Angie Sage
Authorgraph



BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No.195 | July 2012

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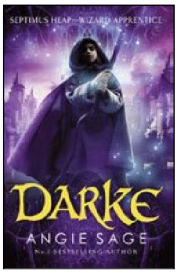
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COVER STORY
This issue's cover illustration by Steve Stone is from **Darke**. Angie Sage is interviewed on p.14 of this issue. Thanks to Bloomsbury for their help with this July cover.



editorial

Stonewall's **School Report 2012** has just been published and it reveals that homophobic bullying is still a daily nightmare in many British schools. Pioneering new research carried out by the University of Cambridge on Stonewall's behalf found that '55 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils in Britain's secondary schools experience homophobic bullying. The research, based on a national survey of 1,614 young people, also found that nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of gay young people have attempted to take their own life, and more than half (56 per cent) deliberately harm themselves.'

It also reveals 'that 99 per cent of gay young people hear homophobic language – like "that's so gay" and "you're so gay". However, a quarter of gay young people – rising to over a third in faith schools – report that teachers never challenge homophobic language. In schools where teaching staff never challenge homophobic remarks, the rate of homophobic bullying is far higher than in schools where such language is always challenged (71 per cent compared to 43 per cent).'

In response to the Report, Schools Minister Nick Gibb is quoted as saying: 'Homophobic bullying, of any kind and of any child, is completely unacceptable. No child should have to suffer fear, victimisation or disruption as a result of bullying, either on or off school premises. Tackling poor behaviour and bullying are top priorities for the Coalition Government. Working with Stonewall and other groups, we are supporting schools to take a zero tolerance approach to all forms of bullying. We are also clear that homophobic language should become as unacceptable as racial slurs.'

Meanwhile Patrick Ness, winner of this year's Carnegie Medal (among several other literary awards) for **A Monster Calls**, in a recent article in **The Guardian** recalled his own teenage years as 'the gay, preppy, deeply anxious son of American fundamentalist Christians'. He adds, 'I felt that nobody understood what I was going through – not in a self-pitying way but literally, in that I had no contrary experience to tell me otherwise. Why do you think teenagers read books so voraciously? They're looking for that very understanding.'

Stonewall is an organisation that works with hundreds of schools and this work has demonstrated that it really does make a difference when schools challenge homophobic attitudes. One way to provide the kind of understanding that (as Patrick Ness so passionately reminds us) young gays long for, is to introduce them to some of the excellent teen novels now available which reflect the very complexities and challenges they are encountering both emotionally and socially. In this issue of **Books for Keeps** Ju Gosling chooses her 'Ten of the Best: Teenage novels with gay or lesbian characters' and it is a hopeful sign of the times that there was a reasonably good range of titles for her to choose from.

Ju Gosling's choices are novels of contemporary society so I take this opportunity to squeeze in Madeline Miller's **Song of Achilles** as an unofficial eleventh title. An Orange prize winner, this historical novel (our reviewer Geoff Fox gave it a resounding five stars in our January issue) has also been published for teenage readers and it is a moving treatment of the love between the Greek warrior Achilles and his friend Patroclus before and during the Trojan War.



Rosemary Stones,
Editor

Books for Keeps

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The Virtual World of **Magic Town**



Aimed at children between two and six years, **Magic Town**, a virtual world based on picture book characters, was launched this May. **Laura Fraine** enlists her two-year-old and her five-year-old to investigate.



'Instead of your bedtime story, we're going to read a new story on the computer,' I try. 'Is that because you're tired and you want a rest?' asks Belle, my five-year-old daughter.



A bad start, but that was my fault. **Magic Town**, a virtual story world created by Mindshapes, is a place to play and discover that books are fun. Digital stories are not about to take the place of physical picture books any time soon and the time they are least likely to replace them is bedtime. Digital demands that we switch on and interact, not lie back, snuggle up and drift off.

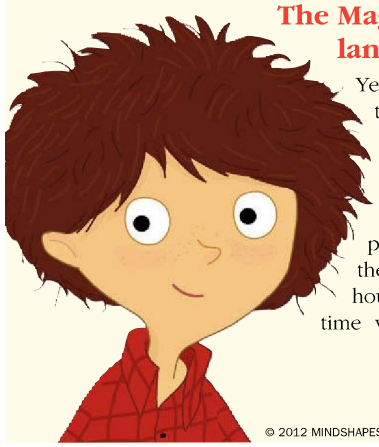
I try again in the daytime and both children are instantly intrigued. I create accounts for each child, Belle and my two-year-old son James, inputting both age and sex. Their virtual worlds appear and at the outset seem to be identical. There doesn't appear to be any gender distinction (a good thing in my view) but neither can I find any distinction between the ages. My five-year-old is capable of reading simple stories to herself, but the text in these books is not easy or large enough for a learner reader. My two-year-old would usually pick stories that are strong on rhythm and rhyme; books with which he can join in, but these are thin on the ground, too.



This turns out to be a minor point, because as children use the programme an algorithm detects the individual child's usage and tailors the selection of books to their preferences. I suspect my eagerness to try everything has skewed our algorithms but I'll admit it: I hate the thought of an algorithm choosing books for my children anyway.



The Magic Town landscape



Yet, we are all quite taken with this virtual world. The **Magic Town** landscape is bright, colourful and quirky; an inviting place. To start off with, the children have eight houses each, but the next time we log in they have each been given a new house. Daily usage also unlocks additional content within the houses.



Inside each house are several Livebooks, based around a picture book character or series. Children can choose to listen to the story being read; read it with an adult; or answer interactive questions in relation to the story. Apart from dominating the mouse, I am fairly redundant here. Neither child is interested in my reading to them when they can listen to a recording instead. They both love the option of interacting with the stories, though, and we are all impressed as picture book images are animated in simple but delightful ways. The illustrations come up beautifully. As well as stories, the houses contain character-related games, including card matching games and jigsaws. These will become more user-friendly for younger children when the iPad version of **Magic Town** becomes available this summer.

The Livebook format is, I think, a strong addition to the world of children's books. I am not completely at ease with putting two-year-olds online, but I see that **Magic Town** has been developed in an educational, creative way which is likely to encourage a love of stories. In fact, in my home I feel confident that it won't replace our usual reading at all, but instead will make a more interactive experience of downtime when my kids might otherwise be watching television. Between digital and print, we are sure to read more books than before.

The strength of the partnerships Mindshapes has made with leading children's publishers, which include Simon & Schuster, Oxford University Press, Hachette Children's Books, Hodder Children's Books, Andersen Press, Egmont and Usborne, further enforces this view. There were 70 titles available at launch and an extra ten to fifteen stories are to be added each month. Classics such as **Little Red Riding Hood** and **The Boy Who Cried Wolf** sit alongside nursery favourites like Elmer and brand new digital-first series, **Shrinky Kid** by Ian Whybrow and **Superfairies** by Janey Louise Jones.

It's like having our own little interactive library online (albeit one staffed by an algorithm rather than a well-read and intuitive librarian). I must admit I am quite intrigued to see what story tomorrow brings. ■

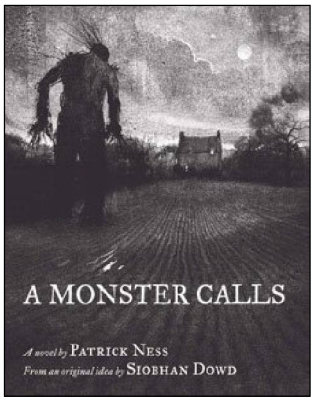
Subscriptions to **Magic Town** cost £7.99 for one month; £39.99 for six months and £49.99 for one year.
www.magictown.com

Laura Fraine is a freelance journalist based in the North East.



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A Monster Calls: Carnegie and Kate Greenaway winner 2012



The history of Patrick Ness and Jim Kay's **A Monster Calls**, winner of both the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals for 2012, has several unusual elements: the book's genesis was Siobhan Dowd's notes for a novel she was unable to complete before her untimely death; the novel would not have completed had it not been for the editorial and design team at Walker Books; their chosen writer Patrick Ness is only the second author to win the Carnegie Medal in consecutive years. How important is all this in assessing this prize-winning book? **Books for Keeps** invites the views of a range of children's book specialists.

Julia Eccleshare, children's book editor of the Guardian

Was **A Monster Calls** the best book of the year? One best book is always hard but it is a very good book indeed. Although it is about death, it is vital and brimful of life; although lyrical and passionate, it also grounded and textually granular. Should Ness have become only the second person to win two consecutive Carnegie Medals? No. He should have won it once for **The Knife of Never Letting Go** and then had a more traditional gap before scooping it again in 2012. The back-to-back Medals are no more significant than if they had been separated by someone else's success. Ness is very likely to write another Carnegie prize winning novel but so too are Mal Peet, Meg Rosoff, Frank Cottrell Boyce and many others. But that's being picky. Historically, and that's also a valuable way of judging these things, this double whammy won't distort the deserved truth about Ness's quality and status in these years.

As to the unique achievement of **A Monster Calls** winning both the Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals, praise first to Jim Kay who so brilliantly combines strong images with great delicacy as he evokes the emotions at the heart of the novel, perfectly matching Ness's storytelling. But behind Kay's individual skill, there's another Medal winner: Walker Books had most of the nominations for the 2012 Kate Greenaway Medal and their core philosophy has always been a passionate belief in the quality of the book as a physical object. To conceive a great novel as a great picture book too is a visionary commitment to the reader. Walker deserve all the plaudits they have received for this. Let's hope it sets a trend…

Geoff Fox, formerly Co-Editor (UK) of Children's Literature in Education.

It's an illusion that young readers love a story which seems to be telling itself, the language running wild. A headlong reader cares nothing for the realities of the graft of writing, illustrating and editing. This tale grew from notes left by one writer who died tragically young, another invited to develop those notes, a young artist illustrating just his second book and the editorial team at Walkers steering the novel towards publication. That ought not to have worked. Collaborations so easily generate neutered language – all the blood drained away. Yet from these different elements have come a haunting work in which words and images interplay with rhythmic inevitability. Driving it all, the yew tree monster's stories, its harsh yet loving insistence that Con tells himself the truth. Poor Con, who knows but refuses to know that his mother is dying far too soon of cancer – much as Dowd died before she could develop her notes.

Elizabeth Hammill, co-founder Seven Stories

I find that this haunting novel remains etched on my memory - vivid, alive, tender, terrifying and truthful. If its origins are poignant, the editorial decision to marry Patrick Ness' development of the late Siobhan Dowd's original ideas with illustrations by Jim Kay was inspired - demonstrating just how powerfully interacting words and pictures can tell a story for older readers. Ness creates a dark, heart-wrenching but ultimately hopeful story that is tautly told, poetic, dramatic, mythic, ambiguous and riveting. Kay's subtly nuanced but bold black and white illustrations, spilling over from one page to the next, are an organic part of the storytelling - atmospheric, shadowy, heightening the light and dark and adding an unusual emotional depth to a tale of a young teenager facing something 'beyond terrible'. Together they convey a truth - unsentimental and rare - that had me in tears from early on.

Everything about **A Monster Calls** speaks of love, care, an artistic attention to bookmaking and to the potential reader's experience that made a double Medal win the only possibility (one that the Seven Stories' shadowing panel unanimously supported).

Clive Barnes, formerly Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton

The singular power of this book, it seems to me, is drawn from the way in which the words and pictures between them create a sense of Conor's desperation: a state of mind barely pegged to everyday reality (although he has to live there), wracked with a storm of pain, anger and impotence, where only the embrace of what is unthinkable can free him. And the wonderful development beyond this book is that we are beginning again to see books for older children in which text and illustration can work in this way. David Almond's and Dave McKean's **Slogger's Dad** (also on the Greenaway shortlist) is another brilliant example. I say *again* because I am old enough to remember Charles Keeping's illustrations for Rosemary Sutcliff's novels and Edward Blishen's and Leon Garfield's **The God Beneath the Sea**. But there is also something new in this contemporary relationship of text and illustration that makes it seem more organic than in the past. Possibly this comes from new possibilities in book production, more



imaginative design (and author and illustrator were right to give credit to the Walker design team); and the application of what has been learned in picture books and graphic novels.

Long may it continue.

Ferelith Hordon, Chair, the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Judges 2011

Traditionally the Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals have been very separate, and for some time picture books with their younger audience have been regarded as the appropriate medium for illustration. As a result, shadowing has concentrated on the Carnegie. Recently the tide has been turning; the tradition of the illustrated novel has been rediscovered allowing barriers to be broken down. Could **A Monster Calls** have won either Medal alone? Yes, because each are judged separately – Jim Kay's starkly powerful work complements and extends the text as the Greenaway criteria demand; Ness in his writing provides not just a surface pleasure but that 'deeper subconscious satisfaction' required for the Carnegie . That it won both Medals is a testament to the judging process; truly an outstanding novel on all counts.

Caroline Sanderson, writer and journalist

A Monster Calls is a story that inhabits your imagination to the extent that you can't remember a time when you hadn't read it. It twines around you, and seeds itself in your consciousness; just as its yew tree monster twists and shape-shifts and spread its needles. It is both simple and hard to fathom. It both shocks and lulls. It opens wounds and then heals them. And no-one reacts as you expect. Neither the hand-shaking bully Harry. Nor Conor's house-proud grandmother confronted with her trashed living room. Nor the prince in the monster's story. Nor yet Conor himself whose violent outburst is a genuinely seismic moment.

And yet this is also the deeply familiar story of all our lives. Death has tapped each of us on the shoulder. Some of us have only given it a backward glance so far. Some of us have already stared it full in the face. But we know it will come again, and the sooner we really know it, the more alive we will be.

Nicholas Tucker, Honorary Senior Lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies, Sussex University

Monsters can symbolise many things, not least one of those cruel human afflictions that seemingly invade the mind or body and then go on to threaten life and sometimes sanity. Two fine novelists in the recent past wrote stories around this theme. One was William Mayne's **A Game of Dark**, far too good a story to be lost now because of the author's current state of disgrace. The other was Catherine Storr's **Marianne Dreams**, memorably illustrated by Marjorie-Ann Watts. This haunting novel was later made into a film and an opera. I would now add **A Monster Calls** to this role of honour. The story of a thirteen-year-old boy fighting his mother's disease which in his imagination has taken on the shape of a monster blends fantasy and reality into an unforgettable whole. Illustrated by Jim Kay in appropriately black line drawings, the final result is a perfect blend of prose and pictures at a time when illustrations for any teenage novels are hard indeed to find.

Damian Kelleher, journalist and writer

There's a theory that as children get older, and as their reading skills develop, they no longer need illustrations in their books. Of course it's perfectly true. Illustrations aren't 'needed' to tell stories because if the storytelling is good enough, the illustrations appear in the reader's mind, as if by magic. But this propagates the myth that 'serious' writing shouldn't be illustrated. **A Monster Calls** blows that myth out of the water.

Just as a clever writer can lead her or his readers on a tangled track through the undergrowth of the imagination, a gifted illustrator can bring us up sharply. The texture and spikiness and subtlety of Jim Kay's illustrations throw Ness's narrative into relief. They offer moments of pure clarity and wonder, of terror and joy. They turn an incisive, enlightening and touching story into something tangible that can be treasured by readers of all ages: they turn it into a book. If the legacy of this work is more illustrated books for more readers, both author and illustrator can feel justifiably proud.

Nicolette Jones, journalist and writer

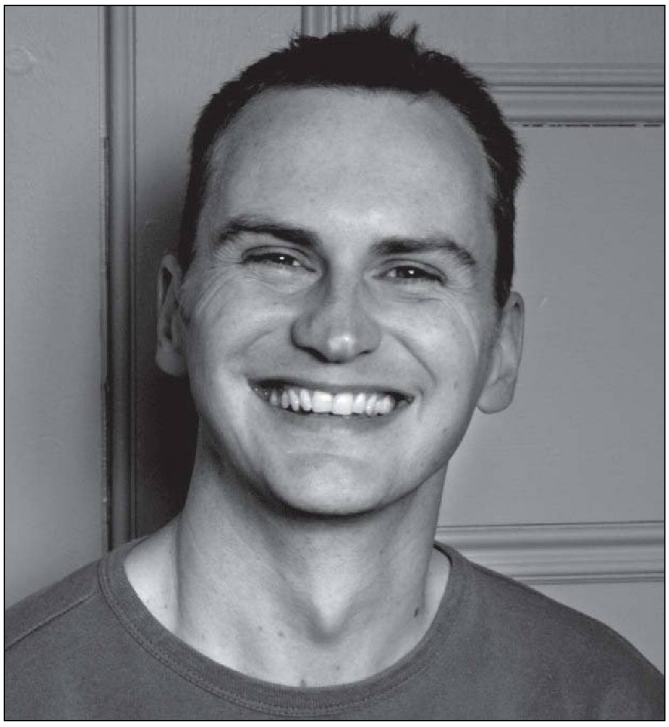
The publicity surrounding this win sustains attention for Siobhan Dowd and her legacy, both for her superlative books and for the valuable work of the Siobhan Dowd Trust. But this peripheral benefit aside, both text and illustration deserved their wins. **A Monster Calls** works so well because of Ness's determination to tell the truth about feelings, his skill with structure, atmosphere and suspense, the complexity of his characters, his wit and his plain-speaking, unfussy prose that nevertheless resonates with big ideas and profound emotions. Jim Kay's images are remarkable for the way they complement the text, for their suggestiveness rather than their literalness, as well as for their sheer technical dexterity, their innovation, their richness of texture, their depth and variety even within the limitations of black and white. This collaboration shows that when both author and illustrator have unusual abilities and commitment, they can produce something enduring that seems more than the sum of its parts.

Marilyn Brocklehurst, Norfolk Children's Book Centre

Patrick Ness's beautifully observed and deeply moving story, along with Jim Kay's sinewy, sombre and terrifying illustrations combine superbly to make **A Monster Calls** a perfect book. Conor struggles to cope with impossible heart-break as he watches his mother dying of cancer. The monster that calls at his window offers him the opportunity to explore his feelings and eventually to recognise the complexity of bereavement and the isolation which accompanies the pain. This is an important book which enables young readers to observe somebody of their own age dealing with a situation which is depriving him of his childhood and compromising his future. He is lost, enraged, desperate. Finally it is the monster that shows him how it is possible to survive. Conor's conversation with his mother toward the end of the book is poignant and personal and I wept copiously. Ness has taken Siobhan Dowd's nascent story and turned it into a classic. ■

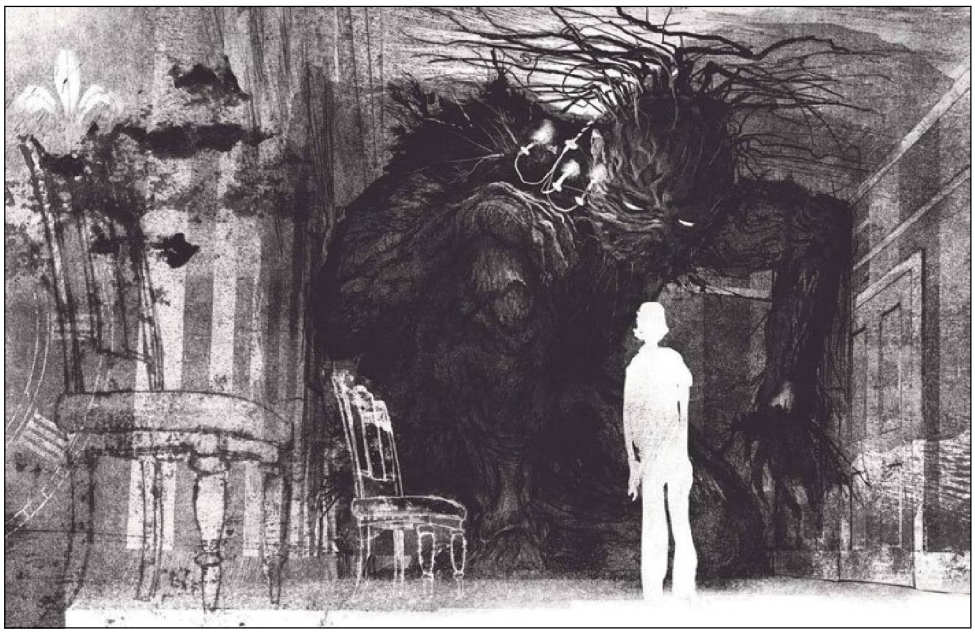
Windows into Illustration:
Jim Kay

Jim Kay's intensely evocative black and white illustrations for his 2012 Kate Greenaway Medal winner, **A Monster Calls**, are full of darkness and ambiguity, mirroring the emotional turmoil of the written narrative while affording the reader space to create their own mental images. It is a boldly experimental style that Kay developed in response to the text. Here **Jim Kay** explains the technique and thinking behind the illustrations to a **Monster Calls**.



I couldn't believe my luck when I was asked to illustrate **A Monster Calls** by Patrick Ness. Not only was the manuscript astonishing, but I was working with the wonderful Art Director Ben Norland at Walker Books, who gave me the freedom to pretty much try anything with regards to the appearance of the illustrations. I was very nervous about working on the book at first; in fact I wasn't even sure if it should be illustrated at all. The story has a wonderful connection with the reader, but does this without relying heavily upon description of the main characters. It was clear from the beginning that the illustrations would have to embrace that sense of ambiguity, in order not to deprive the reader of their personal translation of who the characters are.

I like working in black and white, it gets straight to the point. The light reveals, the darkness conceals, and by working from effectively a black canvas, I could slowly illuminate the important elements and hide the rest. For most of the illustrations the reader is doing the work; they see the basic forms and shapes, but Conor's face, and the Monster's features are ultimately left to the imagination.

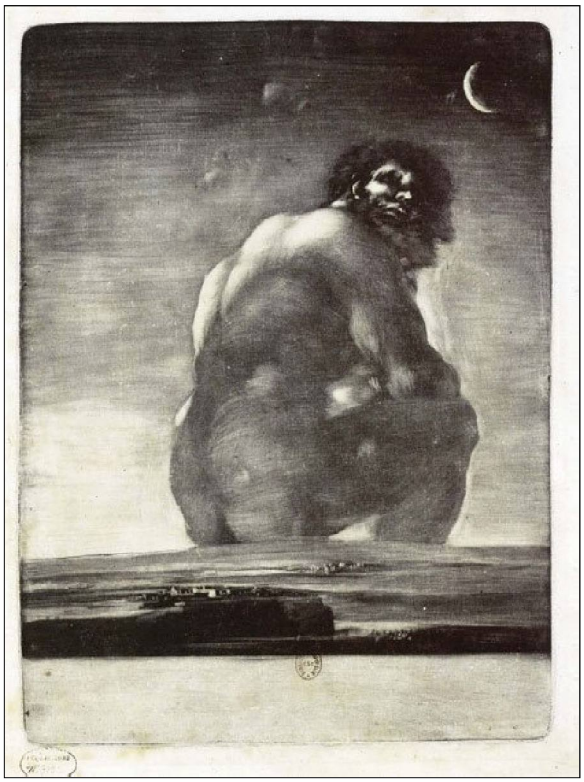


As I mentioned earlier, I was somewhat apprehensive about illustrating this text. I had a crisis of confidence to start with, and didn't have any faith in my own draughtsmanship. I did anything I could to avoid actually 'drawing' the illustrations. I went through my entire house collecting any bits of scrap paper with random paint and ink marks on; any object that could hold ink and physically fit through a press was printed. Within a couple of weeks I had amassed a library of splats, misprints, and impressions on

paper. I discovered that old breadboards produced wonderful textures when inked up and printed, that salt made interesting patterns when sprinkled in black paint. I pinned these haphazard pieces upon the wall and started to see images in them, as one might see pictures in Rorschach ink blots. It felt like someone else was creating the illustrations, which certainly took the pressure off me. I either physically or digitally assembled these fragments and used them in my images. I think this gave the illustrations an indistinct quality that helped to keep just enough distance between them and the reader.

