

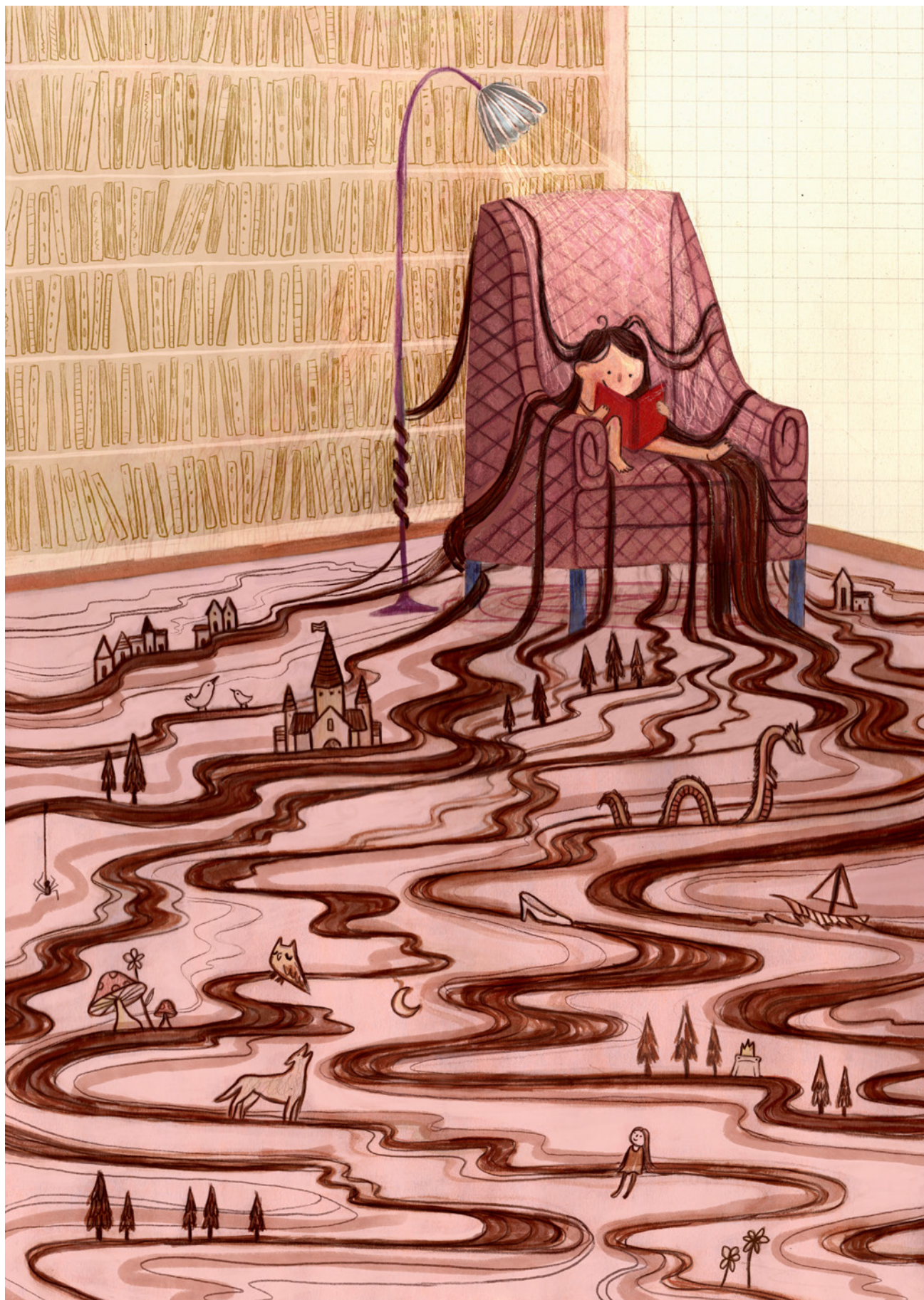
# Weaving Tales

VOLUME 03

2024-2025



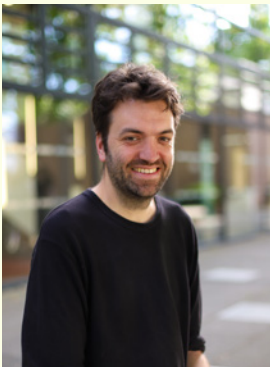




**A Wonderful Story**  
by Ana María Ardila



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# Letters from The Editors

Welcome to Spinning Gold Volume 3: Weaving Tales. This journal showcases work from students and alumni across the three streams that make up the MA Children’s Literature programme at Goldsmiths, University of London. Illustrators, creative writers and researchers from the Theory and Criticism pathway have all contributed work, and I want to express my gratitude and admiration to them for their skill and dedication. Creativity is woven into every page of this collection, as is the spirit of collaboration.

I would also like to thank all of the interviewees who are featured in this edition of Spinning Gold. Joseph Coelho, Chris Haughton, Jenny Downham and Ticiele de Camargo have all been very generous with their time and their insights and we feel privileged to be able to bring you our conversations with them. An extra special thanks goes to Professor Michael Rosen for his role in the fundraising event which has made printing this journal possible. The same applies to course leaders Professor Vicky Macleroy, Dr Emily Corbett and Bruce Ingman. Thank you for your trust, support and enthusiasm.

This journal would not exist today were it not for the devotion shown by its previous editors, Maria Jarero, Adriana Ryn and Jenny Barker. Special thanks also goes to Global Online Adaptable Learning (GOAL) for their continued support, sponsoring the printing of Spinning Gold for a third straight year.

Lastly, I pay tribute to the fantastic editorial team for Spinning Gold 3. You have all gone above and beyond to make this an edition that the whole programme can be proud of. This journal is a celebration of the past, present and future of children’s literature, as well as the extraordinary levels of creativity and talent in the MA Children’s Literature programme at Goldsmiths. We really hope you enjoy reading it as much as we have enjoyed creating it.

**Maxwell Ward**

Putting together the third volume of Spinning Gold has been an incredible experience, made possible by the talented editorial team and the generous support of the Children’s Literature Department at Goldsmiths. From the beginning, the journal has aimed to foster collaboration across the various MA pathways, and this year’s students have truly embraced that spirit. Their work reflects both a strong commitment to learning and a vibrant culture of creative exchange developed during their time at Goldsmiths. We hope you enjoy reading it!

**Deepti Ganesh**





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**Cover design and illustration** by Sharon Leman

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**Spinning Gold logo** by Irem Sencok for the inaugural issue







**Goldsmiths**  
by Victoria Bganba



# The Mud Monster of Kensington Gardens

by Kimberly Bayliss

*A picture book text for 3 to 7-year-olds*

Next to the horse statue,  
along the main path  
The Mud Monster lurked  
with mud-spattered wrath

His eyes were auburn,  
and his fangs were white  
He was a big boggy mess!  
What a TERRIBLE sight!

The school children screamed  
as they ran right on past  
When park runners saw him,  
they'd sprint extra fast

"If he gets you," some warned,  
"He'll tear you to shreds!"  
Anyone who saw him had  
feelings of DREAD

He was a massive muddy mammoth,  
and, oh, did he drool!  
A BLOOD-THIRSTY BEAST!  
A HIDEOUS GHOUL!

Then along skipped sweet  
Dan carrying a big stick  
When the monster ran  
at him frightfully quick!

"EEEEKKK!" Dan wailed as  
he dashed for the trees  
But the monster caught up  
and he fell to his knees

Dan froze on the grass,  
lying still, playing dead  
The monster above him;  
his eyes now BLOOD RED

Then flashes of lightning  
and thunder clouds roared  
The heavens they opened;  
it rained, and it poured

Dan opened one eye but  
what he saw was NOT scary  
The mud had washed off and  
this monster was ... hairy?!

What was this foul creature  
always lurking in the bog?  
Was he really a monster ...  
or was he simply a dog?

It was Mifflin the Golden  
who just loved being muddy!  
He gave Dan a kiss and  
now was his buddy!

He then stole Dan's stick;  
that's what he was after  
And Dan chased Mifflin  
with barking and laughter

No need to be scared of  
this pup in his puddle  
But please watch out for ...  
a big MUDDY cuddle!



**Nyoman Can Cook**  
by Sharon Leman





# Purple Rain

by Lisette Lynda-Rose Alexander

Madiba stood before the cracked mirror in her tiny flat, her fingers lightly tracing the vivid outline of the purple stain on her inner right thigh, just above the knee. Her skin, a warm caramel, made the stain stand out even more—the patch of dark violet that had stubbornly refused to fade since that day. The day everything changed.

The Revolt had been a protest, but not just any protest. It was the moment when the people of South Africa—native South Africans, not the colonisers, not the tourists, not even those who had recently come to the country—stood up against the oppressive apartheid regime in a way that could no longer be ignored. It was on October 2, 1989, the year that marked the twenty-seventh year since Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island, that thousands of aboriginal South Africans, from all corners of the country, had gathered, fuelled by years of mistreatment, injustice and humiliation. The memory of that day, the Purple Rain Revolt, was seared into her mind, as ineffaceable as the stain on her thigh.

She hadn't been planning to join though, she wasn't an activist. Her complexion had afforded her some rights – she had been classified at birth, not as Bantu, but as coloured. As a Bantu, you had no rights: no right to vote, little access to education and access to only the most menial of jobs. Any land a Bantu family owned was confiscated a little over 39 years ago by order of the National Party – the NP. Most importantly, a Bantu had to carry passes to enter the colonisers territories. However, as a coloured, Madiba went to a much better school, had higher quality housing, did not have to carry her identification papers at all times, and through the kindness of the NP, should she want to marry, she could marry another coloured with lighter skin. However, a coloured could not vote or own land. A coloured must wear a badge to enter into designated white areas.

That day, she hadn't been planning to join. She wasn't an activist. But the streets had been alive with the sound of her people rising, the cries for freedom thundering through every corner of the city. The pull was too strong. The desire, overwhelming. The surge of power, and the sense of unity, swept her up in a cross sea and carried her forward in its powerful rip current. It wasn't just a protest. It was a mighty roar from the soul of a nation. That was how Madiba found herself among the thousands marching through Cape Town, her voice blending with the others, and her feet pounding the pavement in unison with the rhythm and the beat of revolution.

But soon came the water cannons. Purple water.

It blasted into the crowd, dousing them, tattooing them. The police had fired it indiscriminately. Nevertheless, it was the Bantu and the coloureds that they wanted—those whose very existence was a challenge to apartheid. Madiba could still feel the sting of the cold liquid, how it soaked through her dress, staining her skin. She hadn't run fast enough. She could still hear the chaos as people scattered amidst the piercing cries of fear and defiance. The moist air reeked of smoke, sweat, and desperation. Her heart pumped with fear and despondency.

It wasn't until several days later that the real fear began. People who had been stained by the purple water—like her—started disappearing. At first, it had been whispers, stories told in muted tones about protesters who had been there, in Cape Town, challenging the NPs authority, on Monday, October 2nd - vanishing without a trace. Some speculated that they had fallen victim to van Schoor<sup>1</sup> or one of the NPs many other assassins that cloaked themselves in police or military uniforms. Then the stories became progressively darker, more chilling. The missing became bodies that appeared in random locations across the city.

Madiba sat down heavily on the edge of her bed, rubbing her thigh absently. She couldn't shake the image of the first body they found—Tshepo. He had been a university student, young and idealistic. His voice was one of the loudest during the protest. His body had been discovered four days later, disposed of in a ditch on the outskirts of the city. He'd been stripped down to his underwear, his deep, earth coloured skin still stained purple, but his face... it was as though someone had tried to erase his identity. To erase him. Tshepo. Bruises, cuts, and burns marred the landscape of his once-smiling face, his body was a mixture of adipose and crimson.

Tshepo wasn't the last. Bodies began appearing in fields, alleys, even the sea. They all bore that unmistakable purple stain on their skin. Sometimes the bodies were misshapen or missing an arm, a leg, or a head. Sometimes they remained untouched, but always marked with the same purple hue, as though the dye was a warning: a death sentence they couldn't escape.

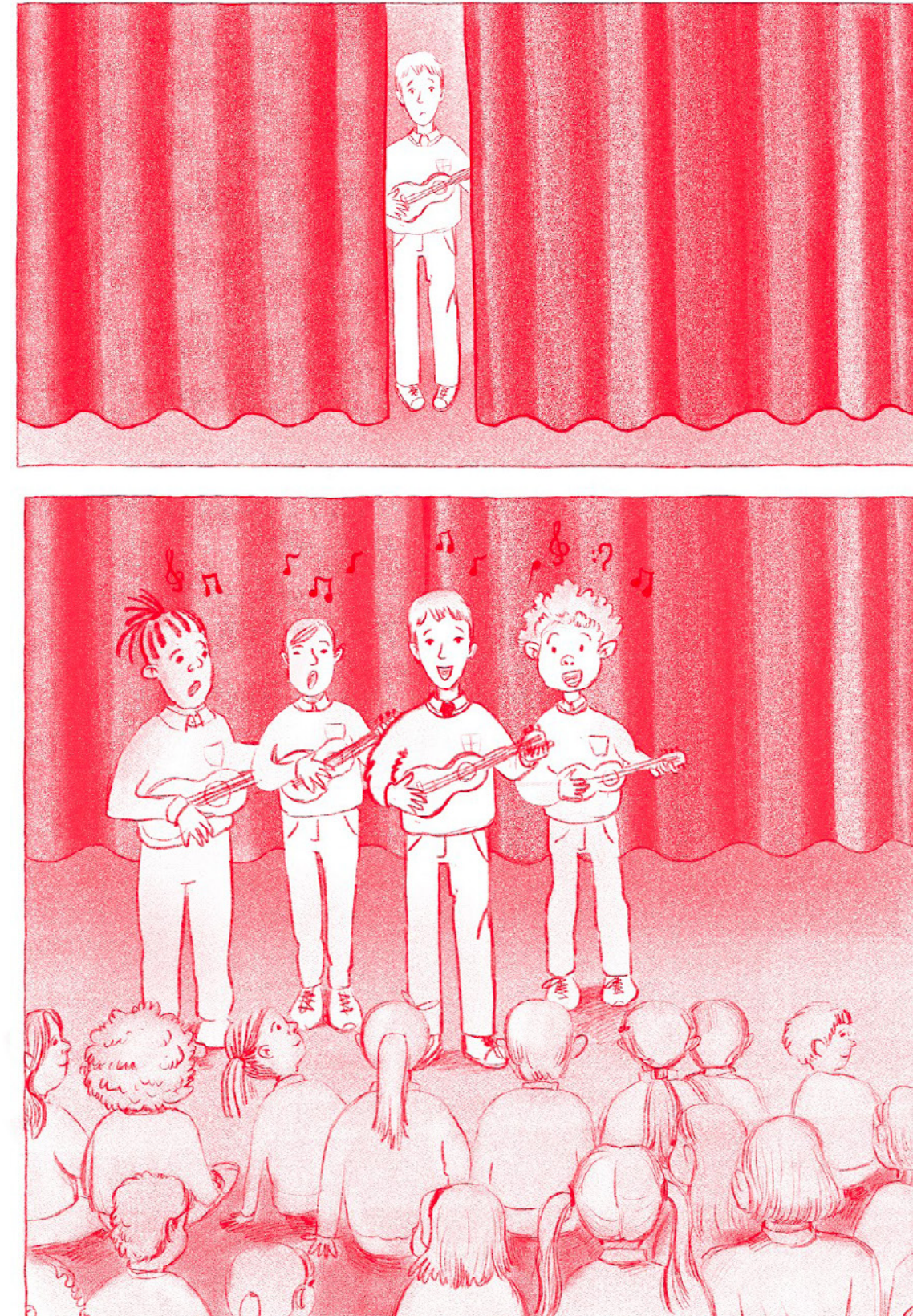
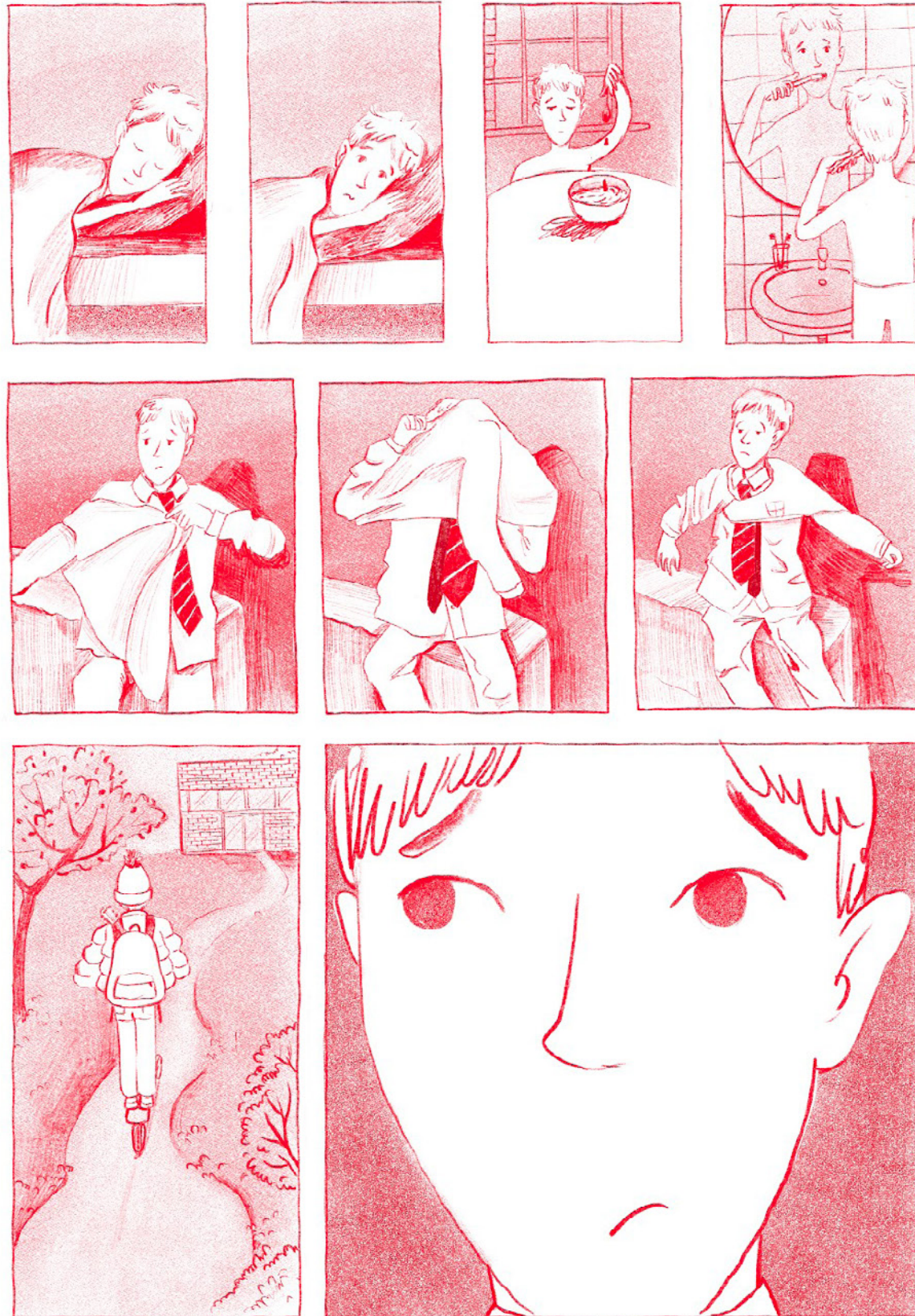
The police claimed ignorance, of course. They said it was likely gang violence, that the “so-called” activists were engaging in criminal activity. But Madiba knew better. Everyone who had marched knew better. This wasn't gangs. This was a silencing, a terrifying reminder that the apartheid regime still had claws, and those claws could reach into the very heart of anyone who dared to resist.

Madiba shuddered, pulling her dress lower over her legs, trying to hide the mark even from herself. She hadn't disappeared, not yet. But she knew it was only a matter of time. She could feel it. Sense it. There was something in the air now, something sinister that clung to those who had been stained by the water.

<sup>1</sup> Sybrand Jacobus Lodewikus van Schoor – apartheid assassin who died in July 2024 (BBC Sounds, 2024)



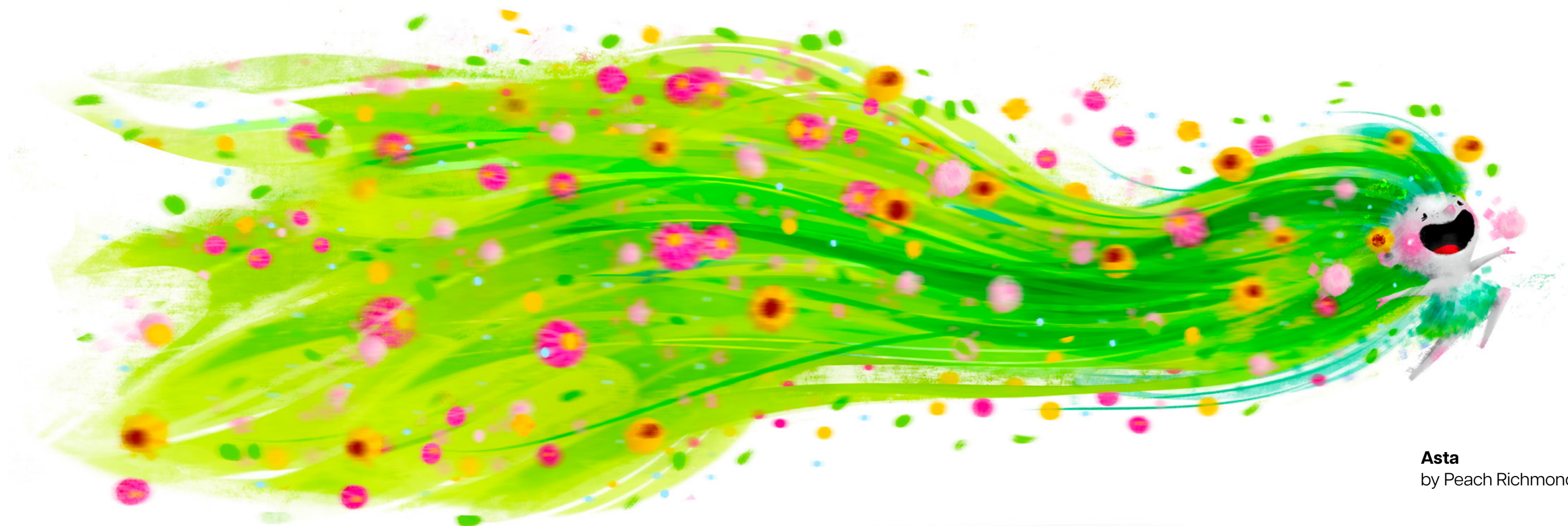




**Behind the Curtains**  
by Victoria Bganba







**Asta**  
by Peach Richmond

## My New Bestie

by Loof

My new bestie,  
Not a beastie  
Hugging tight  
In a fright  
Don't be afraid,  
And nor will I  
As you cling closely  
To the twig so high,  
I move silently,  
To get near  
Only a photo,  
Do not fear  
As I move  
So do you,  
sliding round,  
Out of view.

How do you do it  
So fierce and proud  
No seen movement,  
No heard sound,  
But as I turn,  
So do you,  
We dance the tango,  
Quick one, two,  
I thank our God,  
And nature too  
For allowing me  
to capture you.  
And this is the way  
That it should be,  
Captured on film,  
But forever free.

## Topless Towers of Londinium

by Loof

Sights and smells  
Different bells  
Blue flower  
Elizabeth Tower  
Green bike  
Spotted pike  
Tourists clutter  
Pigeons flutter  
Overflowing pub  
Off street grub  
Fish and chips  
River trips  
No room for thought  
Or I'm caught

Cross flow  
Too slow  
Walkers talk  
Talkers walk  
Distant planes  
Rumbling trains  
Double decker  
Step trekker  
Golden eye  
Burning sky  
Power wields  
No more fields.

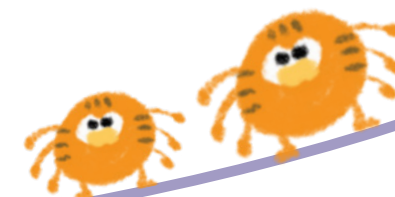






Photo by Faeze Afsharnia

## An Evening with Professor Michael Rosen: Exploring the World of Children's Literature: An Overview by Kimberly Bayliss

We're going to a Michael Rosen talk.  
We're going to hear his story.  
What a beautiful eve!  
We're not scared.

Chitty chatter, chitty chatter...



Organised by the Spinning Gold team as a fundraiser for the journal, esteemed children's author and professor, Michael Rosen, took the time to answer questions from Spinning Gold and the audience. The event took place on April 30th from 6-8pm in the Professor Stuart Hall Building and was a sell-out event with 250 tickets reserved. The evening began with a welcome by Professor Vicky Macleroy, followed by an introduction by Spinning Gold Non-Fiction Editor, Sophie O'Connor. The main interview was conducted by Spinning Gold Managing Editor, Deepti Ganesh.

Michael Rosen began by talking about his life as an academic and his research. He mentioned his time at the University of North London (now London Metropolitan University) where he completed a PhD in 1997. The PhD involved writing a series of poems for children, which was eventually published as *You Wait Till I'm Older Than You!* by Puffin. The PhD itself was also published as *The Author: Towards a Marxist Approach to Authorship*, where Michael examined how he came about writing that collection of poems. He also mentioned his brief time as a visiting professor at Birkbeck and how he helped devise the wonderful MA Children's Literature programme at Goldsmiths, alongside Clare Kelly and Maggie Pitfield.

Michael went onto discuss his main areas of research, which include narratology (how we write stories) and reader response (how readers create meaning). To explain these, Michael used his book, *The Incredible Adventures of Gaston le Dog*. He described how the narration was of course "from the point of view of 'le Dog'" and the reader response was however the child reader synthesised what they saw in front of them. He also highlighted the vital role of the illustrator who must make his or her own interpretations to create the images that work alongside the text. When it comes to Michael's input for any illustrations that accompany his books, he noted how he just "leaves them to it" so the illustrator can create their own unique meaning.

Michael also explored storytelling and experimenting with how to make a story believable. He referenced his YouTube video, 'RATS – TRUE or FALSE?', where he described a man on platform 5 at New Cross Gate station stabbing a rat with a fork and roasting it over a tin can while commuters watched him with shock and dismay. While the content of the story may seem rather unlikely, the way Michael told it leaves the viewer wondering – Did it really happen? Did the man actually eat the rat?

Michael then explained how literature should be accessible to everyone. He stated,

**"There's a whole world of literature that belongs to all of us"**

and described how he firmly believes that no one needs prior knowledge of something in order to read and enjoy a book. This belief got him thinking about how he can make classic literature more available for children. In his book, *Michael Rosen's Pocket Shakespeare: A Beginner's Guide to the Best Bits of the Bard*, for example, Michael included a glossary at the back to explain various words or references that kids (or adults) may be unfamiliar with – thus arming his readers with this added information right at their fingertips.

When Deepti asked Michael what the future of Children's Literature research looks like, Michael insisted that we "have to fight for it"! He highlighted how some universities have lost their Children's Literature programmes altogether due to various issues – one of which he described as the tensions that sadly exist between the adult and Children's Literature departments. Michael stressed the importance of straddling Children's Literature between the English Literature department and the Education department, as teachers are the ones who introduce children to the world of books.

A member of the audience asked about how to deal with writer's block. Michael's tip was to put whatever you're working on aside and write something else completely. He described how he is often working on many projects in one given period so if he gets stuck on one, he simply moves onto another project and comes back to the other later. Other tips included listening to music and reading poems to help reset your way of thinking.



In terms of his creative process, Michael shared that his stories tend to start with a trigger – maybe something he overheard or remembered from his youth. As an example of coming up with a story idea from a memory, he talked about how he was made to take a nap as a child by his teacher, but how the bed was wildly uncomfortable, and the blanket was “hairy”! He explained he could use the hairy blanket as a starting point, applying the voice of the teacher who made him sleep on the uncomfortable bed to tell the story. He also shared that Gaston le Dog started out as a story he told his once three-year-old son at bedtime. The story Michael created ultimately fed his son’s desires, so if his son wanted to go to the beach, then le Dog went to the beach, and the story grew from there.

When an elementary school teacher asked Michael about how to prioritise poetry at her school, he recommended “creating a culture of poetry”. He proposed pinning up poems around the walls, organising poetry slams with the teachers as MCs, and encouraging poetry notebooks. He also suggested letting poetry speak with other artforms, such as dance, music, and pottery. He used Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel as an example – joking that it was made with a “with a very long paintbrush” – and was an interpretation of the book of Genesis. Michael also pointed out his “Kids’ Poems and Stories with Michael Rosen”<sup>2</sup> YouTube channel where he performs his poems online.

Lastly, Michael was asked which book of his was his favourite to write. He said the most enjoyable book he ever wrote was *The Wicked Tricks of Till Owlyglass*, which is based on the famous German folklore character, Till Eulenspiegel, first told in 1510. Michael enjoyed the stories as a kid and wanted to make them available to English children. His version follows two young brothers visiting Germany who are sent to a man called Horst who tells them the

stories of the infamous German trickster, Till Owlyglass. Till Owlyglass travelled from village to village, playing pranks, deceiving people out of money, and narrowly escaping his own hanging by tricking his captors into letting him go. My own personal favourite was the ‘Ninth Day’ when Till Owlyglass deceived Count Limburg out of his money with a series of hilarious, clever bets (that I won’t spoil for you here)! You can even listen to Michael read these tales aloud on his YouTube channel<sup>3</sup>.

At the end of event, Spinning Gold’s Editor in Chief, Maxwell Ward, presented the ‘Rosen Raffle’ winners who received a fantastic range of prizes. Most of these prizes were also available to purchase to raise funds for the Spinning Gold journal. These included block-printed bookmarks, postcards, and tote bags – expertly hand-crafted by Spinning Gold team members, Pippa Cox and Eve Liberman.

A special thanks goes out to Professor Michael Rosen for taking the time to speak to all of us at Goldsmiths, to Professor Vicky Macleroy and Dr. Emily Corbett for their help and support in arranging the event, to the Word Bookshop on New Cross Road for setting up a makeshift Michael Rosen bookshop, and to the entire Spinning Gold team for organising the event and volunteering their time to make the evening a remarkable success.

Be sure to check out Michael Rosen’s official website<sup>4</sup> for further information about Michael Rosen, his books, videos, and upcoming events.

Links:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pGWl00QcV4>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/MichaelRosenOfficial>

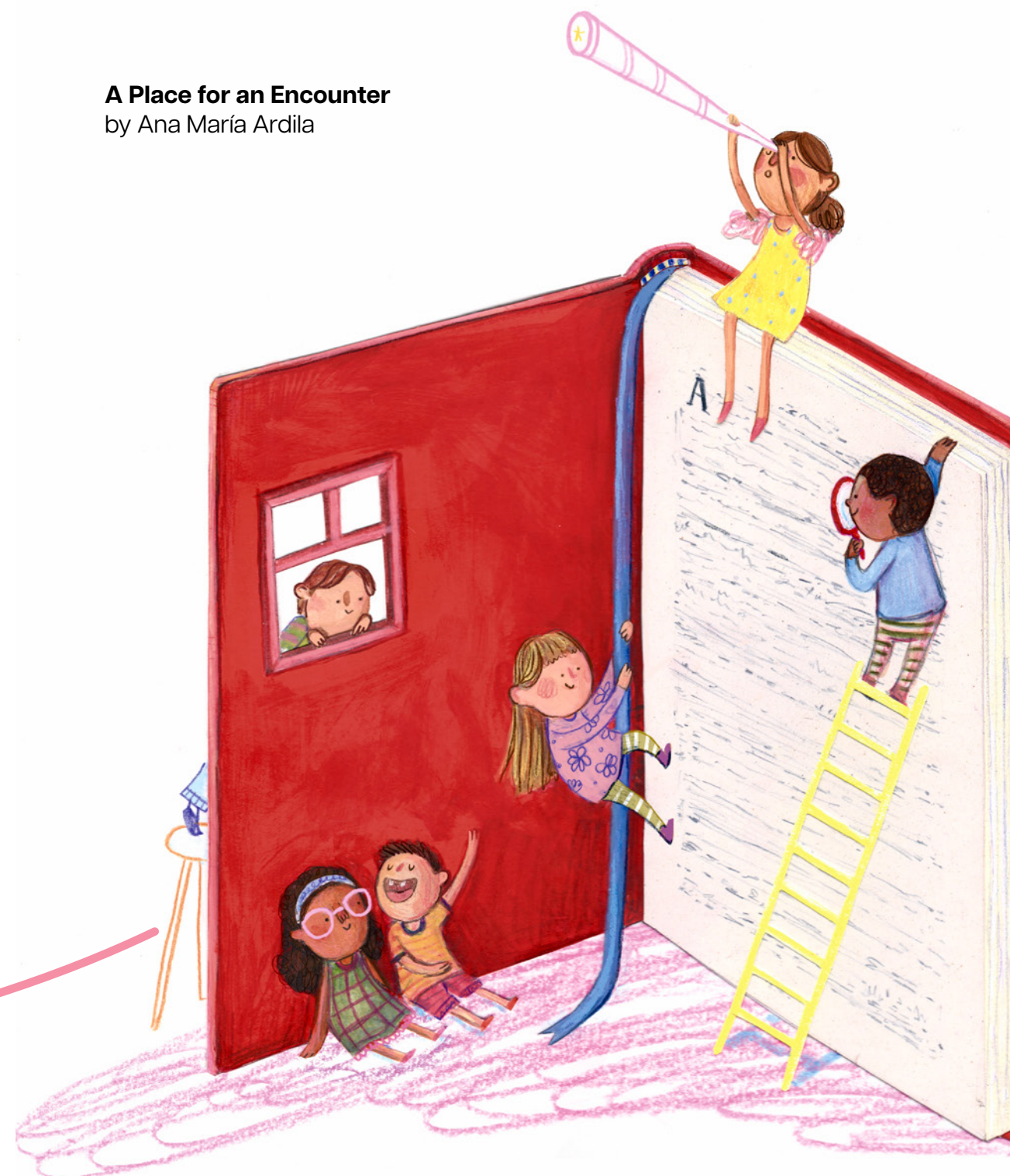
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csy4inhvn6k>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.michaelrosen.co.uk/>



## A Place for an Encounter

by Ana María Ardila







**The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse**  
**(Indonesian Retelling)**  
by Sharon Leman





# Those Gods Bore Hungry: Chapter One

by Daniel Newton

“Dylan, hurry up!

“I’m coming!”

To hurry Dylan is as hopeless a task as any, and everyone in Muscovy House knows it. Thea, of all the inhabitants, is not the most hopeful or the most foolish, however she is the only one who can’t seem to help herself trying.

“You’re going to be late!”

Dylan is always late. This is not so much a character flaw or an indication of distractibility, but a certainty akin to the rising and setting of the sun. Dylan is always, in fact, exactly seven minutes late, and has been since birth.

Certain adaptations had occasionally been made throughout his life to account for this peculiarity. Thea has learnt that schools, however, are generally fond neither of peculiarities nor adaptations, and therefore finds herself trying day by day to fight something which simply cannot be fought.

No matter how many times he is urged to hurry, or how hard he tries to do so, Dylan will arrive at school at 8:37 and not a second sooner. If school were to start at 8:37 then he would be there at 8:44, if it were 8:44 then 8:51, 8:51 then 8:58, ad infinitum.

The alternative to arriving seven minutes late was simply not arriving at all, be it through some catastrophic disaster or threat to Dylan’s life. To miss his deadline is to open the door to misfortune and be left at its mercy.

Torn as they are between tardiness or tragedy, Dylan rushes, and Thea rushes him, as though he might one day arrive on time. The seven minutes remain, despite their best efforts, as non-negotiable as the beating of Dylan’s heart and the deep brown of his eyes.

And school, being school, provides a non-negotiable late mark on the register, leaving Dylan with the worst attendance in the student body and quite possibly the entire country.

Thea, though, is somewhat more sympathetic to his struggle than the British education system.

“What was it this time?”

“I got toothpaste on my shirt.”

Thea probably should have guessed.

Toothpaste on the shirt was such a common occurrence that the first one in the bathroom every morning had taken to applying the toothpaste to Dylan’s brush and laying it on the counter to save him the peril of squeezing the tube. This was kind and helpful logic,

however curses are neither kind, nor helpful, nor logical.

If it was a toothpaste on the shirt kind of a day, the toothpaste would find its inevitable way to the shirt no matter how scenic a route it had to take. If it was a missed alarm kind of a day, the alarm would be missed no matter how loud or how long it rang. If it was a burnt toast, off milk kind of a day, the toast would burn and the milk would spoil, and if it was a cat in the tree kind of a day, the cat would get stuck in the tree no matter how many times the tree had been climbed before.

The shirt had to be changed, the alarm would be missed, the breakfast remade, the cat rescued, and Dylan would be seven minutes late for school, without fail or hope for recourse.

This kind of a curse is not tremendously uncommon, but in the children’s home at Muscovy House it is as dull and ordinary as the worn out doormat or the crack in the bathroom tiles.

“Were there clean shirts?”

“There were last night,” Dylan says, sounding far too forlorn for a boy who found a clean shirt when he needed one.

“And this morning?”

“Apparently I dropped a pen on my laundry. And apparently that pen was tired of being a pen.”

“Understandable. It leaked?”

“Exploded.”

“Unfortunate.”

“As ever.”

“Anything salvageable?”

“Provided you’re willing to dye them all royal blue, absolutely.”

“I am not particularly willing.”

“Then no.”

“C’est la vie.”

“So it goes.”

To the untrained ear or the uncursed heart, many of the conversations within the walls of Muscovy House would sound almost unbearable in their despondency. To those familiar with curses and those who live with them, however, this performative melancholy is identifiable rather as the healthy airing of lifelong grievances that allow the afflicted to continue merrily with their day.

To complain about a curse is to reduce it to an annoyance rather than allow it to become a tragedy. This is a concept Thea champions, but does not practise.

In a house full of annoyances her curse is the unspoken tragedy. She does not complain, she does not joke, and day by day it festers silently beneath the skin, as curses are wont to do.



Unlike some of the other inhabitants of Muscovy house, Thea had not grown up around curses, but had grown into them. Her own curse found her four years ago, shortly after her fourteenth birthday. By her fifteenth birthday she had moved into Muscovy House, and three short months ago at the age of eighteen she took over as the primary caretaker of the houseful of cursed children. This was in fact alone, as on paper her role was Trainee Assistant Care Worker, and she reported to two senior care workers and a house manager. Those titles, however, were titles without fact, and Thea could often find herself the closest thing to a responsible adult within the property for days or weeks at a time.

Which is what left her in charge of such tasks as trying to deliver a boy to school on time who, since the very day he was born, could simply not be delivered on time.

Thea checks her watch. They are, of course, running late.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Yes,” Dylan nods. “Just have to grab my bag. And find my shoes. And—I think my maths homework got flushed down the toilet last night, by the way, can you write me a note? And—”

Dylan cuts himself off before Thea has to bother. He rescinds his nod with a shake of his head.

“No. I’m not ready.”

“That’s okay,” Thea says, endless patience only for the children in this house and not a single person living anywhere outside of its walls. “Find your shoes. I’ll write you a note. Then we go, okay?”

“Okay.”

Dylan runs off as if the success of his hunt will have anything to do with his enthusiasm towards it. He rarely lacks enthusiasm, yet he never arrives at school on time.

Thea can hear him tearing the house apart looking for his shoes while she pens out yet another meticulous note. *Dear Mrs. Underhill, Dylan completed his maths homework last night under my supervision, however...*

Another day, another useless note, another late mark on the register, another detention, another six more years of school. Unless, of course, he manages to get himself kicked out before then.

Thea sighs and signs the note. Right now she just needs to get Dylan to school, a perfect seven minutes late.

It’s not hard to locate him. Thea simply follows the familiar sounds of havoc into the hallway, where Dylan is frantically digging through the cabinet. Just as Thea is tucking the note deep into Dylan’s bag (chances of arriving at school safely, approximately 20%), she’s saved by Saffie trudging down the stairs with her scruffy backpack slung haphazardly over her shoulder and scuffed black school shoes held triumphantly in hand.

“Looking for these, squirt?”

Dylan dashes over to snag them from her hand and gives her a split-second half-hug while he’s there.

“Thank you, thank you!”

Saffie shoves him off of her with only a fraction of the agitation she is capable of, which for her passes as profound affection.

“Where were they?” Thea asks, more from morbid curiosity than any delusion of preventing future instances of missing shoes.

“One in the agapanthus, the other hanging out of Maddox’s window.”

“And they got there how, exactly?”

Saffie manages to make her shrug look almost painfully noncommittal in a way Thea has found only fifteen-year-olds can accomplish.

“Of course.”

Thea doesn’t bother asking why Saffie didn’t leave twenty minutes ago with the rest of the children not destined to be perpetually late, and she would never begrudge her a lie-in. She has deep bags under her eyes and a weariness more pronounced than other girls her age.

Saffie allows Thea to pass her her coat, which means she must’ve had a worse night than usual.

“Did you sleep at all?”

“A little.”

“You can stay home.”

“Got an exam.”

“All the more reason.”

“It’s fine, Thea,” Saffie’s eye rolls have lost their power through exposure, now little more than punctuation. “Not my first rodeo.”

Thea takes her in. It’s true, she doesn’t look any more tired than usual, but that’s rarely comforting. Thea can’t remember the last time she felt half as tired as Saffie looks on a daily basis, and can only imagine how the accumulated sleepless nights must affect her.

“Are you sure?”

“Let’s just go.”

Saffie crosses her arms—conversation over—and Dylan shuffles anxiously towards the door.

“Alright, fine,” Thea throws back an eye roll of her own, which never gained power in the first place due to lack of practice and lacks heat because Saffie is right. They should go. They’re late.

Thea rushes towards the door with Dylan scurrying at her heel and Saffie lingering somewhere behind. She tears open the door and promptly





stops in her tracks. Dylan narrowly avoids staggering into the back of her, bracing his palms against the walls at the last moment. He brings himself to a stop just in time, but allows the momentum to carry his head around Thea to peer out at the cause of the standstill.

Standing on their doorstep is a boy not much older than Thea, hand raised and fingers extended towards where the elaborate door knocker hung just moments ago.

Thea can feel Dylan staring. She lets herself do the same.

Dark woollen coat, smart but worn, collar turned against any possible threat of wind or rain or being perceived as approachable. Dark shoes, lightly scuffed but recently polished. Dark curls, unkempt in a deliberate kind of way. Dark eyes, slightly widened. The shock on his face the lightest, most gentle thing about him.

He is, Thea notes with a practiced kind of distaste, rather handsome and most likely well aware of the fact.

Thea glares.

“Can I help you?”

To his credit the boy does not flinch at her tone. He smiles, only slightly put-out, and withdraws his outstretched hand to the safety of his coat pocket like it might get bitten. Thea has to admire the foresight.

“I was given this address for a curse breaker?” He says, with an awkward charm that Thea dismisses instantly as far too polished to be genuine.

Of course he was. Strangers on this doorstep, much like curses and castoffs, are not uncommon. Thea looks down at the worn out doormat and tries not to sigh. Dylan tries to catch her eye with a grin.

Thea had been praying for a case to show up soon. She always was. She should have learnt by now that prayers are never answered in good faith for such wretched things as them.

To get Dylan to school seven minutes late now would be nothing short of a miracle, and not a soul in Muscovy House has a thing to do with miracles. It's curses that run through every wall and every vein. Curses that are the lifeblood and currency. And it's currency, of course, that sways her.

