BOOKS FOR KEEPS

No. 274 *the* children's book magazine online September 2025

Authorgraph interview **James Mayhew**

Windows into Illustration **Emma Farrarons**

Turn children into poets for **National Poetry Day**



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COVER STORY

This issue's cover illustration is from **Sin Bin Island** by **Doug Naylor**, cover illustration by **Khadijah Khatib.** Thanks to **David Fickling Books** for their help with this cover.

Editorial 274

New term, autumn is definitely making its presence felt, and there's a torrent of Christmas books arriving at the **BfK** headquarters, but let's instead look ahead to March, 2026 and next year's **World Book Day**.

The 15 £1/€1.50 books that children will be able to choose for free in exchange for their £1/€1.50 token have been revealed and this year, children were involved in selecting the titles, which explains why there are so some familiar names in the selection.

Beginner readers can enjoy the 'heartwarming adventure' of Peppa Pig in **One Big Family**, while older children can take flight in **Skandar and the Secret Element** by bestselling author A.F. Steadman, and there's a treat for comic enthusiasts, who get to enjoy **Bunny vs Monkey: Total Chaos!** by Jamie Smart. Also represented are Sheena Dempsey with **Pablo and Splash: The Castle Quest** and Serena Patel with **Pia's Pet Club: Iguana Escape**, while the presence of **Unicorn Academy: My Secret Unicorn Diary** and **Unbelievable Football: The Most Amazing World Cup Stories You Never Knew** written by Matt Oldfield, illustrated by Ollie Mann, will please lots of young readers.

Fiona Hickley, Interim CEO of **World Book Day** explains, 'Our research shows children avoid reading when pressured, so at **World Book Da**y we seek to appeal to children with our wonderful selection of £1/€1.50 books that are meticulously chosen to offer exciting options across popular interests and reading levels. Our aim is to ensure every child can discover their own kind of fun in the books.' With the well-reported fact that only 1 in 3 children say they enjoy reading, and in a new Year of Reading, World Book Day feels more vital than ever.

Children's reading and AI: new research

New research from the **National Literacy Trust** provides insight into how young people and teachers across the UK are using generative AI to support literacy and what it means for the future of reading and writing in the digital age.

Building on findings first published in 2024, the reports draws on responses from more than 60,000 young people aged 13 to 18 and nearly 3,000 teachers as part of the National Literacy Trust's Annual Literacy Survey, 2025. It shows that young people's use of generative AI has become firmly established, with regular, weekly use rising from 1 in 3 (31.1%) in 2024 to almost 1 in 2 (45.6%). Older teens (16–18) were more frequent users than their younger peers.

Alongside using generative AI to ask questions, help with homework, or for entertainment, young people are also using these tools to enhance their literacy activities, including:

- Improving vocabulary (39.5%)
- Checking grammar and spelling (35.2%)
- Summarising a text (33.0%)
- Getting feedback on writing (20.7%)
- Understanding ideas in a text (19.6%)

Young people who enjoy reading and writing are more critical, creative, and active when engaging with generative AI, with significantly more young people who enjoy reading and writing checking if AI content is wrong (1 in 2 vs 2 in 5), and a quarter (26.6%) of those who enjoyed writing using it to help brainstorm ideas and help with story elements, like characters, plot or dialogue [4].

With 1 in 4 (25.1%) young people admitting to 'just copying' AI outputs, a concerning increase from 1 in 5 in 2024, it is promising to see that enjoyment of reading and writing – and the enhanced literacy skills that come with it – may play a key role in empowering young people to use AI more effectively and responsibly as it becomes a bigger part of everyday life.

While 2 in 3 (65.5%) of young people agreed it's still important to learn how to write even when we have AI, the growing tendency to rely on AI rather than think critically highlights the importance of embedding media literacy and reflective AI use into the curriculum. 8.2% of young people surveyed disagreed, and the remaining 26.3% either didn't know or neither agreed nor disagreed.

Find out more, including how teachers are using AI to support writing and reading.

Whose History? Challenging historical narratives through writing for children and young people.

What stories do we tell children about the past? From whose point of view are these stories told? Whose lives are considered to be important and are retrievable from the records?

This year's **IBBY UK** conference (8 November, Open Ealing Arts Centre, London W5 2TD) will explore and interrogate these questions.

Speakers so far include Sandra Agard, Chris Haughton, Catherine Johnson, Bali Rai, Gita Ralleigh, Michael Rosen, and J.T. Williams.

Find out more about this year's conference and get tickets.

Special offer for readers of BfK

Not been to an **IBBY UK** conference before and keen to attend? **Books for Keeps** is offering one free place to someone in that situation.

If this is you, write to us enquiries@booksforkeeps.co.uk and explain in 150 words or less, why you would like to attend the conference and how it would benefit you.

The closing date is 17 October. The winning applicant will be announced on 22 October.

Terms and conditions: Books for Keeps Offer Free Place at IBBY UK Conference

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Animal characters: check your bias

Melanie Walsh of University of Washington shares her investigations into the subtle gender imbalance often at play in picture books featuring animal characters.

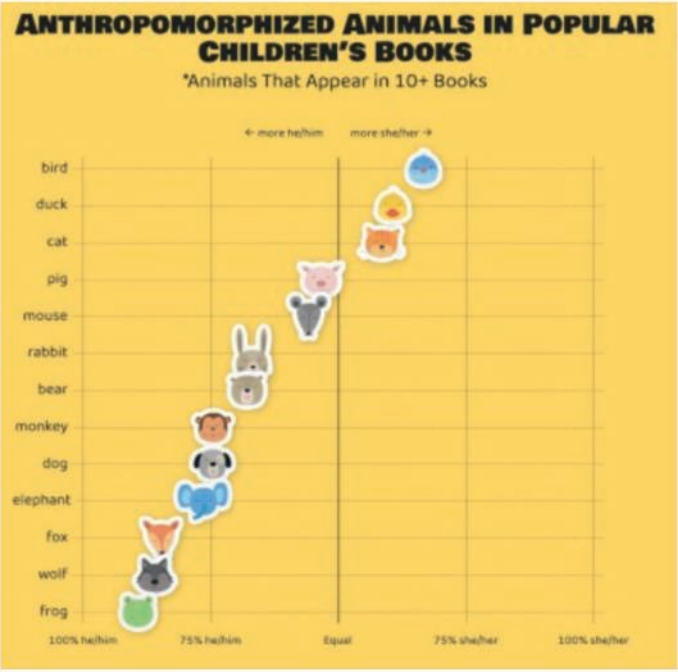
I recently published a data analysis with *The Pudding*, a digital publication known for data-driven storytelling, about animal characters in picture books. We read approximately 300 popular English-language picture books from the past 70+ years and noted the gender of any anthropomorphized animal character that was important to the story.

We found that male animal characters were twice as common as female characters across all the books. Some strong animal stereotypes also emerged: frogs and dogs were boys; birds and cats were girls. Even more surprising, according to our data: this disparity is not obviously improving, even over the last 25 years.

Our study was small and focused on the most popular books on **Goodreads**. But when I started digging into the research and talking to experts, I found out that this sneaky bias has been dogging animal characters for many decades—and it may be a bigger problem than it seems.

In 2011, a study led by Janice McCabe, now a professor at Dartmouth, analysed the protagonists of more than 5,600 children's books throughout the 20th century. The researchers found that representation of female main characters was steadily improving over time. But this was only true for the female human characters. For the female animal characters, representation was not improving.

Why are animal characters so, well, stuck?



The study pointed to an idea that has long shaped children's publishing: animal characters can help us sidestep pesky human problems. Back in the 1970s, one children's book editor told researchers that animal characters just make things "easier": 'You don't have to determine if it's a girl or boy—right? That's such a problem today.'

Decades later, agent Marcia Wernick, whose clients include children's book author Mo Willems, echoed the same logic in the *Washington Post* in 2016. 'Anthropomorphized characters have always been in the forefront of children's books,' Wernick said, 'because they enable the creator to not have to make decisions about is this a tall or short, black or white... character.'

Feather Flores, an editor at Atheneum Books for Young Readers, says that 'universal' animal characters can be powerful but also problematic. 'Anthropomorphized animals can be extremely useful as a vehicle for fable, allegory, satire, or social commentary,' she said. But, Flores continued, 'Attempting to build relatability or universality by stripping away the ways we are embodied and experience the world as humans does not always—or, I would argue, usually—make for the most emotionally resonant stories.'

Beyond emotional resonance, the data suggests that when we create animal characters, that's often when we most faithfully reproduce—and even exaggerate—the cultural norms we think we've left behind.

Even gender-neutral animal characters are often assumed to be male. In a classic 1987 study, mothers reading aloud to their children referred to ungendered animal characters as male 95% of the time. One of the only feminine designations was for a duck pictured with two ducklings—'Mrs. Duck.' We similarly observed that many female animals were moms, background characters for male leads.

And, lest we forget, all this matters. 'Differences in representation really matter, whether characters are human or animals,' says Megan Fulcher, a professor of cognitive and behavior psychology at Washington & Lee University, who focuses on gender role development in children. This lack of female representation not only provides girls with few models, but it also prevents boys from practicing cognitive skills like empathy.

Fulcher and her lab have found the same problem in toys for children. 'Boy toys' like action figures and Legos often include few or no female characters, which makes 'women and girls invisible in boys' pretend play' and leaves their imaginative worlds 'void of girls.'

If we apply this logic to picture books, the view is rather bleak. Because animal characters obscure all kinds of human difference. A 2020 U.K. study found that there were more animal protagonists in British children's books than Black, Asian, or ethnic minority protagonists. And, recently, animal characters have been used to represent transgender people, which writer Parrish Turner has argued can fall flat or worse.

So much for sidestepping human problems. Animal characters don't just reflect our biases; they often deepen them.

I asked Fulcher if she was surprised by the lack of progress in gender parity among animal characters. She wasn't. In new research, her lab is finding that gendered traits in toys have barely budged in the past 30 years. So it wasn't a shock that books reflected the same stagnation.

As she reminded me, it takes time to move the needle, both in the publishing industry and at home. 'Parents provide books to kids that may be new or old, so it will take a minute to trickle into kids' lives even if the gap [in representation] disappears today,' she said.

For now, it may be worth looking twice at your animal characters, and looking into the data.

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Melanie Walsh is an assistant professor in the Information School and an adjunct assistant professor in the English department at the University of Washington. She uses data to analyze contemporary culture, especially literature and publishing. She is currently at work on a book, **When Postwar American Fiction Went Viral: Protest, Profit, and Popular Readers in the 21st Century**, which follows the surprising social media afterlives of five iconic American authors.

Steering boats downriver: how is the GLL Literary Foundation project faring?

The **GLL Literary Foundation**, established to support 'up and coming' children's authors was officially launched in March of this year by charitable social enterprise and libraries operator GLL. It provides 20 author bursary placements, alongside a number of additional author support placements, in areas where GLL operates public libraries under its 'Better' brand: Bromley, Greenwich, Wandsworth, Dudley and Lincolnshire.

Authors are partnered with a specialist local librarian 'champion', who help deliver a series of author events and provide networking opportunities with local booksellers, publishers, literary festivals and schools. Authors are also offered online training courses.

Books for Keeps has been following its progress with interest. As it reaches the midpoint of the authors' Foundation programme, in addition to public and school events in person, the authors are now starting to deliver online events. **GLL Literary Foundation** Trustee Mo O'Hara ran an online webinar alongside Head of the Foundation Rebecca Gediking and Vice Chair Jenny Hawke exploring the different options for online events. Mo shared tips and tricks for presenting and engaging audiences online.

Mary Auld, one of the authors from Lincolnshire, writes below about her experience of delivering an online event to a local primary school. Literary Champions for Lincolnshire, Fabiola Nosenzo and Nicky Grigg, have also written below about their experience of supporting the Lincolnshire authors.

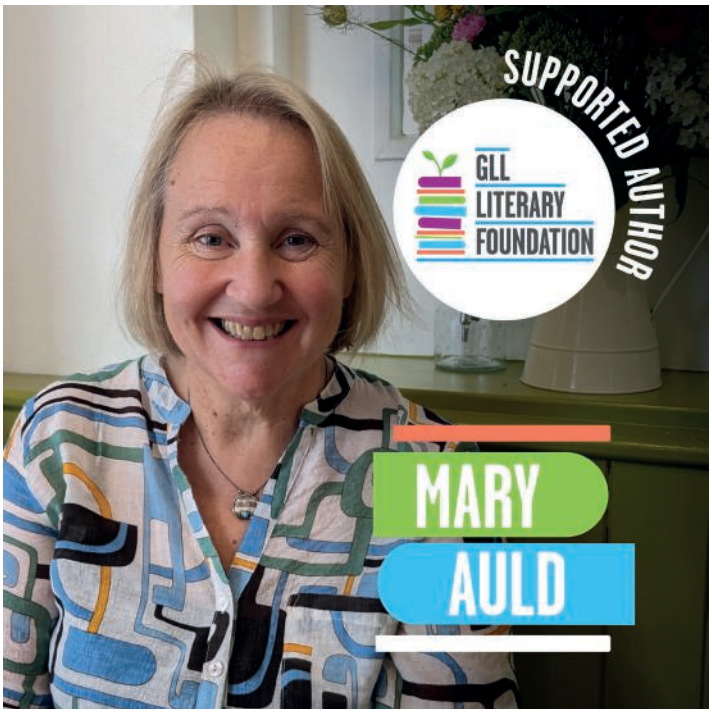
Steering a boat downriver: author Mary Auld reports on her experience

I was so pleased to be awarded a **GLL Literary Foundation** place for Lincolnshire. I had been involved in children's books throughout my career, starting in editorial (under my real name of Rachel Cooke). When I became freelance, I focused more on writing (as Mary Auld). However, as my book count increased, I was aware I had not done much to raise my author profile or, most importantly, interact with my audience: children. The programme has presented me with an amazing opportunity to rectify this, and I am grateful to the Foundation for giving it to me.

From the outset, the Foundation has kept me busy – and kept me learning! On a digital level, there have been online teach-ins, both practical and inspirational, from working on your author 'brand' to the importance of empathy. We also received advice about the variety of online author events and how best to handle them. I was able to put this learning into practice when I presented to the children of a primary school in two different classrooms simultaneously, reading



Mary Auld Online Event



my book **Start Small, Think Big: Fluffy, Flying Seed** (published by Mama Makes Books).

I was nervous as it was the first online event I had done but reassured to have both Jenny and Rebecca from **GLL** online with me. My earlier training from them with the wonderful input of Mo O'Hara proved really useful. It prepared me for the oddness of presenting over the web and the muted (quite literally) response you get. It also gave me tips on how to make the event as interactive as possible.

I was able to share the book on screen as I read (I was a pop-up in the corner). The teachers acted as intermediaries – in this case verbally – so I could ask the children questions and get them to point out details of Dawn Cooper's colourful illustrations on the screen. It helped that I could see the children and adjust my presentation to their expressions! I felt the kids enjoyed themselves, were interested in the book – and learnt a lot, perhaps more than in an in-person event. They asked some good questions at the end. I will feel confident doing more online presentations in the future.

And I will also feel more confident doing in-person events. Mentored by Nicola Grigg and helped by all the Lincolnshire Libraries team, I have shared books, chatted and created with a huge variety of kids. I have had such fun interacting with them and just love their enthusiasm, the look of concentration on their faces and their excellent (if sometimes random) questions. I hope I am learning the art of presenting to children – it's like steering a boat downriver, you have to keep control but also go with the flow.

I still have events to come (including one for an adult audience – now that is scary!) but, so far, my experience as a GLL Literary Foundation author has been great. I have built my confidence as a presenter and had lots of other guidance to help my career. I have also really enjoyed meeting my fellow authors, with a shout out to the other two Lincolnshire authors – Bethany Walker and Helen Hancocks. Finally, I have found my visits to Lincolnshire Libraries and the children's sections so heartening – they are real centres of the community and, in a time of huge change, places that will continue to nurture and grow a life-long love of reading. As an author, I can only say thank you for that.





Fabiola Nosenzo on delivering in libraries

Being the GLL Literary Foundation Champion for Lincolnshire is an incredibly rewarding experience. We have the privilege of supporting three outstanding authors - Bethany Walker, Mary Auld, and Helen Hancocks – whose work brings imagination, curiosity, and creativity to life for children across our communities.

Each author offers something unique:

Bethany Walker infuses her stories with humour and heart, capturing the challenges and triumphs of growing up with warmth and wit.

Mary Auld brings science and storytelling together, helping children explore the world around them with wonder and clarity.

Helen Hancocks creates visually captivating books that blend quirky characters with clever narratives, sparking joy and artistic inspiration.

Through our Lincolnshire libraries, we connect these authors directly with children and families. It's inspiring to see how their stories resonate with children, sparking curiosity, laughter, and a genuine love of reading. Through author visits, workshops, and library events, we create meaningful moments where young readers not only discover new books but also meet the authors behind them. Watching young readers do this is nothing short of magical. It strengthens the bond between our libraries and the community, and it reminds us how powerful storytelling can be in shaping young imaginations.

Championing Bethany, Mary, and Helen is not just an honour. It's a chance to help build a culture of reading and writing that will shape lives for years to come. The **GLL Literary Foundation** makes this possible, and I'm proud to be part of it.

GLF mentor Nicky Grigg on working with Mary Auld

It has been so interesting for me to work with a Non-Fiction author for children as a GLF mentor, so often in my career in libraries I have worked with fiction authors. Mary writes the most beautiful non-fiction books which during our class visits and events engaged and educated children about our natural world and the joy of orchestral music. Mary has worked with schools for some years and has presentations, handouts, colouring and inspiring worksheets which allows children to create art around the themes of the books. It was lovely to see children and families engage with the topics and enjoy the events at Lincoln Library.

During the process of working with the three Lincolnshire authors I realised how interesting the publishing world was. Many questions jumped into my mind, such as, how do you get a book published? Do you have to have an agent? How do you come up with ideas and what format do you use as an author to present these ideas to publishers? I realised that this process might also be interesting to other budding authors, so I asked Beth, Mary and Helen if they would consider doing a Q&A evening for a different audience, grown-ups! They all loved the idea and alongside this we decided to have an exhibition showing the authors workspaces, ideas books, work ups of words and layouts and how and when the illustrators come on board with the process of getting a book from concept to print. I am sure these two events will inspire new authors to come forward and benefit from the GLL Literary Foundation in the future and we can continue to support our authors for years to come.





Authorgraph No.274

James Mayhew

interviewed by

Ferelith Hordon

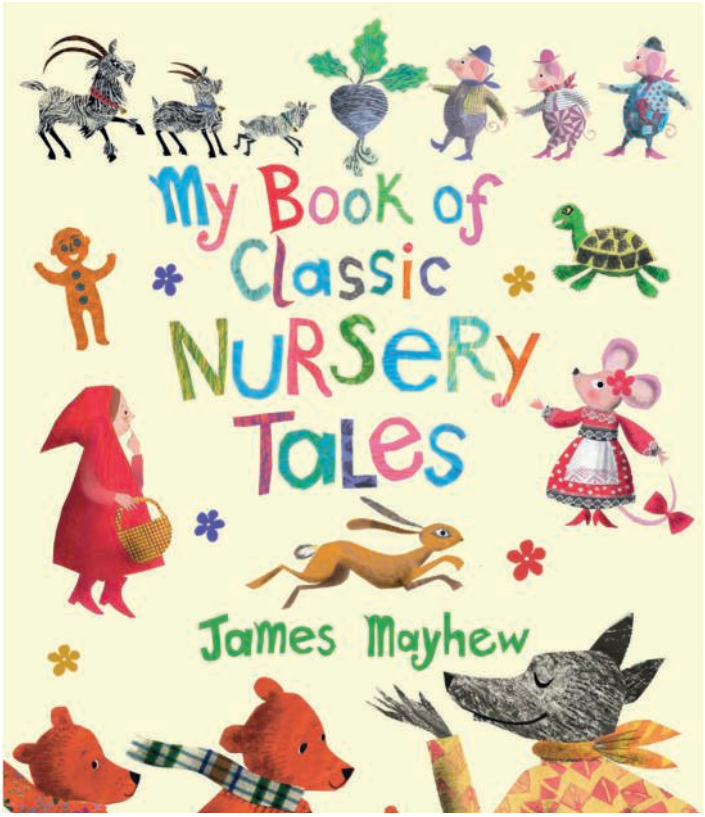


There cannot be many author-illustrators, or book creators, for whom image, colour, words, music, (even smell) work together in the creative process. James Mayhew is certainly one of those. His bibliography spans an impressive three decades with his latest, **My Book of Classic Nursery Tales**, (Otter-Barry Books) just out. I spoke with James on Zoom about his career and what inspires him. His response was as creative and interesting as his work.

James grew up in the village of Blundestone in Suffolk, a place more famous perhaps for its association with Dickens and his character David Copperfield. James was not an early reader. Rather, he describes himself as a 'reluctant reader and writer', feeling inadequate in comparison to his sister, who was fluent at a young age. He said he didn't want to read or write because, *'I always wanted to draw. That's what interested me.'*

Even then, James and his sister went to the library regularly, where he would choose books because of their illustrations. He would scrutinise them closely, admitting 'that's why I fell in love with books; I loved the pictures I saw in them'. He wonders if he had been drawn more to reading, whether this early connection to illustration would have happened. Perhaps his career might have been very different. 'I sometimes wonder if we rush children away from pictures too rapidly and whether we lose gifted people by doing that,' he reflects. He is saddened by the thought that a child could be seen as too old for pictures. His parents, however, were always supportive. 'The best Christmas present I received, I can remember vividly. I was 10 years old… it was a wooden box my father had made full of art materials.' James still has the box to this day, and it is always full of materials.

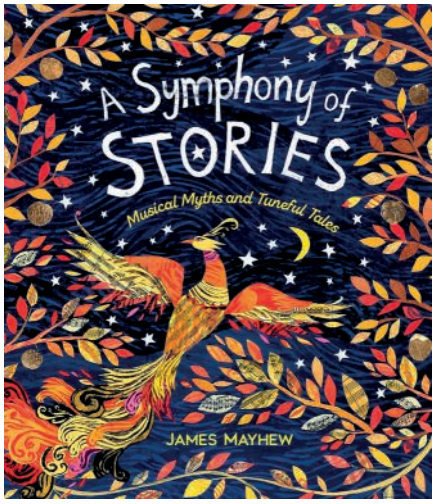
School also played a part. He remembers the time a supply teacher brought bottles of inks and steel nib pens into class – the colours like stained glass, the intoxicating smell… 'They were magical,' he smiles. Using these old-fashioned pens just 'clicked'. He fell in love with drawing and began to interrogate images. He was – and still is – fascinated by line work and cites the artists who inspired this – Ardizzone, Quentin Blake, Tove Jansson, artists of the '50s and 60's who were doing interesting things with line.

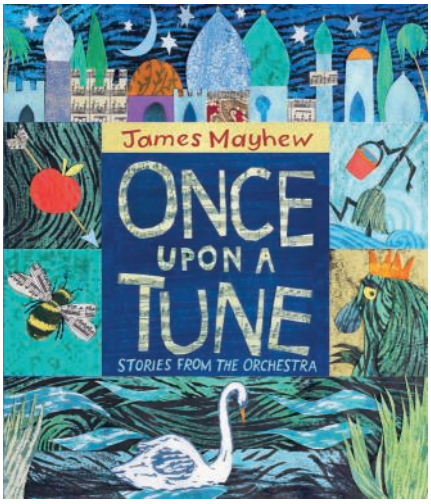


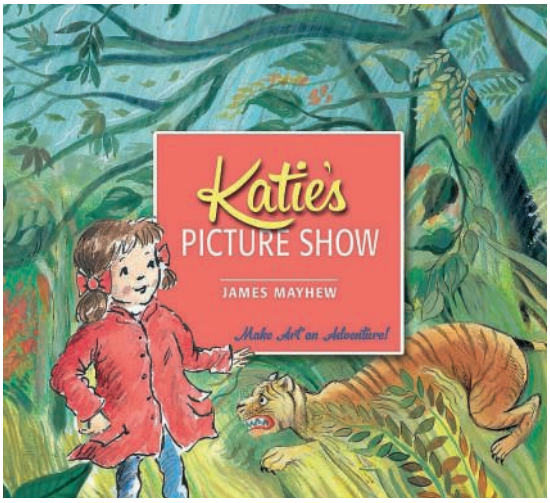
Illustrating children's books was not an early ambition; he rather fancied stage design. He took the general course on illustration offered at Maidstone College. A second-year project was aimed at the Macmillan Prize for Illustration, a new award for unpublished illustrators. This was **Katie's Picture Show**, but it was not actually put forward by his tutors. At the time, the Orchard Books imprint had just been created by Franklin Watts. James took it upon himself to send in his dummy for **Katie** – in his words, a very rough and scrappy production. It was accepted by Judith Elliot who saw the potential, though he confesses he still hadn't found his illustrator's voice yet. Still today, he's 'not sure I ever have. I think I am still searching.' The publication of **Katie's Picture Show** resulted in a whole book series in which Katie visits galleries and museums – and is still in print after 36 years; quite an achievement, and one that has inspired many young readers. James is very proud of this.

Eventually, there came a moment when he realised that he did need to move on – in fact he felt he was losing himself, since for the Katie books, he had to immerse himself in the works of great artists to recreate them within each book. He reached a point where he wanted to do something very different. This resulted in working on titles such as Pinocchio and encountering Shakespeare in retellings by Beverley Birch in **Shakespeare's Story Book**.

James is not just an illustrator of his own books, of course. He has collaborated with other authors, and this is something he has always enjoyed – partly because there is the element of surprise. However, he is also an author who creates his own texts, an experience, he says, that is very different because, 'If writing for oneself, you know







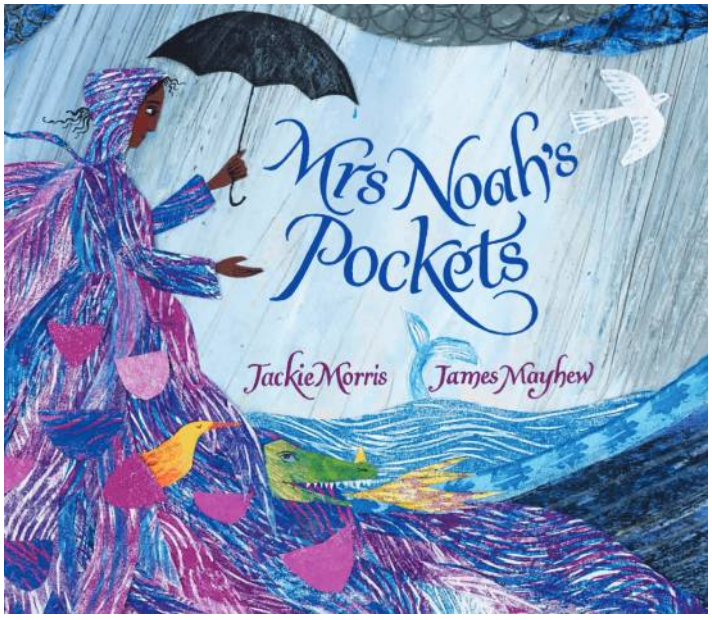
all about it and visually how it should look.' As with his artwork, he is very self-critical and it has taken time to feel confident – 'I had to work quite hard at writing. Only recently have I felt happy with the way I write and able to enjoy that side of my work.'

Storytelling is a very important element in James' work, whatever the medium. In 1993 **Koshka's Tales: Stories from Russia** appeared with its vibrant artwork. Illustrated within a month to meet publishing demands, it is a book that made him very proud. This is unusual because, James states, 'I look back very critically at my books…but **Koshka's Tales** is one of those books I wouldn't go back and touch.'

Music, relationships and memory also play an important part in his creations. He recalls the moment when music made a real impact – listening to a recording of *Scheherazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov – an LP with a cover image by Dulac. 'That is still today my reset music,' he shares. James has loved opera since he was a teenager. Memory, and nostalgia for childhood experience, colour how his books begin and then grow either through images or books he read as a child, becoming subtle resonances that add depth to his creations. Like many artists, he never leaves home without his sketchbook. Indeed, he confesses he feels anxious if he does not have something to write or draw on. His work will then be created in hard copy.

Recently, this has seen a development in technique which he attributes to his illustrations for **Mrs Noah's Pockets**, a book written by Jackie Morris for him. He describes it as his renaissance after a difficult period in his life. 'Out of that came the realisation that I was not happy with my work; it had become stale.' The result was the textured, colour-saturated collages that bring such life to his latest titles – 'I really felt free again.' In this process, he saw new landscapes, the possibility of taking risks and experimenting. Collage is still an element in his latest title, **My Book of Classic Nursery Tales**, but for the first time, he has turned to some digital interventions by taking over the whole process of scanning the images himself. This, he feels, has given him a much greater sense of control, especially over details. Thinking about a very much younger audience, he has also gone for a softer approach than the more sophisticated techniques in the Mrs Noah series, **Once Upon a Tune** or **A Symphony of Stories**. The choice of stories in this collection is drawn from his own memories of the nursery stories of his childhood. They may be familiar but, as he observes, one cannot have too many different approaches. These are his retellings, which will have personal elements – indeed this link to the personal is the reason for including the not so familiar Spanish nursery tale: *The Vain Little Mouse*. In making his choices, James has done extensive research, something he has thoroughly enjoyed, especially exploring different voices and opinions. In the end, 'I love finding my voice and telling these stories again fresh for a new generation my way… this is what I think works.'

Looking forward, I am sure that there are many more stories to be brought alive through the words and images created by James Mayhew – stories rich in images, rich in memory, rich in music; stories taking the audience young and not so young on journeys full of imagination and colour. We must be so glad that when faced with the decision between training to be a theatrical designer or an illustrator, he chose the latter, which, in his own words was, '... the right decision'.



