

## Staff Picks 2021

CLPE staff and their children recommend their best children's books in 2021.



Anjali Patel



Charlotte Hacking



Darren Matthews



Farrah Serroukh



Jonny Rodgers



Lara Bell



Louise Johns-Shepherd



Phoebe Demeger

## Anjali

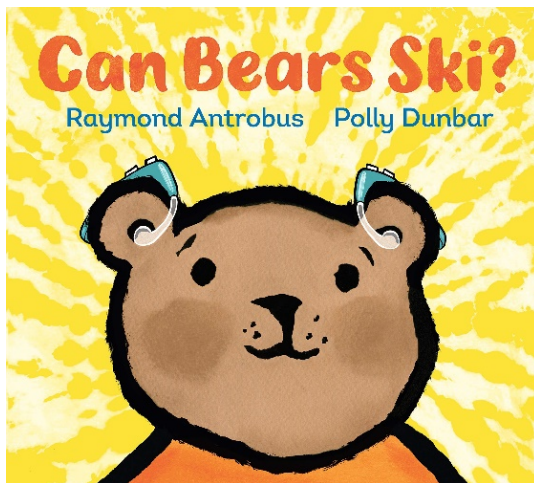

***Stars with Flaming Tails* by Valerie Bloom, illustrated by Ken Wilson-Max**

Otter-Barry Books (9781913074678)

In one of her films for CLPE [How does poetry make you feel?](#), Valerie Bloom says that “Poetry can lift you completely out of where you are into completely different surroundings”. This is exactly what she did for me as I read ‘Stars with Flaming Tails’. It’s a collection that draws you in, makes you think, makes you laugh, creates lumps in the throat and sweeps you off your feet. And – like all the very best poetry – it makes you want to return to it time and again, both literally and in your thoughts. It stays with you. And what a pairing with Ken Wilson-Max’s deft illustrations which sing out alongside their poems. This book should be in every child’s hands. It’s perfect.

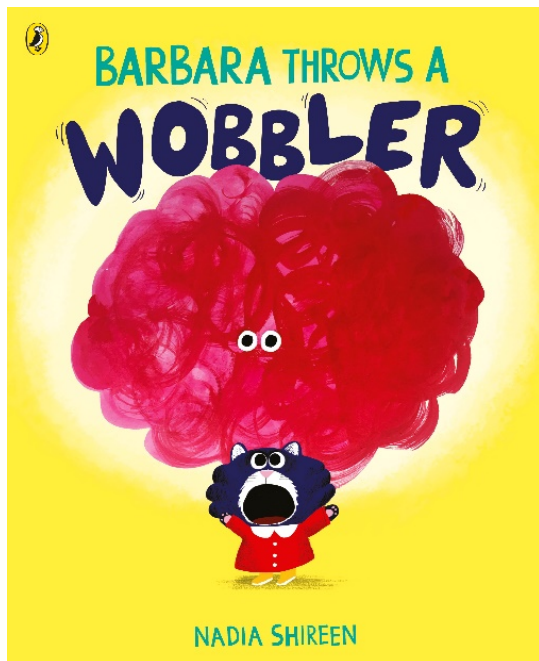
***Can Bears Ski?* – Raymond Antrobus, illustrated by Polly Dunbar**

Walker Books (9781406382624)



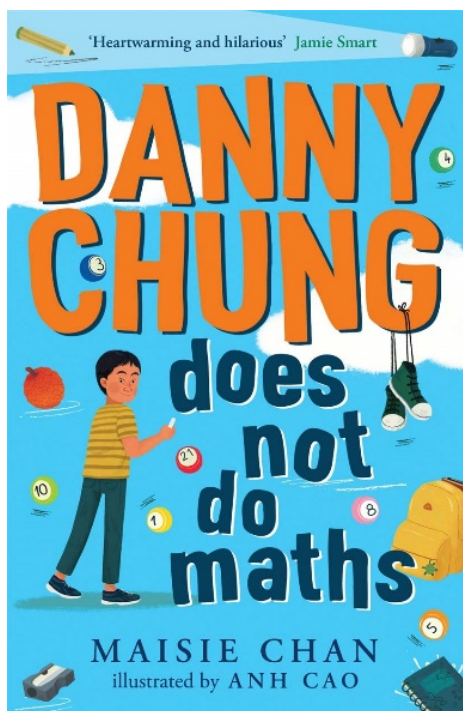
I love this book so much. It is at once moving and joyful. Having worked for years alongside a school for deaf children, I know how much the experiences of this little bear will speak to them, how important it is. By drawing on their own experiences, Raymond Antrobus and Polly Dunbar are able to provide an authentic depiction of a child who is experiencing deafness without yet being able to understand it. Boy Bear responds to vibrations; interprets some of the prosody and sounds of spoken language (“Can bears ski?” instead of “Can you hear me?”); experiences both frustration and isolation; and relies on the love and support of his hearing parent to navigate his way through this journey. The illustrations really capture the depth of this experience, allowing for lots of meaningful talk to take place in poring over them and thinking about the words. We have written [teaching notes](#) to accompany this wonderful story and I hope they can be used alongside the book to support teachers of both hearing and deaf children to help develop an inclusive and supportive environment.