“I suppose you'd better come in.”



**Duke of Wellington Statue, Glasgow**  
by Irem Sencok



# Memories

by Loof

'My memories are in pieces,' she said.

Like a broken jigsaw puzzle  
Pieces from her life are missing.  
Pieces are taken from another puzzle,  
made to look like they're from her puzzle,  
made to look real  
made to look bad...  
made to make me look bad.  
You took a piece of my red pulsing heart  
full of love,  
and replaced it with your black thrusting heart,  
full of hate.  
Smooth fitting edges you stole,  
Replacing them with rough torn ones.  
They didn't quite fit,  
but you forced them in place,  
to make them fit,  
to make your lies  
her truth.  
Your pieces of her broken jigsaw puzzle.

'my memories are in pieces,' she said,  
Innocently.  
And I will work to fix your puzzle,  
And make it whole again.

## To Dad

by Loof

Dawn crept into my bed,  
permeating my thoughts,  
entering my head,  
'Come and play!' she said.

We stole onto the balcony,  
Holding hands, like children.  
Watching the pastel colours  
Change, deepen, painting the clouds,

As the sun rose, she slipped away.

I held your hand, you slipped away.

The sun did not rise.



## Book Review: *When the Sky Falls* by Phil Earle

by Bryony Thomas

The best book I've read in a long time – moving and fast paced. I was sceptical midway through about the historical accuracy, especially regarding how much it could teach young readers about the war. However, Earle encapsulates a trauma-infused character boldly, yet realistically, drawing poignant parallels to behaviour we see today. The book is filled with cliffhangers, brilliant for engaging younger audiences. The destructively bitter ending powerfully reflects the harsh truths of World War Two. Ultimately, it may not be the factual precision that matters most, but the nuanced, atmospheric writing that brings the emotional toll of war vividly to life. The Dawn of Adonis, due to be published in June 2025, will be going to the top of my reading list!







**El Pescador**  
by Andrea Sofía Zorrilla Mora

## Nightmares

by Maxwell Ward

no wonder  
I'm snoring  
with nightmares  
this boring  
the same old  
free falling  
that once  
felt appalling  
now here I  
am sat in  
this exam  
in Latin  
cos every

night'm  
here ad  
infinitem  
Unmoved  
in my sheets  
as it's all  
just repeats  
and up next  
it's The Chase  
from the thing  
with no face  
and I know  
without doubt

that my teeth  
will fall out  
and it's all  
become clear  
I've  
got  
noth  
-ing  
to  
fear...

Till I wake



## M.S.

by Loof

My legs are encased in black sparkling rock,  
One inch thick, covering the knees,  
My toes poke through, I can wriggle them,  
When music plays, they dance.

I walk on rocks, piling up,  
on a rocky boat,  
On a rocky sea.  
If I fall, will I drown?

The rock is hard, rough, heavy, tight,  
As steel, lava, lead, a tourniquet,  
Binding and restricting, tightening more.  
Frightening more.

Sometimes, the rock reaches my middle,  
I am petrified.  
Can you not see the rock?

Andy carries me, cleans the dust,  
sets me free.  
He steadies me when the path is too rocky.  
Andy is my rock.





**Tiger**  
by Zhishun Chi



## Wind Chime of the Fox's Bones: Chapter One

by Anna Huang

Sue was injured.

She was struck by a white Kia, rolling around in the air, and smashing herself onto the ground. Sue was feeling her blood surging from her neck, back and limbs, waiting for her death quietly.

If you saw the healthy active Sue, you would say “such a pretty little red fox”. She’s got a pair of round soft ears, sparkling golden brown eyes, and a puffy, oily long tail. Unlike those “trash-sniffers” who always fumble around by their mouths, Sue picked food by her front paws, lowered her swan-like neck, and tasted cautiously, gently and elegantly, and other foxes in her clan usually called her “Lady Sue”.

Now the “Lady Sue” was dying. Her breath weakened, and the light in her bottom eye started fading.

“Farewell, the green Hilly Field. Farewell, butterflies, friends in flowers. The fox will be gone.” Sue was trying to make a eulogy for herself.

A flash of glimmer suddenly attracted Sue’s attention in the grass in front of her.

That thing looked like a round, thin crystal stone, tied with a rope gathered of red silk threads. Sue struggled to open her eyes wider, extending her bloody little paw to hook onto that thing.

Di! Da!

One drop of her blood fell into the crystal stone, and then disappeared.

On its smooth surface, Sue captured some patterns she can’t recognize. They are a crimson color, with edges glowing with golden light. Sue wanted to see it closer, but she didn’t have the strength anymore.

One second, two seconds, three seconds....

The little fox closed her eyes completely.  
She finally passed away.

### 1. Possession by an animal spirit

Why so soft and cold?  
Yellow’s fingers were tapping crazily on her phone screen, bossing around her





teammate and planning to slay the enemies in the game. Suddenly, she had a weird feeling that something so cold and soft began to sink into her body from the crown of her head.

And then, a voice echoed in her mind.

“Farewell, the green Hilly Field. Farewell, butterflies, friends in flowers. The fox will be gone.”

WHAAAATTTTTT?

Yellow dropped her phone and it slammed hard on her toes. AHHHHHHHHHHH!  
Yellow grabbed her toes, howling like a boar that was stabbed. And the echoes kept going:  
“Farewell, the green Hilly Field. Farewell, butterflies, friends in flowers. The fox will be gone.”

And Yellow saw a picture in her mind that a little fox was hit by a white car and landed on grass.

“What are you? A fox monster? What are you doing in my head? ”

Sue froze. How can she still be alive? Why can she understand a girl’s talking? And it was not even ENGLISH! And most importantly, where is her body? Why on earth is she in a human’s body?!

“Who are you?! Why am I alive? Am I alive or dead? Why are you human? Where am I?”

Sue went nuts, and she wanted to grab her beautiful hairy ears, but she can’t get them any more.

Yellow froze, too. She started to realize that something just shared her body. And it might not be human.

“What are you?”

“Sue. I thought I was dead but I don’t know why.”

“Stop it, just say why you are in my body?”

“I don’t know! I was hit by a car and bled a lot, then I am here.”

“That’s ALL?”

“That’s ALL. I don’t know what happened and why we can talk. I don’t know anything. I’m just a kind fox.”



“A what?”

“F-O-X, fox. I am a red fox.”

“Ah! You are the London fox, I know. I meet you guys when I walk back home every single day.”

“Yeah, I am from the Hilly Field, there are 4 people in my family. Mommy, Daddy, Duh and me.”

“Emmmm.....let me think....think.” Yellow rubbed her chin again and again, lost in her thought. “You said you knew nothing before you died.”

“Yeah, I could only smell my blood and feel the grass.”

“You mean you saw nothing except your blood and grass.”

“I guess so. Wait! I saw a glimmer on a stone!”

“What stone?”

“I don’t know. It... it was white and sparkled a little, and I saw some patterns on it, red and gold colors.”

Just the moment, Yellow captured another picture in her mind: A round flat piece absorbed a drop of blood, emerging lines interwoven with golden yellow and crimson.

“OH! MY JADE!!” Yellow grabbed her round thick little ear, “You found my lost jade!”

Sue doesn’t know what the jade means. Is it her old pet’s name? Sue doesn’t like pets. She was afraid of dogs, for they chased after her.

“Jade...it’s a precious stone, like ruby, like emerald here, the precious stones. You carve different symbols or totems onto the jade, which can symbolize identity.”

Sue started to understand: “That is a magical stone, is it?”

“Yeah, I guess we make some kind of covenant, I guess. You sacrificed your blood and started it.”

“I don’t mean to. It’s an accident.”

“Or it’s destiny, like my mom said. And now that you’ve taken over my body, I must grant your wishes.”

“Wow, I am surprised. I am still confused and panicked, but you are so calm now.”

Yellow sat and started to put on one shoe, and sighed. “That’s a family thing. I knew it from my childhood. Now, let’s find your dead body and my jade, and I will explain everything on the road.”





## 2. Yellow's story

Now Yellow, with one fox soul inside her, was walking on the path in the night, began to recount the tale of her family's past:

"I am from Eastern Inner Mongolia, together with the three northeastern provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning, collectively referred to as Northeast China. This place is full of religions, like Shamanism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam. Shamanism is the most ancient among them. The belief originated from Matriarchal clans ten thousand years ago, believing all things have these spirits. And the believers are all living closely with nature and animals, the hunting Oroqen, the fishing Hezhe, or the herding Mongols, etc. I guess our family is one of them. And we used to live together, and at times, professional shamans would perform rituals and offer blessings for everyone."

"Closely with nature and animals? Like our foxes?"

"Absolutely! You foxes are one of the Guardian Deities. And that means five animals that can cultivate themselves into deities: hedgehog, stands for endurance, concealment; mouse, stands for intelligence, stealth; snake, carries the power of calm, healing, protection; weasel, they have cunning and wealth-keeping power; and you fox means clairvoyance, beauty, wisdom.

"Ewww! I hate weasels, they are so stinky."

"Haha, actually foxes are considered not fragrant, too. Anyway, you 5 animals are powerful and wise, attracting fortune and protecting people from disasters."

"Do people worship us?"

"Indeed. Just like I said, you are the Guardian Deities. Those people with talent may even become disciples of the Guardian Deities, gaining special abilities by "becoming a medium", and we call them chumaxian or daxian, who establish contracts with animal spirits, called xianjia, and serve as their earthly agents."

"How do those deities select those talented people? Can I be a fox guardian deity? "

"I don't know. You are so young, not experienced, and you grew up in cities. More importantly, you are a British fox. Those tales of the Guardian Deities only spread in China, the northeast of China."

"But I must have some power, too. I possess you. And now we made the "chew-ma" and the guardian deity."

"Haha, I appreciate your accent."

Yellow stopped telling. And Sue also thought something else: if she is a powerful spirit, will she come back to life? Can she find her families who are visiting relatives in South Kensington? Oh, how pitiful that she didn't come with them but wanted to walk around to see the roses! Oh, and hunting! Being a "xian" or something is equal to having a better way to get food—without rummaging through messy trash bins every day...

"Wow you poor little Sue, you ate from bins!" "You can read my mind!"

"Of course I can, you are in my body, and I have started skimming all your past memories."

"Please don't see the part where I stole food! That was awkward."

"No worries, I won't. I have many things to clean up. Now I am in a mess as well. And... What was I talking about? Yeah, the "becoming a medium" thing, that's why you can possess me. Powerful guardian deities can actively choose humans to become their mediums, but you, a foreign little fox, are possessing me passively through the jade passed down from my ancestors. I guess it's because your spiritual power is not enough. "

"So what happens if we take the jade?"

"I don't know, let it tell us what to do." "But you say you have to fulfill my wish."

"Yeah, that's the chuma, the mediums duty. I will do what you order."

"I want to..."

"Let's save it now, naming a wish consumes a lot of spiritual energy." "Have you ever been possessed before?"

"Once. When I was two or three years old, my dad accidentally hit a rabbit's hind leg with a shovel in the forest. As a result, in the middle of the night, I was stomping and scratching the bed, shouting at my dad, "Can you be more careful next time? My leg

hurts so much!"

"That was pretty magical!"

"Yeah, it was, and my dad was freaked out, and next day he came back to the same place, putting many sweet potato leaves at the spot in the forest. The white rabbit never came back to me. Perhaps it accepted our family's apology."

Then Yellow told many other "possession stories" she had heard. Like her grandma who had a red snake coiled by the rural stove, and whatever was cooked in that big pot always tasted delicious. After grandma died, the snake just disappeared, too. And when Yellow was young, she liked to catch caterpillars in the countryside and feed them to the little white dog. Later, the dog became very clever and would always help chase away the birds that eat the grain. Everyone said the dog was about to become an immortal... As she spoke, both Yellow and Sue felt a strange energy. They looked toward the end of the path where the forest stood, a beam of moonlight gently shining through, reflecting a small, shining object.

That was the jade.





### 3. The Mission of the Jade

"Here you are, my little precious!" Yellow bent over, snatched it and threw it in her pocket. "I was wondering where I lost you. Curious that I don't remember having been here before."

"But... Where is my body? It's gone!" Sue hadn't sensed anything.

The jade began to glimmer again. The former crimson color disappeared, and now its transparent surface was covered with mysterious ancient golden patterns, resembling a Chinese character.

All the patterns are moving. Yellow and Sue stared at that. The Chinese character's strokes moved as its lines slowly changed. Eventually, there was a shape of a fox glittering on the surface.

"That was a fox!"

"Wow, bizarre! Sue, do you think that was your body curve?"

Sue kept silent. She can feel a warmth flowing into her body. Obviously, Yellow can experience the same warmth. They squeezed the jade in hand. It vibrated gently. It was speaking to them, and wanting them to go to a certain place together.

## I Don't Understand

by Loof

I don't understand how 40 tonnes of steel  
can carry hundreds of people  
tup the sky,  
gliding through clouds.  
soaring like a bird,  
and not crash heavily, loudly, terrifyingly to  
the fragile earth.  
But I fly anyway.

I don't understand how the earth is round,  
like a large balloon,  
floating through the sky.  
moving through space,  
spinning through time.  
But I stay on anyway.

I don't understand how the internet works,  
how information travels  
through invisible waves,  
transcending time and space,  
no bumps or walls.  
But I WhatsApp mum anyway.

I don't understand how my namesake feels,  
how they're not comfortable in their skin  
how they changed their body  
how they altered their appearance.  
But I love them the same as always.

There are many things I do not understand,  
the fridge, the light switch,  
the religion, the politics.  
But there is one thing I do.  
Be kind. That's all.



**Observational Drawing**  
by Sharon Leman



# Story of a Workermouse

written by Philippa Cox  
illustrated by Helen Miller

## Prelude

Have you ever been told a secret? So deep and dark, perhaps, that you must never even think about it in case it might just...escape?!

Well, secrets are mysterious things. They are whispered into eager ears and fly around over dreaming heads late at night when you're fast asleep. We are all completely unaware of the hundreds and thousands of secrets surrounding us. Occasionally, they get lost. They may fly out of an open window or creep underneath a door, and then float away down the street you walk every day. When this happens, they must find another person before sunrise.

But by that time, the secret's out! Another person knows.

All secrets, eventually, will find their way out. And once they're out, there's no denying the havoc they cause.



This is what happened to one secret, in particular.

It swam around in the open air, lost and far away from home. It was searching for someone before the sun rose over the horizon. Finally, it saw a crack in an open window and drifted through gently in the breeze. It was the window belonging to a little girl with dark, brown eyes and wild curly hair. Her name was Clara and she was incredibly interested in secrets.

Once she woke up she knew that this secret was one she had to see for herself.

So, the next night, while her parents were fast asleep, she crept downstairs and went into the living room. There was the piano standing grand and tall in the centre of the room. She had always wondered what mysteries it held and now she was about to discover for herself.



Slowly, she edged closer so she could almost touch the ivory and ebony, black and white keys.

She held her breath.

As if by magic, or as though she were in a dream, she saw something twitch behind the music rest. Something that an ordinary person would never have noticed or even think important, but Clara knew what she was looking for. She jumped, a little frightened, noticing a long thin tail poking out and...whiskers! She knew then that they belonged to a... "Mouse!" she screamed, as the tiny rodent leapt out of its skin, and scampered to safety within the depths of the piano from where it came.

Almost instantly, the little girl's parents awoke and were downstairs within a heartbeat.

"What is it, my dear?" asked the mother.

"A mouse?!" shrieked the father.

"Quick, get the mouse traps!" exclaimed the mother. "Get that piano out of this house!" ordered the father.

And, so, within a very short amount of time, the piano which had once been part of every home in the country before TVs and phones were even invented; the piano, which was the life and soul of any party and people enjoyed playing and loved listening, now, was seen as dirty, filthy, rotten, and foul. After the secret got out and spread like wildfire, every single person got rid of their piano. Hundreds and thousands of them were tossed out onto the streets, abandoned and destroyed. No one played, listened to, or sang any songs again. All, because of one deep, dark secret.









## Chapter 1

Pip Cavendish was not just an ordinary mouse. She was different. There was nothing remarkable about her appearance; covered in mousey-brown fur with two small black eyes, long whiskers and a tail. But she was unique all the same.

She lived inside an old grand piano which had been forgotten about and untouched for years. Every day she would wake up early in her nest hidden deep under the strings and get to work on the never ending job of looking after a piano. It was hard, demanding work. She'd have to chase away moths that like to eat felt from the hammers and dampers, check for woodworm larvae and regulate all the different components of the action. Even though the piano was never played anymore (and it was completely covered up with dust), Pip made sure all the work was done to the highest of standards. She didn't have a mother or a father, so she lived with her grandmother, Nonna, who was incredibly fussy. "I want it spotless!" she'd say. "Just in case, not a whisker out of place!"



Because Pip had never heard music before and was longing to, she agreed. She believed, if she worked hard enough and made sure the piano was absolutely perfect, then maybe, just maybe, a human might want to play it, and Pip could finally listen. She was a *workermouse*, after all, and all workermice live to hear music.

Their nest, deep inside the piano, was made up of two rooms in total. The rooms were connected by a narrow passageway and was almost like a cave with rounded edges and walls. Nonna and Pip shared the bedroom and slept in hammocks which hung from the ceiling above, further down in the next room was the kitchen. Every night, Nonna would tuck Pip in in her hammock and tell her magnificent stories about music.

"We have always lived in pianos," Nonna began, fiddling with her whiskers one by one. "For as long as time. Even before that we were in other instruments too. Our job was simple, we looked after our pianos and made sure they were in the best condition to be played."

"Yes, Nonna," Pip squeaked, settling down in her hammock and getting comfortable. She loved these moments with Nonna the most and would have happily stayed up all night to listen to her, if only she were allowed. Listening to Nonna's stories made Pip feel alive and as though anything were possible.



"And," Nonna carried on in her soft, velvety voice. "In return, we got to hear music." Pip sparkled in awe and wonder, feeling every strand of fur on her body stand on end. Whenever her grandmother spoke about music, Pip's whole body surged with excitement and tingled right down to the tip of her tail.

"What does music sound like?" she almost burst with curiosity. "Explain to me again, Nonna, oh please!"

"Music," said Nonna, and she closed her eyelids, as though she had been transported back to an exact moment. "Music...is magic. There are no words to describe, my love. It can make you feel so many things. It can control your thoughts and drift you off to places you've never even imagined."

"Can it really do all that?!" Pip gasped.

"Of course it can," said Nonna with such seriousness no one would ever dare question.

"But then why have I never heard it?" Pip moaned. "It's not fair."

"You will," said Nonna, stroking Pip's cheek tenderly. "Soon enough, as long as you keep the place looking spick and span, it will truly be irresistible for any human to walk past and not play."

"You really think?!" asked Pip, not noticing a twinge of despair flash across Nonna's face, momentarily.

That night Pip dreamed of hearing music, and dancing and swaying to it as Nonna had described to her so many times before. But in the middle of the night, Pip woke up. She was startled by a noise that came from outside the piano. She often heard noises from outside, the piano was kept in an old garage after all and there'd be a beep from an angry car horn or children shouting playing games in the street. Only, this sound was different. It got louder and louder. There was a creak, and then, the loudest

**BANG!**

All of a sudden, Pip felt the floor beneath her vanish and her entire nest was lifted onto its side. Nonna must have woken up in that same instant because Pip could hear her voice but couldn't reach it. Pip knocked against something and slipped through a hole in the piano, tumbling to the floor. As she landed, she hit her head and rolled under a dusty cabinet in one corner of the garage. She lay there unconscious on the cold concrete.

While Pip lay asleep on that dirty garage floor, the piano was transported far, far away.

For the first time in her mouse-life, little Pip Cavendish was alone.





# Into The Circle

by Daniel Newton



There is nothing but the rain, and the thing that exists between it.

It is a late morning in early October, but it might as well be midnight. There is no sky, no city beyond the heavy grey clouds. Nothing but the rain; blinding, ceaseless, not a moment between the raindrops for even a breath or a heartbeat. Just one raindrop after another pummelling the pavement as if it could squeeze a thousand years of erosion into one cold October morning. One, then another, then another, hitting the tarmac, the cars, the few unfortunate pedestrians, indiscriminate in its assault and uncaring who or what it drowns in the process.

And right there, in the space between the rain not big enough for a breath or a heartbeat, there it sits. Watching.

It could feel the rain if it wanted to, but it is too far from human to understand why it would ever want to. The thought has never even crossed its mind.

It is here for one reason, nothing else, and it is here a matter of seconds before the thing it knows is about to happen. Like the fragment of a second between the raindrops, it is plenty of time.

It watches. One purpose. No distractions. There is only this: the rain hitting the ground. A human, walking. A split second of terror. The moment the blood stops pumping, the last breath is taken, and the body falls still.

It does what it can, but it is so far from blood and bone that how could it have ever gotten it right? How could it ever have known to think that it's not just the blood, not just the breath, but the heart?

Life and death have more meaning than blood and breath and heartbeats. Life to death, death to life, those are easy. Those exist right there between the raindrops, too, hanging unseen in the space where one moment becomes the next.

But the blood, *the heart*, those are the physical, the tangible, something so much harder to grasp.

Life to death, death to life.

One moment, then the next.

One raindrop, then the next.

One heartbeat—

It is gone before it ever gets to see that there is no *next*.



I'm on my way, Enid, but I'm going to be late," Simon all but shouts into the receiver, with the convenient excuse of being heard over the pounding rain. Enid's voice crackles over the phone and he's not sure whether that's interference from the weather, or just her.

Simon raises his voice a notch further to make sure he's heard.

"Yes, I know, *again*, but—"

The line gives out before he can even finish his sentence. There's a few beats of loud silence before he can feel Enid's presence on the other end again.

"I can't hear you. Just—*Jesus*. I gotta go, okay? I'll be there soon. Sign in for me?"

Simon doesn't hear a reply, but he doesn't really need to. Enid signed him into their classes dozens of times last year, and this year is looking to be no different. It does a little to undermine the slight resentment that she's probably been sitting in the library, comfortably dry, before heading over to their class a perfect 15 minutes early, as usual. But not much.

Because here Simon is, stuck out in the rain. And it's relentless, drowning out any sound but the hammering of water on tarmac and the river flowing beside the curb. It had started mere minutes after he left the flat and Simon had been soaked to the skin between one breath and the next, which would be bad enough on a good day, which this certainly isn't. Not that being late for class makes it a bad day in and of itself, because if it did Simon would rarely have a good day.

He just hadn't been expecting this today. It had been a cold but clear morning, no sign of the thunderous rain clouds that now obscure any view of the sky, and Simon hadn't had time to check the weather. Simon never has time to check the weather, but Enid does, and she'd failed to warn him of the storm heading their way. Not that Simon had time to check his messages before he left, either, so any text would've been as useful as the forecast he also didn't look at. But the thought would've been nice.

As it is he left the house in nothing warmer than ancient, scruffy jeans that are starting to thin at the knees and a tired old sweater in an insipid but dearly beloved shade of pale yellow, worn and faded and coming apart at the sleeves. Comfort above all else, always, which is a philosophy that serves him well on a good day—which again, Simon notes, *this isn't*. All he can do is keep his head down, hunch his shoulders against the rain, and keep going.

He feels more than a little stupid, stuck out here in a downpour with no jacket, no umbrella, not even a hoodie to slow down the barrage of water on his head. Sure, there are worse crimes than forgetting to check the weather forecast before leaving the house. Simon doesn't keep a list or anything, but off the top of his head three far worse crimes would be:

1. Not looking both ways before crossing the road.
2. Playing music too loud to hear the helpful shouts of *hey, watch out!* from the scaffolding above.
3. Being too distracted by his phone to notice a fallen car charging port and the live wire it left exposed.



Forgetting a jacket? That's nothing. But those? Stupid. Dangerous. Entirely, unforgivably idiotic.

And if that isn't just the story of his life.

### 1. When Simon didn't look both ways before crossing the road.

The streets of London are not the best place to be lax about traffic safety. Simon knows that. Maybe he didn't grow up here, but he's learnt that by now, surely. Or at least he should have.

The thing is back home there were never any cars coming so there was never that much point in looking, and here there are always cars coming, so in a way there's also not much point in looking. It's not the best excuse, but it's pretty much all he's got. Apart from being late, which is also pretty weak.

It's just kind of embarrassing, okay. How many times had his parents told him, growing up? Stop, look, listen. It's three steps. Maybe four, if you're counting looking left as well as right, which Simon is inclined to argue you should, seeing as that's the bit he forgot.

Head down and shoulders hunched against the rain. Quick glance right. No cars. Good enough for him.

He's one step into the road, and then two, and it's like he remembers belatedly that he's supposed to look both directions, not just one.

He looks left.

It doesn't happen in slow motion. It happens really fucking fast, actually.

Car, barrelling towards him.

Brakes, screeching, but far too late now.

Driver, close enough for Simon to see the terror on his face.

Simon just about has time to think *oh crap*, and then—

Nothing.

The front of the car seems to crumple in on itself and it grinds to a screeching halt, not two feet short of colliding with Simon. Not slowly, brakes somehow kicking in, but all at once.

Simon remembers the time he saw a car swerve and hit a bollard outside the school gates—either that or hit the child that had just dashed out—and the speed at which it had been stopped. 40 to 0 in an instant. The driver and the child had been fine, thankfully, but the car looked atrocious. All smashed glass and splintered fibreglass and warped metal.

And that's almost exactly what he's looking at now. Except there's no bollard or in fact anything at all for the car to have hit, except Simon, and he knows if it had been him that it hit he's the one who would've lost that fight.

So what the hell just happened?

Simon is saved from considering it too deeply by the driver jumping out.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

In his defence, Simon wasn't.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Simon shakes his head, although he doesn't think the driver really wants an answer.

"No. I'm sorry."

"You're damn lucky, is what you are. No way I could've—"

The car comes roaring back to life with a cough of black smoke, saving Simon once again. The driver turns and doesn't look back.

"I really am sorry," Simon says again, though the driver either doesn't hear him or doesn't care. He's reaching back into his car to switch off the engine and has hopefully forgotten Simon has existed.

He hasn't.

The driver honks the horn, more of a screw you than a watch out, but Simon accepts that he probably deserves that.

Suitably scolded, Simon hurries to the other side of the road, looking both right and then left. Twice. His belated diligence is rewarded with him making it to the other pavement with no further incidents, so small victories.

Maybe if he was less late he would've dwelled on it more. The fact that he was one freak crash away from getting pancaked under a car. He's a little shaken, sure, but he doesn't have time for much else. He's still alive, which means he still has to get to class, and he's even later now than he was before.

This is not going to ruin his mood.

### 2. When Simon played his music too loud to hear the helpful shouts of hey, watch out! from the scaffolding above.

Simon walks faster. Class starts in 10 minutes, and by his estimate he's still almost 20 minutes away. He's going to be late, he has to accept that now, but if he can just shave a few minutes off it'll be slightly less embarrassing. He's still going to have to walk in while class is underway, interrupting the lecturer and drawing the attention of everyone in the room. People will still look at him.

Truthfully, Simon wouldn't care so much about being late if it didn't end with everyone just looking at him. The thought is enough to spur him on.

He picks up the pace and turns his music up to match. The indie rock is far too slow to keep him going at this speed so he switches to a different playlist and drops the 'indie' in the move.

And then, because rock deserves volume, he turns it up again.

Perfect.

Of course, as Simon passes under the ever-present scaffolding over the pavement there's no reason for him to look up and see the half-tonne polypropylene bag of construction debris beginning to teeter over the edge of the platform two storeys up. Which is probably why the builder on the third floor, catching sight of both Simon and the bag, yells out a warning.

"Hey, watch out!"

Simon doesn't hear them. Music blaring in his headphones, he's none the wiser.

"Hey!"

Nothing.

"Kid, watch—"

The crash cuts through the music. Simon flinches from the noise and then the dust,





which explodes in a cloud that covers Simon and the pavement and about half of the road. It's quite a sight, for all Simon can't appreciate it.

Simon coughs while the dust settles and then rubs his eyes until he can see again. There's a burst bag of smashed bricks crumpled on the pavement, ripped plastic crinkling in the wind and dust turning to slurry in the rain. Exactly where Simon was standing. Should still be standing. Because Simon doesn't remember moving.

He takes out his earbuds. Looks up. There's a builder peering down at him, expression somewhere between terror and disapproval with no idea which is going to win the fight.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Simon says, more confused than freaked out. "I'm fine."

They're the magic words that kick terror to the ground and let the disapproval take over.

"Couldn't you hear me?"

That's pretty obvious. "No. Sorry."

"How loud have you got it?"

Very. "Sorry."

"You could've died, kid."

Barely a kid. "I know. I'm sorry."

The builder throws up his hands.

"Quit saying 'sorry'."

Simon kind of wants to say sorry.

"Okay."

"Christ—" Apparently had enough of this conversation, the builder vanishes back onto the platform leaving Simon alone on the street with a pile of debris and a lungful of dust, wondering what the hell just happened.

Because he was standing right there where that bag just fell, and now he isn't. And the truth is he's far more concerned about how he managed to move three metres without meaning to than about the fact that he almost just died. Again.

Adrenaline, right? He must've moved out of the way just in time, that super-human speed that people get when their life is in danger... Right?

Right.

Simon gives the exploded bag of bricks a mistrustful glare, brushes off his sweater, and sets off again.

Later and later by the second, covered in brick dust, and starting to wonder if he even still cares.

### 3. When Simon was too distracted by his phone to notice the fallen car charging port and the live wire it left exposed.

This time Simon keeps his earbuds out. Okay, maybe he drops the pace just slightly without the pounding bass in his ears keeping him going, but that's fine. At this point he'd rather make it to class late than not at all, so he'd quite like to hear any more cars or bricks



that intend to interfere with that goal.

His phone buzzes in his pocket and he slows his pace a little more. He's aware he should probably be focusing on where he's going, but he's also aware he's feeling a little rattled and in need of a distraction. So he checks his phone.

It's a message from Rose. A picture, oh-so-helpful, of his jacket slung over the back of a chair in the kitchen and his umbrella propped up next to it, right where he left them last night.

Probably something he'd find quite funny, on any other day. Two near-death experiences in, not so hilarious.

*Thanks, he says. Helpful as always.*

*You're welcome, darling.*

Simon is halfway through typing out his response (*You know, you could've—*) when he looks up to check he's not about to walk into any street lights.

And that's when he sees it.

Not a street light but something much, much worse.

A cable. One that should be buried within the car charging port that is now lying prone on the pavement, severed in the middle and flailing about on the pavement.

Simon wonders first how the hell that even happens, and second why the hell the universe seems to want him dead today.

The business end is facing away from him, maybe a metre away, but the backlash is coming.

He takes a step back, but it's too late now.

The cable jerks, shooting sparks up into the air as it arches backwards.

Simon just about has time to accept that, yes, this is probably going to ruin his good mood once and for all.

And then everything goes black.



## Thoughts on Reading Into The Circle by Daniel Newton

by Sophie O'Connor-Smart

What follows is a collection of some reflections I had while reading *Into the Circle* by Daniel Newton. These reflections tend to fall into three categories: Analysis; the story's place in education; and its relatability to shared human experience.

Before reading I was given a synopsis, so I knew where the story was going. This changed my mode of reading, meaning I was picking up on details with additional context instead of just wondering what might happen next. The ability to connect to other moments in time, be it previous knowledge or predictions for the future of the story, is an important skill. Both can also make the reading experience enjoyable.



This is, after all, why we reread some of our favourite texts. We pick up new things every time and spotting the details we previously missed can be quite exciting. It occurs to me this is also how a blurb functions. Do we think about the blurb when reading? In a lot of cases, the blurb is what causes us to pick up a book. So how does it then affect the way in which we read? A deeper dive into paratextual analysis could be interesting for this topic. But let's not get carried away for this (brief!) commentary.

The presence of LGBTQIA+ stories in schools is a bit of a complex topic. It's not as simple as just including a text or not. If it were, the answer would, of course, be an easy yes. The inclusion is incredibly important, and the books are increasing in number, but there are also many examples of them being actively removed from school libraries.

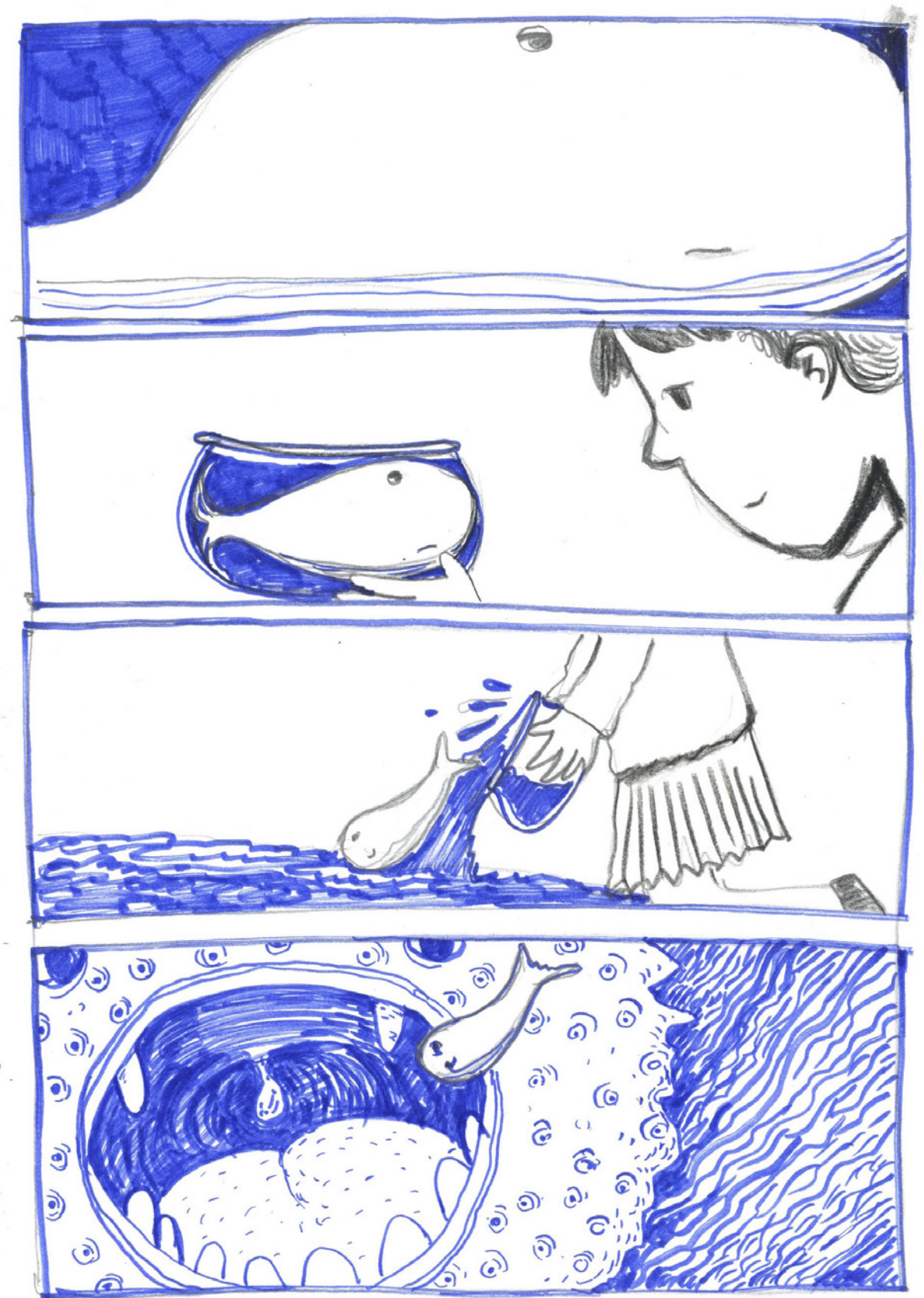
**In 2024, the “Index of Censorship said 53% of librarians polled had been asked to remove books ... many of which were LGBTQ+ titles ... In more than half of those cases books were taken off the shelves” (Creamer, 2024).**

In any case even if a school library holds the book, it is not necessarily going to be studied physically in the classroom. This is made worse by a reluctance to re-plan after using the same texts for multiple years. Though necessary, replanning puts a lot of time pressure on teachers. Time they don't have. Although there is intention to increase this type of reading, there are still barriers in the way.

A very different topic, but with a similar outcome: YA books that contain swearing. It is relatable and a large majority of YA readers are swearing, but that doesn't mean adults want them reading it. On one hand it may be the cause of a young person picking up the book to read it, but on the other many teachers and librarians may prefer not to tackle the issues of them being in a school library. This leads to their exclusion.

Onto the next topic. The weather descriptions in the piece are inescapable. They go into such great depth and could be a brilliant example to students in a classroom on how to write in detail. This is also the same for describing how feelings are felt in the body and not just the mind. It's a very experience-based way of describing. The text could also be used as an example of other literary devices. For example, oxymorons. In this case, 'loud silence'. The text also gives context, making sure that oxymorons are not just thrown about anywhere in writing (a common pitfall when students learn a new technique). There are a lot of relatable moments. This is especially important for texts that become less like reality as you read on. It allows for connection, so it doesn't feel too far away from the reader's life. Most of my personal experience lies in younger readers, in which their books tend to state a lesson that a caregiver may impart. Sometimes with a consequence to show why you should listen to it. And while some might say this text is also doing that, there is a greater degree of awareness from the protagonist that this is happening. This can let a teenager feel seen but not patronised.

And so, we conclude this brief insight into some of what I think about when reading.



**The Price of Mercy**  
by Victoria Bganba





# Protectors of Astrax

by Maya Eadie-Catling

Intended audience: Middle Grade

*Following the death of their beloved neighbour, Mrs Burbage, Matty and Dana discover a mythical fox hiding on the marshes. Astrax is being chased by Tempest, a legendary hunting dog, who has taken human form in an attempt to catch vvhim and seek revenge. Meanwhile, Matty faces the return, at last, of her older sister Grace. Protectors of Astrax is a Middle Grade adventure inspired by my love of foxes, the stars, and growing up in London.*

## Chapter 1

Matty should have known something was wrong when no one answered the door. She turned and looked at Dana who shrugged.

"Mrs Burbage!" called Matty, flapping open the letterbox and peering in. Nothing.

"Maybe she's turned her hearing aids off?" said Dana.

"Wouldn't be the first time," Matty replied with a grin. "She's always complaining about how noisy we are."

"You girls," said Dana putting on her best Mrs Burbage voice, - "I can hear you coming from miles away!"

Dana reached out and pressed the bell next to the door hard. It rang again and again. There was still no reply.

"Let's come back tomorrow," said Matty. The air around them was warm and they'd had PE that afternoon. Matty could have done with skipping the visit to Mrs Burbage's today and going straight upstairs to her flat to cool off.

Dana's face wrinkled into something close to a frown.

"No," she said. "It's Tuesday. She'll be expecting us."

When they were little, Mrs Burbage would pick them both up from school and look after them till their parents got home from work. Now they were at Marshfields Secondary, the girls could take care of themselves. But still, once a week, they popped round to Flat 3 and sat at Mrs B's kitchen table. They did their homework, chatted and told her stories about their new friends and teachers.

Just like the old times, Mrs B liked to spoil them, so she always baked something before they came round. Last week it was Matty's favourite, her special carrot cake with cream cheese frosting. She had cut them both big slices and put them on her best blue plates.

"I suppose," Matty sighed.

Dana crouched down. She tilted the large red plant pot to one side, and picked up the key hidden beneath it.

"Bingo!" she said.

Matty and Dana let themselves in and stood in the hallway. It always amazed Matty how the flats in Towpath Court, which were identically built, could look so different inside.

Dana's hallway had a thick patterned rug on the floor that she said her parents had brought

all the way from Iran when they moved here. Mrs Burbage's flat was carpeted in a soft cream and the walls were covered in pictures of her daughters in different places around the world. Matty's hallway had wooden floorboards, and the walls were a deep green. Mum said the colour was too dark, and that they should redecorate, but Matty wouldn't let her. Grace had chosen it years ago, and they'd painted it together. She had said it was 'Forest Green' and Matty loved it.

Today, Mrs Burbage's hallway felt different in an entirely unfamiliar way. Her cream carpet, which was usually spotless, had a trail of mud running across it. The mud started downstairs in the kitchen, by the back door. It ran all the way along the hallway and up the stairs. There was no sign of Mrs Burbage, and the flat was silent.

"Hello?" Dana called. She shook her head, confused.

"She must be asleep. Her walking stick is right here, by the door," Dana said.

Matty crouched down to get a proper look at the carpet. The mud was still wet and it smelt fresh. It was the same shape over and over. A diamond with four claw marks fanning out from the centre.

The prints were too narrow and sharp for a dog. Everyone teased Mrs B about how large her fluffy, ginger cat Leo was getting, but surely, these couldn't belong to him?

No, Matty decided. There was only one animal it could be.

You saw them in the city at night. Watching from the shadows, or snatching something from a bin. Matty knew they lived on the marshes too. She heard them from her bedroom, burrowing in the undergrowth and barking to one another.

Mum couldn't stand the sight of them.

"Scavengers," she would call, shooing them away. "Overgrown rats."

Matty hated it when she talked like that. She liked how wiry and quick they were, and the rusty orange colour of their fur. She thought they were brave, trying to survive in the city. But brave enough to come inside a house?

Dana crouched down beside her and peered at the marks.

"They're not from the cat, are they?" she said.

"No," Matty replied gravely. "I think there might be a fox up there."

Dana took the lead. When Mrs Burbage woke up, she would not be pleased at all to find a fox trapped in the house, and she would need the girls' help to get it out.

Without talking, Matty followed Dana up the stairs. The second floor of the flat had always been Mrs Burbage's private world. As children, they were never allowed beyond the bottom of the stairs. Even now, Matty realised she'd only ever been up once or twice to fetch something for Mrs Burbage. Going up there felt wrong somehow, like stepping into a part of her life that wasn't open to them.

On the landing, they stopped. There were two doors in front of them, and one was slightly ajar. The muddy prints led into that room, the one that must've been Mrs Burbage's bedroom.

Dana's face was pale and her eyes were serious. She reached out and knocked on the door.

"Hello? Mrs B?" she said faintly. There was no response.

Matty heard a scratching sound, which stopped. Then it was quiet again.

"We'll go in slowly," Matty said. "No sudden movements."

Dana nodded and Matty gingerly turned the handle. The door swung open, and two things happened at once.





In a dark flash of red, an animal leapt towards her. Matty ducked. But not fast enough. It leapt past her, brushing against her arm and escaping out of the door. Matty felt a searing pain spread across her skin.  
Then, Dana screamed.

**Chapter 2**

“It seems,” said the police officer, handing Matty and Dana beakers of cold, sweet, squash, “that Mrs Burbage died of natural causes.”  
The police officer paused, and smiled gently at them both.  
“Most likely she went to bed, fell asleep, and just never woke up. It happens. Peaceful way to go really.”  
Matty and Dana were quiet. Mum reached out from the chair next to her and squeezed Matty’s shoulder.  
Matty blinked. “We saw a fox,” she said abruptly, turning to look up at her. “In the bedroom.”  
“We often get reports of urban foxes inside houses,” the police officer said. “Especially when the residents are away, or leave the back door unlocked by accident. Mrs Burbage was a very old lady. It happens.”  
Matty began to speak again, but Mum looked meaningfully at her.  
“We’re all upset Matty, but the officers are taking care of everything,” Mum said.  
Matty felt her arm prickle and she looked down and rubbed her forearm. There was a mark on her skin. Crimson red, and about the length of a matchstick. It hurt too, the pain radiating from it deep and hot.  
Matty stared down at it.  
“Oh Matty,” said Mum, reaching out. Her fingers were cool as they gently touched the edge of the burn. “What happened there?”  
“It’s nothing Mum. From the toaster probably,” Matty lied.  
She tugged her school blazer off the back of the chair and put it on, pulling the sleeves down firmly.  
“Can we go home now?” she said.