The illustration on this page shows the Monster sitting on a small outbuilding in a garden. The Monster may be familiar to people as 'The Green Man', an ancient and somewhat mysterious character, half tree, half man. When the Monster was aggressive I made him far more tree-like, but in this particular instance he is resting, and therefore more human. This scene (which stretches over several pages) was inspired by Goya's monoprint 'The Colossus'. I wanted that same sense of weight and gravitas. The streetlights behind the monster provide the quiet clash of the ancient and modern, the tiny bird a sense of scale, and the weathervane with the hare - well that was just for me.

The composition deliberately uses a lot of dead space. This emphasises the contemplative mood of the Monster, who is pressed up against the right hand edge, somewhat alienated from the reader. Empty space is a useful tool in composing illustrations, and can speak as loudly as a page filled with action. There is a beautiful painting by David, 'The Death of Marat', which employs darkness to fill almost half the canvas. The painting wouldn't be the same without that expanse of dark paint, looming over Marat's figure. ■



Goya's *The Colossus.*



A Monster Calls (978 1 4063 3934 5) by Patrick Ness, from an original idea by Siobhan Dowd, illustrated by Jim Kay is published by Walker at £8.99 pbk. As well as the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals, it has won the 2012 Red House Books Award and the UKLA Book Award.

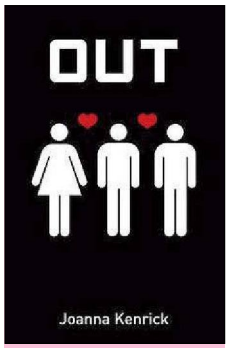
Books for Keeps readers may be interested to know that prints are available of this image and of two others from **A Monster Calls.** For more information visit: **http://www.alisoneldred.com/thumbsJimKay-Originals-1-1.html**

Ten of the Best
Teenage novels with gay or lesbian characters

'While the internet now provides questioning teens with information about gay sexuality, fiction still deals best with the emotional issues involved – as well as explaining these to all teen readers,' says **Ju Gosling**. Here she chooses the ten teen titles which are her personal favourites.

Out

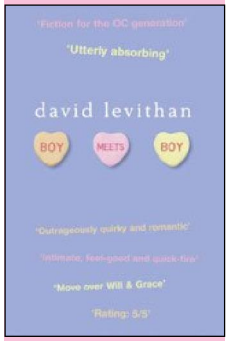
Joanna Kendrick, Barrington Stoke, 64pp, 978 1 8429 9764 2, £5.99 pbk



Out is an illustrated quick read, told from the perspective of Natalie who falls in love with best friend Will just as he decides to come out at school. Natalie never does tell Will how she feels, but supports him when she realizes he is determined to be open and honest whatever the personal cost. A simple story, well told, and well illustrated by Julia Page.

Boy Meets Boy

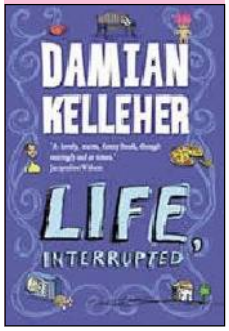
David Levithan, HarperCollins, 224pp, 978-0007191376, hbk. OP but some copies available from Amazon UK. Pbk available from Amazon US.



Coming out is easy in **Boy Meets Boy**, because the gay and straight scenes in Paul's exceptionally tolerant US home town 'got all mixed up'. Paul has known he is gay since his kindergarten teacher wrote it on his report, and has been out ever since. When new boy Noah arrives, though, it becomes clear that homophobia isn't the only thing that prevents the path of true love from running smoothly. Deservedly award-winning.

Life, Interrupted

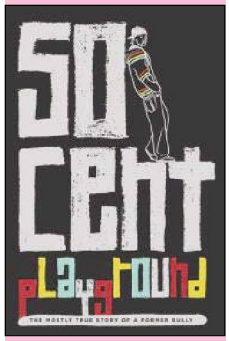
Damian Kelleher, Piccadilly, 192pp, 978 1 8481 2003 7, £6.99 pbk



Life, Interrupted is another hard-hitting book. Brothers Luke and Jesse live with their mother and rarely see their father, who is living in Scotland with a second family. After their mother develops terminal cancer and dies, they form a new family when their Uncle Stu moves in. That he turns out to be gay is rightly seen as being unimportant; love is what counts. Highly moving and extremely readable.

Playground

50 Cent, Quercus, 320pp, 978 1 7808 7330 5, £6.99 pbk



The fact that a parent's coming-out may not be so easily accepted is dealt with in **Playground**. Butterball is a self-described fat Black kid, who is struggling to deal with his parents' separation and his move from New York to the suburbs. When the story opens, he has just been suspended from school and ordered to undergo therapy for assaulting a fellow pupil. It takes the whole of the book for Butterball to realize that his former friend was right to suggest that his mother is gay, and that her 'friend' is actually her partner. Beautifully written and paced.

Losing It

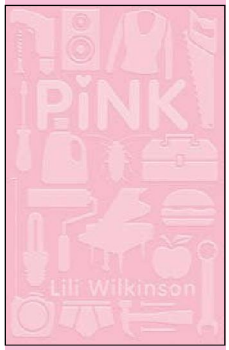
Ed. Keith Gray, Andersen, 256pp, 978 1 8493 9099 6, £5.99 pbk



Losing It (virginity, that is) includes a short story by Patrick Ness, 'Different for Boys'. Ant is secretly having sex with Charlie, who in public derides former friend Jack for being gay. Jack unwittingly outs Ant in school, so Charlie beats Ant up for supposedly making a pass at him. Ant and Jack reconcile, but they take Charlie at his word that he is 'just practising' for women. Ant concludes that it is 'different for boys', and he can decide for himself when he ceases to feel like a virgin. Written with a strong boy's voice.

Pink

Lili Wilkinson, Allen & Unwin, 264pp, 978 1 7417 5834 4, £6.99 pbk



Lili Wilkinson stresses that sexual orientation may not be fixed in **Pink**. Ava's liberal academic parents have already celebrated her coming out, but she transfers schools to escape her girlfriend Chloe and to find out who she really is, a truth she suspects is not so clear-cut. The story explores issues around peer pressure and parental pressure in a touching and often

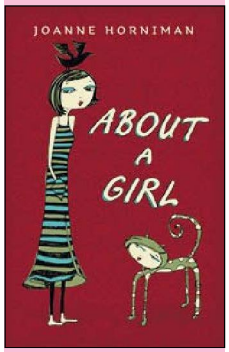
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humorous way, and teaches that everyone is happier when they can be accepted as themselves. Australians seem to be more comfortable writing teen fiction with lesbian themes, and this comfort level transfers itself to the reader.

About a Girl

Joanne Horniman, Allen & Unwin, 228pp, 978 1 7423 7144 3, £6.99 pbk

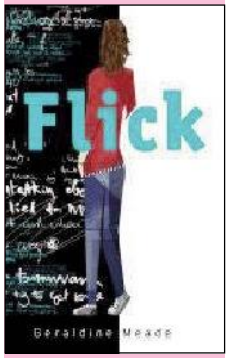
About a Girl similarly highlights the ambiguities of sexual orientation as well as being a coming-out story. Anna has dropped out of college with depression and moved to Lismore to work in a bookshop. She soon meets and falls in love with Flynn, a waitress and part-time singer, but their relationship is short-lived. Flynn returns to her boyfriend, now back from a year abroad, and Anna returns to her family in Canberra and university, finally able to come out to her mother. A satisfying read that deals with some complex issues.



Flick

Geraldine Meade, Little Island, 288pp, 978 1 9081 9501 2, £7.99 pbk

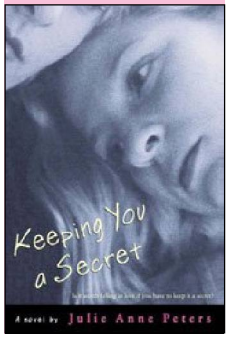
Set in Ireland, **Flick** tackles a subject that is increasingly being aired in LesBi women's circles, namely the self-destructive behaviours that can result from struggling to come out in a world that is less than welcoming, which if not tackled can last a lifetime. 16-year-old Flick's drinking exposes her to unwanted sexual attentions and even rape before she is able to come out to her friends and family, and her lack of comfort with her sexual orientation then almost loses Flick her girlfriend, Joey. Fortunately, with counselling and family support, everything changes by Flick's 17th birthday.



Keeping You a Secret

Julie Anne Peters, Little Brown, 256pp, 978 0 3160 0985 0, £4.99 pbk

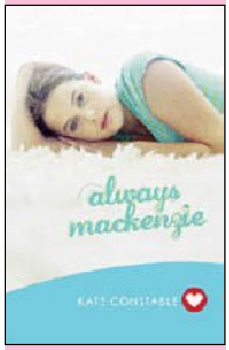
Family support is the last thing that student council president Holland receives in **Keeping You a Secret**. Transfer student Cece is out and proud, and soon makes Holland realize that her feelings for boyfriend Seth are not 'the real thing'. Holland begins a relationship with Cece, but it is Cece who urges her to keep their relationship a secret, even after Seth outs Holland to her family and they reject her. Holland is able to live independently and find a college course that really suits her with support from the LGBT community, though, and finally understands that Cece is simply scared of losing her.



Always Mackenzie

Kate Constable, Allen & Unwin, 192pp, 978 1 7423 7766 7, £5.99 pbk

Last but by no means least, **Always Mackenzie** is another Australian coming-out story. Jem and Mackenzie are in different friendship groups, but are thrown together when their school spends a term in a bush camp. Jem fails to grasp the fact that Mackenzie is attracted to her, and so once they return to Melbourne their friendship breaks down again in a series of misunderstandings. When Mackenzie is finally able to come out to her, though, Jem begins to consider that she may also be attracted to girls. Sensitively written and very readable. ■

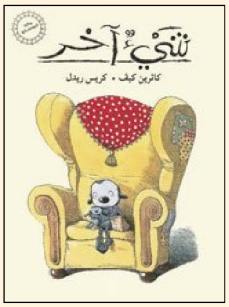




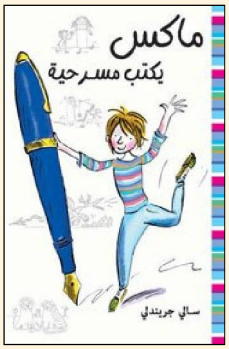
Dr Ju Gosling is director of Bettany Press, a small press specializing in books about 20th century girls' fiction (www.bettanypress.co.uk). She is also a Co-Chair of Regard, the national LGBT disabled people's organization.

The Arab Spring – children's books flourish in a new market

In the Arabic speaking world children's books have been seen as an extension of the education system with an emphasis on reading for learning or learning to read. The idea of reading for pleasure is not widespread. But things are beginning to change. **Sue Unstead** explains.

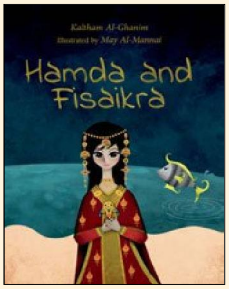


'So much energy … such passion for books and reading… children positively devouring books.' Could this be the Bath Children's Festival, Cheltenham perhaps, or Edinburgh? No, halfway across the globe, the destination is Sharjah, neighbour to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The Sharjah Children's Reading Festival is now in its fourth year. It occupies 'a space as big as Bologna', according to Fiona Kennedy, Children's Publisher at Orion, who was there at the invitation of UAE publisher Kalimat to celebrate two events. First the publication in English of **My Own Special Way**, the tale of a small girl's choice to wear the veil, written by an Emirati author and illustrator, translated from Arabic and retold by Vivian French for Orion's Early Readers series. It is the first of what Kennedy hopes will be an ongoing commitment to a publishing exchange with Arab markets. While in Sharjah a press conference was held for the Arabic edition of another Orion title, **The White Giraffe** by Lauren St John. Such was publisher Kalimat's commitment that the final translator was the sixth person they had chosen.



Commitment and passion

This kind of commitment and passion is witnessed in other markets, nowhere more so than in Qatar, where Bloomsbury have recently celebrated the publication of 25 titles on their list of Arabic children's books. Consultant Publisher Andy Smart tells me that he splits his time between London and Doha. 'When we first set up Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation we had a single room. Now there are over 30 staff in the office in Education City, 90% of whom are Qatari.' Smart himself is an Arabic speaker, with a teaching background who moved into publishing via ELT to run Longman's Cairo office. After a number of years he set up his own publishing company with his Egyptian-born wife, publishing books in both English and Arabic. He joined Bloomsbury when the BQF was set up in 2009. 'It was something I had always hoped would happen, for a British publisher to set up an Arabic company.'



Andy Smart explains that the Arabic world publishing industry goes back a long way, but is largely confined to country-based books, rather than Pan Arab publishing. Traditions he says are very entrenched. There is also a very different author/publisher relationship where an author would normally be expected to finance the first print run. 'If you ask a child which is their favourite book or favourite author, the concept doesn't exist. There are, as yet, no household names.' Children's books are seen as an extension of the education system with an emphasis on reading for learning or learning to read. The idea of reading for pleasure is not widespread. Beyond the publishing capitals of Cairo and Beirut, bookshops are few and far between, chains appearing only in the last 10 to 15 years. Virgin entered the market, establishing chains for supply across Saudi, Egypt and the Emirates, but of course books are only one element among CDs and DVDs. Distribution, says Smart, is still a major issue. I ask whether the internet is changing this. He responds that in the Gulf, where income levels are high enough to support such purchasing, Amazon is the preferred supplier, although there is a local equivalent, the appropriately named Neelwafurat, roughly translated as Nile and Euphrates.

BQF was set up to publish books in Arabic and in dual language versions. The initial choice of titles was made by Andy Smart, who looked for books with a strong visual impact, and headed first to bestsellers or award-winners in order to give their sales team the best chance in a competitive market. Their first title was Julia Donaldson's **The Gruffalo**, and while the choice of a tale set in a Northern European forest might seem unlikely, its similarity to folk tales and the use of rhyming couplets were two features common to the Arab tradition. That first translation was done jointly by Andy Smart and his wife, but they now use a pool of local translators. All publishing functions are based in Doha, apart from printing which is handled by Bloomsbury's London production team, although printing is occasionally done in Dubai or Lebanon to save shipping time.

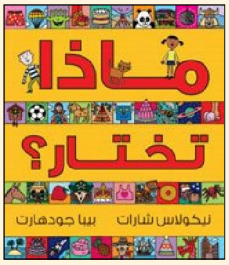
Reading literature in Arabic

The BQF list includes a fine selection of picture books, ranging from Debi Gliori's **No Matter What**, the Ahlbergs' **Funny Bones** and Faustin Charles' **The Selfish Crocodile**, as well as titles by Emily Gravett and Emma Chichester Clark. There appears no difference in the production quality from the well-loved UK editions, though of course the Arabic layout means they read from back to front. **The Selfish Crocodile** is also available in dual language format. Andy Smart hopes that such books will find a market among what he calls 'heritage readers', families who are of Arab origin but find themselves living in an English-speaking environment and worry that their children might grow up not knowing their mother tongue.

This concern is echoed in a recent report in **Gulf News** in which the Professor of Arabic at Georgetown University Qatar imagines the prospect of a future where citizens of Gulf countries wear dishdashas and abayas but are unable to speak Arabic. 'I am afraid that after 20 years, Arabic will just be a language of religious ritual.' But not if this new generation of publishers has

anything to do with it.

The BQF catalogue also includes a trio of books by Sally Grindley – **Dear Max, Bravo Max** and **Relax Max**. Told in the form of letters between a boy and his favourite author, this is an interesting choice not only to reinforce the idea of author profile, but also to encourage language and writing skills. Smart is keen to emphasise that this shows BQF's commitment to children who have outgrown picture books and need something more challenging. The future catalogue lists a range of further titles for the 6-9 age group as well as developing a list for Young Adults including such authors as David Almond, Neil Gaiman, but also Arabic authors such as Al Tameera. Andy Smart talks proudly about the home-grown titles including **Hamda and Fisaikra**, a Cinderella-like folk tale with a Gulf setting by a Qatari author and illustrator which has been longlisted for a major new children's book prize to be awarded at the next Sharjah Bookfair. The award carries a significant cash prize, equivalent to around £150,000, divided among publisher, author and illustrator. According to Smart, a win could transform a publisher overnight and build an author's reputation.



The market for book sales

Bookfairs are important in this market, providing an opportunity for publishers to access markets outside their own country. Abu Dhabi is the main rights fair, but Sharjah is open to the reading public with publishers selling copies from their stands, as well as meeting institutional buyers who can see the range of books on offer as publishers catalogues are not easily available. Public libraries hardly exist in this market, although 12 were established in Egypt under Mrs Mubarak. Lebanon has a more established library system, and Jordan a small one, but the main emphasis is for private sector schools and some Gulf countries where governments fund book buying.



Egypt is the biggest market for book sales in terms of volume, but pricing is fiercely competitive, with a typical retail price being the equivalent of £2.99. Price expectations in Egypt are very different from say the Gulf States, Lebanon, Jordan and North Africa. There is optimism about the long-term future in Egypt, with estimates varying between two to five years or longer before normality, openness and a real sense of security are resolved. For now there remains instability, concern about personal security, land grabbing, kidnapping and violence met with repressive responses. Yet in spite of all this there is a real sense of cultural reawakening, a sense of identity and pride in cultural matters.

I ask Andy Smart about future plans for BQF. He states his hope that BQF can establish some of the fundamentals of a lively children's book market, developing authors hopefully into household names, building a list to establish a canon of good children's books. He is particularly interested in developing books for children ready to move beyond picture books. At present there is little in this area and it is one they are addressing. Future plans include some original non-fiction as well as bought-in titles from Usborne, plus books on social skills and behaviour, a strong area for this market. He is keen too to develop local authors and titles that are of special interest to the Gulf and Arab world. Whether these will travel back into other markets is too early to say, although Orion have shown that the right title can have universal appeal.

A number of other publishers have had some success in selling titles into the Arab market. Francis Lincoln for example have sold **We are Born Free**, published in association with Amnesty International, into Arab markets via a Lebanese publisher. At DK Emma Llewelyn looks after the Arab markets, selling rights to publishers in Egypt, Lebanon, and thus to Iraq, Arab Emirates and Algeria. She reports that there is a definite wish to promote children's literature, with government grants for translation widely available. 'Everyone is looking for change.' Even Iran is looking more interesting, where Farsi is the language. Past problems with pirating are being addressed, and there is more interest in issues of copyright. She reports that educational series are of strong interest, thematic science encyclopedias for example or books on the body or how things work. There are tricky issues to watch, such as the amount of flesh on display (more an issue in adult pregnancy titles) or the avoidance of culturally sensitive images such as dogs or pigs.

There is a growing awareness too which finds its voice in a number of Arab websites and blogs that every country, every culture needs its own children's literature. The author of one blog describes enjoying a search and finding books with her children. 'Apparently there isn't an Arabic **Where's Wally?** which is good. We don't need him. We need Waleed.'

Gulf News in May quotes a publisher at the Abu Dhabi International Bookfair as saying that local YA literature is fighting for existence due to the lack of Emirati authors willing to write in this challenging field. A massive influx of translated books is overshadowing books written originally in Arabic, making it more difficult for Arab authors to shine and 'find their shelf space'.

So one must applaud the efforts of champions such as Sheika Bodour Bint Sultan Al Qasimi, Founder and CEO of Kalimat Publishing who has just announced the sale of two Arabic books to Swedish and Canadian publishers. In a statement she says 'Kalimat endeavours to publish books that not only touch children on a personal and emotional level, but also inspire in them a love for reading. Through bringing books from this region to children everywhere we hope to foster greater compassion and cultural understanding among future generations, regardless of where they are from.'

Clearly this is a market to watch. As BQF's Publisher states 'It's great to be pioneers and we look forward to publishing our 100th title!' ■



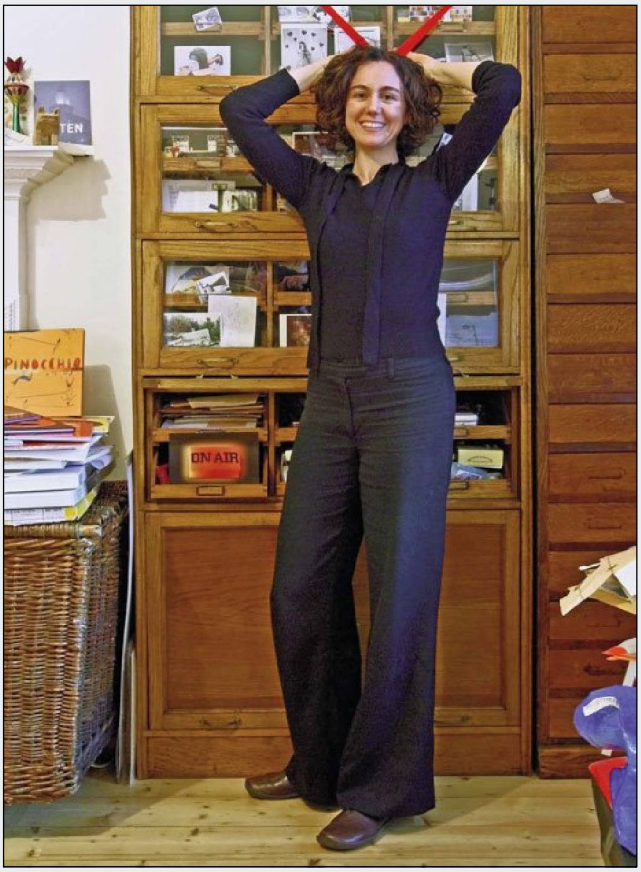
Sue Unstead was a publisher of children's non-fiction publisher for 25 years and is a consultant.

Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation now have official shelves in Arabic on Public Library Online:
http://www.publiclibraryonline.com/DisplayShelf.aspx?shelfId=123

PLO details:
http://publiclibraryonline.wordpress.com/get-started/

The Dream-Like Images of **Sara Fanelli**

Original, quirky, challenging and humorous, Sara Fanelli's innovative take on picture book creation goes beyond the usual conventions and involves the reader on many levels. What are her sources of inspiration? And how does she approach visual and textual narrative? **Gill Robins** reports.



I was just putting the finishing touches to a review of Sara Fanelli's new picture book **The Onion's Great Escape** when my inbox pinged. Would I like to talk to Sara? The opportunity to interview one of the most exciting experimental author/illustrators currently working in the UK doesn't come along often - my answer was a definite yes.

Several things struck me fairly quickly when I started talking to Sara. Firstly, there is her passion for art – she talks enthusiastically about the influence of Paul Klee, the Russian constructivists and avant-garde thinking on her work. Then there is the curiosity which compels her to explore what she sees ('every object has a story behind it to be relayed or reinvented'), her great love of books as objects and an engaging intellectual eclecticism which is physically mirrored in her varied collection of collage materials. But she is also the sort of reflective thinker who draws you into thinking with her – a trait which carries through into her work.

So where did it all begin? Sara was born into a home rich in artistic culture. That home was in Florence, a city that witnessed the birth of the Renaissance and was governed by great patrons of the arts like the Medici family – a heritage which Sara says 'can be very daunting'. She also observes rather sadly that 'the corruption and dishonesty of Italian politicians in the last 20 years have escalated to a point where there is absolutely no connection at all between those high ideals and now'.

It was whilst at school in Italy that she studied and fell in love with the classical mythology which permeates her work, observing, 'I find it wonderful the way these stories can have many interpretations all of which can be true, even when contradictory. They contain timeless truths and, of course, they are also very stimulating visually.' Roberto Calasso's **The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony**, a retelling of the great tales from Greek mythology, was particularly influential.

In 1989, Sara moved to London to study, where art colleges 'encouraged experimentation in order for each student to find their own individual voice'. And Sara certainly found her voice, only to discover on graduating that it was a voice that few commissioning editors for children's books could hear. In the interests of sales on both sides of the Atlantic, most publishers were looking for safe, traditional books – the new approaches which were emerging elsewhere in Europe were apparently not in demand.

Mapping aspects of life

However, by the time Quentin Blake selected Sara for the 2001 British Library Magic Pencil exhibition as one of the best 13 illustrators working in the UK, she already had several books in print, books in which her voice could be clearly heard. Her first book **Button** was followed by **My Map Book**, which not only introduces children to the concept of mapping aspects of life as a form of visual organisation but also invites readers to interact by creating a personal map on the dust jacket.

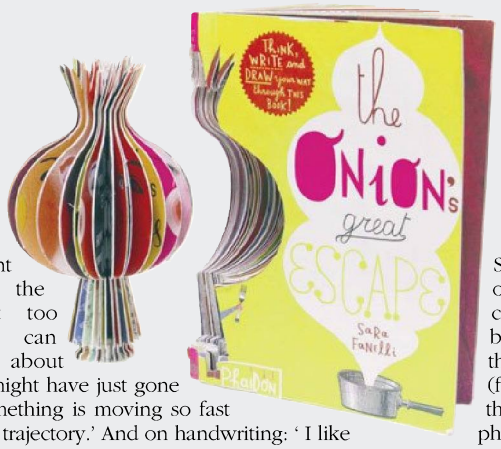
Books, to Sara, are three dimensional objects, any aspect of which can be used to tell a story. In **First Flight**, endpapers are used to record her friends' drawings of butterflies whilst an insect in the corner of each page creates a flicker book effect. 'Most of the time,' she says, 'I develop the narrative around an original image or visual element which I want to explore in that book. For instance, with the book **Wolf!** I had decided that I wanted the main character to be the one that I had noticed children related to the most in my previous book, **Button**, whereas, with **Dear Diary**, I knew that I wanted to use the format of diaries and old stationery combined with the idea of reading other people's diaries.'

In fact, you don't so much read a Fanelli book as form a relationship with it. In particular, **My Map Book** and **The Onion's Great Escape** invite the reader to become part of the authorship. Books are 'a world to retreat to, a place to explore, with different possibilities from the everyday reality. I like the possibility of a book becoming a precious keeper of the child's way of thinking at that time. A little bit like a message in a bottle for the grown up person who once was that child and who might have forgotten what he was like'.

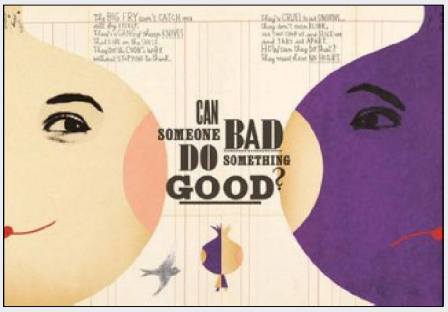
Sara's preferred medium of collage gives the first clue to how she engages a reader in this relationship. In addition to liking the three dimensional, textural quality of collage, she feels that it enables her 'to interweave different narratives, hidden comments, stories, connections' which encourage the reader to keep returning. 'I also very much like the element of chance and freedom that the process of creating a collage brings to the picture,' she adds. Old or stained papers, sweet wrappers, pages from accounts books, printed music, historical documents or print in a range of languages are used to design images which are simultaneously retrospective and contemporary.

The second clue comes in the scribbles and handwriting which are hallmarks of her style, creating an immediacy which gives the impression that the author is thinking aloud on paper. 'Scribbles,' says Sara, 'often have a visual function – they





appear where I want some energy in the picture, but not too dominant. One can imagine anything about them – something might have just gone up in smoke or something is moving so fast that you see only its trajectory.' And on handwriting: ' I like using letter shapes and their weight as elements of the picture, so I use the typography as parts of the construction of the layout right from the first planning of the page.' But the scribbles and the handwriting are also a physical manifestation of Sara's ability to span the worlds of both adults and children.



The interdependency of knowledge and creativity

Because of her family background, Sara has stayed attached to and in touch with childhood even as an adult. She also feels that she retains the connection visually in the way that she looks at the world. She shows great respect for children as serious readers and thinkers, appreciating their inquisitiveness and their ability to contribute and be creative. We talked for some time about the knowledge/creativity dichotomy that education produces. Sara refers to Ken Robinson's 2006 TED (Technology, Education, Design) lecture in which he likens education to strip mining for a commodity, a process which mines for knowledge at the expense of creativity. Her view is that 'knowledge and creativity are interdependent, as the more we know the more connections we can make so the more creative we can be'. Sara's own intellectual curiosity and artistic creativity are the embodiment of this, but as she adds, 'The problem is about finding a method of teaching that nourishes each child's mind instead of forcing it to comply with a set of bureaucratic systems.'

And the creative capacity of children is nowhere better exemplified than in Sara's workshops, about which she makes an interesting observation. 'The most rewarding thing about the workshops I did with children was finding out that what adults (and some publishers) believe is 'not for children', actually comes very naturally to them.' She went on to explain that collage is a very natural medium for children, as they draw shapes with scissors instead of pencils. 'Once they become familiar with this – a couple of minutes! – they naturally play with scale, repetition, textures, etc. using magazines and different papers.' She adds 'children's thoughts are more advanced and sharper than a lot of grownups presume' although she has been told many times that collage is too sophisticated for children.

I ask Sara about her favourite children's authors: Maira Kalman for her poetry and humour, J Otto Seibold's 'Mr Lunch' books as examples of computer generated children's books and Kv ta Pacovská for her beautiful pictures and the rhythm of her books. She references Bruno Munari for his experimentation with book format, ideas on creativity and children's workshops.

So where did the idea for her latest book, **The Onion's Great Escape**, come from? Her answer is indicative of her thought process. She first started pondering the matter of onions after reading the Martian poet Christopher Reid's translation of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem which contained the line, 'To write a weepy poem try onion juice'. In 2007, Sara published **Sometimes I Think, Sometimes I Am**, an adult book which drew on some of the literature which inspires her, including Dante, Goethe and Beckett. The book explored the new territory of printmaking, three-dimensional models and... onion juice.

Sara continued to ponder onions, rejecting ideas until: 'I matched the onion shape to the possibility of a three dimensional character coming out of the book, and then the idea of layers being represented by pages. And these went hand in hand with the idea of a progression through the book: a 'knowledge' that leads the onion to freedom (from the frying pan and from the book).' The final outcome is a thought-provoking book which is part poetry, part narrative and part philosophy, thus reflecting the layers of the onion in the internal structure of both book and vegetable. Interacting with the book leaves you with a little book of philosophy which you have personally released from confinement. The allegory of thinking in new ways to create freedom from traditional conformities is powerful.

In addition to her children's books, Sara has an impressive client list for her commercial work, including Royal Mail, Pizza Express, Tate Modern, **New York Times** and various theatre poster and book cover designs. But perhaps the front page of her website best summarises Sara. It carries Oscar Wilde's aphorism, 'The truth is rarely pure and never simple' and it is the search for meaning beyond the pure and simple which motivates her thinking and her art. ■

The Books

The Onion's Great Escape, Phaidon Press, 978 0 7148 5703 9, £14.95 pbk

Pinocchio by Carlo Collodi, Walker, 978 1 4063 1747 3 £9.99 pbk

The following titles are OP but may be available from Abe Books or Amazon:

My Map Book, Walker, 978 1844280308, hbk

Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece, Walker, 978 0 7445 8898 9, hbk

First Flight, Jonathan Cape 978 0 2240 6457 6, hbk

Dear Diary, Walker, 978 0 7445 8263 5, pbk

It's Dreamtime, Heinemann, 978 0 4348 0207 4, hbk

A Dog's Life, Heinemann, 978 0 4348 0364 4, hbk

Wolf, Egmont, 978 978 0 8037 2093 0, hbk

Pinocchio: Picture Box, HarperCollins, 978 0 6940 0829 2, hbk

Cinderella, Walker, 978 1 8540 6228 4, hbk

Button, Little Brown & Co 978-0316273930, hbk

For adults

Sometimes I Think, Sometimes I Am, Tate Publishing, 978 1 8543 7728 9, £19.99 pbk

Gill Robins is a Junior School Deputy Head, Leading English Teacher for Hampshire LA and Editorial Chair of the English Association publication **English 4-11.** fiction and non-fiction 5 -11.



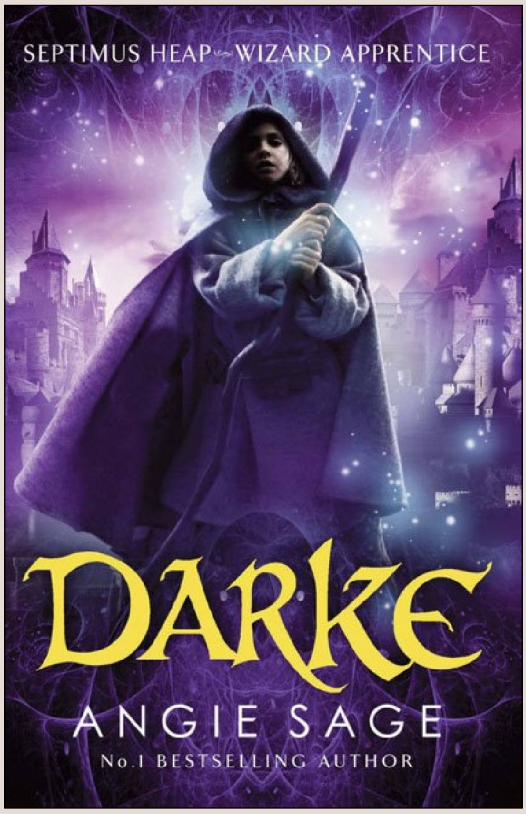
Sara's website: **www.sarafanelli.com**
Phaidon Press website: **www.phaidon.com**

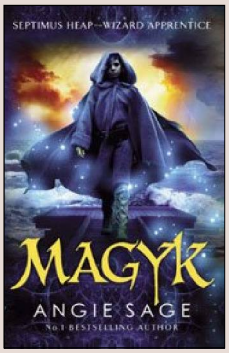
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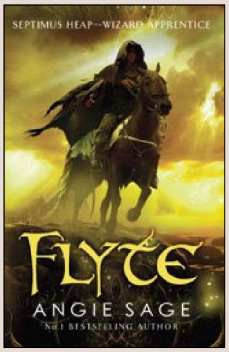


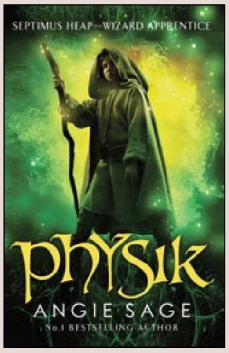
Angie Sage

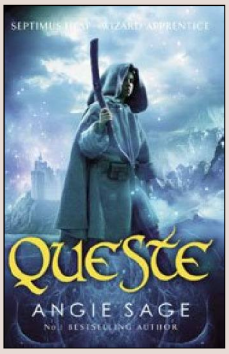
interviewed by **Nicholas Tucker**











It's all happening for Angie Sage. Born in 1952, she originally studied medicine before training as an illustrator at Art School and she has never been busier. The star of numerous school visits, an active blogger and tweeter and now busy with negotiating possible film rights, it's amazing she still has time to write so many of the original, lively and fun stories that have made her popular with thousands of children and not a few adults. Next year sees the publication of **Fyre**, the seventh and last book in her best-selling 'Septimus Heap' series starring the eponymous apprentice wizard. But for those who cannot get enough of this character and the battles he and his faithful friends have to wage against various deadly enemies, **The Darke Toad** is also to be published in 2013. Described as a digital original novella, this aims to fill in some of the gaps in the 'Septimus Heap' sequence with yet more stories.

Gentle in manner and quietly spoken, Angie could easily be over-looked in any concourse of over-weening literary egos. Giving the impression of still being slightly bewildered by her success – she had no idea when writing the first 'Septimus Heap' book that this was going to be the start of a series – she also radiates personal enjoyment at what has happened so far and what should still be to come. So why, when her Septimus books are currently so successful, is she cutting the series off after the next volume?

'I do have an idea for a separate trilogy of slightly shorter books where some new characters can visit the Castle and meet Septimus, who will now be aged twenty-one. But I have always thought that seven was a good number. Septimus himself is the seventh son of a seventh son and must study for seven years and a day before his apprenticeship can end. And I don't want my characters to get too old for their youngest reader. So I have decided to stop while the oldest child character is still thirteen, which is still something of a cut-off point in real life between childhood and adolescence. But I do have older readers too, and I write for everybody – me included. I like to think that readers re-visiting my books when they are older may then spot things possibly missed before.'

Is she referring here to the politics of her 'Septimus Heap' series, where there is the constant threat of good people losing their liberty to ruthless tyranny?

'I am very against any sort of unjust hierarchy. I know the wizards in my novels have some sort of hierarchy, but that is more of a career structure. And I do have a sort of Queen, but she is not given any particular privileges – it's just a job. I think I got this anti-hierarchical feeling principally from my father. He worked in publishing and made many visits to communist East Europe in order to buy paper. He used to tell me of the bad things he saw over there, which I knew upset him a lot. He eventually got me reading Solzhenitsyn's unforgettable **One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich**. He never took me on any of these travels – I don't think my mother would have allowed it! But I did learn from him never to take any of our liberties for granted.'

What about magic? Once it is there in a novel, how important is it to erect boundaries between what now remains possible and what still is not?

'I like to think of it as a science. So there have to be some constants as in physics for example, where matter can't be created or destroyed. Magic in my stories is basically an apprenticeship system where you are learning the rules, and there are a lot of them. I see it as a new technology. I try hard to remember the rules myself and have actually written them down to remind me of what they are. Because there will always be readers who triumphantly remind me of any inconsistencies between a current book and any of its predecessors. The difference between my good and dark magic is that well intentioned practitioners always respect other people's autonomy. But the evil ones don't care what they do to people and never respect what they want.'

Does writing a novel set in the here and now necessarily mean taking on modern technology, which in a way is another sort of magic?

'This can be a real problem. Technology is changing so quickly that any fictional reference to its current state risks being out of date by the time of publication. As for magic again, Arthur C. Clarke once said, "Any

sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." If we were able to take a computer back three hundred years it would certainly be viewed as sorcery. And things that once seemed magic – like amazing speeds or incredible ways of listening in to people from a distance – we now take for granted. But in the imaginary worlds I create I remain in charge, so there is only the sort of magic – or if you like technology – that I personally approve of and can understand.'

What about research before writing? Does this have a role?

'My sort of research is based mostly on memories of books I have once read. I don't read fantasy now but in my teens I was very interested in sci-fi. I loved the idea of other worlds. Maybe some of these ideas are working back into my fiction now.'

When did the writing start?

'I began by illustrating other people's stories. Then I wrote a few little ones for younger readers just to see if I could. But writing for a very young audience is hard – you have to concentrate so much on plot. And I discovered that I was more interested in telling stories more gradually through characters, which meant writing for slightly older readers.'

How do you come up with such an apparently effortless stream of jokes in your stories?

'I don't know where they come from. They just appear, and they usually arrive when characters are being a bit funny with each other. Sometimes they make me laugh as well!'

Do you like the Harry Potter books?

'I read the first two and liked the direct way Rowling wrote. And her books really opened up the market and led to a huge change about how people felt about writing for that age group. She certainly helped put the 'wow' factor back into children's books. And she also made me realise that writing a story about Septimus, whom I had been thinking about for ages, might now be a real possibility.'

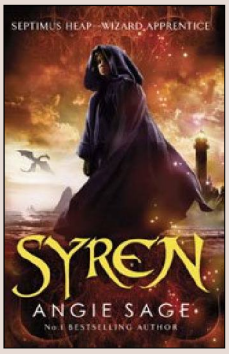
The German author Cornelia Funke in her fantasy novels never kills off any of her villains, however horrible they are. Could the same be said of your books?

'I am with her on this. I would never have anyone killed in my stories as an act of retaliation. A few people do die, but that's always their own fault and it can often be in quite an ignominious way. So perhaps I am using humour here to defuse what might otherwise seem a more serious situation. But I do at times have to remove evil characters from the scene, and this can give me some problems. But I would rather all my characters were given the chance to think about what they had done and perhaps change than merely get dismissed when I have finished with them, which for me would be a bit of a cop out.'

Angie's 'Septimus Heap' novels are inventive, funny, expertly plotted and offer a gratifyingly long read. Devouring them is a happy as well as an exciting experience. Her other main sequence of stories revolves round young Araminta Spook and her ghost-filled Spook House. Written for younger readers, these too are great fun. Writing today as well as ever, this is an author who has already offered a lot and clearly has much more to give. Children are lucky to have her. ■



"I like to think that readers re-visiting my books when they are older may then spot things possibly missed before."



The Books

The 'Septimus Heap' series is published by Bloomsbury at £6.99 pbk:

Darke, 978 1 4088 0627 2

Magyk, 978 0 7475 7926 7

Flyte, 978 0 7475 8449 0

Physik, 978 0 7475 8763 7

Queste, 978 0 7475 9414 7

Syren, 978 0 7475 9886 2

Fyre will be published in April 2013

The Darke Toad will be published in February 2013

The 'Araminta Spook' series is published by Bloomsbury:

My Haunted House, 978 0 7475 8346 2, £5.99 hbk

The Sword in the Grotto, 978 0 7475 8347 9, £5.99 hbk

Frognapped, 978 0 7475 8348 6, £5.99 hbk

Vampire Brat, 978 0 7475 8349 3, £5.99, £5.99 hbk

Ghostsitters, 978 0 7475 9826 8, £6.99 hbk

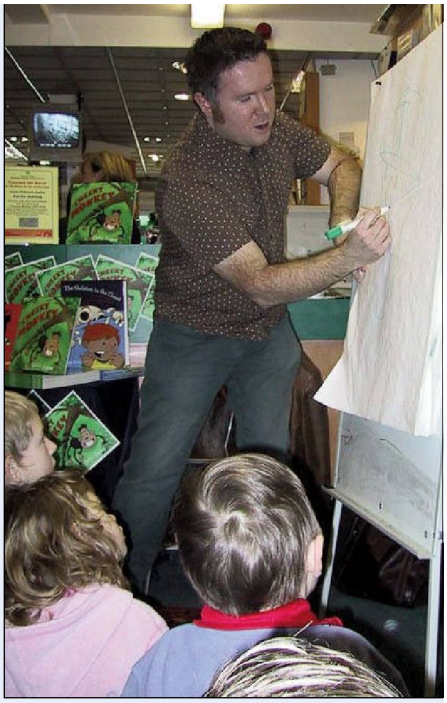
Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.



BfK's Brilliant Children's Bookshops

White Rose Books, Thirsk, North Yorkshire

Winner of the Gardners Independent Bookseller of The Year, North & Scotland Region 2010 Award, White Rose Books staff love to help young readers choose books. They also have a vibrant programme of events. Owner **Sue Lake** explains.



We always have a colourful children's window display to attract the young (currently a Peter Rabbit tea-party) and boards on the pavement with forthcoming events, story times, and the latest yummy treats in the coffee bar.



'Mummy, it's open! we hear as little feet come rushing in, way ahead of accompanying adult. Whoops! The toddler has disappeared! He's in the window having tea with Peter Rabbit! In a few steps, past the counter with a wave, and on to the picture books, displays and little drawing table with crayons and activity sheets... and then the coffee bar with all those treats! There's hot chocolate, milkshakes, fairy cakes, teddy and dinosaur biscuits, just what they need after a hard day at school or nursery, or a swim at the pool. While grown-ups linger over their coffee and cake, the children are then free to go upstairs and browse the books, find more colouring tables or puzzles. They fill all corners, reading, choosing their next book, talking about their favourites with friends and with us.

We have story times for pre school children on Wednesday afternoons and a Saturday morning story time for all once a month. In holidays we have activity sessions, and (very popular!) 'Storysoup with Jo', an exciting mix of stories and fun handicrafts. Jo arrives with huge canvas bags bursting with sparkle and colour, cloth, paper, ribbons, bows – enough to make several Quangle Wangle hats! Last half term she had a Greek myths theme and the children went home bearing their own Pandora's boxes (ex-shoe boxes!).

The children's book club

Our children's bookclub is held every three weeks. We choose the book and try to have a diverse range of genres to appeal to the 8-12 age group of about twelve girls and boys. Popular recent reads have been David Walliams' **Gangsta Granny**, Michael Morpurgo's **Dear Olly** (one of the 'My Story' series), and, most recent of all, **The One and Only Ivan** by Katherine Applegate. Half the children loved this, the other half thought the lack of action dull. Jack said, 'it was just two animals talking, so boring', but then he does like spies, secret missions and drama on the high seas! We have a wall dedicated to the children's bright, colourful, funny drawings and writings about the most recent book. Another wall is dedicated to thank you letters from school groups who come in throughout the year. And photos of all the authors who have visited, sometimes holding workshops, always inspiring us all, staff and customers. Not many empty walls at White Rose Books!

