delights its readers by giving them the upper hand. Those royal slippers are betraying the King's hiding place, but shush! Don't tell the dragon!

Timmers' original text has been freely translated by poet James Brown, whose carefully constructed couplets provide an appropriately eccentric storyline. There's a repeated opportunity to join in – 'Ha ha, ho ho, says small Knight Three...' – and rich vocabulary is explored as the King's observations are reported by Knight One. The rhythm feels a little insecure at times, which may trip the unwary performer, but with such appealing artwork and a strong narrative arc, this is a minor drawback and multiple readings are definitely on the cards. **CFH**

My Daddies

★★★★

Gareth Peter, ill. Gary Parsons, Puffin, 32pp., 978 0 241 40577 2 £6.99 pbk

Gareth Peter started writing stories when his children arrived, and he

brings his own experience of being a stay-at-home dad in a same-sex partnership with two adopted sons to this delightful rhyming story of two daddies and their little girl, who is not named.

Garry Parson's illustrations show them playing, and then reading stories, and that's when the exciting journeys start in their imaginations. With their little brown dog, they battle dragons (in armour) and find treasure, hunt for dinosaurs in a primordial swamp (when they're feeling brave); they go to the Moon, and find secret islands.

However, 'Books take us on these journeys, over forest, sand and sea, but my daddies' favourite story is the one that brought them me' and we see the baby pictures, then the toddler, cuddles with two grannies of different ethnicities, and the girl's drawings of them, lovingly kept. As friends turn up at the door she says, 'Some people have two mummies, and some, a mum and dad, but I have SUPER daddies, who chose me...I'm so glad' and these various families all have a meal together. The daddies are not the best at everything, which gives Garry scope for more fun with his illustrations, but she doesn't care. To her they are 'the world's best King and King', and here they are shown with one dressed as a medieval king and the other as a Rajah, but the other way round from what you might expect from their ethnicity, 'and storytime with them will always be my favourite thing'.

This is a lovely book, full of the joys of parenthood, but your reviewer particularly enjoyed the final illustration of the dog with its lead in its mouth, looking hopelessly at the two exhausted daddies who have gone to sleep on the sofa... **DB**

**"Not that pet!"**

★★★★

Smriti Hall, ill. Rosalind Beardshaw, Walker 32pp., 978 1 40638789 6 £12.99 hdbk

Smriti Halls also writes as Prasadam-Halls, and she had experience in children's publishing and editing before she started writing her own books, which have won awards and been published in 30 languages, so far. The dual-heritage South Asian family featured here is based on her own family: Mum does wear Western clothes, but Grandma wears a sari, and Grandpa sports a very fine moustache.

The premise of this book is very similar to that in Rod Campbell's board book **Dear Zoo**, but the picture book format allows for more expansion on the unsuitability of the various pets that are delivered to Mabel's family's house by Pete's Pet Shop, not the zoo in this instance. It's definitely not to be taken seriously; we start with an elephant, and Mum wants something smaller, so we move on to ants, (though not in a vivarium, which would have been more sensible!) marching about and into Dad's underpants. Mum then wants something they can see. The ever-patient Pete from the pet shop looks very anxious, as well he might, after leaving them a skunk, which is, indeed, visible by day and by night. All is well until the baby startles the skunk, with anticipated smelly consequences, so now they need something that's not afraid of the baby. A snake follows, and then quite a few other creatures, including a wolf and a hyena, which all, understandably, present their own problems. Mabel makes a list of requirements: 'something furry and sweet, without lot of legs or gigantic great feet', 'not smelly or tiny or scary or spiny, not noisy... something everyone likes'. The final choice is rather unexpected – not a cat or a dog, but a rat! The rat is quite cuddly, but has pooped on the floor and seems to have fleas, so maybe that one won't last very long either... it would be a question to ask a young audience!

Rosalind Beardshaw's illustrations are delightful. She is excellent in portraying children of various ethnicities and has illustrated Anna McQuinn's books about Lulu. Mabel and her little brother are full of character, and all the animals look friendly. The image of the family in their beds on three floors of the house, as neighbours shout at them about the noisy owl, shows how the grandparents are very much part of the family, and they all have encounters with the creatures that pass through the house in their quest for something suitable. This will be fun to read aloud, especially with a group of children who might enjoy sharing the pitfalls of each potential pet. **DB**

Mini Rabbit Come Home

★★★★

Written and ill. John Bond, HarperCollins 32pp, 978-0-00-826493-2, £12.99 hbk

This is the third book in Bond's popular series about the irrepressible Mini Rabbit, and this time, he's planning a garden camp-out. It's going to be the BEST day EVER!

Or is it? The camp is lacking a few necessary items, so Mother Rabbit sends Mini on a solo mission to fetch them. The tasks take him to a shop, a farmyard and a woodland clearing, but as usual, Mini's exuberance overwhelms his common sense. By the time he makes it back to camp, Mini has eaten the marshmallows and lost the rope. He's found a log but it smothers the fire, and the weather's

reviews

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

changing. Maybe the campout should be abandoned for another day?

Needless to say, Mini Rabbit isn't keen on that idea. When he makes a plan, he's going to see it through, and nothing the Great Outdoors can throw at him will dampen his spirits - until it's dark and wet and he's all alone, of course, when flexibility may be required.

Illustrate with bright, bold artwork, this book has a stylized, slightly abstract quality that offers children (and their adults) an enjoyable visual adventure. The well-developed storyline includes features borrowed from traditional tales (three tasks, helpful encounters along the path...) which anchor the narrative and give it a sense of a timeless solidity.

Mini's impatience and single-minded devotion to one idea will be recognised and enjoyed by anyone who's had dealings with toddlers, and his ability to set off alone into the big wide world and get things done will bring a delicious frisson of vicarious joy for Under 5's who dream of doing exactly that. **CFH**

Nature's Toy Box

★★★★

Wenda Shurety, ill. Harriet Hobday, Storyhouse 32pp, 978-1-9162818-0-6, £6.99 pbk
'Mum pressed the button and the screen went black...'

When Mum turns off the TV, Tilly can't think what to do. Her toybox doesn't look inviting, but there's a little bird singing in the garden, so Tilly goes outside to investigate. The bird isn't behind the greenhouse, or inside the flowerpots. Could it be playing hide and seek?

Searching under a bush, Tilly discovers a stick that looks very like a magic wand, and as her imagination takes over, we see the garden through new eyes. A tiny wildlife park appears to contain snakes, armadillos and even a rhinoceros, and all sorts of fun activities suggest themselves: wrapping leaves around found objects to give as presents, or using them to make a twirly skirt. When Mum tells her to come indoors, Tilly begs to be allowed to stay outside. That bird still hasn't been found, and surely there's time for one more game of hide and seek?

Entertaining yourself with few resources may be an old-fashioned pleasure, but it's a satisfying and rewarding skill, and one that Wenda Shurety explores in an inviting way. Children are brought on board with a clear narrative, and imaginative forays are framed in a way that cues and reassures readers with less experience of 'how books work' - including family members who may be sharing picturebooks at home.

'Abracadabra! Instantly the wand became a bird-spotting telescope...'

Harriet Hobday's painterly landscapes will please imaginative

art-lovers as well as readers who prefer their picturebooks to capture the flavour of 'real life'. Hobday's saturated blue-green palette highlighted with warm oranges, pinks and yellows is inviting, and allows her to create a world suffused with evening sun and possibilities. The final spread of the garden expanding to become a jungle paradise is particularly enjoyable.

Nature's Toy Box is a quiet gem that will appeal to children who already love imaginative garden play, but those who are new to its delights will be charmed by this book, too. **CFH**

LOUD!

★★★★★

Rose Robbins, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978 1 912650 56 9, £12.99, hbk

Abigail is not having a good day at school. She doesn't want to join in with writing, she feels restless and wants to scribble or fiddle with other children's hair. After being rude to the teacher she is sent to the calming down room in disgrace. The next lesson is music. Abigail arrives late to find everyone has already chosen instruments and seems really good at playing them. Abigail can't cope and starts screaming, very loudly. Expecting to be sent away in disgrace again Abigail is surprised when her teacher reacts positively and helps her find a rewarding role within the music class. With this everything changes for Abigail, she finds a focus for her energy, success, a purpose for writing and friendships too. The feelings of a child presenting challenging behaviour are sensitively explored in this simple story about the frustration of not fitting in or being understood. Towards the end of the story Abigail sets out her feelings plainly in the song she writes - she just wants to be herself and above all to be understood. The impact a sympathetic teacher can have by intervening at just the right time and in the right way is celebrated. Showing the music teacher in a wheelchair is a thoughtful touch. The anthropomorphic illustrations show Abigail and her classmates as a set of young animals and their expressions, especially those of the main character, Abigail, would be easy for young children to read as she switches from boredom, mischief, misery, worry to finally pride and happiness. Another inclusive picturebook from the creator of **Talking is not my Thing**. **SMC**

Best Test

★★★★★

Pippa Goodhart, ill. Anna Doherty, Tiny Owl, 32pp, 978 1 9103 2874 3, £7.99 pbk

Bird's discovery of a succulent strawberry sets in motion an exploration of what it means to be best. So delicious does said strawberry appear that other creatures too would like to have a share, the first being Frog who is quick to challenge Bird's 'Because I'm the best' claim to the entire thing. Bird much be bigger than Frog but when it comes to pulling funny faces, Frog wins unequivocally. Along comes little Shrew also claiming to be special and suggesting a test to help decide which of them really is BEST.

The competitors negotiate, a course is drawn out, Shrew offers to act as referee, the animals line up till Shrew shouts 'Go!' and off they set. Unbeknown to them all there's a small mollusc watching from the side.

During the race something entirely unforeseen occurs: the participants start helping one another and the race ends with a tie and Shrew's 'I declare you to ALL be the best!' And the strawberry? Rat suggests sharing it but there's a surprise in store in the form of Snail munching its way through the prize and there's no question that the race criteria have been fulfilled. However Snail has something crucial to contribute to the 'best' debate.

With its vibrantly coloured, textured illustrations and surprise ending this is smashing demonstration collaboration and teamwork, and of the fact that everyone has something special to contribute to the world.. ??

The Boys

★★★★★

Lauren Ace, ill. Jenny Lovlie, Little Tiger 40pp, 978-1-83891-159-1, £11.99 hbk

From their earliest days playing together on the beach to adulthood, with marriages and children of their own, Rey, Nattie, Bobby and Tam are a team, and this warm-hearted and inclusive picturebook tells the story of their friendship.

