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Brian Wildsmith

A Retrospective

LOTTERY FUNDED
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

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March 2010

COVER STORY
This issue's cover illustration is from Brian Wildsmith's **The Hare and the Tortoise** (© Brian Wildsmith 1966) published by Oxford University Press and re-issued in 2007 (978 0 19 272708 4, £5.99 pbk). Brian Wildsmith's work is discussed by Joanna Carey on page 5. Thanks to Oxford University Press for their help with this March cover.

editorial

How thoughtless of the authors of now classic books for children (think **Peter Pan**, **The House at Pooh Corner**, **Where the Wild Things Are**) not to have bestirred themselves to write sequels or indeed create a whole series. How could they confine themselves, Salinger-like, to the production of only one (OK, in Milne's case two) star titles?

Such curmudgeonly behaviour risks limiting the commercial opportunities available to today's publishers did they not step in to commission sequels from other hands. However, the problem with these other hands is that, even when they write well and in keeping with the voice and vision of the original book, they are not J M Barrie, A A Milne or indeed Maurice Sendak. The result will inevitably be inauthentic and second best.

The 2006 sequel to **Peter Pan**, Geraldine McCaughrean's **Peter Pan in Scarlet**, was authorized and commissioned by the Special Trustees of Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital (to whom Barrie entrusted the rights in his creation) in order to help generate continuing income for that worthy institution – which no doubt it does. Whether the Trustees' stipulation that it should 'share the same enchanting characters as the original' was enough to ensure the preservation of Barrie's particularity is another matter.

Now we have David Benedictus's **Return to the Hundred Acre Wood**, a 'sequel' to **The House at Pooh Corner**. As Brian Alderson points out in his review in this issue (see p.18), after **The House at Pooh Corner** 'nothing more needed to be said'.

Dave Eggers's **The Wild Things** is a very different kettle of fish: a novelisation of the film script he co-wrote for **The Wild Things**, a film adaptation 'based on the book by Maurice Sendak' and directed by Spike Jonze. Sendak served as a producer on the film and was 'fully involved' the press release tells us. He is quoted as saying: 'Spike...didn't do an homage to the book; he did something that belongs to him, which makes him a real filmmaker and a real artist... He's turned it into *his* 'Wild Things' without giving up mine...'

I don't share Sendak's enthusiasm for this utterly tedious full length feature film (**Where the Wild Things Are** on which it is 'based' is nine sentences long!) and I regret that the Wild Things of the film have been so liberally and literally based on Sendak's illustrations. However, it could be argued that this film, however yawn making, is at least a development of the original book into new media, not a 'pretend' Sendak. This cannot be argued for Eggers' film adaptation book, **The Wild Things**, of which Robert Dunbar writes in this issue (see p21): '...there must be few contemporary children's books which seem so utterly pointless.'

Where Brian Wildsmith's 50 year career stemmed from. 'A is for Apple' from his 1963 Kate Greenaway Medal winner **Brian Wildsmith's ABC**. See pages 5–7.

Introducing children to art

In this issue's 'Ten of the Best', Martin Salisbury chooses books that set out to introduce children to the visual arts. These are ten excellent and enjoyable titles but Martin also comments that '... the very best picture books, on any subject, are themselves the best introduction a child can have to art and design. A bookshelf that contains the likes of Maurice Sendak, Charles Keeping, Bruno Munari and John Burningham cannot fail to visually educate and inspire.'

On p.5–7 illustrator Brian Wildsmith makes a similar point. Interviewer Joanna Carey reports that '...he is puzzled by what he perceives in the UK to be a gulf between fine art and illustration – "It's a cultural thing," he says. "Illustration is undervalued in the UK."'

Indeed it is. Astonishingly, given the richness and quality of our children's book illustration, unlike Japan or the US we have no gallery dedicated specifically to children's book illustration.

Rosemary Stones,
Editor

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The Children's Books of the Decade

For children's publishing the first ten years of the new millennium was a decade to celebrate for the sheer quality, richness and inventiveness of the best of its output. And this during a period bedevilled by reductive literacy strategies, stringent cuts in library provision and the channelling of marketing budgets to promote a few favoured authors at the expense of the many. **Rosemary Stones** comments on some of the highlights.

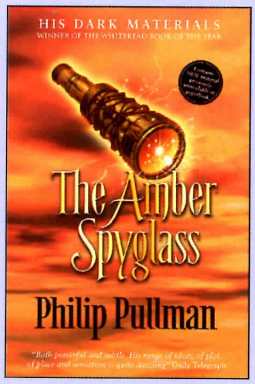
The children's books industry could be forgiven for feeling anxious at the start of a decade that would see some inevitable endings. Most notable among them were the publication of **The Amber Spyglass** (2000), the final volume of Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' and the end of Harry Potter with **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows** (2007). Could the market survive without record breaking Harry? (**Deathly Hallows** sold three million copies in the first *weekend* after publication.) What could replace the boy wizard?

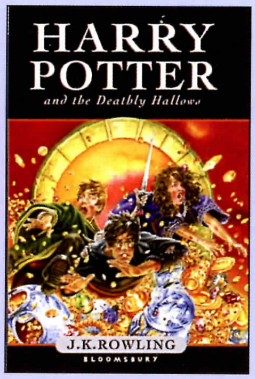
New series

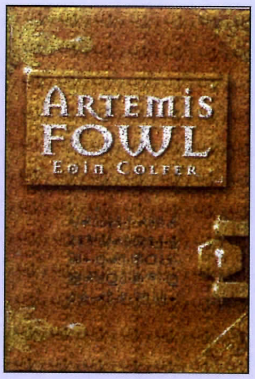
Panic turned out to be premature as American Stephenie Meyer's vampire romance **Twilight** (2008) hit the shelves and went on to sell 17 million copies worldwide. There were sequels of course. The appeal of this new blockbuster (a 'love story with a bite') to teenage girls in particular appears to be the libidinal symbolism of fangs penetrating and blood being sucked. Other writers have scrambled, more or less successfully, to jump on the vampire bandwagon... How soon before we are vampired out?

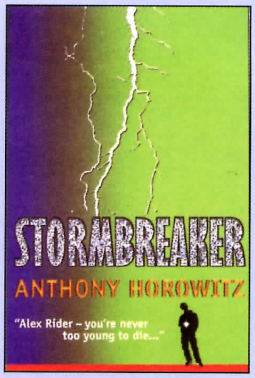
Meanwhile successful standalone titles were being developed into series. Eoin Colfer's eponymous fairy with attitude, **Artemis Fowl** (2001), went on to have further adventures and Anthony Horowitz's **Stormbreaker** (2005) became the 'Alex Rider' series of thrillers credited with turning many a reluctant boy into a reader.

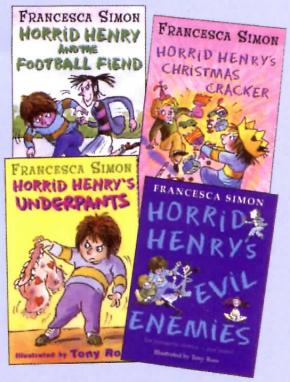
Younger series fiction, a difficult area to get right, fared pretty well in this decade. Francesca Simon's splendid **Horrid Henry**, published as a one-off title at the end of the 90s, grew into a publishing phenomenon with

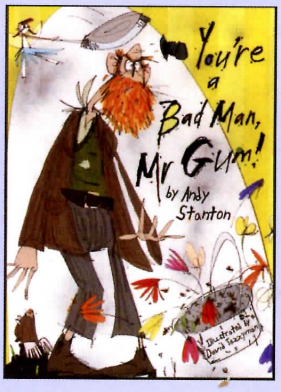


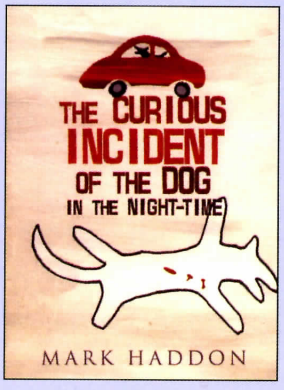


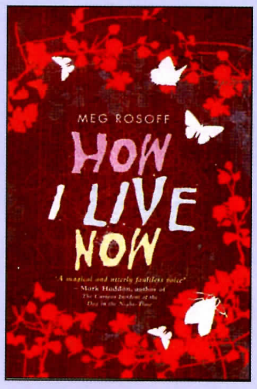


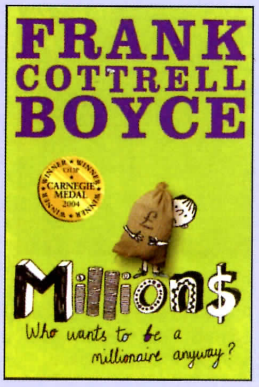












dozens of titles which effectively bridge the transition for younger readers from picture books to fiction. For middle age range readers Cressida Cowell's **How to Train Your Dragon** (2003) became a range of titles featuring the wild adventures of the young Viking Hiccup Horrendus Haddock III. Humour also played its part in making Andy Stanton's **You're a Bad Man, Mr Gum!** (2008) a word of mouth success leading to further Mr Gum titles.

The outstanding series of the decade, however, was indubitably Philip Reeve's 'Mortal Engines' quartet, a brilliantly sustained account of the rise and fall of Municipal Darwinism whose eponymous first volume was published in 2004. 'Witty and thrilling, serious and sensitive, the 'Mortal Engines' quartet is one of the most daring and imaginative science fiction adventures ever written for young readers,' wrote Clive Barnes in **Book for Keeps**. I'll second that.

Stand alone fiction

But what of stand alone fiction titles – now so hated by marketing departments who want, vampire-like, the promise of a series into which they can sink their fangs?

Mark Haddon's **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time** (2003) was a maverick and unexpected cross-over bestseller but, for my money, the outstanding stand alone fiction titles of the decade are those of two writers whose impressive debut novels were then followed by equally impressive subsequent work – they are Meg Rosoff's **How I Live Now** and Frank Cottrell Boyce's **Millions** which were both published in 2004. Both writers have a distinctive and original voice and their narratives are richly multi-layered.

Picture books

Despite concerns about patchy rights deals and the diminishing market for picture books with lists being trimmed, this sector more than held its own as the new century continued. New picture book talent kept coming with innovative standalone titles: Mini Grey (**Traction Man is Here**, 2005), Emily Gravett (**Wolves**, 2005) and Oliver Jeffers (**Lost and Found**, 2006) amongst others hit the ground running, bringing rich intertextuality and a confidently witty use of the picture book medium.

> "Now at the beginning of the next decade the transition from print-on-woodpulp to e-readers may still be at its beginnings but it has become a reality that will have to be accommodated."

Lauren Child's **Clarice Bean That's Me** had been published at the end of the '90s but this was Clarice's decade as it was Charlie and Lola's with a wealth of witty, anarchic titles from the innovatively stylish Child. Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's Gruffalo continued into the new century with the **The Gruffalo's Child** (2004) to became a 'property' with merchandising opportunities resulting in Gruffalo toys, mugs, stationery and so forth.

Non-fiction and poetry?

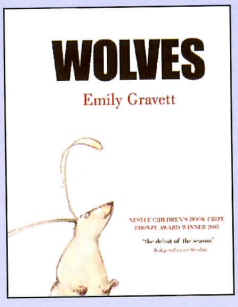
But what of non-fiction, that much ignored but vital sector of children's publishing? Relatively few non-fiction writers are the household names that creators of fiction and picture books can become. Mick Manning and Brita Granström's highly original and distinctive non-fiction for younger readers over the last decade (eg **Roman Fort**, 2004 amongst a heap of enjoyable titles) has made them exceptions to the rule.

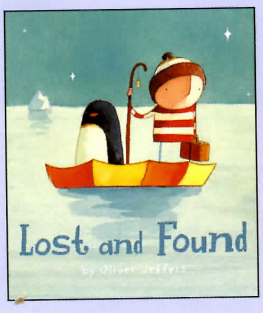
A decade that saw pitifully few single poet volumes published ended well with the appointment of Carol Ann Duffy (known as much for her poetry for children as for her poetry for adults) appointed Poet Laureate.

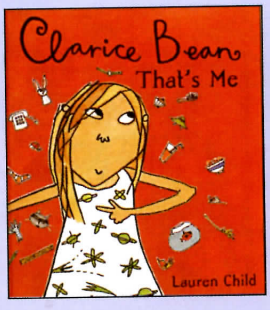
And the next decade?

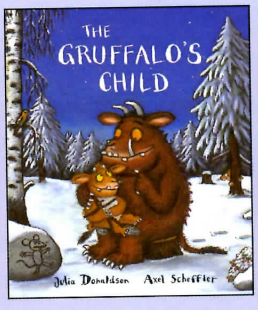
The threat, or promise, of technological change loomed over the decade. Now at the beginning of the next decade the transition from print-on-woodpulp to e-readers may still be at its beginnings but it has become a reality that will have to be accommodated. And who knows, the digital age may find new ways to encourage creativity in publishing for children. ■

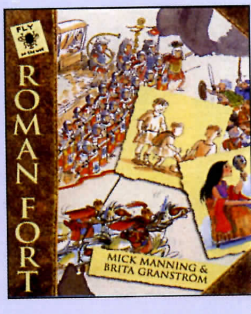
Rosemary Stones is editor of **Books for Keeps**.











Brian Wildsmith
A Retrospective

In addition to Beatles, Mini-Minors, mini skirts and moon landings, the fabled 1960s also witnessed a revolution in the world of picture books. Developments in colour printing opened up limitless possibilities and, along with artists such as Charles Keeping and John Burningham, Brian Wildsmith was quick to recognize the implications of the new technology. Wildsmith is now 80 and **BfK** invited **Joanna Carey** to assess his unique contribution to children's illustration.

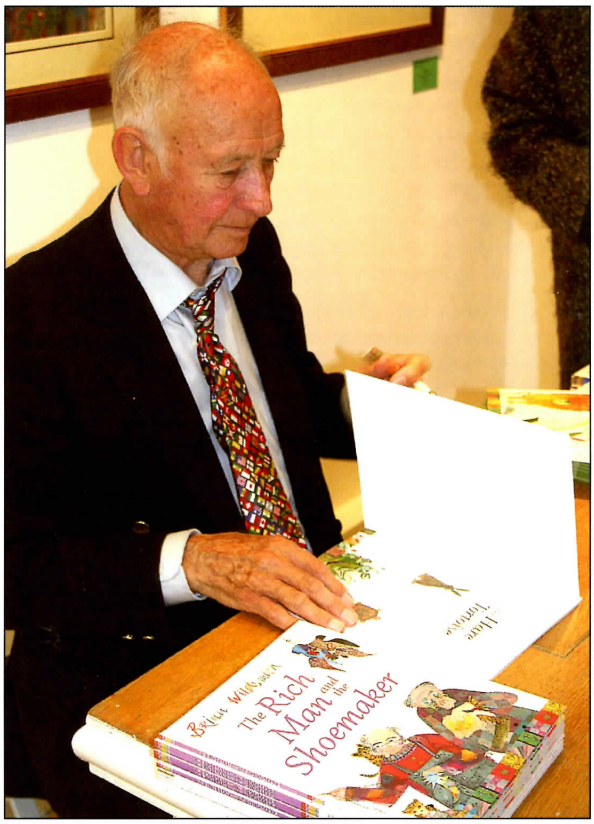
From **Circus**.

When **Brian Wildsmith's ABC** won the Kate Greenaway Medal in 1963, it was startlingly original. Now, nearly 50 years on, the images are still bold and surprising, often cropped in unexpected ways with no mimsy borders, or unnecessary detail. The brush strokes have an impetuous tactile quality, the paint looks thick and fresh, and even now you feel that if you closed the book, the pages would stick together.

The colours shout, sing and whisper, according to the mood. The red and yellow apple is juicily painted, fat, round and comfortable with itself, while the unicorn is a nervy creature, an ephemeral vision on a misty blue ground. There's an impressionistic butterfly, hastily painted, and a violin, whose darkly varnished, perfectly proportioned presence strikes a note of authority.

But it's the kettle that sings the loudest, with a scumbled base of cadmium orange emanating a palpable sense of heat. This alphabet was clearly the work of a painter…

'The North Wind and the Sun', from **Brian Wildsmith's Favourite Fables**.



Formative years

Brian Wildsmith was born in Yorkshire in 1930, the son of a miner. His talents pointed to a career either in music or science, but at the crucial moment of decision, an inner 'voice' told him to study art, and after two years at Barnsley art school he won a scholarship to the Slade in London to study painting. He didn't fit in with the 'public school types' there and even a shared interest in cricket failed to break the ice. Canvases and paints were expensive so initially he concentrated on drawing, and spent a lot of time in the print rooms of the British Museum and the National Gallery, familiarizing himself with the works of the old masters.

Old Mother Goose from **Brian Wildsmith's Favourite Nursery Rhymes**.

The donkey from **The Miller, the Boy and the Donkey.**

'Illustration courses' didn't really exist in those days, and anyway, as a Fine Art student, he didn't expect to become an illustrator. But, looking back, he says 'it does seem very odd that in all my years at art school, nobody ever mentioned the subject of how I would ever earn a living!' He solved this problem (after his National Service) by getting a teaching job which he combined with freelance work for various publishers, doing cover illustrations and honing his graphic skills on the black and white line drawings that were at that time (though sadly no longer) such an important element in children's fiction.

His big break came when his work was spotted by Mabel George, an imaginative editor at OUP. She was about to try out a new Austrian fine art printer. As an experiment she commissioned Wildsmith to do 12 colour plates for the Arabian Nights. The publisher was pleased, but the luminosity of his paintings and his loose graphic style failed to impress the reviewer in the **TLS** who dismissed them as 'pointless scribbles'. Wildsmith was dismayed, but Mabel George wasn't bothered. 'I knew we had something interesting on our hands' she said, 'and that review has convinced me.' She thereupon commissioned him to create his **ABC**.

It caused quite a stir and Wildsmith, still a painter at heart, found in himself a growing passion for children's books. 'Art is food for the soul,' he likes to say 'and a picture book represents a child's very first encounter with art, so I felt this was a way I could make a contribution to the world. A drop in the ocean maybe, but this work offered a chance to communicate to children the importance of such things as kindness, compassion, friendship, beauty.'

Imaginative freedom

Because he was new to making picture books, Wildsmith knew nothing about the process, and if the result was unusual, it wasn't because he was trying to be different; he was, quite simply, 'unaware of the constraints – I wasn't bound by convention, I just went my own, admittedly somewhat arrogant way. This was the 1960s remember! Liberation! The age of freedom and self expression!'

That freedom and self expression has led to 82 books that range from Mother Goose nursery rhymes, fables and fairy tales, to explorations of the natural world and stories from the bible – as a 'cradle catholic' he says, 'I was brought up on those stories and they're some of the best in the world.'

He also turned his attention to poetry. It was customary in the early sixties for poetry to be accompanied by well behaved line drawings that knew their place, but Wildsmith's illustrations for **The Oxford Book of Poetry for Children** have an airy, almost unruly sense of imaginative freedom. And there's a show stopping moment in the drawing for William Blake's 'The Tyger' which with its soulful intensity, and its inescapable eye contact, is the first of the many tigers that prowl through Wildsmith's work.

Animals have always played a vital role and with the three non-fiction books, **Wild Animals**, **Fishes**, and **Birds** (all separately published in the 60s, but now gathered together in one volume, **Animal Gallery**) he was in his element and could allow his painterly instincts a free rein. This resulted in some stunningly beautiful images, rich in colour, texture and pattern, that explore the natural world. Bringing the art of illustration a little closer to the art of painting, these books are as rewarding as they are inspirational. I know from many years as an art teacher that these pictures offer children a valuable chance to see paint handled with freedom and spontaneity in

From **The Little Wood Duck.**

a way that relates to their own efforts, but is importantly free of condescension, or false naivety. The use of colour and texture is magical in its variety – the wrinkled skin of the elephant is thickly painted, then blotted and scraped, while the rhinoceros is delicately depicted in line and wash; then there are the fishes – rainbow fish flaunting their jewel colours, on a splashy spattered background, and the subtly stippled trout, hovering in the underwater stained glass luminosity of it all. Most memorable of all are the owls whose hypnotic stare fixes you and defies you to turn the page.

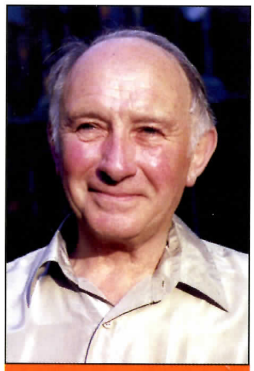
With the Fables of la Fontaine, Wildsmith turned wordsmith, retelling the stories with an economy which, particularly in the case of the Hare and the Tortoise, is in marked contrast to the extravagance of the flower-powered backgrounds where pinks and purples jostle with shimmering blobs of viridian green, cerulean blue and vermilion – all the colliding colours of the sixties.