Matty and Dana stood by the entrance to the station and waited for their parents to finish talking to the officers. There was a large noticeboard next to the door with local flyers pinned to it. Missing cat. Yoga lessons. Maths tutor. Matty’s eyes scanned restlessly and came to a stop on a sheet pinned to the bottom right corner.

**TONI’S PEST CONTROL  
SPECIALIST CULLING OF FOXES AND OTHER VERMIN  
TOGETHER, WE WILL CLEAN UP LONDON**

Beneath the bold lettering was a small photo. A young woman, Toni presumably, was dressed in all black and standing next to a van. She had a large net in one hand and was staring directly at the camera.



Matty swallowed. The fox in Mrs Burbage’s bedroom had disappeared so fast she hadn’t had the chance to see it properly. But the force of the animal’s body as it passed by made her think it was big. Not small and scrawny like some of the foxes round here. Its fur had been a proper red too. Not tattered and mangy, but dark and shiny, like the centre of a flame. That all probably meant it was healthy, Matty thought. Even so, she didn’t fancy its chances against Toni and her van.  
“Hey Dana,” Matty said, turning to her friend, “do you reckon we’ll ever see that fox again?”  
But Dana wasn’t listening.  
“I’ve never seen a dead body before,” she said, staring straight ahead. Her long hair, which was usually combed straight and neat, looked knotted and bedraggled.  
Matty sighed heavily and leant her head against her best friend’s shoulder.  
“Mrs B had a really good life,” she said, repeating the phrase that Mum had said to her as she’d squeezed her tight when she first heard the news.  
Dana nodded but didn’t say anything. Matty didn’t blame her. She knew the words were true and they should have made her feel better. But still, she couldn’t shift the uneasiness which sat like a weight at the bottom of her stomach.

That evening, after all eating fish and chips together at King Kipper on the corner, Matty stood alone in her pyjamas at her bedroom window, and looked out. From the third floor of Towpath Court, Matty could see right across the canal to the marshes. The railway cut a straight line across the horizon, and every ten minutes or so, the low rumble of the tracks would reverberate across the empty plain. Aside from that, it was quiet. The heron was nesting on the water’s edge. Low bramble bushes marked the edges of the flat green, and if she really squinted, she could just about make out the stone circle in the far distance.  
“Best view in the house,” said Grace.  
It was, Matty thought. Especially at this time of the day, when the light was fading into darkness and a cool purple mist settled over the canal. In about five minutes time, you’d be able to see the stars too. You didn’t get that everywhere in the city.  
Matty stared out of the window and thought about the empty, quiet flat downstairs. There would be no more popping round to see Mrs Burbage. No more cakes or stories or board games together. It wasn’t like when she went on holiday either - she wasn’t coming back. This was it now. Mrs B was gone and life would have to keep on going and going without her.  
“Still not in bed yet?” said Dad, coming into her room.  
Suddenly, Matty reached out and wrapped her arms around him. She buried her head in his shirt and for the first time that day, she started to cry.  
“Today hasn’t been easy, has it?” said Dad.  
Matty shook her head and looked up. She wiped her eyes and her nose with the back of her hand.  
“Let’s get you some rest. It’ll help, I promise.”  
Matty climbed into bed and Dad reached out to pull down the blind.  
“Strange,” he said, peering out at the night sky, “must be heavy pollution tonight. I can usually spot Canis Minor from here.”  
“Which one’s that, dad?” said Matty, tugging the covers and rolling over.  
“The little dog,” he said. “Or the fox, depending on where you’re standing.”  
Dad bent down and kissed her on the head. “Sleep well Matty.”



Chapter 3

“Is there anything in particular of Mum’s you’d like?” said Mrs Burbage’s eldest daughter Rachel. “To keep, to remember her by,” she smiled, but her eyes were glassy, her mind on other things.

Matty shrugged. She felt shy in front of these women, Mrs Burbage’s grown-up daughters, Daphne and Rachel. Here to pack up the flat and get it ready to sell.

Matty hadn’t wanted to come over. She had wanted to keep her memory of the flat as it always was, special and safe, before Mrs Burbage died. But Mum had made her come with her, asked her to carry the flowers and the ‘we-are-so-sorry-for-your-loss’ card. So here she was, in the flat, and everything was strange and different.

“Why don’t you have a look around?” said Daphne gently. “Let us know what you find.”

Rachel took her phone out and started showing Mum pictures of her wife and kids in Australia. Mum was a similar age to Rachel and Daphne, a few years below them at school. She’d known them back in the day when they were growing up, and their voices together were loud, noisy.

Matty nodded and slipped away.

The flat felt empty, with boxes neatly stacked outside each room labelled ‘family’, ‘charity shop’, ‘dump’. Matty frowned.

Mrs Burbage’s life shouldn’t be categorised like this. These were her special things and they belonged to her. Matty stared at the boxes. She saw herself pulling off the tape and opening them up. Carefully lifting out Mrs Burbage’s belongings and returning them to where they were meant to be.

“You’ve made a mistake,” she imagined herself saying, calmly but firmly. “It’s all too quick. It’s not right.”

Matty sighed and went upstairs. The carpet was clean now, but if she looked closely, she could still see a faint brown trace of where the footprints had been.

Matty stood outside the door where they’d found Mrs Burbage and the fox. She paused. Then she turned, and went instead into the other room, the room that had been the twins’ bedroom and then was turned into an office for Mrs Burbage and her husband.

The room was messy, piles of books strewn across the big wooden desk which sat in front of the window. This room had the same view that Matty’s bedroom had, three floors up. The marshes, a patchwork of green and red and brown, stretched out into the distance. There was a coffee cup on a coaster, and a book open, still being read. They haven’t started clearing in here yet, Matty thought with relief. That was something at least.

Matty sat down at the desk and imagined Mrs B in the same place a few days ago. She liked to read in here. Matty knew that. Sometimes she would read for hours, deep into the night.

“Oh yes,” Mrs Burbage used to say. “All those years working at the hospital, turned me into a night owl.”

It was something they had in common, Matty and Mrs B, not sleeping right, not deeply anyway. It hadn’t always been like that. But recently, Matty seemed to find herself awake in the middle of the night, her mind strangely alert, even though everything in her body ached to be asleep. Mrs B was good like that. You could talk to her about stuff, anything really. Nothing seemed to phase her, not like Mum or Dad. They only got worried.

Matty looked around her.

“Find something to remember her by”, Rachel had said. But Matty didn’t want a thing. She wanted Mrs Burbage back.

Matty pulled open the drawers of the desk and rummaged through them. A paperweight, a coin, an old shopping list, a pencil sharpener, a badge, a flower press. Frustrated, she tossed them all aside. Sprayed across the top of the wooden desk, Mrs Burbage’s souvenirs and bits and pieces of stationery looked messy and sad.

Suddenly, Matty felt embarrassed. She carefully placed everything back in and tried to close the drawer. She pushed it, but it wouldn’t go. She tried again.

No, it was jammed. Carefully, Matty fed her hand through to the back of the desk. She felt something hard and broad lodged in the teeth of the drawer.

She gripped it firmly. Tugged. Tugged again. At last, it came loose!

Matty turned it over. In her hands, she held a small purple book, its edges gilded in gold. Collected Mythologies, the cover said. It looked old and well read; the threading of its corners frayed. Mrs Burbage had a lot of books in her flat, but Matty would have recognised this one if she’d seen it before.

There was a scrap of something wedged between two of the pages. Matty let the book fall open and lifted it up to the light. A square of pale card with a series of numbers written neatly in pencil.

16.04.2025 00:14 (321, 443)  
20.04.2025 00:51 (321, 445)  
23.04.2025 01:25 (321, 446)

Matty looked at the numbers, her eyes flicking back and forth between them, trying to make sense of it all.

The first numbers had to be dates. Recent dates, the last one only just before Mrs Burbage died. But what were the others?

Confused, Matty carefully slid the piece of card back between the pages and began to read. Her heart pounded as her eyes took in the unfamiliar shape of the words on the page.

Astrax and Tempest

*Once, there was a fox who ran through the stars. The fox was the child of Astra, and he became known as Astrax.*

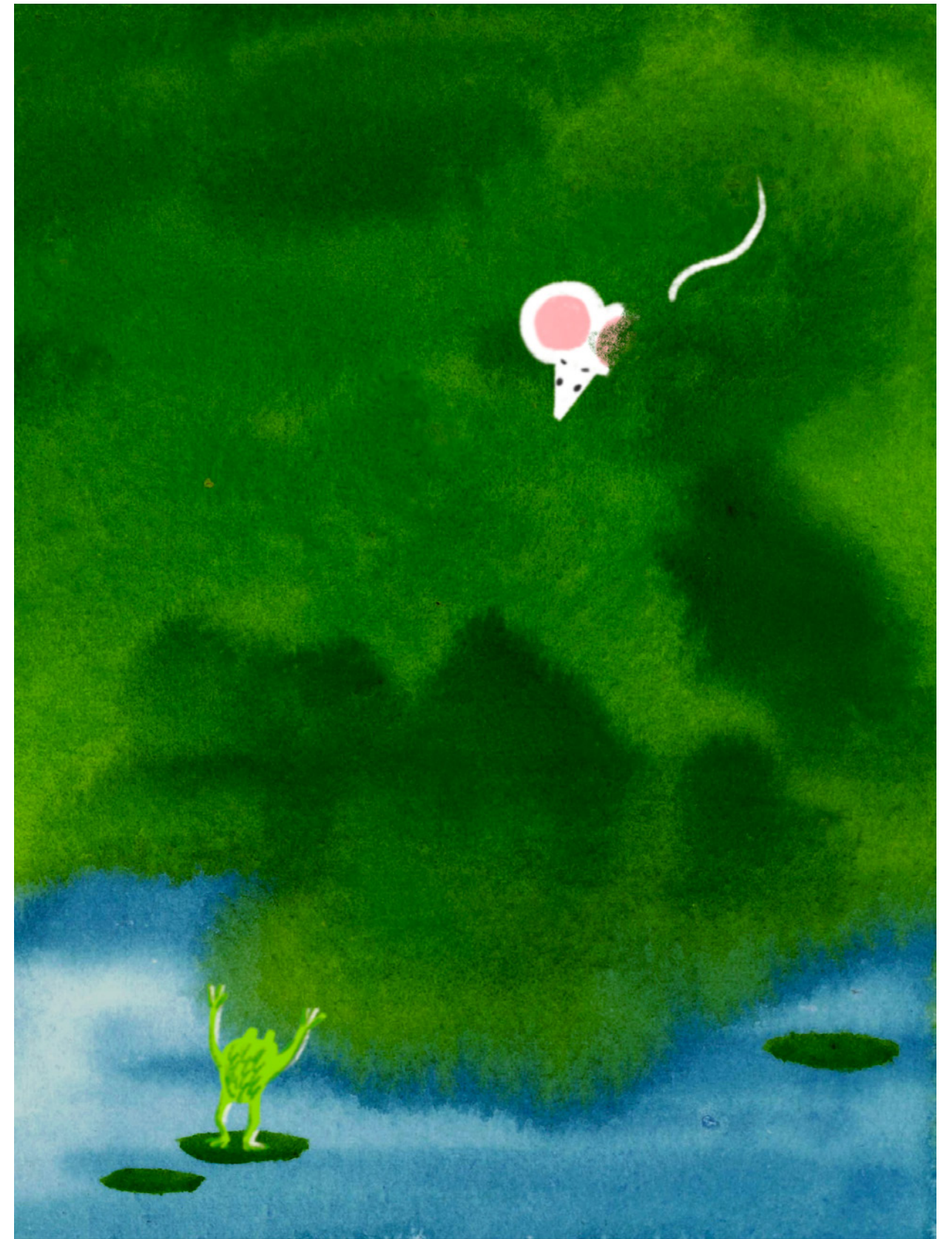
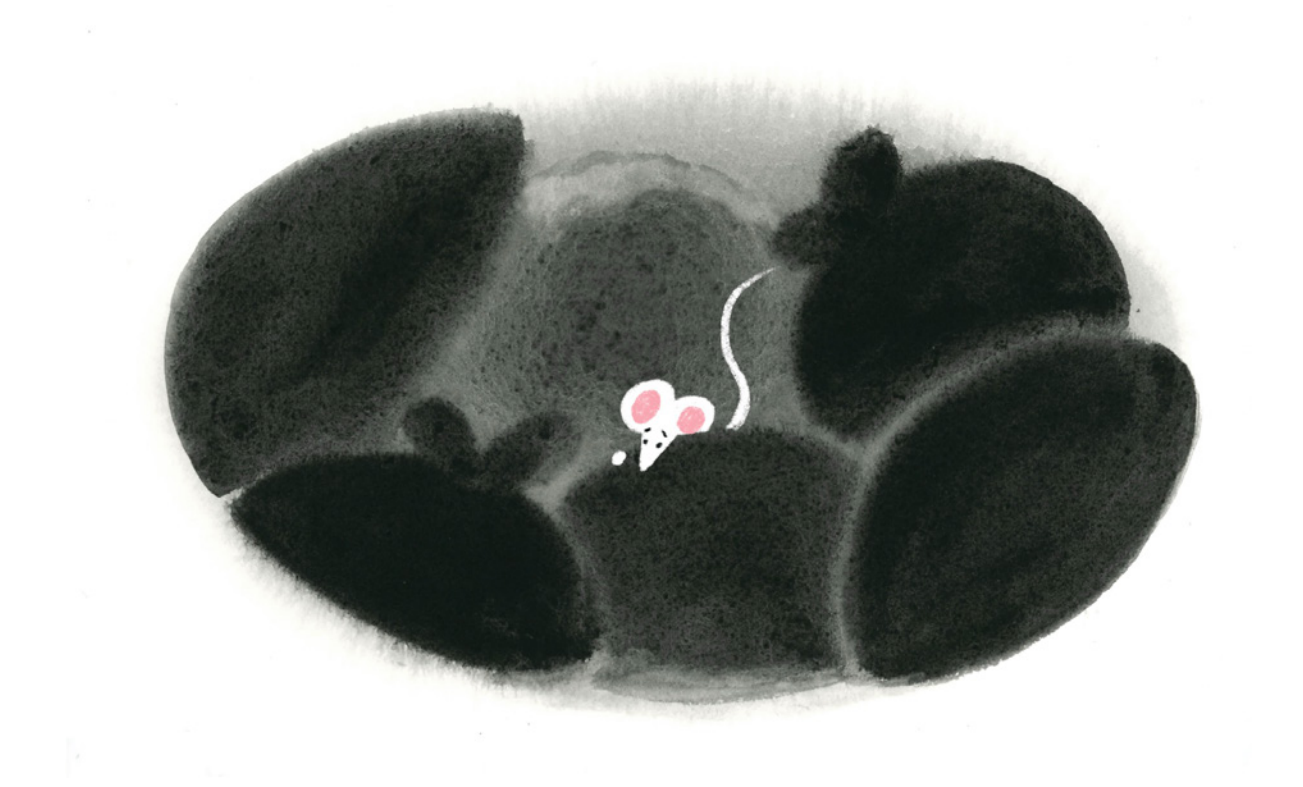
*Astrax was a fire fox. His body burned and burned, and his amber eyes were sharp enough to cut through the darkness. When Astrax was born, the stars knew that he would have many enemies. So, they gave him a great gift, ultimate velocity. With his power, Astrax could outrun all the other creatures of the sky.*

*Astrax’s greatest friend was Tempest. She was a magnificent hunting dog. It was rumoured that she could feel the presence of her prey even before it entered the galaxy.*

*Together, Astrax and Tempest went on many great adventures. But there was one adventure that changed them all.*







**Mr. Jim**  
by Yue Pan





## An Interview with Joseph Coelho



Photo courtesy of: Hayley Madden The Poetry Society

**Spinning Gold:** I love your fairy tales gone bad series, especially Zombierella! But, why fairy tales? What drew you towards them?

**Joseph:** Like many people, fairy tales made up some of my earliest reading experiences via the red, hardback, ladybird collection with their wonderful colour illustrations by illustrators like Robert Lumley. I love how familiar the stories are. As a society we lack shared narratives. There is so much content

and so many niche stories to consume that there are few narratives that everyone will know. A shared narrative is a gift to a writer, because we can play with expectation, we can subvert the tale, turn things on their heads, surprise and delight by tweaking the known characters and the known steps they take on their journey. I had so much fun playing with and subverting various fairy tales in the Fairy Tales Gone Bad series and have always believed that if I enjoy the writing, then others will enjoy the reading.

**SG:** What can you tell us about writing in verse? Why write poetry?

**Joseph:** Poetry translates the soul, it takes the indescribable and somehow, magically, puts it into words. Poetry is also just good writing, writing that has been considered and pondered over and carefully crafted its short form demands that attention to detail. I would gently argue that there is a distinct difference between verse as in verse novels and poetry. The verse of verse novels uses the line break to grab a reader and send them hurtling, wonderfully, through a narrative in a quick and seamless way. In this sense verse novels are often composed of beautifully crafted prose that makes use of the line-breaks traditionally used in poetry.

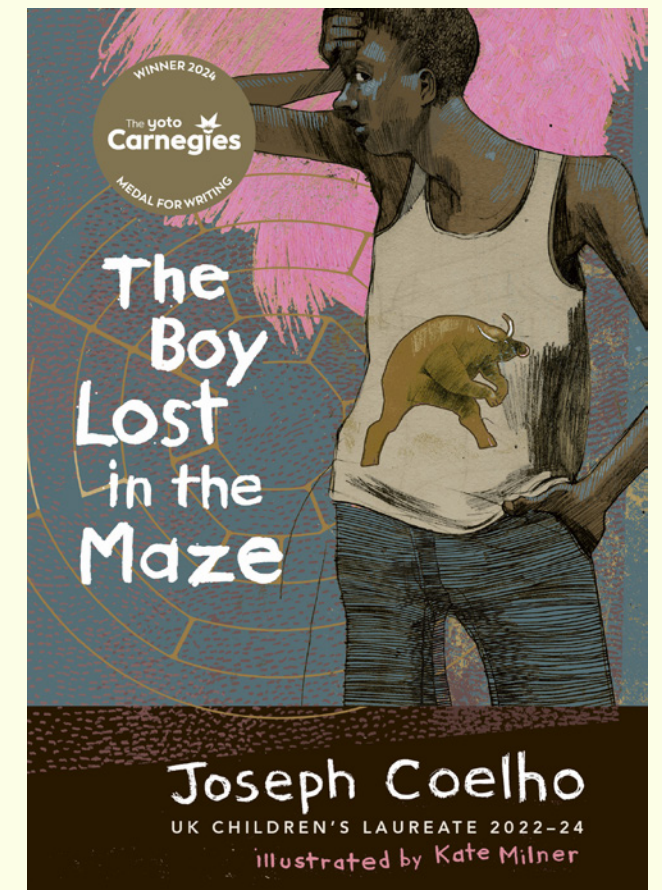
Poems, for my money, are distinct and deal with individual moments and ideas beautifully realised using all the tools and devices at the poet's disposal to underline, highlight and draw attention to ideas and word play, subjects and themes. Individual poems need to be read and re-read and cause the reader to stop and think. For this reason, it makes sense that verse novels stick to focusing on the line-break as the main poetic device, for a continued narrative you want to keep the reader engaged, you don't want them losing that thread.

**SG:** Poetry is finding new audiences on social media, including your poetry prompt series, do you think the future of poetry is online? Have you reached new audiences and what are the benefits?

**Joseph:** I was tempted to say that having things online makes them immediately more accessible and in many ways it does especially if a resource (like my 80 poetry prompt videos available via my Youtube) is free, but of course the internet seems to be getting increasingly filled with paywalls and that's not considering the obstacles that having an internet connection or data subscription may pose. In short, I think there is great scope for poetry and poetry resources online and I have certainly found new audiences by posting poems and resources onto the net for free. Schools especially have been able to access the poetry prompts and simulate an author visit where they may not be able to pay for an in-person author visit. However, there will always be a need for humans to come together in public spaces and to share words and art and community and ultimately I think it is there that the future of poetry lies.

**SG:** How do you reflect on your time as Children's Laureate as a whole?

**Joseph:** It was an interesting time, I loved being the laureate and having the opportunity to serve in that role. But it was hard work. During that time I completed my library marathon (which I started pre-laureateship) joining around 80 libraries (217 libraries joined in total) up and down the country, I wrote and presented 80 poetry prompt videos, had about 10 books published, and took part in countless events encouraging young people to read and write. It was all lovely work but it took its toll and my writing time suffered as a result. I'm now rebalancing and finding time to catch up on outstanding deadlines and to reconnect with my artistry.



**SG:** What advice would you give to aspiring writers and creatives? And do you have any fun writing exercises?

**Joseph:** My main advice would be to not wait for anyone to choose you. By this I mean that you must take ownership of yourself as a writer, commit to improving and doing all it takes to get as good as you can get, but don't wait for "permission" to write. Find ways to share your work through performance or online, work and grow through your passion for writing... and stay off social media!

Journalling is a great exercise for the aspiring writer, it helps you keep track of your thoughts and ideas, try and write daily even if it's just a few lines, take note of the overheard conversations, the colours, the turns of phrase, the weather, collect up your observations and use them in your writing.





**SG:** Is there a typical day of being a writer and what would it look like?

**Joseph:** Not really – some days I'm home and writing (or doing anything but) other days I'm giving keynote speeches at teacher conferences or attending a literature festival, or doing a book signing. For instance yesterday I gave a 20 minute presentation about one of my books in a school library, today I'm doing zoom meetings for a BBC Short Story competition and meeting the cast of a play I've adapted from one of my poetry collections, tomorrow I'll be sharing some of my picture books and poems at a literature festival. Every day is different and that's the way I like it.

**SG:** How did you find your agent? What was your journey like to getting published?

**Joseph:** I had actually given up on getting an agent. My first book was published in 2014 as a poetry collection called Werewolf Club Rules. I had made a connection directly with the publisher and did not have an agent at the time. I had assumed that having a book deal would mean I'd have my pick of agents but unfortunately was continually told by agents that they did not know what to do with me as a poet (ignoring the fact that I had spent seven years writing plays and so clearly could write many things) so, I continued on and assumed I would not have an agent - there are authors that happily exist without. It was while attending an illustrator friend's book launch that I met the agent of the writer for her book. We got to talking and it turned out she was a new, young agent building a list and looking for clients and could not believe that I had not found an agent. That agent was Felicity Trew of the then Caroline Sheldon Literary Agency and she and Caroline had the foresight to see that I could indeed turn my hand to writing lots of different things. Once I had an agent I started to get opportunities for writing picture books and

short stories, I started to have meetings with new publishers and slowly but surely proved myself as a writer of many different mediums.

**SG:** What is the future like for children's literature? How do you see it changing over time?

**Joseph:** Unfortunately, we continue to see diversity in children's literature being treated like a trend, having come out of seeing lots of positive work in the industry in this regard only to slip back into seeing the numbers of books by diverse authors declining again.

('For the first time in its history, the annual CLPE Reflecting Realities survey reports an overall drop in the percentage of racially minoritized characters featured in published children's books reviewed – from 30% in 2022 to 17% in 2023.' (CLPE Reflecting Realities, Survey of Ethnic Representation within UK Children's Literature, November 2024)).

This is a sad state for the industry and leads to an environment where both creators and readers suffer. If children's literature is to survive then more work needs to be done on consistently ensuring that books and the people that make them both on stage and behind the scenes faithfully reflect our beautiful and diverse society. It is vital that we all get to read about ourselves and each other and when that is not the case... publishers miss out on new stories and the next big trends! Readers miss out on seeing

themselves reflected and on reading about lives different to their own and bookmakers miss out on having a chance of earning a living through their art. It is a huge loss to society.

**SG:** Is there anything else you'd like to say? Be creative! :)

**Joseph:**

**There are no gatekeepers to your creativity except those YOU give keys and chains to!**

## Gifts From Grandma

by Maxwell Ward

weird gnome  
wooden frog  
hair comb  
wicker dog  
black socks  
(too big)  
green rocks  
chocolate pig  
year planner  
knitted hat  
coat hangers  
china cat  
coins in  
cotton wool  
money tin  
(half full)  
bath set  
more socks  
tape cassette  
building blocks  
pencil case  
fountain pen  
map of space  
socks again  
a birthday card  
with grandad's name  
three books  
all the same  
cat food  
duck and beef  
her old  
false teeth  
one last  
final note  
in which  
all she wrote  
was Love







**Angels**  
by Yang Xu



# Gifts from The Dark

by Katharina Felicity

"Ready for bed?"

Susie stands in the doorway as Mikey tucks himself in under his starry bedsheets. His parents are away for the weekend and his big sister Susie is visiting from college to babysit. Mikey likes when Susie visits.

Mikey nods as he prepares his body for what happens next. This is his least favorite time of the day. He hates being left alone in the dark when the lights turn off.

Mom and Dad keep saying he's big enough to be in his own room and sleep in the dark. Mikey doesn't want them to think he's not "big enough," he doesn't want to feel like "a baby."

But then he has an idea:

"Can we keep the lights on tonight?" he asks as Susie's hand hovers over the light switch.

Susie doesn't answer. Instead she walks over to sit on the edge of Mikey's bed.

"Are you still afraid of The Dark, Mikey?"



Mikey doesn't answer. He's too embarrassed. Nobody in his class is scared of the dark anymore. He knows it's silly and that most of his fears are made up, but he can't help it.

"That's okay," says Susie. "I used to be afraid of The Dark too. For a very long time. But now, we're good friends."

Mikey sits up. "What do you mean you're friends?"

"Listen, I'm going to turn the big light off and we can turn on this little lamp right here. If you have trouble sleeping, just ask The Dark to be your friend. The Dark is shy. But very kind."

Mikey agrees to turn the big light off. Susie turns the little light on.

"Go make a new friend," she says with a smile. "Sometimes the brave thing to do is just to acknowledge you're scared."

The door creaks as Susie shuts it behind her. Darkness covers the walls.

Mikey tries to sleep, but he can't. He can't close his eyes. He can't relax. He can't even move. Even with the little light on, The Dark is still there in his room. Staring at him.

Mikey takes a deep breath. If Susie could talk to The Dark, then maybe he could too.

Mikey pulls his covers as close to his face as possible. His mind is racing:

Susie is in the house, somewhere. If he's in any danger, he'll just scream and she'll come find him. Hopefully The Dark will be nice to him. Mikey can't just be good friends with someone he doesn't know.

So, he starts with a simple hello:

"Hello Dark."

"Hello Mikey." The Dark's voice fills the room right away. It is quiet and gentle. Nothing like Mikey expected.

"You know my name?"

**"Of course I do."**

"I'm scared of you."

"Why are you afraid?"

"I don't know what you're hiding, so I can't trust you. I don't feel safe."

"Is there a place in your room where you do feel safe?"

Mikey thinks. "Under my blanket."

"Well, Darkness is kind of like a big blanket. When the lights go off, I'll be your blanket, tucking you to sleep."

That doesn't sound so bad, Mikey thinks. He is still nervous, though. Maybe The Dark can answer some questions.

"Are you hiding any monsters?"

"No, don't worry. I checked your closet and under your bed. No monsters live there. But even if they did, I would protect you until they went away."

"You mean, you're not on the monster's team?"

"I'm not. I'm on your side. If you're in danger, I'll hide you. I'll try to keep you safe."

"Why can't it just be light all the time? Why can't the sun keep shining at night?"

"We all need a break from shining sometimes. And the best growth happens when nobody is watching."

"But why do I have to go to sleep? It's so much darker when I close my eyes."

"Your body needs rest and your mind longs to dream."

Mikey yawns. Maybe he does need to sleep.

"Wait, before you sleep, I have a surprise! A little thank you for being so brave tonight."

"What is it?" Mikey looks around excitedly.

In the same moment, Susie peaks into Mikey's room. "Are you still awake?" she asks quietly.

"I am!" Mikey jumps out of bed. "The Dark said there's a surprise for me!" Susie smiles and reaches for Mikey's hand. "I know exactly where to find it," she says.

They walk through the dim hallways of the house, down the shadowy staircase, and into the backyard.

"What do you think the surprise is?" Mikey asks.

Susie looks up at the open sky above, and Mikey does the same. "Wow," he whispers.

A galaxy of stars twinkles above them, more stars than Mikey has ever seen before.

Mikey and Susie stay there for a few more minutes, in silence. Listening to the secrets of the night, without fear.

"You were right," says Mikey. Susie smiles. She doesn't need to ask him what he means.

Who knew that The Dark was this kind?

"Ready for bed now?" Susie asks again. Mikey nods. Together, they walk back inside, up the staircase, and through the hallway.

Mikey crawls into his bed and turns all the lights off, allowing The Dark to tuck him in.

"Good night!" Mikey whispers. "And thank you for the surprise," he yawns as he shuts his eyes.

"You're welcome, Mikey."

Good night."





**Krishna**  
by Irem Sencok

## Dual Worlds: Language, Identity, and Cultural Belonging in YA Literature

by Deepti Ganesh

*"It tells its own story, our language does, and woven through it are all the places we've been, all that we've seen, experiences held close, good and bad."*  
(Woodson, 2003)

### Introduction

We live in an increasingly globalised world, where the question "Where are you from?" is often complex and layered. Although I have a straightforward answer (I was born and brought up in Chennai, Tamil Nadu) my preference for English, widely spoken in urban Chennai, over my mother tongue Tamil, distanced me from my Tamil cultural roots. This contrast led me to reflect on the relationship between language, cultural affinity, and belonging.

Drawing on the idea that the use of non-English languages in English language texts can be described as a "contact zone of literature and bilingualism" (Rudin, 1996, qtd. in Barrera and Quiroa, 2003, p. 268), I examine three young adult novels, featuring first-generation immigrant protagonists, to analyse how bicultural authors of English-language literature use non-English languages to portray cultural identities, illustrating how language both reflects and shapes bicultural identities.

### Literature Review

#### Cultural Hybridity

Culture is often viewed not as a static entity but as an active, evolving process of meaning-making. Most definitions of culture recognise the agency of the participants in defining the culture they belong to. Just as culture is multifaceted, identity is similarly complex. This complexity arises because identity is both self-perceived and externally assigned, shaped by cultural interactions and societal cues (Zhu, 2014)

In a globalised world, identities are often reshaped by transnational migration, where societal expectations and visible or audible markers such as language or accent influence how identities are constructed and perceived. This ambiguity informs Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity. In his view, cultural identity exists in a 'third space'—a liminal zone where dominant and marginalized cultures intersect, reshaping identities and renegotiating cultural meanings.

#### Language and Culture

Language is a powerful tool that is central in shaping identities. For bicultural children, exposure to multiple languages in educational and social spheres enables them to construct multiple identities depending on the language they speak.

Sociocultural theories of learning provide a useful framework for understanding this relationship, viewing language acquisition as a process rooted in active engagement within a community (Hu, 2022). For immigrant children from racialized minority communities in western societies, this often means navigating two languages: their heritage language, typically learned at home, and the dominant language, often English.

Through interactions with their families and communities, children are introduced to cultural codes that help them decipher the world around them and develop strong



ties to their community. These interactions not only promote linguistic competence but also deepen cultural understanding, illustrating how family acts as a bridge between language and identity formation.

### Code-switching and Code-mixing

Code-switching, described by Meisel (1994) as the ability to choose the appropriate language based on context, is a key strategy for bilingual individuals to navigate cultural boundaries. Melzi et al. (2022) observe that during parent-child interactions, code-switching can develop “multicultural or transnational identities” by allowing children and parents to blend their linguistic repertoires. In contrast, code-mixing involves blending two or more languages within a single sentence, a practice more common among children who are equally proficient in both languages, reflecting their linguistic flexibility.

Through these strategies, families navigate cultural boundaries and construct shared identities.

### Textual Analysis

I aim to examine the social realities of the intersection of bilingualism and bicultural identity through three texts - *Run Rebel* by Manjeet Mann (Mann, 2020), *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sánchez (Sánchez, 2017), *Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo (Acevedo, 2020) - which showcase three distinct female protagonists from Punjabi, Mexican, and Dominican backgrounds, respectively, all of whom are bicultural and bilingual first-generation children of immigrant parents. Each protagonist navigates complex familial dynamics and struggles with belonging, ultimately achieving self-acceptance through varying degrees of cultural reconciliation.

### Proficiency and Relationship with Heritage Language (HL)

A person's fluency of their heritage language is often used as a “marker of the strength of one's orientation towards ethnicity of the community” (Zhu, 2014). All three protagonists' parents understand little to no English, which means that the primary communication within the household is in the heritage language. Despite this, the three protagonists showcase varying levels of HL proficiency and varying ranges of affinity towards their HL, which can be analysed through the way they interpret the non-English words in the narrative.

Amber Rai, the British protagonist of *Run Rebel*, struggles with Punjabi fluency despite her parents' exclusive use of the language. The novel includes only three Punjabi words hurled at her by her father—bewakoof, nikame, and behzti—all carrying negative connotations. Since her parents do not speak English, it is implied that Amber is forced to speak to them in Punjabi, but the entirety of her narrative is depicted in English. But by her own admission, her Punjabi is “not as good as [her] English” (p. 155), suggesting that her limited language skills act as a barrier between her and her parents.

This sparse and tense use of Punjabi mirrors Amber's conflicted feelings about her cultural roots. The narrative's absence of Amber's thoughts about her linguistic struggles subtly highlights her complex relationship with her identity, suggesting that her limited proficiency alienates her from her cultural heritage.

Julia Reyes, the Mexican-American protagonist of *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, experiences a comparable struggle with her heritage language. While she is conversational in Spanish, she frequently translates Spanish words into English in her thoughts, such as “volada, which means ‘flirtatious’” (p.

105). This habit reveals that English is her dominant language of thought, highlighting the tension between her cultural heritage and her lived reality.

She is ashamed of her limited vocabulary, believing she sounds “ten times smarter in English” (p. 71). Her uncle's criticism—that she has a “cactus on her forehead” (p. 84)—underscores societal expectations of linguistic fluency as a marker of cultural authenticity. This phrase (which remains unexplained in the book) criticizes indigenous people who appear brown but can't speak Spanish. Julia's discomfort with Spanish highlights her internal conflict between cultural pride and the influences of the dominant society.

In contrast, Xiomara Batista from *The Poet X* demonstrates strong bilingual fluency, effortlessly blending English and Dominican Spanish. Her narrative seamlessly incorporates a lot of Spanish words, with phrases such as “like the whole barrio feared” (p. 18) and “Mami was a comparona” (p. 22) indicating that her thoughts flow in both English and Spanish. Her internal thoughts directly respond to the Spanish words such as “No te lo voy a decir otra vez.” (But I know she will in fact tell me again. And again.)” (p. 230) and the lack of direct translation indicates that both languages occupy equal status in her life, highlighting her strong bilingual fluency.

### The Role of the Family

Amber's relationship with her parents highlights the dual pressures of cultural preservation and assimilation. Her father's insistence on maintaining a monolingual Punjabi household (p. 123) hinders her ability to form a closer relationship with him, further isolating her from her cultural heritage. However, her mother's desire to learn English (p. 268) leads to a stronger bond between them and creates an opportunity for a more meaningful transmission of cultural values.

As the family's ‘cultural mediator’ and ‘language broker’ (Revis, 2019), Amber translates between her parents and the English-speaking world, a responsibility that unbalances power relationships in a patriarchal household (p. 135), further straining their relationships and compounding her feelings of isolation. Amber associates British culture with freedom, rejecting her Punjabi roots due to the patriarchal constraints imposed by her father. Her parents' illiteracy also means that she never got the opportunity to learn how to read or write in Punjabi.

The title “*I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*” underscores Julia's ongoing struggle with the pressure to live up to her sister, who “cooked, cleaned and never stayed out too late” (p. 20). Julia feels her refusal to conform to cultural norms—such as resisting the quinceañera her mother plans for her and firmly rejecting the idea of being a “submissive Mexican wife” (p. 13)—marks her as inadequate in her mother's eyes, unworthy of comparison to her sister. Julia's defiance extends to most cultural expectations, such as greeting others with a kiss on the cheek, even male relatives who behave inappropriately. Her refusal earns her the label of a “malcriada, a badly raised daughter” (p. 77), with her mother accusing her of wanting to be like “those güeros mal educados.” Julia's response of “yes, I do want to be like an impolite white person,” signals her rejection of imposed cultural expectations. She claims that because her parents don't understand her, she feels like she was “born into the wrong family” and like she “never belong[s] anywhere” (p. 236).

Both Julia's and Xiomara's mothers impose cultural and religious expectations that complicate their daughters' relationships with their heritage. Julia resents her mother's strictness, rooted in Mexican traditions, but gains a deeper understanding of her parents after learning about their struggles as immigrants, leading to a shift in how she views her bicultural identity.





Xiomara resists her mother’s religious fervour and the Dominican ideals of femininity. However, Xiomara’s bilingual fluency allows her to push back against these constraints, carving out her own identity within her family dynamic. A striking illustration of this defiance occurs during a verbal confrontation, where Xiomara recites poetry in English, while her mother counters with religious verses in Spanish, showcasing their linguistic and ideological clash (p. 306).

**Verses**

"I'm where the X is marked,  
I arrived battle ready—"

"Dios te salve, María,  
llena eres de gracia;"

"I am the indication,  
I sign myself across the line."

"el Señor es contigo;  
bendita tú eres  
entre todas las mujeres,"

"The X I am  
is an armored dress  
I clothe myself in every morning."

"y bendito es el fruto  
de tu vientre, Jesús."

"My name is hard to say,  
and my hands are hard, too.  
I raise them here  
to build the church of myself.  
This X was always an omen."

"Santa María, Madre de Dios,  
ruega por nosotros, pecadores,  
ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte.  
Amén."

1 - Poet X (Acevedo, 2020, p. 306)

**The Role of the Community**

Community interactions extend the influence of heritage languages beyond the family. All three protagonists describe their communities as restrictive, expressing a sense of being constantly observed and judged. They wrestle with the pervasive feeling of scrutiny from those around them, illustrating how, in Western-dominated societies, minority communities often impose restrictions on their own members in a bid to preserve their cultural values.

Amber’s limited engagement with the Punjabi community further alienates her from her cultural roots. Visits to the temple are uncomfortable for her, and she avoids conversations with community members who are depicted as upholding regressive

cultural practices, such as mourning the birth of her niece, a girl child. Julia's deep connection to her Mexican community, through interactions with Spanish-speaking friends and participation in family gatherings, strengthens her bilingual identity. Her frequent trips to Mexico as a child allowed her to stay connected to her linguistic roots. However, her growing distance from her Mexican culture and her preference for assimilation may be contributing to her struggles with language.

Xiomara’s community is rich with cultural markers that ground her in her Dominican heritage. From the “island Spanish” of old church ladies to bachata music blaring from open windows (p. 1), her environment continually reinforces her cultural identity and fluency in Spanish, allowing her to fully embrace her biculturalism. She and her family attend “Latino mass” (p. 228), and her best friend Caridad frequently incorporates Spanish words in their conversations, further deepening Xiomara’s connection to her heritage.

**Friday, August 24**  
**Stoop-Sitting**

The summer is made for stoop-sitting  
and since it's the last week before school starts,  
Harlem is opening its eyes to September.

I scope out this block I've always called home.

Watch the old church ladies, chancletas flapping  
against the pavement, their mouths letting loose a train  
of island Spanish as they spread he said, she said.

Peep Papote from down the block  
as he opens the fire hydrant  
so the little kids have a sprinkler to run through.

Listen to honking cabs with bachata blaring  
from their open windows  
compete with basketballs echoing from the Little Park.

Laugh at the viejos—my father not included—  
finishing their dominoes tournament with hard slaps  
and yells of "Capicu!"

Shake my head as even the drug dealers posted up  
near the building smile more in the summer, their hard scowls  
softening into glue-eyed stares in the direction

of the girls in summer dresses and short shorts:

"Ayo, Xiomara, you need to start wearing dresses like that!"  
"Shit, you'd be wifed up before going back to school."  
"Especially knowing you church girls are all freaks."

2: The Poet X (Acevedo, 2020, p. 1)

**Connection to their Ancestral Land**

The protagonists’ relationships with their parents’ native countries reveal their evolving bicultural identities. Amber exhibits indifference toward India, referring vaguely to “Indian villages” (p. 2) and her parents’ upbringing “in a poor village” (p. 185). Her detachment from her ancestral homeland underscores her struggles with cultural identity and parallels her strained relationship with her father. Unable to communicate with his westernised daughter, he shares little about his life beyond minimal details, such as being raised in an orphanage, further deepening the cultural dissonance between them.

As a child, Julia enjoyed visiting her grandmother and her extended family in Mexico (p. 20), but as she grew older, it quickly became a source of frustration and boredom, and she developed strong negative feelings about Mexico (Sánchez, 2017, pp. 23, 229). Her eventual journey to Mexico deepens her understanding of her parents’ sacrifices, providing her a renewed appreciation for her heritage. The first time Julia thinks in Spanish is after she arrives in Mexico (‘Como me gusta la mala vida’ (p.241)) which clearly indicates the connection between place and language.

Xiomara’s connection to the Dominican Republic is less direct. Although her father occasionally “calls back to the island” (p. 65), Xiomara’s vague references to her relatives as “Primo So-and-So” (p. 65) reflect a distant relationship with her extended family. Yet, her use of Dominican Spanish, her community of people from the D.R. and cultural practices demonstrates an intrinsic connection to her heritage.

Both Julia's and Xiomara's complicated feelings toward their native countries are influenced by their mothers’ threats to send them there as punishment for bad behaviour, framing these places not as sources of belonging but as symbols of

reprimand, which inculcates a negative perception of their ancestral homelands.

**Cultural Identity and Belonging**

While Amber’s sister Ruby calls herself “British Asian” in her college essay (which is quite a broad identifier), Amber never explicitly identifies with her Indian roots. This lack of explicit reference to her ancestral land indicates the rejection of her Punjabi roots, exacerbated by the restrictive nature of her community, such as her inability to walk down the street without feeling constantly terrified about being watched. After they leave their abusive household, her mother accepts her burgeoning romantic relationship (p. 470), something that would have never been tolerated in her father’s household. Amber’s mother also starts to open up to her, telling her “stories of childhood” and “family back in India” (p. 465), suggesting potential future reconnection with her heritage.

Julia grapples with her dual identity as both Mexican and American. While she describes herself as “Mexican” (p. 174), she also acknowledges her Americanization, such as her concern about being perceived as a “spoiled American princess” during her trip to Mexico (p. 260). The tension between these identities, coupled with her mother’s complete rejection of any ‘Americanisation’ such as rejecting her request for privacy (p. 26) contributes to her complicated feelings of belonging.

Xiomara refers to herself solely as ‘Dominican’ (p. 7, 90, 98), and the word ‘American’ only appears once in the context of ‘other’ (p. 242). Her primary conflict stems from her mother’s rigid and restrictive views on religion and faith. While these tensions affect her relationship with her mother and fuel her desire to break free from her immediate environment, Xiomara never seeks to distance herself from her Dominican heritage. This connection is powerfully





demonstrated in her decision to express herself through a poem written entirely in Spanish, poignantly titled ‘A Poem Mami Will Never Read’ (p. 233), emphasizing that her cultural identity is independent of her mother’s influence.