Celebrating differences in an understated and effective way, this book delivers important messages that will resonate with readers of all ages. Children who are curious about 'what comes next' will enjoy unpacking the life journeys in this book, while those who are focused on their own little corners of the world will be given a gentle nudge towards a broader picture.

The storyline is uncomplicated - the boys grow up, which brings changes that must be addressed and resolved - but a host of events are illustrated along the way, providing snapshots of other stories waiting to be told, and we see the boys valuing

and nurturing their friendship in ways young readers will relate to and understand.

Each boy has different talents and interests, but their enjoyment of each other's company takes centre stage. Text and illustrations work together to show them supporting one another and learning to express their feelings. Difficulties in achieving the 'ideal friendship' are recognised, and realistic scenarios demonstrate how and why challenges occur and are resolved.

The text specifically refers to 'building a friendship', and we're shown the effort and commitment this takes, as well as the enjoyable outcomes. As the boys grow, they begin to compete with each other, and the need to explore other friendships in their teenage years is acknowledged as a natural part of growing up. Towards the end, the text can be read as a realistic and sensible guide to creating better relationships, and it's very welcome to find it in the context of young men developing these vital skills.

'The boys knew they had to be able to talk about their feelings, but it wasn't easy. Just as they had when they were small, the friends worked together to make things better. They came to realise that no boy is an island, and the bravest way to face problems is to talk and to listen. They learned to be patient and kind with one another again, making their friendship stronger than ever.'

The Boys is a companion volume to the award-winning **The Girls**, and follows the same enjoyable format. It's worth noting, though, that instead of the break-up of an adult relationship as featured in **The Girls**, the 'weight of sadness' being addressed at the end of **The Boys** concerns the death of Bobby's dog, which may be more accessible concept for younger audiences.

Like **The Girls**, this is a book that will be given by adults to their friends, and there's much here for tweens and teens to enjoy and benefit from, too. But it does feel comfortably aimed at younger audiences, and families with preschool and primary-age children will feel at home sharing it. ??

The Story Thief

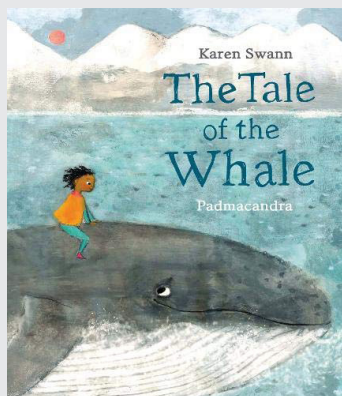
★★★★★

Graham Carter, Andersen Press, 40pp, 9781783448920, £12.99 hbk

Olive is shy. Her adventures happen in story books where she can be the hero. One day returning from the library her book drops into the sea, waking a creature asleep there. Suddenly books and their stories are disappearing. It is up to Olive to find her inner courage to discover what is going on - and even more important, to find a solution.

The theft of stories is a familiar trope, and here it is handled with a refreshing confidence and

imagination. The ending is particularly enjoyable and satisfying. Carter's bold colour-saturated illustrations fill each spread using all the dynamics – whole page, split panels, vignettes – to add rhythm and movement to the story as the pages turn. The end pages themselves introduce the imaginative world Carter brings to life – book shelves, tentacles and an underwater murk. Olive is a brave little character who young readers will recognise. The problem that faces the Octopus is also one that will be understood – books need someone who can read them and share the stories....but it is a problem that has a solution just as access to books, whether for adults or children, also has a solution. A very enjoyable picture book on all levels, to be recommended – and shared. **FH**



The Tale of the Whale

★★★★

Karen Swann, illus Padmacandra, Scallywag Press, 32pp, 978-1912650491, £12.99 hbk

Where land becomes sky and the sky becomes sea,/ I first saw the whale .../ and the whale first saw me./ And high on the breeze came his sweet-sounding song - / 'I've so much to show you, if you'll come along.' So begins a small child's magical journey on the back of a huge and beautiful baleen whale. Together they sail the oceans, dancing with dolphins, diving through the blue seas and exploring the ocean beds 'with carpets of colours that breathed with the sea.' Watched by a polar bear and her cub, they splash so high from the icy seas that the child feels they're flying, not since **The Snowman** has a journey conjured so much sheer joy, connection and imagination. But the tone changes when the whale becomes hungry – opening his mouth wide along with the soup of the ocean he swallows the debris discarded by humans, and the child realises what the whale wants people to see. They travel home saddened and both crying, but the child promises to tell the whale's tale and on the final page challenges us to change the world too. The story doesn't dodge the size of the problem we face, but that final direct message is given from a beach

of golden sand, where other children clean up litter and play together. It's empowering and positive, a fitting end to a book that explores our connection with the natural world, text and images working beautifully together. **LS**

Can You Keep a Secret?

★★★★

Melissa Castrillon, Alison Green Books, 32pp, 9781407194493, £6.99 pbk

Can you keep a secret? What if it is a really big secret with the existence of very special creatures depending on you? This is the question that faces Winnie when she meets the last dragon in the world and his friends. Will she keep their secret?

Castrillon's screen print techniques create the perfect medium for her narrative which gently explores the boundaries between the imagination and reality. A colour-saturated palette of bright pinks, turquoise greens and a sensitive use of white spaces together with definite outlines creates images that have an almost dreamlike quality combined with an energy that ensures the eye moves across the spreads to turn the page. Winnie and her parents are solid, real, while the mythological creatures are imbued with a sense of the fabulous. This gentle story would be a joy to share, raising as it does questions around fantasy, imagination and the real world and their place for a young audience to explore. **FH**

The Rock from the Sky

★★★★

John Klassen, Walker, 100pp, 9781 4063 9557 0, £12.99, hb

At the start of John Klassen's new epic five act picture book there are four characters: a turtle, an armadillo, a snake and a large rock, which enters from above. The first three are looking at us sideways. The turtle and the armadillo wear a bowler hat, the snake wears a beret, and the rock is just a rock. The turtle is rather snappy, unfriendly, and reluctant to admit that he might have done something foolish or to accept help when he has. Consequently, he spends the second act of the book upside down. In the third act the armadillo and the turtle sit on the rock and imagine the future, into which enters another rather scary character on tall spindly legs from a different galaxy of the imagination. In the next act, the snake and the armadillo sit under the rock and admire the sunset. The turtle approaches wondering what they are doing, but by the time he makes his slow way to join them, to his disappointment, they are not doing it anymore, and he feels left out. In the last act, the turtle declares he will leave and may never come back. This is the cue for the return of the scary character from the future and the intervention of a second rock. As in Klassen's other minimalist tales, space on the page,

actors and dialogue are deployed with absurdist skill to create a story that, while apparently inconsequential, has humour, suspense and danger. Through the character of the turtle, the arrangement of the characters on the page and their movement across it, it touches knowingly on the perils of loneliness and the comfort of friendship; and on existential threats, perhaps like pandemics, that can come from anywhere and nowhere. **CB**

What is a Virus?

★★★★

Katie Daynes, ill. Kirsti Beautyman, Usborne, 12pp, 978-1-4749-9151-3, £9.99, hbk

This timely and enjoyable non-fiction board book takes an informative look at the subject of viruses. A single headline question is explored per double spread (including Why Should I Wash My Hands? Which is the Worst? and What's a Vaccine?) and further related questions are answered beneath sturdy lift-up flaps.

Despite the amusing virus mugshots, this book takes a practical, down-to-earth approach to a subject about which children (and their carers) may be confused. The text was written in consultation with a medical expert, and looks to provide reassurance and effective actions rather than sensationalizing the facts. Short sentences get to the point without unnecessary padding, and correct terminology is used throughout. As the author observes 'kids don't want to be fobbed off with half-truths, but neither do they want to be blasted with jargon.' It's a tough line to call, but one that has been addressed effectively in this book.

The appealing illustrations are mostly in full colour, with a couple of black-and-white spreads giving the impression of sketches and notes. As a board book, it is robust enough to survive repeated consultations. However, the format does feel slightly at odds with the interest level, and it would be a shame if older readers were put off (or the book were to be shelved in the preschool section) as the content has much to recommend it right through Key Stage 2. Having said that, though, there is nothing to stop keen nursery children getting to grips with this book.

What is a Virus? is the latest in Usborne's series of **First Questions and Answers**. More titles are planned, including **Why Do Things Die?** and **What is Racism?**

Nano: The Spectacular Science of the Very (Very) Small

★★★★

Dr. Jess Wade, ill. Melissa Castrillon, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1406384925 £12.99, hbk

A notable addition to scientific non-fiction books for young children. Nano succeeds in making a complex area of science inviting, by being immensely accessible and attractive to the general reader.

The distinguished award-winning

physicist, Dr Jess Wade, has created a text that introduces the cutting-edge field of nanotechnology in clear, uncomplicated language which enthuses and never condescends about its topic. Beginning with the simple statement that, 'everything is made from something', we are gradually taken through the building blocks of different materials and introduced to several key scientific concepts on the way. There is much to marvel over with the discovery of graphene and the possibilities it offers for our future. The idea that an elephant could walk along a tight rope made out of nanomaterial, without it breaking, is sure to captivate readers of any age. The clear passion the author shows towards her specialism is likely to leave a strong impression on children, with the text most definitely leaving you wanting to know more.

Integral to the stimulating content is the distinctive illustrations by Melissa Castrillon. The beautiful layers of patterns and crosshatching create an energy to the drawings which complements the subject matter. The limited, cheerful colours she uses, and the detail to be found in each of the illustrations, combine to create vitality and a sense of wonder in the world around us.

A final section provides additional information about the types of scientists who come together to work on nanoscience, and the development in scientific technology that is enabling the investigation of nanomaterials to advance further. There is also a handy index to help track the specialist concepts introduced throughout the text which also gives a 'grown up feel' to the book.