We love to help young customers choose books. We try to champion the 'quiet' books, the quirky, the ones that might get missed – Frank Cottrell Boyce's **Millions** and **The Unforgotten Coat**, Philippa Pearce's **The Little Gentleman**, Gill Lewis' **Sky Hawk**, Eva Ibbotson's **One Dog and His Boy**. At the moment we are promoting Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's delightful **Stick Book** with a display complete with Stick Man and reviews by staff and a 'Mum of two boys'.

The children's passage through the shop is a bit like ours through their childhood. They come in as babies and we help with choice of board books, and the classics every child needs. Like **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** they munch their way through the picture books and nursery rhymes, and then they are suddenly reading on their own and whizzing through the first chapter books. Next they devour the 'Rainbow Magic' and 'Beast Quest' series, and we help find alternatives to broaden their reading choices, and then they are away launched into that wonderful world of books. Milly, 9, whom we have known since she was a baby, came bursting in yesterday with the news that she is now considered a 'free reader' at school. Suddenly it's GCSE guides and Career Guides! Not forgetting all the non-local children – Thirsk has caravan sites, holiday parks, and it's en route for the coast - we provide them with the same experience, help them discover new treasures, activity books for those rainy days, and 101 exciting things to do with sticks!

Two highlights for us yesterday, a busy Saturday: Jake, 7, (a fan of bus books since he was tiny) sang for us, very shyly and sweetly, a song from his school's Easter show. And, upstairs, there was a little boy bursting to share the fact that mayflies only live for one day. Book knowledge is two-way; Jake often reminds us of the books we found for him when tiny to recommend to the new generation of bus lovers! e.e. cummings said, 'the world is mud-luscious and puddle-wonderful.' We would add that it is book-scrumptious too. ■

The White Rose Bookshop, 79-81 Market Place, Thirsk, North Yorkshire, YO7 1ET. Tel: 01845 524353

BfK briefing

AWARDS

Queen of Teen 2012

Maureen Johnson (**The Name of the Star** and **13 Little Blue Envelopes**) has been voted Queen of Teen 2012. New York based Maureen enlisted the help of twitter to gain support for the title. The other shortlisted authors were Cathy Cassidy, Sarah Webb, Joanna Nadin, Cathy Hopkins, Samantha Mackintosh, Chris Higgins, Hayley Long, S.C. Ransom and James Dawson.

Branford Boase Award 2012

My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece by Annabel Pitcher, edited by Fiona Kennedy and published by Orion Children's Books has won this annual award, given to the author and editor of the most outstanding debut novel for children.

UKLA Book Award Winners 2012

The UKLA Book Award is unique as it the only national book award selected by teachers from both the primary and secondary sectors. The judges were all teachers from schools across Leicestershire and Coventry.

The winning book for the 3-6 years category was **Iris & Isaac** by Catherine Rayner, Little Tiger Press.

The winning book in the 7-11 years category was **Sky Hawk** by Gill Lewis, Oxford.

The winning book in the 12-16 years category was **A Monster Calls** by Patrick Ness, ill. Jim Kay, Walker.

CLPE Poetry Award 2012 Shortlist

Established in 2003, the annual Poetry Award encourages and celebrates outstanding new children's poetry. The shortlisted titles are:

Goldilocks on CCTV by John Agard, ill. Satoshi Kitamura, Frances Lincoln, £12.99

Holding the Hands of Angels by Brian Moses, Salt Publishing, £6.99

The Language of Cat by Rachel Rooney, ill. Ellie Jenkins, Frances Lincoln, £5.99

Here Comes the Poetry Man by Fred Sedgwick, Salt Publishing, £6.99

The judges for this year's Award are Philip Gross, Morag Styles and Fiona Waters. The judging panel is chaired by Julia Eccleshare. The winner of the 2012 CLPE Poetry Award will be announced on July 24 2012.

OBITUARY

Barbara Leonie Picard (1917-2011)

Brian Alderson writes…

With the death of Barbara Leonie Picard (and, more recently, Leila Berg) few writers and illustrators of children's books remain to us whose work dates back into the 1940s. Her first book, **The Mermaid and the Simpleton**, illustrated by Philip Gough, after the manner of Rex Whistler, was a set of Farjeonesque fairytales, some of which had been broadcast earlier on the BBC's 'Children's Hour'. It was published in 1949 by a resurgent Oxford University Press and for some twenty years they were to remain her most regular publishers. Much of her work for them lay in the retelling of classic and popular stories, for instance **The Odyssey** in 1952, or **French Legends, Tales and Fairy Stories** in 1955 in the big Oxford Myths and Legends series, to which she would add a Persian volume in 1972. In 1956 however Oxford published the first in a number of historical stories, the very remarkable **Ransom for a Knight** which was (like the later **Lost John**) a runner-up for the Carnegie Medal – both of them more deservous of winning it than the books that did.

Picard, the daughter of somewhat dysfunctional parents who early separated, was herself an eccentric, her intellectual gifts in some measure unfulfilled through an unambitious career as a librarian. That said, it must be added that children's librarianship made little appeal to her, for she did not care much for the young, her writing stemming from the challenge posed by the mythic or narrative material with which she was confronted. Not long before her death she was, as it were, rediscovered, living a reclusive life in a hideaway cottage in Sussex and this led to her donating remnants of her creative life to Seven Stories, the Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Hal's Reading Diary

The way history is taught to11-year-old Hal is very different from the way his father was taught – and will help young people to develop empathy. Hal's father, psychodynamic counsellor **Roger Mills**, explains.



Living with a son who is going through a school career I often find myself trying to remember what my own experiences of learning at school were like. But though I imagine that fairly decent chunks of what I know today were learnt at school, where I draw a fairly comprehensive blank is remembering what lessons were actually like. In History for example I can remember my very first lesson – it was on the venerable Bede and the first history of England – but almost no subsequent lessons until I get to a memory of a flukily successful essay on the Reformation about nine years later.

Memories of lessons may have all but vanished, but one thing that I am sure about is that the way history is taught now is pretty different from the approach in my day. History teaching at school in the '60s and '70s wasn't quite wall to wall dates, but it was very largely a matter of facts and I don't remember anything much that really brought it alive. What is so different nowadays is that while you get a fair helping of facts and interpretations of events and their consequences, you also get a significant emphasis on what the events might have been like for the people living through them.

I found a vivid example of this in Hal's history exercise book, spotted while helping him revise for summer exams. His class had been doing some work on D-Day and given basic information by their teacher on the invasion fleet, the transfer to landing craft and the extremely dangerous arrival on the beaches. Information given, the teacher asked the class to imagine that they were someone who had been on a landing craft and to write their journal. Hal came up with a terrifically evocative piece in which his character first felt sea sick in the heaving ships off the beachhead, and then terrified as the landing craft approached the beach with shells landing in the water all around making the soldier intensely fearful for his life.

I so wish history had been like that in my day – it makes it a much more valuable learning experience. It's valuable not just because it makes it all so alive, but also because it requires you to think about what the lives of other people from other times might feel like. D-Day may not be hugely removed from our own time (though it's not yesterday either), but apply the diary writing method to earlier times and you are steered towards contemplating how fundamentally different the things that people used to think and believe must have been at different points in history.

And there is another, enormous value, in this kind of diary piece. Because it forces you to put yourself in someone else's shoes, it is also a lesson in empathy. Making an effort to see something from the other person's point of view is, I would argue, a basic human skill. It makes you less wedded to your own view point. It makes you more broadly understanding and sympathetic. Of course I'm not arguing that writing diary pieces in History lessons has transformed Hal and his classmates into huge empathisers. They remain, in many ways, ardently self-centred. But I do think that this kind of approach involves a baby-step towards developing a capacity for empathy and that that is a great lesson for any child to learn. Hats off to modern History methods! ■

I wish **I'd** written...

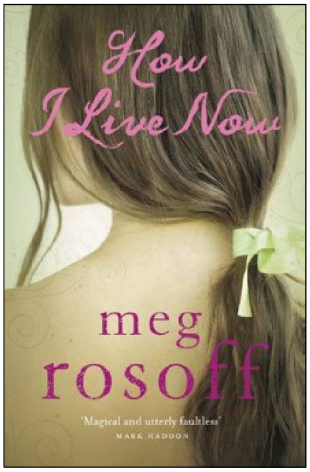
Annabel Pitcher on a book that is sad, uplifting, angry, beautiful, personal and universal...



So many books give me author-envy! When I walk into any library or bookshop, I find my eyes glowing green at the sight of the Harry Potter series, the 'Northern Lights' trilogy or the brilliant 'Bartimaeus Sequence'. I am a huge fan of fantasy, totally in awe of writers who invent elaborate magical worlds, and whose clever plots have more twists and turns than the floor routine of an Olympic gymnast. However, the story I really wish I'd written is nothing like that. It is shorter, simpler and based very much in the real world with its real problems of war, terrorism, divorce and anorexia.

That **How I Live Now** gets bogged down by none of these things is testament to the beauty of Meg Rosoff's writing. This isn't a book about issues; it's a heady celebration of what it means to be young and foolish and rebellious and in love in difficult circumstances. Narrated in Daisy's pitch-perfect, defiant yet vulnerable voice, it made me remember with gulping nostalgia what it was like to be a teenager. **How I Live Now** is impossible to define: sad, uplifting, angry, beautiful, personal and universal. Lots of books made me want to be an author, but **How I Live Now** made me realise what sort of author I wanted to be.

How I Live Now
(978 0 1413 1801 1) by Meg Rosoff is published by Puffin at £6.99 pbk.
Annabel Pitcher's new book, **Ketchup Clouds** (978 1 7806 2030 5) will be published in November by Indigo at £9.99 hbk.



Good Reads

Chosen by Junior 6 (10-11 year- old) pupils from Craigholme School, Glasgow.


Elizabeth Gavin


Lois Chuwen


Sophie Luc


Amy Brown


Ariana Johnson

Chinese Cinderella: The Secret Story of an Unwanted Daughter

Adeline Yen Mah, Puffin, 256pp, 978 0 1413 0487 8, £6.99 pbk

Chinese Cinderella is an amazing book. It is an autobiography about the author's horrible childhood. Her mother died when Adeline (the author) was born and everybody thinks she is bad luck especially her stepmother Niang. Most children think they aren't wanted even though they are. If you read this book you will realise that you are wanted. You will find out all the sad things that happened to her and how she manages to handle it and how her brothers, sisters and stepbrothers and stepsisters treat her like a pile of dirt. I would recommend this book to people who like a real page turner. The book is a sort of book that your friends and family would enjoy.

Elizabeth Gavin

Girl Missing

Sophie McKenzie, Simon & Schuster, 304pp, 978 0 8570 7413 3, £6.99 pbk

Girl Missing is my favourite book because it is quite funny and very dramatic. It is about a girl called Lauren who finds out she was adopted when she was only three. Lauren goes all the way over to the US to find her parents, but on the way she finds out she wasn't adopted she was actually kidnapped and then adopted. When she eventually gets to her real parents she finds out she has got two sisters. The eldest Shelby is a person you do not want to meet but Madison is the complete opposite. She is only 6 and the cutest thing ever. Now her real parents want her to stay with them but her adoptive parents also want her. Maybe finding her real family wasn't the best idea. I enjoyed it so much I could read it again and again.

Lois Chuwen

Out of the Depths

Cathy MacPhail, Bloomsbury, 224pp, 9780747599098, £5.99 pbk

Out of the Depths by the award winning author Cathy MacPhail is a spine-tingling novel full of mystery and suspense. I was riveted by the opening paragraph: 'I saw my teacher in the queue at the supermarket last Christmas. Miss Baxter. I was surprised to see her. She'd been dead for six months.' Cathy made me feel as if I was Tyler Lawless with her bewildering imagination, or is it that Tyler can really see the dead? Ben Kincaid needs her help but Ben Kincaid is dead! Ben keeps appearing to Tyler, a shadowy pale faced boy at the back of the class, in the school corridors. Cathy builds the dramatic story to a climax in the old chapel. Can Tyler change the events and prevent Ben's murder?

Sophie Luc

Pink Chameleon

Fiona Dunbar, Orchard, 288pp, 978 1 8461 6230 5, £5.99 pbk

Pink Chameleon is my favourite book; it is a real page turner! The story is all about two sisters, Rorie and Elsie who are the children of two great inventors. When their parents go to show off their invention they never return. Rorie and Elsie have no other relatives other than cruel Aunt Irmine and Uncle Harris, who own Poker Bute Hall School. BOO! The children most definitely do not get along with any of the other stuck up children at the school and when Rorie discovers she has a magical power, it doesn't go down well. The sisters are urged to find out what has happened to their parents and most of all ESCAPE out of the school or should I say prison! I recommend this book to any child who loves a fun packed exciting book! I love the determination of the sisters and hope you will too!

Amy Brown

The 13 Treasures

Michelle Harrison, Simon & Schuster, 336pp, 978 1 8473 8449 2, £6.99 pbk

The 13 Treasures is a mesmerizing read, driving you to read on and discover the complex plot. The adventure begins when Tanya is sent to stay with her wizened grandmother at Elvesden Manor after another terrible mishap with her tormentors, the fairies whom only she can see. But after she glimpses a girl fifty years dead in the woods, everything changes. The manor begins to reveal its hidden secrets to her, and she sets out to reveal the centre of the mystery. Will she solve the mystery of her family's past, and perhaps discover herself along the way? This enthralling read gripped me from the start, pulling me into the story as it gradually rolled away the veil to expose the plot. I can't wait to read the sequel, and let Michelle Harrison enchant me with more of her spellbinding magic.

Ariana Johnson

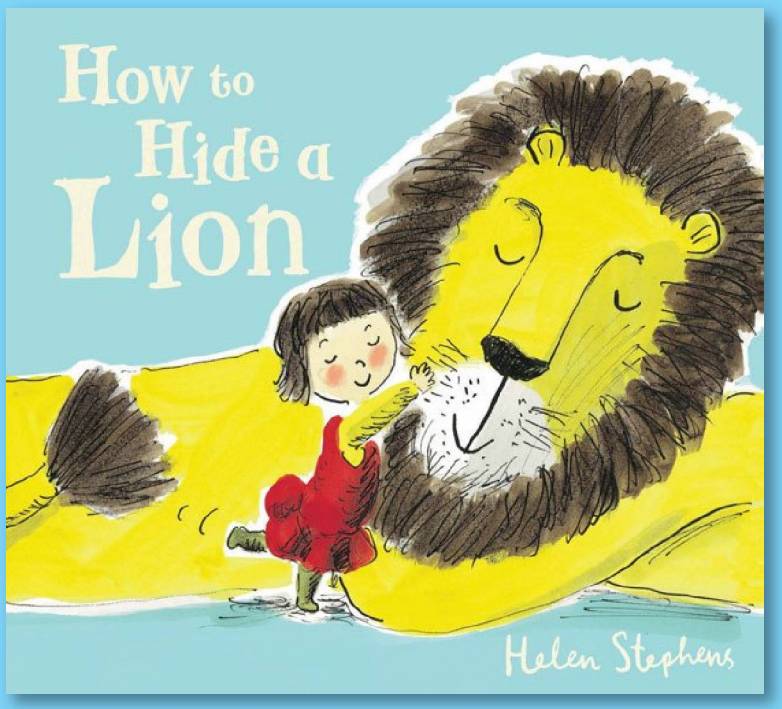
Thanks to Donna Luc, librarian.

SCHOLASTIC

How to Hide a Lion

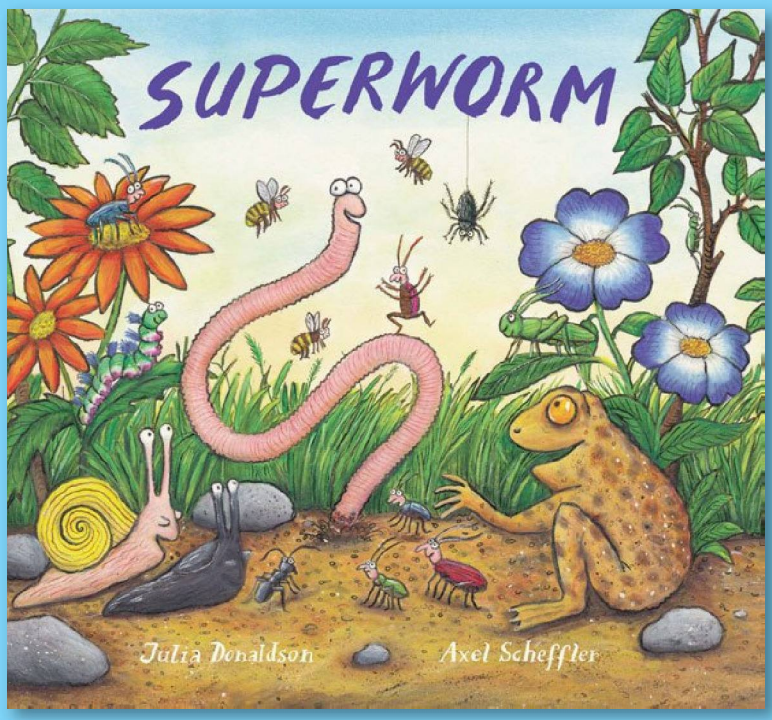
Written and illustrated by Helen Stephens

Paperback 9781407121611 £6.99
August 2012



When a lion strolls into town to buy a new hat, he meets little girl Iris who invites him back to her house. Because mums and dads can be funny about having a lion in the house, Iris decides she'll have to hide her new friend. As Iris finds, there are lots of good places to hide even the largest lion - behind the shower curtain, in your bed, and even up a tree.

But Iris can't hide her lion forever, and when her mum discovers him, he runs away. Whilst hiding in the town, the lion sees three robbers stealing from the town hall. The lion takes his chance to show everyone that he is, after all, a kind (and very brave) lion - just like Iris always said.



Superworm

Written by Julia Donaldson, illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Hardback 9781407132044 £10.99
September 2012

Superworm is super-long. Superworm is super-strong. Watch him wiggle! See him squirm! There's no one like Superworm!

Superworm is the latest creation from beloved duo Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. Superworm is the hero who fishes Spider out of a well, and rescues Toad from a busy road. But who will come to Superworm's rescue when he's captured by a wicked Wizard Lizard? Luckily, Superworm's creepy-crawly friends have a cunning plan…

Children's Laureate Julia Donaldson introduces a squiggly, wiggly and heart-melting new hero in this delightful story of the versatile, plucky and ever-helpful Superworm!

BfK

Reviews (of both hardback and paperback fiction and non-fiction) are grouped for convenience into both age categories and under teaching range. Within each section, you will find reviews for younger children at the beginning. Books and children being varied and adaptable, we suggest that you look either side of your area. More detailed recommendations for use can often be found within the review.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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.**

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

Valerie Coghlan is Librarian at the Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin.

Anne Faundez is a freelance education and children's book consultant.

Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.

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

Ferelith Hordon is a children's librarian and Chair Elect of the Youth Libraries Group.

Jana Novotny Hunter is an author and editor.

Melissa Hyder is a children's books editor.

Margaret Mallett is a researcher and writer on **Primary School English** and a member of the English 4–11 editorial team.

Margaret Pemberton is the librarian for Bristol School Library Service and serves on the YLG committee both at regional and national level.

Clare Poole is Children's Books Manager, P&G Wells, Winchester. (picture books, poetry, 9+ and teen)

Andrea Reece is a marketing consultant and marketing director of **Books for Keeps.**

Gill Robins is a Junior School Deputy Head, Leading English Teacher for Hampshire LA and Editorial Chair of the English Association publication **English 4-11**. fiction and non-fiction 5 -11.

Martin Salisbury is an illustrator and is Course Director for the MA Children's Book Illustration programme at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.

Caroline Sanderson is a freelance writer, reviewer and editor.

Elizabeth Schlenther is the compiler of **www.healthybooks.org.uk**

Rosemary Stones is Editor of **Books for Keeps.**

Ruth Taylor has an MPhil in Children's Literature from Cambridge University.

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

RATING

Unmissable ★★★★★/ Very Good ★★★★/ Good ★★★/ Fair ★★/ Poor ★

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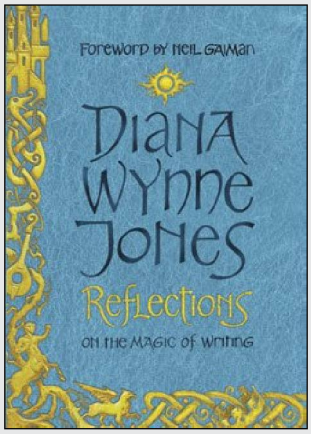
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Books About **Children's Books**

Reflections on the Magic of Writing

★★★★★

Diana Wynne Jones, David Fickling Books, 320pp, 978 0 385 6 5403 6, £25.00 hbk



Sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely, the reader comes to know Diana Wynne Jones through this book in ways which few conventional autobiographies allow. In the separate pieces which comprise **Reflections**, she reveals so much about her childhood, her adult family life, the genesis of her books and her writing practices that readers will surely feel they can identify the sources which sustained this prolific writer of fantasy through 30 years of her working life.

Her preface begins: 'In 2009 I was told I had cancer. In 2010 I was told I had only a few months to live.' She died in 2011. Some of that precious time was spent in sorting through her manuscripts prior to donating them to the archive at Seven Stories. Among her papers, she found 'a pile of the various lectures, articles and reviews I had written between 1978 and 2008'. She was helped, it seems, in her selection from these by the scholar and novelist, Charlie Butler, who contributes an introductory essay which is at once enticing and unstuffy, without a single anxious reference enlisting the support of other academics. The closing pages include Butler's interview with the author, shortly before her death, which reflects a friendship as well as providing sharp insights.

The range of work is extensive, as a few chapter titles might suggest: 'The Shape of Narrative in **The Lord of the Rings**'; 'A Day Visiting Schools'; 'A Whirlwind Tour of Australia' (the texts of three lectures); 'Characterisation: Advice for Young Writers'; 'Something About the Author'; and two clear-eyed tributes from her sons after her death.

The Introduction emphasises her range, stamina, creativity and invention, her magic and her humour. She wrote forty books in forty-one years. She herself declares that the strongest thread in this collection is 'the need for fantasy in all its many facets and its value for children and adults alike'. The reviewer is obliged to read the book in a shortish space of time. But a richer, more appropriately reflective way of reading would be the occasional visit for a chapter or two. A further advantage would be to reduce the irritating consequences of a problem of which both Butler and Wynne Jones are aware. Like most speakers who give many talks, she returns – in some instances several times – to the same anecdotes and this inevitably becomes tedious. Repeated anecdotes tend to turn into fictions themselves. Some are worth retelling (at least once). Tolkien, for instance, lecturing to the undergraduate Wynne Jones at Oxford (or mumbling to the blackboard, rather) was so incoherent and inaudible that she was sure he was trying to lose his audience so the course would be closed and he could get to his study to get on with more interesting stuff.