Animals aren't subject to fashion, but in almost all picture books the characters inevitably get to look a little dated as time goes by. Wildsmith avoids this by dressing them in non-specific, highly coloured archaic costumes – such as those in **The Miller, the Boy and the Donkey**. This is a fable about a donkey that must be carried on a palanquin, to keep its feet clean. It's very funny but because Wildsmith's humour never involves resorting to anthropomorphic winks and nudges, and because the donkey is so beautifully, naturalistically drawn and so intricately textured, the gentle humour is exquisitely subtle.

The Circus (1970) is another sensitive piece. The elegant plumed horses are drawn with a controlled rhythmic grace, as is their rider, and the brightly coloured geometric designs that decorate the circus ring work in counterpoint to the drawing of the animals' natural markings. But circuses have changed over the years, and with its caged lions, performing seals and bicycling bears, this is a thought provoking period piece, and although there is a gentle humour here, with cheerful dogs leaping merrily through hoops, the tiger poised to perform in all his forlorn symmetry is a heartbreaking reminder of the way things were.

The Little Wood Duck (1972), although a rather slight story, is one of Wildsmith's most beautiful books. While the psychedelic butterflies, wilful colours and splodgy brushwork of the flowers and foliage, place this firmly in the 70s, the drawing of the fox and the duck and the delicate handling of the fur and feathers have a tenderness and attention to detail that you often find hidden away in early Italian paintings, and, in addition to that, there's an oriental feel to Wildsmith's exquisite watercolour technique which perfectly captures the thistledown texture of the duckling, so much so, that you almost feel it, soft and insubstantial in your hands.

From **The Cat on the Mat.**



Master of Colour: Brian Wildsmith at 80. Exhibitions celebrating his work open at The Illustration Cupboard (22 Bury Street, London SW1Y 6AL) 24 March–24 April 2010 and at Seven Stories (30 Lime Street, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 2PQ) 2 April–18 July 2010.

Brian Wildsmith's books are published by Oxford University Press.

A stare of owls from **Brian Wildsmith's Animal Gallery.**

In 1974 Wildsmith received a telegram out of the blue from the American film director, George Cukor, inviting him to design sets and costumes for a film of Maeterlinck's **The Bluebird**. It was irresistible; he met the stars including Jane Fonda, Elizabeth Taylor and an eight-year-old Patsy Kensit. It was filmed in Leningrad but although it provided Wildsmith with some unique anecdotes – he's an engaging storyteller in real life, as well as on paper – the film was not a success. However, the book that rose from its ashes has a gentle magic of its own.

But the Bluebird fiasco was a rare exception; most of Wildsmith's ideas are his own. 'The thing about my ideas,' he once told me, 'is that they arrive in my head fully developed – it was like that for Mozart too apparently – but the trouble is, in my case, weeks can pass before I realize that it's a bloody awful idea. So I have to be absolutely certain it's right before I start work on it, because once I start, I'm stuck with it for seven or eight months. So I don't even begin work until I've really fallen in love with the idea.'

Wildsmith is now 80. In 1971 he moved to the south of France with his wife and children – a long way from London, a long way from Yorkshire. He loves the sun and I'm reminded of his glorious retelling of la Fontaine's fable, 'The North Wind and the Sun', with the elemental vigour of the illustrations evoking the ultimate redemptive powers of warmth and gentleness. He's done 82 books which have sold worldwide in their millions and the house is full of his huge abstract paintings.

But he is puzzled by what he perceives in the UK to be a gulf between fine art and illustration – 'It's a cultural thing' he says. 'Illustration is undervalued in the UK. But it's different elsewhere.' He's done lecture tours in Canada, the US, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand. And in Japan, where he has a huge following, there's a whole museum devoted to his work.

But things are changing here, and exhibitions of his work are due to open in London and Newcastle in the next few months. ■

Joanna Carey is a writer and illustrator.

Ten of the Best

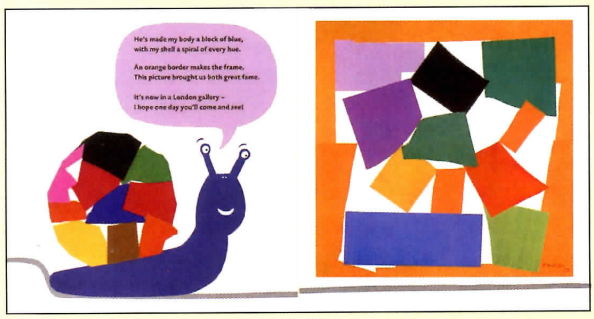
Books that Introduce Children to Art

Martin Salisbury selects his top ten titles.

There has been something of an upsurge recently in books designed to introduce children to the visual arts. Perhaps it's just me, but I sense that this is an area that has suffered more than most from bad ideas. Personal *bêtes noires* are the books that claim to encourage visual literacy whilst themselves being poorly designed or aesthetically jarring. Many others feature badly rendered versions of iconic paintings as a vehicle for a narrative 'way in'. Most of these books, like art history generally these days, focus on the social contexts of the paintings, rather than the formal, artistic qualities themselves. It is my firm belief that the very best picture books, on any subject, are themselves the best introduction a child can have to art and design. A bookshelf that contains the likes of Maurice Sendak, Charles Keeping, Bruno Munari and John Burningham cannot fail to visually educate and inspire. There are also many books that introduce children to drawing and making, by far the most important activities to any understanding of art. These again are of variable quality. But I shall restrict myself here to books that aim to introduce children to pictures and how to read them. And my reservations notwithstanding, there are some very good ones!

Snail Trail

Jo Saxton, Frances Lincoln, 978 1 84780 021 3, £11.99 hbk



Jo Saxton's snail takes us through the book, commenting in rhyming couplets on each well-known painting that he encounters on the way. His shell, he tells us, is made up of the colours of one particular painting, but first we must follow his journey, during which he will 'teach us how to look'. After passing Newman, Pollock, Rothko, Picasso and others, we eventually reach Snail's portrait artist, Henri Matisse. Produced to a simple formula, well designed and easy to follow, this book gives us the visual space to look at and enjoy each painting. (3+)

Tell Me A Picture

Quentin Blake, Frances Lincoln in association with The National Gallery, 978 1 84507 687 0, £10.99 pbk

Blake's tenure as the first Children's Laureate had a major impact on the standing of the picture book as an art form. The exhibition at the National Gallery which this book accompanied was groundbreaking in allowing the viewer to explore pictures, unhindered by verbal instruction or preconceptions about the context in which they should be seen. The mixture of gallery paintings and book illustrations displayed alphabetically would never normally be seen together and in the book, as in the gallery, we are simply led through the alphabet from Avercamp to Zwerger by the comments of a group of chatty, curious children. (3+)

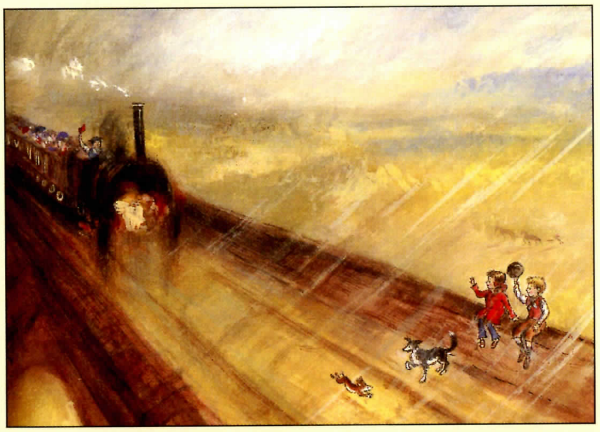
Artful Reading

Bob Raczka, Millbrook Press, 978 1 58013 880 2, £7.99 pbk

I like the simplicity of this idea. The book presents a selection of paintings that feature the act of engaging with a book. We have impressionist readers, renaissance readers and cubist readers. Each picture carries a few words of text inviting us to 'read with each other', 'read while you work' etc. according to the content of the image. The book is only let down by the visually intrusive and fussy page design. (3+)

Katie and the British Artists

James Mayhew, Orchard, 978 1 84616 737 9, £5.99 pbk



The **Katie** books have been around for nearly 20 years now and can be found in museums and galleries the world over. Mayhew's series has been much imitated but what distinguishes these books from the rest is the painterly sensitivity with which the transition from painting to narrative backdrop is handled. This ninth adventure focuses on paintings by Constable, Gainsborough, Turner and Stubbs. The formula for Katie's entry into the world of each painting is never forced and the author manages to maintain a balance between pastiche and personal visual language through a genuine empathy with the formal qualities of the paintings. (5+)

Look Again!

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thames & Hudson, 978 0 500 51475 7, £12.95 hbk

Drawing on the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, **Look Again!** invites the reader to explore 15 artworks using the peephole cut-out technique to initially reveal a section of the image from a predominately white page. A coloured band meanders across the page containing text that describes the scene as it appears in the section but invites the reader to turn the page and 'look again!', whereupon the full

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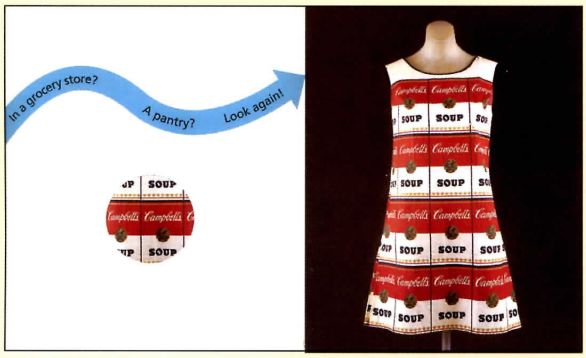


glory of the image is revealed and commented upon. At the back of the book, details of each painting are listed. What I like about this book is the quality of the design. It doesn't patronise with all-singing-all-dancing graphics. (5+)

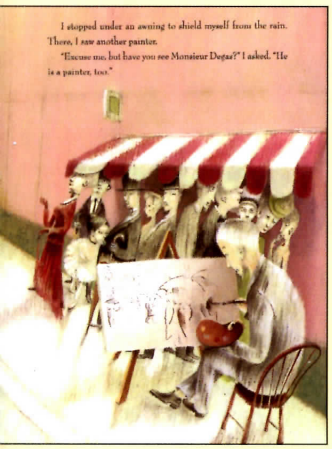
Look! Seeing the Light in Art

Gillian Wolfe, Frances Lincoln, 978 1 84780 038 1, £8.99 pbk

The author is the Director of Learning and Public Affairs and Head of Education at the Dulwich Picture Gallery which has done sterling work to break down barriers between 'high' art and narrative or illustrative art. An eclectic selection of paintings is brought together from a wide range of genres on the basis of each one's attention to the issue of light. From the dappled impressionistic light of a Renoir to the heightened contrast of a Frank Hampson Dan Dare frame, each is examined on a facing page through a knowledgeable but unpatronising text. (5+)

Chasing Degas

Eva Montanari, Abrams, 978 0 8109 3878 6, £9.99 hbk



A young dancer has accidentally picked up Monsieur Degas' bag and taken away his paints. She rushes into the Paris streets to find him and in doing so, passes through the familiar turn-of-the-century Parisian street scenes of painters such as Gustave Caillebotte and Claude Monet, encountering Mary Cassatt and Père Tanguy along the way. Eva Montanari's delightful illustrations manage to successfully integrate the work of these artists and her own distinctive stylistic language to create a convincing world and an engaging narrative. (5+)

In the Picture: Get looking! Get thinking!

Lucy Micklethwait, Frances Lincoln, 978 1 84507 636 8, £12.99 hbk

Lucy Micklethwait selects a range of very different paintings from diverse cultures and eras and asks the reader to look closely by showing little disembodied sections and inviting us to find their origin, puzzle like, in the painting. This certainly gets us looking and the thinking aspect is designed to be initiated by a number of questions relating each painting. (5+)

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

Lives of the Great Artists

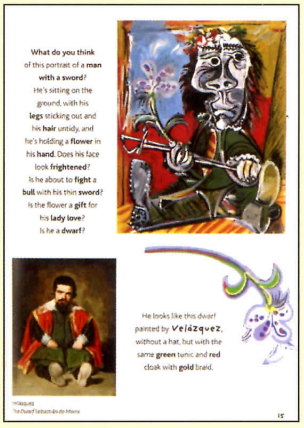
Charlie Ayres, Thames & Hudson, 978 0 500 23853 0, £9.99 hbk

For older children, this book explores the lives of 20 significant artists chronologically from Giotto to Van Gogh. As its title suggests, the book looks at the lives and historical context of the artists rather than examining the paintings themselves in any detail but it is richly illustrated and attractively presented. A wonderful feature of this book is the reproductions of spreads from artists' sketchbooks, always the most revealing and seductive aspects of artists' works. These will perhaps encourage the reader to respond to the little 'why don't you?' panels that suggest various subjects to draw. (8+)

Picasso and the Great Painters

Mila Boutan, Thames & Hudson, 978 0 500 28807 8, £9.99 pbk

The author cleverly uses Picasso's playful inclination to paint his own versions of the works of other artists as a means by which to explore the paintings of Picasso himself and those of Velázquez, El Greco, Van Gogh and many more. The accompanying text is easy to understand (if occasionally a little patronising in tone!) and demonstrates real understanding of the process of painting. (5+) ■



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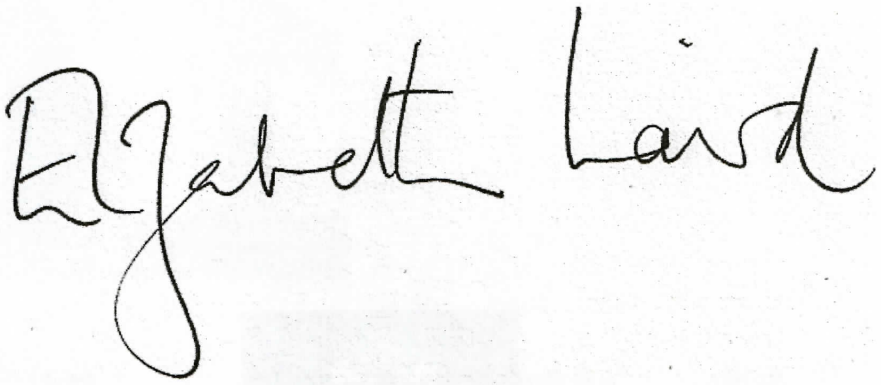


Elizabeth Laird

interviewed by **Nicholas Tucker**

Liz Laird is something of a paradox. Aged 66 she still retains the bright voice and cheerful manner of an enthusiastic first year undergraduate. Producing over 150 children's books over the last 30 years, despite a recent attack of M.E. that put her out of action for 18 months, she also finds time to make school visits and to cultivate an impressively self-sufficient vegetable garden. Writing novels that contain vivid descriptions of cruelty and intolerance, some of which she has witnessed at first hand, she still has an abiding belief in the essential goodness and strength of most human beings. When I interviewed her in the book-lined house in Richmond, South London, that she and her husband bought when property was cheap, time sped by as cups of tea were drunk and cakes consumed, baked that morning by Liz herself.

Born in New Zealand in 1943 but moving to England when she was two, Liz was brought up in Croydon by Scottish parents both of whom were strict Protestants. But far from inveighing against this early encounter with Puritanism, Liz adored her father and mother, enjoying all the hymns and Bible reading and even finding the long sermons interesting. More relaxed about religion now, she still takes every Sunday off, going to her local Anglican church and using the rest of the day to rest and generally take stock.

Aged 18 she spent a year in Malaysia as a teaching aide, trekking through the jungle during her vacations. Despite nearly dying from catching typhoid and then being bitten by a sea snake, she emerged even more determined to lead an adventurous life. After graduating in French and German at Bristol University and then training as a teacher, she headed off to Ethiopia. This seemed the remotest place available to her at the time, and she worked there for two years at a school in Addis Ababa. Touring the countryside by bus or hiring mules when there were no roads, she started writing stories for her students since they had so little to read. Thoroughly enjoying the experience, she later used her background knowledge for **The Miracle Child: A Story from Ethiopia** and **The Road to Bethlehem: An Ethiopian Nativity**. More travel led her to India, walking from village to village with her guide, Mahatma Gandhi's former secretary. It was during this time that she met the author David McDowall. He happened to be sitting next to her in a plane while she was being violently air sick. Romance can strike in the unlikeliest of situations, and the couple got married in 1975, a decision described by Liz as the best thing she ever did in her life.

Transferring to Iraq, she visited the Marshes and the Kurdish regions, picking up invaluable background material later put to use in **Kiss the Dust**. Finally moving to Beirut, the couple, now with two sons, had to move out when the fighting became too fierce; a scenario also eventually drawn upon for **Oranges in No Man's Land**. Deciding to become full-time writers, Liz and David returned to Britain, initially taking in lodgers until the books started paying. But there were many more journeys, to Kenya, Palestine, Iran, Kazakhstan and Russia. Visiting Ethiopia again in 1996, Liz set up a project with the British Council collecting folk tales from traditional storytellers. These later appeared in **Where the World Began: Stories Collected in Ethiopia**.

But despite producing quantities of picture books, readers and junior fiction, Liz remains best known for her teenage novels, almost always set in times of violent conflict both past and present. Does she choose such subjects in order to challenge Western complacency and ignorance?

'Oh, I get so irritated when people say that I deliberately set out to find controversial topics for my books! I simply write the stories that come to me. What I really like doing is exploring emotional and psychological issues, creating characters who feel like real people, even to the extent of not always doing what I want them to do.'

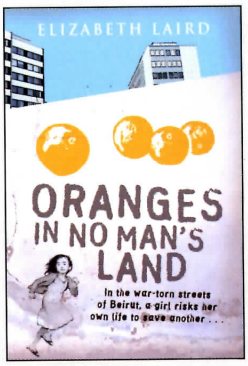
So how conscious is Liz that she is writing for younger readers? Does she ever find she still has to tread round certain topics, such as child abuse?

'I dealt with child abuse pretty strongly I thought in **Jake's Tower**. But yes, I did leave it out of **Lost Riders**, my novel about child jockeys in the Middle East. What they have to face up to is already bad enough; the fact that they are often abused by their owners as well I thought was just too much for a young audience. On the other hand, one can put far more about other things into a novel when writing for this age group. So many adult novels seem unnecessarily negative these days, avoiding any hint of commitment to anything. I love the way that my readers still seem so ready to take seriously and think about the moral issues raised in my novels.'

'In the sense that they have not as yet acquired that protective cynicism so abundantly catered for in adult fiction?'

'Yes, that's so absolutely right! Have another cake.' Interviewing Liz is proving to be a very pleasant experience. But how does she feel about the happy endings she regularly employs in her fiction, even for child characters with so little hope in reality, such as the Ethiopian street children in **The Garbage King**?

'But you see, I am always astonished by how strong so many young people are, even in the worst circumstances. This regularly came out when I interviewed street children for myself. What would be the point in writing a truly dire story about such brave young people, when I know for a fact that they are so



Books mentioned

(published in paperback by Macmillan)

Crusade,
978 0 330 45699 9, £5.99

The Garbage King,
978 0 330 41502 6, £5.99

Jake's Tower,
978 0 330 39803 9, £5.99

Kiss the Dust,
978 0 230 01431 2, £5.99

A Little Piece of Ground,
978 0 330 43743 1, £5.99

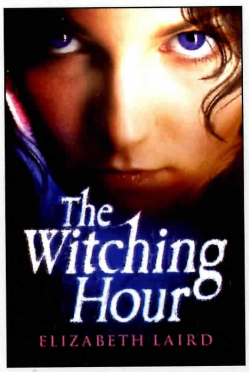
Lost Riders,
978 0 330 45209 0, £5.99

Oranges in No Man's Land,
978 0 330 44558 0, £4.99

Red Sky in the Morning,
978 0 330 44290 9, £5.99

Secrets of the Fearless,
978 0 330 43466 9, £5.99

The Witching Hour,
978 0 330 47210 4, £5.99



often far more resilient than one could ever believe?'

'So you would never want to give your readers the prurient satisfaction of feasting off other people's train of disasters in the way that became fashionable in various 'miserablist' memoirs published over the last twenty years?' 'Absolutely not!'

But Liz still proves controversial for some. **Red Sky in the Morning** was attacked when it was reprinted 18 years later in 2006 for what was claimed to be its out of date attitudes to disability, with the suggestion that it should no longer be made available to young readers at school. Liz rejects such charges, which were particularly hurtful given that the story was based on the life of her own brain-damaged younger brother, who died aged three. Written some years after the event, it movingly describes both the passionate loyalty and the social frustrations as experienced by a 12-year-old girl living with an extremely disabled sibling. Highly commended for the Carnegie Medal, it still reads powerfully today.

A Little Piece of Ground, an unflinchingly grim description of life in Palestine under Israeli occupation written with the help of the Palestinian author Sonia Nimr, also got Liz into trouble. Its 12-year-old hero Karim is a sympathetic character who simply wants to get on with his life, playing football and seeing his friends. But when he forgets to obey a curfew order his life is at serious risk. Some critics have objected that there is no balancing account of what it is like to be a child on the opposing border, with the bookseller Kidsbooks attempting to stop the book's publication. But even those who approach this novel from the strictest pro-Israel perspective would find it hard not be drawn in. For above all else, Liz is a consummate storyteller, expertly manoeuvring her plots so that they maintain tension up to the last page.