Wednesday, November 14  
A Poem Mami Will Never Read

Mi boca no puede escribir una bandera blanca,  
nunca será un verso de la Biblia.  
Mi boca no puede formarse el lamento  
que tú dices tú y Dios merecen.

Tú dices que todo esto  
es culpa de mi boca.  
Porque tenía hambre,  
porque era callada,  
pero ¿y la boca tuya?

Cómo tus labios son grapas  
que me perforan rápido y fuerte.

Y las palabras que nunca dije  
quedan mejor muertas en mi lengua  
porque solamente hubieran chocado  
contra la puerta cerrada de tu espalda.

Tu silencio amuebla una casa oscura.  
Pero aun a riesgo de quemarse,  
la mariposa nocturna siempre busca la luz.

#### In Translation

My mouth cannot write you a white flag,  
it will never be a Bible verse.  
My mouth cannot be shaped into the apology  
you say both you and God deserve.

And you want to make it seem  
it's my mouth's entire fault.  
Because it was hungry,  
and silent, but what about your mouth?

How your lips are staples  
that pierce me quick and hard.

And the words I never say  
are better left on my tongue  
since they would only have slammed  
against the closed door of your back.

Your silence furnishes a dark house.  
But even at the risk of burning,  
the moth always seeks the light.

3: The Poet X (Acevedo, 2020, pp. 233, 234)

## Conclusion

The exploration of bilingualism and bicultural identity in *Run Rebel*, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* and *The Poet X* (Acevedo, 2020) reveals the complex relationship between language, culture, and identity for young protagonists from immigrant backgrounds. Barrera and Quiroa (2003) caution against using non-English words merely as “cultural flavor,” emphasizing that “authors must use these elements strategically and skillfully, and with cultural sensitivity” (p. 247). The three texts analysed in this essay exemplify this principle, employing characters’ heritage languages thoughtfully to convey cultural belonging—or, in Amber’s case, the absence of it.

The protagonists’ journeys toward self-acceptance illustrate the complexity of negotiating cultural hybridity. Amber’s estrangement from her father highlights the isolating effects of linguistic and cultural disconnect. Julia goes from lamenting that her “whole life is unfair” to understanding that she has “choices [her] family” never

had and she needs to live her life in a way that doesn’t “waste their journey” (p. 339). Xiomara’s parents’ presence at the youth poetry slam, gives her the confidence to speak up and provides her the support and connection that she has been craving. These narrative arcs highlight the pivotal role of family in shaping and negotiating bicultural identity.

In a globalised world where cultural hybridity is increasingly common, books that challenge monolithic notions of identity, celebrate diversity enrich the broader discourse on representation in children’s and young adult literature. Multicultural literature that positively highlights translanguaging, as exemplified by *The Poet X*, has the potential to transform perceptions of multilingualism in western societies. This essay underscores the need for more narratives that highlight

**the complexities of multilingualism and multiculturalism, leading to greater empathy and understanding in an interconnected world.**



**Fairy Flower**  
by Irem Sencok





**Snail Spa**  
by Helen Miller



# Strong Swimmers Only

by Maxwell Ward

Eyes closed, you take a deep breath in and smell chlorine and wet skin. Sounds of excitement echo around you, splashing and laughing and a distant cannon bomb. Water drips from your hair onto your shoulders and courses down your back.

You open your eyes.

You are standing in a queue going up concrete steps, and your best friend is in front of you grinning. He’s wearing his ridiculous lime-green trunks and too-tight goggles, and he looks so pleased to be alive. You smile at him. There is water splattered on the ground by his feet. You notice little ridges on the steps and now you can feel them beneath your toes.

You look up again. There’s a sign on your left that says:

**STRONG  
SWIMMERS  
ONLY**

You feel a kind of sinking.

You think of your school report, which praised your effort but warned that your “rudimentary front crawl” needed “significant practice”. You never did find time for that. You think of all that thrashing in the water and your limbs feel heavy. Now there’s a prod in your back from a stranger, and you see the queue has moved and your friend is laughing at you from several steps above. You hold onto the rail and start to climb. Seven, eight, nine, ten. There’s another sign on your left but you only process the words as you walk past it.

Did it really say that?

**YOU’VE  
BEEN  
WARNED**

Your heart rate quickens to the sound of bongo drums being played on worn-out speakers. You keep climbing, even though part of you doesn’t want to, and now you have a view of the pools below. There are breast-stroke bobbies swimming in rhythm to your left, doggy-paddlers and splashers in the infant pool and ball-bouncers and water-gymnasts to the right.

You climb a couple more steps and see the entrance to the rapids for the first time – all that frothing water, a throat in perpetual gurgle. You watch as a red-haired girl at the front of the queue is led towards the void by a tanned lifeguard. The girl sits on the edge of the precipice, grips hold of a horizontal bar above her head and then dangles her legs into the water. Then she waits, poised, until the light goes from red to green and she pushes off with a scream and vanishes into the mist.

You count the number of people in front of you.

Four.

Your swimming trunks feel loose. You undo them and pull the chord tighter. Then you do it again, this time until you feel the string digging into your hips and you tie the tightest knot you can.

Another scream.

Your friend turns around, mocking terror, and then laughs. You wonder if he feels any fear at all or if this is all just fun for him because, for as long as you can remember, he seems to have laughed and stumbled his way through everything without a care or a concern.

You feel your trunks slipping down again and curse yourself for buying them. You are mid-growth spurt, and you haven’t found the right way to dress your new gawky body. You were so wonderfully unremarkable a few months ago and now you’re the tallest person in school and it’s all anyone talks to you about. Your body hasn’t caught up with itself yet either. Everything is skinny and sore, and the doctor told you no sports apart from swimming until the swelling in your knees calms down and your muscles grow around your stretched-out bones. But what if those bones don’t stop growing? People already stare, how long before they start pointing and laughing?

Your friend is the next person up and you feel yourself shiver. He resets his goggles, takes two steps down into the launch area and then says something to the lifeguard. The two of them laugh and turn to look at you before walking over to the precipice. Your friend gets down into the seated position and is about to reach for the bar above his head when you feel an impulse to shout, “You got this!”. Your friend turns towards you and, as he does, slips from his perch. A look of shock breaks out on his face as he is dragged down the ramp by a torrent of water and there is nothing he can do to stop it. The last you detect of him are his flailing arms and the sound of roaring laughter.

A moment later the lights go from red to green.

The lifeguard walks towards you and he doesn’t look impressed.

He points to a sign above your head that says:

**NO  
SHOUTING**





Now he directs you towards the slide and embarrassment meets anxiety and congeals. You try to comfort yourself; you've seen little kids queueing up for this and if it was actually unsafe, they wouldn't let people on it. You don't feel any calmer. You can't stop thinking about those signs because, the truth is, nobody would ever describe you as a strong swimmer. You step down into the ankle-deep water around the entrance. The coldness of it is a kind of clarity: this is a mistake. You keep walking forwards anyway and now the lifeguard is running through his instructions with the exact level of enthusiasm you would expect from someone who does this every day.

You try to get into a sitting position but the simple task of moving that way feels impossible. You think of everyone standing behind you in the queue, watching as you forget how to coordinate your own body, and eventually you just fold in on yourself like a crane collapsing in the wind. You try to compose yourself, then shuffle forwards on your backside and peer over the edge of the slide. You see a drop, a steep drop, but you can't see exactly how steep and how far. You hear the droning of pumps. You force your reluctant legs over the edge and now you feel the velocity of the water on your feet. Your arms feel weak as you reach for the bar above your head, and you get a dreadful sense of your shorts being loose again just as the light goes from red to green and you push yourself forward in shock.

You're off!

You descend into a dark and opaque space – a kind of human drainpipe. Water propels and resists you too, creating spray around your hips and ankles. You try to hoist your trunks up, but they cling to your skin. You tug and tug again and finally they move but you start to lose momentum. What if you get stuck? What if someone crashes into you? You claw at the slide beneath you, getting whatever purchase you can, then lean back and begin to pick up speed. You strain your neck and stomach trying to look up ahead but can see no further than your toes. You decide to lie down. The water feels cold against your shoulders. Tiny ridges where the sheets of plastic join together skim against the back of your head.

You close your eyes, rest your arms by your side and let the water carry you.

You are just a passenger now.

You are just a passenger in a car going through a tunnel, and your friend is driving. He looks the same, he even has his goggles on, but he's older now. There are two other boys in the back seats too, but you haven't met them yet. They pass you a beer and you accept it. You don't want it, but you accept it. They open another can and pass it to your friend, who takes his left hand off the steering wheel to claim it.

You sip your beer. It tastes chemical.

The boy behind you starts to drum on the back of your headrest.

dum  
dum  
dum  
dum

"Hey, dumb fuck," he says. "Got enough leg room?"

You hear laughter.

You look down at your bare legs. You need the space that you have. You wish you didn't, but you do. You bring your seat forward anyway, because making space for others is what you do, and now your knees are up by your chest, and you might just curl up into the foetal position.

The banging on your headrest gets harder:

DUM  
Ha ha ha  
DUM  
Ha ha ha  
DUM  
Ha ha ha

Everyone is laughing now, including your friend; he looks like a stranger now. He keeps laughing and drinking and he starts to cough. Beer spills down his face onto his lap. He coughs again, harder this time, a rasping stream of coughs and the car picks up speed and veers from side to side. The boys at the back roar their approval and the banging on the headrest continues.

"Move forward!" Says the boy behind you.

You look at your friend. He's still coughing. Is he choking?

You try to jerk your seat forward but it's as far as it can go.

"I'm sorry. I can't," you say.

Now you feel the shock of wetness on your head, and something splashes onto your face. The boy behind you is pouring his beer all over you and him and his pal are in hysterics and your friend is still coughing and the car is swerving more than before.

"Move!"







You can't. Your eyes sting. You wipe them and now you see light in the distance. The sounds of shouting and laughing and banging and coughing get louder and louder until they bleed together into a polyphonic roar. The light gets bigger and brighter until there is no longer any car or anything at all. There is just you and your stinging eyes, which you keep open long enough to stare into the light. Even you are shapeless now. You are just a feeling – the feeling of being thrown.

You explode and you reform.

You hear the sound of sinking.

You're in bed. Your old bed, which means your feet stick out the end. You rub your eyes. The walls are all sunshine yellow. You roll over and you see Mr. Croak, your old toy frog, is lying on the opposite pillow. He stares at you blankly. You hold eye contact with him, you're not sure why but you do, and something about his expression darkens.

You hurl yourself out of bed and pull back the curtains and now you see the house is completely submerged. You're underwater. You feel a new wetness beneath your feet and now you see water pouring in under the door. You pull at the door handle. It's locked. You try again, you yank and twist it over and over, but it won't open. You slam your shoulder into the door as the stream becomes a deluge.

You hear something. It's the sound of your mum's voice, you're sure of it, but as if coming from another room. You can't make out the words, but she sounds angry, and you sense that it's your fault. You try to shout to her, but no sound comes out. Water rises above your knees. You bang on the door. You bang on the walls, but they make no sound either. Water rises above your chest and now you feel yourself lifted towards the ceiling. You hear your mum again; she sounds closer now. You tell her that you're sorry.

You're sorry.

The water level keeps rising. There is little room left to breathe.

You hear something rattling. You look up at the ceiling and you see a hatch that you've never noticed before. The latch is moving! The door swings open and now you see clear sky above you!

You are buoyant.

You reach the surface and feel the open air and you breathe. You breathe. You breathe. You breathe.

Mist rises up around you and fades into the ether. You kick your legs in gentle rhythm

You are in a plunge pool bordered by palm trees and rockeries on the banks on either side. Water gushes and roars out of the slide behind you, misting and foaming and spraying on contact with the pool. On your left, you see a lifeguard in sunglasses at the top of a laddered chair. She gazes towards you then turns away. You look ahead and see a wooden sign that says:

**WELCOME**

**TO**

**YOUNG RIVER**

You need to move before the next person comes.

You swim towards the sign, but your clumsy breaststroke makes you tired, so you tread water and pretend to gaze at something in the distance. When you look back over your shoulder you see the lifeguard mutter a few words into a walkie-talkie and then put it to her ear as she waits for a reply.

"Pull, kick, glide," you tell yourself.

Your breaststroke never reaches the point of "glide", though. Your arms and legs refuse to sync, they share no common language. The harder you try the less you seem to move, you're like a frog with a weight tied around its stomach. You persevere, limbs thrashing in the water, until, at last, you feel the floor beneath your toes and the water begins to shallow. You take another few strokes and then you stop. Your limbs scream with relief. You take in air, hoist your shorts up, tie the tightest knot you can and then take a long, heavy stride forward. The sound of sloshing water comforts you. You keep going until you see a zigzagging map of the route you are about to take, and three words written in capital letters at the bottom.

**FEET FIRST**

**ONLY**

The course descends down a channel about three metres wide, starting at the top of a ramp in front of you. You peer over the edge. Gallons of water thunder down the bank, swerving



left and right and then out of view. You try to lift your legs up onto the starting block but your swollen knees refuse. You decide to clamber up using your arms instead. You heave yourself halfway over, legs still dangling in the air behind you, but you feel yourself losing grip. You try to recover but your arms give way and you belly flop, hard, onto the slide. Air bursts out of you. You feel yourself deflate just as the current pulls you in and you are dragged down the slope face first.

You're off!

You splash and scramble as you try to turn yourself around. Waves crash over you, into your face and up your nose. You reach out with your right hand for something to hold. Nothing. You twist your hips and heave your legs but can only get halfway around before you are dragged to the next turn sideways on. You spin one way then another until, at last, you find yourself the right way round in time for another sharp descent. You let out a shout of excitement, which surprises you. You start to laugh. You laugh and laugh and then lie on your back and allow yourself to be carried. Water clears from your ears. You hear the sound of people up ahead.

You feel yourself moving faster now. Sights and sounds arrive at speed, almost too fast to be perceived. There are tree branches and small birds and hands and feet and a hundred different types of light reflecting off the water.

This is a world in fragments, which makes you think of her because you think of her in fragments too: as a smile, a gesture or a moment in time. Yet, when you finally meet her, she will be whole and so will you – the two of you carried forward in ways you can't control, plunging and swerving around blind corners. Two bodies and two minds coursing through life together, side by side, converging, closer and closer until...

Bang!

You hit a ridge and are thrown down a slope which funnels you into a crisscross of narrow channels full of people laughing and colliding into each other. Torrents of water throw you one way and then another, an unpredictable and irresistible flow of energy and bodies. You bump into someone and apologise, but you get the sense that collision is the point. You feel your back up against someone else and when you turn around you see that it's your friend and he sees you too. You grab each other, half in play and half out of affection, before the flow of water draws you apart again.

You wonder if this is a kind of drunkenness.

That moment when a party takes on a life of its own. Normal rules no longer apply, you let

yourselves go. Less thinking and more fun! A sea of smiling faces, a perfect ambience with no sense of what will happen next. You feel it. You go with the flow; you're carried along with everyone else.

You're having fun.

Until you aren't.

You're distracted. You're thinking of her.

You stand alone on the dancefloor.

Where is she?

You see your friend in the distance. You watch him talking to two other people and they seem familiar somehow. Then you work it out. The boys from the car.

You are thrown sideways by a wave, drinks spill everywhere, but your gaze stays locked on them. The three of them wrestle each other and laugh in ways you never would. You've never seen your friend smile like that.

The music gets louder. It's too loud. You can't think.

Why is everyone here so stupid?!

Somebody clatters into you and this time it hurts. You feel anger rising. You push them away and see them crash into a wave and disappear.

Wait.

Was that... her?

Was it?

You drive through the waves towards her. You drive through bodies too. Where is she?







There's no sign of her.

You push past someone on your left and as they stumble back you see it's the boy who poured beer all over you. You try to ignore him, you try to get past, but he grins at you and then grabs you by the wrist and shoves you.

You fall backwards.

You try to clamber up, but he shoves you again – this time with a force that says he has been waiting for this moment.

You crash into the water.

Something is wrong.

You try to get up, but a force holds you down. You push again and again but you can't break free. You throw your tormented body in all directions; you push against anything you can. You lose coherence. The laughter and shouting and crashing waves that roared in your ears are now just echoes. Your senses are flooded. Light blurs in your eyes, then disappears altogether.

Your head breaks through the water, just for a moment, and you gasp for air.

Then, you're pulled back under again.

Your body is weak. The pull is irresistible now.

You feel yourself spinning and folding and cartwheeling in the water.

Is this really happening?

You wonder what your parents will think when they hear what happened. You wonder what story your friend will tell to explain it all and you wonder how quickly everyone's lives will move on without you. You will become nothing more than a cautionary tale that parents tell their children, maybe even a figure of fun. The boy who ignored the signs and got his comeuppance.

You feel disoriented. You have no sense of what is up and what is down or where you are. Thoughts cycle in and out of your mind, a storm of connections and disconnections. You think of regret – regret for stupid things you've said and important things you haven't. You think about not swimming more as a child. You think of the girl with red hair on the slide and your friend's stupid goggles. You think about life.

Something charges through you. You feel it.

You fling your body around wildly. The water is heavy and tormented, and so are you, but you give everything you have and thrust your arms above your head. You do it over and over and now you feel something in the water! You snatch at it but miss and are thrown head over heels by the current. You fling your hands up again and again trying to get a grip, until finally you feel it pressing against your right palm. You grab hold. You've got it. You bring your left hand up to meet it and now you feel a surge. A new energy, a force that moves you.

You are carried through the water. You feel the pressure drop and the air roar as you break through the surface. Light and sound overwhelm you; the only thing you can think about is holding on. You start to cough. You cough and cough and then you breathe in greedily.

The surge that carried you out is still with you – you aren't just floating, you're flying. You are being carried on a pole, an inch or two above the water, by a muscular lifeguard standing on the bank. He heaves you towards the steps where you see a sign that says:

**WACKY**

**WHIRLPOOL**

You hear a light round of applause that breaks out into a small crackle of laughter from the crowd around the edge of the pool. You see your friend standing there, waiting for you. He smirks and shakes his head and then begins to laugh.

A cold breeze travels through you.

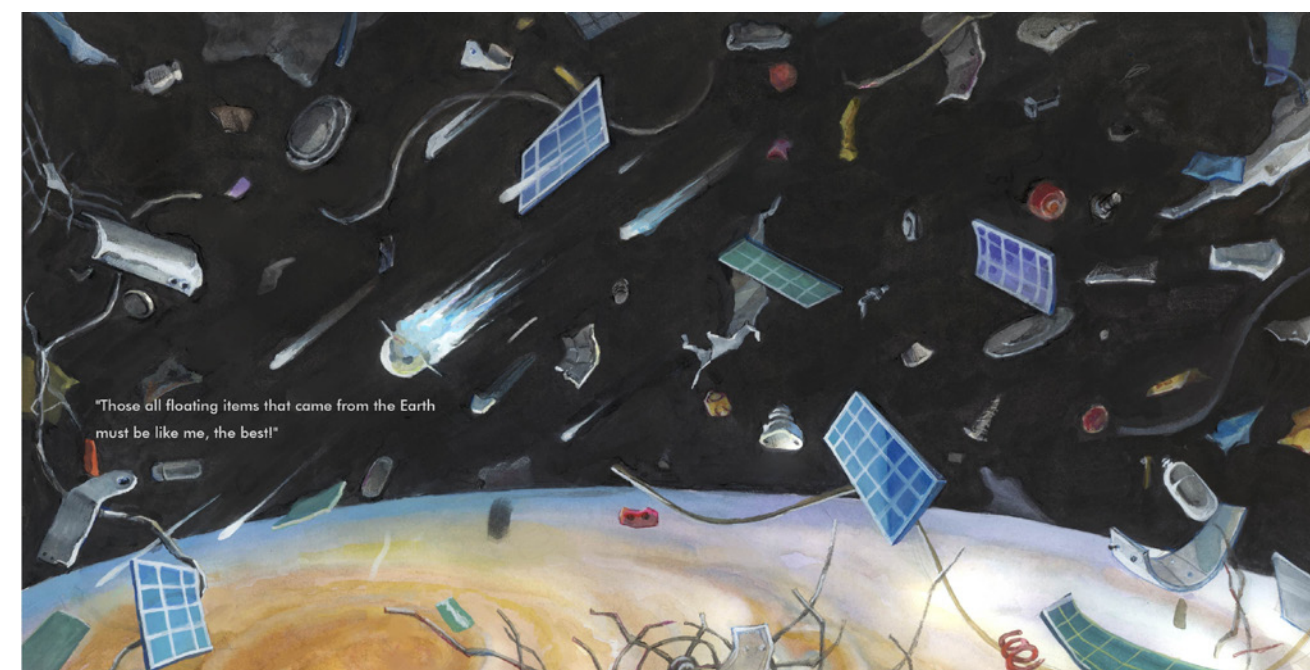
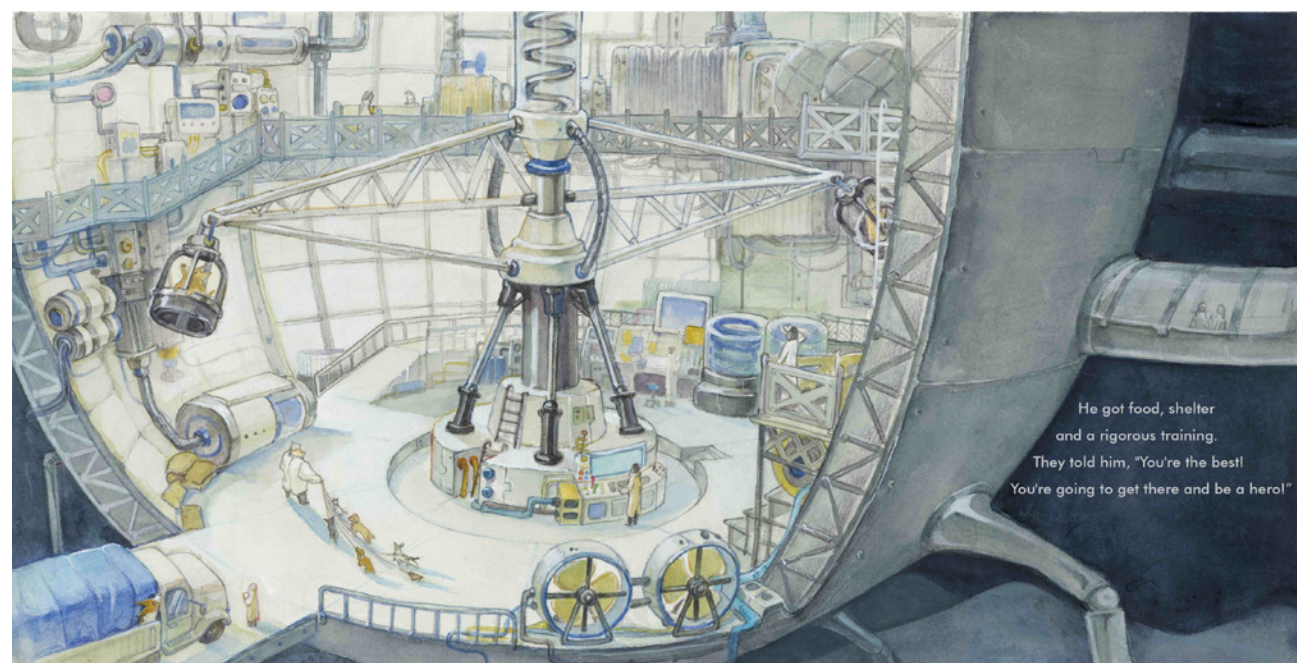
You look over your shoulder and now you see your trunks have gone, sucked into the vortex, and sunlight glistens off your soaked backside.

You smile.

It feels good to be alive.







**Odyssey of Laika**  
by Xidan Liang







## An Interview with Chris Haughton

We interviewed illustrator, designer and author Chris Haughton in the studio at the end of his garden on a sunny Monday afternoon. Chris kindly made us all tea before we settled in for a two-hour conversation about his career, AI and the importance of playing tricks in stories.



**Spinning Gold:** Hi, Chris. Can you tell us how you became an illustrator?

**Chris:** Well... I graduated in graphic design in 2001. I didn't really want to be a graphic designer but I was always into art. I was only doing it because I thought I would get a job whereas to be an artist it's much harder.

I started at an animation studio, which was a really lucky break because it's a brilliant animation studio and they've gone on to do some amazing things. One of them created 'Hey Duggee', another one created

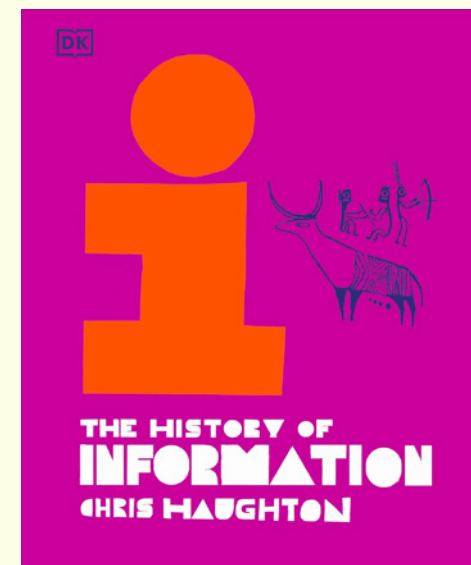
the best-selling children's show 'Nighty Night', another was 'The Amazing World of Gumball'. 'Peppa Pig' actually came out of the studio too, so, you know, I was just like a sponge in there. I was just a runner, making the tea and taking out the bins and the pay was pretty poor. In the end, they actually fired me. It turned out to be the best thing that could have happened because then I started looking for illustration work. Once I got to the point that I could pay rent and had a bit more time, I thought, you know, I'd really like to do children's books. I went to Bologna's Children's Book Fair and a Korean publisher picked up my first book 'A Bit Lost'. The next year, I went back to Bologna with a box of Korean books and I was the strange Irish guy handing out Korean books. I then got a deal with Walker books and started working directly with them. I also got to work with David Lloyd, who was the editor of Michael Rosen's 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt'.

**SG:** Where did the idea for your latest book, 'The History of Information', come from?

**Chris:** People don't know how manipulated the news is. I always wanted to do something about that but if you explicitly make a book about propaganda you're limiting who's going to pick it up. Then, in 2006, I came across this podcast... UC Berkeley had put all their undergraduate lectures online for free. You paid no money and anyone in the world could access it. It was in the utopian phase of the internet. I started listening to it and found a course called the 'History of Communication' - it went from cave painting all the way to the internet in a very accessible way. I was immediately really excited about that and so I contacted the course coordinator in 2009 and that was the start of 'The History of Information'.

**SG:** And now we have AI! What can you tell us about it and what influence do you think it will have on artists?

**Chris:** So, generative AI was basically about identifying images. They'd get a big bank of images that are tagged with 'this is a dog, this isn't a dog' and then after a while the thing can recognize what's a dog and what's not. Then they said, okay, here's this thing that isn't a dog but there's some hints of things that might be triangles or something and you can tell it to look for the dog and it starts looking for the dogs and it will draw the ear of the dog and then this dog appears out of this nothing. That's how generative AI works. Once you can identify an image basically you can draw it. The problem is, they've been training these things on all of our collective work! There's a website called haveyoubeentrained.com and all of Midjourney and the image AI things were trained on this bank of 5.6 billion images and nobody gave their permission to have their images in there. And you can see if your images are in there by searching on the site. So, when I say, "Can you do a squirrel in the style of Chris Haughton?" it comes back with a squirrel in the style of Chris Haughton but that is because it's trained on my work. And I'm not being paid anything.



Instead, better usage might be to say, "Here is an image and you can use it for six months - for those six months they have the right to use it any way they like. You could make the period longer too, say three years, or indefinite. If it's indefinite you get what's called a buy-out. You get a massive amount of money. It's like 20-30 grand, even more for image buyouts because basically, you know, they can use it for their logo, they can use it for, yeah, forever. So what these generative AI companies are doing is basically a buy-out. They're doing it for billions of images they are buying out but without paying any money, it's extraordinary. And, this is illegal under British copyright law and the British Government has basically said, you know, maybe we can just do an opt-out sort of thing?

We need to make absolutely sure that if AI is using our work we get paid for it or they're not allowed to use any of it. They can't use copyrighted things to make a profit.

**SG:** As well as being art, your work also tells stories. What is storytelling, to you?

**Chris:** I've just finished reading a book called 'Trickster Makes This World' and it talks about how the trickster character is everywhere in culture and actually gave birth to culture in a way. The book describes a situation where there are all of these different animals, the predator and prey and everyone is sort of doing their own thing and trying to eat each other or escape being eaten. Then along comes a fox, or some sort of smart animal. The fox figures out it's being chased by the predator following its scent so it runs one way and then back another way and it's basically a trickster because it's outsmarting another animal. The key point is that the fox understands the theory of mind and then is able to outsmart them. And so in every human culture the trickster is the divider. There's a border between the gods and humans and the trickster is there and he either moves people from one side or to the other. In Adam and Eve it's the



snake or the devil or whatever's tempting Eve. But apparently in every culture there is this trickster character. And it's not always malicious. And I think, I mean, this is what telling a story is. You tell a story, you're feeding things in, it's like smoke and mirrors really, like you sort of lead people on like this and then you show it like that. Any good story has to have some sort of swerve. And, to make that serve you have to be sort of a trickster because you need to understand what the people in front of you are listening to and then subvert.

AI as it is at the moment is just hoovering up all of our creative expressions and then averaging them out and, you know, giving us back this sort of brown mess. But I don't expect that phase is going to last very long. So, we can outfox it for a while and I think we can do interesting things. Increasingly, it looks like the future is going to put more and more pressure on your intellect and it will continue to be like an intelligence arms race which is basically all it's ever been. All of human nature is really sort of about that, I think.

**SG:** There's a lot of character and detail in your work. Can you describe your creative process?

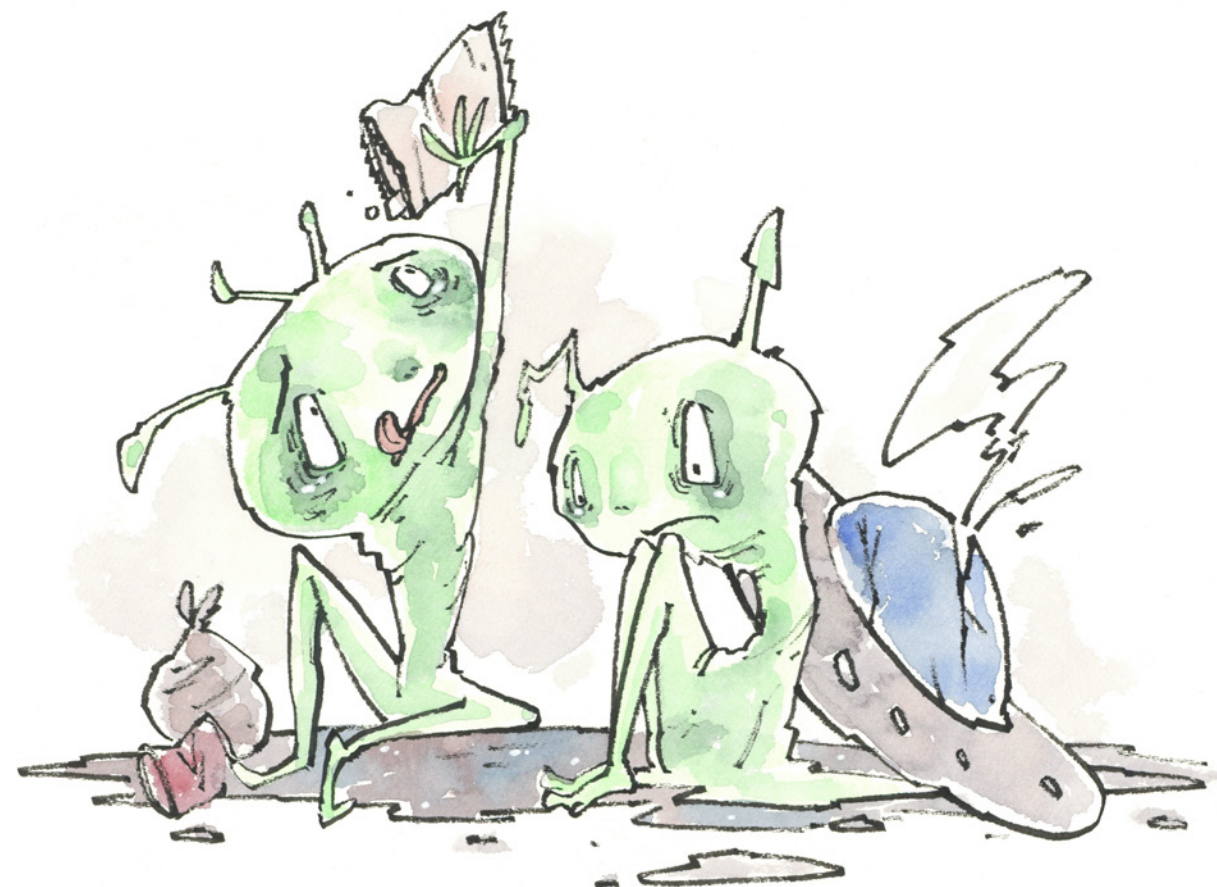
**Chris:** I start with a sketch and kind of map the whole book out on one piece of paper. And then I write down some nonsense idea that comes to me. I'll make lots of different sketches and then I'll do a collage, then I photoshop it together and move it around

a bit. The wonkiness gives it the character. I make it as wonky as I can. I basically get it working somewhat and then I start playing with the language.

I see picture books as almost like songs. There's a sort of chorus in it. Oral culture was really the first information technology, you know, it's intentional. And it's very important when you're telling a story that everybody knows where you are in the story and what's just happened so if you use things like repetition and have a sort of chorus like a song so everybody knows where you are in the story. You don't need that so much if you're reading literature because you can loop back and you're your own guide, you only read the next sentence when you've read the one before that but in oral culture the story is continuing whether you've understood it or not so you need to make sure that all the listeners are on the same page.



*Chris also talked to us about his upcoming book, 'The History of Evolution' which is still a work in progress. He said he spent seventeen years working on 'The History of Information' from the first idea to seeing it as a fully finished book - which is now available to buy.*



**Aliens**  
by Lani Kim





**Lovers**  
by Yang Xu





**Little Red**  
by Eve Soffer Liberman



## Grimm Beginnings: The Child of the Woods

by Philippa Cox

A baby's cry rang out in the forest. A woman heard the noise and followed.

In a clearing in the woods, where the trees thinned to grey, was a baby wrapped up in a red cloak.

She walked up closer, suspicious. There was no one else around. The baby stopped crying.

Without hesitation, she picked up the hopeless thing in her arms, folding the red cloak around so that it was tight. The cloak purred.

"There, there," she whispered. "Let's get you inside where it's safe and warm."

"In the forest?" asked a person from the village.

"Red cloak?!" cried another.

"I don't believe it!"

No one knew where the baby had come from, and everyone said what a strange thing it was to find a baby in the woods wrapped up in a red cloak.

The cloak was thick and firm. It was soft to the touch and when the baby cried it hummed a soothing sound.

The woman lived in a wooden hut she had built by the forest. The beams were old masts from ships and the chimney made from tin cans.

Once inside, the woman gave the infant some milk that she heated on the fire and decided to bring this child up as her own. She had always wanted children and this was a little girl.

When the girl started crawling, the woman made her some clothes out of rags and string. The cloak at first was a blanket, and it whispered her to sleep. As she grew older, she wore it tied around her neck and never parted with it.

"It was my mother's," she'd say. "She left it for me."

"That child is strange," other people in the village would say.

"She's not like us at all."

But the woman loved the child more than anything else in the world. She could see the wildness in her eyes, feel the roughness of bark on her skin, hear the creature's spirits chime in her voice. "She is a child of the woods," she would say. "She is a spirit child."



Eventually the people from the village distanced themselves from the woman and the girl. They didn't want to be seen with such folk.

The little girl was happy and in the forest was where she loved most. She'd walk through the trees as though they were old friends and her red cloak would smile in the wind. She grew to know every plant, nook, cranny, and stream. She knew which mushrooms were the best to eat and where to find the juiciest berries. She'd take them back to the woman she called mother.

"How did you find these?" her mother would ask.

"I taste it in the memories of the wind," the girl would say. "I hear it in the earth beneath my feet."

"Very good, child," the mother would say. "Soon you will know all there is to know about the forest."

The mother would cook with the food that was foraged, or use it to make natural remedies that cured and soothed. They would eat together once the sun rose and lastly just after the sunset. They would share stories with one another about their days and became like the closest of friends. They grew to be companions to each other and both felt grateful that the other was there.

One day a visitor came to the house. It was a man who was as tall as a great oak and had fingers, the girl noticed, that looked like crow's feet.

"I wish to speak to you in private," said the man.

The woman flushed. What did this man have to say? "Very well," she replied and the little girl left the room. She could hear muffled voices and shuffling about. Footsteps and scratching, scratching, creak. The cloak around her neck hissed and shook.

She gathered up her dress and went outside under the windowsill, where the grass was damp, and the weeds caressed her knees. There was a snail crawling up the side of the house and she noticed the spiralling patterns on its carapace. She listened quietly as a fox. Her cloak fizzed and crackled.

"Milk?" She could hear her mother from inside. "Sugar?"

"Yes," came the man's reply.

She could hear the sound of crockery in rhythm to footsteps. Then all was quiet.

"What can I help you with?" her mother finally asked.

"I think you know why I'm here," said the man. The little girl under the windowsill bit her nail and gnawed at the skin guarding it.

"Oh no, you are mistaken," said the woman. "You will have to tell me, please."

"Very well," the man was solemn. "I've come here to take the child away." The red cloak twitched and rippled. The girl ripped off her nail. Blood seeped.

"You can't do that, she's my daughter."

"She is a child of the state. You have no right to call her your own. She needs a proper home with a mother and father, she needs a proper education, and proper clothes. She can't be seen in that red cloak she's been wearing since she was found."

"But it was her mother's," said the woman.

"It's wrong!"

The girl couldn't listen anymore. Already their words were biting at her ankles and pulling at her hair. She could feel their tendrils latch onto her skin, digging in their spikes deep, deeper. She got up and turned. There was the woman, the woman who she had called mother; the woman who was her mother, ever since she had been found that day in the forest, wrapped up in her red cloak.

"Take this," her mother's voice was swift and light.

The girl took the basket from her mother.

"Go to your grandmother's house where you will stay for a few nights."

The girl nodded.

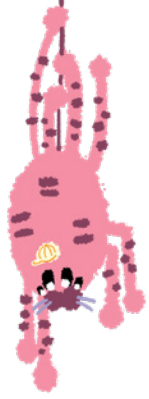
"No one is going to take you away, I will not let it." She kissed the girl and the red cloak purred. "Now, run," said her mother.

The little girl in the red cloak ran.

Once upon a time...







**Rapunzel Retelling**  
by Beatriz Martínez





## Book Review: *Antonia Goes to the River - A Silent Story That Speaks Volumes*

by Maria P. Restrepo

*A book with just one word that will break your heart?*

*Antonia Goes to the River* is a silent picturebook by Colombian author and illustrator Dipacho. On the first spread, you may think it is just a fun story of a little girl and her dog in a tropical forest in Colombia. Then they start a journey, and you may not make much of it, but then you'll find yourself immersed in a deeply moving story about forced migration, loss, and resilience—told with just a single line of dialogue: “Antonia”.

The main characters of the book are Antonia, a yellow Labrador dog, and her little girl. We follow them and their family as they pack up their belongings and leave home by boat, then through the jungle, until they finally get in a car to an unknown destination. But partway through the journey, Antonia gets lost. The family has no choice but to continue without her.



Even though the story doesn't use words—apart from the dog's name—the images speak volumes. However, the author's dedication gives us a powerful clue of the context of the book:

**“To all who have been forced to leave behind their homes.”**

Just with this sentence, this journey acquires a whole new gravity. It's not just a trip—it's a flight from danger, shaped by Colombia's long and painful history of armed conflict.

Dipacho draws inspiration from a real event. In 2002, 79 people were killed during a violent clash between armed groups in the Darién region of Colombia. Many survivors had to flee. Months later, some returned home—traveling in boats, one of which was called Niño Chévere, the same boat the family boards in the book. That's no coincidence.



This layer of historical truth gives Antonia Goes to the River a haunting emotional weight. But the most heartbreaking moment comes when the girl loses Antonia in the jungle. For children, pets are more than animals—they're family, companions, and symbols of stability. Losing Antonia is like losing a piece of home, a friend, a sense of safety. The girl's pain is shown so vividly when she yells her dog's name that it's impossible not to feel it.



Dipacho persuades us to pause and truly feel the girl's heartbreak by dedicating three full spreads to this moment of loss. In the first, we see her and her mother calling out for Antonia, with no response—capturing that painful stage of disbelief, when you're still hoping it isn't real. Then comes a powerful image of the girl screaming her dog's name, the desperation and fear pouring out of her. Finally, we see her collapse into tears, comforted by friends who wrap her in a quiet, collective embrace. These pages don't rush past the pain—they hold space for it, reminding us just how deeply loss can be felt, especially through a child's eyes.



The book also uses another powerful symbol: suitcases. At the beginning of the story, they're everywhere. But as the journey goes on, more and more are left behind. But these suitcases not only represent material loss. When people are forced to leave, they don't just lose their things; they lose parts of their lives—memories, traditions, even their sense of identity. And yet, they move forward, hoping for something better. What makes this story even more meaningful is its ending—or rather, its lack of one. We never see where the family ends up. There's no promise of safety, just the hope that their journey leads somewhere better. In the final pages, we see a bird flying overhead—a quiet reminder that migration is natural, and no one should be judged for seeking a safer place to land.



*Antonia Goes to the River* may be a children's book, but it speaks to all ages. With its silent pages and subtle storytelling, it invites us to feel, to imagine, and to remember the real people behind stories of displacement. It's a quiet book—but one that echoes long after you close it.



Foxy McFluff  
trotted to  
Bark and Brew,

for coffee so  
warm

and a muffin  
or *two*.



Bunny Lu grew anxious,  
her paws all sweaty,  
the kettle brewed

PING!!!

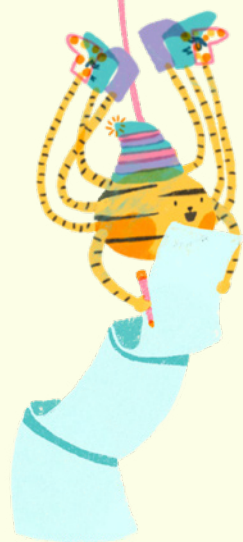
but  
Bunny Lu  
wasn't  
ready.



The Bark and Brew Cafe  
by Peach Richmond







## River Child

by Maya Eadie-Catling

Intended audience: Upper Middle Grade

*This is the opening to a coming-of-age fable which I intend to be told through verse and illustration. When Tam leaves the River behind and comes to land, he meets Calum. This is the story of their deepening friendship, and of the dark consequences of Tam's rebellion against his mother, the River.*



### River Child

Let's play  
river and bank.  
Here we go,  
everyone in a line!

When I say river,  
you jump in.  
When I say bank,  
you jump out.

Try to keep up,  
don't fall in,  
don't fall in.

In the river,  
on the bank.

In the river,  
on the bank.

On the bank,  
in the river.

Bank, river,  
bank, river.

Bank, bank,  
bank, bank,  
river.

Oh dear!

You fell in.



**Popo Mystery**  
by Hebe Ziming Xu

## 1

Downstream,  
the River noticed  
something was missing.

All around  
her waters  
felt quiet  
and empty.

Her child.

Where was he?  
Where had he gone?

Cool darkness  
spread through her.