Very often, the stories are about her mother and father, who – to her perspective, though not her sisters' – were often cruel, stingy of both affection and cash, and wholly self-absorbed. The frequency of her anger towards her mother is confirmed by her son Colin, who felt his grandmother (whom he liked) was the reason why Wynne Jones' 'Arcadias are so dark, and why her fictions associate imaginative children with lonely defiance and with sadness'. She used her fiction, he says, 'to take revenge on people she felt had injured or offended her', which included his teenage self. With considerable generosity, he concedes that 'fiction is not meant to be fair'. Her account of visiting schools and being met by teachers who aren't expecting her and who haven't read her books and who abandon her to dozens of children who also haven't read her books is funny, and many of us have been there. But it's also a caricature.

Reading at reviewer's pace, I was at first entranced (Neil Gaiman's Foreword is right – she is 'ferociously intelligent'), fascinated by her insights about writing and fantasy; then came a period of distancing in the face of her vehement confidence; and ultimately a sense that the more uneven final picture of the author was both trustworthy and provocative. **Reflections** is certainly a compelling read for anyone interested in writing, in how an author sees children as readers, in fantasy, and in the shifting fashions of the children's lit scene from the seventies to the present day. And, of course, it is essential reading for all those, many of them adult, devoted to Wynne Jones' work. **GF**

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

Babies, Babies, Babies

★★★★★

Catherine and Laurence Anholt, Orchard, 32pp, 978 1 4083 1435 7, £11.99 hbk

What a delight! In a large format book, for very young readers each fresh page entices further exploration. Laurence and Catherine Anholt have long been acclaimed a highly successful author and illustrator team, together having produced more than 100 children's titles. They have been awarded many prestigious prizes, including the Blue Peter and the Smarties.

This enticing picture book opens to endpapers filled with charming pictures of busy babies, eating, playing, READING, sleeping. We are then introduced to the babies and some daily activities in both text and merry pictures. Appealing rhythm and rhyme make the narrative bounce along, as each spread is devoted to a different aspect of life… food, colours, animals, the seaside, new things, laughing. Every page begs conversation between child and reader. Babies especially love cuddle time, and this is how the book ends. Sneaked onto every spread is a funny baby bunny to find. Displaying great sympathy between rhyming text and illustration, this book is one I can't wait to share with my baby grandchild! **GB**

Moon Dreams

★★★★

Gleb Toropov, Brubaker, Ford & Friends, 32pp, 978 1 8487 7288 5, £10.99 hbk novelty

An inventive and refreshingly new take on the moon in all its guises – this book uses poetic language and original situations. Seen as a glowing ever-changing shape, the moon is mistaken for many things before we discover that only the child knows what this glowing orb really is and it is time to go to sleep. Since the moon is a cut out shape in the book, when we turn the page those various holes must almost disappear so a dark palette is necessary. This serves to accentuate the iridescent glow of the moon and keep a low, wind down feel. This is a lovely book for bedtime. **JNH**

Shadow!

★★★★★

Robie H. Harris, ill. Patrick Benson, Brubaker, Ford & Friends, 40pp, 978 1 8487 7253 3, £10.99 hbk

Pre-school children experiment with and question the intriguing things they encounter. So it is no surprise that inspiration for **Shadow** came to Robie Harris after she had spent the day with a young child in a city park. She noted the child's delight at the shadow following her, imitating her as she jumped and hopped, and then her sadness when the shadow disappeared. The book is written as if the child is talking and this gives it pace and energy. 'Bet if I run away from it – it won't get me. Woah! It's running too!' The illustrator, Patrick Benson of **Owl Babies** fame, was concerned to show how shadows actually behave at different times of day. To this end he made small cut-outs from cardboard and projected a light on them to help him show, convincingly, what the shadows would look like as a child might run, tiptoe, twirl and spin. So pictures and language combine to show a young child totally absorbed in playing with his shadow. This book would make a lovely gift as well as deserving a place on any nursery or reception class bookshelf. **MM**

Olive and the Big Secret

★★

Tor Freeman, Templar, 32pp, 978 1 8487 7345 5, £10.99 hbk

Sometimes the desire to publish an illustrator is so great that the text can be somewhat slight. This is a case in point. The illustrations are charming, clean and full of clarity with engagingly funny characters. I particularly like the treatment of less important things in pale grey line, allowing the beautifully coloured and patterned areas to have their full measure.

The story is about Olive who just could not keep a secret. When she tells her friend Joe he tells his pal and so on until it gets back to Mollie who had the secret originally. A simple story for the very young which can open up discussion on keeping one's counsel. **JNH**

Jonathan and Martha

★★★★

Petr Horacek, Phaidon Press, 32pp, 978 0 7148 6351 1, £7.95 hbk

Jonathan and Martha bears all the hallmark features of award winning Czech author/illustrator Petr Horacek's earlier books – a carefully designed combination of collage, background and simple narrative. The book started life when Horacek saw a child's painting of a juicy red apple - he wondered what might happen inside a fruit. The outcome is an elegant, humorous book considering the value of friendship and sharing.

It tells the story of two lonely worms who meet when they eat through a juicy pear from opposite sides. They don't much like each other, but a resulting fight ironically leaves them so tangled that they have no choice but to face life co-joined. Then one day a huge bird pecks off their tails and they separate, only to find that they no longer want to live without each other.

In addition to the collage and the vibrant colour, one of the striking aspects of this book is its clever use of framing and space to control the pace of the narrative. At the beginning, the story is told from opposing perspectives across a double page spread as the worms reflect on their loneliness. Elsewhere, the story is given pace by the use of several frames on each spread. Holes in the page (and this is not the only Eric Carle tribute) lead the reader forward and provoke curiosity. Image and narrative work in perfect partnership in this delightful book, which is thoroughly recommended for young children and early readers. **GR**

Foxly's Feast

★★★★

Owen Davey, Templar, 32pp, 978 1 8487 7132 1, £5.99 pbk

Owen Davey's pictorial text playfully references printmaking traditions with its random registrations of colour and line and excellent use of texture and earth colours. The narrative is cleverly propelled through a range of visual clues and signs, all exploiting our inbuilt tendency to stereotype, setting us up for the inevitable final surprise. Foxly is looking for his dinner. Everything tells us that each of the animals that he eyes up with interest page by page is likely to end up on his plate. The tension builds as his eager eye falls on a variety of creatures and he begins to prepare the picnic. But the final dinner scene is not quite as gruesome as we were expecting. The author shows a mature grasp of the picture book form as he cleverly teases the reader and builds the tension. This is a charming book that is beautifully designed and produced. **MS**

Let's Find Mimi: At Home

★★★

Katherine Lodge, Hodder, 32pp, 978 0 3409 9972 1, £10.99 hbk

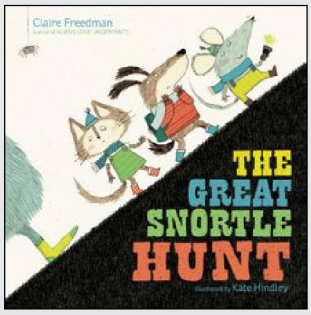
This whole book is really a game of observation and entertainment as the young reader follows Mimi the mouse from morning to night. It also includes a game of Snakes and Ladders at the back. Mimi is tiny as are the other mice active across the pages. It's fun to look for Mimi and takes intricate searching but it is less tricky and sophisticated than looking for that other lover of crowds, Wally. This book is aimed at a younger readership. The cheerful, childlike illustrations are pleasing with all the wonder of small things that children love because it makes them feel bigger.

Let's Find Mimi: On Holiday is also available is what is becoming a successful series. **JNH**

The Great Snortle Hunt

★★★★

Claire Freedman, ill. Kate Hindley, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 0 85707 263 4, £5.99 pbk



Four friends set out to see the Snortle who lives 'on a hill bumpy-steepy' in a big old house. No one has ever seen the Snortle but everyone knows he has a huge appetite and is very, very scary. Snortles, it is also known, love moonlit nights, so one night the brave group sets out armed with everything they might need, including a big iced-cake for the Snortle. On the way they are scared, but not deterred, by all sorts of creepy noises; they even enter the Snortle's bedroom despite the growls, groans, strange gurgly moans and horribly Snortley sounds coming from under a big bedspread covering a huge monster Snortle. There is more excitement and surprises as the friends hastily exit the house, but the tale takes an unexpected turn when the Snortle, who is a really friendly chap, invites them all for tea the very next day.

Recommended for three year-olds plus, young readers will love the build-up of excitement as the gang of four approaches the house, and the ending which gently shows without telling, that you can't make assumptions about Snortles – and perhaps people.

Freedman is an accomplished author who knows what children like and her words are well-matched by Hindley's spikey images. These, laid on matt paper which suitably tones down the brighter colours, imbue each of the friends, and the Snortle, with character, and create a sense of mounting tension. The page shape too is used to maximum effect in this affirming production. **VC**

Everybody Poos

NON-FICTION ★★★★

Taro Gomi, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 978 1 8478 0333 7, £4.99 hbk

Now available in a mini hardback edition (12.4 x 10.8 cm), this brilliant little book gives the reader lots of essential information about poos, a child's scatological dream! Every living animal eats, so every living animal poos and we meet lots of different kinds of animals and their different kinds of poo. They even have different smells! The pictures are wonderfully simple but graphic and we find out there are all sorts of places that pooing can happen. Children will happily shout 'Yuck!' at some of the ideas, but they will highly enjoy the last picture which shows a line of animals, backs to us, all pooling away, with a child sitting on a toilet at the end. **ES**

Is That a Coconut? Yuck!

★★★★★

Tony Bradman, ill. Katharine McEwen, Egmont, 32pp, 978 1 4052 6372 6, £6.99 pbk

When a small round hairy object falls from a tree landing in front of Elephant it sets off a concatenation of disappointment in the hungry animals by or on which it lands. This is accompanied by increasingly distraught cries of 'Hey, hang on a second!' from Mother Monkey as each successive animal sends the 'coconut' flying once again. Said object is subjected to nothing worse than the ups and downs of a live adventure playground until it drops onto the river bank just in front of Alligator. He is delighted to discover that the object in front of him most certainly is not a coconut. It's fortunate then, that Mother Monkey has been following the path of the projectile at each and every toss.

Tension builds in this cleverly paced story as what seems the inevitable demise of the baby monkey comes ever closer. Katherine McEwen's decoratively stylized, textured illustration is full of tension and humour. The suspicions of observant young readers as to the true identity of the UFO are gradually confirmed by the subtle changes in its appearance, provoking knowing interjections, in addition to the audience participation invited by the repetition built into the story. **JB**

Clare Beaton's Farmyard Rhymes

978 1 8468 6736 1

Clare Beaton's Bedtime Rhymes

978 1 8468 6737 8

★★★★

Clare Beaton, Barefoot Books, 14pp, £4.99 each

These two small, square board books have themes that are entirely appropriate for the very youngest children. There are seven rhymes per book, each rhyme being allocated a double page spread. A donkey, Mrs Hen and her chicks, a pig, a cow, ducks and 'Horsie' are the animals featured in **Farmyard Rhymes**. The rhymes are thoughtfully sequenced so that in the opening pages, Donkey brays to wake the sleepy world through to Horsie and child passengers bound for home as evening falls.

In **Bedtime Rhymes** we start with the crow calling children to bed and move through a promise of Nanny Button-Cap, Willie Winkie, owls, a coach and horses, Brahms lullaby and a final lunar blessing.

In both books, every rhyme is graced by a beautifully hand crafted fabric collage illustration in which clever use is made of sequins, buttons, trimmings and other items one might find in a sewing box. These two lovely books are perfect for babies. There is so much for sheer enjoyment and alongside, enormous potential for visual and verbal development. In addition they can be used and enjoyed by children in early years settings who can begin to pick out the words in favourite familiar rhymes. **JB**

Monty and Milli and the Totally Amazing Magic Trick

★★★

Tracey Corderoy, ill. Tim Warnes, Little Tiger Press, 32pp, 978 1 84895 306 2, £10.99 hbk

It's a case of magical messing mouse style in this tale of sibling rivalry. Monty is at the end of his tether; his little sister Milli does everything he does. So, when he receives a big box of magic tricks, she wants to be in on the action too. Monty knows that helpers can aid the cause of magic but interference is something else and inevitably, Milli's interventions become just too much. Some hastily shouted words make his irritating assistant vanish leaving Monty to practice his tricks alone. Teatime comes and with it the realisation that Milli is still missing. Could she really have been turned into a warty toad? All ends harmoniously and what's more, there's a nocturnal magical surprise.

In the hardback format, this is perhaps a book to borrow rather than buy, but if the budget allows, I would certainly consider buying it for an early years collection. There is plenty to think about and discuss both about the words and the lively, amusing illustrations that add much to what we are told. Older brothers and sisters will appreciate Monty's sentiments especially his feelings of frustration. **JB**

The Buttons Family: Going to the Doctor

978 1 4063 2857 8

The Buttons Family: New Shoes

978 1 4063 2855 4

The Buttons Family: Staying with Gran

978 1 4063 2860 8

★★★

Vivian French, ill. Sue Heap, Walker, 32pp, £4.99 each pbk

These warm and reassuring stories are

part of 'The Buttons Family' series but each title will happily stand alone. The stories are built around Cheryl, Charlie and Baby Lou, three children whose problem situations are common to many a young family.

From first visits to the doctor to buying new shoes to a first night away from home, the children's worries are well captured and reassuringly resolved. Each title includes a page of stickers and the illustrations are cheerful and colourful throughout. **GB**

My Friend Nigel

★★★★★

Jo Hodgkinson, Andersen Press, 32pp, 978 1 8493 9404 8, £10.99 hbk

Billy is the son of less than competent magician parents. When he discovers a small snail in their store of spell accoutrements he determines to save it from becoming an ingredient in a magical mixture. Nigel – for so Billy names his new pet – becomes his playmate much to his parents' amusement. Their efforts to divert his allegiance to more worthy creatures – a whale, a tiger or even a dancing bee – have terrible consequences. Feeling inferior, Nigel packs his skateboard and decides to go (leaving behind a note and a silvery trail). If that isn't bad enough, Dad's spelling ineptitude causes the other animals to set off a chain of disasters. But, a true friend can be relied on even in troubled times. All ends happily with Mum and Dad reformed characters, Nigel a hero and Billy delighted at the return of his wonderful friend.

The author/artist's exuberant illustrations perfectly complement the pacey rhyming text. Her quirky characters, both human and animal, are a delight and the riotous scenes are packed with amusing details and visual jokes. There is excitement at every turn of the page. **JB**

Keith the Cat with the Magic Hat

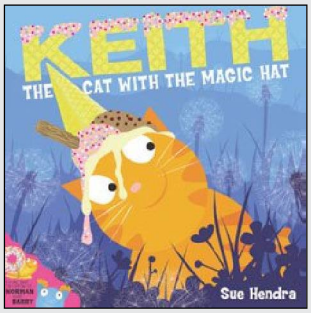
★★★★

Sue Hendra, Simon & Schuster, 32pp, 978 0 8570 7444 7, £5.99 pbk

Sue Hendra has an unerring ability to connect with the imagination and humour of a three-year-old. Not easy!

When a potentially humiliating accident with an ice cream occurs, Keith the Cat turns it to his advantage. He tells everyone the melting cornet on his head is a magic hat. The other cats don't believe him until a seemingly magical trick occurs when an invisible team of ants move Keith's chocolate 'wand', followed by a family of rabbits who pop up from nowhere. It's all fun and excitement with a very pleasing resolution. But what's especially good about this book is the way Hendra manages to convey Keith's feelings in the vernacular of the very young. Witness the moment Keith's friends laugh at the ice cream on his head making him feel just 'a little bit shy and a little bit silly'.

The illustrations are bold, crisp and simple in captivating colours. Keith's a real winner (despite the fact that the editors allowed the word 'fun' to be used as an adjective – a pet hate of this reviewer). **JNH**



5 – 8 Infant/Junior

July Guest Reviewer: Margaret Rustin

Margaret Rustin is a child psychotherapist at the Tavistock Clinic, London, and the author and of articles for ***Books for Keeps*** *on the works of Hans Christian Andersen, Philip Pullman and Jacqueline Wilson and (with Michael Rustin) of* ***Narratives of Love and Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Fiction*** *(Karnac Books).*

The Scar

★★★★

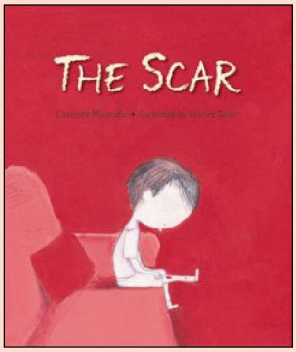
Charlotte Moundlic, ill. Olivier Tallec, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 3595 8, £11.99 hbk

A little boy's mother dies; this book, written in the first person, recounts how he feels. Mother, he realises, said goodbye to him the day before she died, and he is old enough to understand that death is final. Living through the first days of 'no mother there' is what he records. His loss is his own; 'For me, she died this morning' the author writes, because it is waking to the absence of mother that is his experience of death. He is angry, with mother for leaving him and with father for not being her, burdened by the idea of having to look after father and even grandma, too, when she arrives. He clings desperately to the physicality of mother – her smell, the sound of her voice – and tries to lock them inside himself. Gradually, he begins to be aware of the mother inside him as a source of comfort he will not lose, and grandma's understanding of this potential enables him to cry. Memories turn out to have the power to sustain rather than torment.

The scar on his knee from a fall is the metaphor for a heart which is marked but also able to be healed.

The red, black and white palate of the illustrations captures the stark internal world of the bereaved child and his quirky voice would enable a child reader to get close but feel safe in the story of a loss which can be survived.

A book to be recommended as much to adults facing a child's grief as to the child himself. **MR**



Grandma Bendy

★★★

Izy Penguin, Maverick Arts Publishing, 32pp, 978 1 8488 6077 3, £6.99 pbk

This is a cautionary tale about Grandma Bendy, a very unusual lady who uses her astonishing bendiness to burgle houses – until she gets a taste of her own medicine. After a spell in prison she comes out determined not to use her skills again but then a neighbour locked out of her house needs help... After that, Grandma uses her chewing gum arms to help people in an amusing variety of ways. This naughty story is decorated with quirky, original drawings in a fast and funny comic strip style. **JNH**

Thawing Frozen Frogs

★★★★

Brian Patten, ill. Chris Riddell, Frances Lincoln, 112 pp, 978 1 8478 0269 9, £5.99 pbk

This is a welcome reissue of a poetry collection first published over 20 years ago. It includes a range of comic and serious verse that will appeal to a wide age range. The poems are well complemented by illustrations from Chris Riddell. This is an enjoyable collection full of wit and inventiveness which will be enjoyed by a new audience of young readers. **DF**

Mr Leon's Paris

★★★★

Stéphane-Yves Barroux, trans. Sarah Ardizzone, Phoenix Yard Books, 32pp, 978 1 9079 1208 5, 32 pp, £6.99 pbk

First published in France in 2011 under the title **Le Paris de Leon**, this highly original book takes us on an exhilarating ride across the streets of Paris in Mr Leon's taxi. His passengers include all sorts of intriguing people whose names are often linked with the places they are collected from or destined for. This is the source of much verbal entertainment: for example Jeanette the hairdresser goes to Scissor Row and Captain Scott is picked up from Englishman's Street. That the humour is retained is down to the skill of the translator, of course. The illustrations have a surrealist flavour: we have people with elongated bodies and tiny heads and splodges of colour sometimes eccentrically placed. Features in the urban landscapes are fascinatingly detailed: buildings have hundreds of windows, jaunty statues and tiny chimney pots.

After thirty years of driving his taxi Mr Leon wants to move on and to visit some of the places after which the streets of Paris he has traversed so often are named. Children will love spotting them in the splendid picture map of Paris on the endpage – drawn specially for this edition of the book. In short, this is a sophisticated and wonderfully amusing creation which will appeal to people of different ages. **MM**

The Bug Next Door

★★★★

Beatrice Alemagna, Phaidon, 40pp, 978 0 7148 6356 6, £6.95 hbk

Virtually a household name in many countries on mainland Europe and also in the Far East, it is something of a mystery why the wonderful Beatrice Alemagna is published in the English language only through her 'Bugs' books. So three cheers for Phaidon and let's hope they precede the publication in English of Alemagna's more typical work, for example the beautifully lyrical (and hugely successful) **Un Lion à Paris** or her recent **La Gigantesque Petite Chose** (both published by Autrement).

The Bug Next Door follows **Bugs in a Blanket** and **Bugs in the Garden** and is

5 – 8 **Infant/Junior** continued

perhaps even more charming than its predecessors. Alemagna's unlikely subject matter is expressed visually through the equally unlikely but highly successful medium of embroidery. Ever inventive in her approach to materials and story telling, the artist manages to create a totally believable world of little characters, each one with a distinctly identifiable personality expressed through a richly textured yet controlled variety of felts, hessians and assorted ephemera. **The Bug Next Door** explores friendship, gender and attraction in a beautifully understated, very human way. Let us hope that the 'Bugs' books open the door for more of Alemagna's work to get past the marketing departments of our major publishing houses. **MS**

Lucky

★★★★

Roger McGough, Frances Lincoln, 96 pp, 978-1847803214, £5.99 pbk

It is almost 20 years since this sparkling collection full of wit and wisdom and riddles first appeared. Reissued with some new poems to enjoy, the pleasure is, as ever, in the wordplay and use of language. Plenty to read aloud and enjoy. **DF**

The Elephant's Friend and other Tales from Ancient India

★★★★

Marcia Williams, Walker, 40pp, 978 1 4063 3523 1, £12.99 hbk

A new publication from Marcia Williams is always a delight. She has a gift of making stories, whether from history or myths from different cultures, accessible and lively, both with her words and images. Although the publisher advises **The Elephant's Friend** is for children of 7+, younger readers of 5+ would also enjoy the bright illustrations and tales which are simpler than those in some of Williams' other books. The stories in **The Elephant's Friend** are moral tales, advocating the virtues of wisdom over strength or of not taking advantage of those who have befriended you; sometimes they are cautionary, pointing out the dangers of trusting a tiger however old and scrawny he might be. Williams' graphic novel style interspersed with full-and double-page spreads, provides plenty to attract the gaze, and here she has adopted the traditional bright colours of India in another fine production. **VC**

8 – 10 **Junior/Middle**

Editor's Choice

Azzi In Between

★★★★★

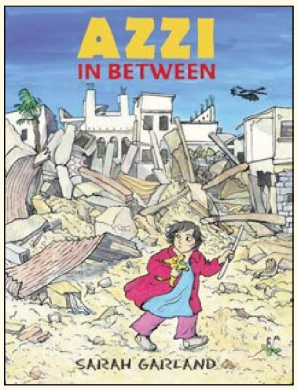
Sarah Garland, Frances Lincoln, 40pp, 978 1 84780 261 3, £12.99 hbk

'There was a country at war, and that is where this story begins. It is the story of Azzi.' Thus begins this picture book graphic novel which immediately captures the reader's attention with a framed illustration in blacks and greys depicting bombs dropping onto a ruined city alongside a brightly coloured picture of Azzi, cuddling her teddy bear in the adjacent frame. The plume of grey smoke arising from the ruins is, however, drifting across the corner of Azzi's frame and indeed it is not long before her family have to flee for their lives, leaving Azzi's grandmother behind.