More recently, she has turned to historical writing. **Secrets of the Fearless** draws on family memories of her great-great grandfather John Allen, press-ganged when he was still a boy and sent to sea. **Crusade** is an epic story set in the 12th century and told from the perspective of two boys, one in the service of a British knight and the other the Arab apprentice of a Jewish doctor. The horrors of the great siege of Acre are faithfully recorded. But what about the problems of historical speech? At one stage a young squire is ordered to 'scarper'. Does anything now go when writing dialogue set in the past?

'Oh yes. I can't be bothered with any pseudo history speech, which would anyhow be equally unauthentic. I write novels set abroad or in the past because I no longer know enough about how contemporary young people talk to each other in my own country. I'm not then going to saddle my characters from another age with difficult dialects or archaic words. I need to know exactly what they are thinking and feeling, and so too do my readers.'

Her latest novel, **The Witching Hour**, has the difficult task of making extreme religious conviction credible to today's largely secular-minded young audience. It describes the appalling suffering of the devout Scottish men and women persecuted for refusing to recognise King Charles II's right to appoint bishops in his role of Head of the Anglican Church. Once again, Liz is drawing on family history, with three of her ancestors making an appearance in her novel. Maggie, the main teenage character accused of being a witch, is also based on a relative to whom this happened in 1698.

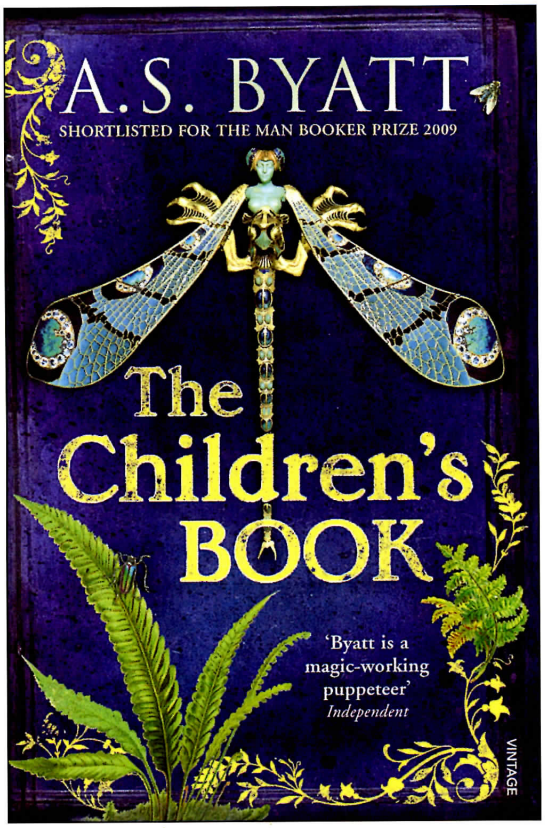
This is another good story, packed with exciting incident but also requiring readers to weigh up the perils of clinging to a blind faith as against the dangers of abandoning all personal belief for the sake of an easy life. By the last page, Maggie too is not quite sure what she is going to do. But as she puts it, 'I'll go where I choose, and I'll be who I am, and I'll rise up to meet whatever comes my way.' Exactly what her author could also have said about herself at any stage of her own continually adventurous existence. ■

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

A Time Like No Other

A S Byatt's **The Children's Book**, her first major work since **Possession**, is a novel for adult readers but its themes – the process of writing for children, the impact of artistic production on the artist's own children, the nature of childhood in the years when works by Kenneth Grahame, E Nesbit and J M Barrie were published – are centrally important to all of us interested in children's literature and its creation. **Peter Hollindale** explores an imaginative and panoramic novel.

Set between the last years of Victoria and 1919, A S Byatt's **The Children's Book** is the story of four families, and two teenage siblings from a fifth. These are momentous times, embracing the Edwardian decade which is often considered a Golden Age of children's literature. At least for the children of intellectual and prosperous middle class families, it was also a unique period. The children of late Victorian England, Byatt argues, were 'different from children before and after', admitted to the family circles as full members, their characters and plans respected and discussed, but also allowed exceptional independence, able to roam wild and free.



Some readers may be tempted to see parallels with our own times, when children's books again enjoy high status and are widely read by adults, and when children themselves are the object of ceaseless and often confused attention and concern. Byatt gives such inviting equations no encouragement at all. This is a work of historical imagination, and sometimes of explicit well-researched history. Moreover, Byatt is by temperament and inclination in part a natural scientist. She views humankind (correctly in my view) as a flawed animal species. This gives her writing distance and perspective. She centres her wonderful cast of children and families in ever-widening concentric circles of political and cultural behaviour, as the Edwardian decade (for her a 'Silver Age') moves inexorably, almost by a biological imperative, towards war. No readers interested in the years which produced **Peter Pan**, **The Wind in the Willows**, **The Railway Children** and so many other classics could fail to emerge from **The Children's Book** without their understanding of childhood's place in the time's complexity deepened and enriched.

The children's writer and her chosen child

There are several reasons why **The Children's Book** is an appropriate title. Its pivotal character, Olive Wellwood, is a children's writer, based on Edith Nesbit. The mother of a large family, she writes a private individual story for each of her children, the most complex of which is for her eldest and favourite son, Tom. Like Kipling's **Just-So Stories**, Barrie's **Peter Pan**, Grahame's **The Wind in the Willows**, and later the work of A A Milne, a private story eventually evolves into a public work, a theatrical counterpart of **Peter Pan**. The consequences are no less disastrous than in several of these other cases. For Tom is a real-life Peter Pan, incapable of growing up – an attractive child who becomes a solitary feral youth and man with almost no relationships outside his family. Coming soon after the destruction of the Tree House, a family den left over from childhood which he has made his adult lair and refuge, the public success of his own private story 'Tom Underground' is felt as a betrayal. The double loss deprives him not just of what he has, but what he *is*, and is past bearing. Tom's story is not only the tragedy of 'boy eternal', but a profound enquiry into the psychology of the children's writer and her chosen child.

The 'children's book' is first the private book that Tom, like his siblings, owns. Next it is the book, and kind of book, that Olive writes, in a time of its ascendancy. But it is also the book we are reading, the story of a society whose privileged members, subsidised by a labouring and impoverished underclass, are able to behave like children even as adults, treating politics and life itself as an ideological game. Byatt's historical interventions quicken later in the novel, as the approach of 1914 brings the period's grown-up childhood to its dreadful end.

By convention children's books have happy endings. With chastening irony, after all the carnage, loss and horror of the War, this most adult of 'children's books' does indeed end happily. From the original large cast of children and adolescents, three men and three women who have survived the war come together in three unions. With careful artistic symmetry, between them they draw together the novel's themes and values. There are Charles/Karl and Elsie, opposites in social origin, whose shared qualities of thoughtful and determined independence overcome the obstacles of class division. There are Grizelda and Wolfgang, she English but half-German, he German but Jewish, who defy the years of Anglo-German hatred with their love. Above all there are Philip Warren the potter and Dorothy Wellwood the doctor, both of whom have in the past abandoned their mothers and fought against all odds to follow through a single-minded vocational commitment, but who compromise at last with the imperative of mutual need. Three love stories, this last especially unfolded by Byatt with fitting reticence, are all traceable to earlier scenes set in the fragile Silver Age when they were young. So this splendid novel, which has shown in families and politics some very childish adults and some very grown-up children, ends with an appropriate reward for the adult and the child in all of us. ■

Peter Hollindale was formerly Reader in English and Educational Studies at the University of York.
Photo courtesy of Eleanor Hollindale.

The Children's Book (978 0 7011 8389 9) is published by Chatto & Windus at £18.99 or in Vintage paperback (978 0 09 953545 4) at £7.99.

EVENT

Beatrix Potter Exhibition, 8 March–12 April

A 1903 edition of **The Tale of Peter Rabbit** will go on display in the Selfridges London book department, as part of a special collection of Beatrix Potter original art, books and toys selected from the Frederick Warne & Co. archive. This is an opportunity to see unique items including a 1905 Steiff Peter Rabbit doll, together with an original Beatrix Potter pen-and-ink illustration of Peter Rabbit and Jemima Puddle-duck. Featuring 36 selected items, the exhibition includes: early editions of all 23 Original Tales, Beatrix Potter title page illustration for **The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies**, bookplate design for the first trade edition of **The Roly Poly Pudding** and the 1925 Farnell Jemima Puddle-duck doll. Over the Easter weekend there will also be storytelling events for children. For further information see: **www.peterrabbit.com/www.selfridges.com**

AWARD

The YoungMinds Book Award

The award goes to the book which most helps young people aged 12+ cope with the stresses and challenges of growing up. The 2009 winner is **A Perfect Ten** by Chris Higgins (Hodder Children's). The runners-up were **The Stuff of Nightmares** by Malorie Blackman (Random House), **Ginger Snaps** by Cathy Cassidy (Penguin Books), **Bang, Bang, You're Dead** by Narinder Dhami (Random House), **Ostrich Boys** by Keith Gray (Definitions) and **Without Looking Back** by Tabitha Sazuma (Random House).

Useful Organisations No.52

Perform-a-Poem

Perform-a-Poem can be reached via the Poetry-Friendly Classroom website, a resource set up for teachers by Michael Rosen while he was Children's Laureate:

http://www.childrenslaureate.org.uk/poetry-friendly-classroom/

Perform-a-Poem, a unique poetry performance website for primary school children, encourages children to write, choose, perform, film and edit poems. Their poetry video performances can then be uploaded by their teachers, and browsed and enjoyed by children in other schools as well as families and friends. Perform-a-Poem imitates the style of social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube or MySpace, but at the same time follows national standards on e-safety procedure. It enables anyone to browse the pupils' videos whilst guaranteeing anonymity to the pupil. It is a completely safe website for children to use. Only teachers with an LGfL username will be able to upload videos. Videos are tagged with a pupil's first name and borough only. Teachers take responsibility for protecting children's identities in video content. As they are the uploaders, teachers can also filter out any unsuitable content. The site contains extensive resources for teachers, written by teachers and other experts, on all aspects of using the site – writing poems, choosing poems to perform, performance skills, filming, editing and uploading. Pupils and their friends and families can search the site by title of poem, pupils' borough or topic of poem.

Michael Rosen, second right, at the launch of Perform-a-Poem.

Hal's Reading Diary

The kind of books eight-year-old Hal prefers at the moment and the games he plays reflect a preoccupation with violence and war. Why are these themes so appealing? His father, psychodynamic counsellor **Roger Mills**, explains.

Recently I asked Hal what he thought was the best book he had ever read. Without hesitation he plumped for the book he is reading at the moment, **Astrosaurs, Day of the Dino-Droids**. I asked Hal what it was about the book that made him like it so much. The reply was fairly predictable – 'it's exciting, there's mystery that makes you want to keep reading, there's adventure'. Next up I asked Hal to nominate the worst book he had ever read. He went for something that he has just finished at school. He didn't know the title but said that it was about a Pirate School. 'All they ever do in this book,' he complained, 'is stay on the ship. The captain is a woman [there seemed to be an unvoiced implication here that pirates shouldn't ever be female] and she is a grandma. Her son and baby grandson come onto the ship and the captain put the baby in a pirate pram which went overboard in a storm. The mum and dad jumped in and all the little children at pirate school help to save them. I don't like it. It's boring.'

The pirate book sounded like it had a fair bit of action in it and I asked Hal why he thought the book was dull if there was so much going on. He pondered this a while and then said words to the effect that to be really good a book needed situations where there were genuinely nasty baddies posing a genuinely nasty threat. In the **Astrosaurs** book there were some pterodactyls with machine guns that filled this bill admirably, whereas the Pirate book didn't really have baddies and all the bad stuff came from acts of God like the storm that swept the pram into the sea. The absence of a decent threat posed by a baddy was in Hal's eyes a crippling omission and, witheringly, he pronounced the Pirate tale 'babyish'.

Hal's fondness for a decent threat is entirely in keeping with the staples of his imaginary play as far as I can see. In his games he is always having wars and battles. Most of the time there is a fantasy machine gun in his hand. I'm tempted to say that violence is never far from his mind.

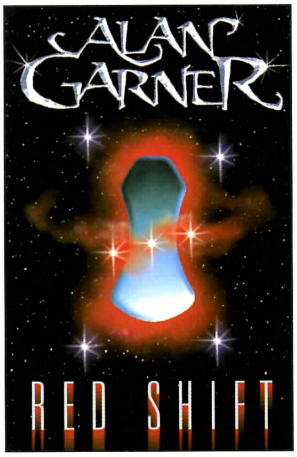
But does this mean that Hal is a thug in the making? Though I'm obviously biased, I am pretty sure the answer is no. To me there is a huge difference between this kind of play violence and what you get, for example, in physical bullying. Play violence seems to be some kind of outpouring of vigour, of energy and it is most definitely not an expression of the hatred and malice you find in bullying. How else can you explain the fact that while Hal and his friends spend hours killing one another in their imaginations, they are also extremely affectionate with one another?

Freud thought that humans have an innately destructive streak and he would, I imagine, have seen boys' war games as an expression of this. But there is another way of looking at it. If you think of violence in kids' books and in kids' play as being about feeling powerful rather than being about being destructive, doesn't it end up seeming really rather innocent? ■

Astrosaurs, Day of the Dino-Droids by Steve Cole is published by Red Fox.

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

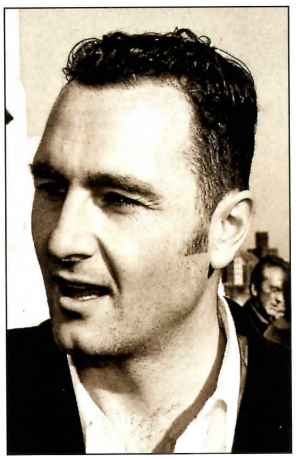
Anthony McGowan on a challenging novel, where meaning often seems to hover just beyond reach...



I missed out on most of the classics of children's fiction when I was a child. I went straight from reading books like **The Guinness Book of Animal Facts and Feats** to adult fiction. It was only relatively recently, therefore, that I discovered Alan Garner. He's probably best known for his fantasy novel (albeit one with a strong streak of realism) **The Weirdstone of Brisingamen**, but the book that utterly transfixed me was **Red Shift**.

It's a genuinely challenging read, even for an adult. Three plots intertwine – one set in Roman Britain, one in the turmoil of the 17th-century civil wars, and one, told largely in dialogue, in the contemporary world. The stories are tied together by geographical continuity, and by the presence of a mysterious object. The historical stories are brutal and mysterious; the contemporary one funny, touching and, ultimately deeply sad. Garner's style is glancing and fragmentary, and often the meaning seems to hover just beyond reach (cracking the secret code in the text helps, a little).

In the intensity of its action, the brilliance of its characterization, the jagged wonder of its prose and, above all the sense that historical sinews bind us together through the ages, giving meaning and wonder to our lives, **Red Shift** is the book I'd have given anything to have written.



Red Shift by Alan Garner is published by Collins Voyager (978 0 00 712786 3) at £5.99.
The author of **The Knife That Killed Me** which was shortlisted for Booktrust's Teenage Prize, Anthony McGowan's **Einstein's Underpants and How They Saved the World**, the first in a new series for younger readers, is published in April by Yearling (978 0 440 86924 5, £5.99).

Good Reads

Chosen by Year 9 (13–14 year-old) pupils from Bishop Rawstorne Church of England Language College, Lancashire, who are taking part in the Lancashire Book of the Year Award.

The Knife of Never Letting Go

Patrick Ness, Walker, 978 1 4063 2075 6, £8.00 pbk

Told through the eyes of 12-year-old Todd Hewitt, the last boy in Prentisstown, a desperate nothing of a town lying in the future but determinedly clinging to the darkest principles of the past. Prentisstown is a town of only men and 'Noise', a forcefield of thoughts and emotions that surrounds every living creature. Amongst all these angry, bitter, noisy men, Todd is the only boy. Filled with tension, emotions, it leaves you with questions about the actions of the characters and of humanity. Action-packed it may be, but it is the characters that really make this book as marvellous as it is. One of the main themes of the book is Todd's inner conflict about killing. This is dealt with in a sincere, emotional way. Viola is another fantastic character. She is introduced as alien to this barbaric world, someone to be feared not trusted. She is no superhuman and she makes mistakes, but she is thoroughly likeable and a strong female character, a rare thing in today's novels. **The Knife of Never Letting Go** is an amazing book that should be seen as a classic.

Isobel Cavan

Blood Hunters

Steve Voake, Faber, 978 0 571 23001 3, £6.99 pbk

It is said you shouldn't 'judge a book by its cover', however, from the moment I saw the cover – a cold merciless, reptilian eye staring out from a torn gap in a wall of steel – I immediately knew what the plot would be. In a secluded Amazon forest, a team of scientists examine the world's deepest lake – one that hides a terrifying secret that could exterminate humanity. While investigating the lake, a strange event occurs and a scientist secretly discovers what the lake has kept from the world for centuries. The book truly becomes a thriller after the scientist is murdered and various attacks on minor characters occur. These include an elderly woman who has her throat shredded and a plumber whose hand is decapitated, which provide some of the most exciting and gruesome chapters of the story. My largest praise is how well it creates these mysterious attacks, making you guess and think hard about what the creature is.

Joe Smith

Thanks to Linda Singleton, librarian, and Nina Ainscough.

The Lady in the Tower

Marie-Louise Jensen, Oxford, 978 0 19 275531 5, £5.99 pbk

A gripping story narrated through the eyes of the young Lady Eleanor Hungerford. Her father is a powerful, wealthy man – an advisor to King Henry VIII. When Eleanor is eight, her father returns home from his usual gallivanting in a thundering rage; gripping her mother ferociously, he accuses her of being unfaithful and performing witch acts. Set in Tudor times, it keeps to the old fashioned theme, giving it authenticity. I really liked the way the author described the women's dresses making them sound majestic and beautiful. Through the book we see Eleanor flourish into a magnificent, strong woman. It is a fantastic story.

Jess Fryer

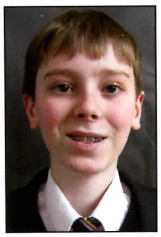
Solace of the Road

Siobhan Dowd, David Fickling Books, 978 1 84992 005 6, £6.99 pbk

Holly Hogan is a 14-year-old girl who lives in a foster home called Templeton House. Holly is done with social workers and secure units. She's done with foster parents. When she gets fostered by Fiona and Phil, a pair of mogits (Holly and her friend Grace's term for 'Miserable Old Gits'), she finds a beautiful blonde wig in a chest of drawers. From that moment, she's heading off on a captivating road trip to find her mam. She's ditching her life as Holly Hogan – she puts on the wig, pulls up her skirt and bats her eyelashes. She's ready, she's solace, solace of the road. When reading this book I felt I knew the protagonist, her thoughts, her feelings. It's as if her heart has spilled into the book. *Gaby Forrest*

The Spook's Apprentice

Joseph Delaney, Red Fox, 978 1 86230 853 4, £5.99 pbk



Tom is the son of country folk from Lancashire. He is the seventh son of a seventh son which means he can see, hear and smell things concerned with the dark. I really enjoyed this book. It is set in Lancashire and I know all the places Tom travels to. Throughout the book, the reader is constantly discovering new secrets about Tom's family and the Spook. Tom's thrilling encounters with the dark are terrifying, yet enthralling. Just when it seems like death is certain, Tom remembers a trick he has learnt and the evil creature is heroically destroyed. Overall, this is a great book with an amazing storyline and a very exciting climax.

Peter Lyon

reviews

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

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

Brian Alderson is a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times** and an historian of children's literature.
Gwynneth Bailey is a freelance education and children's book consultant.
Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian, and is now a freelance researcher and writer.
David Bennett was Senior Teacher and Head of an English Faculty in Nottinghamshire. He now works as an English consultant and supply teacher.
Jill Bennett is the author of **Learning to Read with Picture Books**. She is currently heading up a nursery unit and also does freelance and consultancy work.
Urmi Chana previously worked as a researcher and lecturer on bilingual issues in primary education and as a primary teacher. She now works part-time in Adult Education.
Valerie Coghlan is Librarian at the Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin.
Robert Dunbar is a commentator on children's books and reading.
Anne Faundez is a freelance education and children's book consultant.
Janet Fisher is a children's literature consultant.
Geoff Fox has now retired as Co-Editor (UK) of **Children's Literature in Education**, but continues to work on the board and as an occasional teller of traditional tales.
Caroline Heaton is a former Children's and Schools Librarian.
Peter Hollindale, formerly at the University of York, is now a freelance writer and teacher.
Jake Hope is a children's librarian. He currently works for Lancashire co-ordinating their book of the year award.
George Hunt is lecturer in Education at the University of Edinburgh.
Lois Keith taught English for many years and is now a writer.
Rudolf Loewenstein is a Dominican friar based in a London parish. He also works full time in a primary school.
Margaret Mallett is a researcher and writer on Primary School English and a member of the English 4-11 editorial team.
Ted Percy has now retired to Kirkcudbrightshire after working as a children's librarian in Lancashire, Ross & Cromarty, and North Buckinghamshire.
Val Randall is Head of English and Literacy Co-ordinator at a Pupil Referral Unit in Blackburn, Lancashire.
Vincent Reid is a lecturer in developmental psychology at Durham University.
Caroline Sanderson is a freelance writer, reviewer and editor. She is the author of **Kiss Chase & Conkers**, a book about traditional children's games.
Elizabeth Schlenther is Editor, English children's books for gwales.com, The Welsh Books Council's website.
Rosemary Stones is Editor of **Books for Keeps**.
Morag Styles is a Reader in Children's Literature and Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.
Ruth Taylor has recently completed an MPhil in Children's Literature from Cambridge University.
Huw Thomas is Headteacher of Emmaus School, Sheffield.
Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.
Sue Unstead was a publisher of children's non-fiction for 25 years and is now a freelance editorial consultant and writer.

