

EDITOR'S CHOICE

It's just as well that Quentin Blake and John Yeoman's *Puffin Book of Improbable Records* appears to be out of print. It's a hard book to resist. One record begins, "A potato bearing a striking resemblance to Queen Victoria ..." and there are two identical potatoes except one has a widow's cap and a lace collar. Both look uncannily like HM. It's all a delight.

My choice, however, must be *Tom's Midnight Garden*. There are powerful reasons. It's the book where I first saw how a child could be transported, living with Tom, for that moment, in the midnight garden. It is also set in a part of the country I know and every time I pass Ely, I feel the cold and hear the swish as Tom and Hattie skate up the frozen river until the Cathedral comes into view. There is also a particular satisfaction in the final pages where we discover that this is not just a ghost story. The past and the present are still there in the house. It's a moving moment when past, present and future come together.

Philippa Pearce once took me into the Mill House garden. It was a kind of magic to be in the real garden. But I knew, of course, that all the magic came from Philippa herself.

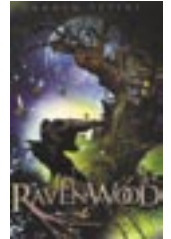


Pat Thomson

Tom's Midnight Garden Written by Philippa Pearce OUP £6.99 ISBN: 978-0192794246.

urchins. Events spin out of control and lead to the inevitable crisis. This book shows life on the edge of society.

Enid Stephenson



Ravenwood

Written by Andrew Peters
Chicken House £6.99
ISBN: 978-1906427467

Ark is running for his life along the high-way. And it is a 'high' way as he is running along a broad branch. Such are roads in this arboreal kingdom. He is apparently a young nobody, just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time who overheard a plot to destroy Arborium and now the safety of his family, friends and his country depends on him. This is an adventure, full of action, ingenious weapons and courageous young people. The killing is distanced and victims recover miraculously, however, we are never in doubt who are the good guys. An extra element comes into play when Ark is rescued by one of the feared ravens and we learn he is not quite what he appears. This is a war novel for younger readers who may enjoy the battle scenes but will also have the mystery of Ark's birth, the varied characters and the whole construct of a world, high above the earth, which depends on trees.

Pat Thomson

Wonderstruck

Written & illustrated by Brian Selznick
Scholastic £14.99 ISBN: 978-0545027892

Wonderstruck is a gem; a Koh-I-Noor-sized one, weighing in, as it does, at over six hundred pages. Readers of *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* will be familiar with Selznick's method of storytelling, in which passages of narrative prose alternate with wordless (though eloquent) black-and-white illustrations, like sequential stills from a silent movie. Here, the two modes of storytelling depict two seemingly diverse lives, that of Ben, a boy in 1970s Minnesota, and of Rose, a New Jersey girl in the 1920s. At the outset, Ben's story is narrated in prose, Rose's in pictures. But as the tale progresses certain elements mingle and the stories start to overlap, until, in New York City in the 1970s, they finally coalesce. At which point, Ben becomes part of Rose's picture story and Rose of Ben's prose. But *Wonderstruck* is far from being just a clever technical exercise. On the contrary, Brian Selznick marshals his ingenious technique to tell a moving and ultimately exultant story about loss, deafness, consanguinity, self-fulfilment, and the end of the silent movie era, that is as exciting and involving and satisfying as the best thriller, and much more human. A wonderful book.

Chris Stephenson

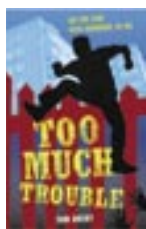
The Girl Savage

Written by Katharine Rundell
Faber £6.99 ISBN: 978-0571254316

Wilhelmina Silver, known as Will, enjoys an idyllic upbringing on a farm in Zimbabwe, where she runs wild in the company of her best friend, farmhand

Simon. Her mother died in childbirth and she has grown up, spirited and free, in the closed and loving world of her father, farm owner Captain Browne and Simon. But her life is turned upside down when her father dies unexpectedly and Captain Browne marries the cold and ambitious Cynthia, who embodies all the colonial values that Will has come to loathe. Cynthia packs her away to boarding school in England. Desperately homesick, Will cannot find her place in this cold and colourless country. School becomes intolerable and her fellow pupils treat her with suspicion and contempt. She has only one resort: to take charge of her life and run away. The writing is fluid, tracing Will's physical and emotional trajectory with great feeling and juxtaposing to great effect the sunlit, open landscape of rural Zimbabwe – and a lost past – to the bleakness of England in winter and, perhaps, new beginnings. Though the book's ending is somewhat unconvincing, its strength lies in the vivid characterisation of Will, whose vitality, courage and honesty will enchant many a reader.