After many adventures the family arrive in new country (perhaps New Zealand or Australia) where they face hardships of a different kind. Will they be allowed to stay? Will father and mother be allowed to work? Azzi yearns for her Grandma but meanwhile she must settle into her new school and learn to speak English. How relieved the reader feels that she is welcomed and helped! And eventually Grandma also manages to escape and join her family.

Sarah Garland weaves other refugee stories (Grandma's and that of Sabeen, the school helper) into the narrative so that young readers can understand more how war and persecution displace people. This is a story full of powerful emotions about fear, separation and loss but it is also a story about hope and new beginnings. Azzi's father had brought a bag of beans with him to plant in their new country but the family have no garden. Eventually Azzi plants some of the beans as part of a class gardening project – and of course they grow well. Garland's love of gardening was evident in her one of previous picture books, **Eddie's Garden** and in these garden scenes she again engages her readers in this wonderful creativity.

Visually this picture book is a tour de force. Garland's expressive line quivers with tension and her subtle use of dark colours and shadow conveys the moments of fear and drama as the family escapes. The movement of the narrative is punctuated by her skilful use of cartoon strips with fast sequences of small frames followed by larger ones that help to convey moments of exhaustion, depression and despair as the family struggle to find their feet in a new country. And yet this is not a sad book – it is also full of warmth and love both within Azzi's family and from those who help them. It could also be read to younger children. **RS**



A Treasury of Welsh Heroes

★★★★

Based on an original book in Welsh by Tudur Dylan Jones, ill. Brett Breckon, Pont Books, 112pp, 978 1 8485 1474 4, £9.99 pbk

In this substantial and beautifully produced book, we meet ten Welsh men and women who have figured importantly in Welsh history and legend. From St David, the patron saint of Wales, to Twm Siôn Cati, the Welsh Robin Hood, from Hywel Dda, the law-maker, to Gwenllian, the brave defender of her husband's kingdom, to Owain Glynd r, the self-declared Prince of Wales, the exploits of each figure is told in true fireside, bard-like manner. Some of the stories are first person narratives, others are told by friends, and two of them are related through poems. Legend is blended with fact giving the stories something of the fairy tale element.

Each page is decorated, and Brett Breckon's ample illustrations are full of the colour, liveliness, beauty and – sometimes – fierce tragedy of the tales told. The stories are recounted very much from the Welsh point of view (the English don't come out very well in these tales) but when it is necessary to admit defeat, it is admitted, though somewhat grudgingly.

This is a book that will decorate libraries both at home and at school, and it will be of real use in showing children everywhere the richness and complexity of Welsh history and legend. **ES**

Bill Badger and the 'Wandering Wind'

★★

B.B., Jane Nissen Books, 128pp, 978 1 9032 5241 3, £6.99 pbk

Bill Badger and the 'Wandering Wind' is the re-publication of one of a series of anthropomorphic books written in the 1950s by B.B., a pseudonym for the author and illustrator Denys Watkins-Pitchford.

This book narrates how Bill, bored with his lonely bachelor existence, restores a canal boat in intricate detail with his friend Matty McVole and then sails a cargo of conkers along the canal. But trouble waits around the corner, as Bill is also taking Matty's gold sovereigns to the bank. In a swashbuckling adventure, Big Ginger and his band of fierce robber cats seize the boat, take Bill and his new hedgehog friend Izzybizzy captive, and steal the gold. When they are defeated, Bill and Izzybizzy become heroes, setting up a canal transport business with their reward money.

The language of the book is very rich in alliteration, simile and metaphor, but I was left wondering how accessible the comparisons would be to a contemporary reader. The book is rooted in a bygone age when potting sheds smelt of onions, ginger beer came in stone jars and 'fallow deer browsed under the spreading boughs' of the golden trees. Much of the language is archaic (for example, would today's readers know what luncheon is?) and the pace of the narrative, where the day lingers gently over fishing conversations, is slow by modern standards.

That said, the story encompasses the universal themes of good overcoming evil, friendship and the dangers of the wide world beyond the safety of home. As such, it will hold appeal to those who enjoy anthropomorphic adventure stories. **GR**

The Abominables

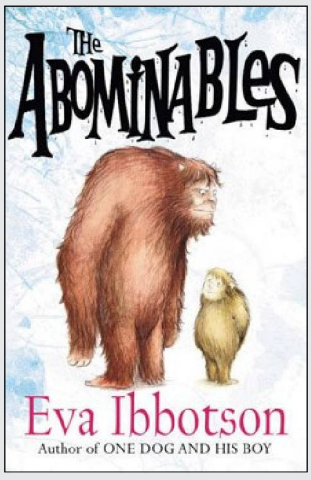
★★★★★

Eva Ibbotson, ill. Sharon Rentta, Marion Lloyd Books, 160pp, 978 1 4071 3297 6, £10.99 hbk

While asleep in her tent high in the Tibetan mountains, Agatha, daughter of the Earl of Farley, is kidnapped by a yeti. On awakening, she finds herself in a secret valley, a paradise of happiness and colour, her huge and hairy kidnaper hovering over her. He explains himself, introduces her to his motherless children and pleads with her to be their governess. Agatha is so taken by the yetis' gentleness and wide open smiles that she readily agrees to teach them

the art of speaking, storytelling and, especially, Good Manners. Together, they live a carefree life until the day that that one of the children leaves a trail of footprints in the snow, so betraying their existence to all sorts of folk — journalists and tourists, but also hunters and evil-doers — interested in abominable snowmen. But there is one small boy, Con, who, worried for their safety, sets out to warn the creatures. He is persuaded by Agatha to lead the yetis to safety – to her ancestral home in faraway England. With Con in charge, his sister and a sympathetic driver, the yetis escape in a lorry and journey across countries and seas, encountering adventures and pitfalls along the way. In all their experiences —humorous, heroic or dangerous —the yetis' inherent goodness and respect for life shine through.

The novel, published posthumously, overflows with a humour that infuses the writing style as much as the plot development and characterisation. As with all her books, Ibbotson effortlessly touches upon large themes of friendship and courage, the essential goodness of animals versus human cruelty. Characters are sharply drawn, the 'baddies' thwarted or transformed and the main protagonists, largely made up of yetis and children, achieving their goal through kindness, empathy, solidarity – and even organised protest. Yet for all that there is to think about and admire in this book, its clarity of ideas and deeply embedded humour, its belief in justice and morality, it is also a hugely rewarding page-turning adventure. Sharon Rentta's softly expressive illustrations are once again the perfect complement to this heart-warming story. **AF**



Shrinking Violet

★★★★

Lou Kuenzler, Scholastic, 224pp, 978 1 4071 3004 0, £5.99 pbk

Shrinking is a familiar occurrence in children's literature – both Mrs Pepperpot and Treehorn bear witness to this. Now we have Violet. She is about to experience what she tells us will be the Biggest and Best Day of her life; a ride on the Plunger. But there is a height restriction. Violet will just qualify. Then she shrinks. However, the ability to become very small is not always a disadvantage, as Violet discovers.

Using first person narrative, a breathless style, contemporary speech, a variety of fonts and font sizes, Kuenzler catapults the reader through Violet's experiences at speed. If characterisation is light, there is plenty of humour and a real adventure to keep the pages turning. Though Violet may be a Shrinker, the problem she has to solve has the merit of credibility – a local theft. Kuenzler also makes sure that there is an explanation for Violet's predicament and a limitation. Light hearted and lively in approach, this is more substantial than many offerings aimed at top KS1 and early KS2. Violet joins company with Pippi Longstocking, Esme and Clementine and can be recommended to young readers of 7+ looking to develop their reading stamina. **FH**

Fizzlebert Stump: The Boy Who Ran Away From the Circus and Joined the Library

★★★

A.F. Harrold, ill. Sarah Horne, Bloomsbury, 256pp, 978 1 4088 3003 1, £5.99 pbk

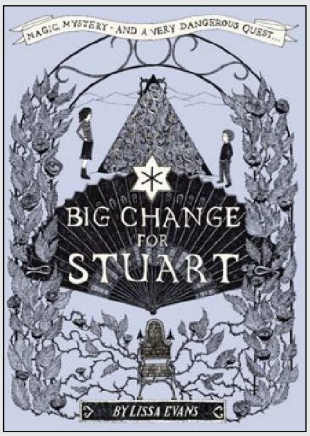
A.F. Harrold is a performance poet and **Fizzlebert Stump** is, I think, his first novel. Fizzlebert is our hero's name ('most often he was just called Fizz'), and Mr Harrold likes a good rib-tickling name. His baddies are the elderly Mr and Mrs Stinkthrottle, Fizz meets a librarian named Miss Toad, and he works in the circus-ring with a lion tamer called Captain Fox-Dingle. (The lion, on the other hand, is called Charles (Fizz's job is to stick his head into the lion's mouth which is not as tricky as it sounds since Charles has rubber teeth)). Mr Harrold is also fond of brackets, and sometimes brackets inside brackets, since he often turns parenthetically aside from his plot to chat with his reader about this story and storytelling in general. For example, there might be a digression about cliff-hanging chapter endings; an explanation of a longish word; or a conversational 'Let's hope the rest of the story gets more exciting'.

Fizz's mum is a clown and his dad a strongman, both rather preoccupied with their careers. His best friend is Fish, the sea-lion; and since sea-lions have their limitations as best friends, Fizz is lonely because he's the only kid in the circus. Once the story kicks in, it's about a library book falling accidentally into Fizz's hands, what happens when Fizz returns it to the library, how he's kidnapped by the Stinkthrottles and then how he's rescued. So no, it doesn't really get a lot more exciting, to be honest, and young readers do tend to like plenty of pace and incident. But for a performance poet, it may be more a matter of how you tell 'em; and Mr Harrold does tell 'em with plenty of wit and a relish for words which his audience could find infectious. The book needs readers who are not looking for pages crowded with action and excitement, but are happy with an amiable tale where the villains are clearly going to cop it in the end; readers who will enjoy an unusual, comical and engaging one-sided conversation with the author – a conversation which would read very well aloud. **GF**

Big Change for Stuart

★★★★★

Lissa Evans, ill. Temujin Doran, Doubleday, 352pp, 978 0 3856 1828 1, £10.99 hbk



Change for Stuart ended, Lissa Evans' second book about Stuart (10-years-old, but looks younger) continues the adventure. Once again Stuart is embroiled in a quest. He now owns his great-uncle's magic workshop, but he has to prove this; he needs Tiny Horten's Last Will and Testament. However, there are others who want to get their hands on the amazing magic contraptions that are the Horten legacy. Stuart, with his best friend April (and her sisters) finds himself facing real dangers as he follows the clues from one adventure, magical or otherwise, to another.

Full of warmth and humour, Evans has created an exciting adventure that combines action with emotional heart. Stuart struggles with his height, wishing he were taller, while his family, though clearly loving, are distressingly eccentric. Neither situation is ideal for a boy who is a new pupil. Young readers will be able empathise and sympathise while enjoying the action. This is a satisfying read: it combines real life with a touch of magic through lively characterisation, brisk prose and plenty of dialogue, ensuring the young reader will keep turning the pages from the immediacy of the opening to the very satisfying conclusion. It is not often that sequels are as good as the first book (or even better) but **Big Change for Stuart** certainly qualifies. Highly recommended. (Readers who enjoy this novel could then be directed to the stories of E.E. Nesbit.) **FH**

You, Me and Thing: The Legend of the Loch Ness Lilo

★★★★

Karen McCombie, ill. Alex T. Smith, Faber, 144pp, 978 0 5712 7261 7, £4.99 pbk

When neighbours Ruby and Jackson first met, they had little in common. But once they had discovered Thing, the squirrel/troll/fairy inhabiting the trees between their adjoining gardens, they became inseparable friends. Thing performs disruptive and anarchic magic – in this third novel in the series, he becomes fascinated by water and the concept of swimming, a pastime which he has not yet encountered in his limited life.

Thing is often provoked into using his magic when he is anxious. On the first occasion, it happens when he decides to explore the bathroom and packs the room with bubbles from Ruby's bath. On the second occasion, the chaos caused by Thing's attendance at a pool party is predictable – the means of causing the chaos is nevertheless hilarious as he turns a harmless lilo into a Loch Ness Monster. After that, the pool party goes with a crackle, a fizz and spit just like Thing's magic.

The book uses font, layout and images to great effect to create a funny, white-knuckle read for 7 – 9 year olds which lurches from drama to crisis as chapter follows chapter. It is every bit as funny as its two companion novels and thoroughly recommended for anyone who enjoys a little chaos and a lot of laughter. **GR**

The Cupcake Diaries: Emma on Thin Icing

★★★

Coco Simon, Simon & Schuster, 160pp, 978 0 8570 7405 8, £5.99 pbk

Emma on Thin Icing is the third title in 'The Cupcake Diaries' series. This new story focuses on Emma, whose family is struggling with Mum's new work hours. Everybody, including Emma's two older brothers, has to help out. Emma herself juggles increased family responsibilities with friendships, her commitment to the Cupcake Club with its growing business opportunities and her need to earn extra money by dog walking.

Even Emma's honed organisational skills are tested to the limit when she is invited to become a bridesmaid. Knowing that her family cannot afford the dress, she reschedules her life and takes on even more work. There is little time left for just being a teenager. Eventually school work, paid work and domestic needs bring her to the point where she has to ask for help. In doing so, she finds the true value of friendship and family.

This is a contemporary fiction title suitable for 7 to 9 year old girls, although the content is perhaps more suited to a slightly older readership. The characters are realistic, the plot lines are believable, chapters are of a comfortably manageable length and the

8 – 10 **Junior/Middle** continued

narrative has plenty of pace. It should be enjoyed by any girl who loves weddings, pink and, of course, cupcakes. **GR**

Pea's Book of Best Friends

★★★★

Susie Day, Red Fox, 288pp,
978 1 8494 1522 4, £4.99 pbk

Life becomes ever more chaotic for the Llewellyn family when, once again, they are on the move, leaving their tiny flat in the seaside town of Tenby for a large house in London. The move, prompted by single mum Bree's success as a best-selling children's author, triggers a flurry of emotions in her three daughters, Clover, Pea and Tinkerbell. They all enjoy the idea of city life and having their own bedroom but Pea misses her old school friend Dot. She cheers up at the sight of a young person about her age in the adjacent garden and at the prospect of making friends at her new secondary school. But when the next-door neighbour turns hostile and no one at school wants to sit next to her, she realises she has to work hard at finding a new friend.

Susie Day has a real knack for delving deep into family life and transforming painful upheavals into humorous, everyday situations. Her characters are memorable – boisterous, colourful and above all credible. There's the Brazilian au-pair who mixes faulty grammar and slang to comic effect, the couple next door, both women – one a family therapist, the other an academic – and many other vividly depicted characters. And, of course, there's drama queen Clover, mischievous Tinkerbell and warm-hearted Pea from whose point of view the story is told. Incredibly funny and touching, with characters the reader cares about, the book will provide hours of pleasure. **AF**

The Mystery of Wickworth Manor

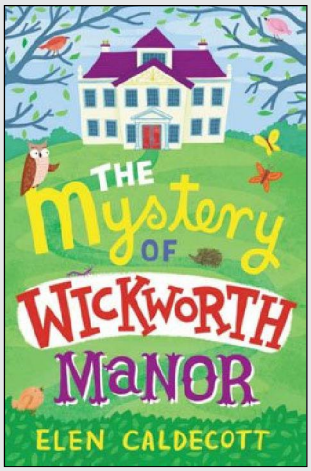
★★★★

Elen Caldecott, Bloomsbury, 208pp,
978 1 4088 2048 3, £5.99 pbk

Elen Caldecott has built up a reputation for attractive, well crafted modern adventures rooted in the real world and aimed at young readers at the top of KS2. Nor does she disappoint in this, her latest offering. Curtis and Paige are lively and recognisable protagonists. They are very different from each other. Paige is impetuous, emotional and bossy while Curtis is quiet and studious – and hiding a secret shame. Their quest to solve the mystery of the portrait in the attic sees them become reluctant allies – and eventually friends.

The adventure moves briskly, well contained within the boundaries of a school residential week organised to ease the transition between Year 6 and the move to secondary school. There are no foreign spies or terrorist attacks. Rather we have a treasure hunt against the background of social history; in this case, the existence of slavery in England in the 18th century. Caldecott employs flashbacks into the past to highlight this theme, linking them to artefacts on show in a museum. This technique is not wholly successful, though clearly the intention is to try to bring the issue to life. It also allows the author to hint at parallels between Curtis and Christopher but ultimately this could be more confusing than illuminating. However, brisk prose, lively dialogue and adult characters who are satisfyingly stereotypical, will ensure young readers are swept on as the narrative unfolds.

An attractive read for young KS3 readers, and accessible to KS2, one aspect might cause concern; Paige, following her mother's footsteps, uses Tarot cards and at one point organises a séance. This is abortive. Throughout, Caldecott makes it clear that this is part of Paige's character and it is cleverly balanced by Curtis who uses research to establish the facts. It is this studious approach that is successful. **FH**



10 – 14 **Middle/Secondary**

Victory over Abu Derya: The Quest for Pearls in the Arabian Gulf

★★

Mohammed Ali, Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation, 48pp,
978 9 9921 4223 3, £9.99 hbk

Pearl fishing in the Arabian Gulf two hundred years ago could be a fascinating subject. It might even make an exciting story for a picture book for older readers. Unfortunately, **Victory over Abu Derya** isn't that book. The idea of the pearl fishers in a battle with the malevolent sea god Abu Derya, who commands storms, plagues of jellyfish and schools of sharks, definitely has potential, but the announcement of the outcome of the battle in the title of the book undermines any dramatic tension that might be generated. Mohammed Ali does not attempt to personify Abu Derya in his illustrations, not even as an inchoate shape in a storm, so that the battle appears to have no real enemy. Nor does he seem to have resolved whether this is a story or an information book. Human interest is introduced in the form of a boy called Rashid whose grandmother has foretold a fruitful fishing season, but although Rashid goes to sea, he disappears from the illustrations for the extent of the fishing expedition. The illustrations are entirely double page spreads that accompany a bland and wordy text, giving a dull and pedestrian feel to the book. Ali is a talented artist and the best of his illustrations are bathed in a strange brown of sunset and boat shadow, showing the pearl fishers emerging exhausted on their ropes at sunset, their baskets around their necks, like sea creatures themselves. Sometimes, however, a cartoon style representation of people introduces a comic element that doesn't fit the subject. Sadly, this handsomely produced but rather unimaginatively conceived book fails to convey either the pearl fisher's extraordinary courage and skill or the dangers that they faced. **CB**

Dark Thread

★★★

Pauline Chandler, Five Leaves Publications, 96pp,
978 1 9078 6956 3, £5.99 pbk

Kate and her mother run a weaving business, but her mother is killed in an accident for which Kate blames herself and this haunts her. After a frightening dream, she has to go back to the studio they shared to clear it. Overcome, she goes back in time to the eighteenth century when the mill was a very different place although still occupied by weavers. Kate lives with a family in abject poverty in a hovel and works in the mill in the worst conditions imaginable. She has foreseen in the dream a dreadful accident and is able to save the child Tabby. Pentecost, the old woman in her dream, enables Kate to envisage her mother telling her how much she loves her and how proud she is of her, helping her to realise that the accident was not her fault and Kate is able to return to life and begin to come to terms with what happened.

This is a dark story, hence the dark thread of the title, beautifully written and structured. The scenes in the mill and the hovel where Kate lives are graphically drawn making this time shift story very credible, but it is Kate's emotional state which draws the reader in, willing her to find the courage to go on living and indeed weaving to carry on her mother's work and faith in her.

Pauline Chandler is becoming a writer to notice. **The Mark of Edain** which I reviewed in 2008 showed great promise and in this short book is beginning to be fulfilled. **JF**

Next

★★★★

Ed. Keith Gray, Andersen, 240pp,
978 1 8493 9300 3, £6.99 pbk

It is two years since publication of **Losing It**, a volume of short stories by different authors on the theme of losing your virginity. Now in this new anthology Keith Gray has challenged another set of fine writers for young people to tackle that other taboo subject, death; or to be more precise, what might happen after death. Gray has succeeded in producing another clever and original collection that perfectly demonstrates the appeal of the short story.

Julie Bertagna opens the collection with a tale of young love seemingly cut tragically short in a car crash but soaring to exhilarating and unexpected new life. Jonathan Stroud's story follows and is as different possible: it is set in a world in which the Free Market has reached its logical conclusion and the uninsured are chased even to the Elysian fields by insurance salesmen after the last buck. It's funny and creepy, but with a central message that kindness conquers all. Philip Ardagh is next and envisions a heaven filled not with a celestial host but with the Muppets: he manages to slip a sharp tug at the heartstrings into the farce and it was this story that made me cry.

Both Gillian Philip and Malorie Blackman's stories have teenagers in the afterlife looking back at acts of cruelty, and shocking violence in Philip's case. In their very different ways, they each explore the redeeming and liberating power of forgiveness.

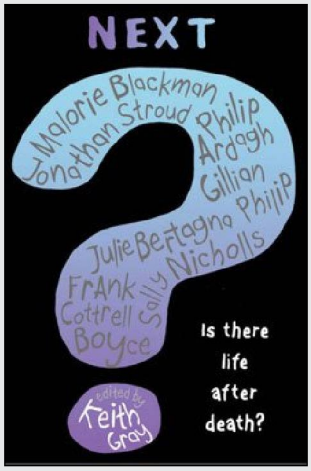
Sally Nicholl's powerful story is the only one in the collection to deal explicitly with religious faith: a girl is struggling to come to terms with her father's suicide, and to reconcile it with their Catholic beliefs. It's lucid, bold and sensitively done.

Frank Cottrell Boyce imagines the afterlife on Facebook, which makes perfect sense if you think about it, and uses it to explore memory and the physical sensations of experience. It's dazzling.

Keith Gray himself concludes the collection with a warm, human story about a group of friends remembering a dead friend. Again, it's filled with a strong sense of the physical and real, while demonstrating that what remains of us is love.

In the end the stories all seem to say that it is not so much what happens

Next that matters, as what happened before: how we live now will somehow determine what happens to us in any afterlife. It's testament to the skill of the authors, and Gray's ability as editor, that this excellent collection provokes, reassures and above all surprises. **AR**



The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind

★★★

Meg Medina, Walker Books, 256pp, 978 1 4063 4194 2, £6.99 pbk

With its elements of magical realism this novel is somewhat reminiscent of the work of Isabel Allende. The heroine Sonia Ocampo is believed to have special powers because she was born during a terrible storm that ravaged the mountain community of Tres Montes. When the people survived, they put this miracle down to the tiny baby that was born that night. As she has grown up the villagers come to Sonia for help with their problems, hopes and wishes, pinning gold symbols to her shawl which they believe will help their cause. This situation changes when a young man, who has gone missing from the village, is found murdered despite the usual intervention from Sonia. Sonia begins to feel that her life has been a sham and she is desperate to leave the stifling situation at home and the limitations of her life there.