RATING

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

TITLES REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE

Books About **Children's Books**

Illustrated Children's Books

0 stars

Edited by Duncan McCorquodale, Sophie Hallam and Libby Waite, Black Dog Publishing, 240pp, 978 1 906155 81 0, £24.95 hbk

Only on the Contents Page do we learn that the people involved in this appalling volume are Peter Hunt, who is a Professor Emeritus, Lisa Sainsbury, an expert, and Anthony Browne (or possibly 'Bowne' – see page 34), a Laureate. The latter has only one page in which to display the errors and illiteracy that are to characterize the volume as a whole – I'm afraid that he does so – and it is not altogether easy to distribute blame for all the hopelessly muddled pages that are to follow. Errors and idiocies abound on most of those that contain text (eg. Caldecott 'one of the major illustrators of the late eighteenth century', Kipling, in large ultra bold type, 'the Poet... of the common solider') and I see no point in wasting valuable **BfK** wordage on any more examples. The book is worthless and how those eminent people allowed their names to become attached to it is a mystery. **BA**

The Private Diaries of Alison Uttley

★

Edited by Denis Judd, Remember When, 336pp, 978 1 84468 040 5, £25.00 hbk

Taking to Alison Uttley is no easy task. Her character, as revealed in Denis Judd's biography of 1986, is not appealing, showing her to be self-obsessed, cantankerous, and weirdly inadequate in all her personal relationships. (She may have driven her husband to suicide in 1930, the fate of her son too a couple of years after her own death.) So if Professor Judd has now thought to mitigate that impression by offering us a modest selection from her diaries (120,000 words out of what is said to be a total of six million) he has set himself a tough job. His choice of entries, drawn from the complete span of the record from 1932 to 1971, does nothing to enhance the portrait – and indeed he had printed many of the most telling entries in his earlier book. Petulance and vindictiveness prevail, only slightly offset by some lyrical passages on nature, and only made sufferable for this reader through the many entries dealing with her writing. Here there is an element of heroism as she sets about her profession (her first book was published in 1929 when she was 44 years old) and the details that the Professor vouchsafes us of her early slog and of her eventually very successful business dealings offer some relief from all the griping.

What though is omitted? It may be that because this book is produced by printers and publishers accustomed to current print-on-demand methods it lacks all professionalism in its editing. We are not given any details about the relationship of the given text to the bulk of the diaries. Apart from a few exiguous parenthetic interpolations, no effort is made to explain to the reader the diarist's location when she writes her entries or the significance of the main people and events that figure in them. Captions to the 34 photographs hardly equal a serious attempt to give the reader essential information – and if you want that you must nurture hopes that you'll find it in Professor Judd's other book. **BA**

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

What's the Time, Mr Wolf?

★

Mandy Ross, ill. Andrea Petrlik, 978 1 40930 473 9

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

★★

Geraldine Taylor and Jillian Harker, ill. Nick Sharratt, 978 1 40930 471 5

Ladybird 'Touch and Count Playbook', 10pp, £6.99 each novelty hbk

There are lots of counting books for infants and toddlers. In order to stand above the rest, a book must be unique in some way. However, rather than innovate, these two titles combine a number of approaches in a piecemeal way. Both books have touchy feely elements but instead of using them to embellish a key feature of a scene, an irrelevant object, like a ball or a cushion, is textured - my two-year-old didn't even notice them. **Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star** must win an award for being a nursery rhyme collection that fails to include the title rhyme – otherwise the counting element is well incorporated by the choice of rhymes. **What's the Time, Mr Wolf?** is a confusing hybrid in which opposing storylines conflict. **VRe**

The Wide-Mouthed Frog

★★★

Iain Smyth, ill. Michael Terry, Bloomsbury, 14pp, 978 1 4088 0496 4, £7.99 novelty hbk

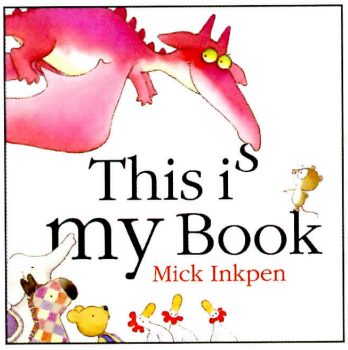
The Wide-Mouthed Frog is a short and funny landscape picture book about a frog that meets different animals and asks them what they eat. The frog's wide mouth is die-cut right through the book, so that it is always open wide and smiling (and so large that I have seen kids using it as a handle for the book when carrying it around). The one element of paper engineering is at the end, when the frog quickly closes his mouth when told that crocodiles eat frogs. The text fits well with the humour of Michael Terry's boldly characterized illustrations, which are very well done and fit the unusual construction of this book perfectly. **VRe**

The Terrible Plop

★★★

Ursula Dubosarsky, ill. Andrew Joyner, Egmont, 32pp, 978 1 4052 5137 2, £5.99 pbk

Inspired by a folktale from Tibet, this is an accumulative story told in rollicking rhyme and great fun to read aloud. Young listeners will want to predict the end of lines, whilst enjoying the tension building in this runaway tale. Six rabbits, panicked by a terrible PLOP, begin a gallop of terror as multitudinous other creatures ask why the hurry, why the scare, and join their flight. The expressive illustrations, bold and emotive, aid the reader in predicting what happens next; the tempo of the rhymes gathers force as the fleeing company swells. But Big Brown Bear will not be intimidated by tales of a terrible PLOP and demands to be shown this terrifying thing. As the audience, we already know exactly what it is but how does Big Bear deal with the terror? Whilst reminiscent of **Henny-Penny**, Butterworth's wonderful **Thud!** and maybe **The Gruffalo**, this telling has an appealing freshness. The text will provide opportunities to discuss real and imaginary fears, and make an exciting starting point for interactive drama in KS1. **GB**



This is my Book

★★★★★

Mick Inkpen, Hodder, 32pp, 978 0 340 98962 3, £10.99 hbk

Snapdragon loves words, indeed he devours then – literally no book is safe, not even this one. So when, one Tuesday, Snapdragon makes off with the 'k' and part of the 'B' of its title (making a rude word), poor Bookmouse (whose book this is) decides it's time for action. He manages to get back the missing part of 'B' and with the help of his friends, finds and steals away hundreds of 'O's from the howls of the ghosts of the Woollywolves in Moonwood.

The following Tuesday when Snapdragon returns (he always comes on Tuesdays), Bookmouse lures him to the edge of the page where his friends extend the broken boo(k) into the largest and scariest of boooos! inducing Snapdragon to mend his ways (and words).

By playing with the size, layout and appearance of the text, Inkpen makes it a character, helping readers to explore and appreciate the structure of letters, words and sentences in a marvellously witty tale. **JB**

Dennis Duckling

★★★

Paul Sambrooks, ill. Tommaso Levente Tani, 24pp, 978 1 905664 77 1, £5.95 + £2.00 p&p

Where is Poppy's Panda?

★★★

David Pitcher, ill. Rachel Fuller, 24pp, 978 1 905664 72 6, £9.95 + £2.00 p&p

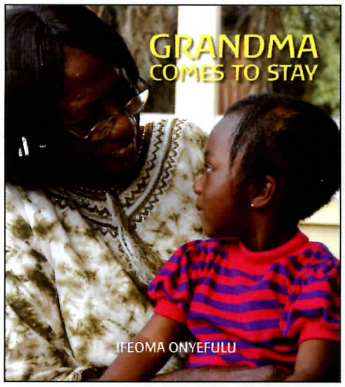
British Association for Adoption and Fostering (available from BAAF Publications, Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS, tel: 020 7421 2604)

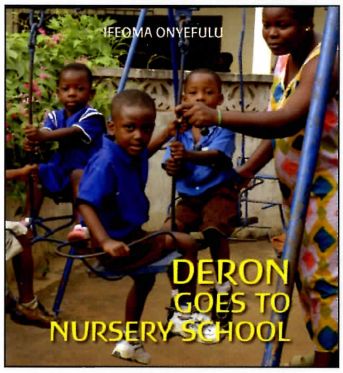
Two new productions from the BAAF continue their impressive publishing tradition. While both books are aimed at young children being fostered or adopted, **Dennis Duckling** is the more specific of the two. Dennis and his small sister find that their parents can't look after them any longer, and while they are sad, they accept that Annie (the social worker duck) will find them a home – which she does, with a family of river ducks. The family is kind, but Dennis is still sad and finds the adjustment painful. Being allowed to see his parents helps, and Annie makes sure that Dennis is asked about what he wants to happen next. We don't discover what this is, but we do know that Dennis is being consulted at every level. Fear and sadness are admitted and dealt with.

Where is Poppy's Panda? is a far more subtle story that could be useful for any child who is facing changes in his or her life and needs the continuity of a favourite toy. Poppy's Panda is lost, and while she searches for him, she thinks about all the events Panda has

shared with her. Neither fostering nor adoption is mentioned specifically, but we see her with what is obviously a set of foster parents, with a respite carer, and with her adoptive parents. And we see her at her first day at nursery, and when she moves house. All along it is Panda who makes the changes acceptable. There is great relief when he is found, although the eagle-eyed will have noticed Panda lurking behind a curtain all along. Poppy's gradual ransacking of her room, leaving a trail of mayhem behind, is all too redolent of a youngster's approach to finding a lost treasure, and the illustrations reflect this beautifully.

Both books contain booklets for parents and carers that will help make the most of discussions with children. **ES**





Grandma Comes to Stay

978 1 84507 865 2

Deron Goes to Nursery School

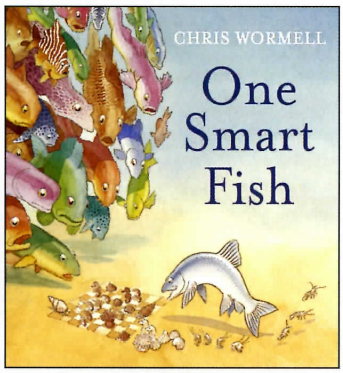
978 1 84507 864 5

★★★

Ifeoma Onyefulu, Frances Lincoln 'First Experiences', 32pp, £11.99 each hbk

These photo books are pleasing to the eye and physically easy to handle. Using photographs of authentic locations and real families in Ghana, the author gives a glimpse of real life events as experienced by three-year-old Stephanie in the first title and four-year-old Deron in the second. The photographs are very subtly framed, one or two to a page, and, with plenty of white space around them and the text, are visually engaging. The text is appropriately simple and clear in a good size and slightly unusual font, matching the pictures aptly for the intended purpose of these kinds of books.

In **Grandma Comes to Stay** we see Stephanie doing the kind of things all three-year-olds do but within her own cultural context. The same goes for Deron going to school, as we see him starting nursery – there's playtime and lunchtime, singing and dancing, nap time and so on, but with some obvious differences from nurseries in Britain and therefore lots to compare and contrast. Good, well-produced titles to have in early years to help broaden children's awareness of life in another country. **UC**



One Smart Fish

★★★★

Chris Wormell, Jonathan Cape, 32pp, 978 0 224 08354 6, £10.99 hbk

This is a playful, tongue-in-cheek attempt to make accessible to young children, the almost inconceivable notion of the evolution of life from the sea to the land in story form.

Smart Fish is nothing much to look at unlike his flashy fishy friends, but what he lacks in finery, he more than makes up for in brain power. This chess-playing genius wants nothing more than to walk upon the land. Not content with lounging at the landside where fishes go for their holidays, he makes himself a set of foot-shaped wellies and astounds his fellow fishy friends by walking up the beach.

But that is not quite the end of the story, as big ideas – walking being one – have a habit of catching on, give or take a few hundred million years. And thus, those fish, or rather their ancestors, become reptiles and before we know where we are, there *we* are...

Wormell's watery, watercolour world teams with weird and wonderful fish of all shapes, sizes and colours. **JB**

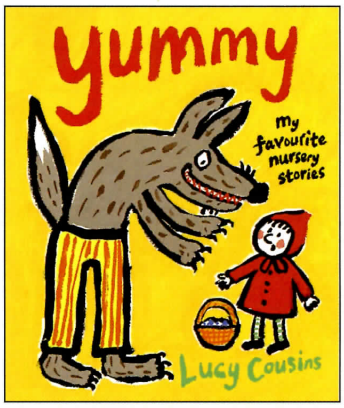
Little Miss Muffet and other rhymes

★★★★

Illustrated and designed by PatrickGeorge, PatrickGeorge, 48pp, 978 0 9562558 2 2, £6.99 pbk

Divergent, playful, innovative, quirky, expansive, are just a handful of the many adjectives that spring to mind after a first perusal of this deceptively simple book of rhymes. Small in format it may be but each of the twenty or so offerings – an eclectic mix of traditional nursery rhymes including 'Humpty Dumpty', 'Little Miss Muffet' and 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', oddities such as 'Daisy Daisy', 'Old Mr Match' and the infant child-devouring 'Grizzly Bear' presented on that small screen, enlarge our perspective of the rhyme obliging the reader to look at it in an entirely new way. Thus 'Humpty Dumpty' is presented merely as **T U M P H Y** while 'Pease Pudding' is three white circles containing red matter, blue matter, and green matter with a spoon strategically angled on the third to become part of the text of the last line.

A fascinating book for all ages especially those with an interest in design and graphics. **JB**



Yummy

★★★★★

Lucy Cousins, Walker, 124pp, 978 1 4063 1621 6, £14.99 hbk

Keeping close to the oral tradition, eight popular European nursery tales (including 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears', 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'The Three Little Pigs' and 'The Little Red Hen') are retold in this handsome, large format picture book in direct, no frills language and bold paintings. Lucy Cousins' illustrations with their bright blocks of colour, thick black outlines and broad brushstrokes have a zest and substance which give the stories both a contemporary feel and enormous child appeal, ensuring that there is plenty to grab the attention while listening and to talk about afterwards. A definite 'should-buy' for the family and nursery bookshelves. **JB**

5–8 Infant/Junior

Miko's Magic Number

★★★★

Ruth Brown, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 1789 3, £11.99 novelty hbk

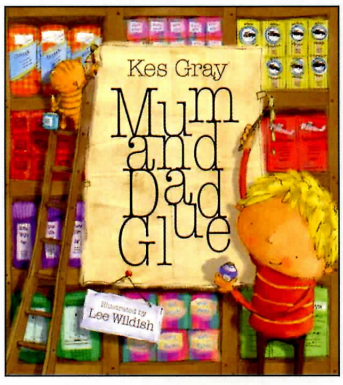
This is a well-produced novelty title which handles extremely well and meets its intentions successfully. The quality and originality of the illustrations and concept make it a pleasurable read. A small circle die-cut throughout the book shows numbers that can be changed with the aid of a sturdy wheel on the side. The wheel has plus and minus arrows and perfectly sized indents to help little fingers turn it up or down as instructed on each double page spread. I do think it would have been better to have the minus sign printed the right way up as you read the book rather than to align it with the wheel's circumference (it appears vertically which might confuse). The book's subtitle invites us to count with the magic wheel and we start by turning the wheel to choose a number from one of Miko's balloons. As we turn each page, Miko instructs us to add or take away: 'Turn the wheel UP to take one away...' The text, clearly written and printed, appears with its mathematical representation below (so -1 in this example) to reinforce the connection between the words, numbers and symbols. At the end we lift the flap to discover our answer is the same as Miko's Magic Number! An entertaining and instructive title with beautiful illustrations. **UC**

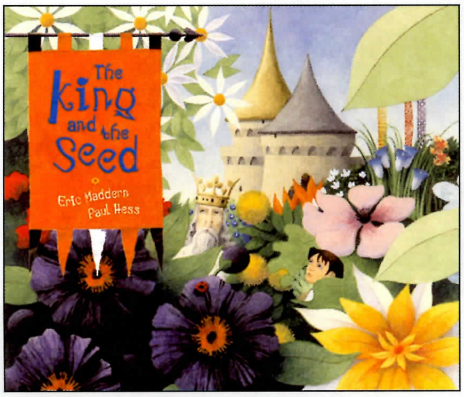
Mum and Dad Glue

★★★

Kes Gray, ill. Lee Wildish, Hodder, 32pp, 978 0 340 95710 3, £10.99 hbk

A little boy's world is coming apart. Because his parents are splitting up, everything else is too – his house, his toys, his bed, the family car, even the bench he sits on at school – all have jagged splits. He is desperate. What to do? 'I need a pot of parent glue to stick them back together. I need to patch their marriage up, I need to make them better.' A visit to the glue shop does not produce parent glue, but he does find an understanding shop lady who helps him see that while his parents' love for each other is broken, their love for him is not and never will be. He learns to look forward and accept that life will be different. To an adult this story is heartbreaking. There is a forlorn tone in spite of the wonderfully colourful illustrations and rhyming text. To a child experiencing family break-up, however, comfort will be found in the little boy's having similar feelings to their own. The integrated text and the child-centred artwork make this a special production. **ES**





The King and the Seed

★★★★

Eric Maddern, ill. Paul Hess, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 978 1 84507 926 0, £11.99 hbk

When King Karnak realises that he is approaching death without an heir to his throne, he challenges the high and mighty of the land to prove their right of succession, not by the expected trial of mortal combat, but by growing the best plant possible from the seed he hands to each contestant. Jack the Farmer's lad decides to have a go, but in spite of all his green-fingered care, he fails to coax forth a single sprig. Nevertheless, there is something about the nature of his failure that distinguishes his efforts from all floribundant triumphs of the gentry.

Master storyteller Eric Maddern brings the same direct narration and intriguing charm to this traditional Mandarin Chinese story that has made earlier collaborations with Paul Hess on retellings of traditional tales such rewarding experiences, **Nail Soup** and **Death in a Nut** being my personal favourites. Hess' boldly painted and idiosyncratic perspectives on the stock iconography of medieval court romances are very entertaining, and in the final spread, florid imagery and simple prose unite in an Eden regained. **GH**

Azad's Camel

★★★

Erika Pal, Frances Lincoln, 40pp, 978 1 84507 982 6, £12.99 hbk

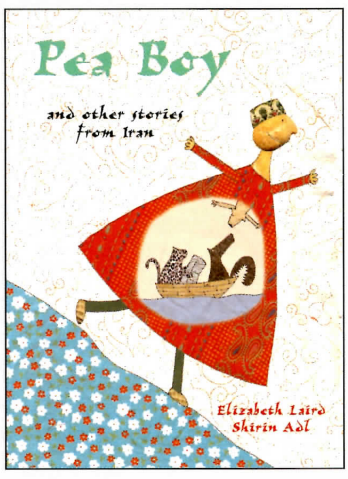
A beautifully illustrated story about an orphan who is taken away to be trained for camel racing. He experiences a dangerous and scary time along with other children similarly entrapped in this sport, but makes his escape into the desert with his camel. There he finds a welcome home at last amongst the Bedouin who sing a song to him of his bravery. Both pictures and text tell the tale well; the text is unfussily and effectively combined with the full-page illustrations. This is a commendable title aiming to broaden children's understanding of the world and the varied ways in which people across the globe experience life. It offers opportunities for discussion and comparison, and for considering real life situations beyond our own lives. **UC**

Pea Boy and other stories from Iran

★★★★

Retold by Elizabeth Laird, ill. Shirin Adl, Frances Lincoln, 64pp, 978 1 84507 912 3, £14.99 hbk

This collection of seven traditional stories from Iran is a vivid combination of the strange and the familiar. The title story concerns a heroic chick pea that leaps alive from the stew he has been simmering in, declares himself son to the poor couple who have been about to eat him, then performs all manner of murderous wonders in his quest to secure prosperity for his adopted parents. 'Kayvan the Brave' shares the Jack the Giant killer motif of a humble weakling bluffing and blundering a convincing course towards greatness. In 'The Sparrow's Quest', a feeble, starving bird seeks the most powerful force in the world, and just as she is about to expire with hunger and exhaustion, realises that in an important sense, it is herself. As in many storytelling traditions, episodes of magic and of romantic affection alternate with unflinching harshness, as when, in the first story, a solicitous husband boils to death in the soothing turnip soup he has been preparing for his sick wife.