Books mentioned

My Book of Classic Nursery Tales: Otter-Barry Books, 9781915659736, £16.99 hbk

A Symphony of Stories: Musical Myths and Tuneful Tales: Otter-Barry Books, 9781915659347, £18.99 hbk

Mrs Noah's Pockets: James Mayhew, Jackie Morris, Otter-Barry Books, 9781910959091, £12.99 Hbk

Katie's Picture Show: Orchard Books, 9781408332405, £7.99 pbk

Koshka's Tales: Stories from Russia: Graffeg Limited, 9781913634735, £9.77 hbk

Shakespeare's Story Book: James Mayhew, Beverley Birch, Hodder Children's Books, 9780340875483, £9.99 pbk

Once Upon a Tune: Stories from the Orchestra: James Mayhew, Otter-Barry Book, 9781913074036, £16.99 hbk



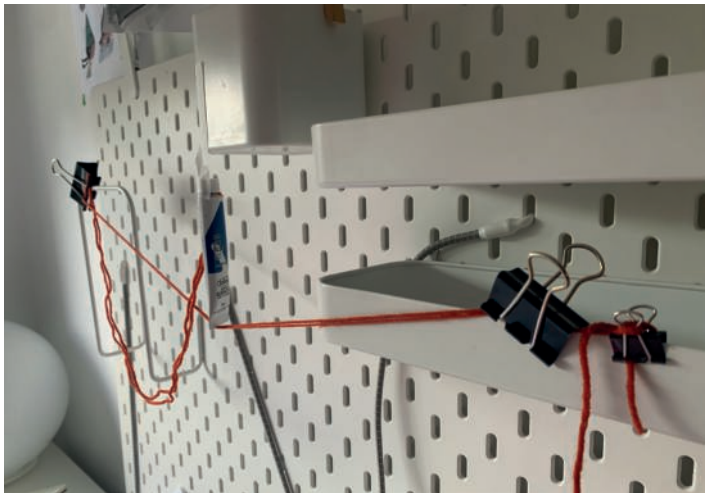
Ferelith Hordon is editorial advisor to **Books for Keeps**.

Windows into Illustration: Emma Farrarons

Emma Farrarons is the winner of the 2025 **Klaus Flugge Prize** with her illustrations for **My Hair is as Long as a River**, written by Charlie Castle. Kate Winter, 2024 **Klaus Flugge Prize** winner and a judge praised her illustration style for its consistent and accomplished artistry, beautiful compositions, line work, colour palettes and feeling and for the level of observation of children's behaviour. Here, Emma describes creating the book and bringing emotion to the words.



I like to start with speedy loose pencils on large A2 sheets, exploring different angles and perspectives inspired by the text. At this stage I don't get attached; it's about finding the most dynamic and narrative scene. With my editor, Grace Gleave, and designer, Lorna Scobie, we reviewed the roughs until we chose the one that felt right. Our guiding question was always: how do we bring emotion to Charlie Castle's words, and how can the art tell its own story?



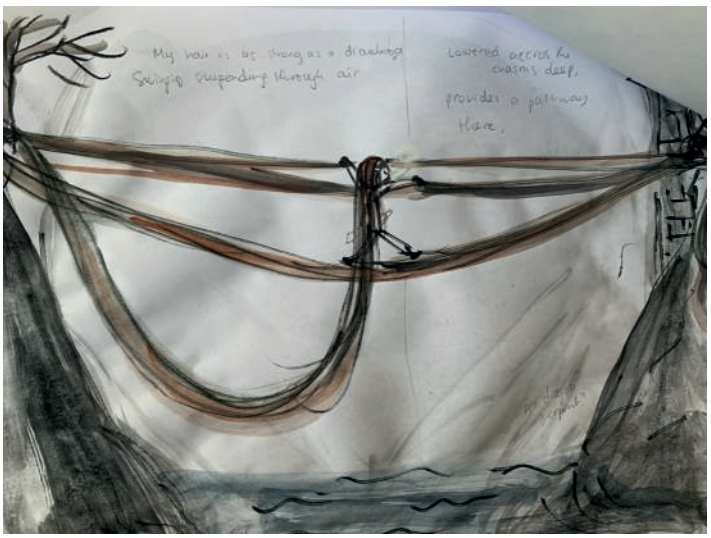
I had just returned from Cornwall, where I visited Tintagel Castle with my family. Crossing a bridge over swirling waters and dramatic cliffs sparked the idea: how could the boy's hair become a bridge? Back at my desk, I grabbed some wool yarn and a paint tube to play the part of the boy, then strung a makeshift 'hair bridge' across my wall organiser. I snapped a photo of my DIY props and emailed the team sketches inspired by them. That solved the image, and the team loved it!

The team wanted more drama and danger, so they urged me to push the art further. The water was not threatening enough. I redrew it again and again, making the waves sharper, angrier, until they resembled jagged shark teeth. For the foam, I flicked white paint with a toothbrush. Messy, but effective.

Texture was another key element. I revisited sketches from Cornwall, studying weeds and plants clinging to the cliffs, and brought those details into the spread. I like my black and white roughs to be highly detailed, almost like the final colour work. Because I paint everything, I aim to have the roughs fully approved so I don't need to make changes at colour stage.

The colour palette grew from the boy's hair, a mix of burnt sienna and phthalo green. (Charlie himself has long brown hair, which felt like a lovely connection.) For other colours I turned to my greengrocer: silvery kale, pomegranate, earthy beetroot, French beans, and bright pops of clementines, raspberries and lemons.

In this book, the hair itself feels almost like a character. I spent a long time studying hair textures and movement, sometimes even standing in front of the mirror with a blow dryer, watching my own hair fly. Layering transparent washes of liquid acrylic created highlights, while quick dip-pen strokes added energy and flow.





I love how ideas bounce between author, editor, designer and illustrator. Charlie suggested flipping the Rapunzel story so the long-haired boy rescues a prince and adding a dragon, even though it is not in the text.

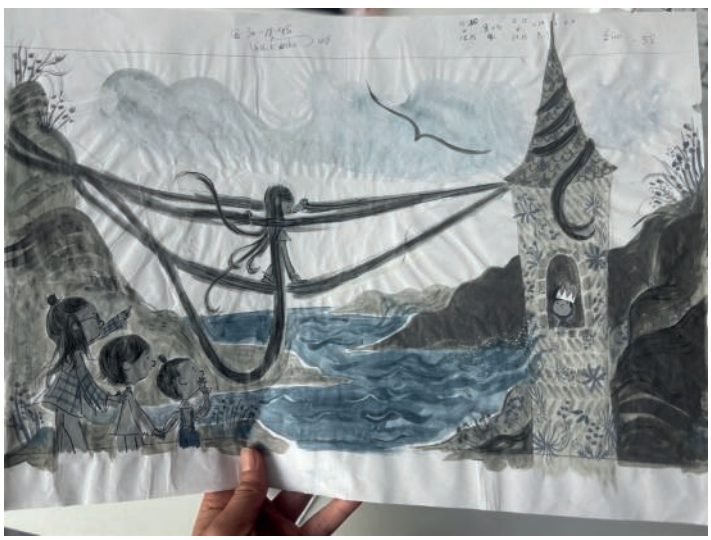
My son, in Year 2 at the time, told me Leonardo da Vinci studied bats and lizards to imagine dragons. That inspired me to watch videos of Filipino sailfin lizards and bats in flight. I prefer drawing from life, so when I can't, I sketch from moving videos without pausing. This helps me capture the essential details and makes the drawing feel more alive.

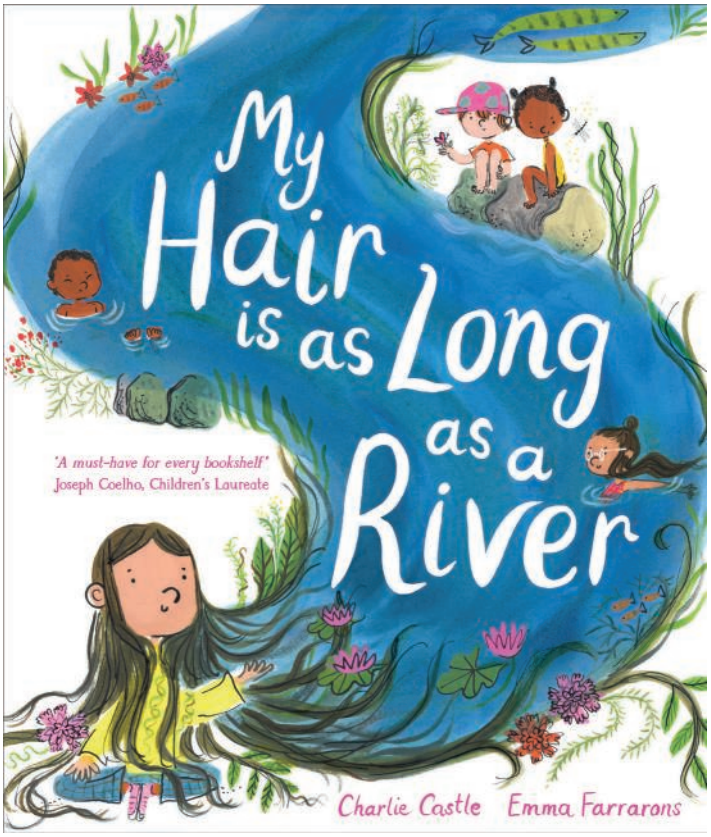
For the finished art I used a mix of watercolour, acrylic paint, dip pen and ink, graphite watercolour, and a toothbrush for splashy water. Watercolour gave transparency to the waves, acrylic added structure, and quick strokes with a dip pen and scratchy nib brought energy.

Working on this book felt like a masterclass, learning about character and world building, which papers and paints to use, and how to create emotion with colour and narrative. Most importantly, the team was there with me for the whole journey - pushing me in all the right ways and helping me discover my picture book voice. It was pure joy and a wonderful collaboration.

And the best bit? My own little boy grew his hair long afterwards.

My Hair is as Long as a River, written by Charlie Castle and illustrated by Emma Farrarons, is published by Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1035018307, £7.99 pbk.





Picture This: Deep Thoughts

In her latest **Picture This** column, **Nicolette Jones** digs deep.

Shirley Hughes once talked to me about depth in children's illustration. She was a great admirer of Edward Ardizzone because you could 'walk into' his pictures in your imagination. Each was a scene that beckoned you to enter. She thought there were two directions to think about in the making of a picturebook. One was the direction through the book as you turned the pages, showing the development of the story, and sometimes including the movement of characters across a page and on to the next. The other was the direction into the book through each image so the reader had the feeling of going behind the surface, as if climbing out of the stalls onto a stage, or stepping through the wardrobe into Narnia.

The three pictures I want to look at today show different ways of creating depth. We tend to expect depth to depend on perspective and a detailed setting, and we think of a simple graphic style as the flattest kind of picture – one in which colour is in uniform blocks, there is no shading, no vanishing point and no backdrop but white space or another flat colour.

An example of this might be the image I chose from Lou Cole's picturebook **Lionel** (Rocket Bird Books) in which a parade of animals rides on the back of a rhinoceros. The colour is completely flat, the background is white, and nothing seems to stretch away from us. This bears no resemblance at all to an Ardizzone interior, nor to Shirley Hughes leading you round the playground at the school fete in **Dogger**. The movement is all from left to right as the 'rhinoce-raft' carries other creatures along a river.

And yet there is a certain implied depth even in the use of this flat technique. The image plays a trick in the mind of the viewer because we cannot shrug off our knowledge that rhinoceroses are bulky. The picture represents something we know to have depth. We don't perceive the rhinoceros as two-dimensional. This is helped along by a few curved marks meant to suggest the rounded flank of the animal and the convex shape of its horn. But even without these hints, flatness can, weirdly, suggest depth. If we consider for instance Matisse's cutouts of a ring of dancers, the arrangement of the figures, which are completely flat, makes us see a circle in which the dancers at the top are further away from the viewer than the dancers at the bottom. And this is true even though the dancers above are not notably smaller than those below, which would bring a shrinking perspective into play. Even a silhouette can imply volume: the edges show the curves of bodies, so we fill in the shapes and believe we see 3D people, not just paper dolls.

Lo Cole's flat shapes, though hardly communicating depth as Shirley recommended, do show that some parts of the picture are behind others. Creatures have arms around each other. The mouse on the rhino's left ear is certainly behind the cat who is clasping the right ear. The birds with two wings have one in front of the other. It's just that it is the mind of the viewer that creates the depth.

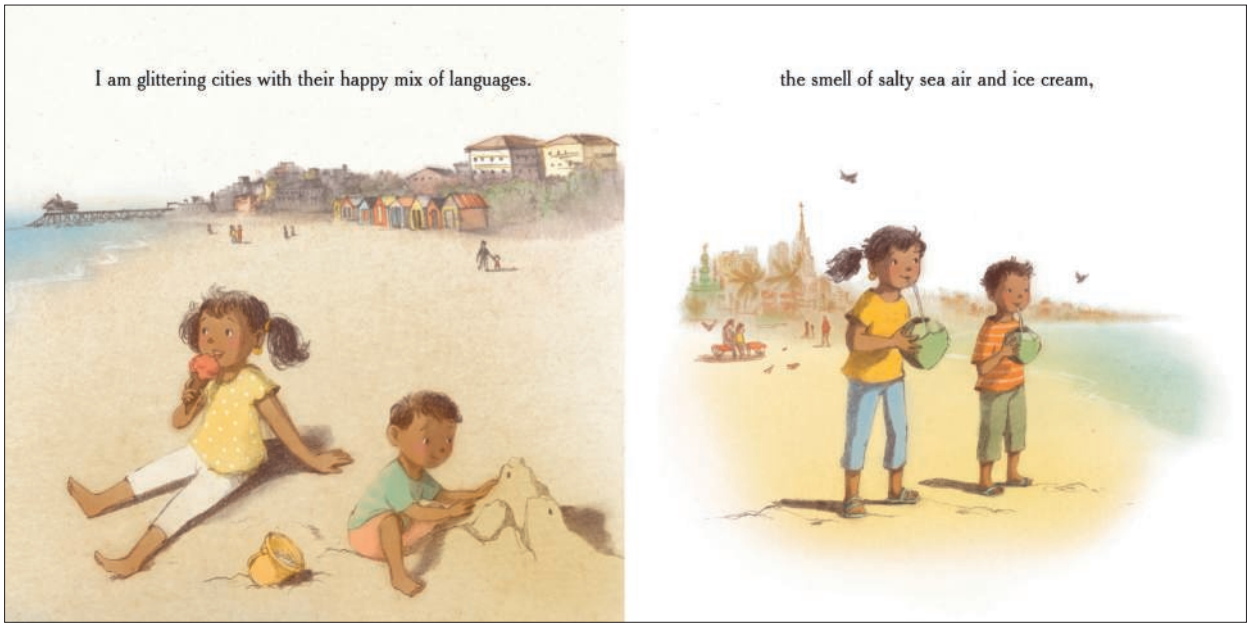
We also tend to think that simplicity precludes depth, but that is not always the case. To take another example: Emma Yarlett's spread from **Unicorn Post** (Walker) seems to be little more than a few washes of colour. But close inspection shows us something quite different: the horizon is very far from us indeed. Here, it is scale that creates the distance. A tiny red figure – the protagonist – seems lost in a vast landscape. We see a minute viaduct, which we know to be a massive structure, and therefore it turns the rest of the view into a huge expanse. There is also some use of perspective because the trees in the foreground, though small, are somewhat larger than the trees on the next plane of the vista. White furrows in a field point towards the horizon. And low white squirls of clouds suggest that there is not only distance but height in this panorama. And the shading of the colours to the skyline also invokes distance, The turning of the page has taken us into an epic scene. And, along with the protagonist, we have a long way to go. (Meanwhile the unicorn is flying in the air in the middle distance.)



from **Lionel** by Lo Col, Rocket Bird Books



from **Unicorn Post**, by Emma Yarlett, Walker



from **This is Who I Am**, illustrated by Ruchi Mhasane, Andersen Press

It turns out that Emma Yarlett's picture has something in common with a more traditional depiction of a far-reaching setting such as Ruchi Mhasane's image of two children on a beach from **This is Who I Am** (Andersen Press). The lone and level sands stretch far away, the effect achieved by the accepted device of larger figures in the foreground and much smaller ones which are further from us. The smaller the distant figures, the longer we understand the beach to be.

But having thought about depth in the other illustrations, we realise that this more conventional approach also uses a trick of the mind. The empty space above the heads of the children resolves itself into a long stretch of sandy beach when it is in fact painted on a flat sheet of paper (or screen). The plane which is the surface on which the picture is made, which is like a mirror we are looking into, tips to extend away from us, like a table top. Simply by virtue of placing tiny figures, small beach huts and a miniature pier in the top half of the illustration. The effect of depth in a two-dimensional work of art is always a kind of magic.

No wonder Shirley Hughes admired it. Just as words can turn little black marks into pictures in our heads, so pictures ask the brain to be creative in many ways. Making us perceive a third dimension is just one of them.

Books mentioned:

Lionel, Lo Cole, Rocket Bird Books, 9781915395269, £7.99 pbk

Unicorn Post, Emma Yarlett, Walker Books, 9781529525175, £12.99 hbk

This is Who I Am, Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illus Ruchi Mhasane, Andersen Press, 978-1839135774, £12.99 hbk



Nicolette Jones writes about children's books for the **Sunday Times**, and is the author of **The Illustrators: Raymond Briggs** (Thames & Hudson); **The American Art Tapes: Voices of Twentieth Century Art** (Tate Publishing) and **Writes of Passage: Words to Read Before You Turn 13** (Nosy Crow).

Ten of the Best Books to inspire young poets

Phoebe Demerger chooses ten books to inspire young people to write poetry.

Children are natural poets in the ways that they picture and perceive the world, therefore some of the very best poetry books for children support, nurture and reward this natural curiosity and creativity, enabling them to see themselves as poets. Whether through interactive activities, how-to advice, or modelling the power that great poetry can have, these ten books will inspire young people to write poetry, show them how poetry can connect to our own experiences and emotions, and helping us to make sense of them.

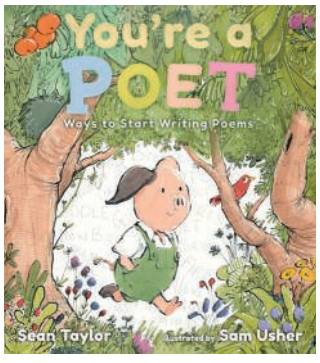
As part of the **CLiPPA Poetry Award** process, **CLPE** produces a series of videos for each shortlisted collection, in which children can hear directly from real poets speaking about their careers, reading aloud from their works, and offering insightful advice to young poets. Tune into our Poetry page for more inspiration: clpe.org.uk/poetry/videos



A First Book of Dinosaurs

Simon Mole, illus Matt Hunt, Walker Books, 978-1529524352, £12.99 pbk

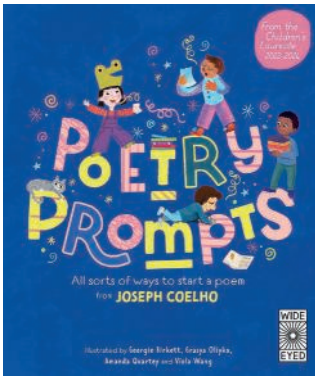
A First Book of Dinosaurs sits happily at the intersection between picturebook, information book and poetry book, providing a 'way in' for many different kinds of readers. Dinosaur fans can meet familiar favourites including Pterosaurs and Tyrannosaurus Rex, as well as some lesser-known creatures such as Eoraptor and Giraffatitan. The poet plays with a range of different forms, voices and devices, showcasing the creative possibilities of poetry, with plenty of humour and astounding facts sprinkled in alongside blocky, boldly dynamic artwork. With a follow-up – **A First Book of Bugs**, illustrated by Adam Ming – released in August 2025, it's easy to imagine these works as an invitation to young poets to come up with their own celebratory anthology based on their favourite topic.



You're a Poet: Ways to Start Writing Poems

Sean Taylor, illus Sam Usher, Walker Books, 978-1536239331, £10.99 pbk

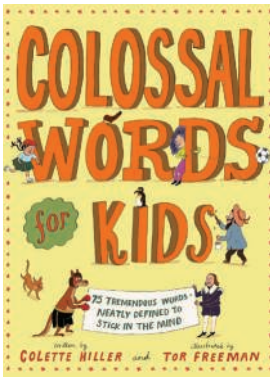
This is a gentle and friendly illustrated introduction to writing poems, within a frame narrative of five short stories about a young pig and his poetry-writing exploits. Each story sees Piglet respond to everyday events, sensations or emotions by working up a poem about them, often in collaboration with family and friends, and closes with a guide for the reader to take what Piglet has learned and turn it into their own poem. The soft watercolour-and-ink illustrations have a timeless quality, and Piglet's poetry adventures are ideal for encouraging both creative writing and emotional literacy.



Poetry Prompts: All Sorts of Ways to Start a Poem

Joseph Coelho, lllus Georgie Birkett, Grasya Oliyko, Amanda Quartey and Viola Wang,Wide Eyed Editions, 978-0711285118, £9.99 pbk

Produced during Coelho's tenure as the Children's Laureate 2022-24, this vibrantly illustrated guide compiles more than 40 'poetry prompts' to inspire young writers and demystify the creative process. Covering such broad topics and techniques as riddles, freewriting, haiku and performance, this book is an invitation to get started, combat the fear of the blank page, and see where writing takes you. Embedded amongst the activities are 'poetry power-ups', inviting the reader to think outside the box and take their writing to the next level. Accompanied by supportive artwork from four distinctive illustrators.

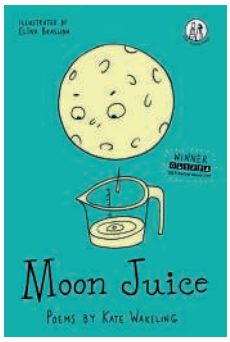


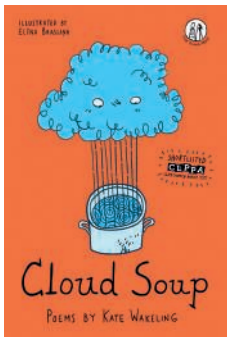
Colossal Words for Kids: 75 Tremendous Words – Neatly Defined to Stick in the Mind

Colette Hiller, illus Tor Freeman, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-0711278738, £9.99 pbk

The ambition of 2025's **CLiPPA** winner is to render the learning of long words accessible, engaging and enjoyable, and it does so in a refreshingly rewarding way. Each poem in this alphabetically-arranged collection explores the meaning of an intriguing word in rhyme, accompanied by gloriously silly illustrations. Not only do these 'definition' poems help build young readers' vocabulary, with Hiller's use of rhyme and rhythm rendering these definitions more memorable, they also unveil the playfulness of language, and celebrate the power of a well-chosen word. From 'Ambiguous' and 'Bravado' to 'Meander' and 'Soporific', readers encounter a wide range of unusual words – the format will appeal to young collectors as well as young linguists.

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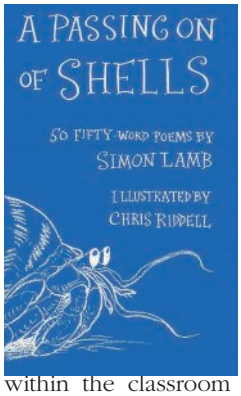




Moon Juice and Cloud Soup

Kate Wakeling, illus Elina Braslina (The Emma Press), 978-1912915743, £8.99 pbk

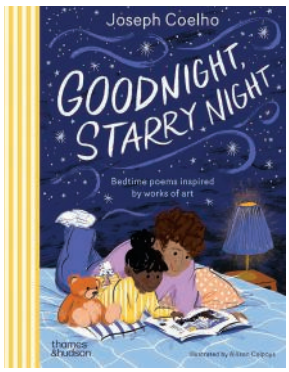
There are few poets with such a pleasing grasp of wordplay and wit as Wakeling. Her two pocket-sized collections with Birmingham-based indie The Emma Press are equally charming, lively, and unexpected, covering a terrific range of subject matter and form and keeping at their hearts a sense of wonder in the everyday. Wakeling has a playfulness with language that is so engaging, and her poems are technically sound, with thorough exploration of form and a healthy dose of silliness – take, for example, the titular kennings for rain: *cloud soup, sky spittle, the puddle artist*. An imaginative, inviting and inspiring pair of books.



A Passing On of Shells: 50 Fifty-Word Poems

Simon Lamb illus Chris Riddell, Scallywag Press, 978-1915252777, £8.99 pbk

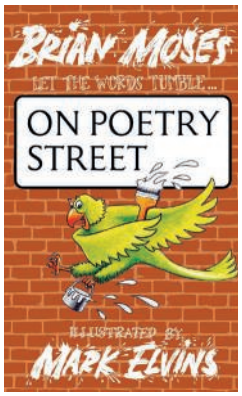
The poet sets himself an interesting challenge in this book: to compile a collection of poems of only fifty words each. Rather than being limiting, this invites a whole different kind of creativity: how to reveal the core of a poem's meaning in as few well-chosen words as possible. This challenge naturally lends itself to expansion within the classroom or the playground: how about a poem of three lines or less? What about thirty words? Or ten? Indeed, this book would pair well with AF Harrold's **A Pocket Book of Pocket Poems** (illustrated by Jack Viant, Bloomsbury), whose witty and imaginative poems decrease in size as the book progresses from sixty words to zero.



Goodnight, Starry Night: Bedtime Poems Inspired by Works of Art

Joseph Coelho, illus Allison Colpoys and Mary Rose Brady, Thames & Hudson, 978-0500653333, £14.99 pbk

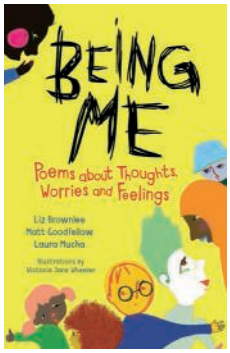
This beautifully produced book is a collaboration between two different media: poetry and the visual arts, each poem written in response to a different piece of artwork. Themes of collaboration and creativity are key here, with the reader encouraged to consider how one form of art could be 'translated' into another. A mix of familiar and less well-known artists and artworks are spotlit, including Vincent Van Gogh, Yayoi Kusama and Ruth Asawa. Perfect for bedtime, and any time of quiet reflection and relaxation.



On Poetry Street

Brian Moses, illus Mark Elvins, Scallywag Press, 978-1915252593, £8.99 pbk

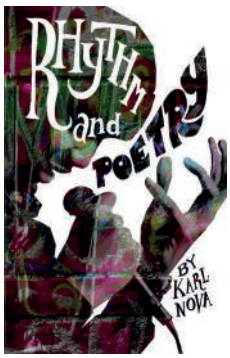
On Poetry Street is a brilliant resource for inspiring young people to write creatively, as it features fifty two poems – one for every week of the year – which are not only entertaining and engaging, but each offers a unique jumping-off point on which budding poets can model their own writing, such as list poems, extended metaphors, and 'What If...' poems. The book closes with an extensive and illuminating afterword from Moses, in which he generously shares his own inspirations, sources and ideas, encouraging readers to pick up a pen and take a walk down Poetry Street themselves.



Being Me: Poems About Thoughts, Worries and Feelings

Liz Brownlee, Matt Goodfellow, Laura Mucha, illus Victoria Jane Wheeler, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1913074654, £8.99 pbk

This collaborative anthology brings together a collection of well-crafted poems which articulate with skill and care a wide breadth of complex emotions and situations that may be familiar to children, but which they may not yet have the language to describe. This book deftly offers it to them, creating a space in which children may practise connecting with their emotions, and shares with them the tools to help express and navigate them. A profoundly articulate and empathetic book which perfectly encapsulates how, through poetry-writing, children may be encouraged to reflect on their experiences – to recreate, shape, and make sense of them.



Rhythm and Poetry

Karl Nova, Caboodle Books, 978-0995488540, £5.99 pbk

The first published poetry collection from Hip Hop artist Nova has a refreshing directness and honesty, and encapsulates the power of writing in one's own authentic voice. A deeply personal collection, many of Nova's poems are drawn from the workshops he does with children and young people, as well as from his own performances. Extensive footnotes accompanying the poems provide detailed insights into his writing process and the experiences that informed his works, paving the way for young readers to understand that they could be poets too. The poems themselves expertly capture the beat and tone of the rap form, lending themselves brilliantly to performance and lifting them off the page



Phoebe Demeger is the Librarian at the **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education** (**CLP**E). A former bookseller, she manages CLPE's extensive library of children's books, hosts regular visitors to the library, and assists the wider team in their delivery of training programmes and special events. She produces book reviews and recommendations for **CLPE**, ensuring that the very best titles find their way into classrooms and schools.

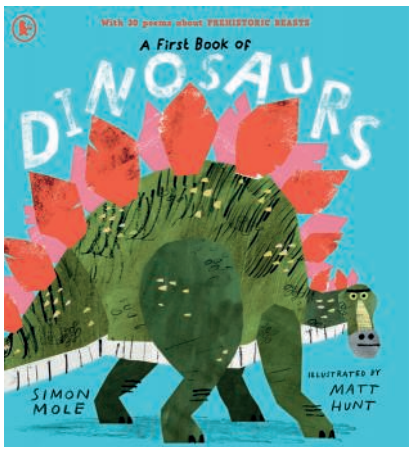
The Poet Who Makes Dinosaurs Roar and Bugs Buzz:

Charlotte Hacking talks to rapper, spoken-word artist, picture-book author, and children's poet, **Simon Mole**.