Medina evokes this mountain village with all its folklore and superstition alongside some gritty realism of life in a small enclosed neighbourhood; the reader can empathise with Sonia's dreams of a different life with no special role to play. With help from her aunt she moves to the city to work as a servant in a large house as an ordinary girl. But young men are going missing from Tres Montes and when she discovers that her much-loved brother Rafael is one of them she is forced to confront family ghosts and use all her real inner strength to find him and discover a way to bring him home.

This story is a charming mixture of a coming of age story and a love story mixed with a dose of magical realism and adventure. **CP**

Earthfall

★★★★

Mark Walden, Bloomsbury, 288pp, 978 1 4088 1566 3, £6.99 pbk

The Aliens have landed, and young Sam Riley is thrown onto his own resources to resist enslavement or death. He goes from being a boy teased at school about his weight to a lean and resourceful survivor, living in the sewers and scavenging among the ruins of London for food and medical supplies. Before long, he joins a gang of young guerillas who, like him, seem able to resist the mind-control which the Aliens have used to turn most of the population into zombified labour.

This book, the first of a series, begins with 40 pages of action as Sam dodges through rear-exits and hides in alleys, avoiding the floating 'mechanised jelly-fish' with deadly tentacles used by the Aliens to hunt their enemies. We then return to the domestic life he was enjoying 18 months earlier, only for him to see on TV the arrival of a monstrous space-ship over London and to witness his family-members turn into mindless shells. We share some of the disturbing dreams that he experiences before he trains as a guerrilla and rapidly becomes a seasoned resistance-fighter, swapping laconic Americanised dialogue with his youthful comrades (both male and female). In a more reflective vein, he finds it quaint that 'people had once been scared of other human beings' rather than 'something that humanity would be completely defenceless against'. The disintegration of human society is effectively conveyed: Sam smiles at a sign warning that shop-lifters will be prosecuted as he helps himself to necessary supplies from a deserted shop and, later, when the group launches a guerrilla-attack through the abandoned Houses of Parliament, muses that the formerly 'powerful' are now, like most others, reduced to mindless slaves. Eventually, we find out why these young people have retained their reason, and the mysterious underlying connections – leaving Sam to feel 'like a tiny, insignificant part of a conspiracy that was almost too big to comprehend'.

Earthfall is an ingenious combination of several established concepts – an extra-terrestrial invasion, survival in a disintegrated society, dehumanised workers, military comradeship, hair's-breadth action, a suave villain, mad science and a conspiracy spanning the millennia. The aliens themselves, 'neither wholly organic nor mechanical, but instead something in between', provide the basis for an intriguing conceptualisation which becomes fully developed towards the end of this volume. Like the best generic work, the book weaves these strands together to produce an original and enthralling tale which will interest readers of 10+. **RT**

Chime

★★★

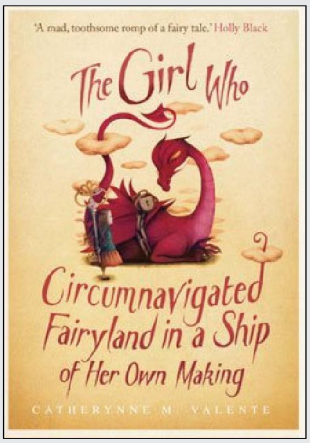
Fran Billingsley, Bloomsbury, 368pp, 978 1 4088 0384 4, £6.99 pbk

Briony is convinced that she is a witch and that she caused the death of her beloved stepmother. She lives on the edge of the marsh in the village of Swampsea with her sister Rose and her father, who is the vicar. Briony can see the 'old ones' who influence the life of the marsh. Rose is a strangely disconnected person (in 21st century terms probably within the autistic spectrum) although Briony thinks she must be responsible for Rose's behaviour as well. With the arrival of the young and good looking Eldric, Briony is faced with challenging the 'truth' of her life.

This is a difficult book to describe. It is set in England, probably at the beginning of the 20th century, yet there is a sense of strangeness which takes it out of time and space. The author has created an almost claustrophobic community which still clings to belief in spirits and our link to the natural world. Briony is someone we learn to empathise with and we want her to escape from the lies told by her stepmother. The narrative grows on the reader as you are absorbed into the lives of the characters. A story that makes you think about how we change the world we live in and the effects on people who live to a different rhythm. Well worth persevering with. **MP**

The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of her Own Making

Catherynne M. Valente, Corsair, 336pp, 978 1 7803 3833 0, £9.99 pbk



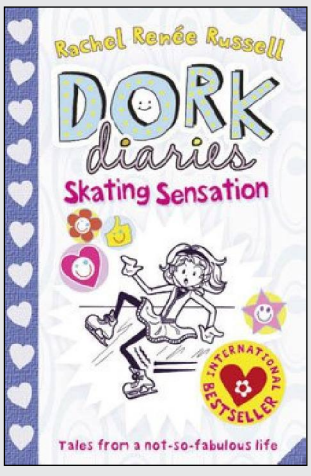
This tale, as you might guess from the antique mode of its title (and its chapter headings), owes its inspiration to the journeys to fairyland, in some shape or other, that had their heyday in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this a girl named September is whisked away from her Omaha home by the Green Wind, pointedly not a tornado, for an initially unspecified adventure in Fairyland, a realm ruled by a wicked Marquess who has replaced a lovely and considerate Queen. As in its literary antecedents, the tale involves quests, tests of courage and resolve, weird and wonderful places and events, and meetings with extraordinary characters, including Death who (pace Bergman) makes clear that chess is not his preferred game. Valente has a rich imagination and has certainly created remarkable characters, like A-Through-L, September's closest companion, who has memorised the first part of an encyclopaedia, and, to all appearances is merely a Wyvern, yet believes his father was a library, hence he is a Wyverary.

The book has attracted considerable enthusiasm since it first appeared online: its instalments being 'crowd funded' by its readers. As an online text, it won the Andre Norton Award in the U.S. in 2009 for 'superior achievement in science fiction and fantasy writing for young adults'; and, since its publication, has made the New York Times bestseller list. However, such homage to past masters is fraught with difficulties that Valente doesn't avoid. There is the temptation to signal over the heads of your younger readers to the adults who may know the earlier books better. There is also the temptation to try to be cleverer and stranger than what has gone before: and, if you are talking about Carroll and Baum, to name just two creators of such classic texts, that's a tall order. Here I don't feel the narrative line is quite strong enough nor the individual incidents and characters intriguing or surprising enough to stand the comparisons that the book invites. Fantasy fiction enthusiasts may disagree. **CB**

Skating Sensation (Dork Diaries)

★★★★

Rachel Renee Russell, Simon & Schuster, 368pp, 978 0 8570 7119 4, £5.99 pbk



The diary genre is often overused, both in literature and as a writing structure in the classroom. This is the fifth volume in the 'Dork' series alone, with a sixth volume and a UK website launch already planned. But to miss a Dork Diary would be to miss an hilarious insight into the angst of female teenage dorkdom.

The diarist Nikki Maxwell (think

10 – 14 **Middle/Secondary** continued

14-year-old Clarice Bean) believes, as most teenagers do, that she is the only dork in the world and she aches to join the cult of cute, cool and popular. But as she helps Brandon, the boy of her dreams, to save his grandmother's animal shelter, she realises that family and friendship are far more important. She also discovers that cute, cool and popular do not always equate with kind, caring and thoughtful.

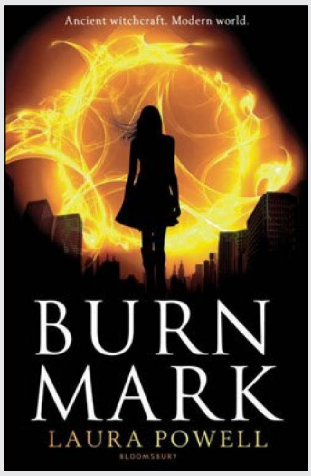
The writing, from the attorney and writer Rachel Renee Russell, is witty, pacy and absolutely contemporary. You need to read it to appreciate exactly why Nikki feels the need to sleep with her sunglasses on or wear her bike helmet to literature classes. Everything is there, from embarrassing parents and pesky little sister to publicly humiliating accidents and a plethora of self-image issues.

This is a realistic, direct, honest and funny picture of life for the modern teenage girl. And perhaps in reading it, Nikki Maxwell's audience will realise that dorkiness isn't exclusive – it's a common feeling when you're 14, your hair is constantly 'greasier than a supersized order of fries' and you regularly want to sue your parents just for existing – a very reassuring read! **GR**

Burn Mark

★★★★

Laura Powell, Bloomsbury, 416pp, 978 1 4088 1522 9, £6.99 pbk



'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live': these words from Exodus chapter twenty-two, infuse Laura Powell's clever and ambitious new fantasy adventure **Burn Mark**.

The book is set in an alternative contemporary England, very similar to our world, except that the obsession with witches is as strong as it was in the fifteenth century when the **Malleus Maleficarum** was required reading for all members of the Inquisition.

But in this version of our world witches are real and have genuine powers. They are required to declare themselves to the government and submit to strict controls, even wearing metal collars or bridles, and are regarded with suspicion by their neighbours, both feared and despised.

In the lower echelons of society, however, witches' special powers are more valued. Here witch families are gangland lords, running criminal operations, and occasionally waging turf wars against other covens. They have their own sets of rules that in their different way are just as restrictive. Powell evokes an atmosphere of noir very well indeed; it's both appealing and frightening, and she captures the glamour and the squalour, the thrill and boredom of a life of crime.

Her central characters are two young people, who both discover their fae powers at the same time: Glory is the daughter of one of the most powerful East End covens, and has been praying all her life for witch powers; Lucas is the privileged son of one of the most powerful of the Inquisitors and the discovery of his witch mark comes as a terrible blow, one that will change the path of his life completely.

Offered the chance to redeem himself by working undercover for the Inquisition Lucas goes into the underworld and with a sceptical Glory uncovers a complex conspiracy against witches. This weaves together political intrigue and acts of terrorism with personal, family betrayals. It's gripping; the parallels with our own society are obvious but never heavy handed. At times the complexity threatens to overwhelm the reader but the strong, attractive characters of Lucas and Glory at the centre pull it all together.

This is a smart, unusual and very effective paranormal adventure. **AR**

Grave Mercy: His Fair Assassin, Book 1

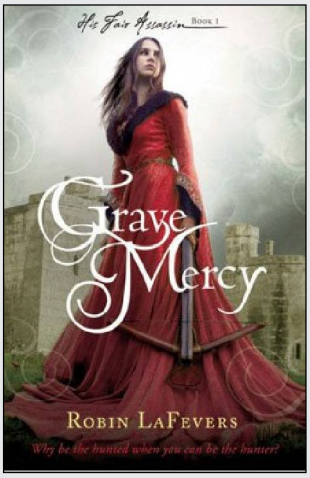
★★★★

Robin LaFevers, Andersen Press, 496pp, 978 1 8493 9413 0, £6.99 pbk

Whilst still in the womb, and against all the odds, Ismae survives her mother's attempts to abort her, though the poison dispensed by the local herbwitch leaves her with a mysterious red stain that runs across her body from the day of her birth. Though ostensibly of humble peasant stock, Ismae is destined for higher things: the stain of her survival marking her out as a girl with special powers, a daughter of Mortain, the ancient god of death. Aged seventeen, she is plucked in the nick of time just as her forced marriage to a brute of a local farmer is about to be consummated, and spirited off to the island Convent of St Mortain. Here is she groomed and steeled to become his handmaiden: a trained and deadly assassin who will kill according to his bidding. She delivers Death's vengeance to the victims of her first two assignments quickly and simply. But then, an infinitely tougher calling: a command to infiltrate the court of the duchess of Brittany, and kill those who dare to spy for the French throne, seeking to invade the Duchy and deprive it of its independence. Before long, Ismae is caught inextricably up in all the cloak and dagger intrigues of the court, and a fight to the death to preserve the Breton nation. And she also finds herself falling for the high-born Gavriel Duval, whose fate – unbeknownst to Ismae - will soon be in her hands.

'Move over Katniss and make way for Ismae: Young, beautiful and trained to kill,' says Andersen, keen to position **Grave Mercy** for **The Hunger Games** market. Yet it is its 15th historical setting which gives this new series its chief appeal as it sweeps the reader up in a page-turning tale of clashing factions, dangerous ambitions and simmering romance, taking in an extensive cast of characters, for which a dramatis personae is helpfully provided at the front. And at the centre of this game of thrones is Ismae, an alluring heroine but one who we are not allowed to forget is also a dab hand with the crossbow, the garrotte, the deadliest of poisons and the sharp blade of the misericorde.

Absorbing as all the court machinations are, I would willingly have heard more about Ismae's training at the convent, in particular the potions and poisons she helps distil (being herself helpfully immune to most of their effects); and the weapons training she undergoes. These elements give the story some of its most intriguing historical components, yet the period of Ismae's education is dispatched rather swiftly, despite providing her with all the vital arts she needs. Still, **Grave Mercy** is an original, and sophisticated beginning to a worthy new YA series. **CS**



Love at Second Sight

★★★★

Cathy Hopkins, Simon & Schuster, 320pp, 978 0 8570 7550 5, £6.99 pbk

Always on the Queen of Teen Award shortlist, Cathy Hopkins is renowned for her easy connection to her readers, engaging stories and charming characters. **Love at Second Sight** shows you exactly why.

Jo is feeling the ache of teen singledom, but a fairground clairvoyant reveals to her that she was a governess in her past life, and while she knew her soulmate then, something happened to keep them apart. Just as Jo is back in the modern world, so is he – and Jo will only know real love in this life if she can find him again. Jo, however, doesn't believe a word of it. While she's got her eye on a few boys, she's not about to go after anyone unless it's on her own terms. But since the death of her dad, she's been seeing a hypnotherapist, and can't help but be intrigued by the idea of past life regression, and isn't entirely against finding The One for her . . .

Such beguilingly easy-reading betrays an innate talent for creating instantly likeable characters, and nailing dialogue and a satisfying story structure. This novel is effortlessly sympathetic to modern teen life, and puts it in context as a layer on top of the histories around us, both personal and social, within our own lifetimes and before. Jo discovers elements of her past life in modern North London: she recognises the church the governess had attended, the house she once lived in and her grave… This isn't spooky territory though; it's bright, breezy and keeps its focus on that fact that we are here now, and need to make the most of it. There are some real laugh-out-loud moments too, especially when Jo and her friends investigate other local people claiming to be clairvoyants.

Hopkins's books are often described as light-hearted as they don't tend to rely on devastatingly traumatic situations for story, but there is also much food for thought and moments of real emotional depth. This one will hit the spot for the thousands of secondary-schoolers who have enough day-to-day worries and problems without reading about terrifying or extreme social situations. Jo's situation is realistic and captivating enough, her friendships and relationships as different and complex as the characters who make them up. Fun, reassuring and beautifully engaging – this book is ideal for inquisitive readers who don't take things at face value. **MH**



Scarlet

★★★★

A. C. Gaughen, Bloomsbury, 304pp, 978 1 4088 1976 0, £6.99 pbk

Will Scarlet a girl? What? But from the first page in this engrossing story, the reader is back with Robin Hood, robbing the rich to give to the poor, fighting the Sheriff of Nottingham and Guy Guisburne, and somehow it could be true. A. C. Gaughen has taken the premise that Will Scarlet was a girl in hiding, disguised as a young man, hiding her past from the 'boys', using her skill with knives and as a thief to aid their work. The story of Robin Hood has been a rich mine for film-makers and storytellers in the recent past, with Kevin Costner's film, and Stephen Lawhead's trilogy, **Hood, Scarlet** and **Tuck**. So few facts are known about Robin of Locksley, that as with King Arthur, imagination can take hold, but then comes the difficulty of making it seem credible and this Gaughen has achieved.

From the moment Scarlet speaks the reader is with her in Tuck's smokey tavern with her close knit band led by Rob, with whom she has a love hate relationship. John Little, burly and with a way with the girls, and Much who lost a hand to the Sheriff form the band with Scar. She has a way of disappearing into the crowds, stealing to give to the needy, and is very handy with knives. Although the 'boys' are aware Scar is a girl they know nothing of her background, but suffice to say (and not to spoil the ending) her real name is Marian and Guy of Guisburne has a reason to hate her.

Scarlet is credible from the first page, as are the other three main characters, moody, troubled Robin, who lost his inheritance to King John's tricks; John who thinks Scarlet is his; and Much a more shadowy figure adding the voice of reason now and then. The plight of the villagers, hounded for their taxes, having their women and crops taken is real and heart-rending. Even when they betray Robin their reasons are clearly understood. The hand to mouth existence, the feeling of always being on the run, never safe but certain of what they have to do, this is a band to which one would wish to belong. A romantic view yes, tempered with violence at times, but one rich in the historical detail of food, dress and the general background. Most importantly the speech is right. No-one knows exactly how people of that time spoke, but somehow this interpretation feels right and adds to the credibility of the plot.

A couple of small points – the author refers to Nottinghamshire when perhaps Nottingham would have been more precise a term, and the cover is of such a beautiful girl that maybe a bit more of the male disguise Scarlet uses so effectively would have been appropriate. But these are niggles which should not take away from the fact that this is a very good story indeed. **JF**

14+ Secondary/Adult

The Seeing

★★★

Diana Hendry, Bodley Head, 176pp, 978 0 3703 3213 0, £10.99 hbk

Set in 1956, this bleak, edgy story is reminiscent of William Trevor's novel **Children of Dynmouth**. Once again the setting is a seaside town after the war within which a dangerously disturbed older child gains dominance over a contemporary unable to escape from the psychological trap they find themselves caught up in. Only Trevor does it all so much better. Diana Hendry is also a good writer, but her plot becomes increasingly hard to believe. Time becomes oddly compressed, with people chased out of the town by the poison pen letters planted on them by Natalie and Lizzie – the two girls in question – in a matter of a few days. Their campaign arises from Natalie's belief that the town is full of left-over Nazis from the last war based in turn on her conviction that evil never stops. Her neglected younger brother Philip is her seer in all this, apparently adept at spotting secret Nazis but in reality simply reacting to the pressure his demented sister is bringing on him. Throw in Natalie's prostitute mother and a visiting artist who has lost relatives in Auschwitz and the result is an omelette far too over-loaded with eggs for its own good. Hendry has previously won the Whitbread Prize with her sprightly novel **Harvey Angell**. This latest, extremely chilling offering may still gain readers, but less plotting would have made it so much better a book. **NT**

Fishtailing

★★★

Wendy Phillips, Coteau Books, 196pp, 978 1 5505 0411 8, £9.56 pbk

This young adult novel in the form of poetry conveys the intensity of adolescent emotions of love, loss and disaffection. The poems of four Canadian high school students, some produced for school work, placed alongside the comments and e-mails of their English teacher and their school counsellor, gradually reveal not only the students' emotional wounds, their hopes and schemes, but also a game of personal manipulation that will end in tragedy. Two of these students, Carl and Tricia, are going through the more mundane forms of teenage turmoil; wondering who they are and how to make their parents understand them. The other two have more disturbing experiences to come to terms with. Immigrant Miguel has seen his parents massacred in a Central American war; and Natalie is the victim of parental neglect and sexual abuse. It is self-harming Natalie who is the catalyst of the tragedy, seeking to cause the kind of chaos to others that she has suffered in her own life. This is a compelling and generally convincing novel, even if, accepting the fiction of four equally competent teenage poets, it is understandably difficult not to hear the voice of the book's author in the poems rather than the voices of her characters. A Canadian publication, this was a Governor General's Literary Award winner there. It is also one of the poetry selections for the White Ravens 2012. **CB**

Wentworth Hall

★

Abby Grahame, Simon & Schuster, 288pp, 978 0 8570 7916 9, £6.99 pbk

In this novel of aristocratic life à la Downton Abbey, there is mention of His Royal Highness King Edward on page 11. It was then that I began to suspect that it may not have been as thoroughly researched as it should have been. The Darlington family have an historic pile and a way of life to maintain but with no money. Help may be at hand in the form of twins who, on the verge of becoming eighteen when they come into a huge fortune, are taken in by the family in the hope that the boy Teddy might marry Maggie, their eldest daughter.

Maggie, however, has had a baby when travelling abroad. It turns out that she is in love with the father of her baby but he happens to be the handsome groom, Michael. He does not know about the baby until the maid Nora points it out to him (the fact that the baby is blond and all the Darlingtons are dark might have been a clue). Therese, the baby's nanny, who does not get up in the night for the baby as that is Lady Darlington's job, is in fact Lord Darlington's illegitimate daughter, and so it goes on. There is a subplot about a gossip column written for a newspaper which is discovered by the son Wesley. He has been in America and decides that the class system is wrong and he can pay court to Therese.