She watched  
and she waited

## 2

'I heard you got kicked out of your last  
school,'  
said the tall girl.

'It wasn't like that,'  
Calum replied.  
'I swear.'

The tall girl,  
Safa,  
smirked in disbelief.

Then, she turned,  
'And you,  
why are you here?'

They both looked  
at the strange boy beside them.

He wasn't wearing uniform,  
when he should've been.  
Was dressed in black,  
instead,  
his own clothes.

This boy wasn't fitting in,  
like they all tried to be.  
There was something about him,  
that made you look twice.  
Eyes a deep deep grey.  
Flecked with gold.







**I Can Do It Alone**  
by Maria P. Restrepo



3

Tap,  
Calum felt on his shoulder.

He didn't turn,  
kept his eyes facing forward.

'New boy,'  
said a voice  
just behind.  
'Look at me.'

Reluctant,  
he turned.

The boy with the red face,  
eyes fixed on him.

The geography teacher  
with his back to the class,  
pen to the board,  
deep in the throes  
of a monologue,  
continued oblivious.

The red-faced boy  
took his cue,  
'Explain to me  
new boy,'  
he began in a stage whisper.  
'How is your mum  
really your mum  
if she doesn't look like you?'

Calum looked at the floor.

Felt his  
hands  
tight,  
heart  
race

and thought of the words  
that came before.

The words that ended in fists,  
that ended with here  
rather than there  
where he was before.

Calum exhaled,  
empty faced.

'Excuse me, sir,'  
came a voice from the side.  
Cold and calm and clear  
in the hot room.

'I'm not feeling well,  
I need to be excused.'

The whole class turned,  
Tam stood up.  
The teacher nodded,  
weary and  
tired.

'Could somebody escort him  
to the bathroom please.'

Calum raised his hand,  
'I'll take him sir.'



4

Calum followed Tam  
along the corridor,  
to the green lit sign  
above the fire escape.

'This way,' said Tam,  
pushing open the door.  
'Let's get some air.'

Calum followed him  
out and up,  
winding, winding  
on the spiral railed staircase  
which clutched to the side  
of the squat square white building.

Pulling himself up  
Calum stood on the flat roof  
and exhaled.

Up here  
where he could breathe  
properly.

Tam sat down  
cross legged on the roof  
and looked out at the water.

With his eyes  
he followed  
the snake of the river into the distance.  
And didn't say  
anything.

Calum sat beside him  
leant his head to his knees,  
and wished he was home.

He thought of her,  
her great warm hug,  
her deep belly laugh  
her calm.,



**Popo Mystery**  
by Hebe Ziming Xu

'She's my mum,  
you know,'  
Calum said, turning to him.

'Not from birth,  
but the only mum I've known.  
Anything different,  
boys like him  
they just don't get.'

Tam was quiet for a moment,  
then he laughed  
to himself.

'I wonder what those idiots  
would say  
if they met my mum,'  
he said at last.

'Why?' said Calum,  
turning to face him,  
his mouth a small smile.

'It's hard to explain,'  
Tam said,  
hesitating.

He was quiet  
for a moment,  
his face thoughtful,  
deciding.

'I could take you though.'



## 5

'You shouldn't have been up on the roof,'  
Safa said  
as the final bell rang.

'I saw you go that way.  
That could get you expelled.'

Tam watched her  
and nodded.  
'You're right,' he said seriously.  
'We should be more careful  
who sees us  
next time we go.'

Calum followed Tam  
out the gates  
out of school.

The sun on their backs,  
they took the shuttle train  
along the river  
one stop.

Away from the shops,  
where the warehouses began  
and the concrete stretched out to a beach.

Here there was no one,  
no one at all  
but them.

Along the quay  
they found a small ladder  
rusted and strong  
hanging off of the edge.

Calum climbed down,  
jumped  
onto the sands  
and stood on the beach.

Closer to the river,  
then he'd ever been before.

The river opened out in front of them,  
like a book  
spread to a double page.

Grey and blue and black  
wide and deep,  
beneath the sky.

They watched  
a low barge  
laden with containers  
chugging past.  
It hooted a horn  
then it was  
quiet.

Tam stood beside him  
and smiled,  
looking out at the river.  
But Calum looked at Tam.

Calum looked  
at the boy who didn't fit in,  
wasn't meant to be there,  
with him  
on the beach,  
after school.

Wasn't meant to be on land at all.



## Under The Umbrella: Comparing Normativity of Sexuality in *Cinderella* and *Heartstopper*

by Sophie O'Connor-Smart

The two reasons that cause adults to pick up a children's book are for nostalgia or to heal the inner child. I dove into the world of Alice Oseman a year ago and found myself wishing I had those books when I was a teenager.

The 'relationship with books from our past is a bittersweet one' (Waller 2008, p20). I loved *Cinderella*, but rereading it left me angry. If 'stories are how we make sense of the world' (Short, 2012) then what heteronormative world does this force us into?

### Queerness

Angelides (2013) defines queer as 'an umbrella category for the sexually marginalized'. While queerness involves a wide variety of identities, including gender, I will use the word queer primarily discussing sexuality.

Queer representation in children's literature allows for the following to happen, based on the concept of Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors (Bishop 1990):

A. Children's literature containing queer characters allows for a window into the world where people are queer.

B. Children's literature also acts as a sliding glass door, allowing them to see what those people are like.

C. The window can become a mirror. If the child reading the book is also queer, knowingly or not, it can validate their sexuality and show them they are not alone.

### Queer Theory

Queer theory focusses on challenging heteronormativity, and identity politics focusses on identity (Sullivan 2003, p81). Combined, we get an expression of identity where heteronormativity is challenged. While identity politics goes further than this, it is this relationship that ignites my research.

### Normativity

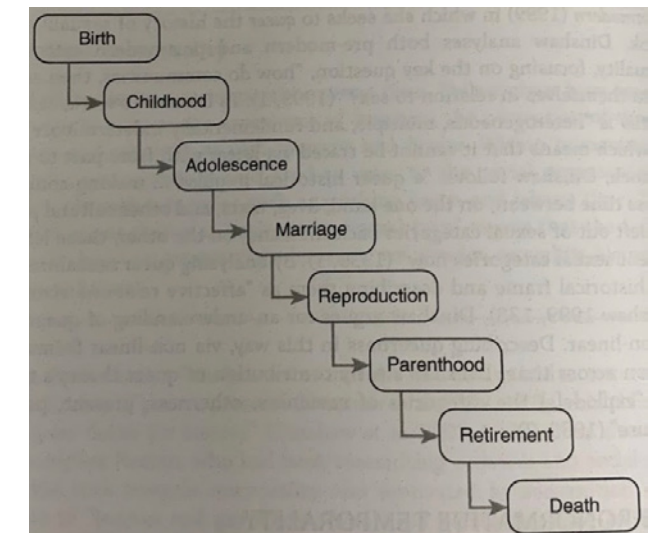


Figure 1. The Heteronormative Timeline (McCann and Monaghan, 2020, p216)





Queer theory defines heteronormativity as 'not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life' (McCann and Monaghan 2020, p11). Heteronormativity not only says that a man and woman should always be together, but also that there are assumptions made about a person's character if they are not heterosexual.

McCann and Monaghan (2020, p13) say that heterosexuality is seen as not just the normal way of living but is 'made to seem ideal'. There is a heteronormative timeline that society seems to follow (Figure 1). Tilsen and Nylund (2010) back this up saying we see heterosexuality as superior.

Allen (2023) says that literature is a source in developing identity, so children's literature must show all sexualities as the norm, so that children learn they don't need to repress sexuality.

### Couple Desires

As in figure 1, it is assumed that following a marriage, couples will have children (Lester, 2014, p245). This refers to heterosexual couples. However, queer couples may have the same desires. This presents more of a normative issue with all relationships regardless of sexuality. Society expects this outcome regardless of relationship. Although, thinking about Tilsen and Nylund (2010), despite expectations, a marriage and children of a heterosexual couple may appear superior to that of a marriage and children of a non-heterosexual couple.

### Bisexuality

One of the biggest issues that bisexuals face, is people assuming they are the identity that externally matches their relationship (Kless, 2010, p129). It can be seen as a person feeling confused until they realise whether they're heterosexual or homosexual. Without children being exposed to bisexual stories, they are not going to get the chance to walk through that sliding glass door and

be exposed to what bisexuality is actually like. This was a take on Bishop (1990) by Knopp-Schwyn and Francentese (2019).

In children's literature, we are seeing an increase in picturebooks that have two mums or two dads. However, the use of the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' are absent (Knopp-Schwyn & Francentese 2019, p.15). Picturebooks don't need this language to display a homosexual relationship, they will use pronouns in the text with images of two women or two men. With bisexuality, there isn't an indicator that a character isn't heterosexual or homosexual. Even if, for example, a man leaves a woman for another man, it could easily be interpreted that the man was homosexual all along. This is backed up by the assumptions made by Kless (2010).

### Comparative Analysis: Examples of normativity in character and couple representation

These books have a different readership. Cinderella (Standbie & Rainville, 2018) is targeted at 3-6 years, and Heartstopper Volume 2 (Oseman, 2019) is targeted at 11+. I chose to continue to compare these texts because both stories are about finding love and how characters navigate that process. They are both big names: the majority of people will know of Cinderella, and Heartstopper is hugely popular among both teenagers and adults, especially in queer communities. Finally, they were published around the same time (2018 and 2019), so hypothetically, they should represent current attitudes towards their stories.



### A Couple's Sexuality



Figure 2: Umbrella (Oseman, 2019, p339)



Figure 3: Friend (Standbie, Rainville, 2018)

### Heartstopper (Oseman, 2019)

Charlie looking is emphasised with 'GLANCE'. This wording feels sneaky, like he has something to hide. This is confirmed through his face. The gap between the two panels of Charlie looking (Low, 2012) shows he has taken time before going to kiss Nick. The space between these two moments shows careful thinking has to be done before kissing. This shows how the characters see their sexuality. Charlie waits to see if anyone is around. This shows they feel they can't be seen kissing, suggesting that they don't see their relationship as the norm.



### Cinderella (Standbie, Rainville, 2018)

Figure 3 shows Cinderella about to leave the ball. Their eyes are locking, hands touching, a cheek being kissed. When you look at the text, a contrasting message is displayed. 'She kissed her new friend' (Standbie, Rainville, 2018). Considering the remainder of the book is a search to find her, fall in love, marry, and have children the word 'friend' is an ironic choice. This may be age appropriacy, but it seems to ignore any romantic relationship. The image doesn't do that. Could this leave a chance for sexuality ambiguity? That could certainly happen in a conversation encouraged by a teacher or caregiver (Johnston 2011, p135).

### Comparison

Figure 2 is explicitly not a heteronormative sexuality. Figure 3 implies a heteronormative sexuality, but it could be open to a discussion with a reader. There is a clear queer identity with Figure 2, but an ambiguous relationship appearance in Figure 3. Figure 2 has a desperate kiss out of romantic desire, whereas Figure 3 shows a desperate kiss and desire to get away. The biggest similarity, shame of identity. In Figure 2, for their sexuality, in Figure 3, for class.



## The Heteronormative Timeline and Couple Desire



Figure 7: Marriage (Stansbie, Rainville, 2018)



Figure 8: Pretending (Oseman, 2019, p532)



Figure 9: Family (Stansbie, Rainville, 2018)

## Heartstopper (Oseman, 2019)

The couple's desire in Figure 8 is to be a couple. They don't want to pretend. It is clear that coming out is what will enable them to be a couple openly. This is unfortunately reconfirming the norm of coming out.

## Cinderella (Stansbie, Rainville, 2018)

In Figure 7, Cinderella's stepmother is assuming that her children will marry, and assuming they will marry a man. The stepmother has assumed sexuality for the girls: heteronormative thinking. Cinderella rejects this. Despite not explicitly queer, there is a rejection of the heteronormative timeline from figure 1. Queer or not, Cinderella shows no interest in getting married, despite society's expectation. Although, she is the only character unhappy in the image, suggesting a lack of sexual desire, or departing from heteronormativity leads to unhappiness.

In Figure 9, Cinderella and the Prince live happily ever after, married with children. This perpetuates the heteronormative timeline (Figure 1).

## Comparison

The timelines of story are very different. This is also because of their medium, the graphic novel can stick much closer to a day-by-day, week-by-week timeline, but a picturebook has to show the whole story very quickly. This leads even more to interpretation in the picturebook, meaning the reader needs to have the skills to do the thinking on what may have happened in-between. This can be helped through discussion.

The comparison of Figure 8 to Figure 9 highlights the heteronormativity of desire. A couple must wish to be wed and bear children straight away, and, also normatively, the non-heterosexual couple desire to be together without having to hide. This creates an interesting parallel, of Figure 8 both

showing a norm for queerness, but also not yet a norm for the heteronormative timeline.

## Bisexuality



Figure 10: Bisexual (Oseman 2019, p361)

Nick has to research his sexuality. We know from the erasure of bisexuality in literature (Knopp-Schwyn & Francentesse, 2019) that needing to search for what your sexuality means, is not the norm. There is no connection between him and Charlie, as you can see in the top frame, his lack of knowledge displaying physical distance from Charlie. As Charlie does know his own sexuality, is this a representation of Nick's distance from queerness? It also shows that Nick has also struggled to find himself relating to bisexual material, which will be relatable for bisexual teenagers in his position, allowing them to see themselves in Nick (Bishop, 1990).

Sexuality is not explicit in Cinderella. This fits with the common pattern with picturebooks and sexuality (Knopp-Schwyn & Francentesse, 2019, p.15). However, the book has no control in what discussions

end up surrounding the book. The lack of label means there is plenty of room for interpretation. Nothing states that Cinderella is not bisexual. If children are taught to enquire with a queer lens, then maybe more heteronormative stories can be queered, or at least investigated so that the assumption is not heterosexual.

## Conclusion

I thought my response would be a desire to 'queer up' Cinderella. Yes, it is still incredibly normative, but it allows for conversation with children about what they expect in terms of sexuality. The main conversation is in fact in age appropriacy, and both texts discuss sexuality in a way that is age appropriate. *Heartstopper* (Oseman, 2019) directly discussing, but *Cinderella* (Stansbie, Rainville, 2018) challenging subtly. The solution is not to have picturebooks specify a sexuality. The solution is to develop a queer lens. We need to get more comfortable with discussing and challenging normative tropes related to sexuality. It doesn't have to be explicit for it to be there. The possibilities of discussion can allow for bisexuality to always be a consideration.

The issue is not content, the issue is the **normativity that we need to shake off, whether we are under the queer umbrella or out in the heterosexual rain.**







## A Creative Response to Under the Umbrella by Sophie O'Connor-Smart

by Daniel Newton

The main points that stood out to me in this essay were the need for age-appropriate representations—directly discussing sexuality in texts aimed at older audiences and challenging subtly in those for younger audiences—as well as the lack of bisexual representation specifically.

I primarily write YA but have been experimenting this year writing for a younger audience, and so I decided to write a Cinderella retelling aimed at two different audiences, exploring how I might challenge heteronormativity in different ways.

The more interior narration in YA allowed for more freedom in discussing the issues surrounding sexuality, in this case who the Prince will marry as well as who he has dated previously, and to more explicitly address bisexuality. The middle-grade piece focuses more on the action-packed events of a joust, with the references to sexuality and gender much more subtle, although marriage is of course referenced throughout. The use of different points of view and tenses was also deliberate, to

reflect trends in the different genres. I chose to write from the Prince's perspective, firstly as I was also keeping Heartstopper in mind, but also as I felt that it is he, rather than Cinderella, who would be more concerned with questions about who he will marry—I imagine Cinderella has far more pressing things on her mind at this point in the story.

### Middle Grade

The Prince was not enjoying this tournament as much as he usually did. Not even the jousting, which was his favourite. The King and Queen had ruined it that morning at breakfast by talking about his wedding.

Urgh. His wedding.

It was all they'd been talking about since he came of age. Finding him someone to marry so that he was ready to be king himself one day. He had always known this would be coming and that it would be expected of him, but he always thought he wouldn't mind too much.

Except the Prince did mind, because he did not want to get married. Not yet, anyway, even though he was of age. Not when there were things like tournaments which were much more interesting than balls and dinners and weddings.

He'd much rather be here, watching two knights take their places and test the weight of their lances. The one on the white horse drew a circle in the air with her lance, and the other one made his brown horse clop his hooves in the dirt.

At the wave of a flag the knights charged at each other, lances raised, and the Prince cheered when each lance hit its opponent's shield and shattered into pieces. Okay, maybe he could enjoy himself a little bit after all.

Why did he have to meet the person he's going to marry at a ball, anyway? Why not here, at the tournament? Where he could see them fight rather than just dance?

Well, for one thing the King and Queen probably wouldn't be too happy about him marrying a knight. Even though he's supposed to be learning how to fight and joust as well as any knight, better even, because one day he'll be king. The person he marries is supposed to be nobler than that, someone to sit politely beside him in the stands while they watch the action.

The Prince thinks maybe it would be better if he could meet someone who was in the action. That sounds a lot more fun to him.

### Young Adult

The Prince runs his hands down his waistcoat and straightens the buttons one more time. His hair will have to do as it is, scruffy as always. Some people like it like that, and he'll just have to hope the guests tonight agree.

The guests. He takes a deep breath to calm himself. All those princes and princesses and nobles here to see him. To try to marry him. It's an awful lot of pressure.

He's not entirely sure he's ready. Sure, he's old enough now to marry, and he's dated enough to know the kind of people he's interested in. There was that knight who beat him in every spar even though she was at least a foot shorter than him. That falconer who took his bird everywhere with him, despite the Prince's begging. The blacksmith who gifted him one of their finest swords, which still takes pride of place above his bed. Those were all fun, but little more than that.

The Prince isn't sure marriage is supposed to be fun. It doesn't seem to be, if his parents are anything to go by. Though that's not entirely fair, considering they had little choice in the matter of whether they were to marry. He, at least, has a little more say. He'll get to decide himself, and it doesn't have to be tonight. It doesn't have to be anyone here.

But it could be. They could be downstairs right now, just as nervous as he is about the prospect of meeting.

The Prince sighs again. There's no point standing here all night wondering whether he'll meet the person he wants to marry tonight. He'll have to go down there, join the party, and find out. Talk to people. Dance. Find a way to battle past his nerves and try to see if there's anyone here, some noble in their finest dress or waistcoat, who he could imagine spending the rest of his life with.

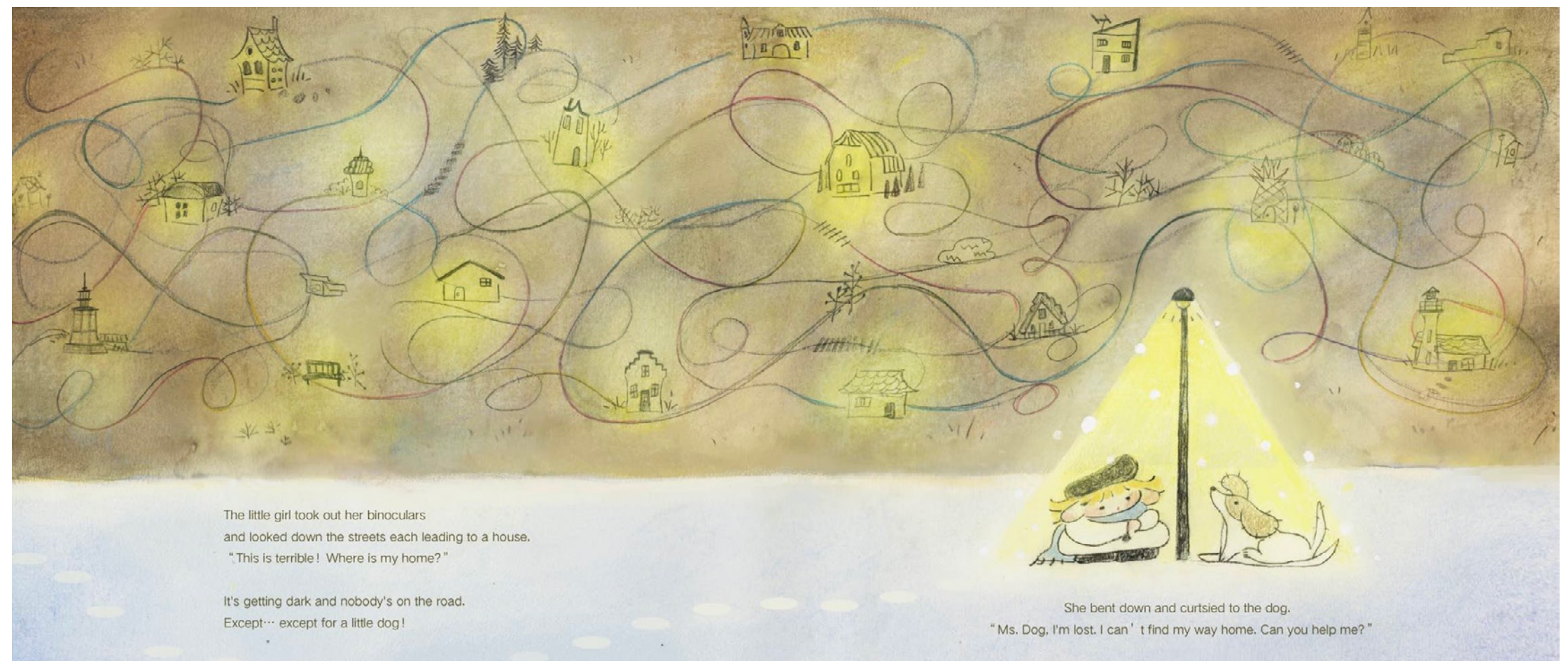
Urgh. The rest of his life. He's not sure how he's supposed to win a battle with his nerves over that.







**A Dog Who Never Gets Lost**  
 by Xidan Liang





# Coco, Bailey and the Ukulele

by Emily Harrison



Deep in the forest where bluebells bloom,  
And birch trees wave with a whispering tune,  
The birds would titter, the leaves would sway,  
The earthworm wriggled through the dampened clay.

Raindrops drummed on mushrooms white,  
The forest hummed from day to night.  
But something else was in the air,  
A sound that made the critters stare.

Was it a bird? A jackdaw singing gaily?

.... It was Bailey and his ukulele.

Strum-strum-strum, and nothing more,  
All Bailey could produce was a looping C chord.

With his tail as a pick, he strummed away,

"C, C, C!" from long night to endless day.

The woodland creatures had had ENOUGH,  
His ceaseless strumming was simply too rough!

"I can't bear this racket, it rattles my brain!"  
Said Squirrel, who leapt from branch to branch in vain.

But Bailey paid no attention, for he was a very stubborn snake.

So, the woodland critters staged an intervention – their sanity was at stake.

Who could they send to stop Bailey's racket?

"I've got it," said Rabbit, "we'll ask Coco, the kindly hedgehog, I bet she can hack it!"

Coco, thoughtful and clever too,  
Said, "I'll help Bailey, there's much we can do!"  
She crept through the moss, the bramble, the vine.

And found Bailey strumming, thinking all was fine.

"Oh, Bailey, what a rhythm you've got!"  
She said, though the sound made her stomach knot.

Bailey puffed up, looking quite grand,  
"I'm the bessssst ukulele player in all the land!"

Coco smiled, her eyes alight,  
"Well, there's more to learn, if you'd like!"  
With a wiggle of her toes and a flick of her quill.

She proffered a plan, and Bailey stood still.  
"Let's try something new! You strum, I'll press,  
Together we'll make music, simply The Best!"

Bailey agreed, a little intrigued,

And Coco helped, with her hedgehog technique.

Together they played, and the notes soared high,  
The critters gathered, not a single sigh!

But Bailey, solipsistic, kept banging his head.  
"I'll rock all night! No need for bed!"

Coco blinked, then gave a little frown,  
"But Bailey, we all need to rest in this town.  
What will you do when the nights grow cold?

Will I press the frets when I'm tired and old?"  
Bailey huffed and coiled his tail,  
"I'll do it myssssself! I'll never fail!"

He wrapped his head 'round the Uke's neck tight.  
But when he strummed, it didn't sound right.

"You're smothering the strings," Coco said with care,  
But Bailey hissed, "It'ssssss ssssssooooo not fair!"

Coco serenely wiped his tears,  
"There's still more to try, no need for fears!  
How about this? Do you think you can glide?  
Let's make music AND have a slip and slide!"

So, Bailey, with a smile on his face,  
Slithered up to the Uke, at a rapid pace:  
He slid across the strings with all his might,  
But by day's end, he looked quite a sight.  
"I highly regret that sssssilly decissssion.  
I look like a ssssausage with a central incissssion!"

Bailey hissed and cried and hissed some more.  
His hope deflated, his stomach sore.  
Coco sighed, but she wasn't through.

She fashioned Bailey something new.

Her quills, like picks, she stuck in his scales,  
Bailey rippled his body and managed some scales.

The sound was strange, but the sight was worse,  
Bailey looked like a sea dragon formed by an evil curse.

But Bailey chuckled, his voice full of glee,  
"I'm a ssssssnake-hog, don't you ssssssee?"  
Though the critters half-chuckled, they still looked alarmed,

But Coco knew Bailey couldn't do any harm  
"Come, dear Bailey, you've done your best,  
But I've got a final trick to pass this test."  
She handed him something shiny and bright – A harp that gleamed in the moonlight.

Bailey's eyes widened as he swept his tail across the flight of strings,  
And shimmering music poured into the night.

The creatures stopped. They smiled and together they listened to the blazing bright heartbeat of a song.

Bailey looked at Coco, bright in his eyes,  
"Thank you, dear friend, I won't deny –  
I was lonely before, but now I can ssssssee,  
You've shown sssuch kindnessss and patience with me."

Coco smiled and gave a small cheer,  
"You're welcome, Bailey, I'm glad you're here!  
Friendship's a song we both can share,  
With music and love, we're quite the pair!"

And so, conducting with her quill, Coco spun songs from Bailey's tail that sent stars shooting into the sky,  
Even the slouching boughs of the ancient trees swayed,  
keeping tempo with the music played.

The wildlife gathered, their eyes alight,  
As the wind carried a cascade of music that danced free into the night.

No more C-chord that made them all sigh,  
Just Bailey and Coco, and a lullaby.



# Mum

By Loof

How do you do it Ann,  
How do you stay calm?  
Everything I say  
Seems to cause harm

How do you do it Ann  
How do you stay in line  
When you've said the same answer  
For the 50th time

How do you do it Ann  
How do you stay sane  
When they talk about you  
All they do is complain.

How do you do it,  
How do you cope  
It's so dark now  
There's so little hope

How do you do it  
How don't you cry  
When all that you do  
Is live a big lie?

I love her you see  
I can't see her like this  
It's her laugh and her smile  
Her strength that I miss

It's preparing me  
So when she does go  
The relief will be bigger  
Than the pain you know

It's a long slow road  
The road to decline  
Take it away  
It isn't mine.  
How do I do it  
How can I stay strong  
To show her I love her  
When everything goes wrong?

Smile and breathe  
Keep your fears at bay  
Play light sweet music  
And laugh every day

Don't think of what's gone  
Think of the now  
Enjoy what you can  
You'll work out how.

**Mother & Child**  
by Ana María Ardila





## An Interview with Jenny Downham



Photo courtesy of Barker Evans

**Spinning Gold:** Can you describe your journey to writing, at what stage did you decide to take writing seriously?

**Jenny:** As a child I'd write stories and poems for my family. That interest kept up all through school. At university I studied drama and English, then I went to drama school and trained to become an actor and joined a touring theatre company. I never stopped writing.

Being an actor is a tough life, and when my second son was born, I decided to stop touring because I couldn't take two kids out on the road with me. I began to write more because it was my only creative outlet. It never felt like a decision, more like a destination, as if all roads had led me there. I started a novel, joined a writing group and began to enter competitions. When I won the London Writer's competition, I began to take myself more seriously. I got an agent by sending out chapters from my novel and it began to feel like a career.

**SG:** How does your experience and background in theatre influence your writing?

**Jenny:** Acting is a wonderful apprenticeship because you learn to tell stories on your feet and to understand structure and keep audience attention in a visceral way. I use a lot of acting techniques in my work – keeping notebooks, researching character, drawing maps, hot seating, walking and talking plot. I don't see writing as something that always has to be done sitting down.

**SG:** Do you have any favourite writing exercises and what are they?

**Jenny:** Surprise yourself by writing somewhere you've never written before, even if it's just a different chair/cushion/portion of the desk/window ledge. Sit (or stand) in new ways, write with different materials.

Go outside. Change space every few minutes. Let overheard conversations be your starting point.

Open a book and put your finger on a word (poetry books are good for this) and that's your prompt. Set a timer for a few minutes and write anything that springs into your mind about that word. See where it leads. Allow yourself to be led. The only rule is to keep going until the timer goes off. Whenever you need, let your finger land on a new word and keep going. It's a good one for becoming 'unstuck.'

Choose a line or short paragraph from another work and completely re-write it using the exact phrasing but inserting your own nouns/verbs/adjectives. This exercise seems to use a 'mathematical' part of the brain and encourages you to write with a different rhythm.

Write a scene in which one of your characters does something outrageous, cruel or foolish. Let the reader see inside their mind so that we know they are behaving justly, kindly, reasonably.

Ask someone to text you a 'prompt' every day - a word, sentence or exercise. Reciprocate. It's a good discipline and it's great to know you're in it together.



**SG:** What were some of the challenges you faced when writing a book with your son?

**Jenny:** Let the Light In was my first collaboration and I found it daunting to pass early scenes back and forth because the work was so raw and usually, no one sees it at that stage. I also found it challenging to distinguish between parental nurture (everything my child does is wonderful) and professional vigilance (think you need to re-write this bit, son). Lastly, compromise doesn't make good narrative, so we decided not to do it. If one of us wanted a scene to stay, they must convince the other. It was sometimes frustrating and often exhausting but serving the story was our priority.

**SG:** Were there any themes or concepts that were difficult to explore?

**Jenny:** The story looks at hidden grief, family, mental health and community. We drew from our own experiences - the love and closeness that come with being a family but also the complications. The challenge with writing about complex subjects is to do so truthfully and sensitively. Research was imperative. If we didn't have direct lived experience of something in the book, we talked to people who did. We watched videos and documentaries and got in touch with relevant organisations.

We knew very little about illegal moneylending and it was vital to us that there were no 'baddies.' Even the loan sharks have backstory and good motivation for making the choices they do. We offer varied opinions through different characters and allow readers to wonder what they might do or say in such circumstances. We hope that this sparks debate.



**SG:** What makes a story a YA fiction story? What is special about this genre?

**Jenny:** YA novels span the entire spectrum of fiction genres and are limited only by the imagination and skill of the author. Typically, there's a teen protagonist and the challenges they face are relevant to their age, such as navigating relationships or problems with family or struggles with identity.

For me, a special attraction of writing YA is that the protagonist is both a child and a soon-to-be-adult, often yearning to step forwards into adulthood but held back by 'gatekeepers' such as parents and teachers. It provides great narrative tension.

**SG:** Have you ever become attached to some of your characters? Which ones and why?





**Jenny:** Tessa from *Before I Die* because she's confronting the biggest ticking clock of all, and it devastated me to let her go when I handed the book to the publisher and could no longer change the outcome. And Lexi from *Furious Thing* because she's outrageous and made me laugh so much.

**SG:** How many projects do you have on the go at once and can you tell us about any of them?

**Jenny:** I can only manage one book at a time. But I like to have several chapters on the go at once, jumping between them as the mood takes me. My current project is for older readers and is about someone who is being haunted.

**SG:** Would you write for any other ages or genres?

**Jenny:** I'm tempted by middle-grade and also by adult fiction. Maybe one of those will be next...

**SG:** Do you believe in the process of teaching creative writing? Is it something that can be taught?

**Jenny:** Good writing is a mix of instinct and craft. All writers do some things instinctively well and a teacher can point these out, so the student understands their own ability.

As for crafting – most writers have some understanding of the underlying principles of good writing but can be guided to explore new ways of thinking that will increase the strength and purpose of their work. A teacher can offer a safe place for rigorous discussion.

But the most important thing (and this can't be taught) is that there's a connection between the writer and their material. They are uniquely able to write their story if it's

one they're passionate about. If that's in place, then they'll have the desire to write and re-write. They will have something to say rather than something they hope to get published.

**SG:** What advice would you give to an aspiring writer in YA fiction?

**Jenny:** Read, read, read. Do it forensically so you can understand how the author made their story such a page-turner/so beautiful/moving/funny, etc.

Watch the world for stories. Listen attentively and imagine with energy.

Discipline. Give yourself a number of pages to write each day/week/month (you decide) and do it. Writing uses muscles and they need to be regularly flexed.

Read scenes out loud – it will make a difference to perception of rhythm and speech.

Join or start a writing group. This provides you with a place to talk, swap work and offer support and constructive criticism.

## Claim your space as a writer and demand to be taken seriously.

It took me years to insist on a desk of my own and the time I needed to write. Childcare is expensive, work can be exhausting, family can be challenging and friends distracting. When you've only written a few sentences and an entire novel is bound to take months or years it's easy to lose heart. Keep breathing! Assert intention. Bean by bean the bag will fill.







"Maybe I'd never get out".

I thought about calling for help,  
but Dodo only had two legs.  
How could he possibly help me?



But just then, I heard  
"Watch your head."



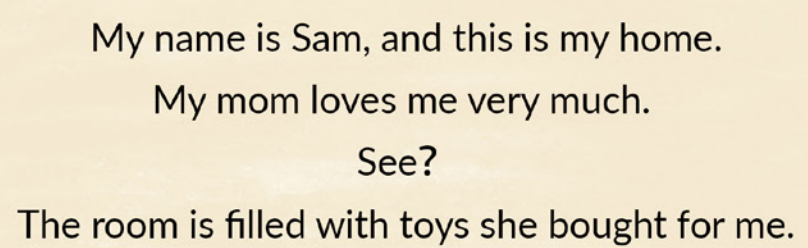
A ball fell down.



**Sam and Dodo**  
by Xinwen Tan







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# White Rose

by Lisette Lynda-Rose Alexander

The streetlights flickered with an icy glow as Adanna hurried through the backstreets of Munich. She kept to the shadows as she sang softly to herself, “Wir sind die Moorsoldaten, und ziehen mit dem Spaten ins Moor,” her hands -fists, were deep in her coat pockets, and her shoulders hunched against the biting wind and the ever-watchful eyes that sought to penetrate her skin. The anaemic moon above was a pallid sliver, barely breaking through the ashen clouds, like some indifferent observer of the world below. The city had become a labyrinth of whispers: a landscape shaped by fear. Even the air seemed thick with suspicion.

It had been days since Hans and Sophie – die Geschwister Scholl, and Christoph were executed: Murdered. Days since the world became unbearably still, as if the entire city and its student population were holding their breath, bracing for another blow. They were gone, their vibrant spirits snuffed out like candles in a matter of days, leaving behind only an aching absence and the unmistakably suffocating embrace of terror.

Adanna couldn’t stop thinking about them—Christoph’s childlike sense of humour, firm resolve and his constant attempts to look older and more refined whilst smoking that well-polished pipe he never once lit! Sophie’s sharp eyes, her fierce will, and that bold haircut! Hans’ calm resolve, and the way he could sooth the others with just a glance. They had all been part of it, the Weiße Rose, the small but defiant student resistance group that dared to believe the truth could cut through the lies. That resistance and moral fortitude could pour sand over the growing embers of hate. But now... now they were all prey.

Adanna slipped into a narrow doorway, her breath hitching in her throat as she pressed her back against the cold stone wall. The adrenaline throbbed in her veins, overwhelming her senses, making her feel both alive and exposed. She hugged her coat tighter, the collar brushing her cheek reminding her that she was not as untouchable or as invisible – in a world that saw her skin as a sin and abhorrent – as her other comrades. Word had been spreading, carried in floating clouds of conversation, in furtive glances—those who had survived the arrests were vanishing. Not just taken by the Orpoi or the Einsatzgruppenii. No one was sure where they had gone, or how. They were simply disappeared. No bodies. No explanations.

Adanna’s hands clenched into tighter fists in her pockets. Fear spread in her like a disease. She had been one of the Munich Circle, too – printing the pamphlets, distributing them. Spreading the truth like a wildfire, hoping to ignite something, anything, that could burn away the Nazi regime’s festering stranglehold on Germany. She believed in their cause with every fibre of her soul. However, as the walls began to close in on them, as her comrades were disappeared one-by-one, terror invaded her soul and eroded her confidence.

There were rumours, whispered in dark corners, that the Nazis had found a way to track them. Not through the usual means, not through the network of spies and informants that filled the veins of the city like myeloma cells. Something else. Something that moved beneath the surface, unseen, but always there, tightening its grip. There was plenty of speculation: Some talked about strange devices; others of traitors who had infiltrated the movement. Adanna had begun to feel it too—the creeping sense of perpetual surveillance. Every time she turned a corner, she felt it. The pressure of invisible eyes. The grip of invisible hands.

A low sound caught her attention and she stiffened. Footsteps. Slow. Deliberate. Her heart lurched into her throat. She couldn’t stay here. She was too exposed. Panic threatened to take hold, but Adanna forced herself to stay calm. Remembering the words of her father, Joseph, who until recently was a well-to-do farmer in Biafra but who was currently fighting the Germans as part of Britain’s colonial army: The British had attempted to convince him that the Nazi regime was far worse than the slavery they were currently experiencing at their hands and that if the Nazi’s succeeded, it could result in the extermination of Native Africans. She remembered her Papa’s stories of the German massacres in Southwest Africa and The German East Africa. He joined the army to ensure that the greater of the many evils of the West could not continue to plant its seeds in Africa, “Remember, Dearest Daughter, apathy is a great enemy of justice. If you do not stand up and challenge in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” With her father’s comforting, gravelly voice echoing in her mind, she pushed away from the wall and began moving again, quickly but silently, her feet barely making a sound on the cobbled street.

Her thoughts spun in dizzying circles. Who could be trusted now? Everyone in the movement had gone underground, purchased new names, and acquired new lives. They had burned everything that could connect them to the Weiße Rose. And yet, still, they vanished. No matter how well they hid.

Adanna turned into another alley, one that led toward a decrepit warehouse. It was a safe house—or had been, the last time she’d heard. As she approached the building, its dark windows were shattered, yet she could see no shards of glass on the ground. Despite this, the warehouse felt familiar, comforting – the closest thing she had to call home.

She cracked open the door and slipped inside. It was just as she remembered: vast, empty, damp, cold and dusty. Yet, somehow, it was welcoming. She shuffled to a corner, sat down, and hugged her knees. Her mind began to race in infinite circles. She needed to focus! To think clearly! To plan! However, each time she tried to focus, the fear grated at her, as if trying to shred her mind, her resolve like the ends of her faded blue jeans.

**How to Choose**  
by Xara Bennett-Jones





# That's My Fingers Making The Things

by Maya Eadie-Catling and  
Sophie Annabell Rose

*That's my fingers making the things* is a collaborative story created with the children at Blue Gate Fields Junior School. It grew out of conversations as we shared our own special objects, learnt about Netsuke from Japan, Worry Dolls from Guatemala, and began to build our own special objects from clay. As teachers, we watched the children play with the clay in a state of flow. This inspired us to create our character Zainab, whose hands know what to do before she does.

Artwork, ideas and words by

Khadija Y.	Adam	Adnan
Omar	Khadija C.	Radiya
Mihal	Arman	Umar
Shoaib	Mariam	Eleina

Thanks to Lydia Brenchley and Emma Went



*That's my fingers making the things*



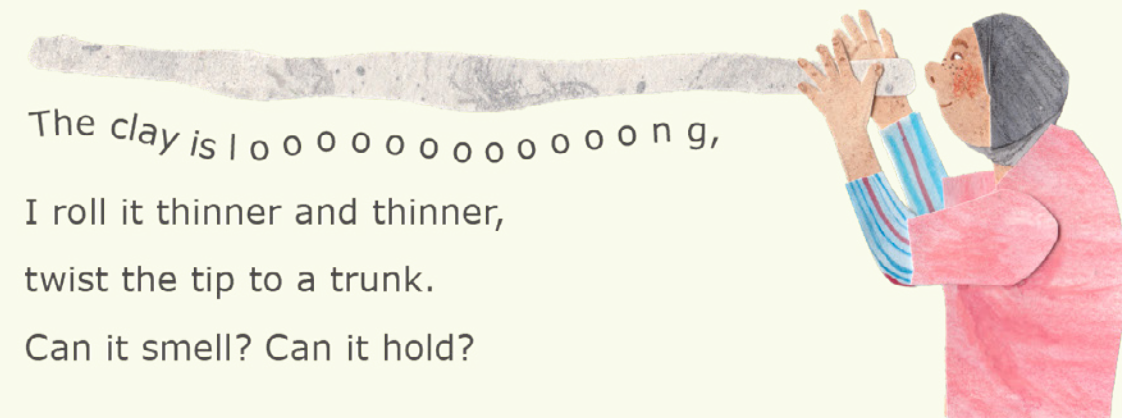
Look here,  
look at my fingers making the things.  
See how they know  
what to do with the clay.

My fingers like to  
turn it round and round.  
Bring the clay  
to a ball  
to shape  
and to mould.



The body forms  
smooth and whole,  
I lean it to rest  
on the calm of the table.

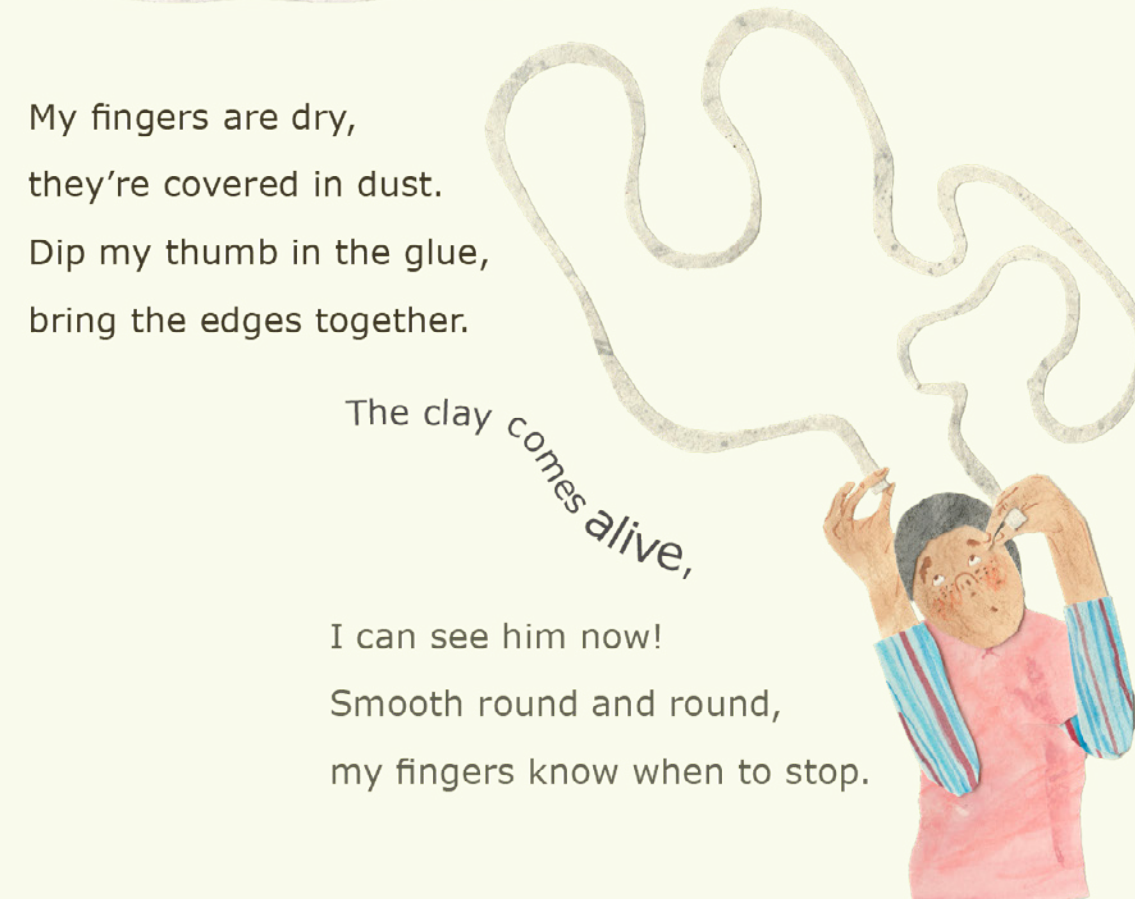




The clay is l o o o o o o o o o o n g,  
 I roll it thinner and thinner,  
 twist the tip to a trunk.  
 Can it smell? Can it hold?