Anne Faundez



Too Much Trouble

Written by Tom Avery
Frances Lincoln £5.99
ISBN: 978-1847802347

This fast-moving, modern Oliver Twist tale won the 2010 Diverse Voices Award and is the first novel by a young teacher. The sense of immediacy is helped by the first person narration. Two young boys make their way, with the help of traffickers, to England from war-torn Africa. They meet up with a Fagin-like character – Mr Green – and join his band of

Nicholas

Written by René Goscinny
Illustrated by Jean-Jacques Sempe
Phaidon (R) £6.95 ISBN: 978-0714861142



This perennial favourite about the antics of a French schoolboy, first published in the sixties, makes a welcome return to the shelves to compete with the likes of the *Wimpy Kid*. Parts are very, very funny, for example when the

hapless Nicholas tries to buy his mother a bunch of flowers and then loses them in a series of hilarious escapades. Other equally amusing episodes occur when the boys cause havoc with Cuthbert's chemistry set, or set about smoking a cigar. There is a lot of slapstick with much of the humour derived from members of Nicholas' gang constantly beating each other up. It's the old-fashioned public school setting and distinct lack of any real female involvement that give the book a slightly dated feel. But that's not to say that the modern reader won't find much to laugh at in this endearing and much loved Goscinny classic.

Richard Monte

Moon Pie

Written by Simon Mason
David Fickling £10.99
ISBN: 978-0385618519

Simon Mason is better known for his writing for adults but he has created a wonderful, innocent child's voice here that will charm a wide range of readers. It is an outstanding story about the effects of bereavement on two children – surprisingly cheerful and full of energy. Martha is eleven years old, bright and well organised. She looks after her little brother, Tug, and often bakes his favourite pies when father doesn't come home. Much of the humour comes via Marcus, Martha's only friend, who is outrageously camp and obsessed with theatrical costumes. He tries to help Martha to support her father when his behaviour becomes increasingly bizarre. Dad is an alcoholic; he has been without work for two years and is now being harassed by the children's grandparents and various social workers. The death of his beloved wife was the final straw and triggered his descent into a deep depression. Martha is a real heroine – cooking, cleaning, caring, coping – but eventually both she and Tug had to be rescued from the danger, the anxiety and the *to-do* lists that had become their life. But it doesn't end there. The conclusion of this tender novel is uplifting and a real joy.

Jenny Blanch



The Wishcatchers

Written by Carol Christie
Kelpies £5.99
ISBN: 978-0863158018

In Antonia's village, there is a legend that the Wishcatchers can really make your wishes come true if you place them in the sea off Wishcatchers'

Point. Ant is fed up of being targeted by Rosie, the class bully, so when new girl Clarissa starts, Ant wishes that Rosie would pick on her instead. All too quickly Ant's wish comes true, and she is left wondering whether she should have wished for something so damaging to happen to someone else. Befriending Clarissa, Ant gets a chance to confess her mistake and undo the harm she has caused. But this still leaves both girls with the problem of what to do about Rosie. A night-time encounter with the Wishcatchers themselves inspires them to give up on the idea of revenge, and instead to help Rosie overcome the troubles that lie behind her bullying behaviour. This is an engaging story that encompasses well-observed, everyday experience (particularly the details of the bullying) and magical and fantastical elements. Ant's and Clarissa's relationship inspires hope in the good that can come from friendship, and their desire to help rather than hurt the already injured Rosie proves a transformative one. An interesting read for young people.