Laird's introduction invites us to contemplate the beauty and the cultural and physical diversity of a land frequently depicted in mainstream media as menacingly austere. Shirin Adl's illustrations support this richer vision, combining bright story scenes with botanical motifs, and providing sumptuous fabric and paper textures as endpapers and backdrops to the text. **GH**

Return to the Hundred Acre Wood

★★

David Benedictus, ill. Mark Burgess, Egmont, 216pp, 978 1 4052 4744 3, £12.99 hbk

'...in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest a little boy and his Bear will always be playing.' A nostalgical, but fitting conclusion to **The House at Pooh Corner** as boy and Bear are silhouetted dancing away from the reader. They had had a score of rural outings together and a valedictory meeting, with a signed Rissolution, had been organdised by all their friends. Nothing more needed to be said.

But Publishing Egonomics and the Trustees of Pooh Properties have decreed otherwise. 'Further Adventures' must be generated and although Disneyfication has done for the imagery years ago 'the style of E H Shepard' is to be revived for the occasion. (Mark Burgess, who did the colouring-in of the Gift Book editions of **Winnie-the-Pooh** and **The House at Pooh Corner**, knows the style well enough and has no difficulty in matching either Shepard's lay-outs or his portrayal of such 'friends' as Piglet, Eeyore and Tigger, but his Pooh lacks the wonderful subtlety of gesture with which he was originally imbued and his Christopher Robin would surely scorn outright the programme here prepared for him.)

Like many another serial devised for commercial ends (remember **Peter Pan in Scarlet**?) the whole venture is misconceived. Far from the delightful entertainment promised by the dust-jacket, tedium prevails. Christopher Robin turns up on a blue bicycle for ten more engagements with his friends but their revival serves only to show us what has been lost. The events of the book are just that, factitious happenings (Owl tries to write a book; a silly cricket match etc.) with none of the endearing barminess which gave the originals their classic status; the introduction of Lottie the otter is superfluous; word-play is leaden ('Piglet said: "It's not a Census, it's a Nonsensus" and then blushed at his cleverness') as are most of the attempts to match Milne's always skilful verse. Anyone confronting the 'Return' without knowing of its sources will hardly be encouraged to investigate further. **BA**

Yucky Worms

★★★★★

Vivian French, ill. Jessica Ahlberg, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 1458 8, £11.99 hbk

This book shows that an information story can be aesthetically pleasing as well as a good source of knowledge. It is colourful, generous in size and use of space, and has much variety of text and illustration on each page. A familiar device invites readers to join a well informed grandmother and her grandchild who are exploring the worms that live in her garden. Both written text and illustrations are imaginative in judging what is likely to interest young learners. Even a simple creature like a worm has a fascinating body; it cannot see, but it has five pairs of hearts. The written text is lively, full of engaging and relevant dialogue and extended enough to give the account gravitas. But it has playful elements too: fictional devices like speech bubbles to give a worm's 'thoughts' and some little jokes.

The illustrations are richly diverse too and include double spreads, vignettes and diagrams which communicate information most effectively. There are some excellent cross sections showing the structure of the worm's long slithery body and indicating the simple but efficient digestive system – the gizzard where small stones break the food down and the intestines from which the goodness of the food is absorbed. Other pictures communicate a sense of place: the generous garden is clearly a place of work and activity as the implements, plant frames and flower beds indicate. And in one double spread we glimpse a town in the distance.

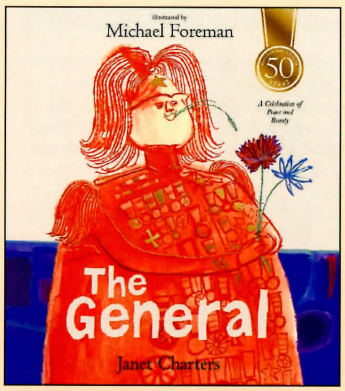
Children are encouraged to respect these useful creatures by handling them gently and appreciating their role in loosening the soil so that plant roots can stretch out and rain can keep the soil moist. **MM**

Editor's Choice

The General

★★★★★

Janet Charters, ill. Michael Foreman, Templar, 48pp, 978 1 84877 153 6, £10.99 hbk



Not many generals can be seen wearing a CND badge but General Jodhpur, illustrated by Michael Foreman in 1961 when he was still an art student, is a general who disbands his army so that the soldiers can return home and make their country 'the most beautiful in the world'. Janet Charters's anti-war text is as ironically apposite today as it was in 1961 when US involvement in the Vietnam War was escalating. Its political theme also anticipates the direction that Foreman was to take as the author of his own pioneering 'political' picture book texts such as **Moose** (1972, pacifism), **Dinosaurs and All That Rubbish** (1972, pollution), **War and Peas** (1974, Third World poverty) and **All the King's Horses** (1977, feminism).

As Foreman's first picture book, **The General** is incredibly assured. His trademark dexterity with watercolour wash is consummate in his glowingly luminous depiction of the general's medal studded uniform and in his depiction of the ploughed field where a former soldier sows seed for the next harvest. Also characteristic are his confidently humorous characterisations of generals and troops. His mosaic city map reminiscent of Paolozzi and his stylised flowers are very 60s and now full of retro charm. A handsomely produced 50th anniversary edition that is a real treat! **RS**

Insect Detective

NON-FICTION ★★★★

Steve Voake, ill. Charlotte Voake, Walker, 32pp, 978 1 4063 1051 1, £11.99 hbk

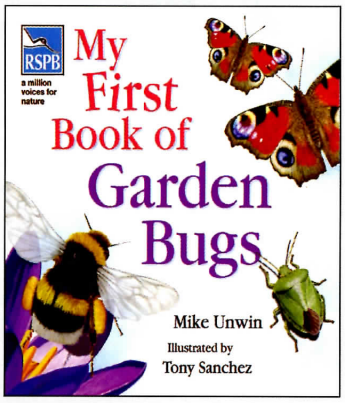
A gentle introduction to insects, how to recognise them, where to find them, and above all how to marvel at the 'strange and wonderful things' that they do. Steve Voake's tone is that of a patient guide, just the sort of companion you would hope to have when setting out on an insect hunt, whether for a wood-chomping wasp, a sociable ant, a solitary bee or a Herald moth in hiding. Charlotte Voake's illustrations, delicate and winsome, are always from a child's perspective, as though you are down at ground level looking for beetles between the grass stems. Imaginative typography combines to make the pages decorative as well as accessible. There are suggestions for attracting insects to your garden and simple projects such as setting a beetle trap or making a place for solitary bees to nest. A charming first guide to natural history which would sit happily on the bookshelf alongside Charlotte Voake's **A Little Guide to Flowers** and **A Little Guide to Trees** (Eden Project). **SU**

My First Book of Garden Bugs

NON-FICTION ★★★

Mike Unwin, ill. Tony Sanchez, A & C Black, 48pp, 978 1 4081 1415 5, £6.99 hbk

Last winter was unusually hard for creepy-crawlies, be they creeping into town from Crawley or crawling into crannies to combat the cold. Shortly after the last big freeze it became fashionable to speak of the cranny-crawlers as 'mini-beasts' and that's what 'Garden Bugs' means here.



Unwin and Sanchez show and tell us about 20 commonly-occurring garden invertebrates so that we may identify and understand them. To do this they use the pleasant strategy of laying clues on a right-hand page and unmasking their chosen subject on its reverse; thus the reader (or readers – this is a fine book for sharing) takes part in inquiry and discovery. The text is carefully spare and seasoned with attractively readaloudable words (Boing!, juicy, champion, lumpy, etc.) and the pictures are super-slick and very accurate despite any reliable indication of scale. So here's a book that does simply and pleasantly, exactly what it says on the tin, in spite of there being only one genuine 'bug' in the cast of 20. **TP**

8–10 Junior/Middle

Bram Stoker's Dracula

★★★★

Retold by Eddie Robson, ill. Nicola L Robinson, Carlton, 28pp, 978 1 84732 302 6, £14.99 novelty hbk

Vampires are in vogue once again, perhaps on the back of the multi-million dollar **Twilight** industry. So the resurrection of one of the classic bloodsuckers in an inventively packaged, large novelty picture book version is timely. In fewer than thirty openings, a very readable skeleton of Bram Stoker's narrative and his use of diary entries, ships' logs, newspaper clippings, occasional letters and telegrams are preserved. In addition, as young readers search the attractively crowded pages, they will discover 'a bite-sized travel guide to Transylvania', a secret map of Castle Dracula, medical notes on hypnotism and the use of garlic; and the endpapers offer a spin-the-wheel board game entitled 'Escape from Dracula'. They will also be invited to 'Pull Here!' to transform the Count's victim Lucy Westenra from rosy-cheeked beauty to whey-faced witch; or to sink Dracula's fangs savagely into the sleeping Mina's neck. Most startlingly, as a page is turned, a veritable plague of bared-teeth rats springs up towards the reader's face. There is some needless compromise, maybe in the spirit of the Horrible Histories, in the humour of some of the embellishments to the original version; vampire survival courses are outlined and recommended; with a Special Offer on 'Attractive crucifix and mirror set'. But, for the most part, page design which invites close exploration and artwork with a macabre, comic-book feel, complement Stoker's tale admirably. **GF**

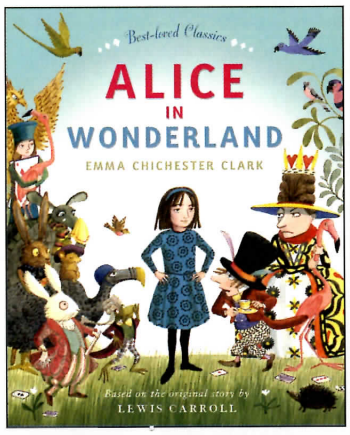
The Man Who Lost His Head

★★★★★

Claire Huchet Bishop, ill. Robert McCloskey, New York Review Children's Collection, 64pp, 978 1 59017 332 9, £9.99 hbk

The first page of this picture book consists of a single line, 'Once upon a time there was a Man who lost his head', above McCloskey's bold, realistic, black and white drawing of the Man sitting up in bed desperately groping for the missing appendage. It's a startling opening to a bizarre story in which the Man fashions himself a series of heads so that he can seek the real object at the village fair. After several demoralising encounters, he meets a wise urchin whose systematic interrogation of the problem leads to a suitably strange resolution.

This is a wonderfully odd book. First published in 1942, and reissued in the fascinating NYRCC series of classic children's books, the vivid words and drawings here depict several layers of strangeness: a vanished rural America; the carnival chaos of the fairground; the nonchalant way in which the headless Man's dreadful plight is responded to until he meets the mysterious waif. There is, perhaps, an unparaphrasable allegory about self-knowledge hovering here, but children will enjoy the story for its mixture of nightmare, laughter and wordplay. **GH**



Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

★★

Retold by Harriet Castor, ill. Zdenko Basić, Carlton, 28pp, 978 1 84732 436 8, £14.99 novelty hbk

Alice in Wonderland

★★★★

Emma Chichester Clark, HarperCollins, 48pp, 978 0 00 731613 7, £12.99 hbk

Lewis Carroll might be surprised by the odd shapes that Alice continues to assume. Castor's retelling promises 'curiouser and curiouser surprises' on its cover and uses Carroll's classic as the springboard for some playful, but not particularly inventive, paper engineering, none of which would be curious or surprising to a reader of one or two standard pop-up books. The text is arranged around Basić's tableau style double page illustrations in rectangular (playing card?) shapes with rounded corners, most often joined together as if unfolded from a pack. Because there are only thirteen double page spreads to use, the print is small; and incidents, puns and puzzles are taken out of the original narrative sequence and presented, mutilated, in even smaller print in *The White Rabbit's Guide to Wonderland*, a small booklet pasted to the inside cover. Alice doesn't benefit from any of this reshaping.

Chichester Clark's retelling (from an abridgement by Alison Sage) takes a lot more liberties with Carroll's original text: Alice even says 'Wow!' and 'Nice...' In this gentle modernising process, we lose the poems, much fascinating vocabulary and some of the strange flavour that comes from the contrast between the formality of the Victorian prose and the madness of the events it describes. But the book retains all the major episodes in the narrative, including the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, which, Cheshire Cat like, all but disappears in Castor's version. And the spirit is definitely still there. Chichester Clark's illustrations are, as you would expect, elegant, sumptuously coloured, and marvellously detailed and characterised. Her Alice is an old-fashioned modern young lady with bobbed dark hair, black tights and a Laura Ashley dress. Chichester Clark varies the mood expertly, using light, tone, and some uneasy colour combinations, to move from humour, through queasiness – Alice eating from the Caterpillar's mushroom – to the occasionally disturbing, as in the scene with the Duchess and the baby. Acknowledging inspiration from Tenniel's original illustrations, she re-works images that have become so fixed in our imagination, like the hunched-up giant Alice in the White Rabbit's house, that they demand to be included, and she retains the original writer and illustrator's mixture of the outrageous, the absurd, and the subtly menacing. It's a very attractive presentation. Each of the 48 pages has at least one illustration, whether single figures, half pages, or whole page and double page spreads. At a couple of pounds less than the pop-up, this is amazing value. As a lovingly shrunk and beautifully dressed up Alice, it's hard to beat. **CB**

The Kites Are Flying!

★★★★

Michael Morpurgo, ill. Laura Carlin, Walker, 80pp, 978 1 4063 1798 5, £7.99 hbk

This story is told in the form of alternating extracts from two sources: the diary of a journalist visiting the West Bank, and the nightly, silent, anguished monologue that a Palestinian boy has with his older brother who has been shot by Israeli soldiers. Max, the journalist, meets Said, the child, when the latter is making a kite while tending sheep. An accident brings Max into Said's community, where he learns that Said has not spoken since losing his brother, but has been making kites obsessively before freeing them to drift over to the settlement on the other side of the Israeli Apartheid Wall. Given that the intention of the book is to present a vision of friendship transcending hatred, you can probably guess the general direction of the rest of the story.

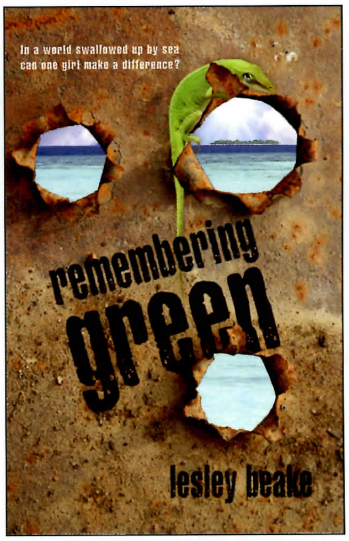
Morpurgo wrote this book in response to a series of events: a Jordanian teenager asking him to present the Palestinian side of the conflict; a kite-flying memorial to its victims on Hampstead Heath; a news story about a child being killed while flying a kite. Eventually, I found the story very moving. There were times when its attempts at 'balance' made me want to hurl it aside, and its glorious climax at first appeared to me to be an over-optimistic evasion of the atrocities happening right now. However, children's literature is not the same as campaigning journalism, and it is at least arguable that one of the purposes of the former is to present young readers with versions of the world as it just might become. **GH**

Remembering Green

★★★

Lesley Beake, Frances Lincoln, 112pp, 978 1 84507 962 8, £5.99 pbk

Global warming is already taking place in this story set 200 years from now. The Tekkies live on a concrete island off the southern-most tip of Africa. They believe that science and rationality are key to preventing the end of the world. But their actions are futile, their beliefs powerless. Only respect for the Earth and its creatures can restore the balance. So they abduct the girl-child Rain and her lion Saa, who represent the old ways. Saa, symbol of the life force, and Rain, daughter of the rainmakers, are now their only hope, to be offered as sacrifices if necessary. As Saa, drugged and caged, loses her will to live, Rain urgently seeks freedom.



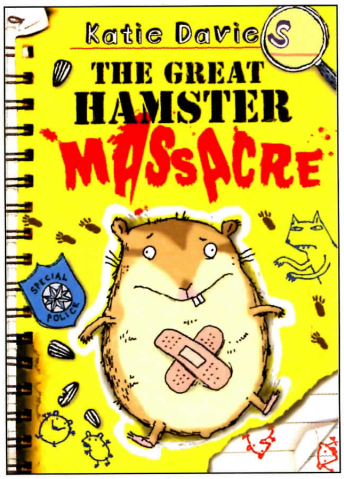
The story contrasts the values of different peoples: the Tekkies, or colonisers, who live by force, rules and measurements, and indigenous peoples like Rain and her family, who live according to the rhythms of nature. Told from Rain's point of view, it is moving, steeped with a sense of urgency and profound loss. Yet, in its ending, there is love and hope. Just as in **Song of Be** and **A Cageful of Butterflies**, intensity of feeling and poetic vision infuse every page of this tale, a plea for a greener, more humane world. **AF**

The Great Hamster Massacre

★★★

Katie Davies, ill. Hannah Shaw, Simon & Schuster, 192pp, 978 1 84738 595 6, £5.99 pbk

Anna is supposed to be writing a What-I-Did-in-the-Summer-Holidays story for school and she describes just what happened when, against their better judgement, her parents get her and her younger brother a couple of hamsters. Things go well for the children and hamsters at first, but fate intervenes. Were they really two female hamsters? Not so sure about that one, especially



when one of them gives birth to eight babies. And who killed the babies just after they were born? Anna's asides to the reader about her reactions, not to mention those of her best friend next door, are frank and will have readers readily identifying with her plight. As for the record of her investigation into who killed the hamsters – any teacher reading it out aloud should be prepared for plenty of laughter. Davies' debut novel reveals a fine sense of humour; I will be looking out for further titles from her. **RL**

The Wainscott Weasel

★★★★★

Tor Seidler, ill. Fred Marcellino, Catnip, 200pp, 978 1 846470 78 3, £9.99 pbk

The cover of this edition of a superb animal fantasy, first published in 1993, quotes a critic's comparison of the story to E B White's **Charlotte's Web**. This is high praise, but for the first few pages I was tempted to dismiss this story of anthropomorphosised weasels addicted to woodland dance events as being merely twee. However, as we get to know the weasels and the other woodland creatures better, the more the tale intrigues. At the centre of the story is the mysterious, retiring hero of the weasels, Bagley Brown, who is in the throes of hopeless love for the beautiful and graceful Bridget. Unfortunately, Bridget is a striped bass. The writing is skilful enough to make you share the sadness of this impossible cross-species romantic agony. Meanwhile, the anthropomorphism fades into the background as Bridget's fellow lake dwellers languish in a ferocious drought that exposes them to the depredations of a marauding osprey, and Bagley launches an Herculean attempt to rescue them.

This is an excellent story that becomes more and more powerful by the page. Marcellino's evocations of woodland and water, depicting in pastel hues the play of light, foliage and animal movement, enhance the subtlety and forlornness of the tale. **GH**

The Wickedest Witch

★★★

Martin Howard, ill. Colin Stimpson, Pavilion, 224pp, 978 1 84365 131 4, £7.99 hbk

A little girl wants to be a witch so enrols with a mentor to learn the tricks of the trade. We've been here before but this new take on an old theme is worth a look because it's a simple, fun story with some good jokes and enjoyable characters. It hasn't strayed into some huge, rambling account full of faux mythology. Everything is kept sweetly humorous and lightly engaging and the scenes between witch and apprentice are really good and hook the reader in.

The magical world it weaves is a pleasant place to be – and with the multi-volume heaviness of recent explorations of the genre I felt happy to be back in a neighbourhood where I half expected to bump into the Worst Witch. **HTh**

The Raven Mysteries, Book 2: Ghosts and Gadgets

★★

Marcus Sedgwick, ill. Pete Williamson, Orion, 272pp, 978 1 84255 694 8, £7.99 hbk

It's back to spooky Overhand Castle for the second book in this proposed series of six, to find worries plaguing its gothic resident family. Edgar, our cantankerous raven narrator, is preoccupied by thoughts that his beak might be looking a bit wonky. Lord Valevine is trying to save the insolvent Overhands from destitution with his latest harebrained contraption, the Mark One Gold Detecting Gadget; whilst his wife Minty is engrossed in a mad attempt to sew the family's way out of debt.

So when their son Cudweed, and his pet monkey Fellah are scared nearly out of their wits by ghosts in the South Wing, it is left to vampish elder sister Solstice and the faithful Edgar to swallow hard, take out their torches and get to the bottom of the haunting happenings.

There's no denying that Sedgwick's characters have a certain Addams family appeal. But these mysteries are already starting to feel a bit contrived, and this plot in particular has the flimsiness of a castle cobweb. Would the apparition of a mere misty phantom really terrify the inhabitants of a pad we are told is already chock-full of 'oddballs, lunatics and fruitcakes' and 'skeletons in the cupboard', not to mention a cemetery outside whose run-off fertilises the cabbages? Surely ghosts go with the territory. And can ravens really smell processed flour? By this thread in part hangs the plot.