Simon Mole has always been fascinated by the spark of creativity in young people. Before he ever published a picture book or poetry collection, before **A First Book of Dinosaurs** or his brand-new **A First Book of Bugs**, he was the teenager running workshops for other youth groups at arts festivals, the rapper weaving words in bands as well as classrooms, the poet turning self-expression into a vital skill. 'Being a writer or a rapper,' he reflects, 'means looking really carefully at the world, and looking again, and thinking how you might express what you think or feel about it. Those are amazing skills for young people to carry into life, whether they keep writing or not.'

The belief that creativity is both a personal joy and a social good has shaped Mole's career. Long before books, he worked in schools as part of Creative Partnerships projects, turning multiplication tables into rap games – 'learn tables with turntables', and using hip-hop as part of PSHE projects. As a performance poet, he joined the acclaimed group *Chill Pill* alongside Raymond Antrobus and Deanna Rodger, as well as touring solo spoken word shows with Arts Council funding. In addition to his work with secondary aged pupils, he began to work with primary-aged children as part of a project with performance poetry organisation **Apples and Snakes**, which allowed him to build a more rounded instinct for how children think, talk, and create and how this could develop his own writing for children. 'I was no longer running poetry workshops and then separately doing my own writing,' he says. 'It all started to connect. Ideas I shared with children were becoming part of my creative process.'

Mole's first step into books came not through poetry but through picture books. 'The poetry I wrote then was for performance,' he explains. 'If someone had seen me live, then I could imagine them enjoying reading my stuff afterwards, but I wasn't sure printing out my spoken-word sets would best represent me as a writer on the page.' A breakthrough came when Simon created *Friends For All*, a children's theatre show for the **V&A Museum**, which later toured with **Half Moon Theatre**. Katie Cotton, then a picture-book editor at **Frances Lincoln**, came to one of the performances, sparking conversations that led to his debut picture book, **Kites**, being published in 2019. Under her guidance he learned to craft stories for the page, balancing the understanding of narrative structure and poetic language he had honed as a performer and spoken word poet, while learning how to leave space for illustrations to do their own storytelling.



Successful partnerships with illustrator Sam Usher followed in two picture books, **I Love My Bike** and **I Love My Cat**, both rich with rhythm and lyricism. Writing picture books, he says, 'is somewhere between structuring a show and writing a poem to a form. You need the bones of a strong story, but you also get to play with sound, texture and sensory detail

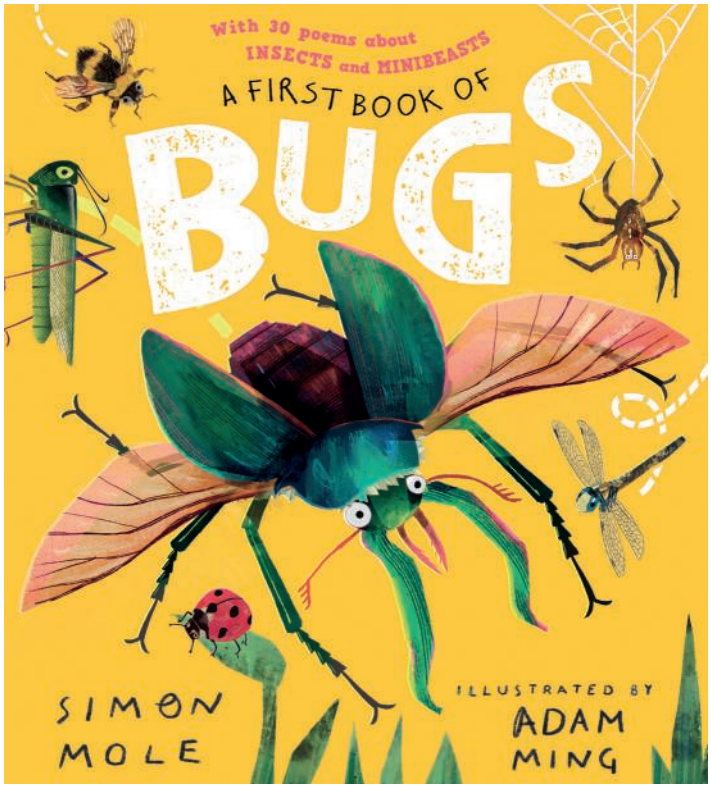


in a way that really keeps children engaged. I realised my writing could be fuller, richer and that kids love it when you have fun with language.'

When Walker Books approached Mole about writing a gift book about dinosaurs, he seized the challenge, and in doing so helped shape what the project would be. **A First Book of Dinosaurs**, illustrated by Matt Hunt, blended poetry and non-fiction in a way that introduced facts while celebrating imagination and language. Rather than trying to write encyclopaedic prose, he distilled his research into bold, vivid snapshots in a series of poems full of awe and wonder. A simple four-line poem about an Argentinosaurus can be full of character, energy, and scientific insight. 'Poetry forces you to be selective,' he explains. 'It's not about telling you everything. It's about sparking curiosity.'

His new release, **A First Book of Bugs**, illustrated by Adam Ming, builds on that approach. Each poem zooms in on a different minibeast, from Woodlice to Goliath Tarantulas, while wider spreads share scientific facts and terminology, explain how bugs sustain life on Earth, keeping ecosystems alive, and explore how children might help protect them. 'I wanted to get the balance right,' Mole says. 'First, make kids love bugs - they might be amazed, curious, delightfully disgusted – then you can give them a sense of what bugs do for the planet and how we can help.'

Behind the lightness of the poems lies rigor and fact. Both A First Book of Dinosaurs and A First Book of Bugs were fact-checked by scientists to ensure accuracy. In researching for the latter, Mole immersed himself in adult entomology texts, visited experts at London Zoo and Berkshire College of Agriculture, took his own kids on bug hunts and watched nature programmes on CBeebies alongside his young daughter to gain a sense, not just of what might be fascinating to her, but of which details she remembered afterwards. 'I wanted the most up-to-date understanding, then to turn it into something playful and accessible,' he explains. 'If a poem says a caterpillar turns itself into a soupy goo before becoming a butterfly, which is true, then I hope kids go, 'What?!' and look it up



to find out more.'

Although Mole rarely gives direct instructions to illustrators, his books' layouts are strikingly bold and playful. 'It's about having a clear vision without telling someone what to draw,' he explains. 'Some spreads, like the patterned title pages, I'm not involved with at all; the editors, designers and illustrators handle that, but every element invites you to open the book and go, "Ooooh!" before you even reach a poem.' The striking layouts of both the dinosaur and bug books, with bold title spreads and playful image-text juxtapositions, turn them into gift books: beautiful objects to treasure as well as engaging poetry collections.

Just as his books have roots in performance, his performances now grow from his books. Working with musician Gecko and director Peader Kirk, Mole has devised stage shows for both **A First Book of Dinosaurs** and **A First Book of Bugs**. These are not simple readings but interactive theatrical experiences: part gig, part creative writing session, part science lesson in disguise.

Whether performing to a class of thirty or a festival audience of four hundred, Mole keeps the emphasis on participation. 'What we ask of an audience's creativity builds throughout,' he says. 'Hopefully, they leave thinking, "I could be a songwriter, a poet, a scientist, a palaeontologist". If they still love dinosaurs or bugs, that's brilliant. But I also want them to feel they have the imagination to do something themselves.'

This philosophy has proved effective: *The Great Big Dinosaur Show* toured to over 4,500 people in its first year, reaching far beyond the usual poetry-loving crowd. Families come for the subject matter and leave inspired by the verse. The upcoming *The Great Big Bug Show* will be performed at the Natural History Museum in November as well as at the Cheltenham Literary Festival and Edinburgh International Book Festival.

The joy Mole takes in collaborating with others is mirrored by his openness to feedback from his core audience: children. He tested early drafts of bug poems in classrooms and assemblies, watching to see which lines grabbed attention, which rhythms stuck. 'Sometimes I'll even run a writing workshop with kids on a topic before I've finished my own poem,' he admits. 'If the activity is fun and creative, if it connects with them, then I know I'm on the right track.'

His favourite bug? 'I love the bombardier beetle. Who doesn't love a creature with a blaster on its bottom?' he laughs. 'But I think the dragonfly is amazing. It can fly in any direction, and it has even inspired human flight technology. That connection between nature and invention is exciting. In our live show, we even improvise songs about imaginary insect-inspired inventions like snail 'climb slime' so you can scale walls and worm rescue tunnels, just to show how bugs can spark creativity.'

Mole is conscious of the challenge of talking to children about climate change and biodiversity loss. He believes in honesty without alarmism. 'It's about attitude,' he says. 'You can inspire children to value nature without terrifying them. If they're curious and engaged, they'll take positive action. They'll be bug lovers and bug protectors.' That belief underpins both books. The poems never lecture, but they invite children to look closely at the natural world, to marvel at its complexity and fragility. By mixing lyrical language, humour and scientific truth, Mole turns environmental awareness into something joyful and empowering.

Mole's next project is his first full poetry collection for older children (ages 7–11), **Poetry Pizza**, to be published by Otter-Barry Books in March 2026, with illustrations by Tom McLaughlin. Unlike the themed dinosaur and bug books, this will be a broader mix of poems, funny, moving and surprising, distilled from years of performing in schools and libraries.

'It's not a how-to-write-poetry book,' he clarifies. 'It's just what I hope is a really great collection of poems; but I hope it also engages children and makes them feel like they could write too. Some poems are tightly structured, syllable-counted, rhymed; others deliberately resist finesse. I wanted that mix, so children see poetry as something they can play with — like a word game, a song lyric, a family joke. I've tested loads of them live, along with some of the first illustrations, and they've had a great reception.'

Across every stage of his career, rapper, spoken-word artist, picture-book author, and children's poet, Simon Mole has woven performance, education and collaboration into a single practice. His books grow from the workshops he runs; his stage shows grow from his books; his research grows from conversations with scientists and children alike. 'For me', he says, 'writing for children isn't separate from working with them. The two things feed each other.'

Whether researching arthropods, performing to festival crowds, or signing books for children who've just learned what a bombardier beetle can do, Simon Mole's aim is the same: to help children look at the world with curiosity, to trust their own creative voices, and to imagine futures where science and creativity work side by side.

With **A First Book of Bugs**, he proves that poetry can be factual, funny and visually dazzling, while helping children see themselves as writers, scientists, and inventors. As he launches *The Great Big Bug Show* and looks ahead to **Poetry Pizza**, Mole is showing that poetry for young readers can be as lively and surprising as the natural world itself. One thing is clear: he is less interested in pigeonholes than in possibilities. 'I want kids to feel that they can be anything,' he says, 'a poet, a palaeontologist, a bug expert, or all of these at once'.

Books mentioned:

A First Book of Dinosaurs: Simon Mole, Matt Hunt, Walker Books, 9781529524352 £12.99 pbk

A First Book of Bugs: Simon Mole, Adam Ming, Walker Books, 9781529507546, £16.99 hbk

Kites: Simon Mole, Oamul Lu, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 9781786035578, £6.99 pbk

I Love My Bike: Simon Mole, Sam Usher, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 9780711256217 £8.99 pbk

I Love My Cat: Simon Mole, Sam Usher, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-0711276512, £7.99 pbk



Charlotte Hacking is a teacher, Literacy Consultant and Educational Speaker. She co-authored the book **The Balancing Act: An Evidence Based Approach to Teaching Phonics, Reading and Writing**, which is currently shortlisted for the **UKLA Academic Book Award 2025**, alongside Professor Dominic Wyse.

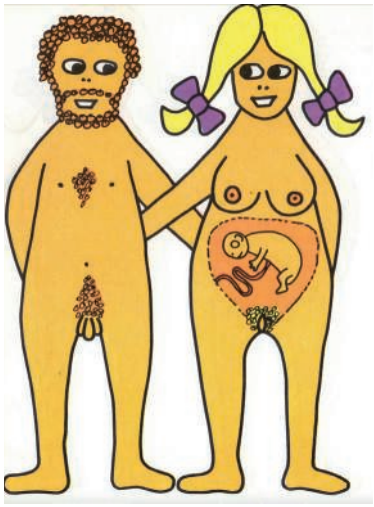
Where do babies come from?

Ruth Thomson and **Pam Dix** are considering illustration in non-fiction children's information books, and in this article **Ruth Thomson** looks at books about making babies from 1973 to today.

When writing the article, **Inside the Body** (BfK No. 272 May 2025), it struck us that not all of the chosen books included mention of the biology and anatomy of sex, conception, gestation and childbirth. Did publishers consider that these topics deserved separate books of their own? Or was it that in trying to appeal to the broadest possible market, they avoided these potentially more tricky topics.

The illustrations in books about where babies come from are critically important for children's understanding but may nonetheless be contentious – either for being too simple, too graphic, too explicit or too detailed, or for avoiding the issue. In books for the very youngest children, for example, the sex act is often omitted and books concentrate upon the stages of pregnancy. This short survey of books published over the last 50 years shows that although the content of books about reproduction has changed, widening over time to include medical advances, in terms of illustrations, there are certain consistencies. Humour has been an important element in the illustrations as well as in the text, simple line and colour illustrations predominate and the biological workings inside the body are always made distinct.

One early example of a very explicit book was written and illustrated by the Danish psychotherapist and sexologist, Per Holm Knudsen, **How a Baby is Made** contains bold, basically-drawn images of a naked couple, including a man with an erection and a full-frontal illustration of a baby emerging. These graphically explicit illustrations caused considerable debate when the book was first published in the UK in 1973, as this was then an unusual approach and indeed remains so today.



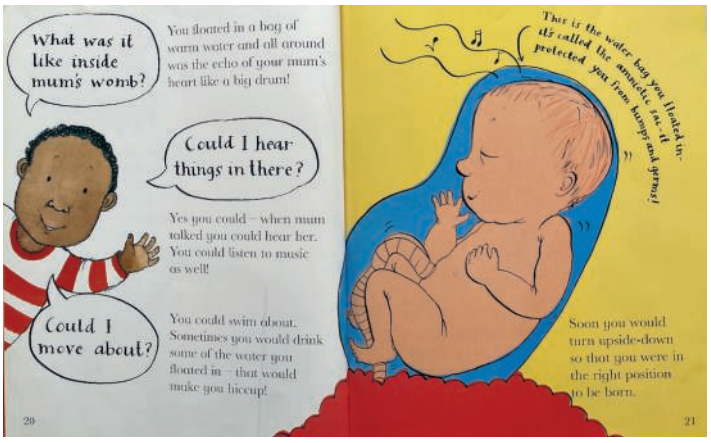
The bright, uncompromising line and wash illustrations in Per Holm Knudsen's **How a Baby is Made** (Piccolo, 1973) live up to his introduction that 'We owe children honesty', even if these might upset some adults.

By comparison, in **Where did I Come From?**, also written in 1973, author Peter Mayle unquestioningly assumed that the topic might be embarrassing, dedicating the book both to his children and 'red-faced parents everywhere'. Still in print, it has sales to date of more than three million copies and a version for Black American readers with black characters was published in 2000. The book's popularity and longevity probably derive from the astute combination of warm, conversational-style text and jolly, gently-humorous cartoons – which amusingly counterpoint key elements of the narrative. It may help dispel potential parental embarrassment that the couple depicted are distinctly middle-aged, rotund and ordinary – although whether children can relate to them is moot. The chatty text likens sex to a tickly feeling and the accompanying image depicts a child tickling a happy baby with the caption 'It's a lovely feeling'. The book does assume that 'the people who made you are your mother and your father'– having been written at a time well before today's medical advances – and the illustrations include several curious elements which would be found in no children's books commissioned today, such as a cigar-smoking dad and a top-hatted sperm holding a rose in its arms.



In Peter Mayle's **Where did I Come From?** illustrated by Arthur Robbins (Lyle Stuart Inc.1973), an orgasm is likened to a really big sneeze, illustrated with a baby sneezing so much that his toys fall in every direction – an innocuous analogy which child might understand and an image which parents would not find embarrassing

In contrast, **How Did I Begin?**, for young primary-aged children, has a more straightforward child-friendly narrative and is illustrated with images in two distinct art styles: soft-edged, textured artwork for the animated children and adults in different settings, and flat, diagrammatic images showing tiny biological elements, such as cells, chromosomes, egg and sperm, as well as the development of a foetus. The narrative is broken up with curious children posing questions in speech bubbles, such as 'How do twins happen?' or 'Was it hard being born?'. This book assumes a loving mum and a dad, who have a 'special cuddle' (naked under bedclothes, with the man on top), after which a 'winning sperm and your mum's egg made your first living cell' and gestation then begins.



Mick Manning and Brita Granstrom **How Did I Begin?** (Franklin Watts, 1997). The second person narrative with images of children posing questions all looking outwards are both effective ways of engaging the reader. The diagrams showing what happens inside the body are crisply outlined in black ink and often set against solid primary-coloured backgrounds, whereas the images of children are mainly set against white.

Ruth Thomson is an award-winning educational author and editor, who specialises in writing books on art and history. She has written children's publications for major British museums and art galleries.

A more encyclopaedic book for top juniors, which quickly became a classic, is **Let's talk about where Babies Come from: A Book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies and Families**. Originally published in 1999, this was updated in 2024 for its 25th anniversary, to provide a more contemporary, inclusive perspective than the original edition. Its wide-ranging contents include puberty, types of love, chromosomes, adoption, keeping safe, masturbation, sexual abuse and HIV and Aids (all topics beyond the scope of this article), as well as sex, pregnancy and different types of birth.

The reassuring text is often broken up into bite-sized boxes, accompanied by light-hearted line and wash comic-style illustrations, mostly set against white. Two bantering cartoon characters – a bird and a bee – enliven the pages. Their quirky conversations, in speech bubbles, informally offer additional information or entertaining asides.



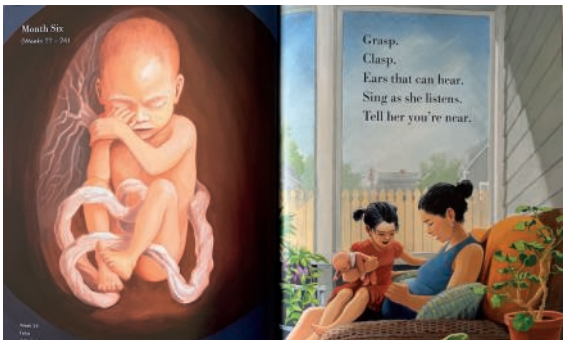
Mike Emberley's images in Robie H. Harris's **Let's talk about where Babies Come from: A Book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies and Families** (Walker Books, 1999) are relaxed and unaffected. The bird and bee cartoons provide a contrast and antidote to the more realistic vignettes of labour and childbirth, and the cutaway diagrams of birthing.

Children under 5 are generally more curious about how they grew inside their mother's (or someone else's) tummy rather than in how they were made. Two notable books for this age group eschew any mention of sex and start with gestation. **J'attends un petit frere** (I'm expecting a little brother) makes clever use of flaps to explore a young child's ambivalent and changing emotional responses to her mother's pregnancy. The exterior of each flap shows an illustration of the fully-clothed expectant mother – her tummy expanding, as the baby develops, with every turn of the page. When each flap is opened, the semi-naked mother is illustrated with a cutaway of the foetus. This responds, often amusingly, to the young girl, whose own emotions range from bemusement, antipathy, anger, rejection, curiosity and finally acceptance of the imminent arrival of the baby.



Marianne Vilcoq **J'attends un petit frere** (I'm expecting a little brother) (L'ecole de loisirs, 1999). Vilcocq's simple line and wash illustrations, set against white, are fresh, reassuring and appealing

Nine Months Before a Baby is Born has minimal, lyrical rhyming text and two parallel sets of softly-realistic illustrations. On every left-hand page, set against a dark background, are meticulously detailed images of month by month changes in growth from a zygote to embryo to foetus – using the correct biological terminology for every stage. From week 15 onwards, the images of the foetus are life-size and, from week 28, seep across the gutter into the right-hand page. The full-term foetus fills both pages. In contrast, the right-hand pages depict aspects of tender everyday family life or preparations for the arrival of a new baby, with the mother's tummy shown larger each month. Chin based his illustrations of the family on people he knew, giving them veracity and warmth.



Miranda Paul **Nine Months Before a Baby is Born**, illustrated by Jason Chin (Neal Porter Books, 2009). A stand-out feature of this book is its depiction of changing seasons, subtly showing the passing of nine months. The images start in frosty winter, continue with spring planting and sunny midsummer, and end with a crispy early autumn day with everyone jacketed or wearing a jumper.

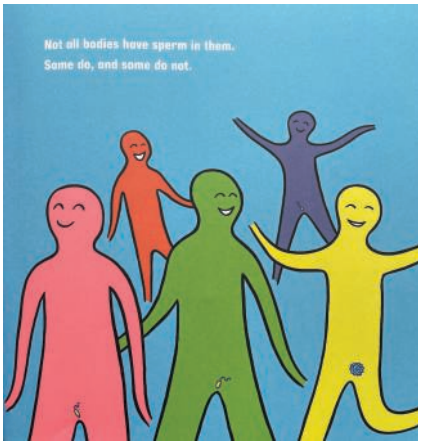
Many of the books published in the 21st century are more inclusive than previous ones, reflecting the reality of our age, showing the many ways in which people may get help to have a child – through medical procedures, surrogacy, adoption or fostering. They also recognise that people now live in many different kinds of families – perhaps with two mums or dads, only one parent or a grandparent.

One title which overtly includes the tagline 'An inclusive guide to how every family begins' is Making a Baby. The text avoids any mention of a man and woman or mother and father, describing instead 'a grown-up with a penis' and 'a grown-up with a vagina'. Owen's soft images, with their well-defined shapes, subtle textures and muted colours are influenced by mid-century illustrators, including Sasek and the Provensens. Like Manning and Granstrom, Owen makes a distinction between illustrations of people and their activities and those inside the body – using the device of a circle to contain biological diagrams.

Rachel Greener **Making a Baby**, illustrated by Clare Owen (Nosy Crow, 2025). Here, it was a good idea to depict undressed female bodies in a totally natural situation – a swimming pool changing room. It seems, however, a missed opportunity not to have pointed out where the reproductive organs, depicted in the diagram below, are on a female's body.

Another inclusive title is **What Makes a Baby**, illustrated by Fiona Smyth, one of Canada's foremost cartoonists and a graphic novelist. Influenced by American pop artist, Keith Haring, Smyth's bold, thick line and solid, saturated images are visually arresting. Hues clash, skin tones are totally unrealistic, and the neon-coloured backgrounds zing – all designed to make the book appealing and accessible.

Cory Silverberg, sex educator and author, starts from the most basic premise that to make any baby, an egg is needed from one body and a sperm from another, and that these need a uterus where a baby can grow. However, he refrains from any mention of gender, body parts or the many different ways in which babies can now be made. His intention is for this unusual book to create a space for parents to share details of their children's birth story with them, whatever this might be.



Cory Silverberg **What Makes a Baby,** illustrated by Fiona Smyth (Seven Stories Press, 2012).In this image, Smyth's vibrant, simplistic smiling figures are deliberately ungendered, apart from showing whether they have sperm or eggs

Beyond the Secret Garden

Drawn to the Stereotypes: Comics and Graphic Novels

In this issue's Beyond the Secret Garden column, Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor turn to comics and graphic novels.

From their beginnings in the late 19th century, British comic makers published content with racist undertones, and continued to do so throughout the twentieth century in some of the most popular comics. Racist humour was present in the early era of **The Beano**, which was bannered by a watermelon-eating character called Peanut; British Empire-era comics such as **Tiger Tim** depicted people in the colonies as either backwards or treacherous; and war comics such as **Commando** vilified racialised minorities.

British readers also experienced common racism within American comics, from superheroes who fought caricatured versions of racialised minorities, to Disney comics that encouraged American imperialism in South America and the acceptance of the Jim Crow south. Racism present in comics has fueled one of the arguments against allowing children to read them. Margaret Marshall noted that while 'serious readers' of comics show evidence of analytical' understanding of story and art (**Libraries and Librarians for Teenager**s p. 150), too often comics include 'a high degree of exaggerated caricature' (p. 151) in the depiction of racialised minorities. Gillian Klein argued in 1986 that racially minoritised characters were only included in comics if they were an 'oddity, a "baddie" or as a buffoon' (**Reading into Racism** p. 47). A rare exception perhaps was the character of Vernon Eliot who appeared in the *Roy of the Rovers* comic strip between 1969 and 1982. Eliot was Melchester Rovers' first Black player and made his fictional England debut before Viv Anderson became the first Black player to play for the England men's team in real life. However, it is harder to make a case for Pak Soon, a Vietnamese refugee with a non-Vietnamese name that may well have been intended as humorous.

In the US, a countertradition grew up of Black-authored comics, often (as in the **Golden Legacy** comics of the 1960s and 70s) focusing on Black history; these appeared alongside the first mainstream American comic to feature a Black superhero, **Black Panther** (first issue 1966).

British comics also celebrated Black History, although much later in most cases than American ones, and generally through independent (and often Black-owned) presses. Nigerian-born Tayo Fatunla has been drawing a history comic, **Black Roots**, for Black British newspaper *The Voice* since 1989. There have also been limited series put out in connection with events such as the Imperial War Museum's 2010 exhibition, 'Extraordinary Heroes, Incredible Acts of Valour' or Newcastle's 'Freedom City' celebrations in 2017.

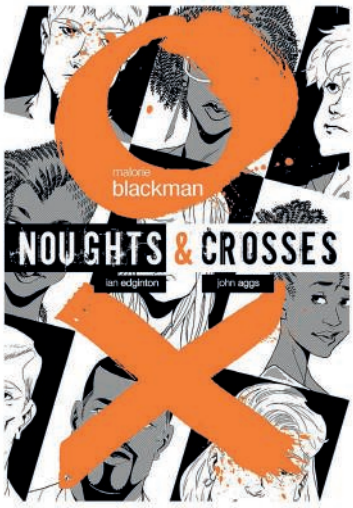
In the short format of a comic strip or book, it is difficult to address nuances of racism, and this is often more easily—and sometimes more controversially—done in a graphic novel format. Just a year before one of the first commercially successful graphic novels, Art Spiegelman's **Maus**, came out, the Institute of Race Relations published a 'cartoon book', **How Racism Came to Britain** (1985) drawn by Christine Smith. This examination of the history of racism used a comic style in the hopes that the book 'will help to take the ideas beyond the classroom and make them accessible to a wider range of readers' (p. iv). Unfortunately, one of those readers included then-Education Secretary Kenneth Baker, who called on the Inner London Education Authority to have it removed from schools.

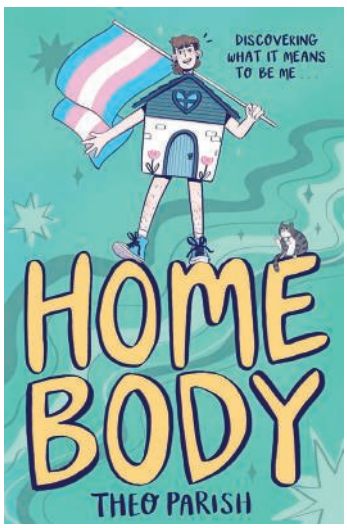
Mainstream comic shops in the UK are still often dominated by US publications. In 2013, London artist and designer Jon Daniel published **Afro Supa Hero: African Diaspora Action Figures** to accompany his exhibition, which opened at the **Museum of Childhood** in London before touring nationally. It featured Daniel's collection of Black action figures and comics from the 1970s and 80s, mostly from the USA. While many of the comic storylines shared the tropes of Blaxploitation films of the era, themes of displacement, hybridity and double consciousness were often present in the comics in Daniel's collection, which can be viewed as an example of what Paul Gilroy terms the 'Black Atlantic'.

More recently, British graphic novels for older child readers have continued to tackle issues of prejudice and racism. Malorie Blackman's **Noughts and Crosses** was adapted by Ian Edginton and illustrated by John Aggs in graphic novel format in 2015. Patrice Aggs and Joe Brady examine the experience of becoming a refugee and resistance to authoritarian rule in **No Country** (David Fickling, 2021), a story which originally appeared in *The Phoenix* comic. And this year's Carnegie Shadowers' Choice Award for Illustration, Theo Parish's **Home Body** (Macmillan, 2024), chronicles the voyage of discovery for a young transgender person.

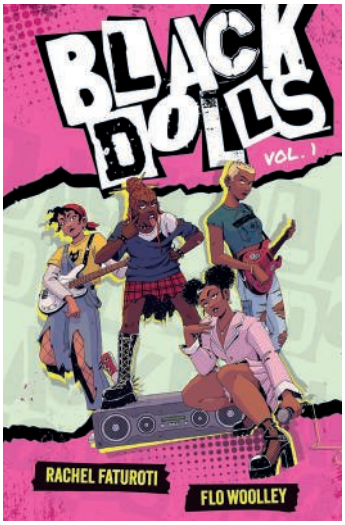
Other author-illustrators make use of the graphic format to reimagine the classics or highlight racial diversity that often goes unnoticed in textual form. Isabel Greenberg, for example, brings the Brontë siblings'





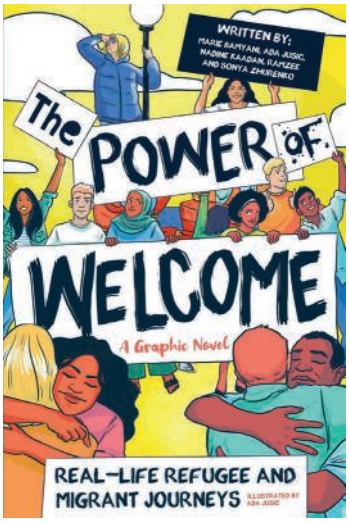












juvenilia to life in **Glasstown** (Jonathan Cape, 2020) including the African characters the Brontë children imagined, and her **Young Hag** (Jonathan Cape, 2024) posits a multiracial Arthurian world.