The clay is round,  
 I press it flatter and flatter.  
 Two ears to hear,  
 spreading open and wide.



My fingers are dry,  
 they're covered in dust.  
 Dip my thumb in the glue,  
 bring the edges together.

The clay comes alive,

I can see him now!  
 Smooth round and round,  
 my fingers know when to stop.



My fingers sit  
 they **wait** with a wiggle.  
 The kiln is at work,  
 get the paint pots ready.







# Fingers mak- ing The Things

A large, stylized blue hand is shown holding a small blue bear. The hand is positioned as if it's about to place the bear down. The bear is standing on its hind legs, with its arms outstretched. The background is white, and the entire illustration is framed by a light green border.

At last, my elephant, my elephant to hold,

sits snug in my pocket,  
in the crook of my thumb.



These are my fingers  
they know what to do.  
Give my elephant to Grandad,  
he needs him too.





# Representation & Identity in *What Jobs Could You Do?*

## By Catherine Barr

by Sophie O'Connor-Smart

*What Jobs Could You Do?* lists jobs according to interest. This is great for framing work as interest based and can build excitement for the future. Fantastic for conversations in a classroom, something that can help those children who struggle in school to feel able to go on to work.

We do not see any backstory of characters, groups or locations, as such, I am only able to examine the cultural representation in the book by analysing skin colour. Therefore, the book would be considered tokenistic rather than culturally representative, however, given it is a non-fiction book with no room for character backstory beyond the illustration, this tokenism is unavoidable. So, while tokenism is a bad thing, I think that it must be excused for this book because it is the main way it could have included diversity.

There are 159 characters in *What Jobs Could You Do?* (Barr 2021) I interpreted 61 characters to be white. This is 38% of the characters. The Government's reporting states that 81.7% of the UK population was white in 2021 (Gov.uk 2022). The Reflecting Realities Report aims for the titles published in a year to include a level of diversity that is reflective of the actual diversity of today's society (CLPE 2023). With these statistics, the book meets the report.

The only other aspect of cultural representation I could look at based purely off of the illustrations are the external signifiers of religion worn by characters. There are two characters in turbans and one character in a hijab. A page with religious jobs such as Priest, Vicar, Imam, Granthi and Rabbi could have been a great addition

There are 4 amputees, two of which are runners with a blade, one plays an instrument with a prosthetic leg, and another is an Engineer with one arm. I feel they could have given a different job to the second runner. Maybe even a different limb difference. I feel two amputees as runners carries too much connection to people with disabilities only existing in the Paralympics.

There are 4 wheelchair users. One is a video game developer, one appears to have a job but is illustrative, another is a

storyteller, and the final one is playing with a kite. I would have liked to have seen one of them in a job that is not just seen as a "sitting down job", for example, a dog walker.

There is one character with a hearing aid, a postman. Contrary to my point about the wheelchair users, this job assumes a lot of talking with others. I love the representation of a character doing something that means accessibility has to be thought of. That means children are seeing a job that requires adjustment but is still possible to do.

I would have liked more representation of medical items, for example, a child with a stoma bag, and different walking aids: walking sticks, walking frames, swapping one of the wheelchairs for a motorized one.

So how does this representation relate to the children's view on their identity?



**This book allows us to look into a world where jobs are inclusive. The world does not discriminate when it comes to work. This allows children to see themselves and see what they could become. This makes them more likely to fight for that in the future.**

This book shows underrepresented children that there is a life ahead, there are jobs they can do, there is hope for an enjoyable future full of work that will inspire. Teachers should be making children feel like they are capable of these jobs. Caregivers should be encouraging of thinking about the future in positive inclusive ways. It allows people that are not in a child's class or home, to be seen as part of society. If a child has never seen someone wearing, for example, a hijab, they see it in this book. Therefore, they know it's possible for there to be others who may not be like them or anyone else they know. That is the impact the representation in this book allows for.



The village sat nestled between steep cliffs and a river that gleamed like molten silver under the moonlight. Its name was long forgotten, a whispered secret among the wind and the cypress trees, known only for the crooked spires of its bamboo roofs and the shadows of its people who seemed to move as if they were tethered to invisible strings. The air here was heavy, with the burden of secrets and unspoken rules.

Ài stood at the doorway of their new home, her hands resting on her blooming belly, where two tiny lives germinated and danced beneath her skin. She could feel them, their sprouting feet dancing against the inside of her abdomen – a reminder of her defiance. She hadn't meant to defy anyone, but the reality of it weighed on her heart every day. Two girls. Her daughters. Her babies.

Beside her, Dingbang, her husband, paced silently, his face lined with worry. His hands twitched as if searching for something to hold, to fix, but there was nothing to mend here. The government's reach was vast, like the roots of a vast silver maple tree whose roots stretch and spread beneath the earth. Silent roots; silent; unseen – infiltrating the solid structures, pipes and foundations of society – forever omnipresent. The one-child policy had been the law of the land for as long as either of them could remember, and the preference for boys—an ancient tradition wrapped in the illusion of practicality—had only festered and fermented into a powerful pottage with each passing year.

But it wasn't until their second pregnancy—the second they weren't supposed to have—that the terror truly set in.

"We'll be safe here," Dingbang whispered, his voice as thin as the mist that wound its way through the village streets. "They don't know about us here. We're just another family." Ài nodded, though her heart clenched with uncertainty. She wished she could believe him, wished the fear would lift. But ever since they had arrived in this remote village, something about the place gnawed at her. The villagers' eyes seemed too knowing, their smiles too stiff. The way they averted their gaze when she passed by, her belly swelling with the evidence of her crime—twin girls in a world that wanted boys. And more than one child in a world where there should only be one.

"Do you ever wonder how they know?" Ài's tender voice betrayed the weight of their shared fear.

Dingbang stopped pacing. "What do you mean?"

"How they know whether a child is a boy or a girl without a blood test or even seeing the child?" she said, her fingers hugged her belly as if shielding her unborn daughters from the prying eyes of the state. "They've always known. Everyone says they can track it, like ghosts in the air."

Dingbang shook his head, though the flicker of doubt in his eyes betrayed his uncertainty. "Rumours. Just rumours. Maybe they don't track it like that. Maybe it's... just a scare tactic." But Ài wasn't convinced. She remembered the stories—the whispers of villages like this one, where local officials were devoted in their enforcement of the one-child policy. Some said they could see through your skin, into your very blood, that the technology to detect X and Y chromosomes remotely had been perfected. It was this, they said, that let the government keep such an accurate count. Every boy, every girl born was known, tallied, and monitored. "They'll come for us, Dingbang," Ài said in a fear coated whisper. "I know they will."

Dingbang's face stiffened; his jaw set in that way that meant he was trying to hold back his own fear. "We'll leave before they can do anything. We'll be careful."

But could they really outrun something so rooted in society, so omnipotent? Ài wasn't convinced. She recalled the posters plastered on billboards, walls, buses and trains – all had one thing in common: one mother, one husband, one child. All three with faces full of joy and good health.

The village had its own rhythm, one that Ài found unsettling. It was as if the people lay in waiting—always on edge, always vigilant. The elderly women in the market would glance over their shoulders as they whispered, and the men rarely spoke at all. There was no laughter here, no children's melodic voices joyous in play. It was as if the very air had been stilled by some invisible force, as if joy itself had been extracted. Outlawed.

It was on the third night that Ài heard it—that blood chilling, low, guttural cry, muffled by the thick bamboo walls of their home but unmistakable in its despair. She shot up in bed, her hand clutching Dingbang's arm.

"Ding, did you hear that?"

Dingbang stirred, groggy with sleep, but when the sound came again—this time more distinct, more human—he was fully awake. They exchanged a glance, and in that look, Ài saw her own fear mirrored in her husband's eyes. Without a word, they rose and moved toward the window, careful not to disturb their sleeping son in the next room.

Outside, in the dim light of the half-moon, Ài could just make out the shapes of figures moving in the distance, toward the house at the edge of the village. There were shouts now, and more cries—cries that Ài's sprinting heart attempted to outrun.

"It's happening," she whispered, her voice trembling. "It's true. They're taking them." Dingbang pulled her back from the window, his face as pale as the moonlight. "We must leave. Now," he said, his voice a tight thread. "We can't stay here."

But Ài couldn't move, her feet frozen as the realisation dawned on her: The stories. Were not stories. They had been true all along.







**Jane the Lioness with a Mane**  
by Beatriz Martínez



**We Forgot the Snacks**  
by Peach Richmond



**Nyoman Can Cook**  
by Sharon Leman





# A Pottered Personal History of Publishing

by Janet Hoggarth

The dog-eared, hand-typed manuscript had seen better days with pencil scribbles in the margins and numerous frantic crossings-out. Barry thrust it into my hands with a, 'See how far you get before tomorrow'. He wanted my thoughts. I shoved it in my bag for the lengthy bus journey back to Muswell Hill that evening. I was used to giving kneejerk responses to manuscripts; there was never enough time because some insistent agent was always breathing down our necks. I'd become adept at skimming, eyes roaming for that elusive hook. Sat on the top deck, manuscript on my knee, I began.

By the time the bus pulled into my stop on the parade of shops, I was fully immersed in the Dursleys at 4 Privet Drive, Muggles, Hagrid, and Hogwarts. By 2am, I'd almost finished but the steady stream of caffeine had run its course. The next morning, yawning nonstop, I finished the story on the bus back to the West End. 'What did you think?' Barry immediately asked as I walked into our cramped office. 'Buy it!' was my answer. No manuscript before or since has ever captured me quite like Gryffindor's famous wizard.

But my story starts before I met Harry. In 1994, with two years as a children's bookseller under my belt (and fistfuls of editorial job rejections) I finally talked my way into publishing. Bloomsbury Children's Books was a brand new publishing venture offering a chance to assemble the inaugural list from scratch with Barry Cunningham and Elinor Bagenal. They needed an editorial assistant and gamely

took a chance on me, throwing me straight in the deep end – opportunity always knocks at small publishers. I got to write and print-buy our catalogues; write cover blurbs; present at sales conferences; vet illustrators; write and design all the Bologna Book Fair AI (advanced information) sheets as well as tackle all the general quotidian tasks of (badly) checking proofs and covers and making tea and coffee.

One day, long before a certain Mr Potter arrived on our desk, Barry called me into a meeting. He asked if I had ever thought of writing (I had not). He thought I had a flare for back cover copy and did I want to write a children's book? After picking myself off the floor, I said yes and thus created *The Whole Joke Book* with my brother, Pete. It miraculously became our bestselling title until *The Philosopher's Stone* knocked it off the top slot.

By now I'd been bitten by the writing bug and when Barry and Elinor left for Somerset to set up what would become Chicken House Books, I also handed in my notice. I couldn't conceive the idea of Bloomsbury Children's Books without them, so found a job as Fiction desk editor at Scholastic Children's Books, working my way up to commissioning editor of Young Fiction before leaving to go freelance in 2000 as a writer/editor, which I have been doing ever since. Meanwhile, back to Mr Potter...

I had proof read the final book for *The Philosopher's Stone* hardback in autumn 1996 before I left Bloomsbury, overlooking so many mistakes that uncorrected first editions are now worth thousands (you're welcome). After I had been at Scholastic for about six months, and just as the first *Harry Potter* was published to barely any fanfare, Scholastic US entered an unprecedented bidding war over it. David Fickling, our publishing director, recalled me having worked on the book and asked me into his office. He said that editor, Arthur A Levine was currently in a New York auction house trying to buy the book but hadn't even read

it. Because the bidding was careering out of control, Arthur thought he should get more detailed information and rang David in the London office. I ended up condensing the plot into a paragraph and writing a brief pitch about why he should pay the highest amount he could, before suggesting it was going to be bigger than Roald Dahl. I then faxed it to the auction house for his attention. The next morning it dominated all the papers: *US Publisher Pays One Hundred Thousand Dollars for Children's Book*. And the rest is history. I can't remember if Arthur ever said thank you, but I do have a first edition that will one day be my pension and bizarrely, an actress played me in a dubious TV film: *Magic Beyond Words, the JK Rowling Story*. It was an inaccurate portrayal: she looked about sixty and I was twenty-six at the time...

On reflection, I didn't realise how lucky I was to be a part of publishing history and to elbow my way into a small children's publisher with such encouraging staff, even if the pay was borderline criminal (a running theme). However, not everyone has been as hashtag blessed at the start of their careers. Children's publishing polymath, Karen Ball, author (current Penguin paperback, *If Looks Could Kill*, written under her pen name, Katherine Blake), Director of Speckled Pen (a successful publishing consultancy), and Bookseller 'Rising Star', gave me the lowdown on her inauspicious first publishing experience.

After a career talk at university complete with a warning of, 'if you want to make your fortune, don't go into publishing,' Karen decided she still wanted to work with books, editorial in particular. Four hundred application letters later over a few years and a postgraduate diploma in publishing, she finally broke into the business. 'I thought that it was going to be sitting around reading manuscripts all day with a pencil in my hand, feeding back to these wonderful authors.' But Karen found herself working for a tyrannical book packager in the newly

set up children's department as a harassed editorial assistant. The staff turnover was like a leaking tap – a far cry from her misty-eyed literary dreams. Before we both ended up at Scholastic, she managed to land a job at a small independent publisher and like myself, realised it was the best way to 'see everything'.

We both found working somewhere small to be a brilliant all-round education of the traditional publishing industry, learning how other departments worked rather than it all magically occurring on another floor. Bigger isn't always better, and in the nineties, there wasn't the amalgamated behemoths of the Big Five. All the publishing houses were under their own roofs rather than crowded under the same umbrellas.

Children's publishing has always been slightly removed from the rest of the industry with specialist publishers like Walker Books, Usborne, Andersen Press, David Fickling Books, Scholastic, and Chicken House back in the day, and more recently Nosy Crow, Little Tiger, Flying Eye Books to name a few. When I started out in children's books, it was the era of *Point Horror*, *Point Romance*, *Goosebumps*, *Michael Rosen*, *the Babysitters Club*, *Horrible Histories*, Jacqueline Wilson, Louise Rennison. But it was the rise of *Harry Potter* and Philip Pullman that really changed the publishing landscape, thrusting children's books into the big bucks arena winning coveted literary prizes and topping all the best sellers lists. Children's books were suddenly cool. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy and the Harry Potters were rejacketed with more grown-up themed covers so adults wouldn't be embarrassed reading kids' books out in public. \*Eye roll\*.





It wasn't just fiction leading the way, Scholastic were reaping financial rewards with their *Horrible History* series in the nineties before it exploded with the film and über popular TV series. Non-fiction commissioning editor, Helen Greathead, couldn't have foreseen the length of the series' success with authors in contact even now saying they're still receiving royalties and that it's made their careers.

Helen started at Scholastic when it was tiny, proving once again a smaller house offers more hands-on publishing opportunities. In 1993, Terry Deary, the author of the *Horribles* (as they became known), was already working on a different series when he dreamt up a vague idea of joke history books. Helen recalls how the red tape-laden acquisition process has drastically changed in the intervening decades. She had to present to the Scholastic book clubs and book fairs with this sketchy idea and they were resistant: history just doesn't sell. Bracing herself she delivered her spiel and it was actually the boss, David Fickling, who suggested the snappy series name in the meeting uniting everyone before coming up with the first two titles of *The Terrible Tudors* and *The Awesome Egyptians*. 'Nowadays, if you're trying to set up a series like that, people will agonise over it, spend ages trying to work out what's the best way to do it. But it really was quite spontaneous, and it just all seemed to work.' Scholastic quickly expanded into *Horrible Science* and *Murderous Maths*, commissioning different authors.

In fiction publishing especially, it's virtually impossible to bring an outline to an acquisitions meeting in the twenty twenties, or an unedited one from an agent. And forget about a manuscript straight off the slush pile (unsolicited manuscripts – now rarely a thing). In August 1996, I'd still felt it necessary to create some drama and rolled up photocopies of the initial three chapters of the first draft of *Harry Potter and the*

*Philosopher's Stone* into scrolls, tying them with red ribbon and slipping in mini boxes of Smarties to bribe each member of the acquisition board into making an offer to Joanne Rowling. I like to think I made all the difference...

Even twenty years ago, there was a chance of getting something before an editor without an agent, but not now. Jersey's Festival of Words Director, Pippa le Quesne, started as an intern at Bloomsbury, then took over my job when I left before working her way to fiction commissioning editor at one of the Big Five: Penguin's children's imprint, Puffin. She recalls filling in hideous P&L (Title Profit and Loss) spreadsheets: every single part of a book's potential journey accounted for before even being considered for acquisitions – rent on the building, printing costs, paper costs, marketing etc all set against the cover price. Despite the dreaded spread sheet which is the industry gold standard, back in the noughties, you could just take an idea to acquisitions. 'My boss used to say my specialty was making a silk purse out of a pig's ear because in those days commissioning editors still bought manuscripts which weren't in a good shape.' Pippa would spend time working with an author if she saw potential in something, whereas now the agent has claimed that editorial role.

After Puffin, Pippa worked for the Viney Literary Agency as Children's Editor and while there, polished the super successful *Geek Girl* series before they were placed with Harper Collins in 2012-13. The manuscripts needed a fair bit of work before submission with author, Holly Smale, undertaking big rewrites, thanking Pippa in the acknowledgments as her 'Literary Gandalf'. Pippa admits that, '...commissioning editors are now buying things that they're looking at through a commercial lens immediately and they're not thinking oh this is really good I love this and there's loads of potential'. Of course

publishers have always looked at what's going to sell, but she believes it used to be a lot more balanced with publishers taking chances on books that might need work or are less commercial. In Pippa's eyes, Faber and Bloomsbury still publish in the more old school way. Faber always has and Bloomsbury completely lifts off the profits of *Harry Potter* so can afford to take those risks.

Meanwhile, back in the late nineties and noughties, children's publishing had changed up a gear as editors' readers sifted through slush piles on the lookout for the Next Big Book. The rise of the agent as the first stop gate keeper had yet to take over. Karen Ball agrees with Pippa and Helen Greathead that publishers used to heavily invest in authors and play the long game: 'What David Fickling was very good at is knowing that it's not about the first book that Philip Pullman writes for me, it's about the fifth book.' Karen has sadly admitted we are now in a time where publishing is all do or die on your debut's TCM (total cost management) and if that's not happening 'it's thank you and good night'.

I experienced this in 2013-16, having been forced to change my name by one publisher to then be marketed as a younger Jacqueline Wilson in an attempt to outrun my failed debut in my real name, even though it was longlisted for Waterstones Children's Book Prize. I then wrote two more books for them, the first one effectively another debut but both titles failed to fly and my pseudonym was dropped as quickly as I was. I would have loved to have seen what might have transpired had I kept my real name.

The arrival of the internet and huge leaps in technology are the two biggest milestones in publishing since I joined the industry. Booktok grows more powerful by the day and with it the sometimes unwelcome surge of celebrity/influencers writing

books. Katie Heywood Taylor has worked in publishing for thirty-two years, starting as a designer and working her way up to Art Director at Egmont Publishing, now part of Harper Collins, before turning freelance. A career highlight for Katie was designing the *Mr Gum* Young Fiction series for Egmont in 2006, collaborating with editor, Leah Thaxton, in stripping the books down to fewer lines per page and adding really wild, innovative illustrations to draw in reluctant readers. *Mr Gum* feels even more relevant now with children's (and adults') attention spans flagging in competition with everything else on offer while more learning differences are being diagnosed. This is why she thinks graphic novels are more popular than ever: '...you're reading a story quite quickly. I think on so many levels, kids love it, because they feel like they've managed to read a whole book, and they have that real sense of achievement when they've finished it.' This way of telling stories encourages kids into reading and, as much as we complain, so do celebrity authors.

However, something that stubbornly remains the same is the wages. The pay for both mid-list writers and publishing staff seem to be frozen in time. With author's advances shrinking or drying up completely while celebrities ghost-written offerings get bigger slices of the publishing pie, money is a definite bone of contention. Both Pippa and Katie's peak career publishing jobs from the noughties have only increased by one or two per cent in over twenty years, this is pretty standard across the board. Meanwhile margins have narrowed and overheads have shot up, keeping wages out of line with inflation. All this has led to a huge lack of diversity in publishing.

Karen Ball paraphrased what the late great YA author, Alex Wheatle, known as the Brixton Bard, said about the low wages: '...if you're second generation (*immigrant*), your parents will have worked their bloody asses off to build a life for you and so what they want in return is they want you to go and





be a lawyer or a dentist or a chemist. They want the four bedroom house and they want the car on the drive and if you turn around to those parents and say I'm really sorry I hope you don't mind I'm going to go and work in publishing and I'm probably going to be earning maximum twenty-five grand a year and your parents are going to be like, oh no you're not doing that.'

Publishing can feel like it's only open to those who can afford to work there, and as for writing for a living, that can also be closed off to a large cross-section of society. Pippa le Quesne agrees about the lack of diverse writers: 'The only way this is ever going to get to be a lot more diverse in publishing is if the gatekeepers are diverse and it just happens that they aren't'. But a lot of publishers are now trying to address this disparity. One of the Big Five, Hachette, has a purposeful Diverse Future Leaders programme, along with traineeship and outreach initiatives. Penguin Random House has a Lit in Colour programme supporting schools to teach more books by authors of colour. Write Now has been going since 2016 and is a programme that seeks out, nurtures and publishes new writers from underrepresented communities on the nation's bookshelves. They also run paid internships for underrepresented individuals, as well as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Pretty much all of the Big Five host these kinds of programmes. And in 2018, UK rap star, Stormzy, set up his own imprint, Merky, with Penguin Random House, with an annual New Writers' Prize.

While these are all steps in the right direction for the future, I will never forget my own first day in publishing, nervously walking into Bloomsbury Children's Books' tiny office in Soho Square in September 1994. A wide-eyed, state-educated, northern fish out of water in a mini skirt and platform shoes, I was greeted by Barry Cunningham and Elinor Bagenal who treated me like

their own flesh and blood from the off. I couldn't have asked for a more wonderful introduction into publishing and writing. They not only taught me so much about books and the publishing process, but also about how to treat people. I am forever indebted to them and all at Scholastic – they are the reason that I can't seem to step away from an industry that sometimes feels overwhelmingly out of one's league.

I concur: if you're looking to make your fortune, don't go into publishing. However, it's always about the people you forge bonds with, and for me, publishing and meeting fellow writers has given me a real sense of community and friends for life. Also, being part of Harry Potter's world domination wasn't bad either.



Janet's latest book for adults *The Swim* was launched on May 7th, 2025.

*Follow Cordelia Franks on an incredible journey as she battles not only the currents of her life, but those of the English Channel. This is a story about the underdog, overcoming crippling adversity and digging deeper than you ever thought possible. Everyone's rooting for you, Cordelia, it's time to show us what you're made of.*

Purchase your copy here: <https://linktr.ee/janethoggarth>



**Blue Whale**  
by Faeze Afsharnia





# An Interview with Goldsmiths Alumna Ticiele de Camargo

We interviewed Goldsmiths alumna Tici who graduated from the Creative Writing Pathway of the Children's Literature MA (2018-19). Tici talks about her new children's book, *Close to Freedom*, which is a heartwarming story about friendship, courage, and the importance of standing up for what you believe in.



**Spinning Gold:** Could you explain a little about your latest book, *Close to Freedom*, and what it's about?

**Tici:** *Close to Freedom* is a story about Forza, a nine-year-old girl and Hercules, a house mouse. They meet unexpectedly in the kitchen and become best friends. The surprise is that Hercules is bilingual (English and Italian speaker) just like Forza is! So, there's a touch of Italian culture sprinkled around and I chose this in honour of my heritage just like my previous books have Spanish words too. I'm multilingual and I do believe being exposed to different

languages and cultures is fundamental in life and this proves to work well in the world of Forza and Hercules.

The story explores themes of hope, resilience, justice and the importance of community. Forza meets Hercules in times of need, great predicament and they fight for their survival.

**SG:** Having completed the MA in Children's Literature Creative Writing in 2019, what are some things you have taken away from the course that have been most beneficial to your writing?

**Tici:** The MA taught me a lot about the importance of storytelling techniques, developing strong characters and ensuring there's a well and balanced, healthy plot. It also helped me understand how to craft engaging plots and communicate messages effectively. Most importantly, it gave me more confidence to pursue my writing ambitions.

**SG:** Can you describe your journey to getting published? Did you go down the traditional route or self-publish?

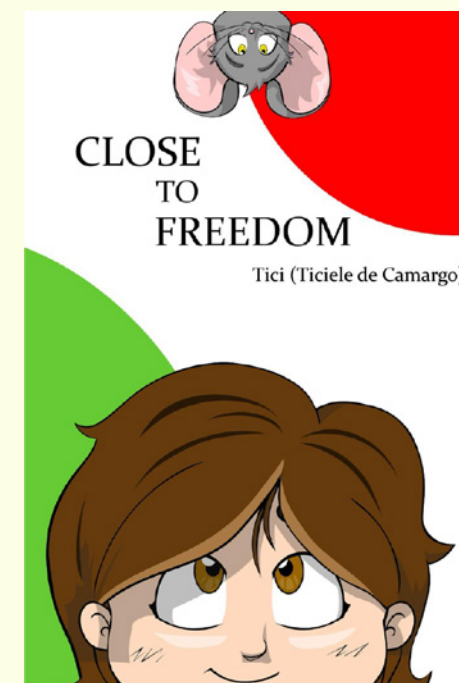
**Tici:** I chose to pursue traditional publishing in my first two books (*Vontade de Escrever I* and *Vontade de Escrever II*) that were both published at the international book fair in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2015 and 2017). It was a great opportunity then and I loved doing it that way. However, this year, I decided to venture into the self publishing process instead.

**SG:** Were there any obstacles in the way? Things you found challenging?

**Tici:** Yes, there were challenges in both ways however they're different types of challenges. The traditional way can lead to rejection and that is painful, plus the waiting which can be long. Now, self publishing is about perseverance and having an eye for detail; it requires much more of your attention and personal time to ensure every single thing is on point prior publishing, printing and of course, promoting the book for sales through the necessary venues.

**SG:** How long was the process from finishing the book to seeing it in print? Are there any things you are proud of or want to share?

**Tici:** *Close to Freedom* was actually a poem which was then built into a novel. The poem was written in a few hours, however the process of building the characters, plot, etc took a couple of months. Given that this is a sequence novel, the plot will continue in another book. It took me some years to finally get this first book done as I had other personal projects in line but, this year, I decided to complete the first manuscript to publication - I'd say two to three months in total, from endless revisions to publishing.



I'm a highly spiritual individual and I'm grateful to my faith in God for giving me the ability and strength to create. I'm proud of staying inspired and dedicated, seeing *Close To Freedom* come to life is a blessing and I'm grateful for the support from my beautiful family, my best friend and of course, especially to the amazing academic team at Goldsmiths (Linda Buckley-Archer, Charlotte Scott and Vicky Macleroy) who all believed in my work and supported me academically in this project, from draft to end, and much celebrated this milestone with me. Super appreciate you all.

**SG:** What are your plans as a writer going forward? Is there anything you hope to achieve in the next few years?

**Tici:** Yes, I don't think I'll ever stop creating although it also has to be driven with a purpose and with an emotional connection for I believe words are powerful tools that enable one's joy and hope; wise words can make someone's day much brighter. So I wish to continue with *Close to Freedom II* and publish it in the near future.







From the quilt sprung forth my sister's  
ghost, with accusation in her eyes and the  
story of her murder upon her pale lips.

**The Robber Bridegroom**  
by Eve Soffer Liberman



# Disability in Imagined Futures: Selective Mutism in Speculative Fiction

by Daniel Newton

## Introduction

Selective mutism (SM) is a disorder which is defined by a '[c]onsistent failure to speak in specific social situations' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.195) in individuals who still 'speak freely to certain people, such as close family or friends' (NHS, 2023). It is considered a 'relatively rare disorder', with prevalence in the US ranging between 0.03% and 1% across various studies (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.196), and in the UK estimated as affecting 0.71% of children (NHS, 2023).

Due to the rareness of the disorder, there is a noted lack of research on the topic in the psychological field (Wong, 2010), and this is reflected in fiction by mis-representation. In fact, I was drawn to this topic in part due to the lack of research, and to the lack of accurate representations. When reading *Pet* by Akwaeke Emezi (2019), one of the texts I will be exploring, I realised that this was an unusually accurate representation of SM compared to my interactions with the real condition. This led me to wondering about other depictions of SM I had encountered, in what kind of texts I encountered them, and how accurate the portrayals were.

Disability studies specialist Lennard J. Davis has commented that '[d]isability studies in the humanities is a relatively recent phenomenon' (2005, p.527), while Levy and Mendlesohn state in *Children's Fantasy Literature* that '[t]he study of the literature of the fantastic is relatively recent, and in some ways still underdeveloped' (2016, p.1). While disability studies in the humanities is no longer such a recent phenomenon, the study of the fantastic perhaps remains so, and begs the question; what of disability in fantasy?

Disability is not a recent phenomenon, nor is selective mutism, or the genre of fantasy, and yet there seems to be little literature on this subject. One of Cheyne's aims in *Disability, Literature, Genre* was 'to establish genre fiction as a key site of investigation for disability studies' (2019, p.2), and with this in mind I concluded that an exploration of SM in fantasy, and fantasy sub-genres, would begin to address this gap.

Although selective mutism is 'not recognised as a federal category of disability in the United States' (Bork et al, 2014), studies are beginning to see it as such (Dieu, 2017; Johnston, 2022). In light of this, and the well documented rates of comorbidity between SM and autism spectrum disorder, Asperger's disorder, and other intellectual disabilities (Wong, 2010; Edwards, 2022), I will be discussing selective mutism as a disability and drawing on disability studies research.

## Literature Review

In her 2023 text *Speech and Silence in Contemporary Children's Literature*, Price notes that 'child protagonists who stop talking... populate children's and young adult's literature' (p.1). The term 'protagonists who stop talking' is vague, but in the texts that Price discusses this generally refers to children who used to talk verbally at an age-appropriate level, however due to a traumatic event become mute. These characters are frequently

referred to—in the text or outside of it—as selectively mute.

Despite the prevalence of these selectively mute protagonists, in the psychological field SM 'has not been the focus of large-scale empirical study' (Garcia et al., 2004, p.433) and 'consists primarily of small sample populations and case reports' (Wong, 2010, p.23). Therefore the research is considered limited due to its 'gaps in knowledge' (ibid., p.23), which is evident in the uncertainty and contradictions within the field regarding causation, treatment, and prognosis of SM. For example, studies have noted both a 'lack of spontaneous remission of the elective mutism [sic]' (Hayden, 1980) and that 'the majority of selectively mute children tend to outgrow the disorder spontaneously' (Wong, 2010, p.24). Recent research challenges both ideas, noting that while many individuals show improved symptoms over time, this occurs following treatment, not spontaneously (Koskela et al., 2023).

The disparity between the limited, contradictory understanding of SM and its prevalence in children's fiction as noted by Price results in distorted depictions of the disorder. Price identifies the concept of literary selective mutism (LSM) as the misguided fictionalisation of selective mutism. LSM describes the formulaic structure of many of these texts; 'a traumatic event; a child who stops speaking; a crisis; and the restoration of the child's power to speak' (2023, p.10). Price argues that this turns SM into a metaphor to ask questions about silence and the power imbalance between adults and children. Although not necessarily done in an intentionally disrespectful way, this reinforces certain myths around SM, for example that individuals 'choose not to speak out of defiance' and are therefore 'disobedient, stubborn, controlling' (Price, 2023, p.18; Wong, 2010, pp.28-29).

Mitchell and Snyder coined the term 'narrative prosthesis' for when disability is used 'as an opportunistic metaphorical

device' (2001, p.47, original emphasis). The LSM narrative certainly uses disability in this way, and this formula of recovery and metaphorization is not unique to SM, but similar to ideas in wider disability representation. Mitchell and Snyder discuss another narrative progression in which a disability is introduced and its origins explained before being brought to the forefront of the narrative in order for the disability to be 'fixed' (2001, p.53). These structures emphasise the origin/cause of the disability, and its rehabilitation or 'cure' (ibid., p.53), in effect making the disability part of a 'chronotope, a time-sequenced narrative' (Davis, 1995, p.3). Questions about how the disability "began" fuel the narrative, and drive it to the inevitable conclusion of how it might end. As Bérubé states, 'disability... demands a story' (2005, p.570), and selective mutism appears to be no exception.

This narrative of a cure is surely due to cultural perceptions of disability as 'a problem in need of a solution' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.47), or as something that 'must somehow be "overcome"' (Dunn, 2013, p.94). While these perceptions apply to the majority of depictions of disabled characters, speculative fiction has a unique response to this. Stemp comments that one of the 'traps' of fantasy, especially fantasy involving magic, is 'the magical cure' (2004). This takes different forms in many texts and differs depending on the sub-genre of speculative fiction—such as "miracles" of science' in science fiction—but usually undermines the real prognosis of the disability (Stemp, 2004).





This is undoubtedly an easy trap to fall into, what with the genre of fantasy being defined as including ‘things that are impossible under ordinary conditions or in the normal course of human events’ (Shipley, 1970, as cited in Nikolajeva, 1988, p.7). However the problem arises when considering how these narratives affect the real individuals with SM. Garland-Thompson suggests that ‘[r]epresentation structures rather than reflects reality’, and that these representations shape how we view and respond to disability (2005, p.523). Therefore, if the metaphorization of selective mutism champions spontaneous remission, this may lead to perceptions that this is a likely prognosis, not an outlier, and may impact the treatment of the real condition.

Bérubé states that ‘[o]ne of the tasks undertaken by disability studies so far has been to point out these tropes and these characters, and to critique them for their failure to do justice to the actual lived experiences of people with disabilities’ (2005, p.570). With this in mind, I will be analysing the presentations of SM in two texts and considering whether they succeed in doing justice to the reality of the disorder, factoring in the use of fantasy elements in relation to the disability.

## Methodology

I will be using close textual analysis to compare *Pet* by Akwaeke Emezi (2019) and *The Last Wild* (TLW) by Piers Torday (2013). Both are fantasy texts in the upper middle-grade to younger YA age range, published in a similar period, featuring a non- or partially-verbal protagonist who still “speaks” to non-human characters telepathically. This telepathic speech is considered separate and visually distinct from verbal speech, and in *Pet*, from sign language also.

Despite these similarities, a key point for comparison is the nature of the fantastic futures they present. *Pet* takes place in a society which could be considered, at least on the surface, a utopia, whereas TLW is set in a dystopian, totalitarian society. This distinct difference shapes the way each text approaches disability, and indeed any difference or diversity. I will discuss the difference between these models and how they impact presentations of SM, as well as whether this excuses inaccurate portrayals and negative perceptions of disability.

## Comparative Analysis

A useful way to begin analysing these two text’s presentations of selective mutism is through Price’s idea of literary selective mutism, and how this compares to the real condition.

Jam, the fifteen-year-old protagonist of *Pet* (Emezi, 2019), exhibits SM almost exactly as described by the DSM-5 and the NHS; a ‘[c]onsistent failure to speak in specific social situations’ (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.195) and the ability to ‘speak freely to certain people’ (NHS, 2023).

Jam’s selective mutism is revealed slowly, as Jam moves through different social situations and her style of communication changes in response. First, Jam uses sign language, denoted by italics, to communicate with her best friend Redemption. Their proficiency with sign language is shown through Jam’s hands moving so fast that they are ‘a blur as she signed’, establishing that this is their usual and long-term way of talking (Emezi, 2019, p.4). Following this, Jam communicates with the local librarian, Ube, by ‘writing her question... down’, noting that they ‘didn’t need to talk, which was perfect’ (ibid., p.5). Again, Jam and Ube’s comfort with this silence demonstrates its long-term nature. Finally, at home with her mother Bitter, Jam speaks aloud, but it is noted that her mother is ‘one of the few people she voiced with’ (ibid., p.10). Together these different types

of communication demonstrate that Jam is only comfortable speaking with certain people in certain situations.

Price’s LSM narrative places emphasis on both the ‘traumatic event’ which causes the mutism and the ‘crisis’ that restarts the speech (2023, p.10), to which *Pet* conforms dubiously if at all. Rather than learning when Jam stopped speaking, we learn when she started. Jam has been selectively mute her whole life, and spoke for the first time ‘when she was three’ (Emezi, 2019, p.15). Although it is true that Jam voices more in moments of crisis, or to lend more weight to her words (ibid., p.116), as she never truly ‘stops speaking’, this cannot be considered a ‘restoration’ of her speech (Price, 2023, p.10). Overall, this is an incredibly accurate presentation of selective mutism in regards to the medical literature, however this is not the case in many texts.

Kester in *The Last Wild* (Torday, 2013), for example, mostly conforms to the LSM narrative. His selective mutism is not revealed slowly, but stated outright at the beginning of the novel, and immediately tied to a traumatic event. The introduction of ‘I know what the words mean... I just can’t say them... Not since Mum died’ follows the beginning of the LSM narrative exactly (ibid., p.5). In LSM texts the traumatic events always occur before the beginning of the novel, and ‘often are connected to death’, both of which are true here (Price, 2023, p.23).

Furthermore, Price notes that LSM is often treated as ‘an “all or nothing” condition’, meaning the character either speaks freely or not at all (ibid., p.19), which is how Kester’s selective mutism is presented. For the majority of the novel he never speaks aloud, and it is implied he never makes any sound at all, such as not screaming when hurt (Torday, 2013, p.13). Due to his silence Kester is unable to communicate with anyone around him through talking, and he does

not sign or write things down.

Kester’s brief return to verbal speech is where the conformation to LSM falters. If his silence is ‘nothing’, his speech certainly isn’t ‘all’, and arguably does not occur during the crisis of the novel (Price, 2023, p.19). Indeed, the worst of the crisis has passed, and while there is still some element of jeopardy, Kester’s voice does nothing to resolve it. His one spoken word—repeated several times—is ‘no’, which accomplishes nothing other than interrupting his father and briefly delaying the ultimate resolution to the crisis (Torday, 2013, pp.313-319). In short, the ‘restoration of the...power to speak’ has no bearing on the plot other than, perhaps, to enable this disability to be ‘fixed’, albeit temporarily (Price, 2023, p.10; Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.53).

The use of telepathic communication in both texts also connects to the idea of disability being fixed. Both Jam and Kester meet a creature/creatures with whom they can communicate telepathically, foregoing the need for verbal speech. In *Pet*, this is the eponymous Pet, and in *The Last Wild*, the creatures are the animals that Kester encounters. Although this telepathic speech is presented differently in each text, both are shown as visually distinct and therefore separate from verbal speech. In *Pet* the telepathic speech is not differentiated from the narration/Jam’s thoughts at all, but is considered comparable to Jam’s thoughts. The first time she hears Pet speak to her she is shocked, as ‘[a] thought fed into her mind, and she recoiled because for the first time ever, at least so directly, it wasn’t hers’ (Emezi, 2019, p.31).

On the other hand, Kester’s internal speech, shown with asterisks in place of quotation marks, is considered separate from his thoughts. It requires effort, and is perhaps more similar to verbal speech than thoughts. For example, when Kester is frustrated and loses his temper he notes that ‘[t]he words sound harder outside my head than they did inside, but I didn’t





mean them to' (Torday, 2013, p.71). He counterintuitively refers to these words as 'outside' of his head, despite their telepathic nature. Furthermore, there is an implication that Kester's internal speech is affected by his selective mutism, although admittedly to a lesser degree. When he first begins speaking to the animals '[t]here's a silence. While I think, and try to speak' (ibid., p.32), and at certain points Kester's 'words falter in my head before they are out' (ibid., p.72). The treatment of this internal dialogue is more in keeping with the reality of SM than Kester's complete lack of speech; he can speak sometimes, but not others, and struggles particularly when he is upset or frustrated.

Is this, then, the 'magical cure' that Stemp warns of?

For Jam it is less a cure and more an accommodation; her selective mutism is never cured, but remains consistent throughout the novel. She continues to use sign language into the last chapter, speaking verbally to certain people but not to others (Emezi, 2019, pp.200-201), showing that her brief time communicating more naturally with Pet has no permanent impact on her life. In fact, her use of sign language is an indication that Jam is not in need of a cure; her community accepts and accommodates her mutism, and therefore there is no emphasis placed on verbal speech.

*The Last Wild* is more complicated; although Kester ends the novel as he began—silent—his practice talking telepathically does allow him to briefly speak aloud. His internal speech is referred to as his 'new talking' (Torday, 2013, p.32), which carries the air of a cure. Kester could not speak before, but due to this ability, he can. The question is raised by Price as to whether 'Kester's silence... attunes him to his "gift of the voice" that allows him to communicate with animals (66)

(Price, 2023, p.26). Bérubé discusses 'the possibility that certain kinds of disability make one a more able participant in certain kinds of narrative' (2005), which is certainly applicable here; Kester's mutism makes him a more able participant in this telepathic communication, perhaps turning it into the 'prosthesis' that Mitchell and Snyder warn of (2001, p.47).

This could be viewed as a magical cure, however could also be viewed through the lens of genre expectations. Cheyne encourages readers to '[evaluate] how well particular representations of disability embody (or fail to embody) their expectations of the genre in question' (2019, p.18). While telepathic communication certainly enhances the experience of the fantastic, *fantasy* may be too broad a genre to define these texts. In *A History of Disability*, Stiker discusses historical 'ways of viewing' disability, and how often 'a social morality is applied to disability' (2019, p.1; p.27). I argue that the social morality which is applied to disability, and other "difference", in these texts is the key to the distinction of their sub-genres.

No social morality is applied to Jam's selective mutism—it is simply accepted and accommodated by her community—but arguably morality is applied to Kester's SM. He is judged by his peers, called 'dumb' (Torday, 2013, p.12) and '[f]reak' (ibid., p.13), and institutionalised by doctors who 'want to make [him] talk again' (ibid., p.6). Furthermore, some of these perceptions have been internalised, with Kester believing that he is 'a genuine freak, mute' (ibid., p.17). This sense of morality is reflected in the treatment of other disabilities or differences, such as; Captain Skuldiss, the antagonist whose crutches conceal tools which facilitate their use as weapons, and even allow him to shoot at Kester (ibid., pp.166-167); 'Big Brenda... a fat girl... who has to sleep on a reinforced bed' (ibid., p.10); the warden, a 'fat man' who Kester criticises for laziness (ibid., p.3); and the Governor, an 'ugly man' who stutters (ibid., p.7). In combination this presents a clear picture;

in this society, any difference—physical or otherwise—is simply not tolerated.