Skeletons notwithstanding, I'd personally like some more meat on the bones of these stories, and a spattering of blood and guts too. Sedgwick is a fine writer, more than capable of providing this. No one wants this age-group to be terror-struck, but children love the frisson of a suitably scary story. Unfortunately they won't find much here to bring on bumps in the night. **CS**

I Spy: The Constantinople Caper

★★

Graham Marks, Usborne, 288pp, 978 0 7460 9710 6, £5.99 pbk

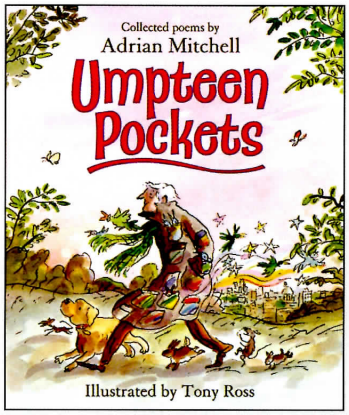
Hot on the heels of **The Dangerous Book for Boys** and other nostalgic trips aimed at the dads of today's readers comes a yarn that has all the ingredients of a classic 'Victor' or 'Boys Own' story. Young Trey finds himself in the Europe of 1927 and stumbles upon the intrigues of the time. The novel contains a well narrated trail of action that relies heavily on period atmosphere, and this is where I'm left pondering. It will either fall flat on a generation that hasn't lapped up Eric Ambler and Graham Greene, or it will inspire them to go and read these forebears. The story clunks along in places and risks losing the reader, lacking the thrill and menace of the best of its genre, and leaving the reader potentially asking Why bother? However, it's a daring blend of old motifs and, as such, I would recommend it for those able readers who have grabbed all there is off the shelf and need a new avenue to follow. This is certainly that – albeit one shrouded in mist. **HTh**

The Wild Things

★

Dave Eggers, Hamish Hamilton, 288pp, 978 0 241 14422 0, £14.99 hbk

'The Wild Things / A Novel by Dave Eggers / Adapted from the Illustrated Book / Where the Wild Things Are / by / Maurice Sendak / And based on the Screenplay / Where the Wild Things Are / co-written by DE and / Spike Jonze.' Thus a note on the title page of Mr Eggers' novelised adaptation, giving details of his book's origins and evolution. And how impressive it all sounds: who could fail with such parentage? Sadly, however, the truth is that it fails very badly indeed; there must be few contemporary children's books which seem so utterly pointless. An original masterpiece which subtly combined text and illustration to provide lasting insights into childhood and its angry volatilities becomes, via a laboured 'back story', a thin, plodding narrative of a dysfunctional American family (very American, some would say) and young Max's attempted escape from it. His temporary refuge is an island ruled over by 'the wild things' (now named as, among others, Carol, Douglas and Ira) who come to see the boy as their king and with whom he has a sequence of 'adventures'. True, there are some humorous and some scary moments but what was once a celebrated 'wild rumpus' is now something very tame indeed; very little actually happens and the novel's occasional moments of speculation about a phenomenon referred to vaguely as 'the void' are, well, nothing more than vague. The universal note of Sendak's classic is here strictly localised – and a great deal (almost everything) is lost in the process. **RD**



Umpteen Pockets: New and Collected Poems for Children

POETRY ★★★★★

Adrian Mitchell, ill. Tony Ross, Orchard, 372pp, 978 1 40830 363 4, £14.99 hbk

All you can do with your life / is live it / Poetry's a gift – / So give it.

'Here are the tunes that future generations will hum' said Roger McGough of much loved and much missed Adrian Mitchell's posthumous final volume, **Umpteen Pockets**. It is accompanied by exuberant line drawings by Tony Ross, whose colourful cover features a Pied Piper Adrian look-a-like, surrounded by cavorting creatures and, of course, his beloved Daisy, the Dog of Peace. McGough's prediction that Adrian Mitchell's poetry will live on is echoed by the comments of Laureates, past and present, who jostle to pay tribute to his significance as a poet. In a moving tribute, Carol Ann Duffy writes of him as creating glorious 'voice-music', Michael Rosen praises his 'long-lasting and wonder-making poems', while Ted Hughes reminds us that 'nobody has produced more surprising verse or genuinely inspired fun than Adrian Mitchell'. It took a very special person with a very special talent to draw such accolades. Adrian was a warm, nervy, often hilarious, always brilliant performer of his own poetry and many of those qualities are evident even on the written page. He was also a distinguished writer of musical theatre and the toe-tapping, let's get dancing nature of his work is plain to hear and see. Like his hero, William Blake, Adrian was a man of vision, an inspired singer of songs whose poetry features innocence and experience. Children, animals, the poor and weak, of whom the poet is passionately protective, are set against the bullies of playgrounds and war zones, as well as those who administer the smaller daily cruelties. Sometimes the poems are angry, more often they are amusing, ironic, tender or take off on zany flights of Adrian's inventive imagination. Here we have the best of his excellent back-list, supplemented by a dazzling new poem sequence on the Umpteen Pockets theme: '...A dictionary pocket / full of wonderful words / A rescue cage pocket / for injured animals and birds...' Like the man himself, most of all his poetry is about love. Treasure this book. **MSt**

Don Quixote

ABRIDGED CLASSIC ★★★

Miguel de Cervantes, retold by Martin Jenkins, ill. Chris Riddell, Walker, 352pp, 978 1 84428 747 5, £16.99 hbk

The team that brought you a rendition of **Gulliver's Travels** now turn their attention to another of those works by celebrated ancients who would surely be astonished (if not miffed) to find themselves adapted for unfledged youth. Unlike the satire which has always made for difficulties in dealing with Swift's book, narrative expansiveness is the problem posed by Cervantes. Near enough a thousand pages of Cohen's old Penguin translation are needed to take us through the multiple journeyings of the Knight of the Doleful Countenance with its numerous side-trackings and the interpolated stories that interrupt them, so that much clarity of purpose is demanded of anyone trying to take short cuts.

At 352 pages it may seem that Martin Jenkins is prepared to be generous to his author's original, but a brief glance at the book will reveal that, as with **Gulliver**, the generosity is exercised rather towards his illustrator. Almost every page opening has the spacious text confined within boxes which are combined with or overlay monochrome drawings and decorations by Chris Riddell, while whole pages are often given over to him for more substantial portraits and scene-settings in colour. This necessitates the curtailing of both the quantity and the length of episodes taken over from the original but Jenkins nonetheless has sought to include all the significant adventures in the two parts of the story. Clearly, no kind of translation is involved, but rather the recasting and ruthless abridging of an unacknowledged English source. The storytelling is necessarily brusque and includes some twenty-first century phrases and jokes. (Sancho's distorted mention of Cide Hamete Benenjeree leads to a remark that 'the Moors are very fond of ice-cream'.)

Both the writing and the powerful portraiture of the illustrations tend to support a view of **Don Quixote** as farce at the expense of an aged and knackered Romantic. That's legitimate enough, for Cervantes was in no wise sentimental about his deluded hero, but among the abridgments for children I retain a preference for those by James Reeves and Olive Jones, with their illustrations by Edward Ardizzone and George Him, which allow sympathy and a muted sense of tragedy to creep in. **BA**

Out of the Woods

★★★

Lyn Gardner, ill. Mini Grey, David Fickling Books, 368pp, 978 0 385 61036 0, £12.99 hbk

I should start by saying that I hadn't read the prequel to this novel (**Into the Woods**) in which Storm Eden puts paid to the dastardly Dr DeWilde and casts the magical pipe he so desperately desires to the bottom of the ocean, so this was my first encounter with Aurora, Storm and Any, the enchanting Eden sisters. However **Out of the Woods** stands alone pretty well and on the whole I enjoyed it, in a rompy sort of way.

Once again, the Eden sisters find themselves in mortal danger among the trees as they try to escape the cannibalistic clutches of Belladonna, a wicked witch who only likes children baked in pies or grated over spaghetti bolognaise. Her specific gastronomic requirement here however is Aurora's heart, which she plans to pluck out and consume, in order to rejuvenate her rapidly ageing body. Just to further complicate things, the pipe homes to Storm's possession, inflaming Belladonna's dreams of world domination still more.

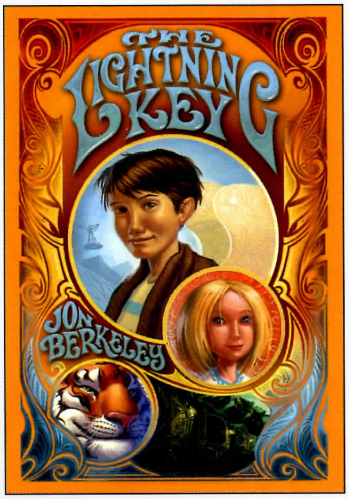
Teaming with references to Greek mythology and fairy tales, as well as more contemporary stories such as **The Picture of Dorian Gray** and **The Lord of the Rings**, **Out of the Woods** unfolds at a cracking pace with regular flashes of humour and lip-smacking references to real culinary treats as well as human offal. Mini Grey's witty drawings also enliven the journey. Overall however it all feels a bit baggy as plot twist follows plot twist in a story which rarely allows pause for thought. I have nothing against a page-turner but ultimately the breakneck speed at which I found myself skittering across the surface of the final 70 pages was disappointing rather than thrilling. Gardner hurtles her main characters towards the dénouement through an Underworld which would have merited more exploration. On the other hand, it feels churlish to express oneself too undernourished by a book which signs off with a recipe for Granny Riding-hood's Double Chocolate Brownies with Hot Fudge Sauce. **CS**

The Lightning Key

★★★

Jon Berkeley, ill. Brandon Dorman, Simon & Schuster, 416pp, 978 1 84738 444 7, £8.99 hbk

In the third volume of Berkeley's trilogy following on from **The Palace of Laughter** and **The Tiger's Egg**, readers again meet Miles Wednesday and his side-kicks, Song Angel Little and blind explorer Baltinglass of Araby. Still in search of the Tiger's Egg stone containing the trapped soul of a tiger, given to Miles when he was only days old but subsequently stolen from him, the trio are once more locked in conflict with villains from The Palace



of Laughter circus. Ringmaster, the Great Cortado, assisted by Dr Tau-Tau are determined to prevent them from reaching the home of Miles's Aunt Nura and the possibility of resolving the problem of the restless tiger and finding Miles's missing father.

As with the previous books, strange characters are encountered and even stranger events take place before Miles wins through with further assistance from the angelic world. **The Lightning Key** will undoubtedly appeal to the many fans of the previous books. Berkeley writes with a light and humorous touch while never letting the pace flag. It will be interesting to see if this talented author next turns his attention to something more reflective. He is more than capable of this. **VC**

Lydia's Tin Lid Drum

★★

Neale Osborne, Oxford, 528pp, 978 0 19 275596 4, £12.99 hbk

Within the sweetie-world of Planet Plenti lies Candy, a country made up of several regions, all of which are under the spell of evil Master Chef, Stannic, and his cohorts of robot guards. The country's inhabitants have been taken prisoner: the adults sent to labour camps and the children placed in solitary confinement, locked into cramped quarters and forced to attend cooking school. Nine-year-old Lydia, whose memories of happier times still haunt her, manages to escape. Pursued by robot hounds, it seems that she is trapped – but then help comes in the unlikely form of seven strange girls, also on the run. As the girls set out on an extraordinary adventure, which involves a quest for exotic sweets with the power to destroy Stannic, so they learn about friendship and the forging of a sisterhood in which each child finds her place.

The story is highly inventive, wrapped in a crazy world of confectionery and food. Not only does the storyline deal with sugary matters but the writing too is filled with wordplay and descriptions of a culinary nature. At times, the wordplay dazzles with wit and originality, but, spread over 500 pages, it soon becomes over-rich and relentless. And this brings me to my main criticism of the book – it is far too long. At half the length, or even less, it may have been able to sustain the sugar-sweet references, but as it is, themes, plot and characterisation are somewhat lost in a cloying mass of verbal dexterity. **AF**

Day by Day by Me

★★★★

Various illustrators, The National Centre for Young People with Epilepsy, 242pp, Publication No. 015/CEIS, spiral bound, free (tel: 01342 832243, ext. 296; email: info@ncype.org.uk)

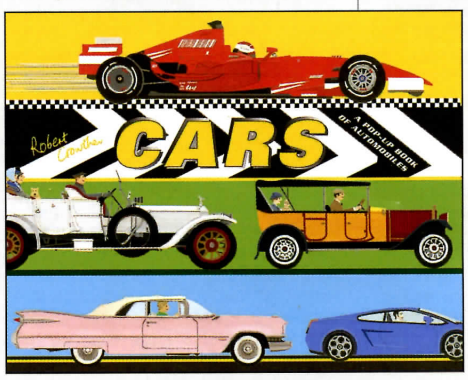
One of the most boring things for children with epilepsy must be the necessary keeping track of seizures day by day. This is a brilliant way of doing so. In an exceedingly 'cool' diary format, we are given a year of week by week charts to record when seizures happen, the type, whether the person is awake or asleep at the time, and the trigger of the attack. Each weekly chart is decorated by an artist – and what artists! Jez Alborough, Quentin Blake, Nick Sharratt, Helen Oxenbury, Catherine Anholt, Anthony Browne and Colin McNaughton to name a very few. Polly Dunbar's little face stickers at the back of the book will provide further fun as children decide their general mood on any given day. Along the way there are jokes, puns, games and information about epilepsy. The spiral binding makes the book easy to use. This is a remarkable production from the NCYPE and one of which they should be proud. **ES**

Cars: A pop-up book of automobiles

★★★★★

Robert Crowther, Walker, 10pp, 978 1 4063 1227 0, £12.99 novelty hbk

In five sections – Early Cars, Supercars, Everyday Cars, Record-breaking Cars and Racing Cars – this well engineered pop-up book contains much to interest and inform young motor car enthusiasts and some older readers too. The first four sections introduce the readers to the category of car and describe typical examples through annotated pictures, pop-ups, flaps and pull-outs. The final section, Racing Cars, gets an impressive three page spread with a pop-up grandstand and pits, and includes useful information about F1 and Stock Car Racing. Keeping up to date is a challenge of course – young fans of **Top Gear** will know that new Everyday Cars and Supercars are created all the time!



The language used in the text accompanying the drawings of the different cars is sometimes challenging and includes technical and specialist terms, but the young car lover will want this level of detail and their interest will carry them through. **MM**

Hamzat's Journey: A Refugee Diary

NON-FICTION ★★★

Anthony Robinson, ill. June Allan, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 978 1 84780 030 5, £11.99 hbk

This is the third book in a series which follows the journeys of refugee children fleeing from some of the contemporary world's conflicts to safety in Britain. The stories, in picture book format, are based on interviews with their real subjects. They are accompanied by illustrations in watercolour and crayon, and occasional photographs. This book is the story of a boy from Chechnya, whose foot was blown off and his leg shattered by a land-mine and who is brought to London by a relief agency to have an artificial leg fitted. At the opening of the book, there are maps of Chechnya and its surrounding states and their position in Europe relative to Britain and, after the story, some information about the country and its conflicts. This short section, although its language suggests an older audience than the book itself, left me only a little wiser about the situation than the occasional reports on the TV news. Rather, the book concentrates on the experience of Hamzat and his family and, aimed at junior school age children – the age that Hamzat came to Britain – seems intended to promote understanding and sympathy and, perhaps, to be but the starting point for a discussion of the wider issues. Both the story and the illustrations, probably in deference to the age of their intended audience, treat the subject carefully, and err on the side of the matter of fact and bland, hardly attempting to convey in themselves what you know would be the horrors and stresses of Hamzat's life. Instead, the book relies on the first person narrative and the photographs to encourage its readers' empathy. They will have to imagine for themselves what it really might be like to be Hamzat. **CB**

10–14 Middle/Secondary

The Lark and the Laurel

★★★

Barbara Willard, ill. Gareth Floyd, Jane Nissen, 176pp, 978 1 903252 34 5, £7.99 pbk

With the current revival of the historical novel for young people, it is good to see a reissue of the first children's novel of one of the leading writers of the genre's heyday: the first of the eventual eight books in the Mantlemass series. In hindsight, the novel is marked as much by the time of its writing, when feminism was stirring again, as by its historical setting. Rich in the detail of country life at the close of the fifteenth century and unfolding at a leisurely pace by today's expectations, it reveals the transformation of Cecily Jolland, the sequestered and naïve daughter of a minor aristocrat. When her Yorkist father flees the country on the accession of the Lancastrian Henry VII, Cecily is sent to her aunt in Sussex. The redoubtable Dame Elizabeth rules her estate at Mantlemass in an egalitarian spirit and with entrepreneurial zeal, raising rabbits for sale for their meat and fur; and, under her tutelage, Cecily, raised by her father for a dynastic marriage, learns to think and act for herself and makes her own choice of husband and future. This reprint has an admiring preface from Kevin Crossley-Holland whose own career as a writer of historical novels spans the 40 years since this title first appeared and whose recent style, in very short chapters and extensive use of dialogue, contrasts with Willard's more reflective and descriptive approach. I hope this novel finds the audience it deserves among young people rather than nostalgic older enthusiasts, but I am not sure that the use of the original illustrations by Gareth Floyd, fine though they are in themselves, will now attract young people of 12 or 13, who might appreciate the story. These days, they suggest a younger readership. **CB**

Salem Brownstone – All Along the Watchtowers

★★★

John Harris Dunning, ill. Nikhil Singh, Walker, 96pp, 978 1 4063 2052 7, £15.00 hbk

Those still searching for a way into graphic novels might not find **Salem Brownstone** the easiest introduction. The prospect, though, is enticing – a 230mm x 300mm volume, bound in a textured purple cloth decorated with the dark, swirling frond-like shapes which we will often find crowding the frames inside. Perspectives shift from close-ups to distance shots, from within a character's eye-socket to vertiginous viewpoints high above the action. Sometimes finding a tiny character among the serpentine lines requires patience. If the illustrations were in colour, their impact might be psychedelic; in black and white, they carry echoes of decadence and Beardsley perhaps, but with less open space to help define and focus upon a character.

The plot is tortuous. Salem Brownstone, owner of the Sit & Spin Laundromat, receives a telegram from 'Lola Q' telling him to check out a 'towering mansion' he has been left by his father, Jedediah, magician in Dr Kinoshita's Circus of Unearthly Delights. It's 'more House of Horrors than swingin' bachelor's pad,' thinks Salem. Here he meets Cassandra Contortionist, guardian of the powerful scrying ball – an object much desired by the Dark Elders of Mu'Bric, the Midnight City, and their minions, the Shadow Boys. When the bad guys do show up, however, they're dealt with easily enough – the contest is not in doubt. The circus freaks (the book's word) who come to Salem's aid appear to have been introduced to offer an opportunity for a fantastic illustration. Sometimes the plot itself seems to take a digression for much the same reason. Since Salem's new friends from the circus never have to do much, tension and interest have to spring from within the illustrations. Although the grotesquery at first seemed repellent, repeated explorations of the images produced an increasing pleasure in their detail and wit. Re-readings of the text in turn sparked an enjoyment of Salem's own cool idiom, the *non-sequiturs* of the plot, the unsolved riddles posed by the characters (just who *is* the taxi-driving 'Lola Q' with her eye-patch and her *chat noir* cigarettes?). Younger readers would probably be far more at ease in the genre; Salem Brownstone and his circus troupe might well develop a cult following, hungry for more of their dark escapades. **GF**

Fortune Cookie

★★★★

Jean Ure, HarperCollins, 208pp, 978 0 00 722462 3, £5.99 pbk

This fast-paced romp will be an irresistible page-turner for 10–12 year-old girls. It has all the requisite ingredients: inseparable friends; a sick child; a lovable puppy; a reformed criminal; and a bad-tempered old lady with a secret heart of gold. There is nothing formulaic about this book, however – just an insistence that old-fashioned values can still prevail and determination and a strong sense of social justice can put most things right.

Fudge and Cupcake have been lifelong friends and when Cupcake's younger brother Joey is diagnosed with muscular dystrophy they both devote a good deal of their time and energy to him. Ure approaches the subject with realism and sensitivity, avoiding the self-indulgence of sentimentality and making clear the emotional toll exacted by the disease: Joey's father leaves and his mother is left in difficult financial circumstances. However, it is also made clear that families can and do support each other in times of crisis – another welcome theme.

When Fudge and Cupcake rescue Cookie the dog from neglect by his owner and give him to Joey, the two quickly become devoted friends. Sadly, it soon becomes obvious that Cookie urgently needs a life-saving but expensive operation and the two girls make a pact to raise the necessary funds. Their journey to success is peppered with disappointments, humour and an unexpected but innocent foray into the criminal underworld.

Right prevails in the end and Ure reminds us of the virtues of honest lives in a refreshing and compelling way: in this book, people get what they deserve – but they are also given the opportunity to change and grow. **VR**

Esty's Gold

★★

Mary Arrigan, Frances Lincoln, 224pp, 978 1 84507 965 9, £6.99 pbk

Esty's father is middleman to Lord Craythorn and runs his estate while the Lord is in England, but even he cannot protect the tenants from the potato famine which strikes Ireland in the late 1840s. He is killed when the bailiffs are called in supported by troops, and suddenly Esty's comfortable world is shattered and she is sent into service. At 13 she is young but is befriended by May whose bed she shares in the big house. From something she reads in the **Illustrated London News**, she is fired up by the thought of finding her fortune and that of her family in Ballarat, Australia. Rather implausibly Lord Craythorn is persuaded to exchange the passage to America that he has arranged for her mother and grandmother to America, for one to Australia and to include May and John Joe, her boyfriend who is on the run. The excitement of the search for gold in Ballarat in the heat and dust amidst the crowded tent city with rebellion against the high cost of the licence fee is the backdrop for the second half of Esty's story.