This is an impressive and stylish book that is perfect for a young child who is beginning to be fascinated by the science of the world around us. **EC**

The Invisible

★★★★

Tom Percival, Simon & Schuster, 40pp, 978 1 4711 9130 5, £6.99 pbk Isabel and her parents are full of love for each other, but they are very poor, and when the bills become too much, they must leave their home and move 'across town', where everything is joyless. Isabel begins to feel very sad and lonely. No one seems to notice her, or talk to her, or even see that she exists. Soon she feels invisible, almost ghostly, and then she begins to notice there are other invisible people too – an old lady, who plants bright flowers in old pots, a man who sleeps on a park bench and feeds the birds, and a refugee boy, who is helping fix a bike – all lonely and all invisible to those around them. Isabel decides to help, and soon the neighbourhood is full of light and colour and sound, with lots of invisible people helping each other, and Isabel has done something very special and difficult: she has 'made a difference'. A lovely parable about all the lonely, invisible people in the world who need to have the rest of us notice them and help make them visible again.

reviews

5 – 8 Infant/Junior continued

The illustrations are outstanding. Full of cold and snow and bleakness in the beginning, they become brighter and brighter until the final two-page spread is crammed with light and colour and happy people sharing happy tasks. A brilliant (in every sense of the word) production. **ES**

Bea by the Sea

★★★★

Jo Byatt, Child's Play Ltd, 978 1 78628 469 3, 32pp, £6.99 pbk
Bea just loves lions, and has vast library of information books on the species. She also dreams about them. Would lions like bubble baths? Do they visit the dentist? But living beside the sea is a problem for Bea, for she just HATES sand. She thinks it is too gritty, too sticky and too scratchy, especially when it gets between her toes. When Mum persuades her to come to the beach for the day, (Bea with her wellies on,) they find it full of sand sculptures, including one of a large life-size lion. Having miraculously come to life, Lion befriends Bea and soon they are playing all sorts of games which involve removing her boots and slowly learning to enjoy the feel of the sand. Meantime, Lion reveals that his fear is of the water, as Bea eventually goes into the sea to get the sand from her hands. Both characters are helped to overcome a dislike/fear by sharing it. Young readers will enjoy reading about how Bea comes to love the beach, even when next day they return, searching for Sandlion, only to find all the sculptures washed away by the tide. The final page shows a delighted Bea who then makes her very own lion sculpture, with a mane as prickly and bobbed as her own. The endpapers are littered with information boxes; at the front, centred on lions. Did you know a male lion's roar can be heard up to 8km away? Or that lions may sleep for up to 20 hours a day? They are top hunters, eating buffalo, deer, warhog, wildebeest and zebra.....and it is usually the females that hunt. The book closes with end papers full of information about sand. Did you know that the tallest sandcastle ever built (so far!) measured 17.65metres? It was built in Germany in 2019. The longest beach is in Brazil, about 240km long. Sand is used to make glass, concrete and bricks. These papers add a finishing touch to a gentle book and will encourage readers to explore them for themselves. **GB**

Howard the Average Gecko

★★★★

Wendy Meddour, ill. Carmen Saldana, Oxford, 32pp, 978 0 19 277734 8, £6.99 pbk
The key character in this fascinating book is Howard the gecko. He considers himself the only camouflaged creature in the forest, so brilliantly camouflaged that he

really deserves a prize. So he is amazed as well as shocked to be told by exasperated bees, beetles, birds and butterflies that they are ALL camouflaged, but he is too busy noticing himself to realise. They tell him he is ...just average, an idea which appals Howard. He believes that no one will ever love him if he is just an average gecko. But into the picture comes the most beautiful creature he has ever seen. 'Her skin is wrinkly. Her fingertips are gloopy. Her eyes wobble about like spinning moons.' Howard thinks she is MAGNIFICENT. But other creatures call her...average. So, one doesn't have to be special to be loved? Indeed. Rich glowing colours flood every page, and the camouflaged creatures hidden in the forest are worth seeking. The final page gives more information on camouflage, how it can help an animal hide from would-be predators. The camouflage can be of colour, or pattern, and some creatures, like geckos, can change colour to match their immediate surroundings. **GB**

Penny and the Little Lost Puppy

★★★★

Emily Sutton, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 4063 8276 1, £12.99 hbk
Moving home is often difficult especially when you've had to leave all your friends behind like Penny in artist Emily Sutton's debut as both author and illustrator. Imagine her joy then when as she sits under an old apple tree in the back garden, out of the bushes appears a little dog that, far from being scary, clearly wants to play. By the end of the day with a new lively friend, Penny feels very different about things and can't wait for the following day when they can play together again. Next day however, there's no sign of the little dog so Dad suggests visiting the shops and asking if anyone has seen the animal. They certainly get to know the new town and shopkeepers a bit better, but of the little dog there is apparently no sign, so the newcomers make their way back home. As they approach their house, a neighbour's door opens and what should bound out but Penny's canine companion from the previous day. Moreover she's swiftly followed by a little boy who introduces his pet as Smudge and himself as Bill.

Soon Penny is having a tea party in her new home to celebrate not one but two new friends.

Illustrations crammed with a cornucopia of colourful details, particularly the shopping and park pages, positively cry out to readers to join in the quest to find the missing dog which may only become apparent in a retrospective perusal. **JB**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle



The Weather Weaver

★★★★

Tamsin Mori, Uclan Publishing, 322pp, 978-1912979455, £7.99 pbk
A stormy island in the Shetlands provides the setting for Tamsin Mori's debut, a story of magic and old myth. Eleven-year-old Stella is staying there with her grandpa and finding things difficult: it's her first visit since her grandma died, and the atmosphere in their cottage is very different now, and much sadder. After one particularly big row with her grandpa, she runs out onto the clifftops where she encounters the mysterious Tamar who, to Stella's astonishment, reveals that she has magical gifts. Stella, it appears, is a weather weaver, able to commend and control clouds and the wind. Indeed, she is able to pull a cloud out of the sky. When the island is threatened by a sea witch, Tamar and Stella, with the help of the clouds and Grandpa form an unlikely team of heroes to stand against her. It's a story that makes the most of old magic and of its wild backdrop, while the idea of having a cloud as a best friend will intrigue readers – Nimbus, as Stella calls him, is a wonderful mix of reassuring companion and cheeky, badly behaved puppy, though with the added advantage of being able to provide 'cloud cover' when necessary from attacks generated by the evil witch. The plot scuds along like clouds on a spring day and it's a commendable debut. More adventures for Stella and Nimbus are promised. **MMA**

The Cooking Club Detectives

★★★★

Ewa Jozefkiewicz, Zephyr, 244pp, 978 1 789543605, £7.99, pbk
Erin Bellissima, our young narrator, is facing lots of changes as she begins her story, she has just moved to a new flat and has to start a new school too. Fortunately, she makes friends and develops new interests when she starts attending activities at Skipton House Community Centre,

an intriguing and ramshackle building full of life and activity.

There are changes for Lara (Erin's mum) too when she loses her job. A skilled and creative cook, Lara enters a cookery competition hoping this will be the answer to their financial problems. Unfortunately, she is unsuccessful. Concerned, Erin and her friends help her find a new role when a leader is suddenly needed for the Community Centre's cookery club.

Skipton House Community Centre becomes pivotal in both Erin and Lara's lives. Unfortunately, Erin discovers the community centre is under threat from a mystery buyer. Who could this be and how can they be stopped? Erin and her friends Tanya, Sam and Frixos become the cookery club detectives determined to solve the mystery.

This is a warm and engaging story with appealing characters. Many themes are explored such as settling into a new school and making friends, including with those whose lifestyle is very different from your own. It also touches on bigger themes such as food poverty, the impact of unemployment, online bullying, the importance of community centres and the potential power of activism.

Healthy cooking on a budget is another focus and seven recipes are sprinkled throughout the book to tempt young cooks to create their own *Fantabulous Fatijas*, *Perfect Pizza* and of course when the mystery is solved, celebratory *Banana Bread*. **SMC**

Coyote's Soundbite – a poem for our planet

★★★★

John Agard, ill. Piet Grobler, Lantana, 30pp, 978 1 911373 5, £12.99, hbk

The rainforest is buzzing with news that the Earth goddesses are having a conference to discuss what should be done to save the planet and stop humans destroying it. Coyote is keen to attend and is undeterred by the fact this is a female only event. He decides to go in disguise and wearing his wife's blue dress, with matching shoes and handbag, he arrives undetected. The conference begins and one by one, the Earth goddesses make their speeches relating creation stories from cultures around the world. As he listens an idea occurs to Coyote and he decides to interject to make his point. He tells the speakers and delegates that what the Earth goddesses need is a soundbite to get their message across. Coyote's suggestion is enthusiastically received. On returning home, after successfully infiltrating the conference Coyote is surprised to discover that he is not the only one who has been playing tricks, his wife has too.

New talent

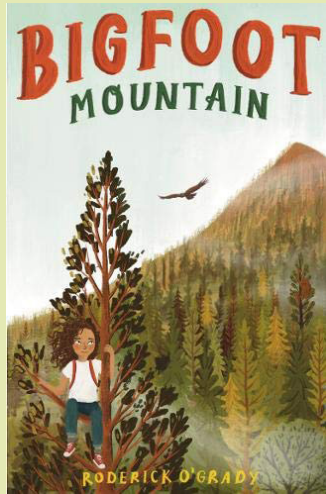
Bigfoot Mountain

★★★★★

Roderick O'Grady, Firefly, 272pp, 978913102418, £6.99 pbk

Minnie lives in a remote coastal area of the United States together with her stepfather Dan. They are both struggling to come to terms with the death of Minnie's mother and with learning to be a family of two. Their home is a small group of holiday cabins that was the dream project of Minnie's Mum. The only other people around at this late end of the season are Billy and his mother Connie, who live in one of the cabins. Subtle changes start to happen in the area after major forest fires devastate the land on the other side of the mountain. This leads to wild animals moving territory and coming closer to habitation. However, one day Minnie and Billy find footprints that are way too big to be human, leading them to consider the possibility that the 'Bigfoot' might actually exist. The other side of the story is told through the eyes of a young 'Sasquatch' called Kaayii, who guards the family's sleeping areas during the day. He becomes aware of the humans and tries to keep them away from the rest of his family, or clan. What becomes clear through this story, is that the humans have unknowingly built over the historic migration route of the Sasquatch. The problem is how can this be resolved without either group being threatened by the others?

This is an extremely powerful story that looks at the idea of family and how important that is in our lives.



Each set of characters are having to come to terms with great change in their lives, which leads to changes in the dynamics of their relationships. What particularly impresses me is the way the author has created the characteristics of the Sasquatch; they are not a version of a human being, but are very much their own race. Language is mainly non-verbal and they often communicate through thought. The way they hunt, build dwellings and mark their territory is all beautifully explained and we get a real sense of how traumatic having to move has been for them. At the same time Minnie and Dan are having to learn more about each other and the enclosed community they are in does not allow them as much space as they would like. This is a wonderful and thought-provoking book and one that I would highly recommend. **MP**

Inspired by Earth Day, award winning poet John Agard's narrative poem is full of humour and perfectly matched by acclaimed illustrator Piet Grobler's striking, quirky and detailed illustrations.