Stella Madden



The Western Mysteries: The Case of the Deadly Desperados

Written by Caroline Lawrence
Orion £9.99 ISBN: 978-1444001693

From the author of the popular Roman Mysteries comes a brand new detective series set in the Wild West. Told in the first person by twelve-year-old P.K. "Pinky" Pinkerton, *The Case of the Deadly Desperados* is not so much a mystery as a rip-roaring adventure story with the promise of mysteries to come. The action kicks in from the first chapter, when P.K.'s foster parents are scalped by outlaws disguised as native Americans, who then pursue the orphaned child from Temperance to Virginia, hoping to get their hands on a valuable deed. With the help of some new found friends, P.K. manages to evade the villains but eventually ends up in a tight spot with only a newly learned set of observational skills to outwit the dreaded Whittlin' Walt. Featuring real historical characters, as well as convincingly portrayed fictional ones, you get the feeling that Lawrence had a whale of a time immersing herself in the lore and ephemera of the era. Her enjoyment leaves you exhilarated and thoroughly entertained.



Rowan Stanfield

Montacute House

Written by Lucy Jago
Bloomsbury £6.99
ISBN: 978-0747597957

Cess the poultry girl collects eggs and cleans out the chicken coops on the estate of Montacute House. One



morning she finds a gold pendant in the straw, depicting a woman dressed in furs, silks and jewels and instinctively she feels it is a glimpse of the world beyond the village. Soon it leads her to the knowledge that bodies are either disappearing or turning up bruised and broken as if the victims have been struck down with the plague. When her friend William vanishes, Cess is determined to find him. She delves deeper into the mysteries of the sixteenth century Somerset mansion presided over by the Earl of Montacute and soon unearths a plot to blow up the Protestant Queen Elizabeth. The novel is packed with detail about the Elizabethan age and gives a vivid portrait of Montacute House. It is also a book about a young girl discovering her destiny, which might strike a chord with many young readers, even if Cess does turn out to be a witch!

Richard Monte

The Memory Cage

Written by Ruth Eastham
Scholastic £5.99 ISBN: 978-1407120522

Alzheimer's can be a frightening and confusing condition for everyone involved. For the adopted Alex it is particularly painful as he's so close to his

ailing Grandad who came to the Bosnian refugee camp to find him. In an effort to stop his parents sending Grandad into care the two of them start working on a scrapbook of Grandad's past to help jog his memory. But there are dark secrets that might endanger the rest of the family. By seeking the truth about what his grandfather did or didn't do during the Second World War Alex is forced to confront his own past during the Bosnian wars. Turning and twisting this debut novel is compulsive reading. It is written with a clear, thoughtful voice and will appeal to a wide range of readers.



Benjamin Scott

Coping with Chloe

Written by Rosalie Warren
Phoenix Yard Books £6.99
ISBN: 978-1907912023

Everybody thinks that Anna's twin sister, Chloe, is dead following a terrible accident. But Anna knows that Chloe

lives on, sharing body space with her. Since Chloe is a very different personality from her twin, this causes no end of problems. Only Joe, the new boy at school, is prepared to take on both twins. And Chloe isn't sure she wants Anna to muscle in on this developing new relationship. The special bond between twins has an enduring appeal in children's fiction; here it is seen through the prism of loss and the different ways people cope with bereavement. Perhaps the story does not always maintain its pace but Anna's fight, to save herself from the abyss of domination by the invisible power of the lost twin, is gripping enough to keep attention.

Yvonne Coppard

Hank Zipzer, the World's Greatest Underachiever

Written by Henry Winkler and Lin Oliver
Walker £4.99 ISBN: 978-1406321753

Henry Winkler is a *sleb* so I was wary of this book but soon became beguiled by the personality of Hank Zipzer, the hero beset with learning problems. Hank can't read so how can he audition for the school production of *Anna and the King of Siam*? Resourceful Hank finds a way and gets the main part, but there's another problem: Maths or rather Math as this book is set in an American school. His father says he cannot be in the play unless he achieves a B+ in the next test. Enter Heather Payne, the prim high-achiever assigned to him as a peer coach. Hank has to submit to this humiliation but triumphs in the end. This is a fast moving story, with larger than life characters and slapstick humour but also with psychological insight, poignant moments and an encouraging message.



Julia Jarman