The connections made here between physicality and morality are openly rejected in *Pet*—a core theme of which is that '[m]onsters don't look like anything' (Emezi, 2019, p.12). Disability is treated far more kindly, with Ube the librarian, a wheelchair user, presented as a friendly, helpful figure who assists Jam however she needs (ibid., p.5; pp.125-130). Difference, too, is not simply tolerated, but accepted. Redemption has three loving parents, one of whom uses they/them pronouns, which is never explained, because in this world it doesn't have to be (ibid., p.82). Jam's male-to-female transition is covered briefly, and has no bearing on the events of the novel or other character's treatment of her (ibid., pp.16-17). These differences are facets of the characters, not their entire identities, and Emegi never shows these characters facing judgement, discrimination, or having to defend their right to exist.

These are stark differences, which I argue are due to the differences in the societies that Emegi and Torday present, which are inherently and fundamentally opposites; one utopian, and one dystopian.

Price refers to Lucille in *Pet* as 'a utopia that has conquered racism' (2023, p.149; p.54), in which difference is not vilified, but normalised and accepted. The city claims that it has removed all the bad people; '[t]here are no monsters in Lucille' (Emezi, 2019, p.18). This positioning as a utopia directly correlates to the treatment of diversity. In *Disability and Disease in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*, Schotland proposes 'a new framework for analysing the treatment of individuals with disability in utopian texts' which includes a lack of stigma/implication of punishment attached to the disability, the disability not reflecting a 'deformity' in the person's character, and lack of mocking in relation to the disability (2011, p.6). All of the presentations of diversity in *Pet* which I have

discussed conform to this framework.

The same cannot be said for the presentations in *The Last Wild*. Schotland also notes that 'today's dystopian fiction portrays political surveillance, ecological disaster, and/or apocalyptic catastrophe' (2011, p.10), and TLW meets these criteria. The Island, where the novel is set, is surrounded by 'the filthiest and most p-polluted sea in the world' (Torday, 2013, p.8), and home to the remainder of the human population after 'the rest of the world grew too hot' for habitation (ibid., p.5). A virus has 'killed all the animals' (ibid., p.16), and there is no food left to eat after all the crops died too (ibid., p.11). The authoritarian company Factorium has 'forced everyone to move to the cities' (ibid., p.16), locked up Kester's father, and was responsible for Kester being taken away (ibid., p.312).

So, then, the treatment of disability and difference—the stigma, sense of punishment, reflection on the person's character, and the mocking which should not be present in a utopia—fit in this counter-narrative, the dystopia. Therefore, when evaluating these novels through Cheyne's framework of genre expectations, the treatment of SM, disabilities, and differences in both texts can only be said to be exemplary; they perfectly embody the expectations of utopian and dystopian fiction respectively.





## Conclusion

This begs the question of which must be prioritised—accurate representations of disability, or genre expectations? Considering both Bérubé's statement of the duty of disability studies to critique representations 'for their failure to do justice to the actual lived experiences of people with disabilities' (2005) and Garland-Thompson's argument that representation 'structures rather than reflects reality' (2005, p.523), then the answer is clear. These representations must be evaluated, and accurate representations must take precedence over genre expectations.

While the negative perceptions of disability in TLW could be attributed to the dystopian genre, the inaccurate portrayal of selective mutism cannot be, and should be critiqued as such. By presenting this misleading portrait of SM, Torday fails to do justice to lived experiences, and perhaps continues

the concerning trend of metaphorizing disability. Emezi's *Pet*, on the other hand, presents an incredibly accurate depiction of selective mutism, and shows the kind of acceptance of disabilities expected in a utopia. This not only challenges the trend

of metaphorization, but **presents an alternative; a world where disability is allowed to simply exist.**

Perhaps it could be said that due to the rare nature of selective mutism, this is arbitrary; simply not enough people are affected by this for it to matter. However, this rarity does not eliminate the need to do justice to these lived experiences, and to provide respectful representations of disability across genres, which is a standard that should be upheld across all depictions of disabilities.



**Egg in a Hat**  
by Lani Kim



## Book Review: Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in *My Two Blankets* by Irena Kobald and Freya Blackwood

by Loof



### The Gift of Words

Welcome to my blog!

My daughter gave me a gift today. She texted me a new word. 'Susurrous' (adj.) the gentle whisper that leaves make as the wind passes through them. I was delighted with her gift of a word. It made me delve into the importance of language and the impact it has on our identity. Journey with me and see how Irena Kobald and Freya Blackwood introduce the themes of identity, inclusion, and linguistic diversity, through a story based on real events of a girl and her blankets, and take my gift of words with you.



### Inclusion and Linguistic Diversity in the Plot

Cartwheel (not her name but a nickname), flees a war-torn country with her Auntie. In her new country she is surrounded by new sounds; traffic, animals and buildings. But most unfamiliar are the sounds that people make, the new language. Feeling estranged, at home she wraps herself in a metaphorical blanket of her familiar words (language).

A friend in the park talks to her and helps her learn the language, and in this way, Cartwheel feels more secure and that she belongs (inclusion). She realizes the new language will not replace the old one, but they can both be an equal part of her. The book ends with Cartwheel playing happily in the park, and her aunt sitting on a park bench chatting, both have found inclusion with the language.

The barrier that language created has been removed, and as the languages mix, the characters too integrate into the new country. By giving both languages equal importance, the reader sees the values of different languages and that by having two languages, possibilities are enriched.



### Language and Identity in the Text

*'The connection between language and identity is a fundamental element of our experience of being human. Language not only reflects who we are, but in some sense it is who we are' (Llamas and Watt, 2010 p.1).*

In *My Two Blankets*, Kobald uses a waterfall as a metaphor for how Cartwheel feels as she is engulfed in the new language. Overwhelmed, she fears that if she loses her mother tongue, would she 'ever feel like me again?' As she becomes familiar with the new language, it too becomes part of her, she knows that whatever language she



chooses, she will 'always be me.' Here the author demonstrates that language is an important part of our identity.

It is vital for all people to see themselves reflected in literature (Bishop, 1990). Names identify us; our country, religion, and cultural background. Names are personal, most people are not pleased when their name is pronounced incorrectly, names can be 'essential to an understanding of self' (Keller and Franzak, 2016). Therefore, it is significant that neither characters nor countries are named. This neutrality of both countries and names renders the book more accessible to diverse readers.



### Language and Identity in the Illustrations

In picture books, the role of the illustrator is a vital one. Blackwood's illustrations complement and 'significantly enhance' the text; by offering further insight into the new ideas and concepts that Cartwheel is adapting to (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000). This synergy is recognized in the peritext where both creators are credited side by side as authors.

Here I will show how Blackwood uses colour, shape, and size to represent language and identity, enhancing the reading of the text.

### The Colour Scheme

The colour scheme complements the text, earthy shades of red and terracotta represent Cartwheel's home and her cultural and linguistic identity. Whereas greys show the unknown and the strange, and light blues symbolize the new. Cartwheel and Auntie are dressed in a red earth colour, the friend is dressed in blue, unknown characters are mainly depicted in grey tones until the final image. In the final image the reds and blues combine as cultures and languages unite.

### Illustrating the Words



When Cartwheel arrives in the new land the words are harsh and cold, the new vocabulary is illustrated initially as sharp rudimentary shapes, which form the waterfall that is drowning her. As Cartwheel becomes accustomed to the new sounds, the images of words become softer and take on the form of objects.



Then finally in her blanket they are fully formed; softer and rounder, showing her familiarization with the language, in which she regains a sense of self. The images of the words show us how the once difficult language is now recognizable, symbolizing her growing confidence in the language.

### In the Park



The colour scheme is reflected in the park. In the first image, everything is different shades of grey, apart from Cartwheel and

her aunt, highlighting their insecurity and loss of identity.



Teaching Cartwheel, her friend holds up a blue umbrella representing the new language, to shelter them both from the 'waterfall' of words that is engulfing Cartwheel, also showing that no matter your linguistic background, you can share a sheltering umbrella, and language is no longer an insurmountable barrier.



The final image of the park sees Cartwheel performing a cartwheel, fully at ease in her new language and developing identity. It is significant that the new environment is welcoming Cartwheel's culture, the friend's trousers are red and orange, the unknown characters on the page are also wearing ochre-coloured clothes, the park is displaying red bunting, the chimneys are red, the kite is red and orange. This represents an inclusive society where the cultures and languages meet and mix (Daly, 2021).



### Size and space of the images

The size of the image and the amount of space it takes up on the page influence how we see the character. Larger images dominate the space and our focus, depicting the sense of security of the character. Smaller images can indicate a feeling of insecurity or less value (Nodelman and Perry, 1990).



In the very first image we see Cartwheel taking up the entire page in a vibrant image of happiness, confidence, and hope.



However, when she moves to her new country, she and her aunt are small faceless images in a grey strange land. This shows their lack of confidence, fear of their surroundings, and their loss of identity. This is exacerbated by the loss of language, as seen in the waterfall in the city.

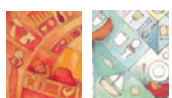






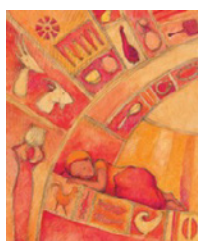
The umbrella image takes up most of the page, each girl of an equal size, showing Cartwheel's self-confidence returning, as she is on equal ground with her friend. Language is no longer a barrier.

In the final image (above) Cartwheel matches the size of the other characters or is larger than them, reflecting her immersion into her new country. 'All in all, this scene depicts one of happiness, freedom and interaction between two formerly separate worlds' (Daly, 2020).



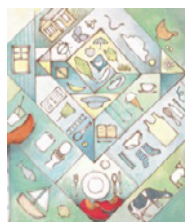
### Language and Identity in the Blankets

Blankets across the world primarily offer warmth and cover. They represent comfort, security, and cultural traditions. In this section I am going to look at language and identity in the blankets in *My Two Blankets*.

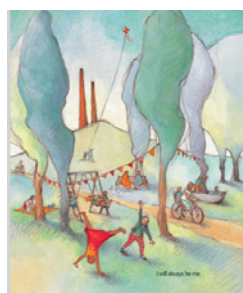


To comfort herself in the unknown land of strange and scary sounds, Cartwheel wraps herself in a metaphorical blanket, which she calls her 'old' blanket' made up of her 'own words and sounds'. In the illustration the blanket is adorned with familiar items from her past; kitchen

utensils, domestic animals, food and more. It is evident that the authors here are tying language to a sense of comfort and identity.



When she is gifted new vocabulary, Cartwheel begins to create a different blanket filled with the unfamiliar words and new customs. The words are the same categories, although the pictures are different. Interestingly, in the image of the new blanket we also find a birthday cake and candles, (reminding the reader not all cultures celebrate birthdays) and many novel items that have made an impression on Cartwheel. Also, in a corner tucked away comfortably, are Cartwheel's old slippers, reflecting the two cultures and languages that are now integral to her identity.



Cartwheel and the readers realize through the two blankets and languages that make up her being, that she is now made up of two cultures, and whichever culture or language (blanket) she uses, she is herself. As she says on the final page, 'I will always be me'.

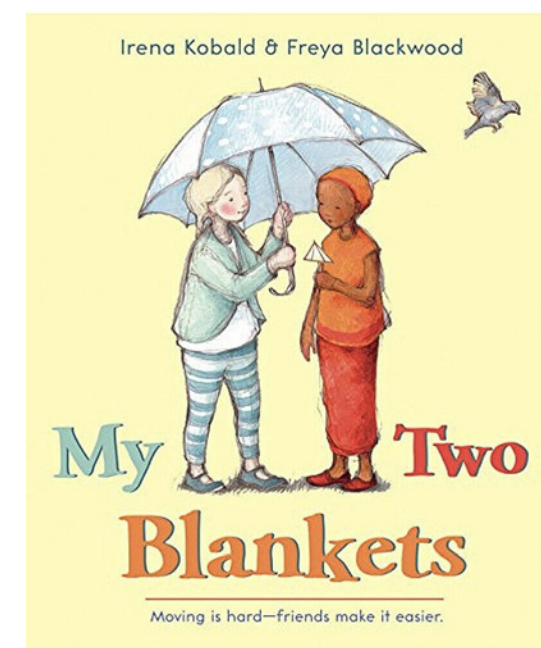
## The Gift of Words in

## My Two Blankets

This blog demonstrates how in *My Two Blankets* a gift of words can be life transforming, and how it is possible and enriching to immerse oneself in a new culture and language, without leaving your old identity behind, creating a richer sense of self. We know that readers need to see themselves represented in literature in order to feel a sense of belonging and value (Bishop 1990), and in *My Two Blankets* readers facing a linguistic struggle will empathise with the protagonist. Others might come to understand the difficulties and challenges people encounter, when language is not understood.

My question is why the illustrations on the final page, while strongly showing the friend wearing orange as she learns about Cartwheel's culture, Cartwheel does not wear any blues to show she has taken on her new culture?

**What do your blankets say about you?**  
**Please add your comments below!**







**Hansel and Gretel**  
by Eve Soffer Liberman



## Grimm Beginnings: The Luck

by Philippa Cox

If you go up the hill by the left side, by the left, there is a house on stilts you will see. If you travel further eastwards, further eastwards, you will find another house, the house in question.

On the hill, in this house, on this land, in this story, there were born twins.

Twins you say? Twins.

A girl and a boy. One for night, one for day. One for high tide, one for low.

Their names were, well don't you already know?

Hansel and Gretel, their names were Hansel and Gretel.

On the day they were born people came to visit the house with gifts but were turned away.

"Mother's not well," said the father on the first day.

"She has a cold," he said on the second.

"She has a fever," he said on the third.

By the fourth day, the people had grown suspicious.

"You don't think," said one.

"It couldn't possibly be, could it?" came another.

"Is it...twins?!"

"Mother," said the father on the seventh day. "The people in the town know. What are we going to do?"

"We will move to another place, find another home and hopefully the luck won't catch us."

The luck was what they were afraid of. The luck was bad.

So, they packed up all of their belongings, the clothes and food, the furniture, cutlery and plates, and packed it all into bags. These bags were strapped onto the donkeys, they had two. And, they walked, and walked, and walked to another town, just over the hill where no one had heard of them or knew their name.

There they found a lovely house right by a river. It had flowers out the front and it was the perfect place for the children to grow up.



After a few years, some of the neighbours stopped speaking to them, they decided not to sell the family any of their harvest or share their wine. They had found out about the twins. The bad luck had followed. So, the mother and father said they should move again.

Up they packed but with one donkey this time instead of two, to pay for the cost of moving and to find another job in the next town.

The next town was large and bustling just like a city, there were plenty of places to buy fruit and vegetables and they believed they could stay.

“We will be well hidden here,” said the father. “This is the place for us.”

However, wherever they went the bad luck followed. People soon got wind of their story and distanced themselves so that the family struggled to eat and live. They begged on street corners and relied on people to pity them until, again, they packed up their belongings but with smaller bags than the last time and no donkey. They strapped the bags onto their backs and walked. Each time they moved, people would soon find out about their luck and before long they would have to leave again. Their belongings got smaller and smaller each time, with less and less.

“What are we going to do?” asked the father one night before they moved again.

“I don’t know,” replied the mother.

The children, who were now older and beginning to understand, asked, “Is it because of us?” and “Are we the reason?”

“No, no, no!” cried the mother and father. “We love you both very much. Our love is so strong, so endless, the luck will never come between us.”

But the children stayed up late that night and whispered in hush voices about the houses and towns they had lived in since birth, and how all was not right. It wasn’t fair that mother and father were suffering because of the bad luck they had brought. It wasn’t fair that they were now poor.

“What can we do?” asked Hansel.

“I have a plan,” replied Gretel.

The next town they came to was down in the valley. They arrived as paupers with only the clothes on their backs and with just enough food



to get them through the night. Before anyone could notice and the bad luck appear again, Hansel and Gretel slipped out early the next morning and were gone. They had heard stories about wells being entrances to worlds and that they could give people good luck if they drank from them.

And so, they agreed, that was where they would head.

They walked over hills and down into other valleys until they reached a forest. They knew not to enter this forest alone for the trees were thick and lush, and the branches overbearing. They walked along the edge of this forest where the brambles latched onto them like hands, and tore at their clothes until they became rags.

Eventually, they came to a copse of hazel trees and in the middle was a well that was guarded by a circular stone wall. They tread carefully. Leaning over the wall and peering in, they could see the murky water below. It bubbled.

“We must drink some of the water,” said Gretel. “The water will give us the luck we desire.”

Hansel nodded and peered down again to work out how they could reach it. There was no bucket or chain and so no way to fetch the water. There were no overhanging branches or ways in which the water could be collected.

“Lower me down,” said Gretel. “I can bring some up for us to drink.”

“Down there?” Hansel felt afraid. He remembered the stories of people who had been punished trying to enter other worlds through wells. He remembered the one about the girl who fell down the well and never returned.

“We already have all of the bad luck,” said Gretel. “Nothing can happen to us that is as bad as what’s already happened before.”

Hansel thought about this for a few moments. It was true, they had lost every home they had visited, every friend they had made, every possession apart from the rags on their backs. How could anything be as bad? And so, he agreed.

Gretel perched on the wall to the well and Hansel held onto her legs. Slowly, she lowered herself downwards, head first. She put her palms on the walls of the well to keep balance and edged herself in hand by hand.

Hansel leant his body up against the outside of the well and held onto Gretel’s feet with both of his arms.

“A little further,” Gretel’s voice echoed up the walls. Hansel tried to lower her deeper but



was struggling with the weight.

Gretel carried a little leather satchel where she used to keep money but now stored things she foraged from time to time since they had become poor. Her satchel, she thought, would be able to carry some of the water. She reached down to fill it up.

Just as she did so, a voice came from deep below. It rippled the water's surface and if she'd blinked she might have believed it had never happened at all. It whispered to her, "All luck comes with a price."

For a moment, Gretel froze.

But what could be worse than the luck we already have? she thought.

So, after a moment's hesitation, she filled up her satchel with water from the well.

"Up," she called to Hansel. "Pull me up."

Hansel pulled with all of his strength and Gretel pushed herself against the walls of the well so that she walked with her hands back up. Once her feet were on the floor she showed Hansel the satchel which was almost empty of water.

"Quickly," she said. "We must both drink from the well and wish for good luck." Gretel drank a sip first and Hansel had the last drop. They hoped that it would be enough as they were too tired and weak to try to fetch for some more. They would have to make do and return.

Once they arrived back at the town all was different. Their parents looked wealthy and happy. The neighbours called out to them as friends.

"Hansel, Gretel, it's a miracle!" their parents cried.

How marvellous, how wonderful, nothing could ever stop them from being this content now. That night they stayed up late with the people in the village and ate from their harvest and shared their wine. They sang songs together and told stories, and by the end of the night called everyone brother and sister. Here was a place they could stay until they grew old.



However, after the next few days, Hansel and Gretel noticed their parents' love towards them change. They no longer looked at them in the same way, kissed them goodnight, or told them bedtime stories. Instead they complained about them. They said what filthy children they were and that they were ungrateful and lazy. The love that used to bind the family together so tightly had now turned sour and rotten. Their love had turned to hate.

Hansel and Gretel worried about the water they had drunk from the well. They had thought that no luck could be as bad as theirs. But all luck comes with a price.

Once upon a time...



**Cream Then Jam!**  
by Andrea Sofía Zorrilla Mora





**Popo Mystery**  
by Hebe Ziming Xu





# We Have Always Been Here

by Victoria Lane Doxford

## Chapter 1

It was years later that I saw Zadie again. I was sent a zip folder by Angela, a producer I was working with. It was a bunch of clips titled Potential Talking Heads...xxx and a message saying, 'I like number four, she's funny.'

She always liked to shock. I suppose.

When I opened it, I didn't recognise her straight away. My brain disconnected. It was like a power cut, hundreds of lights across a city going off at once. It was the warm Scottish lilt that switched it back on. Lit my memories. And it's true, she was still funny, she still had that warmth and way of talking that made you feel nothing else mattered. I could have watched her for hours.

I texted Angela the producer. "Thanks for the clips. No. 4 not for me. Let's go with 6." She replied with a thumbs up.

I typed Zadie's name into my phone, and it all came up. The years and years of messages and photos and fun. My phone still stored it all now, five years and an iPhone upgrade later. I typed her name into Instagram and pressed the unblock button and there she was. Exactly the same. Completely unknown to me now.

In the years since I'd known her, she'd blown up on the socials as they say. Now, she was a funny combination on the fame Venn diagram of being Hackney famous, mum famous, social media famous but not actually famous. Famous enough that if people saw her in cafes, they would stop and ask her if they'd gone to school together: they knew her face from somewhere. Famous enough that people would say, 'Hi, how are you?' thinking that she was a friend of a friend. But not famous enough that she had entered the sidebar of shame on the Daily Mail website. You would most likely know her from the 'recommended for you' search pages on Instagram.

The last time I had seen her had been at the dinner that Simon had organised for my 50th. He had wanted me to have a party, and in the months and years that followed, I wish we had just done that instead. But at the time, I couldn't face it. I felt like the people I had collected by 50 were a raggedy bunch – holes left in friendships groups from those who had left marriages, the country or even just London, never to be seen again. I knew I would just end up looking after the single friends who arrived at the party not knowing anyone and who considered themselves too old to make an effort with new people anymore, while watching everyone else who did know each other have fun.

It wasn't just that though. Even though I know now differently, at the time it felt like Simon couldn't feel the gulf that had grown between us and other people when Rose was born – the loneliness that set us apart from other families which meant that there were very few people who I was now close to. And I certainly wouldn't have explained it to him.



The day of the party, he'd been working from home as he did every day back then. He was sat at the desk I was at now, in the basement. I've claimed it from him. It was originally supposed to be the children's playroom, but Simon had taken it over during Covid and somehow stayed there for years afterwards. It had been covered in papers and the basement smelled of man, earthy and stale, and sweaty feet. The lights were on, and despite us having lived there for nearly 18 years, it was the only room in the house Simon had painted. He had painted the ceiling the same dark grey as the walls. Colour drenching he called it. He said he had seen it in other people's houses, but I thought he did it that way because it was easier to cover a bad job when everything was the same colour, and dark. It was also the only warm room in the house, the whirl from his multiple screens filled the small space with heat. He'd been a lawyer his whole life.

I'd come in from taking the kids out and gone downstairs to see him. I stood in the doorway and took off my coat and held it in my hands. He didn't turn around. I stared at his dark curly black hair, soft where it met his skin, his thin frame hunched over the screen. When I met him, I loved how dark and hairy and bony he was, physically sharp as well as his mind. He was the opposite of my dad, in every way. Now that I was bigger (we would have said 'fatter' twenty years ago), I did sometimes wish for someone who would dwarf me instead of the other way around.

"We're meeting Zadie and Frank at 8," I said. "Did you talk to Rose and Violet about babysitting Ren?"

"I did," he said. Then, "It will be great. I've booked a table". He hit return a few times and started a new paragraph. He still hadn't turned around.

Violet was our eldest. She was 17 that winter. She'd always been such a good girl. After the second or third time I brought Rose home from the hospital as a baby, she came over to me wearing her miniature baby sling, top rumpled from pretending to breast feed and said, "I'll help you look after her mummy," and she hadn't stopped. Ren was everyone's baby. Neither Violet nor Ren had ever said that they knew Rose came first, but I waited for the accusation every time I yelled at either of them, which I did more often than I would like to admit.

"Brilliant," I said. "I hope it's something normal. I'm a bit sick of small plates." I spoke to his back as Simon answered a Teams call I didn't know was ringing. He chuckled a 'hello' and I walked back upstairs.

\*

I was desperate to see Zadie. It was always the way back then. Since I had become a mother, the overwhelming feeling I had until I met her, was tiredness. Just tired all the fucking time. Whenever anyone asked how I was or in fact any question about me, the answer had always been the same: 'I'm tired.' So boring. So true.

Before she came along, the thing I had feared about not having any energy was not life passing me by, though that was a worry. It was that I was no longer funny. Being witty relied on quick recall, that sense of having everything at your fingertips, that crackle of energy that forces the punch line out of your mouth before you even know you're saying it. That's all being funny is – that ability to join all the dots at lightning speed and bring them together to create a laugh. That thumping dullness that came from being tired had taken it away.



Before I knew Zadie, I looked at other mothers and all I noticed was how boring they had become. I was not looking at their Boden uniforms or the scraped back buns, what I was really talking about was their dullness of thought, killed by tiredness. When I used to enter a room, I didn't feel fear. I could talk to anyone, my ability to make people laugh was my superpower but now it was gone. I was afraid of new rooms and of those new people inside. I noticed myself shrinking back away from them and of course counting down the hours till I could get some sleep.

I thought I would never get that superpower back, until I did. I had been sat on a balcony overlooking the sports hall where Violet had a gymnastics class, feeding Rose, the cold concrete wall holding us up while my forehead leaned against the glass and watched. Every time Violet turned around, I would wave enthusiastically and give a thumbs up. She tried so hard. I didn't notice Zadie come in at first.

"You know we don't have to stay here and watch them, don't you?" I hadn't seen her sit down next to me. Bleached blond bob, gold hoops, red lipstick. She didn't look like any of the other parents I had met. She looked like I used to. My eyes had been momentarily closed, resting, seeking that dreamlike state of being neither awake nor asleep while my baby fed, and my other child was safe. To have just enough awareness that Rose was ok but finally some rest. Every week everyone else had given me a wide berth with my dead eyes and my sick looking child. Zadie was the first person to talk to me.

"We could go somewhere else," she said. I opened my eyes and looked into her bright blue ones. "I know, but what are we going to do instead?"

That first time she took me to the pub. A boozer on the corner that definitely didn't allow children. As she asked me about myself, something inside my brain stretched out and yawned and woke up. The crackle of energy from her was enough to find my bank of witty retorts. I was fast thinking in a way I hadn't been in years. She gave some of that energy back to me. The thing was of course that she had no idea. She thought that person I was when I was around her was the normal me. It made me want to see her again and again and stay longer and longer each time. She was funny, that made me like her too. But mainly, I liked just being seen.

Slowly, I felt myself coming back but it remained inextricably linked to Zadie. It made me never want to give her up. Zadie wore bright colours; she wore reds and yellows and oranges, and I started to feel like they could suit me too. Without realising it, I had been wearing clothes of black and greys and brown and pulled them into a nondescript wardrobe that meant I didn't claim any visual space. People skipped over me when they saw me in the street with my children. I started to dress like her, not in her style as she was all sharp edges and structure: the architectural design of her clothes meant you couldn't see where she ended, and rigid material began. I never gained that degree of confidence from being around her, but my loose drapes of colour thrown onto linen or silk echoed her colourful style. My jeans stayed in the wardrobe. She encouraged me, taking me shopping or sharing her #gifted #spon clothes from East London boutiques after she had photographed herself in them. She was generous like that. More than that though she was confident and quick paced, my mind raced to keep up with her and remember how to be funny. She made me remember how to fill the gaps in between sentences, how to raise an eyebrow at the right time, how to see all my lines in a conversation laid out before me in my mind. They say that being funny was attractive but what if being funny made me more attractive to me.

"So, what, you give Rose medicine every night at 1.30?" She asked me one time we were in

the pub opposite gymnastics. "What happens if you're out? Or if you forget?"

I rolled my eyes, "Well, I'm never out."

"Why not?" She was serious.

"Well, because I have a tiny baby for a start." But the truth was, I hadn't been out in years. When Violet was born, I had been determined not to make the same mistakes as my parents – to be better, though the bar was pretty low. I had gone full earth mother – baby wearing, breast feeding, I devoted myself to her. I wanted her to always feel safe and loved, and like she was my only priority. I still saw friends but in naptimes. I stopped drinking in case I was needed. Looking back, I don't know where I found the energy, but I was all in. I was committed. But Zadie didn't need to know all that, I hadn't forgotten the basics of making a friend and implicitly criticising her life choices wasn't going to get me anywhere.

"Well, what if you forget?"

"It's not ideal, but as a one-off its fine, she'll feel nauseous and have a huge headache but she's still a baby who cries all the time, so I don't know that I'd know any different. But when she's older she'd feel pretty rough. If I did it a lot, she would stop growing but if she went for any length of time – say if I missed two doses, she'd get pretty sick, pretty quickly. She would be slowly dying. It's the same as when she's really sick, she needs to be on a drip to get the amount of cortisol she needs or if she seriously hurts herself because her body can't replace the amount of excess cortisol that we would produce naturally."

"That's crazy. You seem very calm about it all," Zadie said, and I was so grateful. I was anything but calm, but I loved the idea that I knew what I was doing and was in control. I smiled, not wanting to spoil the illusion. I never told Zadie the biggest thing about Rose, the thing that would change the way Zadie saw her, and us too it turns out. I'd been right to trust my instincts.

"And so what, you'll be doing that for the rest of your life?"

I nodded. "Yes, if she's unwell I also have to do a dose at 4am to keep the cortisol levels topped up. But yeah, I'll be doing it forever."

"Well, hats off to you." I thought of her that night when Simon asked me why I made such a fuss about doing Rose's medication. Simon hadn't felt the same way. He said that it didn't matter. That you had to just get on with things.

He said it all the time. He said it when he told me that he was going to go for a quick run before dinner. I was at my desk where I had been all day, Friends on in the background, that millennial lullaby, Matthew Perry's intonation and the canned laughter that followed washing over me, my step count at 100 and my waistline at postpartum even though the kids were in school. I had tried to work while listening to Radio 4, or podcasts people shared details of with the excitement we used to speak about gigs, anything to keep me connected to the world, but I would just stop and listen instead of working. I couldn't fit all the things I was supposed to be doing into one week let alone a day.

At 7.30, as we were putting our coats on to go out to dinner, Simon had said he wished he'd organised the party instead. He said, "Isn't this just an excuse to get drunk with Zadie?"





"It isn't," I said and turned to open the front door. Then, "I won't get too drunk, I promise. Just a few glasses of wine, it's no big deal. You used to do it all the time before you got old and boring." I looked back again and saw that I had hurt him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"I do get drunk. I just get up the next day and get on with things."

Later we sat at our table for four surrounded by other couples the same age as us. No one ever went out in big groups of friends anymore. Zadie's bleached blonde hair was shining almost white in the dimly lit side lights. She had red lips and straight white teeth, pointed nose and smooth forehead, light reflecting from her instead of being absorbed like most women our age.

"That dress is amazing," she said as I sat down. "I love it on you." I looked at best, average – a tent from Toast covering all the bits I hated but couldn't be bothered to do anything about. I wanted to return the compliment, but Zadie was dressed, typically, in a tight ruffled leather Vivienne Westwood dress that took no prisoners, along with tartan tights and shoes that looked like pointy leather hooves. I didn't know where to start so I didn't.

We sat down at the table that was too low to be comfortable. The planks it was made from uneven, leaving the little salt and pepper dishes balancing on rough edges, threatening to spill over onto the paper menus stained from a previous diner's decisions. Zadie didn't look at the menu but ordered the Pet Nat with four glasses. I didn't look at Simon, but I knew his eyes had narrowed at the cost.

"And some tap water, please," is all he said.

"Happy birthday, doll," she said, her Scottish lilt adding warmth to everything she said. Her face was delighted, and she was all the present I needed. Someone in my book club once saw her do a pitch. She described how Zadie came in like the sun, all warmth and light and how they had all turned towards her. I had known what she'd meant, but I had shifted in my seat when she said it. I don't like sharing.

"How're the girls?" she smiled, and so we began. The Pet Nat became two became three. Simon laughed, and I remembered how the vein in his forehead always appeared when he laughed. "You're unbelievable," he said to her again and again. But there was no banter between us the way there was when men were doing all the talking, no badoom-badoom-swish of a punchline, no taking the piss, no saying savage things and pretending it was just a joke and that we could take a joke when one wasn't intended. Zadie and I were just talking, talking, talking in that language of women, spiralling and roaming into clever observations and things we've recently learned. There's no competition, instead we said, 'you're so right. I've never looked at it that way before,' and 'how did that make you feel?' Our humour was infused through everything we said, building tiers to support each other until we had made a cake and could eat it.



**Pipe**  
by Faeze Afsharnia







**The Traveller's Companion**  
by Yang Xu





# Children's Literature in Action

A Report by Sophie O'Connor-Smart

Children's Literature in Action is a module on the Children's Literature MA programme, particularly taken by those on the theory pathway. Each student conducts an empirical research project with the aim of discovering something that can contribute to the world of children's literature. This report contains six projects from the last three years. Each will discuss their research question, conducting the research, motivations behind the project and conclusions drawn.

**Victoria Lane Doxford**

*How can we use "booktalk" to help boys challenge and understand emerging constructs of masculinity that they encounter predominantly online?*

My interest in this topic began through an interest in how intersex and other gender identities are understood in literature and how children use them to form their understandings of gender identities. The brief moved as I followed the meaning created by the participants rather than enforcing an academic response to the texts.

I chose to work with a small group of boys initially as several studies indicated the need to engage boys in gender construction debates, specifically the defensiveness of boys when asked to think about their power and place in partaking in gender construction that suits them. Instead, I learned more about how the boys related to newly established ideas of the male gender and masculinity – the so-called manosphere - led by the smartphone (which wasn't conceived when some of these studies were written), and in particular the 24-hour access it provides to social media and YouTube.

I concluded that if we can develop critical readers, we can enable children to think critically about all texts they see, including those online as the broadest definition of what a text is, which will help children navigate and create understanding of the way masculinity is being constructed around them.

The tools from the pre-digital age - developing a community of enquiry around reading, using a reader response to texts to create meaning in the world - can also be extended to the digital age to help children navigate it, and that children's literature is a key tool for children to develop and exercise their critical thinking skills. There is limited understanding of how children use YouTube, etc. to construct their gender identities, but there is a huge overlap with their response to literature and my work helps contribute to the understanding of the link between the two.



**Deepti Ganesh**

*How do privileged urban Indian children respond when introduced to characters who are different from them in terms of class, caste and privilege?*

The research was conducted with four children, who are between 8-10 years old, living in Chennai through once-a-week book club sessions over Teams. The children all come from urban, privileged backgrounds and attend international schools. I chose the book *Lost in Translation* published by Karadi Tales which follows the journey of a young boy who is forced to migrate to different cities in India along with his family of daily-wage labourers as they look for work in big cities.

Having experienced firsthand the ignorance and indifference of privileged middle-grade students during my time as a school librarian at an international school in Bangalore, I wanted to explore the power of literature and book discussions in introducing children to difficult conversations. Using the story as a starting point, I was able to initiate discussions on topics these children are often indifferent to, such as systemic injustice and the stark class and caste divides that surround them.

While the focus of the project has remained the same, over the course of the sessions, I was able to situate my research more firmly within the field of critical literacy and the role of literature circles. By taking on the role of a knowledgeable adult, I was able to guide the discussions toward topics the children would not have encountered without the book club setting. I was surprised by how willing they were to engage with subjects typically deemed 'risky' by adult gatekeepers.

The field of critical literacy is significantly under-researched in India, particularly among urban privileged children. Since Indian children's literature is largely dominated by upper-caste and upper-class voices writing about the 'other', it is vital for educators to recognize the inherent biases such literature may perpetuate. In today's world of misinformation and political hate-mongering, creating safe spaces where children can explore difficult realities through literature becomes more important than ever.

**Sophie O'Connor-Smart**

*How can we support teenagers to explore their reading identity?*

I find I have two different interests in children's literature. The first being examining why children fall out of love with reading, and the second, examining emotional representation in literature. The latter has unsurprisingly been discovered throughout the degree, making me feel like I had abandoned my first interest, the one that led me to this degree after leaving teaching. I chose this project to dive into the former interest.

I conducted my research with two seventeen-year-old girls. One of the participants was my sister, leading to some interesting observations on how identity as a reader can vary depending on who you are talking to (with her having varying definitions of herself as a reader whether she was talking to her friend or myself). The majority of my research collection involved interview style discussion and prompted discussions without me in the



room. These questions were a combination of Aiden Chambers' 'Tell Me' questions (1993), and Michael Rosen's matrix (2017).

The causes of teenagers abandoning their love for reading was confirmed in my first session, and also very predictably involving reasons such as it not being "cool", not having time during study and part-time work, and preferring digital forms of entertainment in the limited leisure time they do have. My focus then moved towards how they can be encouraged to read more.

A major observation came from this. My bias against digitalised and non-obvious forms of reading. Audio books were exciting, news articles were frequently clicked on in social media apps, videos were being watched with subtitles. When asked if these can be classed as reading, the teenagers disagreed. Even non-fiction pieces from classes and further interest were classed as "study" and not "reading". There were many debates over what can and cannot be classed as reading. Leading to conclusions that it is not that teenagers simply stop reading, it's that we're not validating the formats they are reading in. Therefore, they are not able to identify themselves as a reader, because we're not making them feel like one.

We know that literature has to evolve with the times and accepting of digitalised forms, but there is a further layer of implementation that isn't translating. If teenagers don't feel validated as a reader if they're not sitting down with a physical book, we still have further to go in how a reading identity is portrayed. It isn't just about digitalising more stories; it's about discussing what it looks like to read.

### Rebecca Stewart

#### *How do young children respond to the exploration of gender stereotypes in children's literature, using non-gendered objects? (POTATOES!)*

My interest was generated in response to a piece of action research I encountered by Kate Paterson (2015). After appreciating her use of fairytales to explore children's understanding of gender, I pondered the idea of using non-gendered objects to gauge the children's unconscious bias. The use of vegetables as the non-gendered objects in my study was a concept I regarded when reading *Supertato: Veggies in the Valley of Doom*, (Hendra, S, and Linnet, P, 2018) as few characters are explicitly gender identified, yet in discussion most children used 'he' when communicating their ideas. Considering this, the potato was my focus as it can be deemed gender neutral due to its shape and lack of gendered features.

The research involved four, five- and six-year-old children in a familiar educational classroom setting. The children were chosen considering their age, confidence and linguistic ability to openly share their thoughts. As the focus of this study was gender, it seemed appropriate to have equal representation of male and female participants.

From session 3, each session was structured with: 1. story, 2. talk, 3. activity. I used and adapted various stories including: *Supertato: Veggies in the Valley of Doom*, (Hendra, S, and Linnet, P, 2018) *Rapunzel* (Isadora, R, Grimm, J, and Grimm, Wilhelm 2008), *Mr Rapunzel* (Fransman, K, and Plackett, J, 2020), *Prince Cinders* (Cole, B, 1997), and *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, B, 1987). The activities planned were typically creative, to allow the children to explore the characters and demonstrate their understanding.

For example, in one session the children created a female supertato using potatoes and craft materials. In other sessions, they painted, drew and even put on a puppet show to act out their imagined events after the end of the story.



It is evident that I was witness to the undeniable that gender is a construct. The deeply ingrained stereotypes exposed themselves as we traversed the topic of gender using children's literature. Although I had not set out to postulate an ideology, it is important to note that change and acceptance did occur throughout the study.

My action research is situated within the realm of the exploration of gender stereotypes. Using vegetables as non-gendered objects was effective as it enabled the research to exhibit the participants' indicators for reasoning their gender bias. This was an interesting outcome as the children would grapple with their stereotypes and attempt to justify using physical appearance and convention. In light of this, it would be prudent for this study to be taken further, using a larger, more diverse pool of participants and children's literature.

### Bryony Thomas

#### *Does making graphic novel terminology explicit with ten- and eleven-year-olds change how they think about the genre?*

Action research often begins with a moment that begins away from the normal routine. I noticed a group of children develop an interest in graphic novels in my class. I wanted to see if giving children a repertoire of language to discuss graphic novels had the potential to enhance their conversations and enable a deeper thinking about the genre.

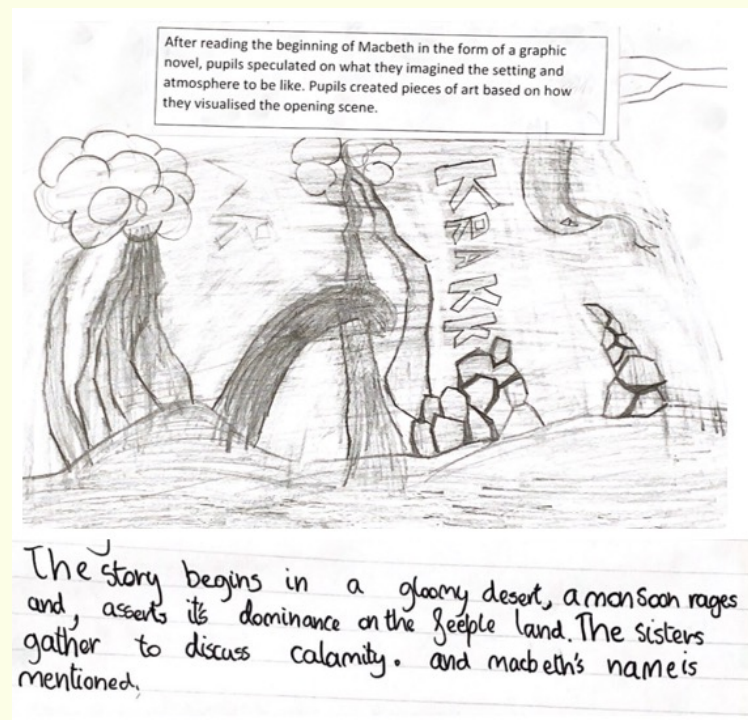
I was in an interesting position, with the children being more familiar with graphic novels than I was. This meant that the traditional student-teacher relationship changed as I put myself in the position of the learner. The groups were focussed on talk, using and adapting Aiden Chambers' 'Tell Me' questions (1993) and also questions recommended by Michael Rosen.

When we first looked at the features of the graphic novels, children's knowledge was self-taught and intuitive. They had a really strong understanding of how to read graphic novels. I then made the reading process explicit with them which enabled them to think through the whole genre of graphic novels. The responses became more profound over the course of the study.





I looked at two graphic novels of *Macbeth* by Shakespeare with the children. I found that the fusion between the text and the artwork provided children with layers of meaning to interpret. They went on to create their own artwork. The writing shows how they were thinking aloud about the graphic novels that they had encountered. Moving to this different artistic medium meant they were selecting elements of the original text to focus on and then creating something from this.



The children's responses revealed how participating in the critical work around graphic novels involving breaking graphic novels down into units of communication gave them the vocabulary and repertoire of skills which laid the groundwork for the creative work. Centring the children's talk and discussions as the focus of the sessions gave the children agency and empowerment and it suggested that the oracy has to be planned to have the most impact.

This research shines a light on a medium that's not considered much in reading curriculums and not valuing this genre suggests that we don't care so much for the children who read differently or enjoy reading this genre. This process showed that graphic novels can be rich meaning-making spaces with many gaps that the reader has to fill. The potential is definitely there for them to be used in classrooms.

**Caroline Baumber**

### **Can picturebooks help children from predominantly White areas develop an understanding of the concept of othering?**

I spent an hour a week over the course of 8 weeks reading books and carrying out activities with two white 8-year-old girls. My interest in this research started with the book *Cicada* by Shaun Tan (2018). Initially I was looking at reader response but was struck by how neither girls, when talking about inequity, mentioned ethnicity. They mentioned gender, ability, class

and sexual orientation but not racial inequity and I was curious about this. Both girls were White, lived in a predominantly White area and went to a primary school where 80-90% of pupils were White. I realised that they were so immersed in Whiteness, that the idea of racial inequity had completely passed them by. The project changed immediately because of this, and I decided to use children's literature as a means to help the girls develop a concept of othering based on racial inequity.