Steeped in creation mythology from around world, this is a trickster tale with an important theme – human responsibility for the state of the Earth. **SMc**

Rainbow Grey

★★★★★

Laura Ellen Anderson, Egmont, 294pp, 9781405298728, £6.99, pbk Ray Grey lives in the city of Celestia in the Weatherlands a kingdom high above our world where clouds really do have silver linings and the inhabitants, or 'Weatherlings' are equipped with powerful weather magic they use to protect Earthlings. All that is except for Ray who has no special powers and feels woefully inadequate, frustratingly even her own friends can create snow spells

or transport themselves by becoming puddles. Against instructions, Ray decides to become an Earth Explorer like her hero La Blaze Delight. She travels to earth by cloud cat (how else?) and finds an amazing treasure which proves instrumental in enabling her to become Rainbow Grey, a Weatherling with her very own amazing powers and multicoloured hair. Her problems are just beginning however as before she has a chance to get to grips with her new powers, she has to put them to use to save the world from a terrible storm and simultaneously contend with an unexpected foe.

This is a lively story with a fully imagined alternative world, an entertaining collection of characters and a brave heroine. The glimpses of artwork available in the proof copy reviewed suggest a similarly lively style in the illustration too.

The first of a brand-new series from Laura Ellen Anderson likely to be eagerly received by fans of her popular *Amelia Fang* stories. **Mc**

Rumaysa: A Fairytale

★★★★★

Radiya Hafiza, illus Rhaida El Touny, Macmillan Children's Books, 240pp, 978-1529038309, £6.99 pbk

Three interlinked fairytales form the heart of this sparkling story, all reimagined in fresh and exciting new ways. It opens with the *Rapunzel* story, adapted to become the tale of Rumaysa, spirited away and locked in a high tower by wicked witch, Cordelia. A prince arrives to rescue her but by then Rumaysa has already made her escape, weaving a hijab long enough to reach the ground and climbing down it to freedom. With newly discovered magical skills and a magic necklace passed on by the prince, Rumaysa next finds herself helping Cinderella, oppressed by a wicked step-mother and longing to go to the ball. Again Radiya Hafiza makes the story her own, so that by the end we feel sorry for the step-mum, despite her cruel behaviour, while Ayla has decided that the prince isn't nearly as nice as he seemed at the ball and far too much of a snob to marry (even if she was old enough). The final story is another adaptation, this time of *Sleeping Beauty*, in which the sleeping princess is stolen away by a dragon, rescued by Rumaysa and returns home realising that, if you want to govern people properly, it pays to make sure you know them and understand how they live their lives. Hafiza puts a definite 21st century spin on the stories and the last thing any of these girls want is a husband, but it's refreshing and welcome too that the central characters are Asian and the setting a glorious mix of magic and South Asia. Full of humour and charm, and a real page-turner too, this fairytale retelling is highly recommended. **LS**

Digger and Me

★★★★★

Ros Roberts, Little Tiger, 180pp, 9781788953207, £6.99 pbk

This moving, warm-hearted story explores the importance of family, love, friendship and finding a way to communicate emotions and fears. The narrator, 11-year-old James, has had a lot to deal with; his parents have split up and both have new partners, his Uncle Bobby has died of cancer and he is soon to start a new school. The constant in James' life is his beloved dog Digger, his support through challenging times. So, when James finds a lump on Digger's leg and his dog faces cancer treatment, James' world falls apart.

James' feelings of anger and isolation are powerfully conveyed; however, he does have a network of support, a loving family, a close friend, and an inspirational teacher who encourages James' class to write poetry thus allowing James to express his feelings in a creative way. Ros Roberts skilfully portrays the complexity and strength of family relationships and the importance of a pet as James is gradually supported through a period of anxiety and

change. The poems written by James and his classmates are included and contribute greatly to the power of the story, showing the impact that an empathetic, inspirational teacher can have. Free writing is close to the author's heart and the book ends with some blank, lined pages to encourage readers to write their own poems.

This poignant, empathetic, and well-observed tale of a boy and his dog should appeal to 8+ fans of family and animal stories. **SR**

Harklights

★★★★★

Tim Tilley, ill. Tim Tilley, Usborne, 304pp, 978147966603, £7.99, pbk

It would be hard to find a story more up to the minute than this. *Harklights* is a fantasy, written and illustrated by Tim Tilley, in which the organic and mechanised world are in archetypal conflict. Wick lives in an orphanage which doubles as a match factory ruled over by the dreadful Ma Bogey, who feeds the orphans a staple diet of porridge and whose punishment for those who get out of line is to throw them down the bottomless well. Wick escapes with the help of the Hobs, a tiny people who live in the surrounding woodland and are led by Pa Herne. The Hobs call themselves a tribe. They look after the forest and its creatures, talk in an appealing, possibly rural, accent, travel by blackbird, and welcome all comers, big or small; not unlike a friendly band of HS2 protestors (apart from the blackbirds and talking to wood sprites, I assume). They quickly become a new family for Wick, teach him the ways of the forest, including that even small people can make a big difference, and to observe the two forest laws: protect the forest and never harm a living thing. He even has the promise of earning the green cloak of the "Forest Keeper". Of course, life doesn't continue to be so pleasant for too long. A monster is chewing up the forest (and the Hobs). It must be tracked down and stopped; and the other orphans are still to be rescued from the match factory and the threat of the bottomless well. So, there's a lot happening in the last few chapters to sort these things out. To some jaded (old) adult sensibilities (well mine anyway) this might all be a bit pat and worthy. But you can hardly disagree with the sentiment and, as a way of introducing the under tens to enjoying and looking after nature, it's an enjoyable magical adventure. **CB**

Me and the Robbersons

★★★★★

Siri Kolu, trans Ruth Urbom, Little Tiger, 160pp, 9781788953177, £6.99 pbk

"I was stolen the first week in June..." – Maisie on the way to what promises to be the worst family day out ever, is suddenly snatched from the car and finds herself travelling into an amazing summer of heists, mayhem, friendship – and sweets! She has

8 – 10 Junior/Middle continued

been taken by the Robbersons – yes, a family of highway bandits who travel the summer roads on their way to the great Summer Shindig. Maisie has to work out how to get back home. It is a journey that is full of surprises and self-discovery.

Madcap, anarchic, a riot, this is an adventure to delight. It has the almost surreal qualities of **Alice in Wonderland** – a family of bandits on the highways taking random items but especially sweets, enjoying the summer with an infectious joie-de-vivre. These are the events of the imagination – a childlike imagination – which even adults can recognise. Who would not want to abandon the rigid constraints of the everyday? But chaos has its own dangers – and not everyone wants to live without a framework. It is Maisie who is able to suggest alternatives and in so doing learns to understand herself and her own family better. This may be a story that turns the everyday upside-down, but running through it there are serious themes around families and family relationships with a clear message at the end. The reader meets a galaxy of characters they can recognise, both adult and child, with Maisie very much at the centre. The writing, captured in the translation by Ruth Urbom, matches the energy of the story – contemporary language, lively dialogue and a setting that is familiar but with just enough difference to open the mind to a wider world. This is brought to us from Finland, an Honour title in **BookTrust's In Other Words** campaign and is a welcome addition to shelves where Moomintroll is already resident. This is a book to promote and share – a joyous adventure that expands the boundaries of belief with confidence without losing sight of its gentle message about family and self-identity. **FH**

Harley Hitch and the Iron Forest

★★★★

Vashti Hardy, ill. George Ermos, Scholastic, 236pp, 9780702302558, £6.99 pbk

Harley Hitch is one of those characters that always seem to get in trouble. She means well, but finds it difficult to keep to the rules. Harley would rather being off having adventures with her robotic dog 'Sprocket' and her best friend Cosmo and living in the fantastical world of Inventia gives her plenty of opportunity. This is a world ruled by science and there is even an "Iron Forest", where mechanical parts grow on trees and supply the needs of the populace. When Harley discovers a fungus attacking the forest everyone is given the task of trying to find a cure. Will they succeed in saving the forest and hence Inventia's ability to create scientific wonders and more importantly will Harley win "Pupil of the term" at school?

This is a highly entertaining story

by one of our new wave of brilliant fantasy authors. Vashti Hardy is well known for her books Brightstorm and Wildspark, but this time around she is writing for a slightly younger audience. The world is a mix of fantasy and science fiction and makes the reader think about what is possible and how much we depend on technology in our lives. George Ermos has brought Harley to life and given her the look and attitude that exactly re-enforces the image that we get from the descriptions. The pictures throughout the book are a fantastic way of adding to the atmosphere and introducing us to many of the other characters, including Harley's two Grandpas and Cosmo. Look inside the back and front covers to see the fabulous versions of some of the 'plants' to be found in the forest; it shows the depth of detail that the author and illustrator have achieved. This is a wonderful book about friendship and how we can find it in unlikely places, as well as about family and learning to understand the needs of others and I can't wait to read about more adventures for this feisty young hero. **MP**

How to Save the World With a Chicken and an Egg

★★★★

Emma Shevah, ill. Kirsti Beautyman, Chicken House, 296pp, 9781910655474, £6.99 pbk Emma Shevah has written the perfect book for eco-aware young readers as it combines positive action, humour, and plenty of animal facts with mystery, adventure, and a large dose of the author's own passion for the animal world. The two central characters, Ivy and Nathaniel, spring vividly to life and complement each other's skills and traits so completely that they form the ideal team, although it takes the two of them the whole book to realise this fact.

The narrative is first person with chapters that alternate between Ivy and Nathaniel in a very amusing way. Lively, high-spirited Ivy lives with her foster parents on the Suffolk coast and uses her ability to communicate with animals to try and help them wherever possible. Nathaniel, who has moved to live with his mother after the death of his beloved grandmother, has Asperger's Syndrome and finds it hard to adapt to change and copes with difficult social situations by communicating abstruse animal facts. Both children, in their different ways, have a passion for saving the natural world and when the wondrous 'impossible possible' happens and a giant leatherback turtle lays her eggs on their beach the pair unite to protect the baby turtles. This mission to make a difference leads to Ivy's dream of an Animal Action Agency being realised.

This funny, heart-warming story, full of quirky and appealing characters, both animal and human, is a must

read for all children with a passion for the planet and its creatures. Conservation and eco themes combine with humour, a celebration of diversity, fascinating facts, and top tips on protecting the environment to produce an inspiring book. **SR**

Noah's Gold

★★★★

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, illustrated by Steven Lenton, Macmillan, 294pp, 9781529048261, £12.99 hbk

This story begins uncertainly with a small group of modern primary school children somehow becoming stranded on an uninhabited offshore island without adult support. But Frank Cottrell-Boyce is a master of his craft, and once into his stride disbelief soon fades away. Witty but also with some serious points to make, endlessly imaginative, never predictable, this is story-telling at its best.