Some recent YA publications have been closer to the anarchic style seen in many UK comics for adults. YA graphic novel **Black Dolls**, text by Rachel Faturoti and illustrations Flo Wooley (Orion, 2025), follows four Black teens who form a punk band and compete in Clash of the Bands. Like Shazeen Khan, Faturoti has cited Nida Mansoor's *We Are Lady Parts* television series as an inspiration for her work. Aimed at 13-17-year-olds, **My Dad Fights Demons** (SelfMadeHero), written by Bobby Joseph and illustrated by Abbigayle Bircham, will be published September 2025. Rye is a non-binary teen with a Black mother and a demon-fighting Indian father with whom he is reunited after a decade. The story includes zero-hour contracts, influencers, and a satirical storyline of a white character telling Rye how to be a good antiracist. Joseph's use of Multicultural London English, social satire and scatological humour retains elements of *Skank*, a Black British magazine often compared to *Viz* magazine that he created and edited between 1993-7. He developed one of his characters from the magazine for **Scotland Yardie** (Knockabout 2016), a graphic novel for adults. Joseph is the fifth person and first person of colour to be the UK Comics Laureate (2023-5) and has been a prominent advocate for diversity in British comics.

Buuza!! by London-based writer, illustrator and designer Shazleen Khan, is described as a slice-of-life comic set in a sprawling, urban fantasy Middle East and features Zach, a trans man who works as a sex line operator. The series is independently published, having won the **2024 Ignatz Award for Best Web Comic**, with a hardcover version published by Abrams scheduled for May 2026. Khan's **Brown Girls Are Everything** is, in their own words 'a collection of illustrations and short essays about the Black, Asian, Indigenous and ambiguously Brown characters I fixated on as a little brown muslim kid'! The comic includes art and writing from Khan's girlfriend, now wife, Ishaani.

Comics for younger readers have become more diverse this century. The *Guardian* began publishing **Donny Digits** by Woodrow Phoenix in its comic inset in 2008. Donny is a young Black boy, seemingly able to fix anything but harbouring a secret of his annoying twin brother Dylan. A book of the strip was published by Bog Eyed Books in 2021. Recent graphic novels for younger readers draw on the wide range of traditions in comic culture. Deploying a bright visual style reminiscent of Disney, **Brielle and Bear** (Harper Fire, 2024) is an uplifting university romance story with a racially diverse cast and allusions to *Beauty and the Beast*. References to rugby and cheerleaders combine elements of US and UK culture. Chanté Timothy's **Supa Nova** (Nosy Crow, 2025) is a science-themed superhero story with a Black middle-class family at its centre. Nova also has a secret underground lab in which she invents a creature in order to deal with the problem of plastic. Timothy's artwork is bright and bold in keeping with the pacey plotting. The story is led by the visuals with words used sparingly after the opening section. A short section after the story has Chanté in comic book form informing readers of the science behind the story, plus pages helping readers to draw their own Supa Nova.

Newer graphic novels for younger readers demonstrate an ability to address serious issues in compelling visual storytelling. As well as illustrating her own writing, Shazleen Khan illustrated **Saving Sunshine** written by Pakistan-born and US-based writer Saadia Faruqi (First Second, 2023). This middle grade graphic novel follows quarrelling twins Zara and Zeshan on a family trip to Key West and explores sibling rivalry, animal welfare, and anti-Muslim racism in the USA. London-based Indian creator Debasmita Dasgupta has produced a number of highly original graphic novels for primary school aged children. In **Faiza is a Fighter** (Soaring Kite Books, 2025), the title character is a young girl living in the Himalayas who decides to take up boxing, inspired by Mary Kom and supported by her father and grandmother. In Dasgupta's **Terminal 3** (Penguin, 2019), Khwab Nazir, a young jiu-jitsu competitor from Kashmir, waits to board a plane at New Delhi International Airport.

While non-fiction graphic books have been very popular for adult audiences, there are fewer for young readers. One of the best is **The Power of Welcome** by Marie Bamyani, Ada Jusic, Nadine Kaadan, Ramzee, and Sonya Zhurenko and illustrated by Ada Jusic (Scholastic, 2023) recounts stories of real-life refugees and migrants to the UK. Each story is preceded by a history of the country that the writer left, giving readers a broader context than often seen in newspaper coverage about refugees moving to Britain.

Thanks to Ramzee for more recommendations than we were able to cover in this column.

Use this link to see the books mentioned



Dr Darren Chetty is a writer and a lecturer at UCL with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip-hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikesh Shukla, and has since published five books as co-author and co-editor. He tweets at @rapclassroom.



Professor Karen Sands-O'Connor is a Visiting Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield. Her book **British Activist Authors Addressing Children of Colour** (Bloomsbury 2022) won the 2024 Children's Literature Association Honor Book Award.

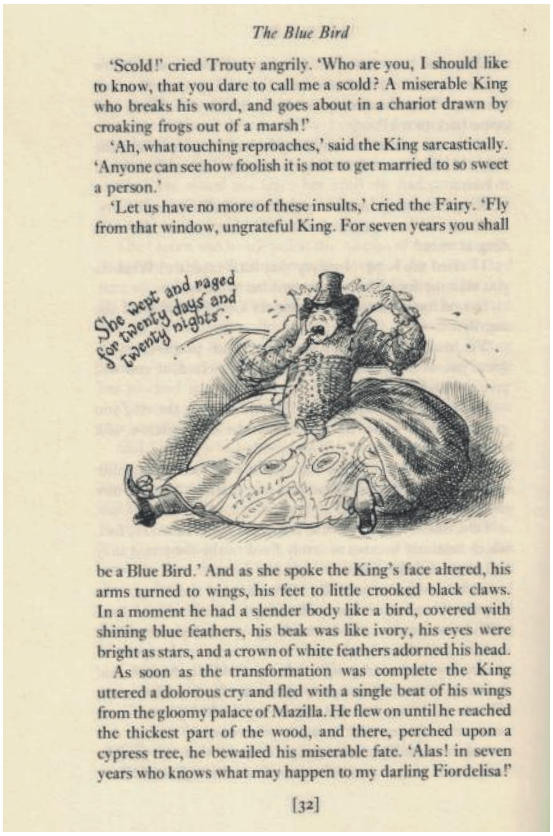
Darren and Karen's book **Beyond the Secret Garden: Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books** is out now, published by English Media Centre.

Obituary: Antony Maitland

17 June 1935 – 7 August 2025

by **Brian Alderson**

Long years ago -say 1978– I was working on one of my customarily failing projects on children's literature. I had been commissioned to edit a revised set of the **Colour Fairy Books** of Andrew Lang (Recte Mrs Lang!). The idea was to edit the story contents and accompany them with illustrations by contemporary illustrators who were asked to model their work on the famous original black and white drawings by Henry J Ford. We had got to **The Green Fairy Book** when Fritz Wegner took fright and said that he couldn't manage the drawings. As a result my publisher, the late Patrick Hardy, called upon Antony Maitland as an emergency replacement. The result was magnificent with Antony producing 109 drawings following our hoped-for model, all done on time (Other choices for the finished books were; Blue: John Lawrence; Red: Faith Jaques; Yellow: Eric Blegvad; Pink: Colin McNaughton.



The Blue Bird

'Scold!' cried Trouty angrily. 'Who are you, I should like to know, that you dare to call me a scold? A miserable King who breaks his word, and goes about in a chariot drawn by croaking frogs out of a marsh!'

'Ah, what touching reproaches,' said the King sarcastically. 'Anyone can see how foolish it is not to get married to so sweet a person.'

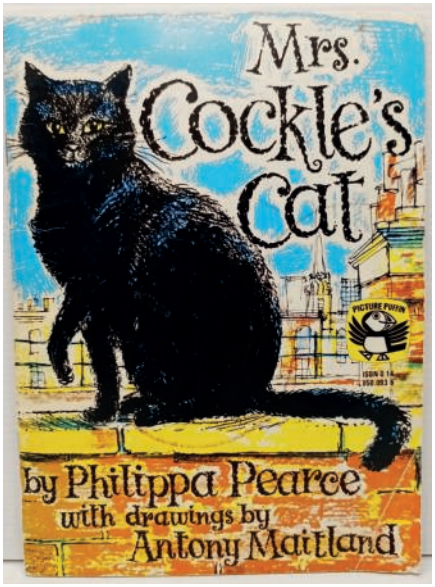
'Let us have no more of these insults,' cried the Fairy. 'Fly from that window, ungrateful King. For seven years you shall

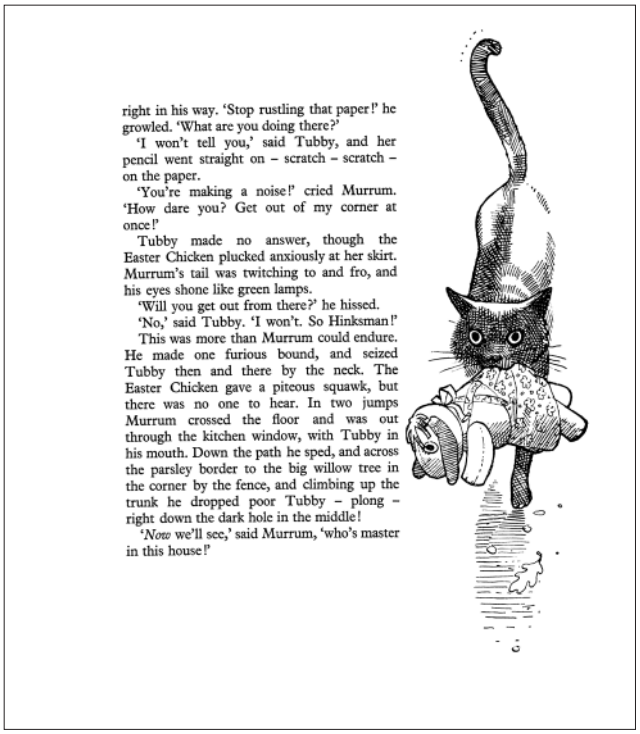
be a Blue Bird.' And as she spoke the King's face altered, his arms turned to wings, his feet to little crooked black claws. In a moment he had a slender body like a bird, covered with shining blue feathers, his beak was like ivory, his eyes were bright as stars, and a crown of white feathers adorned his head.

As soon as the transformation was complete the King uttered a dolorous cry and fled with a single beat of his wings from the gloomy palace of Mazilla. He flew on until he reached the thickest part of the wood, and there, perched upon a cypress tree, he bewailed his miserable fate. 'Alas! in seven years who knows what may happen to my darling Fiordelisa!'

[32]

This was not Antony's first success story. His very first drawings were done for Philippa Pearce's **Mrs Cockle's Cat** (1961) for which he was awarded the Kate Greenaway Medal. Soon after that he illustrated the first novel by Leon Garfield **Jack Holburn** (1964). This had been submitted to Messrs Constable as a novel but had been passed on to Grace Hogarth, their children's books editor, for her children's list, and she passed it to Tony to do some illustrations. It was an immediate success and he became one of Garfield's illustrators of choice doing some of his best children's books such as **Black Jack** (1968). Altogether he remained a highly thought of illustrator producing 21 books for other authors and four under his own authorship, the best being **Idle Jack** (1977). Most satisfying were drawings for **Poor Cecco** (1975), a commission of genius from Pam Royds who had succeeded Phillipa Pearce as children's editor at André Deutsch (the original was published in the United States with illustrations by Arthur Rackham against whom Tony's drawings were far superior).





right in his way. 'Stop rustling that paper!' he growled. 'What are you doing there?'

'I won't tell you,' said Tubby, and her pencil went straight on – scratch – scratch – on the paper.

'You're making a noise!' cried Murrum. 'How dare you? Get out of my corner at once!'

Tubby made no answer, though the Easter Chicken plucked anxiously at her skirt. Murrum's tail was twitching to and fro, and his eyes shone like green lamps.

'Will you get out from there?' he hissed.

'No,' said Tubby. 'I won't. So Hinksman!'

This was more than Murrum could endure. He made one furious bound, and seized Tubby then and there by the neck. The Easter Chicken gave a piteous squawk, but there was no one to hear. In two jumps Murrum crossed the floor and was out through the kitchen window, with Tubby in his mouth. Down the path he sped, and across the parsley border to the big willow tree in the corner by the fence, and climbing up the trunk he dropped poor Tubby – plong – right down the dark hole in the middle!

'*Now* we'll see,' said Murrum, 'who's master in this house!'

Amongst his other work was included Furniture Design, Graphic Design and Interior design. His interest in theatre also led him to create the moveable book (**Encore** 1984).

Tony died on 7 August 2025 aged 90 years; his long-term partner Roddy Taylor had died earlier in 2017.

Brian Alderson is a long-time and much-valued contributor to **Books for Keeps**, founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

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



The Wintermoor Lights, Book 2 in Dan Smith's new **Night House Files** for Barrington Stoke, is out now, 978-0008700508, £7.99 pbk.

Dan Smith chooses the first book he ever fell in love with

Choosing a favourite anything is difficult for me, but a book I wish I had written? That's really tough. **The Lord of the Flies** is a contender –- for the island and the beast and the terrible tragedy. Or **Holes** for its clever plotting and colourful characters. Or **The Outsiders** for being golden and just so cool.

But I'm going to choose **The Runaways** by Victor Canning, for being the first book I ever fell in love with. The story begins during a storm, with teenager 'Smiler' escaping police custody after being accused of a crime he didn't commit. Smiler has nowhere to go - his only parent is his father, always away at sea – so he ends up on the run, moving from place to place, finding shelter wherever he can. Meanwhile, a cheetah named Yarra escapes from Longleat safari park and finds her way onto Salisbury plain to have her cubs in privacy. Both lives become intertwined as the runaways try to survive and hold on to their freedom.

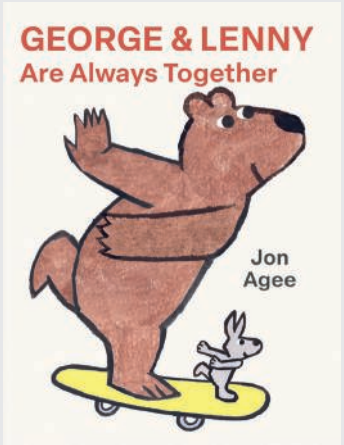
When I had that book in my hands, I was Smiler. I felt his isolation and his fear. I felt his joy when he found kindness. I was right there with him and Yarra, in the wilds of Salisbury



The Runaways by Victor Canning is available from Farrago, 978-1788423489, £8.99 pbk

BfK reviews

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



George and Lenny Are Always Together

★★★★★

Jon Agee, Scallywag Press, 40pp, 978-1836300311, £12.99, hbk

Jon Agee is a **Books for Keeps** favourite and his latest picture book definitely gets the **BfK** seal of approval. George and Lenny are best friends and always together. Until one day, Lenny (the smaller of the two of course) decideds he wants to find out what it's like to be alone. George, whizzing down a slide, arms in the air, is certain nothing could be as much fun as being together, and when Lenny says he's off to find a quite place to be alone, suggests he'd better come too. The two friends have a tetchy moment, quickly resolved, and Lenny finds his perfect place in a small tree house. It will be no surprise to anyone that after a while he's missing George – where is his friend? In a wonderful visual gag, readers will spot exactly where George is. He too has found the perfect spot to be alone and it's even better now because the two of them are together. Agee's characters, outlined in his characteristic minimalist black line, are wonderfully expressive and the text, all dialogue, is also simple but full of meaning. A perfect description of friendship, the need to balance it sometimes with time alone, all delivered with real warmth and humour. **MMa**

Minna's Masks

★★★★★

Louise Gooding, illus Irina Avgustinovich, DK, 32pp, 978-0241687925, £7.99, pb

It's a big day for little Minna: her first day at school. It's an experience that will be challenging to some degree



for all children but is particularly worrying for Minna. Minna is is neurodivergent; she has AuDHD, meaning she is autistic and has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In new places, when things feel overwhelming, or when meeting new people, Minna masks, consciously adapting her behaviour to be more socially acceptable. We see her wearing masks in different situations and having a difficult time at school when she can't find them. All is sorted with the help of a fellow classmate, who also uses masking, and support from her teacher. With lively, appealing illustrations, this picturebook sensitively explores a range of neuro-diverse experiences for children like Minna, and for their classmates and adults who know or work with them. The device of representing Minna's masks literally makes Minna's situation comprehensible even to very young children and the story is reassuring and positive. Notes at the end of the book share more information for parents and caregivers, with practical advice on ways to help and a reminder of just how exhausting masking can be, something else the story makes clear. This is the first in a planned series and Louise Gooding is also author of **Wonderfully Wired Brains** for older readers. **LS**

Put Your Shoes On

★★★★★

Polly Dunbar, Walker Books, 40pp, 978 1 5295 2469 7, £12.99 hbk

Young Josh is busy playing with his toys when an adult, presumably his mum, calls 'Josh. Josh. Josh, love. It's time to put your shoes on.' Despite the shoes being close by, Josh continues playing with the toys. More urging follows but Josh is engrossed in his imaginative play indicated by bright squiggles of all kinds.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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

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

Joy Court is a trustee of **The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA),** co-founder of All Around Reading and Conference Manager for **CILIP Youth Libraries Group.** She is a Past Chair of the **CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals.**

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

Rebecca Bate is a secondary school librarian

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

Tony Bradman is an award-winning author of children's books, editor and reviewer

Rebecca Butler writes and lectures on children's literature.

Jane Churchill is a children's book consultant.

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

Cassie Hands is qualified and chartered librarian working at Creative Learning Services, the Schools Library Service equivalent for Leicestershire.

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

Anne Horemans is a secondary school librarian.

Tanja Jennings is a judge of the CKG Book Awards, a dedicated school librarian, children's book reviewer and creative book blogger from Northern Ireland.

Louise Johns-Shepherd was CEO of the **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education** for ten years and is non-exec board member for a range of organisations.

Matthew Martin is a primary school teacher.

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

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

David O'Rourke is Programme Manager at charity **The Kids Network**

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

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

Anna Rushall is a primary school teacher and English lead.

Lucy Staines was a primary school teacher, now retired

Nick Swarbrick is Affiliate, School of Education, Oxford Brookes University

Janet Syme is a former school librarian and current member of the FCBG.

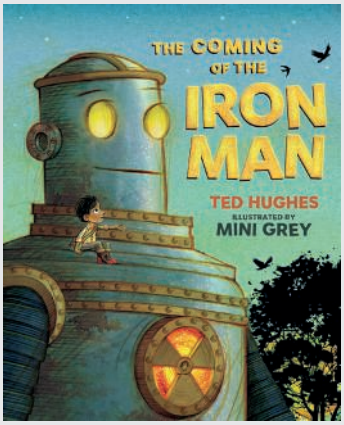
Mat Tobin teaches English and Children's Literature in Primary ITE at **Oxford Brookes University.** He also leads and teaches several modules at Masters level on Children's Literature.

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

The adult whom we've yet to see remains calm and tries again, 'We're in a hurry, because it's Aunty Nelly's BIRTHDAY PARTY.' Josh imagines a smily birthday cake, odd shaped stars and a present, gift wrapped. He also imagines other guests including Tobias and Clementine, his cousins wearing funky shoes. By this time, the adult is losing patience and, morphing into a large blue monster, yells, 'JOSH! PUT. YOUR. SHOES. ON!' Reality returns and Josh finally obeys. An apology comes from the adult plus a hug, but the sparkles are back and there's a smile on the adult's face.

A note from the author/illustrator preceding the story explains that her two sons created the 'imagination' visuals as they were growing up. Polly herself portrays so well the adults feelings of frustration and Josh's exuberant imagination. Young listeners will delight in the antics of the green caterpillar that finds its way onto almost every spread but on the back endpapers has undergone metamorphosis and flies off sporting a pair of chosen shoes.

(Throughout, Josh doesn't utter a word: is he non-verbal perhaps but eager to communicate nonetheless.) **JB**



The Coming of the Iron Man

★★★★★

Ted Hughes, illus Mini Grey, Faber, 48pp, 978-0571382736, £7.99 pbk

This specially abridged edition of **The Iron Man** takes us from his mysterious arrival, 'How far had we walked? *Nobody knows*. Where had he come from? *Nobody knows*. How was he made? *Nobody knows*.', through his dramatic tumble from the cliff and careful self-reassembly, his entrapment by the farmers and sudden re-emergence from the earth, concluding as he happily snacks on metal delicacies in the scrapyard with his new friend Hogarth. It is, of course, a joy to read aloud, the poetry, energy and precision of Ted Hughes' words given space and room to breathe across the 48 pages and perfectly celebrated in Mini Grey's new illustrations. Sometimes she frames passages of text within riveted panels, elsewhere using these strips of riveted metal to divide spreads vertically and horizontally, almost graphic novel style. Our point of view ranges as we sometimes have a bird's eye view – maybe that of the seagulls watching as he gazes at the ocean - see from his perspective, or gaze up from Hogarth's, and her Iron Man is both immensely powerful, looming on the edge of the cliff, striding through the sea, and childlike, squatting down to better hear Hogarth's plans for his future, lying on the ground as Hogarth reads to him. So full of life are the illustrations, that you can almost hear the clank of metal as he strides along, or the birdsong in the trees where Hogarth waits for him, the balance and synergy between robot and natural world perfectly maintained. A beautiful and thoughtful version of a children's classic. **MMa**

Wednesday is for Wiggling

★★★★

Eva Wong Nava, ill. Holly Sterling, Walker Books, 32pp, 978 1 5295 0991 5, £7.99 pbk

For the little girl narrator of this book, each day of the week means something different. She begins the description of each day with an alliterative declaration: 'MONDAY is for moping.' This is because her Mama has to work and drops her little one off at nursery; the moping though is short-lived. TUESDAY, we hear is for tiptoeing. Dressed in a pink tutu and matching ballet shoes and ribbon, she attends Madame Svetlana's dance class, having been dropped off by her childminder, Mandy.

A different experience takes place on subsequent days: WEDNESDAY (her Mama's day off) is for wiggling. It's also for cake baking, sharing books, hugging and snuggling. 'THURSDAY is for thinking!' and she's taken to the library by Mandy – a time for thought-provoking book sharing. 'FRIDAY is for friends!' This means her pal Ming comes home with her for a playdate. Saturday is spent at Gramma and Grandpa's allotment and later learning how to make paper cranes. SUNDAY is for riding a scooter with Daddy along the canal bank and generally catching up with the week's events as they play in the park. Goodness, what a busy schedule but the characters clearly relish their time together and the young narrator obviously feels loved. Her parents are separated but Holly Sterling's warm illustrations show the strength of this love in every spread and complement the lively text very well and together offer a good starting point for discussion. **JB**



Banana, Banana, Banana

★★★★★

Sarah Finan, Post Wave, 9781836270287 £7.99 board book

How to eat a banana: this joyous little board book celebrates the banana as a bendy treat, the 'perfect food' for a journey, seen through the eyes of a young reader.

The artwork is simple and bold, and the book's appeal is enhanced by the various shapes that lead the reader through the rhyming couplets. The text suggests that having them 'in a smoothie, through a straw' is a great way to have them: the next line has the child's full face, with the lenses of their sunspecs cut out for the conclusion 'Slurp, slurp, slurp! Can I have more?' The reader is tempted to turn the page by poking into the holes in the sunspecs. The adult sharing the book could act this out with great expression, but also could read it fairly plainly, and let the child find their own delight in 'mash mash mashing' the banana in a bowl, I found the final idea both enchanting and a little perplexing: the banana- shaped hole (which we saw from the previous place where someone nearly slipped on the skin) becomes part of a bathtime duck – do children eat bananas in the bath? And the final illustration suggests eating one 'cosy and clean in my pyjamas,' - and I can't imagine the mess that might make!

A mixture of children in terms of age, activity and ethnicity adds the richness of this lovely, silly rhyming book, which I could imagine contributing to family sayings such as 'I could eat them by the bunch' for years to come. **NS**

The One and Only You

★★★★

Shane Hegarty, ill. Ben Mantle, Hachette Children's Books, 978 1 44496 640 4, £7-99, pbk

In this 'not normal' book of facts, it takes 6 pages to reach the statement 'there is only one you.' Whilst the girl at the centre of the tale might look just like her cousin, or have her mummy's nose, all family traits when put together have created her and no one else. Back we go; Earth is 4 1/2 billion years old and from the teeniest grain of dust floating around

reviews

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

came 'the lumbering; the skies full of swallows; the whales who sing songs across seas.' But of everything that have has ever lived, there is only just one of her. Without feeling any sense of loneliness in realising this fact, there is joy in being unique and that in interacting with other people, family, friends, birds and beasts, there is celebration in being the only one. The pages zing with colour and show an emotional warmth to enhance this perfectly pitched tale of individuality. **GB**

I REALLY, REALLY DON'T LIKE PARTIES

★★★★

Angie Morgan, Otter-Barry, 978 1 915659 76 7, £8-99, pbk

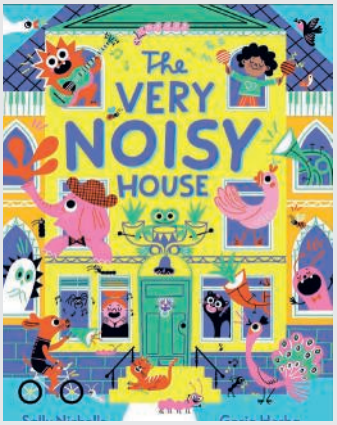
Dora's experience of parties has not been good. Too loud and too busy. When she receives Rashid's party invitation Dora knows she really doesn't want to go despite her Mum's assurances that she will have FUN. Thinking up a myriad of excuses from sore throat to a gorilla stealing her party dress, Mum heeds none, still holding out that parties are fun. The next double spread shows Dora standing alone amidst a dozen very noisy children, but then she seeks refuge when Rashid's birthday cake is produced, diving under the tablecloth where it is lovely and peaceful. Surprise! Another child is hiding there too, Tom, along with a plate full of party food. They immediately connect, and spend time discovering all the things about parties they both dislike. So the next time Dora gets a party invite, she reflects that she is not alone in disliking loud and busy parties, and that there are some just like her who prefer a different kind. Every page shows small children in all kinds of noisy, busy situations, with lots to discuss with readers whose experience of party-going maybe just beginning. The text fonts, size and spread on pages add much to the book's appeal. **GB**

Doodle and Dot: Squiggles on the Loose

★★★★★

Lily Murray, ill. Bia Melo, Oxford University Press, 978 0192787729, £7.99, pbk

Doodle and Dot, best friends, are experimenting with line. Dot adores the perfectly straight line, while Doodle loves to create with twirly-whirly, wibbly-wobbly, squiggly-wiggly lines. Racing to outrun each other, they draw whirly clouds, straight mountain sides, and get carried away with their creations. When Doodle's squiggles burst into life and start chasing the two friends, escape seems impossible. Dot to the rescue with his straight lined maze; that should fool those squiggles. Turn a page quickly and be faced with millions of multi-coloured squiggles, each with a pair of eyes bent on chasing Doodle and Dot. How to resolve the tale? With an ice cream of course; straight sided cone with creamy squiggles. The whole tale is visually arresting, and will inspire readers young and old to get creative. There is a feel of enchantment on every page, willing readers to explore the book and then to explore their own creativity. Amazing! Get doodling and dotting! **GB**



The Very Noisy House

★★★★★

Sally Nicholls, ill. Gosia Herba, Andersen Press, 24pp, 978 1 83913 287 2, £12.99, hbk

As young readers open the book, they will spot an intriguing gate and will inevitably wonder what they'll find behind it. They are taken on a guided tour of a very noisy house starting with the garden. Here we encounter a cacophony of sound from cats and bees to helicopters and doorbells.

As they explore the house children are encouraged to join in, making musical sounds in the music room, finding out about echoes, trying to be quiet, whispering and tiptoeing, or being very loud, shouting and banging. There are funny sections with a 'silly room' and a 'mixed-up room' where we find owls bleating like sheep and wolves hooting like owls. There are scary pages too; watch out for lion waiting to roar at you and the ghost in the spooky cellar.

This is an engaging, interactive book with a simple but clever premise and lots of opportunities for under-fives to explore sounds in the world around them and to make sounds of their own.

It is another highly successful book from the team who created The Nose, Toes and Tummy book and is likely to become a firm favourite with the very young.

Fortunately for parents and carers, the book ends with the peaceful sounds of bedtime. Great fun. **SMc**

5 – 8 **Infant/Junior**

New talent

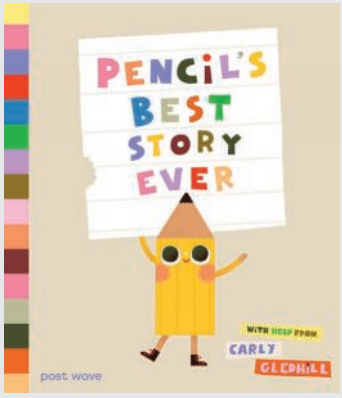
The Great Green Island

★★★★★

Becky Colvin, Macmillan Children's Books, 32pp, 978-1035045839, £7.99 pbk



Ali and her dad live high on the hill of a great green island. To the busy people of the fishing village, says the text, the island was simply their home, 'but to Ali it was a place of wonder!' Readers will agree with Ali as we see her exploring the island, a glorious cross section giving a hint that there's more to this island than first appears. Ali's only disappointment is that her dad and the other villagers won't join her on her adventures across the island, arguing that they're always too busy. Frustrated she makes a wish one evening for a way to make everyone stop. Observant young readers will spy that something is listening in. Sure enough, the next morning, all the fish have disappeared. This is illustrated in a gorgeous full page underwater scene, perfectly blue, perfectly fish-free, a shaft of sunlight diagonally cutting across the page. Now there's no excuse not to take time off, Dad and Ali go searching for the fish, finding them somewhere that is a huge surprise to them, though perhaps not to that observant reader! The variety of composition, the lovely use of light and colour, a cracking story and gentle signpost to the importance of the great green in all our lives makes this a very special picturebook. Becky Colvin won the 2023 Macmillan Prize for Illustration and is a talent to watch. **MMa**



Pencil's Best Story Ever

★★★★

Carly Gledhill, Post Wave Publishing, 32pp, 978 1836270256, £12.99 hbk

This is a story written by Pencil, aided and abetted by author/artist Carly Gledhill. The main character is Pencil's friend, Peanut, and he's going on a BIG adventure, an adventure that sees him venturing into the Super Spooky Forest, despite the warning signs at its edge. Therein though, another character Jelly, also gets involved in the adventure and before long the two of them encounter a large grizzly bear. Fortunately for them both, Bear chases them up a hill but despite his rumbly tummy, fails to consume them. Jelly, he says, is his friend and he has a nut allergy. so Peanut is safe too. And so it continues with the unexpected appearance of peas, crocodiles, a gigantic octopus and a ginormous snowball. Talk about a twisting, turning narrative: how will it all end? Happily, it appears, but not, ever after.