The measured start with its picture of a privileged child who has been taught to read and write, observing the harshness of the world around her, soon turns into a gallop through Esty's service in the Burgess household, her voyage to Australia, and life in the goldfield.

There are implausible moments such as when Esty goes to Lord Craythorn to change the passages to Australia instead of America, and somehow the danger that the family are in while travelling to the goldfield does not come through because of the pace of the story. But Esty is a spirited heroine and her relationship with her mother who turns out to be very resourceful, setting up a café for the gold miners when all their money is stolen, rings true. It is just a pity that Arrigan did not take the story more slowly which would have been more satisfying for the reader. **JFi**

Thief!

★★★★

John Pilkington, Usborne, 240pp, 978 0 7460 9799 1, £5.99 pbk

Thief! is the fourth of John Pilkington's enjoyable 'Elizabethan Mysteries'. Young Ben Button is a boy actor with Lord Bonner's company in London and his adventures have already been chronicled in **Rogues' Gold**, **Traitor!** and **Revenge!** This time, Ben takes a break from the stage and the excitements of the London underworld to return to his home in rural Hornsey, a three mile cart ride north of the city.

There is to be no respite for him, however, since his village has suffered a number of violent burglaries – the work of no mere thief, but a murderer in search of a priceless treasure. As if that were not enough, his widowed mother is considering an offer of marriage – and security for her children – from a local farmer whom Ben dislikes. The boy actor hero, the excitements of the theatre, an intriguing mystery – readers familiar with the genre might well recall the stirring tales of Geoffrey Trease. It is no mean compliment to say that Ben Button's adventures stand the comparison. You trust and enjoy the authenticity without feeling the research is poking through the prose. The author shares Trease's interest in the lives of common folk and also his ability to keep his tale moving rapidly through a tight plot. His dialogue has a sense of 'otherness' but never descends to an affected idiom in which, the great man once wrote, characters were liable to exclaim, 'Ha, we are beset!' There is nothing pretentious about Pilkington's story at all. Cliff-hanging conclusions to chapters drive a reader on. The dangers of the hunt for the killer prove the suitor-farmer a coward and Mother makes a wiser choice. The villain

comes to a blood-soaked end and, while a couple of minor characters get killed off, Ben lives on to solve the mystery and, one hopes, to fight another day. **GF**

Witch & Wizard

★★★

James Patterson (with Gabrielle Charbonnet), Century, 336pp, 978 1 846 05474 7, £12.99 hbk

Brother and sister, Whit and Wisty, have Wiccan powers that they do not fully realise and only learn to utilise when they are accused of witchcraft and condemned to death by a cruel, ruthless totalitarian regime that has taken over the land. What follows is a fast, exciting, fantasy adventure told in turns by the siblings, with wall to wall thrills and spills.

There is some preachiness at the end but this is outweighed by the page-turning suspense, pace and invention, street smart irony and upbeat humour of the style. Most of the young characters ring near to true though the adults are grotesques, even the goody, goody parents.

In truth it does feel as though it might have been produced in a series writing factory and the ending suggests that this is not going to be a stand-alone. The last 24 pages contain a mix of extra detail as well as self promotion that characterise the whole production of the novel. **DB**

Halo

★★★★

Zizou Corder, Puffin, 384pp, 978 0 14 132830 0, £6.99 pbk

Halosydne – 'the girl who was fed by the sea' – or Halo for short is the name given to a mysterious human baby with a strange tattoo on her forehead, by the Centaurs who find her washed up like a turtle on the shores of ancient Zakynthos. Halo is fortunate flotsam indeed. For one who has no knowledge of who she really is or where she comes from, her childhood with the wise and gentle Centaur family who adopt her is an idyllic one, full of sunshine and stories. That is until the fateful day when her kidnap by fishermen forces Halo to disguise herself as a boy and embark on an epic and often perilous odyssey across ancient Greece, that will ultimately bring to light her real home and origins.

Halo is the latest book from mother-and-daughter team Louisa Young and Isabel Adomakoh Young, authors of the 'Lionboy' trilogy and **Lee Raven, Boy Thief**. Halo is an attractively feisty heroine whose quest introduces us to many of the diverse peoples of Ancient Greece: the belligerent Spartans; the cultured and fun-loving Athenians; the downtrodden Helots and most intriguing of all perhaps, the inscrutable Skythians. Heroically researched, **Halo** is full of rich and fascinating detail about the ancient world, from the lives of Spartan boy soldiers and the battle techniques they must master, to ancient surgical procedures, and the offerings required to please the pantheon of gods and goddesses which presides over it all. The mystery of Halo's real identity will keep readers guessing until the very end, and it's a revelation well worth waiting for.

This is an enthralling story which kept me sustained throughout a marathon cross-country journey of my own in the form of a snow-prolonged train journey. Any book that can do that has got to be worth its weight in gold. Or should that perhaps be salt? **CS**

Time Quake

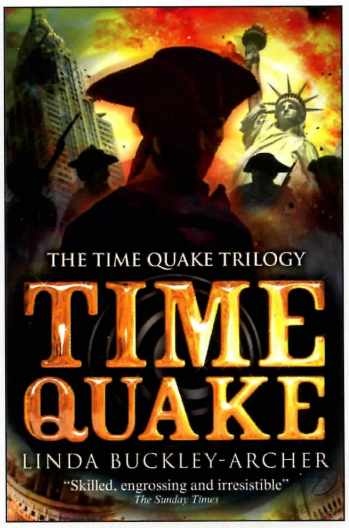
★★★★

Linda Buckley-Archer, Simon & Schuster, 384pp, 978 1 41691 714 4, £6.99 pbk

Clever and thought provoking, **Time Quake** concludes the trilogy started in **Gideon the Cutpurse** and **The Tar Man** in which Kate and Peter travel back and forth through time using their father's anti-gravity time machine. In spite of the fact that there is a preface detailing some of the events of the previous two books, it would be difficult for this to stand alone, but I would imagine that there are many avid readers awaiting this final volume.

Lord Luxon is determined to save America from becoming so by changing the course of the American War of Independence, while Peter and Kate are trying to track down the Tar Man who has the machine which would enable them to return to their families in the twenty-first century. Kate is worryingly 'blurring' and fading while discovering she can fast forward and see events before they happen. Peter, Kate and Gideon who is refusing to believe that the Tar Man is actually his older brother, try to stop Lord Luxon who seemingly is able to save America from its future and in an exciting page-turning ending they manage to do this, although Kate appears to pay the ultimate price or does she?

The thought that the course of history could be changed is a challenging one



although the author paints a less than flattering portrait of how New York could have been had the British not lost the War! There is much detail of life at the various periods of history, in particular the crossing of the Delaware River by George Washington and his forces, depicted in a famous painting in the Metropolitan Museum in New York where some of the action takes place. The author has done her research well and the difficulties encountered by the characters are well drawn, in particular Lord Luxon and the Marquess de Montfaron who with their quaint language do stick out rather in the twenty-first century. But equally the Marquess's enchantment with the technology of our world does make you stop and think. The reader moves seamlessly between the two periods believing while they are reading about New York in the 1760s that they are there, while equally at home in the New York of 2009. **JFi**

Hell's Heroes

★★★

Darren Shan, HarperCollins, 240pp, 978 0 00 726034 8, £12.99 hbk

The climactic end of **Dark Calling**, book nine of Shan's 'Demonata' series, saw Lord Loss and Bec forming an alliance whilst a growing unease and mistrust formed a rift between Grubbs and Kernel. This sets the tone for the opening of the series' finale.

True to form, the book opens with immediacy as Dervish, Grubbs' uncle, is dying. There's a sense of poignancy and the intimacy of the cave setting where the scene takes place adds to the scene's intensity. As Grubbs digs a grave, the atmosphere is brooding, thick with tension and malevolence. A battle between the Demon world that is encroaching further and further into human domains ensues with the full venom and force of Bec and Lord Loss being unleashed. This leads to an action-packed and surprising crescendo.

Alongside the considerable thrills and spills of the narrative, wider issues are given space to gestate – the nature of trust and belief, the corrupting influences that power and control are able to exert. These ethical dilemmas are not always resolved but on the whole, the 'Demonata' has been a darker, more complex and sophisticated series than the 'Saga of Darren Shan'. Relentless and raw, this is a gripping, satisfying conclusion to the series. **JHo**

Crocodile Tears

★★★

Anthony Horowitz, Walker, 416pp, 978 1 4063 1048 1, £14.99 hbk

The eighth novel in the Alex Rider series sees the action adventure begin in explosive style as a terrorist attack is waged against an Indian nuclear power plant. This high octane opening is maintained throughout the remainder of the novel. Relief is sent to the communities surrounding the plant by a company called First Aid, a charity headed by McCain, a wealth-obsessed, power-crazed individual who makes a suitably ruthless, albeit not entirely surprising, arch rival for Alex.

There's a frenetic quality to the novel which is variously located in India, Scotland, England and Kenya. In lesser hands this furious and frantic pacing might disorientate readers, but characteristically, Horowitz creates sufficient deft circumstantial detail to ensure each of his settings is vivid yet does not intrude upon the narrative's intensity.

Horowitz writes with a cinematic quality that creates heightened immediacy for his readers. That he skilfully selects contemporary issues – here the politicised nature of genetic engineering in crop production and the power this yields – creates a tangible sense of realism that serves to compound the danger. Another accomplished teenage thriller that is sure to satisfy hungry fans and to entice new readers to further explore the series. **JHo**

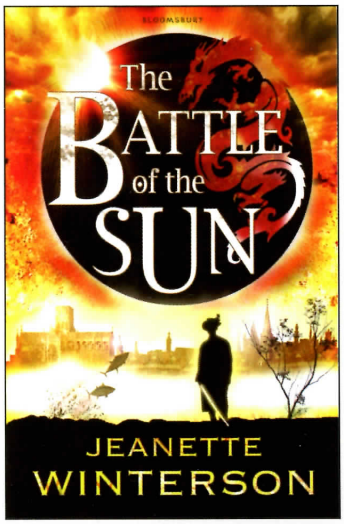
The Battle of the Sun

★★★★★

Jeanette Winterson, Bloomsbury, 400pp, 978 1 4088 0042 3, £10.99 hbk

Reading this book is like sitting entranced before a flickering series of magic lantern slides. Or again, like watching a hand deftly deal out fan after fan of tarot cards with a cast of symbolic figures: Jack, the Radiant Boy; his counterpart, the Golden Maiden; the Magus; the Keeper of the Tides; Mother Midnight; the Sunken King; the Knight Summoned... They are supplemented by an array of grotesques: The Eyebat, Wedge and Mistress Split (the male and female halves of a 'whole' cleaved in two), Abel Darkwater, with his boar-like head. If Jeanette Winterson were not already known as a consummate storyteller, the poetic roll call of these names would suggest an imagination steeped in literature, magic and folklore: the language of this new tale is resonant with echoes of all three.

Winterson takes her young readers on an exhilarating journey through Elizabethan London, sweeping them along the great thoroughfares and back alleys, in and out of taverns, great and



mean houses – along the banks of the Thames, within its tides, upon its smooth, turbulent or gilded surface. Gold is one of the key elements and symbols of the story. On one level, it is the heart's desire of the dark Magus, who kidnaps Jack Snap, as he has kidnapped a series of other boys to toil in the Dark House to fulfil his great alchemical project. It is also temporarily the lure and deception of greedy London citizens when the Magus's project appears to succeed and everything in the city is petrified into gold. But, more profoundly, it is Jack's task to find 'the gold within', a self, integrity and purpose not manipulated by others. Like every fairytale hero he has a series of tasks to fulfil, from negotiating with a riddlesome Dragon, whose Cinnabar Egg he must find, to freeing the Sunken King and rescuing the Magus' captives who have been turned to stone.

Similarly, his steadfastness and kindness bring him an array of helpers, including the nimble Crispis, a diminutive captive of the Magus, to the Golden Maiden, herself – otherwise known as Silver. She will be familiar to readers of Winterson's **Tanglewreck**, to which this title makes deft allusion, cleverly weaving in elements of Silver's own story from the 'future' of the earlier book. Readers will need nimble wits to keep abreast of the crisscrossing plot, as it drives towards the grand climax of the Battle of the Sun, simultaneously furthering Silver's quest to protect the Timekeeper, a magical clock, from both Abel Darkwater and her time-travelling nemesis – met here in the guise of the Abbess.

The exuberant storytelling and wit are beautifully and unobtrusively grounded by psychological truth-telling: if alchemy and time provide the plot's dynamic, love – its poignant lack or nurturing presence – is the real theme, the golden thread running through the tale. Many of the dark characters have an unacknowledged, unassuaged wound: the Magus, whose mother died in childbirth and father '...sold him for a gold coin'; the son the Magus disowns; the fundamentally broken Wedge and Split. Mistress Split glimpses wholeness through her passion for Jack's loyal dog, Max, while Jack's loving mother remains his watchful guardian in the Magus' Dark House, a living talisman even when imprisoned in stone.

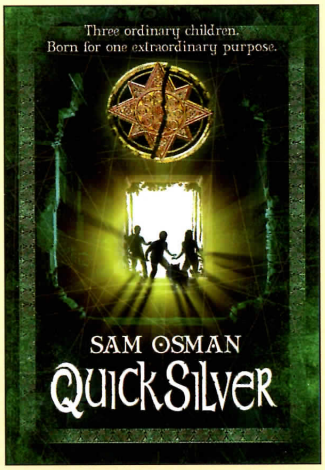
A marvellous book for both young and old readers – I look forward to the third in the series which is surely promised by the tantalising conclusion. **CH**

New Talent

Quicksilver

★★★

Sam Osman, Marion Lloyd Books, 448pp, 978 1 407105 73 4, £7.99 pbk



Ever since Alfred Watkins coined the term 'ley lines' in the 1920s and proposed that the lines connecting ancient sites are in fact old routes followed in prehistoric times for religious or trade reasons, there have been those who have attributed magical energies to leys which they maintain were understood by our ancestors but are now lost to us. In this, her first novel, Sam Osman draws upon these theories to create this engaging mystery adventure.

In **Quicksilver**, Thornham, once a prehistoric site and now a London suburb, has a ley line that runs through the sweetshop, home to Wolfie and his single parent mum, and on through the vicarage where refugee Zi'ib has been taken in. Another key line runs to the ivy covered house where American Tala now lives after her father disappeared. As well as all having green eyes with yellow flecks it transpires that the three children share a birthday (they are all 12), all three have an absent parent and – as they discover – they all have an ability to tune in to the mysterious forces that run along the ley lines. Is their destiny being controlled by these forces and is it for good or bad? Will they find their missing parents?

Osman sets a good pace with lots of cliffhangers in this story in which the trio start to use their unusual powers as they turn detective. It is peopled with stock characters (an amiable vicar, an eccentric historian, a French teacher straight from **'Allo, 'Allo!**) and has many agreeable moments of slapstick humour; its unpretentious style and straightforward narrative will carry young readers along as they get caught up in the fun. A welcome debut. **RS**

Leviathan

★★★

Scott Westerfeld, ill. Keith Thompson, Simon & Schuster, 448pp, 978 1 84738 519 2, £12.99 hbk

It is 1914, and Europe is on the verge of the First World War. But while the countries concerned remain the same, the conflict this time is between two factions straight out of science fiction. On the one hand there are the Darwinists, who have used their master's discovery of DNA to fabricate sometimes huge animal eco-systems that can function as air-ships, messengers with human speech or fighting forces of many varieties. These are opposed by the Clankers, who have put their faith in ever more ingenious machines, some of them enormous structures that can walk or fly while dropping bombs or firing cannons to deadly effect. In between there is 15-year-old Alek, the son of the assassinated Austrian Archduke and now hunted by both sides. There is also Deryn, a supremely gifted girl pilot of around the same age pretending to be a boy.

Most of this novel is made up of two parallel stories before Alek and Deryn finally get together and manage to evade their many enemies. For most of the time Westerfeld writes well, and as his many fans will attest he has indeed extraordinary powers of imagination. But even so fatigue eventually sets in. Deryn's oft-repeated insult 'bum-rag' soon becomes very tedious, and there is too much hearty shoulder clapping, particularly at the end of chapters. More seriously the author trivialises scenes of mass death on the battlefield. Deryn's efforts with her machine-gun 'spewing death in all directions' should surely not to be taken so lightly, but neither she nor Alek ever show much concern over other people's fate while treating their own as if it was all part of a good if dangerous game even when they are most threatened. Splendidly illustrated in swirling black and white by Keith Thompson, particularly effective in bringing some of the Darwinists' weirdest new species to light, there is a lot to entertain here, with two more instalments still to come. But good as it largely is, it could also have been so much better. **NT**

Energy Revolution: Climate change and our post-carbon future

NON-FICTION ★★★

Joseph Lacey and 'young people of the world', Evans/Peace Child International, 96pp, 978 0 237 53962 7, £9.99 pbk

The British edition of this obviously very international production has a foreword from Ed (David's smarter brother) Miliband. In it he perceptively says, 'On the issue of climate change more than any other, it is young people who will see the effects of action we take now.' And that's the jumping-off point for this multi-faceted assembly of ideas, facts and fancies about our carbon and post-carbon future. With a list of authors, editors, managers, coordinators and contributors long enough to cause Dorling Kindersley embarrassment, it presents, eventually, an intriguingly positive version of how we earthlings can turn the carbon cycle from vicious spiral to virtuous circle.

But this is no easy read, in fact it may not be designed to be conventionally read at all, being full of separate (but related) bits of information, theories, advice, questions and prophecies derived from many sources and churned until a sort of eco-butter results. And, of course, eco-buttermilk.

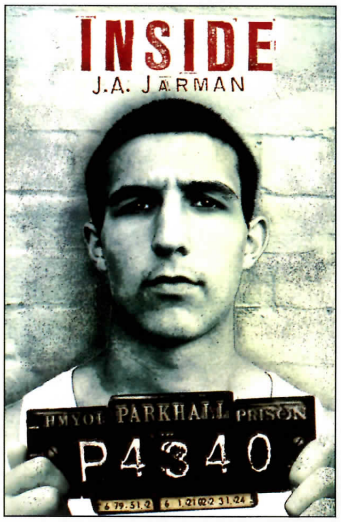
There's enough butter to spread over three *tranches*. First we huddle round the present problem – global warming. No place for sceptics here as with the help of **New Scientist**'s Fred Pearce (now there's a name I know) we pick up the basics of a warming world (every 'regular' American produces 20 tonnes of CO_2 per year).

Then we move to a postulated solution – a post-carbon future. Familiar features like solar power-towers and cookers (hey, my dad was using solar power to purify beeswax in 1947), geothermal coops and tidal turbines rub shoulders with 'smart' electric grids and the 'smart' meters that we'll all have by 2020 – allegedly, Shai Agassi's electric cars, and algal biofuel. The grisly vision of geo-engineering gets a brief look-in too.

And finally, folks, how do we do it? The meagreness of this *tranche* suggests we may not know yet. The *ignis fatuus* of carbon offsetting gets an airing but really it's down to international political and commercial cooperation and individual flexibility and restraint. Transition towns, solar cities and vegetable villages all have their part to play and the book ends envisaging today's carrot-mobsters as tomorrow's carbon-crunchers.

This book may not be designed for end-to-end reading and those who are weaned on screenformation may fare better than those not. Its real use is probably as a teacher/leader's discussion handbook. Me, I think I'll put the kettle on and light the fire. **TP**

14+ Secondary/Adult



Inside

★★★

J A Jarman, Andersen, 224pp,
978 1 84270 977 1, £5.99 pbk

In J K Rowling style, writer Julia Jarman has chosen to use her initials rather than her name for this book whose target group is likely to be teenage boys who like a bit of gritty realism. The story starts with 17-year-old Lee on his first day in a Young Offenders Institution for a crime he admits he *has* committed. He mugged and then burgled an old woman who is now afraid to leave her own home. His defence is that he needed money to pay back his mother's debts to the local loan shark. But his mother has had enough: her son's recent violence reminds her too much of her ex-husband and Lee's girlfriend seems unlikely to stick around. Only the community worker who 'dobbed him in', an ex-offender himself, seems likely to be of any support.

The YOI is no holiday camp. It is overcrowded with the constant threat of violence from the other offenders and an unhelpful and sometimes dangerous lack of attention from the officers. But this is a story of redemption and the reader waits to see if Lee is strong enough to make the choices that will change his life.