It is narrated by young Noah, who should never have been on the school trip involved but smuggles himself onto it. His presence is not received well by his older sister and her classmates until it gradually becomes clear that he is the one to go for when it comes to finding possible solutions. He does indeed have something like a magical touch except when it comes to anything to do with the Internet, where he manages to close down the entire world network by accident. Having then to fall back on pre-digital skills and technology is one of the main themes of this story. But the children survive as successfully as those in Lord of the Flies fail to do, a point the author briefly discusses in an afterword. He also disentangles truth from fiction where the Internet is concerned, and some of what he has to say here could well come as a surprise to his readers.

Noah tells his story in the form of letters to his parents which while never delivered are often mysteriously answered. All is revealed at the end in this truly joyous narrative, which manages to be both exciting and very funny. No doubt about it; Cottrell-Boyce is a bit of a genius, and this story is one of his finest achievements yet. **NT**

The Dog that saved the World (Cup)

★★★★

Phil Earle, ill. Elisa Paganelli, Barrington Stoke, 96pp, 978-1-78112-968-5, £6.99 pbk

The very experienced and talented Phil Earle explains at the end of the book that he has merged two stories here: the true story of Pickles, the dog that really did find the World Cup with his owner, Dave, and a story like that of Fara Williams, a homeless girl who became a professional and successful footballer, notably for Everton, 2005-2017.

He turns Fara into young Elsie, who, with her Dad, owns Pickles, and the story is told through Pickles' eyes. He loves football too, and his

dribbling skills, he says, are better than Elsie's – the whole family love football. Pickles sees that Dad gets a lot of letters from 'Bill', which cause him to worry, and when Dad loses his job he finds it difficult to admit his difficulties, but they have to move to a smaller flat. Dad puts a brave face on it, (Pickles is always on the look-out for the good things that are 'just around the corner') but the flat, in a converted office block, is awful, though neighbour Samir and his family invite them to watch the World Cup matches with them. Dad and Elsie queue to see the Trophy when it comes to the Tigers' Stadium, but they learn that the Cup has been stolen. Pickles resolves to find it, and of course he eventually does. Dad is too ashamed of their life to be interviewed in the papers, but the discovery in the park had been noticed, and at the Cup Final, a huge fuss is made of Pickles as the dog that found the Cup. Elsie's Junior team had won the opportunity to play on the pitch at half-time, and Pickles joins in with his ball tricks, so it all becomes a joyful experience, and Pickles knows that the family are a great team together.

It's a charming story, and really works with the addition of a young female footballer. Barrington Stoke's creamy paper and clear font make this more accessible for readers with difficulties, and Elisa Paganelli's illustrations show a harassed Dad, Elsie's fun with football and Pickles, skilfully and entertainingly. This book is sure to be popular. **DB**

Tragedy at Sea: the Sinking of the Titanic

★★★★

David Long, ill. Stefano Tambanelli, Barrington Stoke 80pp., 978 1 78112 966 1 £6.99 pbk

David Long writes non-fiction, the kind of books he would like to read himself, he says, for adults and for children. He has produced a few books for Barrington Stoke now, and this will be a useful addition to a school library or to that huge number of people fascinated by the story of the Titanic.

He sets the scene, explaining about the urge to build bigger and better ships, and how the shipbuilders had to modify their ways of working, gives a lot of detail about the people making this exciting maiden voyage, from the rich and famous to poor emigrants seeking a better life, and mentions the incident, almost a smaller disaster, that happened in Southampton Docks the day before the fatal sailing. There is some information about icebergs and the damage they can do, but a crucial issue was the fact that warnings about a big one in the area were being ignored as the radio operator was sending the innovative 'Marconigrams', telegrams, from the richer passengers to their friends and families on shore at the moment the ship hit the iceberg much too fast.

It's page 51 before we get to the chapter 'Disaster Strikes', and then

it all happens very quickly. The fact that there were not enough lifeboats for everyone on board meant that the 'women and children first' policy operated, so that families were separated, and there had been no safety drill, so nobody really knew what to do. Some lifeboats left with space for more people, and the White Star Line's managing director, Joseph Bruce Ismay, managed to get away, which caused fury among the survivors and the families of those who had died. After all, Captain Smith had nobly gone down with his ship, as was expected. Lessons were learnt from the disaster, however, and the drills and safety precautions on all ships are now much more stringent.

David Long makes this an exciting story, even though most people know what happened, and there is some fascinating detail, well-illustrated by Stefano Tambellini. The drawing of the various levels of cabin is telling: the luxury suite is at the top with crew to wait on the passengers, then business class is in the middle, and poorer people had bunk beds at the bottom. Sketches of the various types of people needed to maintain the ship and look after its passengers add an extra level to the tragedy, as most of them died. On Barrington Stoke's familiar cream-coloured paper and in a clear font, this book is well worth adding to a collection. **DB**

Twitch

★★★★★

M.G. Leonard, Walker Books, 304pp, 978 1406389371, £7.99 pbk
Right from the opening tense episode in which twelve-year-old Twitch successfully intervenes to prevent a group of lads from hurting a pigeon, this pacey adventure story immediately grabs your attention and ensures you're already rooting for a boy who prefers the company of birds to most humans.

It's the start of the school summer holidays which means Twitch will have plenty of time to spend on his favourite pastime of bird spotting from his secret den in the local nature reserve. Plus, there's chickens to tend at home and a pair of pigeons he is keen to train. When Twitch hears news of a bank robber on the run and that a haul of loot may be hidden within the area of woodland where he has his hide, the scene is set for him to apply his bird watching skills in order to solve a mystery which has so far foiled the police.

Set alongside the many twists and turns of the accomplished plot is a joyous, human story about the qualities of friendship and attaining self-confidence through being true to yourself. Twitch is a very likable, loyal and humorous boy with whom young readers will easily identify. The relationship he establishes with the pigeons which he patiently trains, the difficult journey of his friendship with

Jack (his erstwhile nemesis) and the pleasure he derives from observing bird behaviour are features which greatly enrich the story.

For those readers who are fans of the author's previous **Beetle Boy** series, there is much to enjoy in the celebration of the natural world and the specialist information which is deftly sprinkled throughout the story. M. G. Leonard has the wonderful knack of being able to seamlessly both entertain and educate her young reader encouraging them to be more curious and excited about the birds that frequent our cities and suburban gardens. **EC**

When we say Black Lives Matter

★★★★★

Maxine Beneba Clarke, Wren and Rook, 32pp, 978 1 5263 6398 5, £6.99, pbk

The text in this picturebook is a powerful and moving poem explaining the Black Lives Matter movement as if to a small child.

The narrator explains that the Black Lives Matter movement reflects the need to speak out, recognising black people have not only been badly treated by history; many are badly treated now too. The writer emphasises that black people are strong, beautiful, brave and deserve respect.

Look closely at the illustrations as you turn the pages, and you will see a young child gradually grow from a babe in arms. His development is revisited in the final double page spread and the following graduation image with the implicit message that every child has potential for success.

The artwork is bold, textured and colourful. Although the figures are simply drawn with faces silhouetted, they are expressive and full of colour and movement. There are many details to spot in the powerful illustrations- look through the windows and find bunting made from Pan-African coloured flags. Stained glass windows are a repeated motif providing an effective framework for a silhouetted figure enslaved and in chains, or for present-day placard bearing protesters. Other images use the fragmentation of stained glass to great effect, including those referencing African ancestors. Spot the police incident tape and the all too familiar image of an outlined figure on the ground.

This book is a great introduction to the Black Lives Matter movement for children and offers many starting points for discussion. It is beautifully written, the structure, repetition and vocabulary would make this a wonderful book to read aloud or perform. **SMC**

10 – 14 Middle/Secondary

Show Us Who You Are

★★★★★

Elle McNicoll, *Knights Of*, 330pp, 978 1 9133111 3 1, £6.99 pbk

When Cora meets Adrien, at his birthday party, little does she know that her life is about to be turned upside down. Cora's older brother Gregor works for a secretive company, the Pomegranate Institute which makes amazingly realistic holograms of their loved ones for recently bereaved people. Adrien is the son of their CEO Magnus Hawkins but is somewhat of a disappointment to his father as he has ADHD and does not conform to his father's perception of how his son should be. Cora and Magnus strike up an unlikely but rewarding friendship as Adrien is the first person who immediately accepts Cora for who she and they soon discover they have a lot common as she is autistic.

Cora's mother had died two years previously and Cora becomes fascinated by the Pomegranate Institute and how it can help grieving families. She jumps at the chance to find out more and meet one of the holograms. Against her father's wishes, Cora joins the research programme lured by the charismatic Dr Gold with the promise of making her own hologram as the scientists are keen to know more about her autism. Cora and Adrien soon discover that there is a much more sinister motive behind the holograms and it is up to the children to uncover the web of deceit and lies. But disaster strikes as Adrien is in a coma after a hit and run accident leaving Cora to work out the clues for herself.

This insightful and highly-charged novel challenges many of the common preconceptions held about neurodiversity and explores pertinent issues such as AI, ethics, eugenics, grief and love in an engaging and open way. The plot gallops along and although it stretches incredulity a little in places it is more than made up for by the warmth and charm of both Adrien and Cora and their strong bond of friendship. There are some great witty one-liners too. Above all this is a story of what it means to be human and the importance of being brave enough to stand up for yourself. **JC**

The Nightsilver Promise

★★★★★

Annaliese Avery, Scholastic, 374pp, 9780702306037, £6.99, pbk

This is a stunning story set in a world where science is all important, but there are memories of the past, where dragons ruled together with humans. Paisley Fitzwilliam is the heroine of this story, but it looks as if it will be for a short time as the stars on her wrist (which tell her destiny) says she will die by her 14th birthday and she is already 13 years old. When her mother seems to have been killed in a scientific accident, Paisley has to take

care of her younger brother Dax, who appears to be 'crippled' but is in fact dragon touched (with his leg covered in dragon like scales). When Corbett, her mother's assistant, brings Paisley her mother's watch, he explains that she must be alive, because the watch is made of Nightsilver and would not be warm if her mother was dead. This sets the young people on a mission to find her mother and to protect her brother from the mysterious 'Dark Dragon' and her underlings; and the fate of her world might also depend on thwarting the evil mastermind.