Young readers/listeners will delight in this, not least because of the way Pencil carries the story he's writing with him throughout and treats everyone to extracts from time to time. Silly and huge fun, both in the vibrant visuals and verbally (there are speech bubbles, signs and lists as well as the main narrative.)

The book as a whole demonstrates the kind of imaginative, co-operative play that adults, especially those in education, love to see children engaging in. **JB**

The Best Jollof Rice Ever!

★★★★

Onyinye Iwu, Otter-Barry, 32pp, 978 1 9156 59484, £12.99 hbk

Kamsi and Kwame are best friends and each says jollof rice is their favourite food. (Jollof is a tasty, spicy rice and vegetable dish that originated in West Africa and is now enjoyed all over the world.) Both of their mums make superb jollof and each boy considers his mum's to be superior. To settle the matter, Kamsi suggests they each make their own jollof and see which really is the best.

Out into the garden they go and each collects some ingredients. However both boys are tricksters and each chooses items that nobody would want to find in a rice dish – muddy puddle water, a caterpillar, ants and dried-up chewing gum. Yuck! What a mess each boy has created. Now what? Seemingly they've completely forgotten the purpose of the competition.

5 – 8 **Infant/Junior** continued

In the meantime both mums have been working away in the kitchen and call the boys to come and join them in cooking their favourite dish. In they both go, don their aprons and prepare the ingredients. Soon a gorgeous aroma emanates from the large pot. My taste buds were tingling as I watched the children clear up and lay the table. Then it's time to sit around the table (Grandpa included) to share the meal. The wise mums have this to say: 'See, alone we make good jollof ...' - that's Kwame's mum. 'But together we make the best jollof!' So says Kamsi's mum and their sons both shout 'TOGETHER!' They also decide that henceforward they will always work together, the occasional trick notwithstanding.

Onyinye Iwu has most certainly served up a tasty offering of readers and listeners. Humour is one of her main ingredients and her vibrant illustrations are a feast for the eyes. There's a recipe for Kamsi and Kwame's best jollof rice for those who want to try making it, but don't forget to find somebody to cook with. **JB**



The Wild Robot on the Island

★★★★★

Peter Brown, Piccadilly Press, 9781835872645, £12.99 hbk; 9781835871652, 7.99 pbk

NB: This book, as the author puts it in an afterword, 'is a simplified version of the Wild Robot,' first in a trilogy of books and a highly acclaimed animated motion picture. This review won't discuss the trilogy or the film adaptation of Book 1 but instead deal with **The Wild Robot on the Island** on its own merits.

Roz the robot is adrift after the ship carrying her loses her crate in a storm. The crate comes to land on a natural Utopia - 'Everything was just right on the island.' – and Roz, programmed to find a way of belonging, watches and imitates the animals, and by learning how they communicate, makes friends. Her guardianship of an egg, and the relationship with Brightbill the gosling that hatches from it, form the major thread of the story.

The illustrations are everything the careful reader would want: the ship losing one square on the endpaper, the crate cube attended by gulls coming to the island; these are engaging pieces of artwork. My favourite picture has to be where we see Roz hiding among the seaweed-encrusted rock, where Peter Brown has used the light in a rain storm to incredible effect, and Roz's eyes shine out from among the weed camouflage. For animal lovers there are some enchanting vignettes, as we move to Roz's care for Brightbill. The montage of the gosling grown up - 'Mama, I'm talking...' 'Mama, I'm flying!' is both funny and moving. The seasons change, and Brightbill flies off on migration. Peter Brown makes effective use of colours to show us the changing year, until Brightbill returns and again 'Everything was right on the island.'

Choosing a proposed readership for this was hard: the illustrations are rich but need some careful exploration; the text sometimes uses vocabulary a younger reader might find challenging – but on reflection this is not in any way badly placed, or even a celebration of the novels: it is lovely, simple telling of a story, with lots of issues around belonging and the beauty of the world to ponder. **NS**

These are my Rocks

★★★★

Bethan Woollvin, Francis Lincoln Children's Books, 9781836004653, £7.00, pbk

Bethan Woollvin is the author and illustrator best known for the gloriously inventive **Little Red**. Here she explores something maybe closer to home: what collecting is and how varied it can be. We are invited into what seems like Woollvin's own collections (there is a page from her at the end, explain that she has a 'lifelong love of collecting things,') and here we see collections of pointy things, delicate things, things with too many legs...There is humour here, and details to ponder as the reader explores Woollvin's goggly-eyed rocks, teapots and foodstuffs. What are the invisible things she has collected? How do you collect bubbles?

There are some issues in the voice the author has chosen to employ: Bethan Woollvin addresses the reader, a singular reader, directly, in a one-sided dialogue that – for me, at any rate – doesn't always quite come off. I am not sure how a group of young children would respond to 'I've heard you'd like to be a collector...But I'll warn you, it's hard work' or the pages which show 'my enormous collection of fan mail.' This (invented?) voice seems to jar. Similarly, there is a question about how one starts collecting that the author seems not to address. The focus may be described as curating: most children who gather and sort things are already making choices about certain things – rocks, petals, wind-up toys – and are not looking for a varied series of collections which an adult is keeping on a whim... But this is perhaps churlish: this is, after all, a lively, funny book first and foremost, with vivid, typical Woollvin artwork, designed to give an enthusiastic collector something to delight in. **NS**

Come Back Gosling

★★★★

Anne Booth, ill. David Litchfield, Templar books, 978 1 800 783 072, £12.99, hbk

A little girl has the love of a small gosling and together they explore a mutual love of stories. The girl loves to read aloud to her friend, high up and cosy in her treehouse. Visits to the library supply constantly different worlds to enter, but each world is never quite right for the girl. When she hides a book from Gosling, refusing to share its contents, Gosling gives way to curiosity and at night he hunts for the book in question. When Gosling accidentally falls from the tree house and discovers his ability to fly, (seen in the hidden book,) he flaps away and eventually joins a V of geese flying high. The story resolves with Gosling returning the following Spring, the friends joyfully reuniting. The colours are vivid throughout and portray well the girl's and the gosling's feelings as they explore their shared yet different worlds. Every picture extends the reader's understanding of the special friendship between the child and the bird, and the rich use of colour makes the story come alive. The endpapers glow with bright sunshine and set the scene for all the adventures to come. Delightful. **GB**

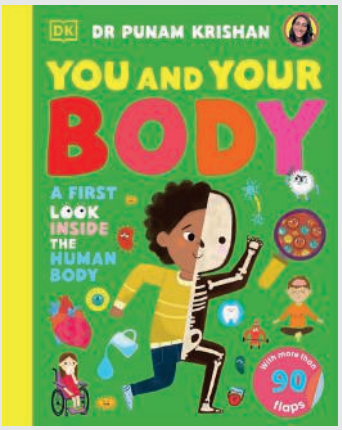


Noah's New Home

★★★★★

Zeshan Akhlet, ill. Nabila Adini, Templar, 978 1 78741 936 0, £7.99, pbk

TThis book thoughtfully explores displacement, trauma and the strength that can come from community. It will resonate with anyone dealing with grief and anxiety. Despite facing death at one stage, the book feels full of hope. Opening with noisy explosions, the displaced child Noah is terrified, remembering the skies exploding outside his old home. The illustrations show how terrified Noah is, and it takes much reassurance to make him understand that they have left their home of terror, where his father had been killed. They have arrived as refugees in a strange country where no one speaks his language, but finds his mother and himself supported by a caring community. So, a fireworks party which caused Noah to flee to the dark inside of a cupboard, becomes a revelation. With support from his family and friends Noah no longer fears the bangs, and stares with wonder at the starburst splashes up in the sky, reminding him of the jasmine flowers so beloved at his old home. They will remember his father with the piece of home they carry in their hearts. At the beginning every page shows the trauma Noah carried with him from his war-torn homeland, the latter illustrations show a shared joy within a new community. A book to share in every area of our modern life, one to build empathy. **GB**



You and Your Body: A First Look Inside the Human Body

★★★★

Punam Krishan, ill. Verónika Chaves Morales, Dorling Kindersley, 24pp, 9780241675502, £12.99 hbk

You and Your Body is a one-stop 'first look inside' for everything young readers need to know about the human body and has been created by TV's Dr Punam Krishan. Each spread covers a different aspect of the human body including the heart and blood, lungs and breathing, brain and senses, the digestive system, the skeleton and muscular system, skin and hair, kidneys and the bladder, and even a spread dedicated to illnesses and germs- this book has it all!

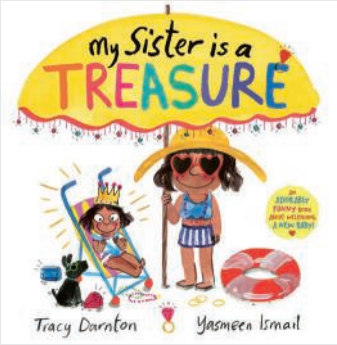
The pages are bright, well-laid out and attractively illustrated with inclusive and diverse characters. The book itself is in a good-sized sturdy board book format and comes with durable flaps, ensuring it's a robust text for the classroom, library or at home. Information is delivered in accessible snippets of text and is well-pitched for the intended age group.

One point to mention for more conservative readers- the kidneys and bladder page includes illustrations of a naked boy and girl with flaps that show the relevant organs and what they do. The nudity doesn't feel unnecessarily done but within context, and does not cover reproductive organs for those wishing

5 – 8 **Infant/Junior** continued

to avoid questions related to puberty and reproduction for young readers.

Overall this would be a great addition to school or public libraries for those wishing to support leisure reading or topic work. It would also work nicely as a gift for young readers at home to share with an adult. It's attractive, durable and informative- a real gem. **CH**



My Sister is a Treasure

★★★

Tracy Darnton. Illustrator Yasmeen Ismail, Simon and Schuster, 32pp, 9781471187711, £7.99 pbk

The arrival of a new baby is always an experience. Here a baby sister has arrived and all the grown ups are coming to see her. They all describe her in strange ways – a treasure, a ray of sunshine, a dimply dumpling. But if she is a ray of sunshine, why is it raining? Granny called me her dimply dumpling...so can you have two dimply dumplings in a family? These terms of endearment are confusing- especially if, as a young child might do, they are interpreted literally. But it doesn't matter because an older sister knows exactly what her baby sister is. Well, a snuggly bunny of course – and a perfect sister

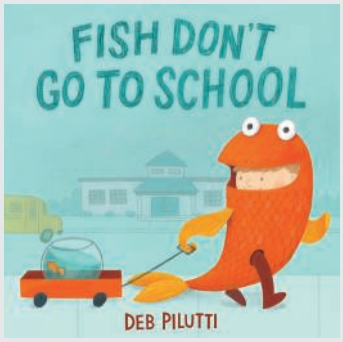
This is a fun book with a very positive take on that familiar situation- the arrival of a new baby. Here there are no tantrums rather an enjoyable play with language that taps into the imagination. Yasmeen Ismail's quirky illustrations enhance this text. Her bold use of line and colour bring this little girl to life as she strides across the page, waves her cutlass in the air, races on her bicycle with that special delivery. Her smile is infectious – as infectious as the humour in the text. This is a book to raise a smile; an affirmation of a new family member rather than a traumatic experience and it is all the more welcome for that. **FH**

Fish Don't Go to School

★★★

Deb Pilutti, Christy Ottaviano Books, Little Brown, 40pp, 9780316565271, £14.99 hbk

Henry wears his wonderful fish suit everywhere – it has shiny scales, flippery fins and a long swishy tail; it feels like wearing a hug. So when



Henry starts school, he wears his fish suit even though he is told 'Fish don't go to school'. While it certainly makes him feel good, there are aspects that prove more difficult. No one sits next to him at circle time, he is able to paint with his fins but he cannot cut out his pictures. A tail isn't very good for scrambling through tunnels – so maybe his teacher could look after it and swapping his fish head for cat ears is a good move at storytime. Will he wear his suit again? Well certainly – a lovely top made of shiny scales – it feels like wearing a hug.

An attractive story about that all-important moment of starting school, of leaving the familiar behind to face the unknown. Of course a hug is necessary. The author taps into the pattern of the school day as Henry moves from sitting by himself to gradually finding the confidence to join in – even to support a new friend. The familiarity will be enjoyed by her audience both affirming what has already been the experience and helping those still unsure. Her illustrations done in a mixture of gouache and watercolour add to this atmosphere, the colours creating both warmth and a strong sense of place. Interest and rhythm are introduced through varying expansive double page spreads with vignettes set against a white ground and single page images allowing different perspectives and attention to details. A reassuring story to add to stock. **FH**

Amelia Cheeseheart Investigates: Mummy Mayhem

★★★

Cat Weldon and Nene Lonergan, 120pp, Mini Guppy, 9781916558359, £7.99 pbk

Amelia Cheeseheart is a brave mouse who lives in a hot air balloon in the gift shop of a museum. With her pet spider – Webster (who is very keen on bananas, for reasons unknown) - she loves exploring in her airplane like her famous namesake. With all sorts of exhibits, from Romans to dinosaurs, there is much to investigate. When all sorts of precious items start disappearing from the museum, Amelia and Webster have a crime to solve!

The pair cheerfully soar from

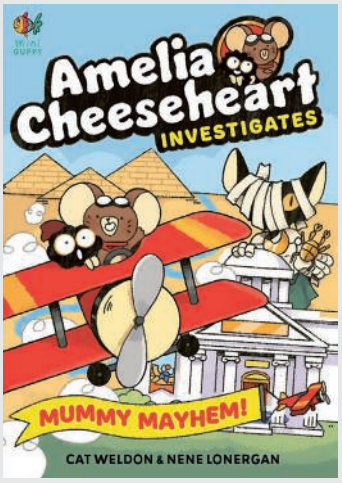


exhibit to exhibit and, wherever they land, they find an historical band of very angry mice, eager to deliver revenge upon whoever has stolen their beloved relic. This is bad news for Amelia and the museum, as it seems certain to lead to war between the Vikings, and the Romans, and the cave-mice! The race is on to discover the true culprit before battle begins.

Amelia and Webster's investigation takes them to some very unexpected places, several of which are dangerous and require daring escapes in some of the book's most exciting scenes. The pair learn that things are often more complicated than they seem and that the line between good and evil is not always straightforward. There are important lessons to learn about friendship and open-mindedness, which Amelia faces with an endearing, charming naivety.

Mummy Mayhem is not necessarily an effective way to introduce children to the subject of history: there are too many tired stereotypes and anachronisms. However, like Amelia Earhart, it has an adventurous spirit. Amelia and Webster zoom about the museum and the book's action-packed illustrations add much to the excitement.

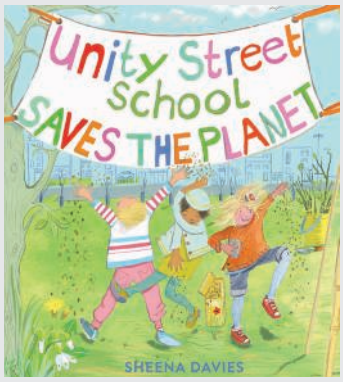
This is Mini Guppy's first publication, and their aim is to bridge the gap from picture books to more mature fiction. Mummy Mayhem sometimes feels a little juvenile for those young readers aiming to push themselves, but the manageable language and playful tone certainly feel like a positive next step forward from picture books. **SD**

If You were Here

★★★

Kathy Stinson. Illustrated by Maya McKibbin, Greystone Kids, 40pp 97811771649926, £11.99, hdbk

A child explores the natural world around, taking the reader on a visual journey through meadow, forest and down to the sea. Together we hear the sounds of the wind, the leaves, the birds and insects. We feel the grass beneath our feet, the tickle of the sea, we can smell the earth and taste the salt on the breeze. 'I wish you were here ' says the child speaking directly from the page. The illustrations are lush, vibrant, colour saturated covering each double spread following the onward movement of the child who is very much at the centre of the images. Who is the child talking to? This is a book about absence – maybe a friend who has moved away, maybe a grandparent has died. Through this exploration of the natural world it could help its audience to find a connection, to share through experiencing the physical world. The book would be a good basis to open discussion and comment among its audience – an Early Years class perhaps, or family where the situation has arisen; how to connect with someone who is not there. Discussion would also help widen the background. While the artist draws us into a world of trees, woods, rivers and sea this would not necessarily be a familiar environment or the experience of many children. The situation and the feelings however are universal. **FH**



Unity Street School Saves the Planet

★★★

Sheena Davies, Otter Barry, 32pp, 978 1 915659 61 3, £13.99, hbk

After 'The Green Team' came to Unity Street school and tell the children about the damaging effects of climate change, the children are inspired to take action to help save the planet. They decide to create a wild space in their school by transforming a disused part of the old playground. With more help from the Green Team together with their long-suffering premises officer, they clear the area of rubbish, raise funds, grow saplings, create a pond and plant wildflowers. Eventually the Unity Street wild meadow is opened.

This is a beautifully illustrated, awareness-raising picture book which may encourage discussion about some of the impacts of climate change including plastic pollution and wildfires. It may also inspire children to take small steps of their own to make a difference. In fact, the book ends with a call to action with simple and achievable suggestions for young readers such as switching to reusable bottles and planting vegetables. It may also lead to children recognising and respecting efforts being made in their own neighbourhoods to create wild spaces in parks and playgrounds. **SMc**

8 – 10 Junior/Middle



Good Bits

★★★★

Kes Gray, illus Ruby Wright, Dorling Kindersley, 32pp, 978-0241720608, £8.99 pbk

Tales told by an expert, this new story collection from Kes Gray and Ruby Wright is all killer, no filler. The dozen or so stories are pared right down so that readers are presented with the good bits only: the very minute the space ship lands in the garden; the confrontation with the school bully and his comeuppance; the very moment the friendliest young pirate realises it's time to make a quick exit from the crow's nest. Each one is a bright burst of adventure and imagination, with exactly enough to leave readers smiling, entertained and thinking about what might happen next too. In an age of diminishing concentration spans, it's exactly what's needed, and a demonstration of what books do so brilliantly, inviting the reader to dive into the action head first, engage their imagination to fill in the background as required and be ready to enjoy whatever treats the story and the author has in store. The stories are varied, some funny, some quirky, some that are surprisingly tender, but they are all delivered at the same speedy pace, Ruby Wright's illustrations matching Kes Gray for with, humour and inventiveness. Good bits? You get the best bits here. **Mma**

The Unfamous Diaries of Daisy Brewster

★★★

Jenny Valentine, ill. Hannah McCaffrey, Simon & Schuster, 208pp, 9781398544369, £7.99 pbk

Jenny Valentine will already be a familiar name to many and here she begins a new series pitched at slightly younger readers, offering an alternative (but very much in a similar style) to **Dork Diaries.**

We meet the main character, Daisy, at a point when she appears to be everything many children at this age are not: popular, confident, and setting out to secure the best part in her school play. So far, most readers will relate to Daisy's every day life, if not feeling slightly envious of how easy she finds it all. That is until her film star cousin turns up. Daisy worries about sharing the spotlight, about whether her own acting ambitions in the school play will suddenly appear underwhelming, and whether she should have to share the ins and outs of daily life with her cousin. But Maxxy's arrival brings with it perspective that Daisy could never have anticipated – suddenly she is left questioning whether her ambitions for success on the stage are everything she had hoped for.

Perhaps this title has an admirable message for youngsters who seem ever more determined that being popular or achieving celebrity status are effective ways to judge your life. Though arguably by making this the central theme of the book, perhaps just more focus has been given to this particular desire instead of providing a welcome escape from the topic? It is of course very readable, and will be welcomed by fans who have already engaged in similar series – and anything that keeps this age reading is to be valued. It isn't a series that will be providing young readers with any challenge though, and for this reason perhaps its value is limited. **ARu**



Twice Upon A Time

★★★★★

Michelle Harrison, ill. Natalie Smillie, Simon & Schuster, 336pp, 9781471197673, £7.99 pbk

Michelle Harrison has rightly carved herself a place amongst the best junior fiction writers for offering a sense of mystery and encouraging a challenged readership to complete 'just one more page'. Twice upon a time is another fine example of this skill, providing an engaging and fast-paced adventure alongside believable characters that young readers will relate to in many of their trials, if not in their exceptional powers to manipulate time!

Meredith and Rose are twins and although identical, their differences are apparent from the outset – something that will please many twins reading the title. The pair are born either side of the clock striking new year and so are inevitably bonded and yet set apart by the years they were born and their personalities. Yet the pair share an unusual ability to stop time, as their mother discovers at their birth – and this is to become a central feature in the plot.

The children leave London with their mum, who works in art restoration. They arrive at Fox House which has all the expected trappings of any mystery setting: there is a section of the house which has been damaged and has been left untouched, there is a locked study, the house itself is far from the city life the children have led in London. The characters the children meet are equally well developed and characteristically questionable – a missing woman, the death of a lord, an abandoned baby. There are characters too that readers will instantly like and empathise with like Ben – and so, both the twins and the readers quickly adjust to this strange landscape and begin to unearth the secrets held at Fox House.

Truly engaging, right to the end, offering readers both escapism and much craved adventure and teachers a quality text with challenging language and plot development – both to support book talk and to support developing writing, this is a book with much appeal. **Aru**

Hero The Highway Girl

★★★★

Penny Chrimes, Firefly, 252pp, 978 1 9177 18028, £8.99, pbk

A wonderfully atmospheric adventure story of bravery and derring -do following in the footsteps of classics in this genre such as **The Wolves of Willoughby Chase**.

Set in a time of highwaymen and treachery where the divide between rich and poor is wide and when girls and women have no agency over their own lives, our feisty heroine Hero, a rich heiress, decides she must take action.

She needs to dodge a marriage proposal and the only way she can see to escape is to be held up by a highwayman. But when the notorious highwayman Gentleman Jack holds up her carriage he gets more than he bargained for when Hero orders him to kidnap her. Against his better judgement he takes Hero and her pet wolf Flow back to his hidden cave, gloriously kitted out with candelabra and posh stolen furniture. The two form an unlikely alliance, Hero with her wolf and Jack with his beloved horse, Diabolo. They all have something of the wild and untamed about them.

Hero longs to be a highwayman herself, to gain her freedom, and is a willing learner but she is headstrong and wilful and almost at every turn hijacks Jack's plans, putting both their lives in jeopardy. Jack is finally captured but Hero rescues him in a daring jail breakout.

Hero and Jack are chalk and cheese yet have much in common as they were both left as orphans as very young children, and had led lonely lives up until meeting each other. Both feel as if they are missing something deep within themselves.

The adventure is fast paced with many twists and turns. Chapters are short and snappy with Hero and Jack taking turns to narrate the story. It is a satisfying and heartwarming tale with ends neatly tied up, and the villain getting his rightful come-uppance. It would be the perfect story for children moving on to greater challenges after early readers. **JC**

When the Storm Comes

★★★

Polly Ho-Yen, Knights Of, 234pp, 978 1 91582 006 8, £7.99 pbk

Mali is missing his fiend Shiyoon, who has moved to America, but is unable to articulate his feelings and starts skipping school. Shiyoon had brought Mali out of his shell as they were working on drawing a comic together. The bane of their lives is Petey, who throws his weight around in class and torments Mali about his real name, Amaryllis, but Shiyoon had been there to protect Mali.

To encourage Mali back to school, their heavily pregnant teacher, Mrs Devine picks Petey, Mali and two girls, Jonesy and Fara, to choose the longlist for a new children's book Award. It has been raining non-stop and while the children are in the library choosing books, the storm becomes much worse until the thunder and lightning fuses the lights, the telephones go down and even worse, the library doors are locked shut trapping the children and their teacher inside. Even the Wi-Fi isn't working so no-one can send any messages. It is a terrifying situation.

The children all react in different ways and Petey upsets them all by eating the remaining food that was to be shared between the children. They discover there is a janitor still on the premises and he manages to free the library door, but the flood now covers the bottom floor of the school, and they still cannot escape. Then Mrs Devine starts to go into labour. After various failed attempts to escape, Mali climbs up a ventilation pipe to fetch help.

8 – 10 **Junior**/**Middle** continued

All four children are thrown together as unlikely companions, but throughout their ordeal they begin to forge a friendship and to trust each other and work together as a team, learning surprising things about each other in the process and that they all have their own demons to face. By the end they are determined to do what they can to fight climate change. **JC**



The Girl with Gills

★★★★

Becca Rogers, Zephyr, 272pp, 978 1 0359 1238 4, £7.99 pbk

This accomplished debut gives us a refreshingly original, beautifully described fantasy world which combines snippets of real history, traditional folklore and a dash of modern environmental concerns. More importantly, at its heart, it is a cracking adventure story with a genuine heroine fighting for family, friendship and her community. Twelve-year-old Effra is a Larker; one of a secret community who live in houseboats along the river, making their living from trading treasures trawled from the mud. Their secret, which must be concealed for their safety from the land-dwelling Lubbers, is that over time they have developed gills to enable them to breathe underwater. Effra has been the sole carer of her young brother Fleet since the death of their beloved Grandfather, Boppa. There are two neighbouring Larkers who keep an eye on them, but she is often lonely, grieving and anxious. When she rescues a girl trapped in the mud, she tentatively enjoys the company of one who shares her passion for the river and for what the girl Bow calls mudlarking. But when an evil Larker called Rivermun is released back into the river after committing a terrible crime many years ago, he is out for revenge. He blames Effra's family for his punishment and unless she can bring him the river serpent's pearl, which he believes will reopen his gills, he will take Fleet and imprison him forever. To do this Effra must bargain with the ancient and powerful Mother River and outwit the terrifying Rat Queen in order to confront the truly terrible river serpent. To save her brother she would venture anything and fortunately her new friend Bow is determined to help her and proves to be an excellent ally, as is an adorable sentient rat called Clay, who Effra befriends in the Rat Queen's kingdom. Eel island is where Rivermun has his lair and where he keeps all his captives. The description of this nightmarish amalgam of rubbish, litter and plastics echoes real life environmental horrors and it here that the Effra must defeat him. Friendship and found family are what save the day (and the river) in a thoroughly satisfying and exciting conclusion to an action packed and excellently plotted quest. **JCo**

Will Wolfheart

★★★

Teresa Heapy, ill. Adam Beer, David Fickling Books, 272pp, 978 1 78845 341 7, £7.99 pbk

This debut novel from an acclaimed and popular picture-book author, will immediately find fans amongst dog lovers because of the strength of the relationship between Will and his adored dog Whisker. However, this is an exciting action-packed adventure that will also have a much wider appeal, helped by the brilliantly atmospheric illustrations throughout. We cannot help but empathise with Will who is forced to move with his family to a flat in the city, because of his mother's new job, and must leave his beloved Whisker living with his Gran-Mishti, because no dogs are allowed in the flat. He lives for the weekend when he can return, and they can play together, but dreads Sunday afternoons when he has to leave again. But one Sunday afternoon, Will and Whisker are magically transported to the realm of Wolf World, that is as beautiful as it is dangerous, where Whisker is revealed to be a wolf. The icing on the cake is that Will and Whisker can now 'speak' to each other and this deeper communication brings them both intense joy. They have been summoned by the ailing leader of Maple Pack to help restore the realm and defend the pack against the marauding Flint Pack. It is when Will is threatened by Flint that Whisker comes into his power, but there is much to learn. Can they really be accepted into Maple Pack and why has another human arrived in the world without a dog by her side? They eventually discover Clara is mourning the loss of her beloved Daisy and about the connection between Daisy, Whisker and Maple Pack. We also learn about the vital link between the three moons of Wolf World and wolves with mooncraft like Whisker, but Will cannot help but wonder that if Whisker is so vital to Wolf World, will they ever be able to return home? This fast-paced adventure offers a satisfying mix of thrills and emotion, with some sensitive themes around family and loss that are deftly handled and satisfactorily resolved. **JCo**

Dante N. Ferno is Not a Loser

★★★

Brian Gordon, 247pp, Macmillan, 9781035063598, £7.99, pbk

In this new illustrated comedy series for children, a hapless young demon boy fights hard to reinvent himself after a terrible time at school.

Dante N. Ferno is about to move on to high school and is absolutely determined to rid himself of his reputation as a loser, which was harshly earned after an unfortunate trousers-down-in-the-cafeteria incident. It is bad enough putting up with his flatulent brother and pest of a sister at home, but school is even worse. Dante is perpetually tortured by a hoard of bullies, constantly reminding him of 'the incident' and making his life a nightmare.

Dante is a resilient demon, though, and makes a plan to reinvent himself as he moves up to high school, where he hopes to avoid an entirely new group of bullies and show everyone that, deep down, he is the coolest of cool. His plan has some merit (such as getting good at 'sports stuff' and wearing sunglasses) but Dante is delightfully clueless when it comes to social situations: his efforts to look cool make his parents think he has become a mime artist!