I concluded that children's literature is a powerful tool when trying to develop racial consciousness in White children who live in predominantly White areas. The combination of text and image helped the girls to see and learn about diverse cultures. Some of the books were challenging and confronting. Navigating them and talking about the issues they raised led to important and valuable conversations around racial inequity. I also used books which showed children from diverse backgrounds 'thriving in a world where racism exists' (Darren Chetty 2025) and these were equally valuable because they prevented the telling of a single experience.

I think this research shows how powerful children's literature is. Many children live in communities which lack diversity, and they are often raised by parents who have had similar experiences. The National Curriculum was created to perpetuate White dominance in our schools, especially primary schools. However, there is freedom in the books primary teachers can read and explore with their class and this is the most powerful and effective way we can disrupt this.





# The Unusual Fate of Malcolm Crane

by Adrianna Ryn

All crows have busy schedules, and this crow is busier than most. The crow’s name is Timothy.

Timothy flies North, following the snaky, brown line of the river. Other towns rise and fall below him, larger and more prosperous towns than Newmarket – the rambling streets of Hucklebuck, the crooked steeples of Lanterloo, the cobweb farms of Seven Bells. On and on the crow flies, and the air thickens and wraps around him like a hot, gray blanket, pierced with lights from an enormous city below.

Timothy keeps on North and comes at last to a green space by the mountains, where the river runs fresh and clear, and a girl is lying in the grass, eyes closed, wrapped in an oversized gray coat. A little way up the hill, two people are calling the girl’s name, but she doesn’t seem to hear them. Her eyelids flicker just a bit as the crow passes between her and the sun, casting the briefest shadow.

She looks like she is sleeping, but she isn’t.

Patience is remembering.

Patience likes to remember. She has very little to call her own, except for her memories, so she clutches them tightly to herself, tighter than her coat in the dead of winter.

Patience has only seven memories of the time before she came to live in the mountains. She keeps these memories organized in her mind like a stack of photographs.

For a long time she remembered like everyone else, accepting whatever her mind threw out at her, like sea-glass washed up on the shore. But as the years passed she realized that that would not do. Some memories she dwelled upon, so they got hazy with use. Others barely came up, so they grew thin, and were in danger of vanishing completely.

So she started numbering. That way she can run her thumb over them, to be sure she has not lost any.

Just now, she is thinking about Memory Three.

Memory Three is a warm memory. When Patience was really little, her mother would stir flowers into a cauldron over the fire, and pour scented oil over Patience’s long black hair, and tell her all the rules about being a witch.

Witchcraft was a responsibility, her mother said, running a comb through Patience’s

hair. Witches could see into different futures, so witches had to be extra careful about their choices, because it was their responsibility not to make mistakes.

Besides, witches who made mistakes generally ended up dead.

Patience’s mother had made a mistake.

And that is why Patience is here, lying in the mountains far to the North, ignoring the increasingly desperate sound of her foster parents calling.

\*\*\*

There is a low croak off to her left. Patience comes to herself with a start.

A large and windswept crow is perched on a rock nearby, looking down at her with one ink-bright eye.

“Oh, hello,” Patience says, sitting up. Witches, after all, should always remember their manners. “Are you hungry?” She reaches into her pocket and fishes out a chunk of brown bread. She was saving it for dinner, but she would make do.

The crow tilts its head and seems to think. Patience holds very still. Then, just as she expects it to fly away, it hops down onto her knee and pecks the bread out of her palm. Crows are heavier than you’d think, Patience realizes, and for a moment she admires the miracle of it, this black mass of breathing muscle and tendon, as it wolfs down the bread.

That’s when she notices that it has something in its claws -- something square and papery. As she stares, the crow swallows up the last of the bread, then takes heavily to the air. But it leaves the paper behind.

Perplexed, she picks it up. It is a thick green envelope, folded into quarters. In silver ink on the front, it says:

FOR PATIENCE  
(CONFIDENTIAL)

“Patience!”

Patience jumps. The voices are loud and close now. Quickly, she drops the envelope into her pocket and stands up, just as her foster parents come up over the edge of the stones, looking frantic.<sup>1</sup>

“Sorry,” says Patience. “I was just – ”

1 Patience’s foster parents do not matter much to this story, but here are a few facts about them anyway. They have a son named Hugo. Their names are Tabitha and Francis. They once locked Patience in the cellar for three days to cure her of witchy thoughts. Once a year, they scrape together enough money to buy a chocolate cake from Boon, which they share equally among the four of them.





"It doesn't matter," interrupts Tabitha. "Stop talking and listen."

Patience closes her mouth. Her foster parents are often angry with her, but this is a different kind of thing. Under the anger, they seem almost scared.

"You're not to come home again," says Francis. "It's not safe."

Patience blinks. "What?"

"They're not to see you," says Tabitha.

"Who?" Patience looks around at the thin grass and bare rocks. She looks up the slope of the mountain towards the cottage where she lives. A curtain twitches; her foster-brother Hugo is peeking out at them.

She looks back at her foster parents, nonplussed. The only explanation she can think of is that they've all lost their minds.

Francis gives Patience an almost pitying look. "Look. Downhill."

Patience turns.

Living just up the hill from the City of Boon, you get used to seeing it. Behind the gates, great smokestacks churn. Huge pipes cough sludge from the factories into the river, and downstream, fish float dead on the surface. A steady stream of trucks moves through the city at all hours, piled high with things for the people of Boon: taps and knobs and snaps and clasps and pipes and mailboxes and many, many other things. For the city of Boon is constantly growing. And when you are growing, you need things to feed on.

The walls are closer today. Standing next to them are lines of red-cloaked soldiers, chatting and laughing, and peering up towards the mountains.

"Boon is nearly here," says Tabitha breathlessly. "We don't know when it'll stop, but we think it'll reach us this time."

"But –" Patience turns back to them. "But we live here."

Tabitha and Francis look at each other.

Francis puts a hand on Patience's shoulder. "The Duke is very generous. If the city needs our land, the Duke will give us a new home within the city. A proper flat. After all, it's better to live in a modern place like Boon, than in a little cottage in the mountains."

"Oh," says Patience. She feels a little dizzy. Something else is looming on the horizon, something at least as large as the city, but she cannot yet see what it is. "Well ... should I pack?"

Francis looks away.



"The thing is," says Tabitha, "the city has laws. About who lives there."

"The Duke knows everything that happens inside the walls of Boon," adds Francis. "It's much stricter in there than out here in the wild."

Patience suddenly feels cold.

"You're not taking me," she says, slowly.

"It's not that we don't want to," says Francis. "It's just ... they don't permit ..."

"... Witch orphans," says Tabitha.

Patience shivers.

"It's for safety," says Francis. "Everyone knows that witch orphans are quite likely to become witches themselves."

"I don't do witchcraft," Patience hears herself say, distantly. "I know it's not allowed. I don't even have scissors."

Francis and Tabitha both wince, as if she had said a bad word.

"We can't risk it," says Francis. He looks uncomfortable. Perhaps he thought that Patience would not argue so much. "It's not about whether you have sci ... witchy things. If people found out about your mother, well ... we might all be in danger. Hugo might be in danger. You do understand, don't you?"

Patience glances back up at the cottage. She can't quite make out Hugo's face from this distance, but he sees her looking, and the curtain twitches again. He's gone.

"But where do I go?" she whispers.

Her foster parents don't have an answer for that.

\*\*\*

Patience walks slowly down the mountain. She wasn't explicitly told to get away from the cottage yet, but she figures she might as well start now. Moving is better than doing nothing. Her feet lead her blindly downhill, down paths she has explored for years, and knows like the back of her hand.

She reaches a large, flat stone that has fallen on its side, and sits down on it. She pauses and looks up and down the mountain. The cottage is out of sight, behind boulders, here. Then, carefully, she takes off one worn boot and pulls at the fabric lining. It comes out in her hand, and behind it, a pair of small, silver scissors lies gleaming.

Patience smiles and drops them into her pocket.

The shadow of Boon has snuck farther up the mountain. Patience walks on in silence, running her thumb over the side of the scissors. Even with her witch's scissors, where is a



witch orphan to go? Should she try her luck with another family, and hope they take her in? Should she turn and flee up the mountains to the other side, and live off the land, and hope the city never reaches her?

But Boon will never stop growing. There is nowhere to run.

The longer she walks, the angrier she gets. She had been good for seven years – seven years without doing any magic, just to please her foster parents. Her anger is vast and vague and covers her foster family, and Hugo, and even her mother, who got herself caught long ago, and put Patience in this situation. It covers the two red-cloaked men standing next to the gate in the walls of Boon. They don't even see her. They're looking up at the sky.

"I think it's a crow, not a raven," says one. "It's too big for a raven."

Patience thinks furious, witchy thoughts.

Her vision blurs. Shimmering threads of fate spread off everyone, connecting to everything. A long thread runs towards a ghostly version of Patience being questioned by the guards; being hauled into a black prison van; walking in freely under the gate --

She focuses on that future, sees the threads that connect back to the present, adjusts her stride. She veers just a little bit to the right, passing through some grass, frightening a mouse away --

The mouse skitters over a guard's boot, and he snaps his head down so quickly his hat falls off.

The hat rolls in front of the other guard, who lunges for it with a laugh, and for just an instant, no one is looking at the road.

Patience walks right through the gate.

She grins to herself. She has not done witchcraft in a long time, and had forgotten how nice it felt, how wild and natural. As she steps into the white stone city of Boon she thinks joyful, witchy thoughts.

Like:

This sunbeam has passed millions of miles through nothingness and cloud and air, just to land on your own skin. What a tiny chance! How lucky to have been born to feel it!

Like:

That potted plant is living its own life, and if I had not walked here, in this exact spot, I would never have known that it exists!

Like:

Just a tiny puff of wind could push a drop of rain an inch – but if it was the right inch, it could end up on the other side of a mountain, and from there fall down into a totally different river, a totally different sea.

And up above, Timothy the crow wheels higher, carried on updrafts from the heat of the city. For everything is connected to a million other things, and sometimes evil can have good ends. The same factory that poisons fish, can help speed a tired crow back home.



**Magpie Flight**  
by Xara Bennett-Jones





# Prizing Identity: A Case Study of the Jhalak Children's and YA Prize (2021-2024)

by Deepti Ganesh

*"The area of awards is almost a microcosm of the history of children's publishing"*  
(Barker, 1998)

## Introduction

Prize culture has long been integral to the literary world, conferring on its recipients what Bourdieu (1993) calls "cultural capital". The prestige attached to awards like the Newbery or Carnegie lends these books a kind of global legitimacy and marketability, signalling to international publishers, booksellers, and educators what is considered 'the best' in children's literature.

In this essay, I examine the shifting conversations around the prizing of children's books in the western world, with a particular focus on identity-based awards, such as the Jhalak Prize. As one of the first UK awards to exclusively recognise BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) authors, the Jhalak Prize offers a vital case study for exploring the potential of identity-based recognition.

Because the books selected for such awards reflect the values and priorities of the institutions behind them, I focus my analysis on the four winners of the Jhalak Children's and YA Prize (2021–2024). I draw on Genette's concept of paratexts (Genette and Maclean, 1991) which consists of the peritext (elements found

in the book such as the book cover, blurb, notes from the author), and the epitext (elements "distanced" from the book such as reviews) in order to explore how identity is constructed and communicated outside the main text.

## Identity and Representation in Children's Book Awards

Kidd and Thomas (2017) define prizing as "understanding, affirming, and promoting the value of books, whether aesthetic, moral, educational, economic, or some combination thereof", and argue that it is a key mechanism through which "commercial promotion and canon-making" occur. Unsurprisingly, book prizes have long been subject to scrutiny and critique. Kidd (2009), for instance, contends that "prizing is scandalous at the core" and may even function as "a form of censorship". When the organisations making these decisions are overwhelmingly white and heteronormative, the books selected for longlists will (consciously or not) tend to reflect those dominant identities.

The first major children's book award in the western world was the Newbery Medal, established in 1922 by the ALA and named after John Newbery, a white English publisher. In 1965, Nancy Larrick published a pivotal article criticising the Newbery Medal, highlighting the "all-white world" of the awarded books. This article became a catalyst for the creation of several identity-based book awards, such as the Coretta Scott King Award (1969), the Stonewall Book Award (1971), and the Pura Belpré Award (1996), which respectively honour African-American, LGBTQ+, and Latina/o experiences.

Although these identity-based awards were supported by the ALA, the "mainstream" Newbery Medal remained slow to respond to calls for broader representation,

continuing to reflect an overwhelmingly white literary canon. In 1998, Miller's article "*What Color is Gold?*" criticized the Newbery committee's ongoing preference for white authors and protagonists, arguing that its selection criteria implicitly suggest that "the 'most distinguished' protagonists and authors are white" (Kidd, 2007). This criticism continued well into the 21st century. In 2008, Pat Scales, then-president of the Association for Library Service to Children, responded to a study spotlighting the lack of diversity among Newbery winners from 1922–2007, asserting that "ethnicity, gender, nothing of that is necessarily taken into consideration" (Itzkoff, 2008).

In the UK, similar debates around diversity and exclusion have played out in response to major awards. Pearson et al. (2019) argue that the Carnegie winners construct a "national identity" by awarding books that are "predominantly white, English and (to a lesser extent) middle class". In 2017, when the Carnegie Medal faced criticism for its all-white longlist, Nick Poole, CEO of CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), defended the list, stating:

"The books on the longlist are judged on merit and on an equal playing field ... with no consideration of gender or ethnicity of either the writer, illustrator or audience" (Wood, 2017)

It is notable that both Scales and Poole insist that identity markers such as ethnicity play no role in the selection process. However, Poole's assertion of an "equal playing field" ignores the systemic inequalities and barriers to access that have historically excluded authors of colour. This approach reflects what Cummins (2016) identifies as the "white normative" mindset, wherein "white maleness is so hegemonic that it is considered neutral".

## Responses to Identity-Based Awards

The mushrooming of identity-based awards reflects what James English (2009) describes as the "logic of proliferation" where "each new prize that fills a gap or a void in the system of awards defines at the same time a lack that will justify and indeed produce another prize". While proliferation of identity-based awards in the US addresses gaps in representation, its emergence has not been without controversy and has sparked debates within the children's literature community.

In the early years of the ALA's identity-based awards, Aronson referred to these awards as a "slippery slope," speculating whether "mixed-race authors, Muslims, those with disabilities, [and] Christians" might soon "demand awards of their own" (2001). Critics of Aronson's view, including Rudine Sims Bishop (2001), argued that including author identity in award criteria does not negate literary quality and challenged the assumption that prioritising identity undermines merit. Pinkney (2001) similarly emphasised the catalytic role of such awards, arguing that they help bring new authors and illustrators "into the fold". These responses shift the debate away from a false binary between identity and excellence, moving the discussion toward a more nuanced inquiry: not just who is included, but how that inclusion is framed and understood.





## Diversity in the UK

Conversations around diversity in children's publishing have gained traction in the United Kingdom only in recent years (Tripp, 2020). Bold's (2021) research into authorship in UK YA literature identifies a modest rise in the visibility of both authors and characters of colour in 2019. However, she cautions that "the increases are still small and are from a very low starting point" (p. 28).

The dismal representation of creators of colour in UK publishing makes it harder for their work to be recognised by mainstream literary awards. Jury members often take a defensive stance when questioned about diversity in their selections (as illustrated by Scales' comments earlier) and award criteria frequently remain vague. Judging criteria relies heavily on the judges' "subjective interpretations of 'quality' and 'appropriateness'" (Bittner and Superle, 2016).

Importantly, Bold interrogates the kinds of narratives explored by authors of colour, asking:

"Are YA authors of colour still being encouraged to write stereotypical depictions of their cultural heritage, or books centred on race, racism or trauma?" (2021, p. 28)

Her critique underscores a key tension within "diversity" discourse. Calls for diversity can be problematic in themselves since it "centres Whiteness" (Bold, 2021) and only "exists if there is an assumed neutral point from which 'others' are 'diverse' (Bhanot, 2015). Recognising these limitations within the diversity discourse prompts a rethinking of what meaningful inclusion can look like.



## The Jhalak Prize

Established in 2017 by writers Professor Sunny Singh and Nikesh Shukla, the Jhalak Prize was created to "celebrate books by writers of colour in the UK and Ireland". It emerged in direct response to a 2015 report highlighting the lack of diversity among both published authors and publishing industry employees (Munro, 2020). At the time, it was only the second UK literary award to specify author identity as an eligibility criterion. The award is restricted to BAME authors and offers a prize money of "£1000 to each winner along with a unique work of art created by artists chosen for the annual Jhalak Art Residency". In 2020, the Jhalak Prize introduced a second category dedicated to children's and YA books by BAME creators, signalling a belated institutional acknowledgment of long-standing calls for inclusion in children's publishing.

Despite the precedent set by long-established identity-based awards in the US, the Jhalak Prize faced a difficult start in the UK. It was forced to legally defend its right to exist against accusations of "positive discrimination" from Conservative MP Philip Davies (Munro, 2020), and the inaugural prize received just 51 submissions. One author, who felt that her inclusion was "purely based on the accident of [her] place of birth and [her] skin colour" (Cowdrey, 2017) even withdrew her novel from the inaugural longlist, which illustrates the scepticism and delegitimization that identity-based awards often encounter.

## The BAME Criteria

There has been recent conversation around the Asia Pacific American Librarians Association's (APALA) award, which can serve as a compelling parallel to the challenges posed by the BAME criteria of the Jhalak award. In 2024, APALA issued

an apology after representatives from the Pacific Islander committee raised concerns that, "over the last 23 years, only three honorees had any potential connection to Pacific Island cultures" and "not a single winner identifies as an Indigenous Pacific Islander" ('APALA', 2024). The criticism led to the creation of two distinct awards - one for Asian literature and another for Pacific Islander literature - reflecting a growing recognition that identities historically grouped together warrant greater specificity in how they are represented and rewarded.

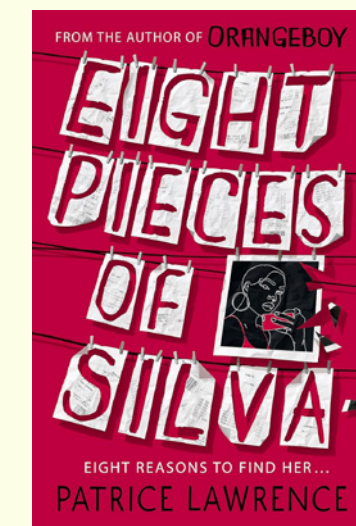
This issue echoes the broader critique of the BAME label in UK publishing, which similarly consolidates multiple, distinct racial and ethnic identities under a single category. Much like Asian and Pacific Islander communities being clubbed together under a single award, BAME categorization risks homogenizing experiences and flattening the unique literary contributions of individual communities. While creating separate categories may help more voices, it does not automatically guarantee structural change within the industry. García's (2016) critique of the Pura Belpré Award underscores this concern, questioning whether identity-based prizes truly shift industry-wide publishing patterns or merely act as checkbox gestures for awards juries.

In line with Bhanot's call to "decolonise not diversify" (2015), I argue that identity-based awards remain crucial for dismantling years of white hegemony and play an instrumental role in creating space for minoritized communities to claim representational power. While it is important to continue holding mainstream prizes accountable, awards that explicitly centre marginalised identities play an essential role in shifting industry norms. By validating stories from underrepresented voices, such prizes signal to publishers that there is both demand and value in expanding whose

stories are told, thereby creating a slow system of change.

## Paratextual Analysis of the Jhalak Prize Winners (2021–2024)

In line with Rudine Sims Bishop's position in her *Letter to the Editor* (2001), I do not question the literary quality of the books included in my analysis. Rather, I focus specifically on how identity and cultural authenticity are constructed and represented through their paratextual elements.



## *Eight Pieces of Silva* by Patrice Lawrence (Winner - 2021)

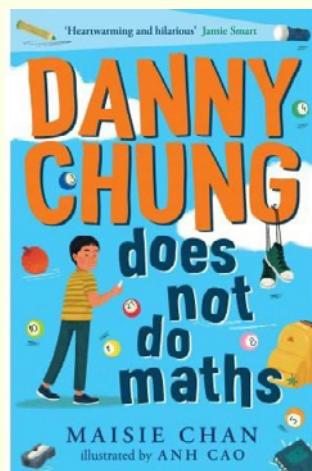
In *Eight Pieces of Silva*, while the front cover does not explicitly mark the character's race, the entirely black silhouette can be read as a subtle reference to Black identity. However, with no direct reference to race in the blurb or tagline, the character's racial identity is not foregrounded in the marketing materials.

Another identity absent from the peritext of *Silva* is protagonist Becks' queerness. Within the novel, Becks' sexuality is presented as an ordinary, integrated part



of her identity, without a “coming out” narrative. Lawrence’s approach exemplifies what Bold and Phillips (2019) call “incidental diversity” - the inclusion of minoritized identities without making them the story’s focal point - which they argue is essential for truly inclusive representation.

However, the publisher’s website departs from this narrative subtlety. The first line of the online blurb reframes a line from the novel to foreground Becks’ queerness: “Becks is into girls but didn’t come out because she was never in”. While this line in the book functions as a casual affirmation of identity, it becomes her defining feature in the online blurb. This shift highlights a tension between the author’s narrative approach and the publisher’s marketing strategy, potentially shaping reader expectations by emphasizing identity more than the novel itself does.



***Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths* by Maisie Chan (Winner - 2022)**

Maisie Chan’s *Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths* (2021) explicitly engages with identity across both narrative and peritext. The cover depicts Danny, a visibly Chinese boy, and the title itself subverts stereotypes commonly associated with East Asian identity. This subversion continues in the blurb, which presents Danny’s discomfort

with “the Chinese way” as a key narrative element.

Lawrence, one of the judges for the 2021 award, praised the novel for the “nuanced way it approaches the challenges of being a child negotiating multiple identities.” Singh further noted that the book would “break new ground for publishing today and open pathways to writers and creatives of colour who shall follow,” signalling that the jury prioritised the representation of identities that remain underrepresented in the industry (Shaffi, 2022).



***When Our Worlds Collided* by Danielle Jawando (Winner - 2023)**

Similar to *Danny Chung*, an explicit treatment of racial identity appears in *When Our Worlds Collided* by Danielle Jawando (2022). The cover, illustrated by Raymond Sebastien, features realistic images of three Black teenagers, offering visible Black representation in a market still dominated by white or racially ambiguous protagonists on book covers (Kimura, 2019). While race is central to the novel’s plot, the blurb avoids naming the characters’ racial identities directly, instead referring to “teenagers from very different walks of life”. Nonetheless, it gestures toward racial themes through phrases like “deep-rooted prejudice and racism” (*blurb*). The judges noted that the book “speaks to many young people today that have been vilified or who go unheard” (*Alabanza and Jawando win Jhalak prizes*,

2023) which highlights the narrative’s centering of marginalized identities.

The judges’ proclamation that the book is “timely and timeless, courageous as well as meticulously crafted” (*Alabanza and Jawando win Jhalak prizes*, 2023) suggests that the award responded to the prevailing conversations of the time, particularly the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. The global pandemic further amplified discussions around racial and structural inequalities, making the book’s themes especially resonant.



***Safiyyah’s War* by Hiba Noor Khan (Winner - 2024)**

In *Safiyyah’s War* by Hiba Noor Khan (2023), the cover image, illustrated by Kaja Kajfež, prominently features a colourful mosque set against a greyed-out Paris, visually foregrounding the Grand Paris Mosque’s central role in the narrative. Although *Safiyyah* is not explicitly described as Muslim in the blurb, her name and the mosque imagery clearly signal her religious and cultural identity. Her Algerian heritage, which is integral to the historical setting, is completely omitted from the marketing copy. While this omission may align with what Bold and Phillips (2019) describe as “incidental diversity,” it can also be read as a missed opportunity to explicitly

centre Arab Muslim visibility in children’s literature, particularly within a publishing landscape where such identities remain underrepresented.

*Safiyyah’s War* was described by the judges as a “necessary book for these impossibly difficult times” (Spanoudi, 2024). The novel’s exploration of the role of the Paris Grand Mosque in aiding Jews to escape during the war could resonate as ‘necessary’ given the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

### Cultural Authenticity

Cultural authenticity in relation to authorship is a complex issue, as no one person can claim to be the sole expert on the culture they depict. I agree with Gates’ (2003) assertion that “no human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world” (p. 142). This perspective underscores the idea that cultural authenticity is not solely about the creator’s background but also about their willingness to engage with and respect the culture they represent.

The absence of explicit relationships with the cultures in the peritexts of *Jawando* and Lawrence’s books suggests a different kind of engagement with cultural authenticity. Rather than foregrounding the authors’ personal connection to the cultures they write about, both authors allow their stories to stand on the characters’ lived experiences, social realities, and universal themes. Although *Jawando* discusses the inspiration behind her novel in an online interview (*Jawando wins the YA Book Prize with ‘powerful and thought-provoking’ novel*, 2023) this personal connection is not highlighted in the book’s peritext. The omission suggests that some ‘#OwnVoices’ authors push back against the idea that cultural authenticity requires an overt, personal claim to the culture depicted.





While Khan, who is of Pakistani descent, shares a religious identity with her protagonist of *Safiyyah's War*, she does not share the same ethnic identity. In her acknowledgments, Khan thanks a person of Kabyle descent for introducing her to their “rich Kabyle heritage,” suggesting that the cultural details in the book were vetted by someone from that culture, demonstrating her awareness of her outsider status. Additionally, Khan highlights her extensive research in a “Historical Note,” where she details her immersion in Parisian culture and provides historical context for the narrative, which indicates the efforts she made to deepen her understanding of the culture.

In *Danny Chung*, Chan directly connects the book to her own lived experience in her “Note from the Author,” stating that she wrote it “for all of those British-Chinese and British East and Southeast Asian kids who have never seen a kid who looks like them on the cover of a British middle-grade book.”

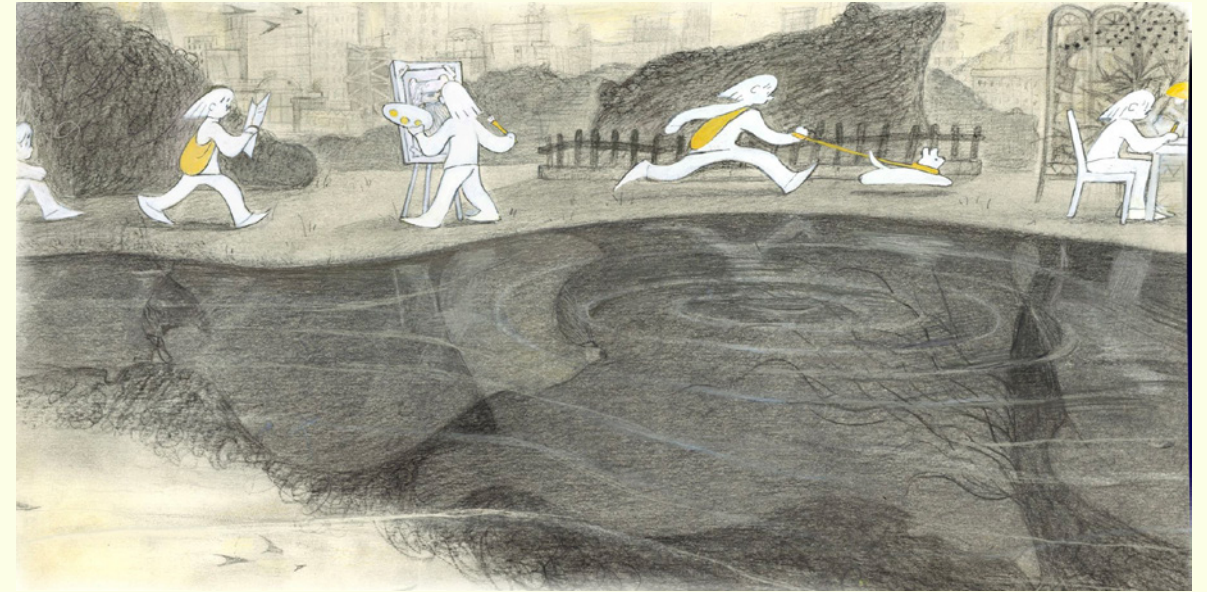
## Conclusion

Singh points out that the structural, industry specific issues that led to the foundation of the Jhalak Prize persist (Singh, 2019) but my analysis of the paratextual elements of the four winners of the Jhalak Children's and YA Prize reveals a promising trend for the future of the award.

While the Jhalak Prize plays a significant role in amplifying underrepresented voices, it is not without its limitations. As my analysis demonstrates, a sustained effort by juries to critically engage with the evolving literary landscape and highlight overlooked voices may serve as an effective strategy for ensuring meaningful representation.

A broader analysis of shortlisted titles may provide further insights into the dominance of specific communities within its selections. The example of AAPI experiences discussed earlier raises the question of whether the Jhalak Prize might benefit from further bifurcation to honour multiple communities within the broad BAME umbrella.

As adults in the field of children's literature, our role as gatekeepers demands that we do everything we can to ensure that young readers are exposed to as many “windows and mirrors” (Bishop, 1990) as possible. As Cummins rightly pointed out, we are still a long way from moving beyond identity-based awards (2016). In this light, awards like the Jhalak Prize take on the responsibility to not only recognise excellence but also act as active participants in shaping an inclusive literary culture - one that reflects the multiplicity of lived experiences, empowering the next generation of readers and writers.



**Bearskin**  
by Xidan Liang

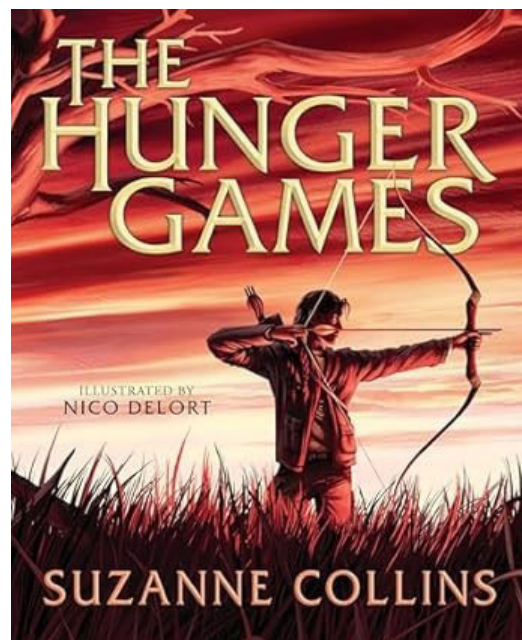




## Book Review: *The Hunger Games*

By Kate Lock

*Winning will make you famous. Losing means certain death.'*



With the second prequel to the Hunger Games trilogy - 'Sunrise on the Reaping' - released in March 2025 to much fanfare, I revisited the first volume in a series of books that has captured the imaginations of young adult readers around the world. What inspired the author, and why do these books still resonate with readers today?



The Hunger Games, published in 2008, was the catalyst for the dystopian YA genre that followed. Long before BookTok, The Hunger Games was a word-of-mouth bestseller, compared at the time to classics such as Lord of the Flies (1954), and its Japanese counterpart, Battle Royale (1999), for their violence and brutality amongst teenagers. Controversial, but ultimately a trope that readers can't get enough of.

Suzanne Collins got her idea for the novel while watching TV one evening. "I was channel surfing between reality TV programming and actual war coverage when Katniss's story came to me. I was tired and the lines began to blur in this very unsettling way."

Collins' upbringing taught her to understand why battles occurred and their consequences. Her father was a military specialist in the Air Force, which no doubt

had some influence on the story. This is evident when reading the Hunger Games as we understand the motivations behind the games and the powers at play.

The Hunger Games opens with our protagonist Katniss Everdeen, a District twelve citizen, preparing for the reaping of the seventy-fourth games, an occasion in the town square orchestrated by the Capitol. Each of the districts - along with the Capitol - make up Panem, formally known as North America. The names of one boy and one girl (known as tributes) - between 12 and 18 years-old - from every family within the twelve districts are entered into the annual Hunger Games as punishment for the uprising against the Capitol many years before.

Treated as a festivity, as well as a sporting event, the tributes are pitted against each other whilst being broadcast live to the districts for the duration of the games. For the tributes, the games signify a fight to the death where their strength and survival skills are tested. The lucky, and - by then - somewhat traumatised winning tribute is given a comfortable life in the coveted victors' village within their district.

From the very start of the book, we see that Katniss is used to providing for her family, her mother and little sister Prim, having lost her father in a mining explosion

when she was younger. Katniss and her friend Gale are practised hunters in the woods, being careful not to get caught for trespassing as it is considered an illegal crime within the Capitol, with poaching carrying severe penalties.



Years of setting traps and using her bow and arrow to kill and trade livestock at the local market ensures Katniss has a head start amongst the tributes when, in a twist at the reaping, Katniss volunteers to take her sister's place when her name is read out. Sacrificing oneself is rare during the reaping and the act galvanises an emotional outpouring of support from the people of District twelve.





Katniss, along with Peeta, the male tribute from District twelve are put through vigorous training before the games commence. This is where we learn who the other tributes are, their strengths, weaknesses and motivations. The scenes within the training centre are a stark reminder of what they are up against.

The Hunger Games is an exciting and at times brutal look at society and what is deemed as entertainment. Pitting teenagers against each other as a way to keep citizens in check and to flaunt it as a celebration is warped and concerning. However, what really makes the Hunger Games special are the relationships forged in and out of the arena. As the reader you are invested in the bonds the characters make, all the while rooting for Katniss throughout. There are no fantastical moments within the games, other than the elaborate sets the game-makers concoct when they feel the audiences' interest may be waning – like the floods and fires that are designed to flush the tributes out to keep the fighting on track. Katniss instead relies on her survival skills and the inexperience of others.

Well written with brilliant pacing throughout, and never once leaving the reader with a chance to relax, the tension and suspense are palpable. It is a thought-

provoking read and a social commentary mirroring the parallels between Panem and the world in which we live.

As well as captivating younger readers, the series has a large adult following that doesn't show any sign of slowing down. The publisher Scholastic is using this to their advantage by publishing multiple special, anniversary and illustrated editions to appeal to collectors. But what is it about the book and the other two in the trilogy – *Catching Fire* (2009), *Mockingjay* (2010), as well as its prequel, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020) that have kept readers coming back for more and found a new readership almost twenty-three years after the original was published? Perhaps it is the enduring message of hope and resilience in a world that is becoming darker and increasingly out of our control? In fighting for what she believes is right, Katniss is a reminder that survival isn't an option, it's a necessity.



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by Lani Kim

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Submissions: We Have Always Been Here,  
CLA Report

**Maya Eadie-Catling**

MA Creative Writing and Education (2023-2025)  
mayaeadiecatling@gmail.com  
Submissions: Protectors of Astrax, River Child,  
That’s my Fingers Making the Things

**Katharina Felicity**

MA Creative Writing and Education (2024-2026)  
katharinasheldon@gmail.com  
Submission: Gifts from the Dark

**Deepti Ganesh**

MA Children’s Literature - Theoretical  
Approaches to Children’s and YA Literature  
(2024-2025)  
deepti.ganesh94@gmail.com  
Submissions: Dual Worlds, Prizing Identity, CLA  
Report

**Emily Harrison**

MA Children’s Literature - Creative Writing  
(2022 - 2023)  
emileyygracee@gmail.com  
Submissions: Coco, Bailey and the Ukelele

**Janet Hoggarth**

MA Creative Writing and Education (2024-2026)  
janetplanetski@googlemail.com  
Website: <https://linktr.ee/janethoggarth>  
Submissions: A Pottered Personal History of  
Publishing (Nineties to Now!)

**Anna Huang**

MA Children’s Literature - Theoretical  
Approaches to Children’s and YA Literature  
(2024-2025)  
annastark@qq.com  
Submission: Wind Chime of the Fox’s Bones

**Lani Kim**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)  
laniart9911@gmail.com  
Instagram: @lani\_art\_\_\_\_  
Submissions: Egg in a Hat , Aliens, Rumpelstiltskin

**Xidan Liang**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)  
xidanliang@outlook.com  
Instagram: d\_ginkgo;  
Website: [xidanliang.cargo.site](http://xidanliang.cargo.site)  
Submissions: Odyssey of Laika, A Dog Who Never  
Gets Lost, Bearskin

**Sharon Leman**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)  
sharonlemanillustration@gmail.com  
Instagram: @sharonlemann; Website:  
[sharonleman.framer.website](http://sharonleman.framer.website)  
Submissions: The Town Mouse and the Country  
Mouse Retelling, Observational Drawing,  
Nyoman Can Cook

**Kimberly Bayliss**

MA Children’s Literature - Creative Writing  
(2023-2025)  
kimberly.bayliss@gmail.com  
Twitter: @zotgrl  
Submissions: The Mud Monster of Kensington  
Gardens, An Evening with Professor Michael Rosen



**Eve Soffer Liberman**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)

eve.liberman@gmail.com

Instagram: @eveliberman; Website: www.eveliberman.com

Submissions: Grimm Beginnings, The Robber Bridegroom, The House in the Woods

**Kate Lock**

MA Children’s Literature - Theoretical Approaches to Children’s and YA Literature (2024-2026)

klock003@gold.ac.uk

Submission: Book Review: The Hunger Games

**Sophie Annabell Rose**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)

sophie.lomer16@gmail.com

Submission: That’s my Fingers Making the Things

**Loof**

MA Children’s Literature - Creative Writing (2024-2025)

loofen123@gmail.com

Submissions: Book Review: My Two Blankets, To Dad, Memories, My New Bestie, Topless Towers of Londinium, I Don’t Understand, M.S., Mum

**Beatriz Martínez**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)

hellobeamar@gmail.com

Instagram: @by\_beamar

Submissions: Rapunzel Retelling, Jane the Lioness with a Mane

**Helen Miller**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2026)

hmiller1204@outlook.com

Instagram: @By\_helens\_pen

Submissions: Workermouse, Snail Spa

**Andrea Sofia Zorrilla Mora**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)

arteporandrea@aol.com

Instagram: @arte.por.andrea; Website: arteporandrea.com

Submissions: El Pescador, Cream Then Jam!

**Daniel Newton**

MA Children’s Literature - Creative Writing (2023-2025)

danielrnewton@outlook.com

Submissions: Those Gods Bore Hungry, Into the Circle, A Creative Response to Under the Umbrella by Sophie O’Connor-Smart, Disability in Imagined Futures

**Sophie O’Connor-Smart**

MA Children’s Literature - Theoretical Approaches to Children’s and YA Literature (2024-2025)

sophieoconnor23@yahoo.com

Submissions: Thoughts While Reading..., Under the Umbrella, Representation and Identity in What Jobs Could You Do?, CLA Report

**Yue Pan**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)

py1213@hotmail.com

Instagram: @pannyueeeee; Website: https://ypan0120201.wixsite.com/my-portfolio

Submission: Mr. Jim

**Maria P. Restrepo**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)

mariapaulina.restrepo@gmail.com

Instagram: @mariap.doodles

Submissions: Book Review: Antonia Goes, I Can Do It Alone, Character Studies

**Peach Richmond**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2026)

pexchy2704@gmail.com

Instagram: @peachiink

Submissions: The Bark and Brew Cafe; We forgot the Snacks!, Asta

**Adrianna Ryn**

MA Children’s Literature - Theoretical Approaches to Children’s and YA Literature (2022-2023)

adriannarynn@gmail.com

Submission: The Unusual Fate of Malcolm Crane

**Irem Sencok**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2022-2023)

irem.sencok@gmail.com

Instagram: @iremsencok; Website: www.iremsencok.com

Submissions: Duke of Wellington Statue, Krishna, The Fairy Tailor Shop

**Rebecca Stewart**

MA Children’s Literature - Theoretical Approaches to Children’s and YA Literature (2023-2025)

becstew@outlook.com

Submission: CLA Report

**Xinwen Tan**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)

xtan004@gold.ac.uk

Instagram: @newstxxw; Rednote: @Seventhing95

Submission: Sam and Dodo

**Bryony Thomas**

MA Children’s Literature - Theoretical Approaches to Children’s and YA Literature (2023-2025)

bryonythomas2@gmail.com

Submissions: Book Review - When the Sky Falls, CLA Report

**Maxwell Ward**

MA Children’s Literature - Creative Writing (2023-2025)

maxwellwardwords@gmail.com

Submissions: Strong Swimmers Only, Gifts from Grandma, Nightmares

**Hebe Ziming Xu**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)

zimingxu227@foxmail.com

Instagram: lilyahebebi; Rednote: @无理狸; Website: zimingxu.cargo.site

Submission: Popo Mystery

**Yang Xu**

MA Children’s Book Illustration (2024-2025)

dmian027@hotmail.com

Instagram: dmian027

Submissions: Destination, Lovers, The Traveller’s Companion



## Announcement

# (Re)discover the stories that shaped us

The Children's and Young Adult Research Forum (CYARF) is delighted to present Reading the Classics in Context—a monthly book group and accompanying podcast series dedicated to exploring foundational texts in Children's and Young Adult literature. Each month, we gather online to read and discuss a key work of children's or YA fiction—texts that have shaped their genre and continue to influence writers and readers today. In our conversations, we'll look at each book in its historical and cultural context, examining its inspirations, legacy, and relevance to contemporary literature. While there is an academic interest behind the group, you don't need a scholarly background to join—just a curiosity about stories that have captured imaginations across generations.

Reading the Classics in Context is an informal, welcoming space chaired by Mette Lindahl-Wise and Harry Oulton. We encourage open discussion and a variety of perspectives—whether you're revisiting a childhood favourite or encountering the book for the first time. After each session, Mette and Harry will produce a podcast episode summarising the key points and themes from the discussion.

We meet online on the second Monday of each month during term time. Each session focuses on one classic work, and we'll also touch on adaptations and retellings—so whether you've read the book, watched a film version, or simply want to listen in, you're very welcome.

**13th October** – Adventures in the First Person - Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson (1883). Set sail with one of the earliest and most influential first-person adventure narratives. How does young Jim Hawkins' voice shape the story—and the genre?

**10th November** – The Roots of Fantasy - Five Children and It by E. E. Nesbit (1902). A timeless tale of wishes gone awry. Discover how Nesbit laid the groundwork for modern fantasy in children's literature.

**8th December** – Real Voices, Real Lives - The Family from One End Street by Eve Garnett (1937). A groundbreaking depiction of working-class family life—plus a look at The Glasgow Boys by Margaret McDonald, the latest Carnegie Medal winner. What's changed—and what hasn't?

To be added to the mailing list, or if you have any questions, please contact Harry Oulton at [h.oulton@gold.ac.uk](mailto:h.oulton@gold.ac.uk) or Mette Lindahl-Wise at [mlind004@gold.co.uk](mailto:mlind004@gold.co.uk).

## About Our Programme

# MA Children's Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London

The MA Children's Literature programme at Goldsmiths enables you to expand your understanding of children's and young adult literature by specialising as a researcher, creative writer, or children's book illustrator.

We are based in London, the hub of children's and YA publishing in the United Kingdom. Studying in the city gives you unparalleled access to industry professionals, events, and opportunities that are not always available elsewhere in the country. Beyond its prime location, the programme offers a robust and comprehensive curriculum that expertly prepares graduates to develop careers in publishing, creative writing and illustration, education, children's media, and cultural and literacy organisations. For those interested in pursuing further research, the MA Children's Literature also supports graduates to go on to achieve doctoral awards.

Building on the success of our on-campus programme and the global reputation of our teaching team, we are proud to be launching our online MA Children's and Young Adult Literature programme. We have partnered with the Goldsmiths Online Adaptable Learning (GOAL) team to create a version of our programme that can be studied around the world. Find out more about our programme and how to contact the team by visiting the website: <https://www.gold.ac.uk/pg/ma-childrens-literature/>