The author has created a world that is magical in many respects and yet is ruled by the ways of science. There is the fascinating and almost Victorian feeling 'lower London', where people fear the existence of dragons and those that are 'Dragon touched' face execution if found out. Then we have the 'Floating Boroughs', which literally float in the sky above the city and where dragon touched are found and not persecuted. There is a feel of Steampunk about the place and for those who love works by Philip Reeve and Peter Bunzl this will be a very welcome addition to their reading lists. This is very much about how we should accept difference and even celebrate it; we also learn about friendship, loyalty, self-belief and the determination to do the right thing. The story is full of action and we have a very satisfying cast of heroes and villains; not all of whom are obvious at the beginning, as we are lead through a range of dangerous situations that gradually bring the evildoers to light and give us some unexpected twists and turns. I totally loved this book and will be waiting avidly for the next chapter in the lives of Paisley, Corbett and Dax. **MP**

Just Like Me

★★★★★

Louise Gooding, illus Angel Chang, Caterina Delli Carri, cathyhookey and Melissa Iwai, Quarto, 978-1787418486, Quarto, £12.99 hbk

This book is a non-fiction anthology giving the reader a brief glimpse into the lives of forty achievers from around the world who live or have lived with various impairments. The profiles include well known figures such as Stephen Hawking the astrophysicist who lived with a form of multiple sclerosis and Frieda Karlo the artist who lived in constant pain. Daniel Radcliffe, the Harry Potter actor, has dyspraxia, a disorder of developmental coordination. Many other disabilities are also discussed. The impairments cover a wide range of severity, from dyslexia to severe burns. Gooding has clearly researched her subjects in a comprehensive and detailed manner. She views each subject positively. Each biography lists the achievements of its subject as well as some of the difficulties that individual has faced. It is relatively

Ed's Choice

When the Sky Falls

★★★★★

Phil Earle, Andersen Press, 312pp, 9781783449651, £7.99 pbk

Set in the London Blitz this is a striking story which cannot fail to move anyone who reads it.

Joseph is sent to stay with Mrs F as a favour to his grandmother who can no longer cope with his unruly behaviour and the rage he feels that his mother abandoned him at a young age, and his father gone to war. His fury at the world does not endear him to anyone but he meets his match in Mrs F, a formidable lady who takes no prisoners and professes no love of children either. She sets Joseph to work the very next day and he is amazed to find that her job is running and trying to maintain a run-down zoo that has been in her family for generations. The only animals remaining that have not been re-homed are two hungry-looking wolves, a camel, two miniature ponies and a magnificent silverback gorilla, Adonis. Is it clear Mrs F loves this huge beast in particular and does her best to feed the animals with whatever meagre rations she can procure.

Joseph is at first afraid but gradually develops a strong bond with Adonis whose strength and sensitivity he respects; he has more in common with Adonis than he realises as both have lost loved ones. The zoo becomes Joseph's place of refuge. He also meets there Syd, a young girl Mrs F had taken under her wing as both her parents had recently died. Joseph gradually



warms to her and she becomes an ally when he is mercilessly picked on by bullies at school and by the terrible headmaster who beats Joseph with his cane, because he can't read. It is obvious to the reader however that Joseph is probably dyslexic.

The story is unflinching in its detail and realism. The chaos of the falling bombs, and the intensity of the hurt and anger Joseph feels are palpable and the way Mrs F finally admits her own pain and sorrow and comes to love and mother Joseph is magnificent. The story has a similar emotional resonance to *Goodnight Mister Tom*. The bond between Joseph and Adonis and that between Mrs G and Joseph shows that redemption and humanity are possible even in dark times and that the power of love is unshakeable. This is an exceptional novel. **JC**

uncommon for biographical essays to highlight the difficulties encountered by the subject.

At the foot of each page there is a brief summary of the medical condition or impairment relating to that individual. This structure makes for a concise form. However it does not adequately demonstrate how seriously the impairment affected the individual, or how difficult it was to overcome it. The book would be useful as a teaching aid in Key Stage 2 and beyond, helping to discuss and normalise personal differences. **RB**

Children of the Quicksands

★★★★★

Efua Traoré, Chicken House, 274pp., 978 1 913322 36 6, £7.99 pbk

Efua Taroré grew up in a little town in Nigeria, and had imaginary adventures with her friends in the nearby countryside, also sneaking to the forbidden lake where the banks were like quicksand. She used these memories when, having moved to Germany, she started writing stories. Her 6 year-old daughter had come home from school

saying that she had learnt that children in Africa were hungry and suffering. She was appalled at the misleading information that the class was getting, and asked her daughter to remember their happy holidays in Nigeria and to tell her classmates about them. Unable to find stories for children that showed a more positive side of Africa, she began writing, won a prize for a short story, and then produced this, her debut novel.

13 year-old Simi, short for Oluwanifesi, is sent to stay for a school holiday with a grandmother she has never met before. Her life in Lagos with her friends had been like most other children's experiences, but in Iyanla's village of Ajao there is no phone signal or internet, indeed no electricity at all, nor running water, and therefore a very basic shower and toilet, and, although at first Simi finds this hard, she begins to appreciate other aspects of village life. Iyanla is a "wise woman", helping people with their problems and using herbs for healing, and also a priestess, interacting with Oshun, goddess of the Yoruba culture. Forbidden to go into the forest because children

have disappeared, of course Simi is tempted to go in, and discovers a lake surrounded by quicksands that suck her in until she pops out into another country beyond. It's a scary place, and she is able to return, but when another girl, Morayo, goes missing, and her new friend Bubu goes into a trance in the forest, she is eventually told the story of the lake, and the reason for the antagonism between her mother and grandmother is gradually revealed. When a local politician decides that the lake must be filled in to prevent any more losses, the villagers are anxious at this prospect, and another new friend, Jay, (Jide) the chief's son offers his help. Simi, the only child who has the ability to return from the forbidden lake, is determined, against all advice, to go through the quicksands again to try and sort it all out.

This is an engrossing story, an excellent debut novel, and it's great to feel so involved with another culture. There are some Yoruba words, which are all explained, and the interaction with the gods, who sometimes act as capriciously as Greek or Roman deities, is intriguing. Perhaps we can hope for more stories set in Nigeria for young people from this author? **DB**



Cardboard Cowboys

★★★★★

Brian Conaghan, Bloomsbury, 352pp, 978-1526628602, £6.99 pbk

A flattened Iru-Bru can chucked down a canal bank kicks off a typically surprising and moving novel from Costa Book Award winner Brian Conaghan. The can is thrown by twelve-year-old Lenny, who drinks an awful lot of the stuff. Like many of Conaghan's heroes, Lenny is bullied at school – it's because of his weight – but out of it too, one attack leading to life-changing consequences for his family. The can lands close to the cardboard shelter that is home to Bruce, another lonely outsider, and despite this inauspicious start, and the age-gap (Bruce is 52), the two form a special friendship. Perhaps their relationship isn't as unlikely as it might seem: he may only be twelve, but Lenny is a thinker and indeed a poet – the book is scattered with his haikus, which Conaghan manages to

make both gawkish and poignant. It's the combination of his friendship with Bruce, who has his own heart-breaking experience of disaster, and the opportunities for self-expression that the haikus provide, that allow Lenny to work out for himself and for us, what is the most painful aspect of the situation he and his family are in, and how to put it right. Conaghan has a great ear for dialogue and Lenny's narration is one of the many pleasures of this book. It's probably his voice that steers what might have been rather a sentimental and improbable story onto different ground altogether. Lenny's honesty, whether describing his feelings or his long-distance lorry driver dad's smell – is irresistible and we are in the palm of his hand from start to finish. Conaghan has previously written for teenagers but seems to have relished writing for younger readers, and the book is funny, authentic and heart-warming.

Brian Conaghan was the subject of our *Authorgraph* interview, **BfK 230**.

InvestiGATORS: Take the Plunge

★★★★★

John Patrick Green, Macmillan, 200pp, 9781529066050, £9.99 hbk Children will love this graphic novel series, which is crammed with more jokes than it is possible to keep up with! Mango and Brash are the InvestiGators, a crime-fighting partnership who travel the sewers, powered by their VESTs (Very Exciting Spy Technology) hunting for villains.

The InvestiGators arrive in scene one sitting atop a giant missile dressed in waistcoats and carrying a trombone. This sums these heroes up perfectly: they're brave, ridiculous and explosively chaotic. They are not the only completely crazy characters in this comic strip, either...the baddies are just as bonkers. Crackerdile is an evil genius with a serious grudge against the gators and a seriously unfortunate condition (he has been turned into a saltine, making life in the damp sewers very challenging indeed!).

In this sequel, Mango and Brash have to take on Crackerdile while also trying to locate the 'combinotron' (a weapon that can stick any two things together) and solving the mystery of a dripping wet ghost of a robot who keeps hugging people against their will. There's an awful lot going on...it's no wonder the third instalment of the series is also about to be published.

The action is described in vibrant, energetic cartoons that will instantly grab the attention of any fans of Dog Man or Diary of a Wimpy Kid. As well as plenty of visual gags, there are countless puns, silly acronyms, and toilet humour that will have readers giggling from start to finish. The pace of the action is furious, with the story leaping around and juggling several narratives before smashing together again like a victim of the 'combination', itself.

Fast, fun, frenetic and full of toilet jokes, InvestiGators are bound to be a hit with young readers. **SD**

14+ Secondary/Adult

Shades of Scarlet

★★★★★

Anne Fine, David Fickling Books, 273pp, 9781788451352, £12.99 hbk
Long gone are the days where young people set out from home on adventures supremely confident that the same domestic structures will necessarily remain intact while they are away. In this story the family itself and its survival has now become the focus for the main action. Its main character, the ferociously outspoken teenage Scarlet, is determined to discover why her 43-year-old mother has left her dull but sweet-natured husband. Although at least half her class at school have already experienced family break-up 'sometimes twice over', nothing has prepared her for this change in her own domestic life.

Anne Fine is merciless in pointing out how painful such separations can prove to everyone, particularly offspring. But she also makes it clear that there can usually be no way of going back. Scarlet eventually has to accept that parents have rights to their own lives just as their children do. Looking for blame is tempting, but ultimately gets no-one anywhere. Scarlet's parents are human, not monsters. They both love her and even each other yet still their marriage has ultimately come unstuck beyond repair.