Nevertheless – despite managing to draw the attention of the head teacher on his first day at high school – Dante strikes it lucky when an angelic boy called Virgil sits next to him in class. Though neither boy enjoys positive social status, they are stronger as a pair, and Virgil's intelligence helps to fend off the bullies to a certain extent. When they spot a sign saying 'Dante N. Ferno is a loser' they hatch a plan to win the school quiz competition and shed their painful reputation.

The story's mythical setting is somewhat confusing and adds little to the enjoyment of the story. Apart from his tail and horns, and the fact that the food in his house is always burned, there is very little evidence of Dante being a devil boy. The other characters (monsters, unicorns, human flies, angels) are also only discernible as non-humans by Gordon's hilarious, characterful drawings.

Many children will empathise with Dante's situation of managing the social challenges of moving up to high school and – demon-boy or not – Dante is delightful company. His misplaced confidence and swagger provide great comedy, with expertly-timed drawings illustrating Dante's whimsical asides to the reader.

With such a compelling main character, there is much for young readers to enjoy about Dante N. Ferno is Not a Loser and, with all of Heaven and Earth...and Hell to explore, there is plenty of scope for future episodes. **SD**

The Girl Who Raced the World

★★★

Nat Harrison, 298pp, Piccadilly Press, 9780008667343, £12.99, hbk

This fast-paced reimagining of Jules Verne's **Around the World in 80 Days** retells the story from the perspective of Maggie, a determined young girl with a mysterious link to Phileas Fogg by way of his French servant, Passpartout.

Young Maggie arrives in London with a letter from her mother and little else. She is immediately swept into a world of trouble when she bumps into Detective Fix and loses her letter! Maggie finds herself destitute and in dire need of employment at precisely the moment when Mr Fogg intends to begin his epic adventure around the globe in time to win a handsome bet with his peers at The Reform Club. Luckily for her, Fogg is persuaded of the benefits of taking on another manservant: Maggie has her ticket to adventure!

Maggie's travels are exciting and breathless, as the group lurch from one disaster to the next. From a Calcutta courtroom, to joining a circus, and various episodes of getting lost, Maggie proves herself stoic and resourceful in a fix. She relies heavily on the kindness of strangers, though, who tend to arrive just in time to provide sage advice when Maggie needs it most. The most compelling is Valentine – a fearless and sharp-witted woman who acts as a guardian angel for Maggie and a catalyst for the story. There is also Jack – a hungry boy working on a ship – who offers loyalty and humour near the start of Maggie's journey. These characters, and a handful of others, add a pleasing variety and originality to the familiar feel of Fogg, Fix and Passpartout.

As Maggie accompanies him on the journey, she grapples with the moral quandary of whether to believe Phileas Fogg is capable of the theft of which he is accused. Is he a villain, or a misunderstood adventurer with a heart of gold? He bribes guards, hands out cash to the needy, and is constantly on the run—but it is never quite clear what for. Maggie's determination to find out one way or the other adds a level of intrigue to the story (for those readers not familiar with Verne's original).

The pace of the story is frantic. In order to fit an entire global circumnavigation into just a few hundred pages, descriptions of atmosphere and location sometimes feel underdeveloped, and there is rarely time to take in the scenery or savour the cultural richness of Maggie's adventure. Encounters with helpful (and unhelpful) characters happen so frequently that the world begins to feel oddly small, with familiar faces repeatedly popping up in far-flung places.

The book makes a valiant effort

8 – 10 **Junior/Middle** continued

to modernise some of the themes from Verne's classic novel. Maggie learns that doing the right thing often means breaking the rules—but also that money has a curious way of smoothing everything over. Fogg's immense fortune repeatedly saves them from trouble, offering a less-than-ideal message about how problems are solved.

The Girl Who Raced the World is an ambitious retelling with a cast of fearless female characters. It stays true to the spirit of Verne's original, but it rarely gives readers the time or space to enjoy the journey. A final twist opens the door for new adventures for Maggie, Fogg and the team which, though a pleasing notion, does beg the question: wasn't Around the World in 80 Days exciting enough already? **SD**



Bright Birds: and their brilliant brains

★★★★

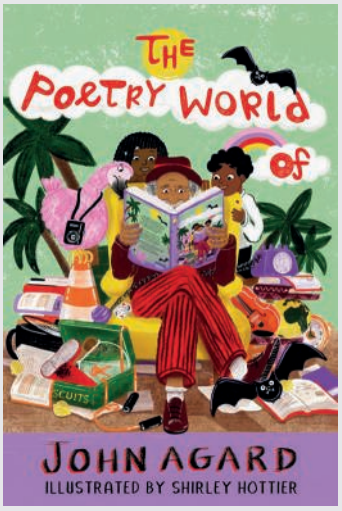
Kate Read, Two Hoots, 96pp, 9781529088182, £20.00 hbk

What do woodpeckers, drongos, blue tits and keas all have in common? According to this enchanting information book by award-winning illustrator Kate Read (whose debut One Fox won the Mathical Book Prize and an Ezra Jack Keats Honour), quite a lot. With a foreword by zoologist and wildlife presenter Megan McCubbin, it becomes a beautiful celebration of bird intelligence: memory, mimicry, tool-use and more.

From the embossed cover to the thick, luxurious paper stock, every detail has been carefully considered. Inside, themed spreads introduce clever birds: memory masters, engineering experts, toolbuilders, even predators that plan ahead. A jackdaw that recognises your face, drongos who mimic alarm calls, or Japanese crows cracking nuts using cars—all upend our assumptions about 'bird brains'.

Read's collage and monoprint illustrations are bold, graphic and full of flair. Her birds practically sing off the page, each composition gliding with rhythm and colour. One standout spread explores the astonishing memory of the Clark's nutcracker, which caches over 100,000 nuts and seeds each summer and retrieves them months later. Here, the text is sharp and precise, balancing scientific fact with storytelling economy, while the artwork overlays richly textured scenes and sweeping flight lines. The result is both poetic and precise — a visual symphony that rewards careful looking. With invaluable input from ornithological consultant Phil Atkinson (BTO), the scientific foundations are solid and confidently delivered.

McCubbin's foreword places bird intelligence within the wider context of biodiversity loss and conservation, lending urgency to the wonder. This is more than a collection of avian facts — it's a vibrant, intellectually framed, visually generous invitation to see and care differently. A beautiful information text that soars. **MT**

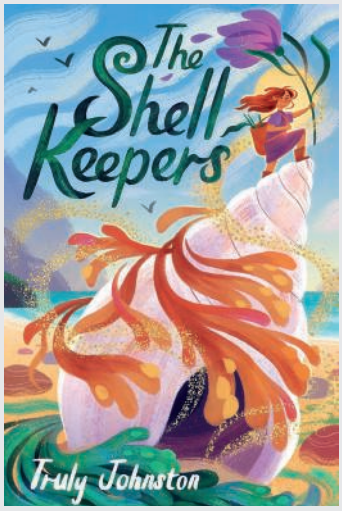


The Poetry World of John Agard

★★★★★

John Agard, ill. Shirley Hottier, Otter-Barry Books, 132pp, 978 1 915659 47 7, £12.99, hbk

This is a marvellous book. It is a taste of John Agard's children's poetry selected from his early career in a sumptuous hardback, in which Shirley Hottier's illustrations jostle his verse with matching verve and invention. These are selections that the poet has made himself from his collections from 1983-2001, each section with an infectious Agard introduction, telling us about his inspirations, welcoming us to the magic and mystery of words, and inviting us to take our own dip in the restless seas of language. These are poems whose disarming simplicity and charm show us that here is a poet who can do nearly everything apparently effortlessly: entering the mind of a child as he subtly negotiates for the colour of shoes he wants; celebrating the time-honoured sayings of granny; spicing up nursery rhymes with Caribbean flavour; and making animals talk to us and to each other. He deals in close and subtle observation, and thoughtful and mischievous transformation. His default mode is joy and his incitement is to laughter and wonder. **CB**



The Shell Keepers

★★★★

Truly Johnston, Chicken House, 9781915947734, 304pp, £7.00 pbk

Corrine has always enjoyed spending time with her beloved grandfather, Siya, mudlarking by the Thames, hoping to uncover something exciting and is thrilled to discover a beautiful conch-like shell, a very special sort of treasure, which she vows to keep forever. A few months later, she finds herself on the beach looking for more treasure near Siya's home in Whiteshell Bay, although sadly he is no longer there to search alongside her. Spying something gleaming in the sand, Corrine is amazed to find another perfect shell, very similar to her previous find, but what she wasn't expecting, was that this one is occupied by a tiny girl, who announces herself as Kauri of the Democonch. Her people and their miniature world are in danger, trapped in 'bad water' and Kauri has come to find the Shell Keeper, to help save them, before the tides turn and they are lost forever. There also seems to be something wrong with the beach, as seaweed and plants are dying and the water looks unusually dirty. Corrine, along with her sister Nimali and cousin Anthony, are determined to help the Democonch, and aided by clues left behind by their grandfather, come to understand that this was actually his plan all along, and they are continuing a legacy he began many years before. This heart-warming debut novel has everything an adventure seeker and young environmentalist would want in a book, with elements of the beloved Borrowers, plus mystery and thrills, with brave heroes and just the right amount of activism. Full of imagination and even a new language to interpret, (help can be found at the back of the book), the determined children work together to uncover a dastardly plot threatening their beloved beach and help save their new friends, discovering the importance of family and belonging along the way. **AH**



Marvellous Messages

★★★★

Rose Ayling-Ellis, ill. Lena Addink, Dorling Kindersley Limited, 96pp, 978 0 2416 8167 1, £16.99, hbk

Join Rose, her sign language interpreter Dev, Perky Pigeon and Halo the cat as they travel together through time and space discovering more about communication! Rose was born deaf and uses British Sign Language. She is an English actress and is famous for winning Strictly Come Dancing! In this book she fulfills her dream of shining a light on the many ways we communicate, as well as focusing on her superstars who have achieved great things despite their disabilities.

This gorgeous hardback has 29 stops on its long journey. It starts in the Olympic Stadium in Greece and ends in Rose's home with many interesting visits along the way. I enjoyed looking around the Calligraphy Studio in China and learning about the 'Four Treasures of the Study' (p.29). These are brush, ink, inkstone and paper which are the four calligraphy materials. Rose brings the past to life with her text. When she visits the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, Perky explains that 'Hieroglyphs are just really, really old emojis!' (p.32.)

As well as interspersing the visits with information on Rose's Superstars there are Messaging Milestones covering communication tools such as printing (p.30), the telephone (p.42) and television (p.60). The book is both well-structured and clearly laid out. It is bursting with information to satisfy the curious reader and probably works best as a volume to dip into rather than reading it from cover to cover in one go. I was fascinated to hear about deaf stuntwoman and racing driver Kitty O'Neil, for example, as well as the famous inventor Thomas Edison.

Many congratulations to the team behind this innovative publication. The vibrant illustrations work well with the text and the fusion of fact with fiction makes for an interesting read. I learned lots of new information with just the right amount of detail. **JS**

reviews

10 – 14 **Middle**/Secondary

Ed's Choice

Sin Bin Island

★★★★★

Doug Naylor, David Fickling Books, 400pp, 978-1788453707, £7.99 pbk



Orphans, a boarding school with some very strange rules, lost treasure, pirates, magic: all elements familiar from fantasy adventure stories, but they're given a real shake up and a polish in Doug Naylor's debut children's book. Recently orphaned, Jack Digby is shocked to discover that he's being sent to Cyril Snigg's Correctional Orphanage for Wayward Boys and Girls, a school with a very unusual pirate-based education policy. Children who accumulate the most lashes – don't worry, they're not literal – for bad behaviour are sent to detention in the worst place you can imagine, a desert island which is hard to get to and even harder to leave, alive at any rate. As Jack learns the rules of his new school he makes friends (and some enemies) and decides, for the most altruistic reasons, that he has to get into the group going to Sin Bin Island. Before heading off to the school, Jack has been presented with a Russian nesting doll, bequeathed to him in his family will, which passes on messages from the future and is clearly steeped in magic, and by the time he sets sail for the island has managed to acquire some further magic objects and has literally swallowed some magic himself. Just as well...

Reading this is rather like opening a Russian doll, each chapter revealing some new treat, though there are a lot more surprises than you get in Russian dolls. Indeed, by the end of the book, Jack and his friends will have encountered pirates, sharks, sea lampreys, a Komodo dragon, and something even bigger and scarier. Most surprising of all however, is that the most surprising thing is a secret Jack has kept from his friends throughout and indeed from readers.

As you might expect from the creator of Red Dwarf, no matter how zany or off the wall the events are, they all have a purpose and develop the plot, while the story's foundations are the characters of Jack, his new friends and their relationship, which is always convincing and often touching. As you would expect from the creator of Red Dwarf, it's also very funny indeed. Bring on the next in the series! **AR**

The Dawn Of Adonis

★★★★

Phil Earle, Andersen Press, 234pp, 978 1 839134198, £7.99 pbk

This prequel to **When The Sky Falls** set in 1911 is an equally moving and remarkable tale of courage, loyalty and derring-do.

12-year-old Nettie lives with her father, a vet. Her mother died a few years previously along with her baby brother and Nettie feels their loss keenly. She is a kind-hearted girl and rescues a run over cat and asks her father to save it. Unbeknownst to her this act of kindness is witnessed by a young petty thief named Toff who whose 'uncle', Goliath Deeds is one of the most feared and notorious crooks in London. Toff is somewhat of a dandy and loves wearing outlandish clothes.

Goliath has acquired by nefarious means an illegally imported gorilla that he is sure will bring him fame and fortune. The gorilla has been severely mistreated and is gravely ill so Toff is despatched to find help. He brings back vet, Edward Beecroft along with Nettie. They arrive at a warehouse where they find a caged gorilla about to give birth in filthy conditions. The vet manages to save the baby but not the mother who is too weakened to survive but is badly beaten for his trouble. Nettie manages to get him home but realise his vet's bag has been left behind. She returns to find it and finds the baby gorilla alone and whimpering. She cannot leave it and takes the baby back to her father's. She quickly realises she is in a serious danger when Toff appears to claim his master's property. Toff can't quite give in to the bully either and the two children find themselves on the run with the criminal underbelly of London after them. There is danger and peril at every turn. They hide in the sewers but Nettie is betrayed by Toff but manages to escape again just in time and makes her way to Kew and a final stand-off with Goliath.

This is a non-stop roller coaster of chases and drama through London, showing the resourcefulness of the two children and the very real difficulties of looking after a hungry and fractious baby gorilla. It has all Phil Earle's trademark emotional warmth. Although she has to give up the baby gorilla at the end of the story, Nettie finds peace and redemption in having looked after the baby and in finally naming in him Adonis, god of rebirth. **JC**



Gloam

★★★★

Jack Mackay, Rock the Boat, 256pp, 978-0861549528, £7.99 pbk

Jack Mackay's debut is a thoroughly chilling Gothic thriller that makes excellent use of the tropes of the genre while introducing some very distinct and memorable terrors. The setting is a creaky old house on an island accessible only via a causeway and completely cut off when the tide comes in. Moving in are Gwen, her young brother Roger and twin siblings Hazel and Hester, plus their stepfather, Henry. The house belonged to their grandmother, now dead, as is their mother, and without them, The House feels very different: dark, haunted even. There's enough in their new home to scare the children – and they each have a particular fear – but the most terrifying monster of all is introduced by well-meaning Henry. Esme Laverne is beautiful, organised and seemingly very fond of children; Henry appoints her as a babysitter to mind them all when he is at work. Gwen immediately feels that there's more to Esme than it seems. She is right, and the more is cruel, malicious, and very threatening. The truth turns out to be even worse than Gwen suspected. Esme is truly monstrous and able to harness the children's worst fears to get what she wants. As a vile black mould envelops the house the terror mounts, slowly and then suddenly. Mackay manages pace and narrative very well indeed and makes the most of all the opportunities to frighten readers, while also exploring feelings of grief and family relationships. The full cast of characters are as well described and as solid as The House, but Gwen is particularly well-drawn. An excellent debut. **MMa**

Read our Q&A interview with Jack Mackay

The Odyssey of Phoebe Quilliam

★★★

Annelise Gray, Zephyr, 225pp, 9781035911011, £7.99, pbk

Using Greek myth as a background to a contemporary adventure story runs the risk that anything modern will still look tame by comparison. And so it is with this author's brave attempt to take readers on a new journey around these classics. Young Phoebe, grieving for her recently senile grandmother, somehow finds herself transported on a quest to defeat the Morpheia, an evil spirit who lives in a nest made up of sailors' bones. This ancient witch is served by Klepts, flying bird assassins looking for shipwrecked crews to supply her next meal. But now she wants to feast off others' memories to make up for her solitary dark tower existence. Can Phoebe thwart her and in doing so help restore her grandmother to better health?

She is aided by handsome young Meander, himself in search of a lost father who was once a shipbuilder to King Odysseus. Many adventure follow, with the Cyclops, Charybdis and Circe all making yet another guest appearance. But the link between Phoebe's past life and present fantasy world never really works, with too many mini-encounters reducing any real tension when it comes to the final show-down on Morpheia's gloomy island.

The author has previously written lively stories set in the Roman Empire, and her knowledge of those times and classical mythology is impressive. Yet this present story is neither one thing nor the other, written in prose that hovers uneasily between references to a 'wine-dark sea' mixing with descriptions of a dog's tail 'wagging like a windscreen wiper.' In fact Phoebe's story works better before the fantasy element takes over. On this basis, this hard-working author clearly has much to offer, but not quite yet in this present story. **NT**

How to get magically popular

★★★

Radhika Sanghani, Usborne, 320pp, 9781805318286, £7.99 pbk

We meet Sabina initially in the lunch hall of her new school, alone. We learn that she has moved schools recently and that this has not been

either easy or her choice. The intended audience for this title is very much those transition years at the start of KS3 and although it might be said there is little challenge within the text for this readership and the cover perhaps appeals more to KS2, the topic: the notion of feeling alone at a new school, is something many young readers of the intended age will relate to.

Sabina feels she is unable to fit in in every way – her new school is lacking in diversity, everyone appears to already be in solid friendship groups, and far from improving her popularity as she had hoped, Sabina's previous life in London is completely alien to the children in this village. Miserable and hoping for a return to her old life, Sabina attends a yoga class and everything changes. Although she has previously meditated with her mum, and this is perhaps an important link as at this stage in the story Sabina's relationship with her mum is challenged, this class in particular gives Sabina the chance to connect with her chakras and see into the future.

Suddenly this ability becomes a gateway to Sabina achieving popularity... or so she thinks. With her mum starting a new business and Sabina lacking the usual support of either a family unit or existing friendships she becomes more and more determined to use her new abilities to her advantage. That is until seeing into the future becomes as problematic as it is popular... faced with examining whether these new abilities are really what she needs and considering how to live in the moment more Sabina has to make important decisions about what she wants from her life and how best to achieve it.

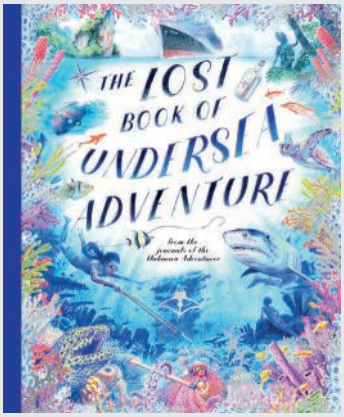
In many ways the concept of popularity and teenage anxieties around achieving this are as relevant now as ever, and for this reason the title is likely to be successful. The profile of the author will also undoubtedly help. There is perhaps an underlying question about whether some of the issues the title raises, such as how to live in the moment, are pitched ideally for the age group and conversely the text itself and presentation at times feels a little young; nevertheless as teens continue to ponder their own place in society and are ever more plagued with questions about popularity, there is certainly a place for such a title. **ARu**

The Lost Book of Undersea Adventure

★★★★★

The Unknown Adventurer, Frances Lincoln, 96pp, 9780711296763, £14.99 hbk

The Lost Book of Undersea Adventure tells the story of an expedition undertaken by The Unknown Adventurer who placed a journal into a bottle to send home to their younger



siblings. The journal was discovered in 2022 when it washed up on a beach in Devon yet the Unknown Adventurer is still yet to be named.

The journal details The Unknown Adventurer's voyage to the other side of the world to find the Bajo people who their Grandmother had once told them about. These people- also referred to as sea nomads- live their lives entirely on the water and are famously known as the world's greatest free divers who can dive to incredible depths to catch their food.

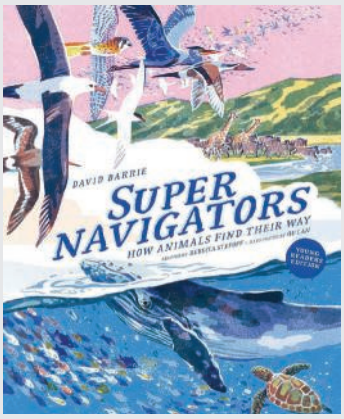
This book is made up of notes and illustrations drawn by The Unknown Adventurer during their expedition and where possible, the original layout of the journal has been honoured and the drawings restored by editor and compiler Teddy Keen. Teddy previously oversaw the publication of two other works by The Unknown Adventurer based on other journals found in the depths of the Amazon rainforest. The story behind the books may seem far-fetched, but for the curious reader it is a fascinating rabbit-hole to fall into.

There's a scrapbook-like feel to the design of this book which makes the reader feel as though they're reading something special, something unique- and you definitely are! You often see non-fiction titles for young readers that try to replicate an epistolary genre, but this is the real deal and knowing it's based on real-life adventures and views makes it truly awe-inspiring.

The illustrations are stunning- beautifully bright pencil-drawings ranging from stunning underwater coral scenes of the island The Unknown Adventurer made their home to more sketch-like illustrated instructions of how to build a raft from found materials on the island. I wouldn't be surprised to see this book on the nominations list, if not long or shortlist for the Carnegie Medal for Illustration next year.

I'm reluctant to reveal too much about the expedition in this review but the Unknown Adventurer did find the Bajo people and a good portion of the book is detailing their way of life and beliefs, the latter of which I found particularly fascinating.

I couldn't recommend this book more to those readers who would want to go on an adventure of a lifetime through the pages of this stunning and moving book. **CH**



Supernavigators: How Animals Find Their Way

★★★★★

David Barrie, ill. Qu Lan, adapted by Rebecca Stefoff, Tra Publishing, 64pp, 9781962098137, £23.99 hbk

Supernavigators is a great read for anyone who has ever wondered about how animals manage to find their way over such long distances using just their instincts. This version has been adapted from the original adult title Incredible Journeys, which published in 2020.

It covers familiar and possibly unfamiliar topics within animal navigation that gives the reader an insight into animal behaviour that we may not think twice about. It features different kinds of migration from bird migration to grassland animals in Africa who take part in the Great Migration. It also looks at the senses used to navigate such as bats and echolocation, how sight and light affect journeys, how smells help animals find their homes and more unusual skills like using magnetic sense which give birds an inner compass to help determine where they need to go, and how fish used lateral lines and pressure to move together as a group. It also covers more human-like navigation skills such as using landmarks and memory, reading the stars and position of the sun and moon to determine time of year as well as direction.

What I found was a pleasant addition was the section about how we humans affect animals and their navigation. This was humbling after reading chapter after chapter about how incredible animals were, to then be reading about how we stop them being able to do what they've done for many, many generations. Whether that's environmental issues like fertilisers and climate change, or man-made problems like reflective glass and light pollution. There is a helpful section on how we can help reverse or change some of these issues and some good news stories too.

The illustrations are done in a block printing style with simple detailing and muted colours. The range of readers who may pick this book up is quite wide- I'd suspect it would be useful in primary schools to compliment topics but look of the book would attract older readers too, making it useful in secondary schools as well.

Overall this is a brilliant book for those wishing to deep-dive into animal navigation behaviours whether for schoolwork and study or leisure reading. **CH**



Matt O'Shanter. A Cautionary Tale

★★★★★

Simon Lamb, Ross MacRae Scallywag Press, 112pp, 9781836300090 £12.99 hdbk

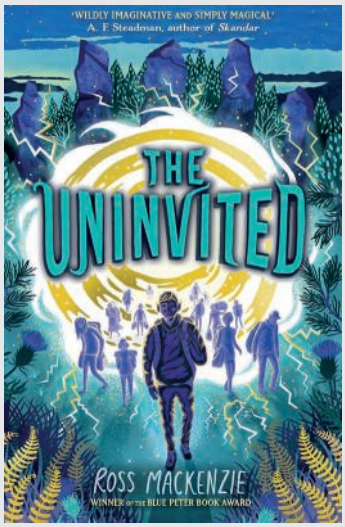
Matt is a bit of a lad – definitely not a 'good' boy; a bit of a bully, out with the boys at all hours with no care for his parents' anxieties. Out late one night after day with the gang who have sensibly left for their homes, the weather breaks. Matt must get going. He starts his cycle ride back to home and hearth. The rain pours down, the wind howls – there is a deserted building, he sees lights – maybe something he can join? But no – this is far more than that, a witches ceilidh no less, with Auld Nick in charge. And there in the crowd, the girl from school that he and his mates had harassed and bullied. If only Matt could have held his tongue. If only he had taken note of his parents' wishes. If only he had really listened in school ... This is not a tale that ends well

Simon Lamb takes on Robert Burns and the iconic poem **Tam O'Shanter** and does so with panache. Taking the metre, rhythm, format and indeed vocabulary of the original (it is a Scottish story), Lamb takes us on a rollicking journey full of colour and action. The scene setting is perfect – the end of the prom in Prestwick (yes, we are in a real town). There the lads hang out 'as Kings of Cool'. Then time to leave. The storm is brought to graphic life not just through the words but also through the drama created

by Ross MacRae's energetic pen and ink illustrations that invade the pages, adding to and enhancing the verse. We follow Matt's ride, we see the witches and warlocks – and Auld Nick not playing the pipes but here the DJ, while mixed with the traditional objects associated with the witch world there are, of course, mobile phones. The tale ends dramatically. Burns may be kinder to Tam, Lamb is writing a cautionary tale

'But Matt has been a stupid boy/ It's not the bridge but flowing water/ that can stop a Deil's daughter...'

Lamb is clear about the setting, Prestwick a Scottish town and the language places the reader firmly in Scotland. However, this is tale for everyone to be read, and enjoyed – even better, performed There is a helpful glossary at the end as well as an autobiographical note in which Lamb tells us his personal experiences with Burns and his relationship with this poem, **Tam O'Shanter**. He also explains why his tale is so much more 'cautionary' than that of the original. For those who may not know this original the introduction gives a quick résumé. A masterly retelling both an homage and a truly contemporary narrative. Highly recommended. **FH**



The Uninvited

★★★★★

Ross Mackenzie, Andersen Press, 368pp, 978 1839133176, £7.99 pbk The troubled summer of 2025 seems spookily the perfect time to be publishing a book which is not only a highly imaginative and convincing fantasy adventure, but one that powerfully illuminates the issues of refugees, racism and immigration. The award-winning Ross Mackenzie's books all seem to tread the border between primary and secondary, and while this would make an excellent class read for year 6, where it could be discussed and the themes mediated, it is perhaps better suited to year 7 and above. However, I also know many avid 10-year-old readers of fantasy who will happily devour it as well! From the evocative start within the Stones of Calanish on the isle of Lewis, where the doorway opens between our world and the world of Faerae, to the dramatic and thrilling conclusion, this is a story which will not let you go. Two five-year-old boys from either side of the divide have no idea how important they will be. Samm Wolfback is with the 'ragged, pointed-eared men and women with packs and bags slung over shoulders, children clutching stuffed animals,' escaping the deadly Scourge destroying their land because their protective Dragon's Eye has been stolen. Ally Grey is with the tourists in the stone circle, but he alone notices the tiny spark of magic that opens the door. He touches and tries to grasp that magic and it changes him forever. The human reaction to The Arrival is to lock the foreigners away in a dreadfully familiar tented camp and then a purpose-built camp, Glass Forest, in the Lake District, where conditions are little better; disease and crime are rife and Faerae magic is fading. Samm lost his mother to a terrorist attack, but he has two artefacts from his father which give him the ability to 'find things and people.' He is recruited by the self-styled boss of the camp, Joe Lively, who has a plan to escape the camp, find the Dragon's Eye to overcome the Scourge and the missing Locksmith who can open the door and return them all to Faerae. While Samm and the giant Brogan pursue those objectives, Lively kidnaps Ally and painfully forces him to practise using the magic he unwittingly absorbed from the Locksmith. Magic which has been out of control and forcing his family to constantly move to escape the consequences of his outbursts. The complex layers of the story are skilfully woven together by this superlative storyteller, as Samm and Brogan track down the Locksmith in a nightmarish circus where the true villain hides. Will the boys survive these challenges and will the Faerae get home? Will Samm learn that some humans have compassion and bravery? This clever fantasy has real heart and emotional depth alongside moments of real peril and a touch of horror. Powerful, original and thought provoking in equal measure, this may well be the author's best work yet! **JCo**

Dance of Resistance: The Josephine Baker Story

★★★★

Catherine Johnson, ill. Katie Hickey, Barrington Stoke,128pp, 978 0 0087 2621 8, £7.99 pbk

This is the story of a remarkable life, taking one girl from her 1906 birth in St Louis, through a childhood characterised by abuse and poverty, to achieving her performing dreams in Philadelphia, New York City and Paris, taking on fearless WW2 espionage in France, and a lifelong fight for equal rights in the USA, until her death in 1975. But it is also a remarkable feat of storytelling, to compress all of that into just over 100 pages of accessible text and still capture a vivid, individual, first person voice. Catherine Johnson has proven her ability to breathe life into biographies, winning the **Young Quills Award for Historical Fiction**, and she tells us she had 'always wanted to write about Josephine Baker' because this was someone who used her fame 'to fight for freedom and fairness'. It must have been quite a challenge to authentically represent the discrimination and abuse faced by Black people in early 20th century USA, and the trauma that Josephine suffered growing up, in an age appropriate way. Even so there are one or two episodes that whilst not explicit or dwelled upon, do make this more suitable for older readers. What is wonderfully captured is Josephine's indomitable spirit and her passion for dancing and entertaining an audience, her pride in being able to earn real wealth and prestige and her strong belief that she deserves respect and equality. I think it will be eye opening for many young readers to realise what it meant for her to arrive in France, where the treatment of Black people truly embraced the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, in total contrast to the racism she had encountered at home, and why she was so determined to fight for her adopted country in WW2. This earned her the highest honour of the Légion d'honneur and a final resting place in The Panthéon in Paris, one of only six women to be honoured there. Her iconic life provides a fascinating insight into so many important periods of the 20th Century social history and is an inspirational story of self-determination and courage that is bound to impact young readers. **JCo**

Great Escapes

★★★★

David Long, ill. Jamie Coe, Faber, 210pp, £18.99, hbk

This book comprises thirty-two real life stories of escapes from captivity, organised chronologically from the mid nineteenth century to the present day, and drawn from across the world.