Although his interest in the education classes and his remorse at his crime might seem a bit obvious and glib, the story picks up momentum and the dilemmas Lee faces in this violent and uncertain environment make for a compelling read. **LK**

Paradise Red

★★★

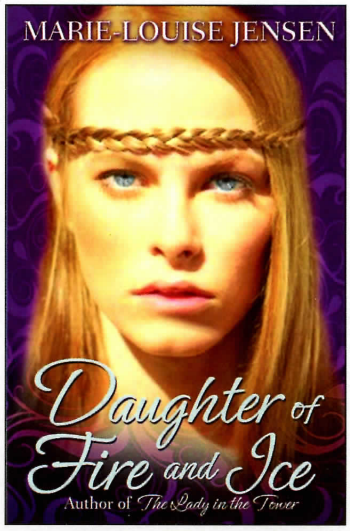
K M Grant, Quercus, 304pp,
978 1 84724 707 0, £9.99 hbk

In this the third book of her 'Perfect Fire' trilogy, K M Grant has written a much deeper and more powerful conclusion to her story of the fight of the Occitain people for their independence from France. Raimon and Yolanda have been forced apart and she has married Sir Hugh, who fights for the King, and Raimon believing her lost to him determines to recapture the Blue Flame which is the symbol of the Occitain people. He uses a Cathar refugee girl, Metta, to gain entrance to the castle at Montsegur where the White Wolf and the Cathars with the Blue Flame are awaiting the French army, together with Yolanda's brother whom he does not trust. The Blue Flame is rescued but meanwhile Yolanda who has been raped by her husband Hugh while drugged, bears him a son. Raimon vows to kill Hugh but in a tragic scene at the end of the story while two hundred Cathars burn in a square pyre built by the Inquisitors of the Catholic Church, the two men rescue Metta at the cost of Hugh's life. Raimon and Yolanda start their lives together with Hugh's son, with the Flame keeping the Occitain people together.

The book starts with a recap of what has gone before which is in fact quite confusing. I do not think many readers would come to this book without having read the other two. The unfamiliar historical background with its fight within the Catholic Church and the mystical nature of the Blue Flame and the people of the Occitain (around Carcassone) did not seem strange to me having read the other two books, both of which I reviewed in 2008.

This however is a darker tale altogether and will require some maturity to read and understand, particularly Yolanda's refusal to consummate her marriage to Hugh which is spelled out quite clearly. The rape scene although not graphically described at all, is not hidden from the reader, with its consequence for her and her relationship with Raimon, and Yolanda's attempt to abort the baby at six months is painful to read. The burning of the two hundred Cathars who had refused to take the way out given them by Sir Hugh is difficult to read. But this is a powerful and fitting conclusion to a story which was bound to end messily given what had gone before.

Minor points to raise, but an historical note telling the reader what did happen to the Occitain would have perhaps been comforting. A map would also have been useful. **JFi**



Daughter of Fire and Ice

★★★

Marie-Louise Jensen, Oxford, 336pp,
978 0 19 272881 4, £5.99 pbk

The tough and male-dominated world of the Vikings is the setting for Jensen's new novel. Having reviewed her previous story, **The Lady in the Tower**, it is interesting to follow her progress as a writer of historical novels for teens. This story has the real feel of place and time missing in the previous one and paints an authentic sounding picture of the harsh life of the Vikings.

Thora sees her father killed by Bjorn, the violent man who wants to marry her, and forced by circumstance falls in with her fellow captor's plans when he kills her suitor. Taking Bjorn's place this former slave seizes the Viking longship and some of its crew and sets sail for Iceland, a place Thora has dreamed of seeing. Her growing feelings for 'Bjorn' are dealt a blow when he marries Ragna ironically to free Thora from death and the ship sails on for Iceland and the crew found a settlement on the north coast of Iceland. Thora has the gift of second sight and foresees various events and 'auras' surrounding people giving her notice of their intentions and thus she saves the settlement from harm but Ragna is always vicious and jealous towards her, even trying to poison her. Inevitably the way is made clear for 'Bjorn' and Thora to look forward to a future together.

Thora is a healer as well as a visionary and some of the most interesting historical parts of the story describe her methods of healing, using plants. The harshness of the Viking life with its strict code of behaviour which makes Thora unable to show her feelings for 'Bjorn' who is married, and its faith in its various gods, is an integral part of the story making this a much more satisfactory read, reflecting the real growth of Jensen's writing and feel for the period about which she writes. **JFi**

Evermore

★

Alyson Noël, Macmillan, 384pp,
978 0 330 51285 5, £6.99 pbk

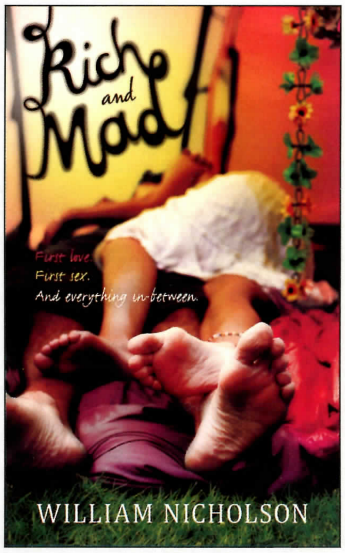
Macmillan have placed this book squarely in the highly lucrative teenage horror market – a heavily stylised dark matt cover with the title overlaid in silver script signals its contents in no uncertain terms. Add characters with names like Ever, Haven and Damen, spirits, psychics and immortals and the picture is resoundingly complete.

Ever survived a car crash in which her family were killed and which left her with psychic abilities and the constant companionship of the spirit of Riley, her dead younger sister. Ever is unable to cut herself off from the babble of people's thoughts and the intimate knowledge of their lives until she meets and falls in love with Damen, an immortal who she eventually discovers she has met repeatedly over several lifetimes.

Evermore would have benefited from a more ruthless editorial input. Its set pieces are often repetitive and still further repetition is provided by a chorus of minor characters explaining the significance of the action. On several occasions, the story fails to successfully walk the fine line between fantasy and incredulity, undermining reader confidence in the narrative.

The book is clearly intended to be a page-turner and there is little weight to its themes – missed opportunities abound. Characters are too often stereotypical and their dilemmas provoke few sympathies. The dialogue seems to accurately echo the language patterns of the American high school student: 'I'm totally cool with it. Pinky swear.' with its idiosyncrasies and irritants and rarely rises above this level to allow richer contemplation of characters and events.

Noël intends **Evermore** to be the first of six books in 'The Immortals' series with an additional series devoted to Riley. I have no doubt that there will be readers who will welcome this but I cannot help but feel concern at the paucity of such a literary diet. **VR**



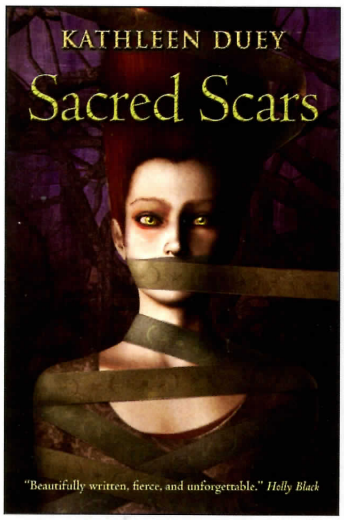
Rich and Mad

★★★★

William Nicholson, Egmont, 448pp,
978 1 4052 4739 9, £6.99 pbk

Rich Ross and Maddy 'Mad' Fisher – thus the title – are 17-year-old virgins at the same school in search of a first proper love affair. Both are intelligent, middle class and well read, and both

make an initially disastrous choice, with Mad falling for a boy who hardly realises she exists but who she mistakenly thinks loves her and Rich only having eyes for the heartless class vamp. First passion for both of them soon comes to mean first betrayal, but then they find each other. Their growing love and first experience of sex is described tenderly and with enough attention to detail to satisfy the curiosity of most teenage readers still on the verge of taking such a step themselves. Told mostly in dialogue, this is a sweet-natured story, respectful of sentiment but never straying into sentimentality. Set in modern times, it also has a slightly old fashioned air to it, with the teenage characters emailing each other, sometimes to ill effect, but otherwise unconcerned with the rest of the blogosphere that now plays such a large part in the lives of almost all of today's adolescents. Some good minor characters represent earthy cynicism, cleverly offsetting the main story when the general sense of rapture might threaten to become a bit too much. A sub-plot, involving the couple's strange, self-hating English teacher, is not so successful, and the one truly beautiful but bad girl in the story has an unconvincing predilection for being beaten up by her boy friend. But for readers happy with perhaps a just slightly idealised version of what they might hope will one day happen to them, this is the book. **NT**



Sacred Scars

★★★★

Kathleen Duey, Simon & Schuster, 560pp, 978 1 84738 244 3, £6.99 pbk

Sacred Scars is the second part of a trilogy entitled 'A Resurrection of Magic', the first of which, **Skin Hunger**, appeared in 2007. This second novel plunges us immediately into the Limori Academy, a truly horrific parody of an English public school located in a 'wormhole maze' of subterranean stone passages and chambers. There, young people are drafted to help preserve the magic contained in old songs which they must learn and recite in class on pain of punishment, despite the incomprehensible language used. The Academy is run by wizards and presided over by the evil Somiss, an arrogant and sadistic nobleman who wishes to revive the magic for his own selfish purposes.

Duey presents two parallel stories based in the Academy but set generations apart, and recounted in alternating chapters. The earlier story, written in the third person, concerns Sadima, a peasant girl whose ability to communicate with animals has apparently led to her entrapment in the Academy. The later story is a first-person narrative by 14-year-old Hahp, an unwanted second son deposited in the Academy by his merchant father. Hahp's story is mostly one of the daily grind in an oppressive institution, closer to Ivan Denisovich than Tom Brown, with mutual suspicion, secret communications and, eventually, covert resistance. Sadima's story starts in this milieu but changes momentum after she escapes from the Academy, ending up in a nightmare version of a mediaeval seaport 'stinking of rotting fruit and dead fish and sailors' piss'. There, Sadima discovers that she doesn't age and, after 'living nearly four lifetimes', could be approaching the time-period represented in Hahp's story.

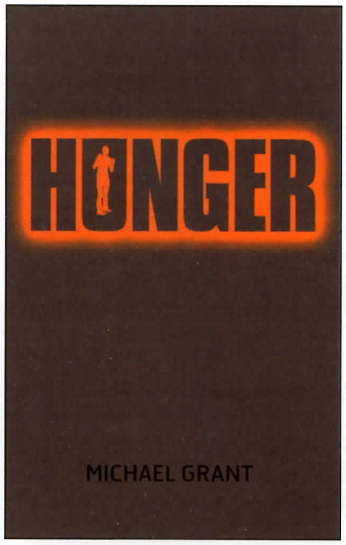
The book portrays a dark, grim world which is developed fully and convincingly. There is a stark reality to many of the descriptions, including the frequent use of words that are often asterisked out in periodicals. The split structure provides scope for a range of styles and issues and the development of parallels and contrasts. Hahp's story is essentially masculine, with persistent violence interspersed with questions of loyalty and trust-worthiness, in a situation where nothing is quite what it seems. Sadima's story is innately feminine, describing her love for various people and sad acceptance of apparently eternal life in some extremely moving passages. However, the fact that the two story lines constantly interrupt each other can be frustrating for the reader. Overall, despite the persistent harshness of its contents, **Sacred Scars** presents a positive view of the human spirit in adversity, and the trilogy seems to be moving towards reasserting a sense of fairness and rural tranquillity. Undoubtedly, the book is most suitable for older teenagers with strong constitutions. **RT**

Hunger

★★★★

Michael Grant, Egmont, 608pp, 978 1 4052 5152 5, £12.99 hbk

Hunger is a science-fiction fantasy and a sequel to **Gone**, of which one reviewer aptly remarked, 'If Stephen King had written **Lord of the Flies**, it might have been a little like this'. The setting is a small peninsula on the Californian coast, containing a town called Perdido Beach, a nearby residential school for the behaviourally challenged children of the rich, and (crucially) a nuclear power station. 15 years before the story begins, a small meteorite hit the power station and ploughed deep into the earth, carrying much uranium with it. Although the



accident has been (in every sense) covered up since then, the whole area has come to be known as Fallout Alley. Then everyone over 15 disappears in a single instant, and Fallout Alley is imprisoned by an impenetrable dome, admitting light and dark, but shutting off all contact with the outside world.

As if this were not enough, many of the children in both town and boarding school acquire diverse mutant powers, different for every individual, such as the ability to run at superhuman speed. These powers can be used for good or ill, and **Hunger** picks up the violent rivalries and conflicts that the situation generates. The 'hunger' of the title takes two forms. One is the simple famine that begins among the children as supplies run out. The other is the 'hunger' for radioactive sustenance of a monstrous alien organism buried deep in the earth, where the meteorite fell.

The paranormal powers and threats and dangers are the material of a Stephen King-like fantasy, while the struggles among the children themselves for power and leadership and order and survival, the pressures on skin-deep habits of civilized behaviour, do indeed recall **Lord of the Flies**. The leading character, Sam Temple, is in direct descent from Golding's Ralph, though Sam himself is one of those endowed with mutant powers.

Hunger, like its predecessor, is a fast-paced, over-the-top, ingenious, and highly readable fantasy which holds its many storylines together with great narrative panache and skill. It is a true page-turner, and there will be plenty more pages to turn. The next instalment is signalled in the sinister closing sentences of **Hunger**. Some disturbing episodes mark this off as strictly teenage reading, but the series will win plenty of enthusiasts in this age group. **PH**

We Were Young and at War

NON-FICTION ★★★

Sarah Wallis and Svetlana Palmer, Collins, 352pp, 978 0 00 727352 2, £18.99 hbk

Many young people kept diaries during the Second World War and some of these, discovered in some cases after their deaths, appear in this compilation. It makes for harrowing reading but could well change the emphasis of how the conflict is seen by young people in this country. Often it is seen as between the United Kingdom, Commonwealth, America and Germany whereas this book makes clear the awful consequences for most of Europe, especially the eastern states. In fact it is the rather banal letters between Brian Poole and his America penfriend Trudi, and the diary of David Hogan, another American, which show the contrast at its most stark. I think this is a pity as young people who were evacuated in the UK or interned in America also had harsh stories to relate, although not on the same scale as those from Stalingrad or Lodz.

However, the diary entries and letters home from both sides show all too clearly the hardship, the hunger and the sheer terror of this war. It is difficult to pick out one more than the others which touch the heart from Yura who was left to die in Leningrad because he was too weak to be taken to escape by his mother and sister, to Ina, killed as a partisan, to Dawid who died in Lodz of TB and hunger. These stories are counterbalanced somewhat by the words written by the young Germans, Herbert on the Eastern Front and Klaus who was drafted at 15 for the defence of Berlin, and Hachiro who became a suicide pilot right at the end of the War.

It seems to me that this will be a very useful resource book for students of history, and for teachers in particular. Young people who read it in its entirety, will find it a difficult, upsetting but ultimately rewarding read. There are photographs of the young people but no map which would have been very useful. There is no index, but a list of the published diaries, and a bibliography. **JFi**

BOOKS ALSO OF INTEREST TO OLDER READERS

Little Miss Muffet and other rhymes (see p.17)

Bram Stoker's Dracula (see p.19)

Umpteen Pockets: New and Collected Poems for Children (see p.21)

Cars: A pop-up book of automobiles (see p.22)

Energy Revolution: Climate change and our post-carbon future (see p.25)

Classics in Short

No.80 Brian Alderson

Not Rosemary Sutcliff's first book, but the first in her classic Roman sequence...

'That's not a sand-castle,'

said the busy child on the beach, 'I'm building a temple to Mithras.'

Thus Rosemary Sutcliff,

recounting an anecdote to a bevy of librarians to show her pleasure at finding so receptive an audience for **The Eagle of the Ninth** not long after it was published in 1954. In all probability the temple-builder's enthusiasm for the work came from hearing its famed serialisation on 'Children's Hour' but (perhaps unlike television serials) the wireless version sent listeners straight back to the book to get the author's full-dress narrative to go with the spoken one.

They were keen readers,

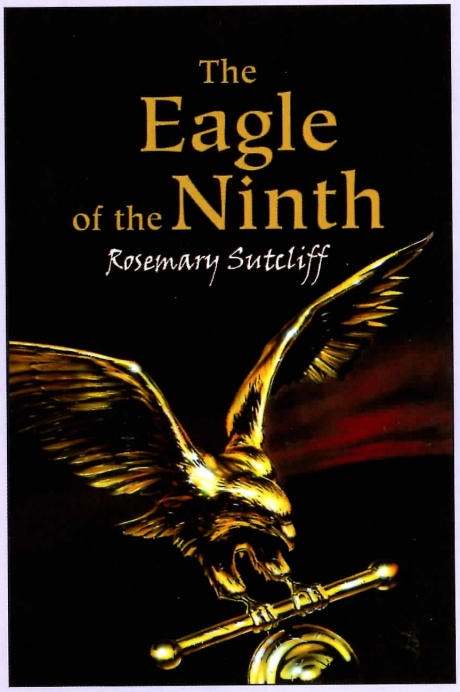
those librarians – our first critics, long before the academic brigades were mustered – and for them, at that time, the landing of **The Eagle of the Ninth** had something of the force of a revelation. True, it did not come from an entirely unknown author. Miss Sutcliff could be seen as one of the new post-war talents in the writing of children's books (several, like her, being fostered by John Bell and his editorial colleagues at the Oxford University Press) but of the five books with her name on them at that time only the most recent, **Simon** of 1953, suggested a voice suited to something beyond what she herself later referred to as her 'books for little girls... too cosy... too sweet...'

The Eagle of the Ninth

revealed how quickly that voice had matured and now, in retrospect, we can see that its development is closely related to her imaginative apprehension of a subject that was lying in wait for her: the matter of Roman Britain. Her five earlier historical stories had not come near that period, being set mostly in post-medieval times, but Rome had been implanted in her mind well before them. There had been what sounds like a rather frenzied youthful attempt at a novel: **Wild Sunrise**, a 'very bad... saga of the Roman invasion, as Victorian-English as anything out of Whyte-Melville's **The Gladiators**' and that, in turn, had been influenced by her mother's early reading to her of Kipling, 'especially the three magnificent Roman stories in **Puck of Pook's Hill**'.

Those were not separate tales,

but rather three episodes in the career of a British-born legionary who is sent from Sussex to help defend the Wall. It is no longer



Rome's hey-day in England, but the time when the Empire is crumbling at the edges – the 'decline' adumbrated in the first two volumes of Gibbon – and what Sutcliff found there was a complex of subjects of great dramatic potential: civilising discipline set against tribal barbarities, the servants of Empire with an allegiance also to a homeland within its borders, the selfless devotion, on either side of the equation, to causes and to overarching human relationships (and even those between man and beast).

It looks as though

the realisation of this potential almost forced Sutcliff to find a match for it through her storytelling. For the tremendous adventure of **The Eagle of the Ninth**, which sees Marcus, a lamed hero, and his companion, the freed slave Esca, journey from Sussex to the Pictish lands beyond the Wall, has an emotional density that cannot be denied. The wide-ranging geography of the book, the diverse characters who people it, are delineated with an unhurried confidence which gives substance to its episodic plotting (and even – a Sutcliffian hallmark – its happy coincidences), all building towards its Romantic denouement. Even now, I find it a 'gulp book' for its admission of untainted chivalry – the manumission of Esca, say – and its resolution of taut moments of crisis – the return of Cub, the wolf-dog and the ensuing discomfiture of the Tribune Placidus.

Decline and fall

was too resonant a subject to be encompassed by a single story and **The Eagle of the Ninth** was the begetter of a chronological sequence that would carry the reader through centuries of warfare in disintegrating Roman Britain towards a kind of resolution four books later in **Dawn Wind**. (One of those four is the substantial novel for adults that seeks to establish an historic Arthur: **Sword at Sunset**.) The sequence is given continuity through the presence throughout of descendants of the **Eagle**'s Marcus and the flawed emerald ring that he inherits from his father, and it confirms that Sutcliff's narrative technique deployed in the first book proved more than dependable in the making of its successors. Dramatic construction, the significance of landscape, a workable solution to the patterning of ancient speech, and, above all, an unflinching recognition of the disasters of war sustain the credibility of the saga. (John Terraine, the eminent military historian, claimed that Sutcliff – crippled from childhood by Still's Disease – had a more refined concept of what it was to be a fighting soldier than most of the specialists in the field.)

We are soon to hear more

of these affairs, for a movie version of **Eagle** is on its way and Sutcliff's original publishers are to bring out what they call 'a bumper volume' containing the first three stories of the sequence. It's understandable that they do not take on **Sword at Sunset** but not that they omit **Dawn Wind**, and — looking over the chequered history of all these texts at their hands — I find it sad that they will yet again ignore the illustrations of Walter Hodges for **Eagle** and of Charles Keeping, whose work on the later books startled those old librarians and stands now as a notable part of his own outstanding *oeuvre*. ■

I have relied for some details in the above on Rosemary Sutcliff's classic memoir of her early life: **Blue Remembered Hills: a recollection** (1983).

The cover illustration is taken from the 2004 Oxford University Press edition (978 0 19 275392 2, £6.99 pbk).

The Eagle of the Ninth Chronicles (including **The Eagle of the Ninth**, **The Silver Branch** and **The Lantern Bearers**) will be published in June 2010, and a film tie-in edition of **The Eagle of the Ninth** is planned for the autumn to coincide with the release of the film.

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