Fine is an old hand at describing different variations of family mayhem, and this novel is well up to her past high standards. The blackly comic mind-games played between Scarlet and her mother, each determined to have the last word, are truly something to behold. Sub-plots involving a best friend, a baby and a potential boyfriend offer temporary respite from their epic battles, but ultimately this is a story about mother and daughter fighting it out each in their own way as one climactic row follows hard on the next. Sometimes exhausting but more often exhilarating, this is a brilliant as well as a timely novel. **NT**

Nevertheless She Persisted

★★★★★

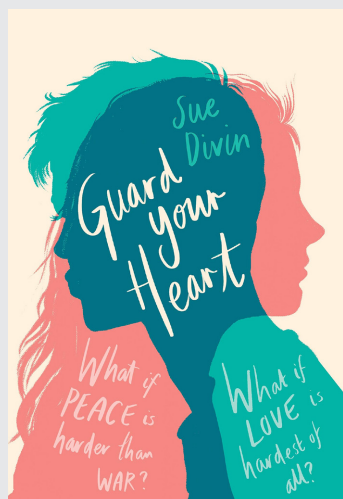
Jon Walter, David Fickling Books, 327pp, 9781788450263, £8.99, pbk
From the first chapter where Nancy has a baby, which is then taken by her sister Clara and given away, to the final reversal of fortune for the two sisters, the reader is taken on a journey through the fight for women's suffrage and the choices young women had to make.

Clara works at Holloway Prison, where many suffragettes, the more militant of the movements for votes for women, are taken and when on hunger strike force fed. Her sister Nancy, raped by her own father, is taken by Clara to join her as a warder, after the birth of the baby. On the suffragette wing, Nancy becomes

fascinated, indeed obsessed, by Daisy Divine, an actress, witnessing her courage as she is force fed, and is slowly drawn into the movement, which ultimately culminates in her own arrest for a bombing. Clara wrestles with her desire for a career but chooses another path.

The courage of the suffragettes and the 'cat and mouse' techniques where they are released until they are well enough to be re-arrested grips the reader. The scenes of force feeding are hard to read, but at the heart of the story are the choices women had to make and the lives they led as a result. Clara who also suffered at the hands of her father, has made her move out of the family home and started a seemingly successful career, but is torn by her love for Ted, and the knowledge of what marriage would mean, the loss of all her dreams, even that of owning a bicycle. For today's young women these choices are spelled out all too clearly. Nancy starts as a girl who feels she has been weak and manipulated learns she has courage to strike out on her own.

This book is a tour de force and a must read for all young women, telling them of the courage and conviction of those women who fought for their vote, and ultimately the lives they can lead now. It would have been good to have some suggestions for further reading but this is a small point. **JF**



Guard Your Heart

★★★★★

Sue Divin, Macmillan Children's Books, 416pp, 978 1 5290 4167 5, £7.99 pbk

In her Author's Note, Sue Divin suggests her novel is 'a Romeo and Juliet, a love story across divides'. Readers might well think Iona and Aidan faced more intractable problems in contemporary Londonderry than those which cropped up in fair Verona. The summer of 2016 is charged with a violence whose roots lie a hundred

years deep in Dublin's Easter Rising.

Divin tells her story through a series of parallels. Iona and Aidan share a memorable date of birth: that of the Good Friday Agreement, 10th April, 1998. Both are now completing their A-levels and leaving school. After a couple of dramatic chapters narrated by Aidan, the following 41 chapters are told alternately by Aidan and Iona, enabling readers to share in the pair's different perspectives on events and their discovery of each other, alongside their private emotional journeys within their respective families which, on the surface could not be more different, yet at deeper levels have strong echoes of each other.

Aidan shares a small house in the Catholic Creggan district with his older brother Sean. His sister Saoirse, upon whom both boys depended, is travelling abroad. His mother has died, though she remained unbroken in spirit to the end despite a husband active in the IRA throughout The Troubles, an alcoholic and a brutal domestic abuser who eventually quit the family home. Sean now seems to be following his Da's footsteps, as the New IRA gathers impetus and recruits. On his mother's death when he was still only fifteen, Aidan had spiralled into drink and drugs. Against the odds, with the support of a couple of far-sighted teachers, he'd discovered an interest in his school subjects, including Politics, and made it through to A-levels.

Protestant Iona's voyage through her late teens seems far calmer. But she too has a controlling father; an ex-police officer, veteran of The Troubles, leaving him with PTSD and unresolved prejudices, despite his professed belief in tolerance and community. Now, Iona's elder brother has recently completed his police training. Younger brother Andy is in a Loyalist band. In this male household, Mother plays a subservient, peace-keeping role. Her hope is that Iona will graduate from Queen's in Belfast with a good degree and a nice fiancé from the Christian Union.

Not unlike R & J, things kick off within the opening pages with a savage street brawl, leaving Aidan broken and bleeding on the ground, assaulted by Loyalist thugs. By chance, Iona and Andy witness the incident but can do nothing to stop it. Iona picks up Aidan's fallen phone and, on an impulse, films the attack. Her decision to return the phone to Aidan the next day brings the two together, and their unlikely journey begins.

From their first meeting, Divin traces their relationship with insight and respect for the complex intensity of early adult feelings. Aidan, with his confusions and his honesty, is unlike any male Iona has ever met. It is through their relationship, and what

she is learning about herself, that she challenges her family's assumptions about male dominance – there's a fine scene in which she asserts her 18 year old's independence from her father. She is not without conflict; her longing to make love with Aidan has to be balanced against her quiet certainty, stemming from her faith, that she wants to wait for marriage to the one with whom she will share her life. She is so lost in Aidan at times ('Aidan was clueless to how he melted me') that she hardly knows the part she plays in releasing Aidan's search to find ways into a future which, constrained by culture, money and religion, had seemed to offer nothing. At the same time, he finds himself pushing towards a spirituality which transcends his childhood experience of Catholicism ('all bells and incense').

In those alternating chapters, Divin skilfully maintains two attractively distinct voices – they have different idioms tempered by different senses of humour. Importantly, Divin also sets her story with an insider's knowledge of the dynamics of Derry itself. All of which will surely prove absorbing to potential readers for whom much of the novel's territory will be unfamiliar as well as to those within the island of Ireland. **GF**

House of Hollow

★★★★★

Krystal Sutherland, Hot Key Books, 302pp, 9781471409899, £8.99 pbk

The three Hollow sisters survived a horrendous event ten years previously to the events of the book, when they had suddenly disappeared, when out with their parents; they then re-appeared a month later, with no memory of what happened. Fast forward to the present and they are still a subject of awe, fear and questioning. Iris, the youngest sister just wants to be normal, but her two sisters, Vivi and Grey, are at the centre of media interest. Where they are, odd things very often happen; so, when the eldest sister, Grey disappears her two siblings feel a desperate need to find out what has happened. Strange things are going on around them, even finding a decaying body at Grey's flat and then there is the weird man who appears to be following them, with the intention of causing harm. There are so many questions that we need to be answered in this story; will they save Grey, what is the mystery behind their disappearance and can they ever live normal lives?

This is the sort of story that properly takes over. As someone who doesn't like horror stories, I was amazed at how much I needed to keep reading this extremely dark and scary tale. The idea of a parallel world, or even somewhere between life and death

14+ Secondary/Adult continued

has been used on a multitude of occasions, but where normally these are places of wonder, fantasy and even adventure, Krystal Sutherland takes us to a place that is hellish in the extreme and definitely somewhere we want to avoid. The relationship of the three sisters is central to the whole story and we can only watch in horror as the truth gradually begins to unfold and the framework of their lives begins to unravel. The author leaves us with a bit of a cliff-hanger, which might mean there is potential for a follow on, or she might just leave it to our imaginations; only time will tell. This is a superb read for those who love their horror stories and compulsive reading even for those who don't. (NB, there's quite a lot of blood and gore and some strong language). **MP**

Bone Music

★★★★

David Almond, Hodder, 212pp, 978 1 444 95291 9, £12.99, hbk.

From the beginning of his writing for young people, David Almond has been concerned with the malleability of time and perception: the way in which the past and present are twisted within us and shape us; and how our nature, for better and worse, remains elemental despite all the trappings of the modern world that we wear and carry with us. In his work, the visionary and the ordinary are inseparable. Perhaps not as in earlier ages of signs and miracles but never too far away, particularly in childhood and adolescence. In this new novel, his protagonist Sylvia, has moved from Newcastle to the wilds of Northumbria. At first, she hates it, cut off from friends and all she has ever known, even her mobile phone is near useless. But gradually she is drawn into an understanding of the place and of herself. Music, reaching back through the Northumbrian folk tradition (clog dancing and all) into prehistory, plays a big part; particularly through the bone flute of the title, fashioned from the wing of a dead buzzard. And there are new friends, too: Gabriel, a boy of her own age, who makes the flute with her; and old Andreas, a former prisoner of war from Germany with a troubling past. Yet, perhaps more than any of Almond's other novels, it is what Sylvia herself experiences that is important. Among the plains peoples of the Native Americans, a young man would go on a vision quest into the wilderness, where he would find the name by which he would be known for the rest of his life. Sylvia, too, goes out into the dark Northumbrian wilderness (passing a fallen 'totem pole') to find her own way from the past into the future. **CB**

Felix Ever After

★★★★

Kacen Callender, Faber & Faber, 368pp, 978-0571368013, £7.99 pbk. Felix Love is seventeen, a talented artist attending a selective New York art school. His main ambition is to secure admission to Brown University, Rhode Island, by winning a scholarship. Felix was born a girl, though he is now known to everyone as a boy. In fact his former female life is something he carefully conceals. He has never been in love. The book describes Felix's struggle to find love in whatever form it may take. He must also learn to command acceptance, not least by defining his own gender identity.

Callender's novel is unusual, mounting an examination in depth of the emotions an individual may experience during the process of gender transition. The author himself has made just this transition. Accordingly he is in a position to provide a detailed account of the transitional process and its attendant complications. He also shines a revealing light on the question of family acceptance during transition, and on the danger of receiving abusive mail.

Felix is in fact part of three minorities in the USA, also being black and gay. Callender's book will stimulate a range of active discussion, not only because of its central theme but also because it features profane language and drug taking, giving the impression that both are a normal part of art school life. It is persuasive to argue that the inclusion of these features is no more than realistic. But teachers and parents should be aware of these features before handing the book to an impressionable young reader. The 14+ categorisation should also be strictly respected. **RB**

One in a Hundred Thousand

★★★★

Linni Ingemundsen, Usborne, 335pp, 978-1474940641, £7.99 pbk.

ASander Dalen is a Norwegian boy aged fifteen. He has Silver Russell syndrome, with restricted growth and arms of different lengths. He is of course the shortest person in his school year, a fact which irritates him profoundly. He has an older brother Jakob and a younger brother Adrian. Naturally people imagine that Adrian is older than Sander simply because he is taller. A new boy Niklas joins the school and befriends the Dalen brothers. The book poses two questions. Can Sander come to terms with his condition and begin to accept himself as he is? And what is Niklas's secret?