Some of these stories have already been well documented, such as the stories of escape from the infamous prisons of Alcatraz and Colditz. However, the majority are less well known. Many of these stories are about prisoners of war, and the majority take place during the first and second world wars. However other conflicts feature, including the story of Winston Churchill who was captured while working as a reporter during the Boer War and escaped his imprisonment via freight train and hiding in a coal mine.

Most of the escapees are male but there are stories of several notable females too including Susan Travers who became the first woman to join the French Foreign Legion and helped troops evaded capture in the Sahara Desert with her daring driving.

These are stories of bravery but also perseverance and ingenuity – we find out how insignificant objects such as toilet rolls, potatoes or cutlery can be instrumental in the success of an escape mission.

The book opens with the dramatic account of Henry 'Box' Brown who was nailed in a crate in a brave effort to escape slavery after separation from his family. Appropriately the book ends with another story of slavery, this time taking place in the twenty first century. We hear the tale of Murad, a Yazidi girl who was captured by Isis in 2014. Slavery is an important theme in the book and Harriet Tubman, who helped so many to escape slavery via the network of safe houses and supporters known as the 'Underground Railway,' is also featured.

A few of the stories involve prisoner escapes and the author takes pains to ensure young readers are not encouraged to glorify their crimes but rather recognise their ingenuity in escaping.

The stories are well written with engaging strap lines, and the illustrations are suitably striking and dramatic. It is unfortunate that the editing and book design feel a little rushed. The pagination in the contents is inaccurate for the majority of the book, and the layout is odd with a large number of completely blank pages throughout. With a different layout and design and possibly a smaller format this could have been a more successful book. **SMc**

My Soul A Shining Tree

★★★★★

Jamila Gavin, Farshore, 978-0008617189, 149pp, £8.99 pbk

In 2014 I edited a collection of short stories to commemorate the outbreak of the First World War. That anthology was called Stories of World War One, and the first story in the book was a brilliant tale called The Man in the Red Trousers by Jamila Gavin. So I'm delighted to report that Jamila has now turned that story into a novel called **My Soul, a Shining Tree**, published by Farshore. The title is from a Siegfried Sassoon poem, so the novel's strong anti-war stance is pretty clear from the outset.

Both the original and the expanded version were inspired by the true story of Khadudad Khan, one of the 1.5 million soldiers from India who fought for Britain in the First World War. He came from the Punjab, and found himself in Belgium in the autumn of 1914. There he and his fellow-soldiers were pitched into terrible fighting with the invading German army, his courage winning him the first Victoria Cross awarded to an Indian soldier, something he is remembered for to this day.

As the writer of **The Wheel of Surya** trilogy, **Coram Boy** and many other books, Jamila needs no introduction.

In **My Soul, a Shining Tree** she has crafted a gripping, poignant story about Khadudad Khan and several children devastated by the war, who are finally brought across the English Channel as refugees. What struck me in the original, and even more in the novel, is the madness of a war in which soldiers from India fought for the British Empire against Germans, in Belgium a country with its own tensions, divided as it is between French and Flemish speakers. All this is explored in the novel, but always from the viewpoints of the young characters Jamila has created. And as ever, it's the young and vulnerable who suffer the most.

At just under 150 pages, **My Soul, a Shining Tree** is quite short, but it's a terrific read suitable for top Primary and lower Secondary, especially if you're planning to tackle the First World War this term. There's certainly some contemporary relevance to be talked about as well. I cannot recommend it highly enough! **TB**

Vern: Custodian of the Universe

★★★

Tyrell Waiters, Flying Eye Books, 176pp, 9781838742744, £14.99 pbk

Vern is stuck. Having left Florida for San Francisco in search of purpose and work, he's now back home—jobless, aimless, and crashing with his mum and grandma. Then comes an unexpected opportunity: a mysterious job prospect with the Quasar Corporation (coincidentally, where his grandmother once worked), a reality-bending place of employment, and a sudden promotion to... Custodian of the Universe. Vern would rather lie in bed and soak up the gloom, but his grandmother is a force to be reckoned with.

This ambitious debut graphic novel hurls its protagonist—and readers—into a frenetic sci-fi multiverse, where dimensional jumps, sentient space gators, and a 'giant wire computer dude' all jostle for attention. At the heart of it all lies a surprisingly relatable existential thread: Vern's ongoing confrontation with 'The Void,' a cosmic force that repeatedly asks, 'What is the point?' — a question Vern himself can't stop asking.

There's no shortage of energy here. Waiters' art bursts with saturated colour, erratic momentum, and experimental layouts. Some spreads dazzle; others overwhelm. Readers may find themselves working hard to keep up, both narratively and visually. In the rush of high concepts and chaotic detours, emotional depth occasionally slips away, with characters often driving plot rather than anchoring it.

Still, there's genuine thematic weight beneath the madness: explorations of burnout, intergenerational care, identity, and the dread of stepping into adulthood. Vern's arc—rooted in his grandmother's cryptic past—offers glimpses of clarity in an otherwise deliberately scattered structure.

This isn't a book to skim. Vern asks its readers to sit with its messiness, take their time, and make peace with not having all the answers. For some, it'll be a cosmic joyride. For others, a challenging plunge into the void. Either way, there's value in the ask. **MT**

Paddock Grove: A Pony to Own

★★★

J.P.Rose, cover ill. Max Thompson, Walker Books, 235pp., 978-1-5295-2284-6, £7.99 pbk

George (Georgia) is excited about her scholarship to the elite equestrian school, Paddock Grove, and delighted that her parents are buying her one of the horses from the nearby riding stable, which is closing, but she is less than thrilled when instead of the sleek Timmy on which she had proved her skills, she is given the scruffy piebald cob, Bear, who is more interested in finding food than being ridden. Money is tight, and Timmy was too expensive. Disheartened and full of nerves, she makes an undignified entrance to the school as Bear drags her along, and the mean girls mock mercilessly (aren't there always mean girls in these books? But without them there would be no story...). She finds some nice friends, though, and they help her to get over her disappointment and to start to build a better relationship with Bear.

A mean girl sabotages her big opportunity to be featured in a glossy magazine, and George is disgraced, so it looks as if George's time at the school is over after only one term, but when her friend Lili's expensive horse, Ted, and Bear are stolen, George and her friends spring into action, and it all works out satisfactorily, with George realising finally how much she loves Bear, with all his foibles.

Your non-horsey reviewer was surprised to learn that there are indeed equestrian boarding schools in this country, but, without the horses, this could be any school story: Appreciating real friendship, being true to yourself, and putting effort into a worthwhile relationship that doesn't look promising at the start. The cover is likely to be attractive to horsey girls, but could be enjoyed by any. **DB**

Spirit Warriors

★★★★

Ashley Thorpe, Usborne, 312pp., 978-1-80507-565-3, £7.99 pbk

Your reviewer enjoyed Ashley Thorpe's previous novel The Boy to Beat the Gods, set in West Africa, and this will also appeal to readers who enjoy stories involving myths and magic, this time in the Caribbean. It is set on the fictional island of Xaymaca, which 'the English call Jamaica', and Ocho Rios Bay does exist there. Thirteen-year-old Evie has been adopted by Mrs Bell, (the owner of a magical hotel, where enchanted vines lift residents' suitcases up to their rooms), and they have a loving relationship, but she is anxious to take the larimar, a blue stone her parents left her, to the local festival, in hopes of finding a spirit waker to reach the ghosts of her parents, who had died 9 years previously. Her friend, Arthur, an experienced thief and pickpocket, helps her to retrieve it from the hotel safe, and goes with her in hopes of acquiring booty to sell. Of course, it all goes horribly wrong, and the battle against evil begins. The Blackheart Man and his associate, La Diablesse, want Evie's stone to join with other powerful stones that together will destroy the barrier between the living and the dead. Arthur gets caught up in the spells that flew about that night, and spends most of the book as a talking cat, (which makes his appearance on the cover showing him in boy form rather misleading), but he can still be useful, as is the trainee warrior Cai. It turns out that Evie has powers of her own, which she has to learn how to use effectively, and of course all is well at the end, but it's a roller-coaster ride of a plot, and recommended. **DB**



The Last Bard

★★★★★

Maz Evans, Chicken House 307pp., 978-1-913696-90-0, £12.99 hbk

Whether readers like Shakespeare or not, this is tremendous fun. Maz Evans is well known as the author of **Who Let the Gods Out?** and its sequels, and for other witty novels for young people, and this one is just as clever and funny.

Thirteen- year- old Will Davenant has no time for Shakespeare, so he is not very excited when, while attempting to clear his deceased grandfather's flat, he finds an ancient 'Complete Works' with various papers tucked inside, but when he opens it, he is astonished to find 4 tiny characters from the plays greeting him as his grandfather's heir 'Bard', and demanding chicken nuggets. Grandfather Rex and previous 'Bards' had released most of the characters, and they are out in the world leading their own modern lives. Will and his Mum, Mary, have been living a miserable life with Mary's 'kindly' brother, Claude, and his son, Jon, so this is a respite for them. They soon get drawn in to the lives of some of the people who live in Arden Heights, and the possibility of the block being sold for development, with a fat pay-off for the residents. The Shakespearean characters offer to help keep everyone in their own flats, and their involvement leads to some interesting consequences. Mary had started off on the wrong foot, arguing with neighbour Ben, and they become a Beatrice and Benedick couple, (**Much Ado about Nothing**) with Ben's foster daughter, Ani Hathaway, 'accidentally' letting slip that each fancies the other, until they do, of course. Ani takes charge of Will and helps him to enjoy life. They help solve the mystery of a lost daughter (**A Winter's Tale**) and eventually sort out two couples mixed up in love (**Midsummer Night's Dream**). Claude's machinations are exposed, and Mary's and Will's prospects look much better as the story ends.

(The historical William Davenant, from whom grandfather Rex and Will are supposed to be descended, was rumoured to be the illegitimate son of William Shakespeare, but we may never know!)

The Shakespearean characters are great fun, with Lady Macbeth always hoping for someone to murder, Juliet looking for romance, the lugubrious Yorick predicting doom, and Puck up to his usual mischief: the reader often has to supply the end of his cheeky rhyming couplets, which is not difficult...

Maz Evans evidently loves puns, and there are some enjoyable chapter headings, notably: 'The Taming of the Shrewd' and 'Stairlift-crossed lovers', but there are other recognisably Shakespearean nods, which can be ignored, but were much appreciated by your reviewer. **DB**

The Spick and the Span

★★★

Pil van Martin, Harper Collins Children's Books, 315pp., 978-0-0087 2478 8, £7.99 pbk

The publishers hail this book as perfect for fans of Terry Pratchett's **Discworld**, and it's clear why they make that claim: the main characters are Ward, a dwarf; Magda, an ogre; and Jago, a magician who has been turned into a talking frog. Add Jezebel, a benevolent vampire, and the ghostly owner and founder, Alfreda, and we have an interesting mix of people who are the firm Spick and Span. In Helm, magicians had been profligate in their use of magic, using it for trivial reasons like tying their shoelaces and scratching their noses. Consequently, there was too much magic in the air, and magic would do strange things like making a tap only produce cough syrup, and too many portals to other lands had materialised and disappeared, leaving some unfortunate people

10 – 14 **Middle/Secondary** continued

stranded. The cleaners are therefore very important, hoovering up excess magic (like the Ghostbusters?) and, as young people are only magic-resistant until the age of 17, the cleaners are all children. Ward, the dwarf, had been inventing anti-magic potions since he was 4 years old, and was rejected by his dwarf family as an unsuitable dwarf, Magda is constantly looking for the right portal to get home, Jago needs to be released from his frog form, and their colleague, the elf Nessus, needs to be rescued from the void.

There are a few gender-neutral characters e.g. the magician Mx Hazan, and their rival Billie-Billy, who is both, and there are same-sex relationships. It all gets quite complicated, and a lot happens before all is resolved, but along with the excitement and the jeopardy, there is wit and humour, (not only in the footnotes), and this will be an enjoyable read, even if it's not quite Discworld... **DB**



Thirst

★★★★

Darren Simpson, Pushkin, 286pp, 9781782695721, £9.99, pbk

This disturbing tale begins with the dedication, 'For those we sacrifice,' that promises to challenge our complacency. It does so in the form of a fantasy adventure that moves through mystery and menace to a violent finale. The beginning of the story proper is prefaced by an incident in which a boy disappears while playing in the woods with a friend. We see what happens to him. Burdock is drowned in the nearby river by a spectral woman who smells of putrid flesh and stagnant weeds. But his friend, Gorse, who goes home alone, knows nothing of this and it takes him the remainder of the book to realise what has happened and to meet a ghoulishly transformed Burdock again. The boys' bucolic names give a clue to Maimsbury, the village where they live, oddly thriving in a land of failed harvests, and, five years after Burdock's disappearance, we find Gorse just about to enjoy Yeldthanc, one of those quaint annual festivals like well dressing that, as any watcher of The Wicker Man will know, might turn out to be rather more sinister than its folksy trappings. Meanwhile, from a distant famine-stricken village, a determined young woman sets out to find work in Maimsbury, and to find her fate cruelly ensnared with that of Gorse. If you were just to read the book for its thrills, for its expert orchestration of cat and mouse chases, and for its repellent descriptions of bloated reanimated bodies, there's enough here to satisfy you. Simpson winds up the tension expertly, as one horrific revelation follows another. But there's more. There's Simpson's layered description of village life and its rituals, and, most important, the playing out of the meaning of his dedication. At the last, Gorse is faced with a difficult choice. Will he stand with family, community and the way things have always been done, and sacrifice one innocent life for the good of all? Or is there another way? **CB**

The Notted Island

★★★

Katherine Child, Flying Eye, 142 pp, 9781913123147, 16.99, hbk

Katherine Child's debut novel is gentle, witty and strikingly original, enhanced by her own characterful and delicate line drawings, some of which, we are promised, will be in colour in the published edition. Last Island's night sky is the responsibility of the Nott, who should make sure that it arrives at the right time every night. However, the Nott has not been doing her job properly and the island's inhabitants have become impatient. Their mood is not improved by the failure of colour to arrive on the island, even though the islanders have been on their best behaviour to encourage it. A plausible salesman aims to provide an answer to both these problems by installing an automated night sky. Umbertiska Lupp, who would like to be a Nott one day, (the clue is in her first name), thinks the present Nott should be given another chance and sets off north to find her and to find the river or wood sprites, who, with other important persons, have the right to say no to the salesman and his sky. This is the story of her journey, on which she is accompanied by Jink, the shadow of a sundial, and dogged by the salesman, who suspects her purpose. It ends with meeting the Nott and with a spectacular attempt by the salesman to drown Nott's sky and install his own. I found this a difficult book to review. There was a lot I liked about it. It is full of delightfully quirky invention: the Nott and the fabric sky waiting to be drawn over like a starry curtain; the detachable shadow; and the listenberries that can also talk that Tisk meets along the way. The illustrations are a perfect match. Yet, it doesn't feel fully realised and it is certainly cramped by the cut down 130-page proof copy format that I read. The published edition might give it more scope. **CB**

Dracula & Daughters

★★★★★

Emma Carroll, Faber, 9780571388769, 320pp, £7.99 pbk,

Emma Carroll has long been a firm favourite with children for her many wonderful historical fiction novels, exploring world wars, Egyptian pharaohs and Victorian mansions, to name but a few. **Dracula & Daughters**, whilst still being a period tale, is Carroll's first foray into writing an adventure series and it does not disappoint.

Temstown is full of rumours that vampires are back in town, having been previously banished years ago following the terrible time of the 'Contagion'. It seems to be linked with the unexplained death of popular theatre star, Elsie Irving, but there are mysterious happenings and many people with secrets to hide. When Elsie's body goes missing from the cemetery, it sparks a chain of events which lead to uncovered family secrets that will change the lives of those involved forever.

The three main protagonists, Mina (the narrator of the story), her sister Buffy & newly discovered cousin Bella, are bold, brave and determined. In a world dominated by men, they set out to save their friend and expose the secrets that have caused the return of the vampires, gradually understanding the powers that each of them holds and how they are even stronger working together as a team.

This is an exciting thriller set within a gloriously atmospheric and spooky, gothic world, with just the right amount of danger, giving us a unique feminist take on the vampire hunter genre. Instead, these girls set out to become the world's first vampire healers, aided by an ancient book and their trusty raven friend Poe. Older readers will enjoy the many cleverly named characters and all will love the connection to the most famous of all vampires, Dracula himself. With its perfect mix of adventure, dark humour and excellently drawn characters, plus a strong message of the importance of family and female empowerment, this is certainly a book with bite! I look forward to reading how this unusual family business will solve their next case. **AH**

I Don't Do Mountains!

★★★★

Barbara Henderson illus. Victoria Di Meo, Scottish Mountaineering Press, 168pp, 978-1907233548, £7.99 pbk,

We all know someone like Mary McKenzie, known as Kenzie, quiet, bookish, dislikes the outdoors, or we are like her. So, imagine this! Kenzie is told she has to spend three days hiking up mountains in the Scottish Highlands. Also, going camping with strangers from other schools while she is paired with her arch enemy, Sorley Mackay, from her own school.

The premise is a recipe for disaster. How will this play out? Will Kenzie learn to make friends?

The story starts in a predictable way – a camping trip on a remote mountain with a hugely enthusiastic guide and his wonderful dog, called Drookit. But then, the guide goes missing, reason unknown. The group and Drookit must find him.

This challenges all of them, particularly when you add the uncovering of a wildlife crime ring into the mix. The chapters are short and fast paced and at points, very scary. Both outdoor types and those like Mary will enjoy I Don't Do Mountains. Victoria Di Meo's illustrations in black ink and mostly of animals add to the atmosphere of the Scottish Highlands. This is ideal for readers of Year Five and above. **RB**

Incredible Journeys: Discovery, Adventure, Danger, Endurance

★★★★

Levison Wood, ill. Sam Brewster, Hodder Children's Books, 64pp, 978 1 44498 236 7, £10.99, pbk.,

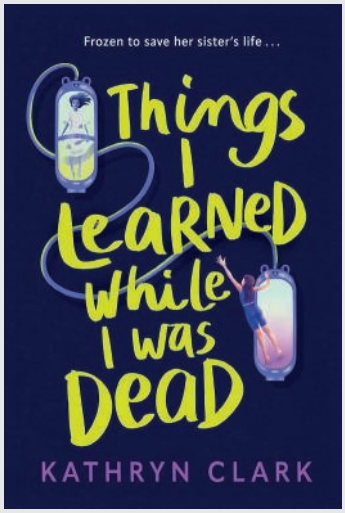
Levison Wood is a well-known, award-winning writer and his passion and energy for exploring shines through this book from cover to cover. The 20 marvellous expeditions described here are very varied and detailed. We set off with information about our ancestors 60,000 years ago, take in the Egyptians, Alexander the Great, the Silk Road, the Hajj, before looking at Christopher Columbus and Captain James Cook to name a couple of famous explorers. The softback ends with journeys to the Poles, Mount Everest, Space, and finally James Cameron's Deepsea Challenge Expedition!

One of the many strengths of this volume is the blend of famous names with lesser-known explorers. This keeps readers of all ages keenly interested and the inclusion of plenty of female characters ensures a great balance. Two full pages are given over to Zheng He, the Unknown Traveller (pp.28-29) and I was eager to learn about Nellie Bly, an American journalist who travelled around the world in 1889, reporting on faraway places and communicating her discoveries by telegraph and post. There is something in this book for everyone and the reader is left feeling as though they have been on the voyage with Levison.

The illustrated maps showing the routes of explorers are a key part of the publication and contribute greatly to its success. Colourful illustrations are clearly labelled for the young reader and help to make the stories come alive.

If, like me, you enjoy armchair travelling with lots of excitement then this is the perfect book! However, it is aimed at young people who have lots of their own exploring still to do and will be encouraged here to set off on new adventures far and wide. I would recommend it for ages 9 upwards and hope I have whetted your appetite to get involved in this interesting voyage covering widespread parts of our planet and beyond. **JS**

14+ **Secondary**/Adult



Things I Learned When I Was Dead

★★★★★

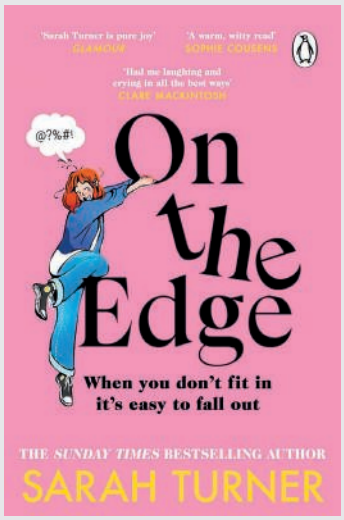
Kathryn Clark, Faber, 390pp, 978-0-5713-8586-7, £8.99 pbk.

The eye-catching title draws the reader into a tale of all-consuming love for a sister and its consequences. 17-year-old Calico is stricken with grief and guilt at the death of her sister: grief because they are twins and were inseparable and guilt because she left terminally ill Asha alone one evening to go out to a party and returned to find her slipping into death. Her mother had returned and Calico felt that she saw blame in her eyes and determined to do anything she could to repair the damage.

The path she chose was cryogenics: Asha would be frozen until a cure was found and she would be frozen too, reanimated when Asha's cure had been found and participating in a 2 year research programme to pay for the procedures. However, when Calico was reanimated 45 years had passed, there was no sign of Asha and she was in a primitive, run-down former prison rather than the state-of-the-art medical research facility she had been promised. Both she and her mother had been duped into signing up for cryogenic preservation by Lucas Fates-a deliberate pun?- an unscrupulous doctor obsessed with reanimating his mother and prevented by a lack of funds in a damaged world increasingly resistant to the concept of cryogenics.

Calico and the other 3 participants lied to by Fates-Jem, Taylor and Veda- attempt to find a way out of their imprisonment. The only ally they have is Doctor Perez who represents the antithesis of Fates and his deranged practices. Calico has been returned to life in a world crippled by climate change, almost shorn of technology and struggling to make a new beginning. Perez is committed to the primary concerns of protecting people and the earth, fighting viruses and restoring the planet by drawing on knowledge and human wisdom: the old, rational way rather than conflict and annihilation. Fates' shambolic medical facility, a metaphor for the ills of the old regime, must be destroyed if its inhabitants are to survive.

The destruction is achieved despite seemingly impossible odds, strong and healthy relationships are formed between the four young people but for Calico there was a price to pay. Asha is dead, her Russian cryogenic centre destroyed in a fire years previously and their mother is dead, too. Despite the pain, disillusionment and immorality which the Fates Centre represented, the ultimate message of the book is hope for the future. We leave our characters involved in regenerative projects to bring the planet back to life and to steer its inhabitants away from prejudice, hatred and taking advantage of others and the planet's resources in order to further their own ends. This is a timely tale, full of both drama and contemplation and we would do well to heed its warnings to reject what is destructive and instead focus on what we have and how to help it thrive. **VR**



On the Edge

★★★★★

Nicola Garrard, Old Barn Books, 306pp, 978-1910646755, £9.99 pbk

Glasgow Boys by Margaret McDonald has been picking up well-deserved plaudits for its tender, insightful story of two young men navigating the care system. Nicola Garrard's On the Edge, the story of three young brothers in a Devon town that is both fishing port and holiday resort, takes an equally moving and empathetic look into the lives of boys growing up in the most challenging of circumstances. Seventeen-year-old Rhys is the oldest and main character. A NEET (not in employment, education or training), he's a talented surfer but through misfortune and misjudgement without a surfboard or the means to get one and has lost his summer job teaching 'grockles' in the local surf school. The boys' father is a long-distance lorry driver, travelling to Murcia and back each week to collect pallets of lettuce and it's mostly left to Rhys to take care of his young brothers Dav and Owen, the latter just eight years old. Their mother died giving birth to Owen, the closure of the local maternity hospital a contributing factor. When then, on a rare evening out in Exeter, Rhys meets Dodo and his girlfriend Milly, he's immediately swayed by their plans to strike against capitalism, in the form of second home owners and the letting companies pricing locals out of their hometown. Rhys' anger, frustration and naivety lead him into violence and to commit an act that almost destroys him. He's ultimately saved by the love of his father and brothers, there to fill the gaps that we're shown have dogged him all his life. This seems so right in a novel that highlights and celebrates male bonds and love. In contrast to his brother Dav, set on escaping Lythcombe for Nottingham University, Rhys wants to stay in the town where he was born, 'maybe marry a nice girl and have kids who are happy at home with their mum, and to work hard and do no harm.' The book's conclusion holds out that hope for him, and a final metaphor in a book that is often poetic describes him diving through the Atlantic waves that keep rolling into the shore and into the calm beyond. As well as poetry, there's a clear-sighted realism to the narrative that fully respects Rhys' life and dreams and this is a beautiful and carefully written story that repays close reading and attention. **AR**

Roar

★★★★★

Manjeet Mann, Penguin, 403pp, 9780241647622, £8.99, pbk

The title does not lie – this story never lets up in expressing its fury about the position of women in modern India, particularly those from the lower castes. Its main character seventeen year old Rizu, herself from a comfortably off home, witnesses the murder of her loving and innocent servant-companion Jaya, accused of being a witch. As it is, witch trials accounted for 2500 deaths carried out between 1995 and 2009, with many more after that. Jaya in this instance is blamed for an outbreak of sorcery engineered by Rizu's rich one-time friend Sonu but now bitter enemy after boyfriend trouble between them. With Rizu threatened by a local witch doctor, her father fatally shifts the blame to Jaya to save his family.

Unable to live with this guilt, Rizu runs away and joins a militant feminine group loosely based on the exploits of Phoolan Devi, once notorious as India's Bandit Queen. By this time she has given up hope of getting social change through slow court processes, turning to arson and even assassination instead. But in time she repents, with her old enemy Sonu now cooperating in building schools for the poorest children.

This turbulent tale is narrated in a series of first person confessionals all conducted in blank verse, occasionally interrupted by rhyming couplets. The only criticism is that this powerful story opens with a somewhat woozy prologue. The publishers would be well advised to add a note to the effect that many customers might want to fast forward to page 16, when the main narrative starts. For this is a book too good to risk missing because of its slow start. For the rest of the time it is gripping, remorseless and profoundly moving. It more than deserves to be read. **NT**

Sisters in the Wind

★★★★★

Angeline Boulley, Rock The Boat, 384 pages, 978-1-83643-067-4, £8.99 pbk

Angeline Boulley, bestselling author of **Firekeeper's Daughter**, returns with another powerful and compelling thriller that blends pacey storytelling with deep cultural resonance. Sisters in the Wind follows Lucy Smith, a teenage girl who has lived a life defined by loss, fear, and dislocation. Raised by her beloved father in a world of small rituals and shared stories, Lucy's childhood is abruptly shattered when he dies, leaving her alone and adrift in foster care. From that point onwards, she learns to survive by trusting no one, hiding her true self, and moving on before her past can catch up with her.

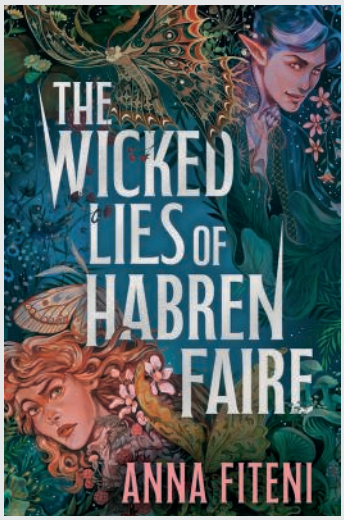
The narrative accelerates when a stranger approaches Lucy at the diner where she works. Claiming to know her estranged mother, he wants to introduce her to his friend Daunis and a web of connections that threaten to upend the fragile control Lucy has maintained over her life. When an explosion at the diner leaves her badly injured, Lucy has little choice but to accept help. What follows is both a thriller of survival and a journey of rediscovery, as Lucy begins to uncover long-buried truths about her father, her family, and her own place within the Ojibwe community.

Boulley's writing has an unmistakable filmic quality. The action sequences are taut, the suspense relentless, and the emotional stakes high. Yet what makes the novel so gripping is not just its thriller elements, but its layered exploration of belonging, identity, and institutional injustice. As Lucy's story unfolds, Boulley lays bare the ways in which child welfare systems

can sever young people from their cultural roots, compounding trauma rather than healing it. She highlights the persistence of institutional racism and its devastating impact on Native communities, while also celebrating the resilience of Ojibwe culture.

At its heart, this is a story about trust, about learning to risk connection after a lifetime of withdrawal and about the strength that can be found in rediscovering heritage. Lucy's cautious but profound shift towards accepting love, friendship, and family is handled with great tenderness, adding depth to the high-octane narrative.