The Americanisms in this book are legion: I could go on and on, but 'school at Oxford' not university, shows how little care has gone into the research and the editing of this inane story. Downton Abbey it is not. I do not understand how such a book could have been published for the British market. **JF**

My Brother Simple

★★★★★

Marie-Aude Murail, trans. Adriana Hunter, Bloomsbury, 288pp, 978 1 4088 1471 0, £6.99 pbk

A novel featuring a young adult male with the mentality of a three-year-old could have been harrowing. But miraculously this French author has written a story that is moving and funny without ever being insensitive. Simple, the adult in question, is being looked after by his younger 17-year-old brother Kleber, who can't bear the idea that his amiably high-maintenance sibling should return to the institution that he so clearly hates. Sub-renting a room in a student flat, the two gradually win round the four others who already live there. Like Dostoevsky's Idiot, Simple has a way of blurting out home truths uncomfortable at the time but later on more appreciated. But he can also be a terrible nuisance, guilelessly stealing or destroying objects that have momentarily taken his attention. Readers suffer with Kleber when such things happen, and it is by no means certain at the end that however fond everyone else has become of Simple that he will be able to live with them indefinitely. The others have their own private agendas too, which means that Simple does not dominate every page. Feeling without becoming sentimental, never playing down the difficulties of coming to an accommodation with extreme learning difficulties, this is a book to cherish. In 1899 the best-selling British novel **The Lunatic at Large** poked fun at the mentally unstable. This present compassionate story is one measure of how far we have come since then. **NT**

A Brighter Fear

★★★

Kerry Drewery, Harper Collins, 320pp, 978 0 0074 4657 5, £6.99 pbk

This tale of the life of Lina, a young middle class Christian Iraqi, takes us from the time of Saddam Hussein, through the Iraqi war, to the withdrawal of allied troops from the troubled country. During the course of the book, Lina loses both her parents. Her mother, a lawyer, disappears during Saddam's regime after refusing to work for the government. Her father, a university professor, dies working as an interpreter for the American army during the occupation. Lina's account of her life knits together all those images and stories so familiar from news reports: the disappearance of political opponents during Saddam's reign; the dreadful loss of civilian life during the war and the collapse of civic life afterwards: the suicide bombings and the kidnappings, the failure of power supplies; intercommunal violence and the rule of the militias. Through all this, Lina struggles to hold on to her dreams of a normal life and a university education, as well as the apparently vain hope of seeing her mother again; at one point sustained only by an unlikely and dangerous romantic attachment to an American soldier. If this account of Lina's life by a British author does sometimes seem to be put together at a distance from news reports (it is perhaps indicative that the account of her parent's courtship takes place in London while they are students) there is nevertheless a toughness and sense of reality here that challenges the reader. The account

of Lina's mother's sufferings in jail, which is interspersed with Lina's story, is truly harrowing, not in gratuitous detail but in placing the reader precisely inside Sacha's experience. It's a book that implicitly and insistently asks a difficult question: how might you survive in circumstances as terrifying and demanding as these? **CB**

Saving June

★★★★★

Hannah Harrington, Harlequin Teen, 336pp, 978 1 8484 5095 0, £6.99 pbk

Sixteen-year-old Harper Scott is angry – about the small Michigan town where she lives ('in a bubble'; 'stuck in the fifties'), her recently divorced parents, her mother's drinking, inane TV programmes and her aunt's religious harangues. Unexpectedly, her older sister, June, 'the gilded child', commits suicide. As we discover, June was never comfortable in her own skin, and had been unable to take her place at Berkeley because the family couldn't afford it. In June's room, Harper finds a postcard marked, 'California, I'm coming home' and a home-recorded CD produced by a friend of June's, Jake Tolan, an obsessive about classic rock-music whose brother sells vintage vinyl records on the other side of town. Jake offers the use of his van, 'Joplin', for a trip to California to sprinkle June's ashes on the Pacific and, together with Harper's extrovert friend, Laney, they set off on the 2,345-mile journey across America.

What follows is largely in the style of the classic American 'road' story, in which the constant drive westwards is accompanied by a voyage of self-discovery. The book is reminiscent of work from the fifties and sixties by writers such as J.D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac, while Jake draws a direct parallel between Harper Scott and Harper Lee. On the way, the young travellers come across various aspects of the counter-culture, including a student-protest in Chicago, a modernist sculpture in the desert (Fridgehenge, 'a comment on consumerism') and a violent punk concert in Texas, before making a detour to visit the site of James Dean's fatal accident. The entire experience is filtered through discussions on classic rock, and Harrington demonstrates her own knowledge of the subject by appending three glossaries of recordings cited or included by implication in the text. But the metaphorical implications never impinge too heavily on Harper's first-person, introspective narrative, which reflects her confusion and anxieties.

Harrington writes about these disaffected young people from the inside, being not much older than them herself. Harper is an engaging and complex character with whom many female readers will empathise. The realism extends to the language used, and there are scenes of teenage drinking and sex - in fact, Laney discovers at one point that she is pregnant, although she then miscarries. It is a tribute to the book's sincerity and integrity that these elements appear neither prurient nor exploitative. However, the presence of themes that might, in a different context, be regarded as 'adult' would best be appreciated by mature readers aged 14 or over. **RT**

The Double Shadow

★★★★★

Sally Gardner, Indigo, 416 pp, 978 1 7806 2036 7, £6.99 pbk

Proust and the madeleine biscuit are explicitly present here, for times remembered are at the core of this novel. There may well be a borrowing from Pip's Satis House humiliation by Estella; and echoes of Eliot's Waste Land – perhaps the falling towers of the Unreal City. Yet though this is a playful, riddling, allusive text, the novel does not tease you to rake through a 'heap of broken images' – there is a pleasure in having merely a sense of an echo here and there, for echoes and half-memories run through the text. Rather, the book asks its reader to set out on a journey with a risk-taker; here, we are in the company of a searching mind, eager to take chances with ideas, with plot, with language itself. There are no concessions. The plot is increasingly non-linear – flashbacks illuminate and alter what we thought we had understood. Towards the end, the narrative voice switches from one character to another, and back to the third person – blink, and you're lost. Able teenage readers will need to enjoy being alert, to welcome the demands being made upon them.

It's tricky to indicate briefly a plot as crowded and complex as this web of a story. Things start just before World War II and finish on V.E. Day. The period is important, for the shadow of the Great War hangs over several of the older characters; the sleazy 1930s pleasures of the empty rich stand in contrast to the lives of working folk; the threat of fascism and the events of the second war – all these are integral to the story. It is in this context that Jewish American millionaire, Arnold Ruben, seeks to protect his daughter Amaryllis from the uncertainties of adulthood. Even stronger, however, is his drive to satisfy his lifelong craving to create a 'memory machine'. Essential to his experiment, his daughter will be placed at the machine's centre, fixed in time, her mind filled with happy memories of her childhood. Ruben's naïve picture of that childhood excludes the drowning of her tipsy, vacuous mother, and the absence of any family warmth. By contrast, working-class Ezra's home is strong and steeped in love, his mother at its heart, caring for her two children and a husband tortured by the ghosts of the Flanders trenches.

Drawn by a glimpse of that homely warmth, Amarylis meets Ezra. They move slowly from uncomprehending antipathy towards understanding and then, after many excitements and twists of the plot, towards maturing love; a process observed by Sally Gardner as delicately and poignantly as you could wish.

The density and surprises of the plot make any summary almost impossible – the above may well read as banal. It won't help if I add that a ten foot long tiger makes regular appearances throughout the novel, occasionally seeming to speak. On a first reading, the narrative sometimes seemed confusing; yet also absorbing, entertaining, puzzling and disturbing. A second reading, which this book virtually demands, revealed how tight the plotting actually is, though a reader must sometimes wait 200 pages for a fragment of plot to become clear. **The Double Shadow** is at once thriller, love story, and an exploration of memory and forgetting ('what is the use in editing the past, if all it does is make the well of forgetfulness more terrifying?') I thought it extraordinary - one of those rare novels published for young readers where we are admitted to a secondary world charged with its writer's exceptional intelligence of both mind and emotion. **GF**

New Talent

Ibarajo Road

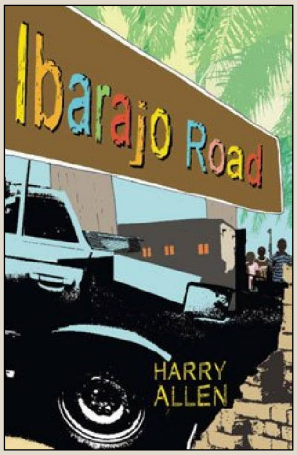
★★★★

Harry Allen, Frances Lincoln, 352pp, 978 1 84780 320 7, £6.99 pbk

Set in the West African city of Ilaju in the 1980s, this coming-of-age tale centres on 17-year-old Charlie, a white English boy who has spent the last year at a privileged international school, taken there each morning by Samson, the chauffeur from whom he is learning pidgin. A shocking event jerks Charlie out of the complacency of this pampered post-colonial life: he witnesses a road accident in which two boys are killed and the driver of offending car set upon and necklaced (burnt to death by having a petrol soaked tyre placed round his neck) by the crowd at the instigation of a charismatic man in a suit. The efforts of another, shabbily dressed man, to diffuse the situation come to nothing. It turns out that the shabby man, Joseph, runs a refuge for orphans where Charlie must volunteer his help as penance following a wild evening at a bar involving prostitutes; the alternative is to be expelled from school.

For Charlie and another school friend, Guppy, also a volunteer, the work of the refuge to which they quickly become committed is an eye-opening experience that reveals the realities of poverty and social breakdown for the most dispossessed people of Sengharia. The mysterious charismatic man reappears and opens a nearby church promising the congregation that he has the power to give the infertile children. Alerted to this traffic in babies and small children, the boys and their friend Yejide who has grown up in the refuge, try to unmask the villain.

This novel is a pacey adventure involving detection and exciting, sometimes unlikely action that keep the reader turning the pages. Its strength, however, lies in its gritty realism and rich sense of time and place. Harry Allen spent his teenage years in Nigeria and he writes convincingly and in a multi-layered way about its complex society including the depiction of characters such as Joseph and Yejide. Meanwhile, faced with difficult choices and moral dilemmas, his central character Charlie grows in stature. The novel ends with the arrival at the refuge of people dying from a new and mysterious illness – the AIDS pandemic has arrived. **RS**



The Blessed (Book 1)

★★★★

Tonya Hurley, Hodder, 432pp, 978 1 4449 0475 8, £9.99 pbk

This intense, visceral novel provides a Goth's-eye view of three teenage girls with close affinities to the three early saints whose names they bear. All are admitted to ER at Perpetual Help Hospital on the same evening. Agnes, the youngest at 16, is locked in a mutually destructive relationship with her mother and has slit her wrists. Cecilia, 18, is a Goth-style singer/guitarist at clubs 'around Brooklyn and the Bowery' who has nearly drowned in a puddle while in a state of 'acute intoxication'. Lucy, also 18, works at being an 'A-list party-girl', a 'celebstitute' with 'fame as an endgame' – she has passed out in the gents' toilet at a fashionable night-spot. While in hospital, the three come into contact with Sebastian, a

boy with 'Byronic good looks and a whiff of tragedy around him', who also has saintly connections. Through his intervention, the girls draw upon their martyred forebears to become female avengers.

Hurley has written a powerful, though rather distended, piece of modern Gothic, depicting a nightmarish city where those in power are evil and corrupt. The book's punk roots are evident in both the fragmented, edgy style and the frequent references to blood, tears, sweat and vomit. Performing in a club, Cecilia is 'the Warrior Queen of her own private Dystopia', 'breathing in the stink of her own sweat mixed with splintered floorboard marinated in spilled beer, saliva, smoke and ash'. Lucy, 'a girl primarily in love with herself', is followed through her social strivings by Jesse, a contemptible but observant publicist who is like a punk version of the character in the 1957 film, **Sweet Smell of Success**. Commandeering a taxi, she comments on the rainy weather: 'Drizzle is such a limp dick'. The taxi-driver prefers to see it as 'God's tears' and, indeed, the drizzle presages an apocalyptic tornado. The girls find themselves taking shelter together in a disused church, where 'debris and dust from above tumble down like vomit'. Beneath the church, led by the ubiquitous Sebastian, they find a chapel-cum-ossuary complete with chandelier fashioned from human bones and stained-glass windows 'depicting horrific scenes of torture and death'. At this stage, the novel turns to full-blown Gothic as Cecilia falls into an iron maiden (there as an instrument of mortification) and Lucy trips on to a mirror, leaving shards of glass embedded in her head.

Religious imagery permeates the book, as holy statues are desecrated and appear to bleed and the characters themselves shed tears of blood and bleed from stigmata-like wounds. However, not everything is so violent: as the gentle Agnes awakes, 'the rising sun… crown(s) her head with a yellow-orange halo of sunshine', an example of the Pre-Raphaelite imagery which recurs occasionally. Next to these extreme experiences, described in great detail, the villain seems slightly mundane; possibly he will be dealt with as the girls take up their mission in the sequel. Although the world depicted in the text is anything but attractive, there is an element of masochism and an easy acceptance of drug-taking which might influence impressionable readers. The book would, therefore, be more suitable for those able to appreciate the literary context in which it appears. **RT**

The Selection

★★★

Keira Cass, HarperCollins, 272pp, 978 0 0074 6669 6, £6.99 pbk

In a future society, people are divided into numbered castes, from the royal Ones, through to the working Fours and troubled Eights. America Singer, a Five and a musician, works hard to help support her family, and her life is made all the better with her intense and forbidden relationship with Six Aspen. The prince of the land, however, must choose his bride from the general populace, and those who want a chance at a better way of life apply for the chance to be part of The Selection. America reluctantly signs up thinking of the money she might get to support her family and friends, but is still shocked to be chosen.

America is whisked off to the palace with thirty-four other girls, who will now enjoy the lifestyle some of them could only have dreamed about, full of sumptuous food, gorgeous gowns and the chance to compete for Prince Maxon's love.

This novel is a light, dystopian fairytale that should appeal to more than just fans of reality TV. The story is more intriguing and compassionate than the premise suggests – and will quickly engage readers who can't deny their hopeless romanticism. While there are no surprises with the plot and characters, it's still enjoyable watching events unfurl. The underpinning social set-up is also interesting, though much felt unresolved – and perhaps is being held back for the sequel. **MH**

Dying To Know You

★★★★★

Aidan Chambers, Bodley Head, 288pp, 978 0 3703 3236 9, £12.99 hbk

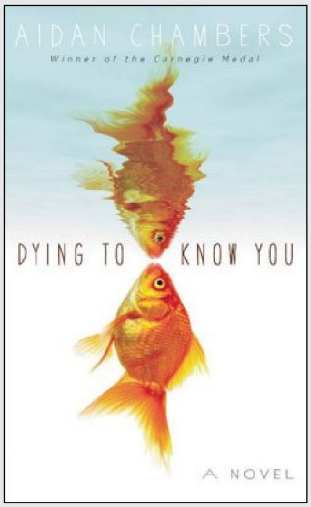
There are plenty of surface similarities between the first person narrator of this novel and Aidan Chambers himself. The unnamed storyteller is a writer of books for teenagers, now well into his seventies. He struggled early on in school, he hated team games, his father was a joiner. The narrator is most comfortable - most himself – alone in his workroom. Chambers shares all of this with him – the information is in the public domain, not least in **BfK** Authorgraph 130, September 2001. There are less factual similarities. Like Chambers, our writer remains fascinated by late adolescents, their searching relationships, their ways of thinking. He is especially drawn to the vital, often painful, way some teenagers explore experience, not least because he still shares this intensity with them.

Best to take this line of thinking no further. The reader needs to be a little wary of this narrator, to my mind. The trigger for the plot is a knock on the door by 18-year-old dyslexic Karl, a plumber. His girlfriend, would-be writer Fiorella, wants Karl to write about himself for her, and as it happens she is also a fan of our narrator's books. So, asks Karl, would he help him out? The author responds, reluctantly at first but then whole-heartedly and, we might well think, unwisely and intrusively. He listens to Karl, then shapes his words and thoughts into emails for Karl to send as if they were Karl's own. On a few occasions, the writer is also not averse to sharing the wisdom of old age uninvited with the young, a practice which is at least doubtful and perhaps arrogant. He is not Mr Chambers. Most significantly, this writer has lost his wife and is still adrift in loss, which underlies every page of the novel. The physical irritants of old age – his sciatica, the frequent need to pee which he prefers to call 'consulting the hedge' - are seen as daily reinforcements of his disabling grief.

As time passes and their friendship develops, it becomes clear that the writer is not alone, for Karl has never escaped the pain of losing his father some six years earlier. Despite misunderstandings and through shared experiences, both slowly discover the seeds of solutions in art. Karl finds what may be a talent as a sculptor. In the final pages, the writer at last returns to his workroom, takes up his 2B pencil, and opens his accustomed 'new refill pad made of recycled paper, with faint narrow ruled lines and four holes in the margin for filing', and begins to write the story he has just told to us.

Young readers may well focus on Karl and Fiorella, appreciating the gradual shifts in a relationship recorded in serious language rather than the brash action and jokey idioms of much YA fiction; but they may also see that need and openness do not disappear with age. My guess is that Chambers enjoyed, even indulged, a wry self mockery throughout the book – maybe some private smiles that the rest of us can never share. That would be characteristic of him – he's always seemed to be attracted to the irony within a memory or an anecdote.

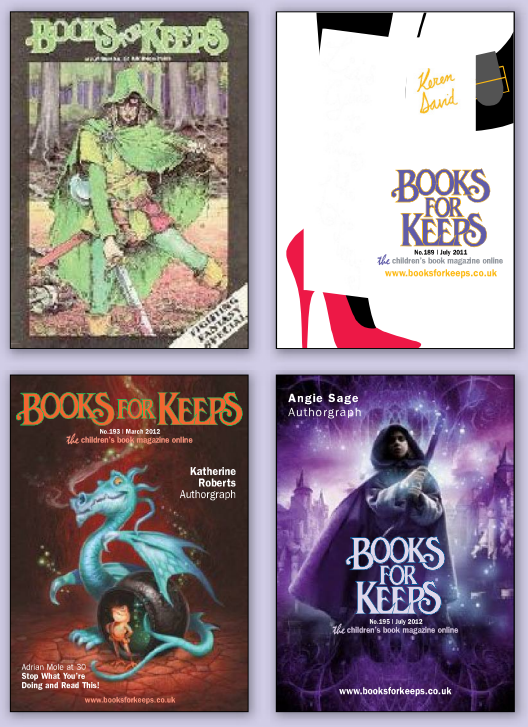
Required reading for Chambers watchers, young or old. **GF**



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Classics in Short

No.94 Brian Alderson

Let's take a stroll past the Plumassiers, the Submarine Engineers and the old Knife Grinder in **HIGH STREET**

What's this then, Mr Backpage Classicist?

High Street? Never heard of it. Is there some backpage barrel-scraping going on here among all the knife-grinding and the selling of feathers for hats?



If there is

then please don't blame **High Street**. Your never having heard of this children's book is hardly the fault of Eric Ravilious who has put on this display of twenty-four shop-fronts and the like for your delectation, or of Jim (later Sir James) Richards who has supplied the descriptions. The two of them produced this small masterpiece for Noel Carrington at Country Life in 1938, but a couple of years later Adolf Hitler dropped a bomb on their printers, the Curwen Press at Plaistow, destroying all Ravilious's lithographic plates, without which further printing of the book became impossible. It became a classic cut off in its prime.

Mind you,

it was by no means the first book to latch on to the idea that children like shopping. Way back in 1805 the bookseller Benjamin Tabart puffed his wares in a story for children called **Visits to the Juvenile Library** which included some very fetching plates of what the shop looked like. A bit later, Mrs Sherwood portrayed a steely-eyed mama taking her vain daughter on **A Journey by Coach through the Streets of London**. 'You may buy what you choose,' says Mama, 'so long as you purchase something from the last shop we visit' – which is, of course, a coffin-makers. (No such ominous threat surrounds Mr Thrave the Undertaker in **High Street**.) And, almost matching **High Street** itself in terms of the wit and variety of its studies in retail therapy is E.V.Lucas and F.D.Bedford's versified picture book, **The Book of Shops** of 1899. The two have at least half a dozen scenes in common, but Ravilious doesn't run to a picture of 'Pa's Bank'.

There are admittedly some oddities

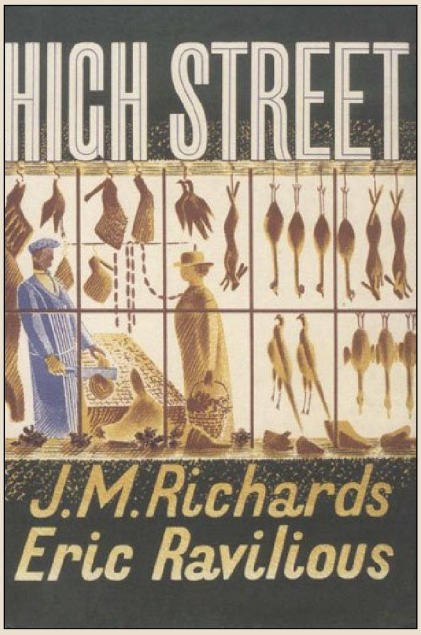
among the traders who inhabit his high street – not just the plumassier and the Submarine Engineers who sell kit for deep-sea divers, but a Coach Builder with Daimlers in the downstairs showroom and a Clerical Outfitter with an array of cassocks and surplices on show. Nevertheless, the choice was made with child readers in mind (the book had originally been conceived as an alphabet book) and the presence of these unexpected emporia alongside the more conventional Butchers and Bakers turns the commercial travelogue into a species of urban exploration.

The loved and the unexpected –

'Fireworks'...'Oyster Bar', 'Model Ships and Railways'...'Second Hand Furniture and Effects' have an attraction in themselves, but it is, of course, their portraiture by the lithographer that is the glory of the street. In 1938 Eric Ravilious (along with his friend Edward Bawden) was emergent as one of the most versatile of a new generation of designers. Draughtsman, painter, muralist, wood engraver, lithographer, he had skills enough to choose from for the commissions that came his way and the variety of work that he undertook was carried through with a bonny mix of grace and levity. The observation and the handling of design and colour in **High Street** turn the shopping trip into a visual adventure – how spooky the Pharmaceutical Chemist under the moon, and – good Lord –isn't that Queen Mary eyeing a rococo wedding-cake in Mr Buszard's cakeshop?

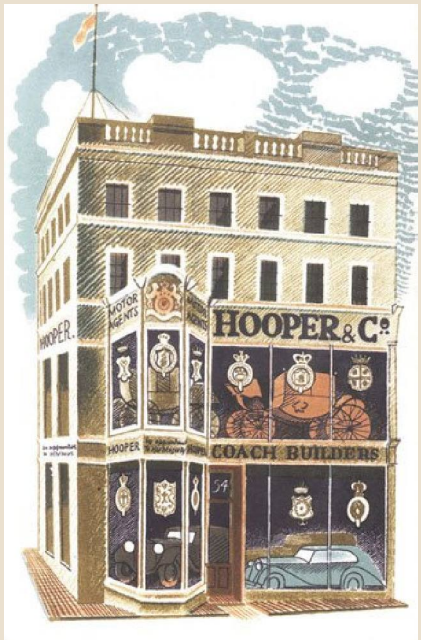
Ravilious's street

was indeed made up of an eclectic bunch of shopkeepers, but in almost every instance their premises were drawn or adapted from reality. (James Russell in a recently published study: **The Story of 'High Street'**, [The Mainstone Press, 2008] has sought out their varied locations and often appends doleful accounts of their flourishing and decay. Two have heroically survived into the present: Wipple's the Clerical Outfitters and the ever-glorious cheesemongers, Paxton & Whitfield of Jermyn Street.) It may seem difficult to present such an heterogeneous array to children, but Jim Richards is helped in the job by the very weirdnesses found among the twenty-four neighbours. He is informative without being mechanical or predictable and for readers who read there is a dry, offbeat humour under the surface.



His reticence

sets off the gaiety of Ravilious's lithographs which have been admirably reproduced by the V&A's Chinese printers, and it's easy to think that this successful collaboration between artist and author helped trigger Noel Carrington's ideas for the first Puffin Picture Books that would arrive in 1940. Indeed, Ravilious was to be a Puffin illustrator for a volume on 'Downland Man', but the War, having destroyed his artwork, destroyed him too, he being lost somewhere over the North Atlantic while working as an Official War Artist.



High Street by J M Richards, ill. Eric Ravilious (978-1851776894) is published by V & A Publishing at £20 hbk.

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