One of the strongest features of this novel is the friendship Sander forms with an elderly man who is initially described as 'the town

lunatic'. The name is a misnomer. The two individuals discover that both of them have lost someone they love, in the case of the Dalen brothers their father and in the case of the older man his beloved wife. Sander and his new friend discover that they have a shared passion for photography, which leads them to a closer bond. Another strength of the book is the way that Niklas's secret is revealed, slowly and credibly.

This reviewer found only two points at which the performance of the book was less than satisfactory. At the opening of the book Sander deliberately fails some tests at school. He reasons that if he is marked down as less intelligent he will be held back and have a better chance of being the same height as his classmates. The message delivered to children with impairments is that underperforming may be a legitimate competitive tool – the opposite of what should be encouraged. The author no doubt wished to register just how desperate Sander had to be to resort to this tactic. But all the same the message is unacceptable. Elsewhere in the story the friends attend a Halloween party. Niklas decides to attend disguised as a suicide victim. Suicidal impulses crop up frequently in the book. Once again it is possible to understand the motivation of the author. Reality may accord too often with her image of an impaired life. But it is a note better left unstruck. **RB**

All American Boys

★★★★★

Jason Reynolds & Brendan Kiely, Faber, 330pp, 978 0 571 36675 0, £7.99 pbk

Rashad and Quinn share the narrative. Jason Reynolds, who is black, writes the chapters told by sixteen-year-old Rashad, while Brendan Kiely, who is white, writes those contributed by Quinn, a senior at the same high school as Rashad. Reynolds and Kiely are educators as well as writers; Kiely is an experienced high school English teacher, while Reynolds is currently a National Ambassador for Young People's Literature in the States. Following publication in 2015 in the US, **All American Boys** made a considerable impact, winning the **Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award**; the writers visited many schools, listening and talking to students who had read the book, fulfilling their hope that it would 'start conversations'. In publishing the novel six years after its initial appearance, Faber presumably decided the UK was also ready to talk.

Within a few pages, Rashad is in Jerry's Corner Mart, taking time selecting chips (aka crisps) to buy before he heads off to a Friday night party. He's glad to be out of school, and out of military uniform, since Fridays include ROTC drill (Reserve Officer Training Corps), and he has to wear full kit all day. He loathes the Corps - he joined only to satisfy his ex-soldier, ex-cop father, who sees the

army as the way forward for a young black American male. A woman is also scanning Jerry's shelves – until she stumbles and trips over Rashad, just behind her. He offers his help. After shouts and accusations – and no time for answers – the cop on duty in the store, watching out for shoplifters, grabs Rashad, slams him down outside on the sidewalk, cuffs and beats him, 'a fist in the kidney, a knee in the back'. Each blow is an earthquake to Rashad. All this is witnessed by Quinn, standing twenty feet away. To his horror, he realises he knows this cop – it's Paul Galluzzo, older brother of his closest friend. Paul has been a trusted mentor to Quinn since the death of Quinn's father, blown up by an IED in Afghanistan and now revered throughout the town.

That's how it all kicks off. Rashad's hospitalised, with a broken nose and fractured ribs, facing police charges; and also facing his father, who assumes his son's guilt, while Rashad's activist older brother Spoony never doubts his innocence. Quinn keeps his head down. He's made it onto the school basketball team, tipped for State honours; soon there will be visits from scouts from universities with lucrative sports scholarships to be won.

The two plots, driven by the incident, follow separate paths through Rashad's recovery in hospital with numerous visitors and Quinn's life at home, in basketball training, in lunchtime cafeteria arguments, dialogues in and out of lessons and at parties and barbecues. Video evidence of the arrest explodes onto social media, attracting national news channels. The whole town takes sides. Everything culminates in a mass demo organised by the students. All those conversations lay things out for Quinn – and readers – to consider. This is not a simplistic anti police story, but it is anti police brutality and racism. Quinn sees that he cannot hide for ever – he has to work out where he stands.

There may be some blind spots for UK readers. The values, language and dynamics of the basketball squad and their dictatorial coach – and those of the ROTC – may well seem alien. Likewise the bad-ass banter of the overwhelmingly male cast, in contrast to the occasional voices of reasoned protest of just two significant young women. Readers might not recognise the names and stories of real world victims of police shootings such as Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, which are read out at that final demo; but the web offers instant information. However, they will surely realise the book was written before the restraint and death of George Floyd and the subsequent impact through Black Lives Matter. They might also think Rashad's experience was not so different from the frequently reported instances of Stop & Search on the streets of South London and elsewhere. **GF**

Classics in Short No.147

On the fortieth anniversary of its publication, **Brian Alderson** examines beginnings and endings in Michelle Magorian's **Goodnight Mister Tom**.

Willie's paper bag

contained nothing but a towel, some soap, toothpaste, a second-hand Bible and a strap with a buckle; also a letter 'To whom it may concern' apologizing for the paucity of what was sent and urging the use of the strap when required for 'like most boys he is full of sin'. Such were the revelations that Willie brought from London as an evacuee to an unidentified village a couple of days before the start of the Second World War.

The reader concerned

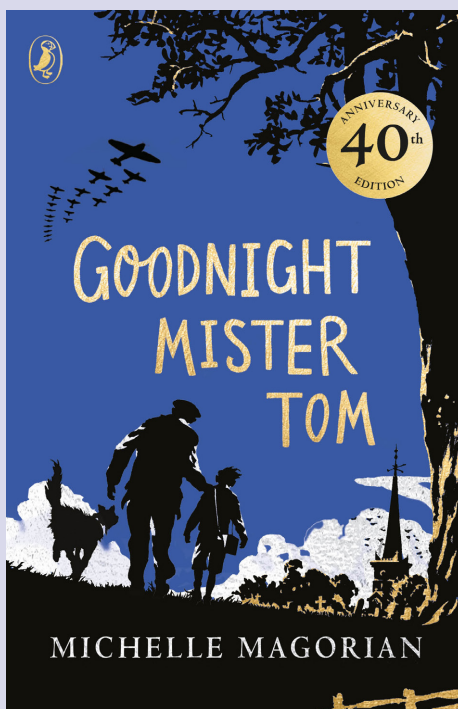
in receipt of the letter was the village's reclusive sexton, Tom Oakley, a man driven in upon himself following the death of his wife in childbirth some forty years previously but now lighted on by the billeting officer as the evacuees were distributed around the local community. A strange coupling: an eight year old boy, still unable to read or write, unloved and friendless at his Deptford home (with evidence of the use of the strap in weals and welts on his body), and an unsociable sexton, affectionate only towards his dog, Sammy. The sudden larger demand of a national emergency (the whole village assembles at church on the Sunday to hear the declaration of war on a communal wireless) has overridden traditional attitudes and Mr Tom's acceptance of his duty opens up a natural sympathy once he recognises the deep-rooted problems of the child he has involuntarily inherited.

The events of the story,

make up a loosely assembled agglomeration of experiences that take Willy from his ninth to his tenth birthday. It is hardly an 'evacuation story' since the other Deptford children who arrived with him barely appear and mostly go back during the phony war anyway, although a singleton, the 'infant prodigy' Zacharias, son of two Jewish performers in London theatres, proves to be instrumental in Willy's late blooming as a child of some talent.

From Willy to Will, or even William,

he evokes sympathy and friendship among his village school mates and with the astonishing facility allowable in novels joins his natural gifts as an artist, to full-fledged literacy, and a lead in the school Christmas play in a couple of months. We are never given an account of how the performance is produced, since the school has only two teachers, nor of the inner life of the village or its dialect, an all-purpose 'ent' for 'isn't' does duty as the local patois.



Such fame as the book has

(and its subsequent production as a television play with John Thaw as Mister Tom and, later, as a musical) derives from the momentous events that follow Will's recall to Deptford by his mother who is ill. The sixty pages of this account in which the woman's cruelty is horrifyingly revealed and which lead to Mister Tom and Sammy to kidnap Will from a hospital and the ministrations of a spooky psychiatrist are the most absorbing of the book. Once truly 'home' though incidents pile up in unspecific detail and only with the death of Zach in the London blitz do we refocus on Will's grief and his eventual mastery of that grief, all ending happily with Mister Tom being granted the boy's adoption.

There would seem to be

a dangerous precedent for celebrating a book's fortieth anniversary even if, as with **Goodnight Mister Tom**, it has won an award (in this case the **Guardian** prize). There could be quite a queue. But Puffin has augmented an obviously commercial venture by including, thanks to Ms Magorian, some illuminating supplementary material. After a publisher's note outlining her accomplishments, there follows a four-page Introduction by herself in which we can follow the emergence of the full-fledged novel from her mother's reminiscences as a nurse in London during the blitz. There are also ideas sparked by an unprompted mental picture of a child evacuee with a label round his neck

standing in a graveyard, and this is joined later when she sees a sexton's house on the edge of a graveyard.

There was, she found,

the germ of a story in the conjunction of these disparate ideas and she sketched out what was to be an account of the first meeting of Will and Tom. Then, seeking to imagine the origins of Tom's reclusiveness, she wrote the short story, 'Rachel and the Paint-box' (c.1978?) which told of his early marriage and the tragic loss of his young wife and new-born son to the ravages of scarlatina. That of course was to become a fulcrum for **Goodnight Mister Tom** (the clinching moment when Will calls Tom 'Dad') and it is one of the features of this new edition that Magorian has offered a complete version of that tale as an Appendix.

Nor is that all, however,

for in the conversion of the novel to a musical she found lyrics 'pouring out of my head' and the book concludes with a selection of these given to the characters' voices. They form an alternative telling of moments of the story as it were from the inside and there is a revelation in the double rumination of Mrs Beech, Willie's mother. In the story she is a wholly enigmatic character, her hair-spring descends into anger and violence hardly explained by religious zealotry. Her appearance now makes for no justification but, for readers taking up small clues in the story, an implication that she may be on the game and brimful of guilt provides a feasible explanation. Moreover the blunt announcement in the book that she had committed suicide is filled out in the adagio transition of her song to the further implication that she had drowned herself at sea, cleansing her impurity. One remembers then the otherwise barely relevant episode in the story when Will and Zach and Mister Tom take themselves off for the rare solace of a wartime fortnight, finding an equivalent peace.

The 40th anniversary edition of **Goodnight Mister Tom**, is published in a clothbound hardback edition, Puffin, 9780241524541, £12.99 hbk.

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