Sisters in the Wind is both a page-turner and a work of real substance: a gripping thriller that leaves readers reflecting on identity, justice, and the power of story to reclaim what has been lost. **LJS**



The Wicked Lies of Habren Faire

★★★

Anna Fiteni, Electric Monkey, 264 pp, 978-0008684174, £9.99 pbk

Anna Fiteni's **The Wicked Lies of Habren Faire** is a YA fantasy adventure that mixes Welsh mythology with a nineteenth-century setting. The story begins in Cardiff, where sisters Sabrina and Ceridwen watch their father sentenced to ten years' transportation for joining a miners' protest. With their grandmother, the girls return to their village facing poverty and an uncertain future.

Sabrina, the younger sister, has grown up caring for Ceridwen, who is delicate and often unwell and expects her own life to be one of service and struggle. That changes when Ceridwen disappears one night, and Sabrina follows her into a strange world that is nothing like the one she knows but is full of the stories she has been told growing up.

This new realm is full of creatures taken from myth and faerie tale. Sabrina comes across giant toads, mermaids, horses, and elves, each encounter carrying danger as well as discovery. The story moves quickly from one episode to the next, giving the sense of a journey through a shifting, unpredictable landscape. While the fantasy elements provide plenty of colour and atmosphere, the story never completely lets go of its historical roots. The shadow of the mine disaster and the harsh realities of class and survival remain in the background.

Sabrina is the heart of the novel, and her journey is as much about her own identity and self-discovery as it is about rescuing her sister. She begins the story certain that her life will be narrow and predetermined by her appearance, but as she navigates the faerie world she gradually learns to recognise her own abilities and strength and bravely completes what at first appears to be an impossible quest.

Fiteni draws on Welsh myth to give the story a distinct flavour. The settings and creatures feel rooted in tradition but are made accessible for today's readers, with all the elements of the fantasy genre. The book is written in a straightforward style that keeps the pace brisk and the action easy to follow, which will appeal to readers who enjoy plot-driven adventures with romance and fantasy.

The Wicked Lies of Habren Faire doesn't linger too long on any single scene or idea, preferring to keep the story moving. But it remains an engaging read, balancing a sense of history and of Wales across time, with the excitement of faerie tale adventure. It will likely appeal to fans of folklore-inspired fantasy and readers looking for a story that combines myth, romance, family, and fast-paced adventure. **LJS**

Black Dolls

★★★

Rachel Faturoti, illus Flo Woolley, Hachette Childrens, 217 pages, 978-1-510113084, £12.99 pbk

Rachel Faturoti's **Black Dolls**, with illustrations by Flo Woolley, is a YA graphic novel aimed at readers 14+ that explores friendship, identity and creativity through the lens of music. From the outset the book signals its older teen focus, with strong language and adult themes that place it firmly at the upper end of the YA spectrum. The story centres on four young women; Sassy, Silver, Jada and Dina, who come together to form a punk band. Each character brings her own set of challenges, whether family pressures, mental health issues, or the difficulties of finding her place. Their shared ambition is tested at a band camp, where the promise of a Battle of the Bands competition sharpens rivalries and reveals tensions both within the group, and with those around them. The set-up will be familiar to many readers, but Fauroti makes space for each character to experience a moment of self-recognition, usually prompted by support from the others.

The narrative employs some unusual devices. A podcast, Zombified, acts as a running commentary on the girls' anxieties, and there are parallel mini storylines about a vengeful cat that provide comic distraction. These elements, together with the lively illustrations, attempt to capture the restless, non-conformist spirit of punk music, always a challenge in a silent medium. Lyrics are written directly onto the page, and while the effect can feel static, Woolley's artwork gives the band a sense of movement and presence.

One of the book's strengths lies in the diversity of its cast, both in terms of background and outlook. The characters are distinct and varied, and the illustrations support this variety. The emphasis on solidarity and persistence is handled positively, though at times the messaging can feel more familiar than fresh.

Black Dolls works best as a story of friendship under pressure, rather than as a full exploration of music or subculture. Readers who are already enthusiastic about graphic novels will find plenty to enjoy in the humour and style, while newcomers may appreciate it as an accessible introduction to the form. It is not without its rough edges, but perhaps that is fitting for a story about four teenagers determined to sound different and to be heard on their own terms. **LJS**

Inside

★★★★

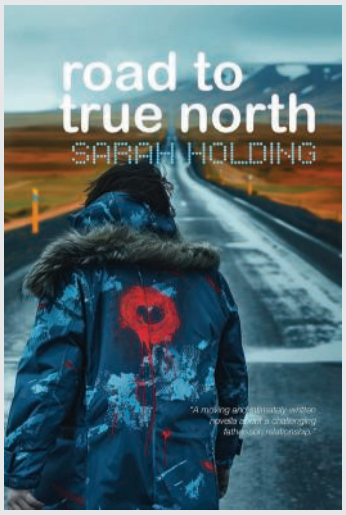
S.A. Gales, Faber, 322pp, 9780571385829, £8.99 pbk

Naya has always lived inside the city of Emas, which changes and adapts constantly to the needs of its citizens, seducing them with a life of ease and plenty. Outside is strictly forbidden and a deeply entrenched propaganda machine exercises Orwellian control by means of fear, warning of the Spiravits-a race of murderous criminals who allegedly seek only to hunt down and kill the inhabitants of Emas and take over the city. The fiction is consolidated by the use of military cadets trained to hunt down and kill these alien beings. It is Naya's ambition to be a fully-fledged member of the NSDE and, like other aspirants, she has undergone brutal and dehumanising training throughout her entire life in order to deal with what she has been indoctrinated to believe is a terrifying threat to a secure and peaceful existence inside the city and, indeed, to the fabric of the city itself.

However hard she works and trains she falls short of the standards expected by her mother, who is the General, the supreme controller of Emas. When the General proposes to send her on a spying mission outside the city walls and into the very heart of the Spiravit community to discover their weaknesses she accepts, desperate to prove her worth and thus take her place in the ranks of the NSDE. In order that her exodus from Emas can have credibility she must be branded a criminal and undertake a vicious gladiatorial-style hand to hand arena combat with a captured Spiravit, with whom she flees.

Outside proves to be very different to the toxic mythology taught inside Emas and as Naya begins to peel back the lies she has been told she realises that she wants to be accepted by this community, built around the idea of family, self-sufficiency and working with Nature instead of seeking to control-and, ultimately, destroy it. Naya begins to develop emotionally-unheard of in Emas- and believes that what she has learned from the information she has been sent by the General to collect can be used to change the perception of the Spiravits for the benefit of all.

The narrative is thrilling, with raids into Emas to acquire the essential things with which to support life which the outsiders are denied, but it is also threaded through with the compassion exercised by the outsiders and their solidarity in the strength of their beliefs and their desire to protect them at all costs. At the very heart of the story is Naya's betrayal by her mother for her own ends and her realisation that she can no longer be part of a city where truth is constantly manipulated and distorted. Outside, she finally finds the emotional support she has never had and she leaves the city to begin a life of hardship and uncertainty with the knowledge that the forces of goodness are on her side. **VR**



Road To True North

★★★★★

Sarah Holding, Firehouse,190pp, 978-1916307094, £7.99 pbk

Historically, a road trip is a voyage of discovery, a chance to heal what hurts emotionally, an opportunity to reflect, a direct line to bonding with your companion(s). When Olly's father Sean takes him to Iceland to distract him from the pain of a first love ending

and a set of exam results which debar him from his academic ambitions, it soon becomes clear to the reader that Sean is just as broken as his son. His alcoholism has lost him his job, put his marriage to Tess in extreme jeopardy and cut him off from any meaningful relationship with Olly.

Holding adds Iceland to the mix, creating both a metaphor for this bleak emotional landscape and a series of intoxicating, life-threatening physical challenges which appeal to Sean's misplaced bravado, especially when he is fuelled by drink. All is ripe for misadventure and disaster. However, this narrative-and Olly's experience of it-is balanced and enriched by the people he engages with, who offer him opportunities to air his musical talents and a warm and welcome respite both from his father and the rigours of Icelandic landscape and weather.

Sean's Icelandic liaisons are far less nourishing, consisting of addictive relationships with all the alcohol he can lay his hands on and spending time with Anton, his wife's wealthy former partner and an inveterate thrill seeker who still insists on calling round regularly to see Tess. Anton's packs his Icelandic holiday with reckless and dangerous activities designed to prove his masculinity and he goads Sean until he joins him.

Olly is clearly the adult in the relationship with Sean and Holding's story-telling puts readers firmly inside his head and on the front row of the tragic pantomime which is Sean's life. This is masterly writing-intuitively analytical and utterly authentic. Whilst Sean fritters away his life chances, Olly develops his musical ambitions and begins to make his mark. When tragedy strikes it is Olly who saves Sean's life when Anton loses his.

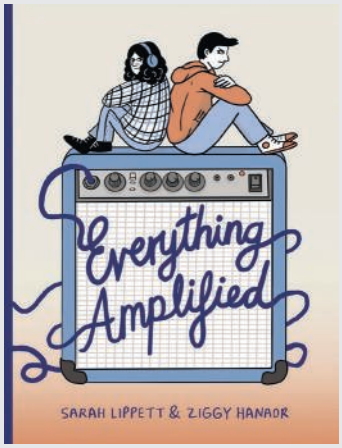
At the end of the novel Sean must rebuild his life with Tess and accept the baby she is carrying, which is Anton's. Olly has rediscovered his confidence, taken the first steps on the road to a musical career and seen the quiet regeneration of the love he thought he had lost. Holding gives us a mix of hope and uncertainty, bringing to the end of the novel the subtlety and drama which she threaded so successfully throughout the rest of its pages. **VR**

Everything Amplified

★★★★

Sarah Lippett and Ziggy Hanaor, Cicada Books, 300p, 9781800660601, £18.99 hbk

From the peritext to the end notes, this collaborative YA debut is a love song to the beauty, power and therapeutic nature of music. Its creators are known for their acclaimed nostalgic novels Alte Zachan and Stan and Nan, celebrating the wonder of grandparents. Influenced by their musical tastes and Lippett's experiences with song writing



and playing in a post punk band, Everything Amplified exults with good vibrations, accentuated with a melange of moody blues, the clash of drums and the beat of the guitar bite. Zinging with enthusiasm for the versatility of music throughout from the mellow to the thought provoking, to feminist punk to the rocking out exuberance of a garage band, to the heady joy of a rock n' roll gig, to the soothing nature of easy listening and lyrics that speak to the heart, it is an anthem to self-expression.

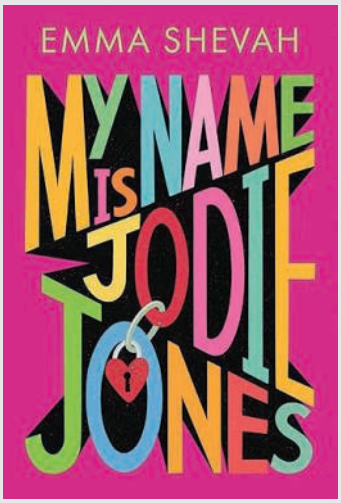
Opening with a quote from 1990's grunge icon Courtney Love, it is organised in four accessible chapters and an epilogue that explore anger, family dynamics, ambitions, dreams, hopes, concerns of juggling GCSEs with social life, and the highs and lows of navigating identity, friendships, manipulative behaviour, romantic complications, secrets, teenage hormones and plans for the future.

Frustrated 15-year-old narrator Nel finds solace from her hum drum small town life, troubled school environment and constant battles with her popular twin Ludo, in the 'secret passageway of sound'. Suddenly everything changes when a surprising turn of events gives her the opportunity to take the limelight from Ludo. Her bête noir Bea, radiating with rage, alternately bullies and charms her, while her non binary friend Kit and her charismatic musician aunt Jan provide support. But what effect will Nel's decisions have on others? Ultimately, she must search her soul to discover what she really wants.

Showcasing iconic females Nel sees as role models, like the melodious Karen Carpenter, rebellious teen vocalist Ari Up from the band, The Slits, the soulful Janis Joplin and the Jamaican reggae record producer Sonia Pottinger, the novel perfectly captures the turbulent nature of contemporary teenage life.

London based illustrator Lippett opts for dramatic panels displaying a myriad of emotions and strobing through grey backdrops with the predominant colours of bright orange and cool blue. This style effectively brings the connectivity of the characters with their different musical worlds alive as they shout lyrics and jam together.

With an eclectic range of music showcased, artist biographies and Nel's special playlist at the back, this will appeal to readers who appreciate the glory of music. Band loving teens who are searching for queer representation within a recognisable world with knotty relationship dramas and strong visuals will also enjoy this entertaining and expressive novel. **TJ**



My Name is Jodie Jones

Trigger Warnings: References to trauma

★★★★★

Emma Shevah. David Fickling Books, 352p. 9781788453516, £8.99, pbk

This incredible YA debut novel is a thing of beauty that cracks the heart and speaks to the soul. Interwoven with the sweet inner music of intertextuality and the unusual filmography of Wes Anderson, it has a vibrant, neurodiverse narrator of mixed heritage who possesses the 'independent will' of Jane Eyre fired with a feminist spirit. Jodie Jones, who insists on being called by her full name, revels in the rhythm of words. Sequoia. Propinquity. Mellifluous. Profound. Elixir. Perfervid. They are her refuge. She is an avid reader and a collector of sentences. She is a philosopher and analyser who embraces alliteration and onomatopoeia. She is entranced by the imagery of Fitzgerald, the sentiment of McCarthy and the word trickery of Joyce. She luxuriates in the poetry of Dickinson, Duffy and Rosetti. To her words are 'a sky full of snowflakes, individual and free' while sentences are 'ribbons tied to a pole, flapping and dancing in the breeze.'

Unique, complex and traumatised, Jodie Jones takes the reader on an incredible journey through her psyche as she deals with bereavement, divisive family dynamics, painful memories, the butterfly flutterings of first love and academic choices. As she struggles with inner turmoil deliberately performing badly at school, she finds mysterious scraps of paper with wondrous words just waiting for her. But what is at the root of her trauma?

Thai Irish wordsmith, free-thinker and English teacher Emma Shevah infuses her novel with a colourful cast of accompanying characters including supportive psychiatrist Dr Kumar, empathetic Moses, loyal friend Becca and her caring family: a controlling mother, a grieving father, an irritating older brother who is hiding a secret and diverse teaching staff.

A compulsive and empowering read, Jodie Jones celebrates the lyricism of literature and its ability to illustrate the human condition. Reflecting author Sally Gardner's belief that 'words are sweets in the mouth of sound', this thought-provoking book will appeal to lovers of language, students of literature and readers looking for something completely different. A triumphant tour de force with a distinctive, fierce and fresh new voice, it's one to watch. **TJ**

Not Going to Plan

Trigger Warnings- References to sex, stealthing, toxic behaviour, homophobic speech.

★★★★

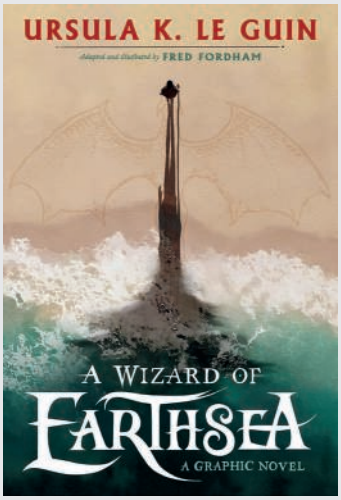
Tia Fisher. Hot Key Books, 400p. 9781471418372, £8.99, pbk

This debate worthy verse novel comes from the pen of Tia Fisher, Carnegie Medal for writing short listee. Written for 'the rebel inside her', it aims to educate, including analytical discussion resources for schools and reading groups at the back. Through the tandem voices of vulnerable and passionate artist Marnie, who uses provocation as armour and cautious, studious scientific introvert Zed, and a cast of troubled characters, she shines a searing spotlight on the insidious crime of stealthing and all of its consequences, exploring the tangled and turbulent world of teen relationships. Its web spins out to cover further thorny topical issues, in the wake of the programme Adolescence and debates in parliament, including the autonomy of a woman's body, what constitutes consent, misogyny, sexual politics and the right to an identity without labels.

Like her previous novel, which exposed County lines drug gangs, Fisher investigates an important issue that affects and damages the lives of teens. Explicit concrete poetry and punchy verse is employed to shock the reader with the subject matter and highlight characters' concerns. The battlefield and recklessness of unsupervised teenage parties, the vicious rumour mill at school and character assassination on social media all play their part. With visual clues in the chapter headings, the reader is led through a quagmire of secrets, lies and slander as Marnie deals with the fallout of events along with her friends Zed, Luca and Rakel.

Not Going to Plan is an ambitious project, juggling with a myriad

of issues. At times it slips into stereotyped descriptors but ultimately it addresses social stigma, giving teens a voice through art activism. Sometimes the storyline is submerged under a didactic voice though the book's aim is to help. An empathetic author's note further elucidates the importance of boundaries and 'explicit consent at every stage of sex.' Fisher also cautions against relying on AI sources as the solution to life changing questions, providing help lines for readers needing support. **TJ**



A Wizard of Earthsea

★★★

Ursula K Le Guin. Ill. Fred Fordham, Walker, 286 pp, 78 1 5295 2626 4, 12.99. pbk

It is a long time since I read this classic fantasy of a young wizard, destined for greatness, growing to maturity through a series of trials. I do not remember it as the kind of novel that was waiting to be pictured or filmed. But here it is, more than fifty years later, as a graphic novel. Illustrator Fred Fordham, with the blessing of Ursula Le Guin's son Theo, remaining faithful to the original storyline, offers his own imagining of setting, character, and incident. There are dramatic moments, it is true. Ged begins his wizarding career by conjuring up a fog that misleads invading raiders to their death. Later, proud and provoked by the taunts of a fellow novice wizard, he inadvertently summons a malignant shadow from the otherworld which threatens to haunt him for the rest of his life. And, on the way to his final confrontation with the shadow, he subdues a dragon. But these are incidental to a tale of his growing understanding of the world and how to live in it which is wrung slowly and at a cost from mystery and confusion. There is a point in this adaptation where another character says of Ged that he might 'win through darkness to great dominion, even to kingship.' Fordham seems to have taken this to heart, for so much in this retelling takes place in darkness, fog or mist, and, even when the sun shines, Fordham is happier in the shadows. Character's faces, to which you might look for emotion and reaction, are cloaked or hard to read. It is a bold choice and I think I see the reason for it but it narrows Fordham's scope. While he pursues his vision with admirable persistence and skill, and he is given a handsome production by Walker, it makes for a book that is not immediately arresting or comfortable to read. Possibly, it also makes it less inviting for younger teenagers. **CB**

Space, Royal Observatory Greenwich Poetry Book

★★★★

Gaby Morgan ed., Macmillan, 268 pp, 9781035068265, £14.99. hbk

Gaby Morgan is an experienced anthologist and here has produced a wide-ranging collection of poetry to celebrate the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich. The titles of the book's sections give a hint of subjects of the poems she has selected: telescopes, and the history of the Greenwich telescope itself; the moon, the sun, the planets and the stars; people who have looked up at the universe and what they have made of it; and the immensity of time revealed to us in space. In short, from here to infinity and beyond. It is an impressive gathering of poets from Sappho, through D.H. Lawrence, Louisa May Alcott and Thomas Hardy to present day voices like John Rice, Chrissie Gittins and Kate Wakeling, if I may invidiously pick out a few from the throng. The collection is not advertised for young people, although the introduction from the Deputy Head of Astronomy at Greenwich suggests that they are the intended audience. There are poets here who did not knowingly write for young people alongside those who certainly do, but such is the skill of Gaby Morgan's selection that very few poems, I think, would be beyond a poetry loving teenager. And there is skill and care in the arrangement, too, as viewpoints, reactions and registers switch from poem to poem and subject to subject, sometimes complementing one another and sometimes contrasting. There are poems here you might know and some that you won't, particularly those that have been commissioned for the collection, and there are many that will stay with you. My only misgiving are the black and white illustrations enclosed in broken lines that, unfortunately, look like an invitation to cut the pictures out. Illustrating the history of the observatory and many of the pioneers of astronomy, they are always relevant, but seem to me to have a lack of visual impact to match the poems they accompany. **CB**

Thorn Season

★★★

Kiera Azar, Harper Fire, 978-0008721817, 416pp 16.99 hbk

This is a romantic, political fantasy. Lady Alissa Paine is supposedly of noble birth and a Wholeborn. This means that she does not have a spectre, a force within someone which is controlled by their emotions, and which can give them the power to help or hinder others by means of placing their spectre upon them. People with spectres are called Wielders and, in the narrative's society, they are disliked and feared by many. They are also hunted by a malevolent group called the Hunters whose sole purpose is to eradicate Wielders. The position of Wielders could be compared to any marginalised group in our society.

Lady Alissa has three suitors, one of whom is potentially dangerous. She also has a secret. She is a Wielder, a fact she must keep hidden at all costs. On their eighteenth season, nobles must spend a period at Court similar to the British debutante season. Lady Alissa discovers that the Hunters are trying to find a compass which would allow them to locate all the Wielders in a Kingdom to kill them. She undertakes a dangerous mission to find the keeper of the compass, which can be likened to Phillip Pullman's Alethiometer, and to steal it from them without being discovered as a Wielder.

Will she manage it and at what cost?

This book has some strong sections particularly those dealing with family loyalty and grief. The reader is never quite sure whom to trust. Some readers may lose the thread of such a complex plot. More editing could have been beneficial. **RB**

Real When I'm With You

★★★

Lucy Powrie, Scholastic, 978-0702342097 352pp £8.99 pbk

Effie is seventeen. She has both autism and ADHD. She is also utterly tired of being put on the sidelines of her best friend, Chelsea's, romances. These are of questionable quality and there have been many.

Effie decides that she must persuade Aidan, the cute barista in the local seafront coffee shop, to engage in a fake relationship with her to prove to Chelsea that Effie can have a relationship of her own. What happens when these feelings, at first manufactured, become real? Will Effie be able to trust herself and find her own happiness with Aidan or will she let her need to be liked by Chelsea ruin a genuinely good relationship?

This book can be predictable in parts, although as Effie points out, autistic people like predictability. However, it can slow down the pace of a narrative. There are two stand out features in Powrie's novel. One, is the absolutely brilliant character of Effie's cat, Lady Mousington, who provides emotional comfort and support. The other, is Powrie's eloquent and often painful description of an autistic shutdown and of the length of time and effort it takes to get out of one.

This is an own-voice novel and that could not be clearer than in the detailed description of the shutdown. This will be affirming and cathartic for autistic readers. **RB**

Moving to Mars: Building a Colony on the Red Planet

★★★

Eduard Altarriba et al, Button Books, 56pp, 978 1 78708 158 1, £12.99, hbk

This hardback considers how humans are reaching for Mars, 'Our unavoidable destiny if we want to become a multi-planetary species, living not just on Earth but on many planets' (p.3).

It begins by looking at the myths around Mars and how it was named before delving into the comparison between Earth and Mars and continuing with a look at the red planet's two moons. After exploring solar wind and cosmic radiation more of the practicalities of humans reaching and staying on Mars are explained.

'Moving to Mars' contains sections on, 'Some orbital mechanics', 'Setting up Base Zero' and then 'A city on Mars'. Various aspects of life on the planet which is most like Earth are then discussed in sections about 'Community life', 'Energy', 'Parks and green spaces', 'Martian diet' and 'Transport'. This publication ends with a look at terraforming which is, "A process of 'planetary engineering' aimed at improving a planet's environment and climate" (p.54).

This volume is full of some very clear and well-labelled diagrams to explain the physics and practicalities behind living in alien conditions in Space. I feel that the knowledge needed to access some of the text is at GCSE level because topics include parabolas as conical trajectories, for example. Students with physics and/or astronomy as a special subject will enjoy this book, and it could inspire budding physicists who would be eager to imbibe meticulous scientific details. However other students might be turned off by the high level of knowledge needed to enjoy the book fully.

It is a pity there is no glossary or index included here as they would both be useful. There is ample scope for bringing together explanations and definitions of scientific terms at the end of the book, and an index would help with accessibility. If you are looking for information on conquering Mars this is a very full and advanced study of the subject. **JS**

Valediction: **No.24** Some Running Rhymes

A notable volume from publisher Blackie is the latest of book from **Brian Alderson**'s collection to be wrapped up and presented to **Seven Stories**.

Scotland has a notable place in the history of British writing for children. If we rule out the great Dundee publishers of such comics as *Dandy* and Beano we can name such book publishers as the Chambers Brothers and Thomas Nelson, both of Edinburgh, and William Collins and Messrs Blackie of Glasgow. They could not help opening London offices but Scotland was their true homeland.

The firm of Blackie was founded in Glasgow in 1809 and opened their important adjunct as printers in 1819. Although it was much later in the century that they entered the field of publishing for children. Their multiple successes included many of the children's novels of G A Henty where their multiple variants have been marvellously described in the bibliography by Peter Newbolt and the 20th Century would see a raft of popular items, not least the long run of Blackie Annuals.

Florence Harrison found a place with them soon after she got to England from Brisbane, Australia where she was born. Her first book was **Rhymes and Reasons**, which she wrote and illustrated herself in 1905 and she remained faithful to the company until her death in 1955.

At the start of things she was fortunate to encounter Talwin Morris, the great book designer employed by Blackie, and it was he who would have been responsible for the design of the **The Rhyme of a Run**, which was her second book. It is a fine piece of book design giving ample space to the layout of Florence's first compositions. The title poem is the longest of these and gives a good idea of her entertaining style;

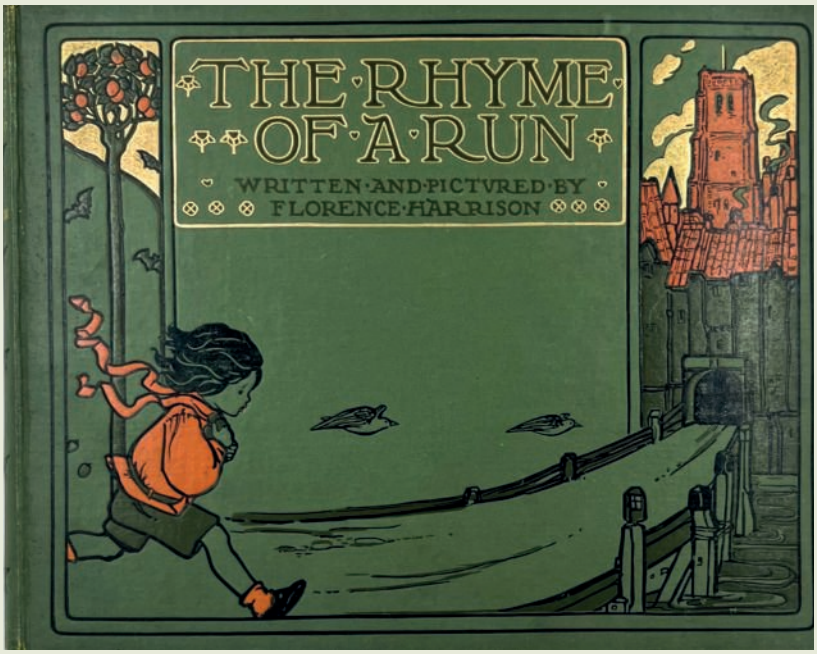
Fingers and Thumbs, they stole the plums,
And little feet ran away,
The big scarecrow cried "Bo Ho Ho!
You'd better not come this way".

However, Fingers and Thumbs escapes past a blue stream, a stone wall, and sundry ducks and geese and the like, and eventually ends up in the town;

And the big Church Bell went ding, dong, dell,
And the soldiers beat the drums,
And all the people ran up the steeple,
And caught poor Fingers and Thumbs.

The nine additional sets of verses that followed this were shorter but uniformly cheerful;

Four little lasses took me to the fair.
What did I buy them when I got there?
I bought one a posy, and I bought one a pin;
I bought one a bow and a little violin;
I bought one a dolly in a bright blue shawl.
What was it I had? Nothing at all.
What was I had? Nothing at all.





Florence, perhaps under the direction of Morris, accompanied all the verses with either coloured or monochrome illustrations to make a completely satisfying book.

Florence published over 21 rhyme books during her stay with Blackie, including one or two classic poems by such as Christina Rosetti and Tennyson.

Eventually, in 1991, Blackie closed down both their publishing and printing operations only to make way for the rather less child friendly horrors of social media and such like.

Brian Alderson is a long-time and much-valued contributor to **Books for Keeps**, founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His most recent book, **The 100 Best Children's Books**, is published by Galileo Publishing, 978-1903385982, £14.99 hbk.

Florence Harrison. **The Rhyme of a Run and Other Verse.** [rubricated] [4 titles] Glasgow: Blackie & Sons Ltd Glasgow. Dublin. Bombay & New York. [rubricated] The whole within a monochrome frame with hand drawn illustrations on sage green paper. 225mm x 285mm.68pp. On sage green paper throughout. [1-2] blank [3] monochrome vignette [4] blank [5] half title [6] blank [7] title–page as above [8] blank [9] contents [10] blank [11-29] The Rhyme of a Run [Title and Verses on versos faced by illustrations, 6 in 4 colours, 4 in monochrome.[30] blank [31-63]: 9 further sets of verses by Florence Harrison. The following rhymes with variegated coloured illustrations as previously: *Four Little Lassies, Mother Malloon, Topply Tilts, Heathery Mill, The Flying Piggy, Brownie's Park, Billy Boatman, Marigold Mary, Lucky Loo.* [64] blank [65] Monochrome vignette [66-68] blank. Green cloth over thick boards colour illustrated title to front, titling to spine, back blank. Front and rear end papers with animals and characters.