## Charlotte

***Barbara Throws a Wobbler* by Nadia Shireen**

Puffin Books (9781780081366)

Every child will relate to being overwhelmed by their emotions at one time or another and will be able to empathise with the character of Barbara in this funny, but moving tale. Barbara the cat is fantastically well-developed through Nadia Shireen's carefully observed illustrations – one of my favourite spreads shows the range of emotions Barbara goes through as she drops an ice-cream on the floor. This is an illustrator who knows and has observed children and can translate this into illustrations that engage them as readers, reflecting their own lived experience. One of my favourite aspects of the book is the fact that Nadia Shireen has made the conscious choice for Barbara to grapple with her problem herself, providing young readers with an important exploration into self-regulation, a key skill for young learners. The final endpaper 'BAD MOODS (A Very Useful Guide)' is a fantastic invitation to open up discussion around the nuance of emotions and will enable young readers to personally connect with their own experiences. A must have for children (and adults!) of all ages.

***Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths* by Maisie Chan, illustrated by Anh Cao**

Piccadilly Press (9781800780019)

This book is the middle grade book I've loved most in a very long time. A marvellously warm and funny story about the everyday life of Danny Chung, who loves drawing but does not do maths. This is an expertly crafted story of everyday life, giving a window into the highs and lows of life for the Chung family, who are preparing for the arrival of Danny's grandmother, his Nai Nai, from China; unbeknownst to him! The carefully developed characters and relationships between them are what make this book so memorable. These include the inter-generational relationship that develops between Danny and his Gran, which is so beautifully rendered; the warm and welcoming nature of Mr Pontempa at the shop where Danny takes Nai Nai for fruit, finding ways to understand and communicate beyond words; and the relationship between Danny and his best friend Ravi, which is so carefully developed, exploring the difficulties of building and fostering relationships in the upper primary years, wanting to fit in and allowing oneself to be emotionally vulnerable. The story events include a careful exploration of the impact of casual stereotyping and everyday racism experienced by the characters, which could provide a window for more in-depth discussion around the attitudes and behaviours of the characters, and the relevance of story events in today's society. A rich and rewarding read for upper primary.

## Darren

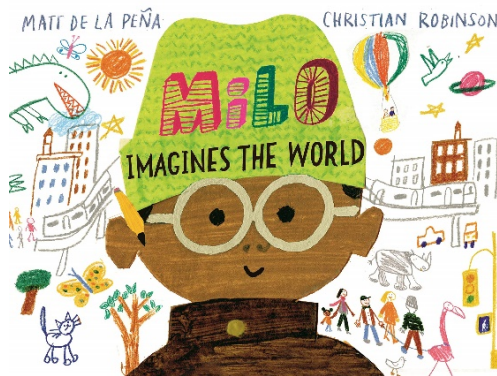
***When the Sky Falls* by Phil Earle**

Andersen Press (9781783449651)

This stunning piece of immersive historical fiction starts with a terrific inverse of the evacuee scene that begins so many children's books and films set in World War II London. Instead of being packed away to the countryside, we meet 12-year-old Joseph arriving in London, walking against the flood of evacuees and contemptuous of the tearful goodbyes on display all around him. With Joseph and Mrs F (the woman charged with taking in the boy), Phil Earle has created two characters that feel wonderfully real, hugely engaging and with whom we empathise from the start – partially because the author's own love for these characters shines through in the writing. This is one of those rare books where you come across sentences that are so perfectly crafted, you just have to pause, take a breath, recover and reread. Phil Earle has managed to construct a propulsive action-packed page-turner that also has something true to say about love and trust and loss. An engaging, exciting story that also gives the characters room to breathe, to talk and to develop in ways that feel earned and real. I loved spending time in this world – despite how devastating and heart-breaking it sometimes was – and must confess that I read it again almost immediately and haven't stopped recommending it since.

***Milo Imagines the World* by Matt de la Peña, illustrated by Christian Robinson**

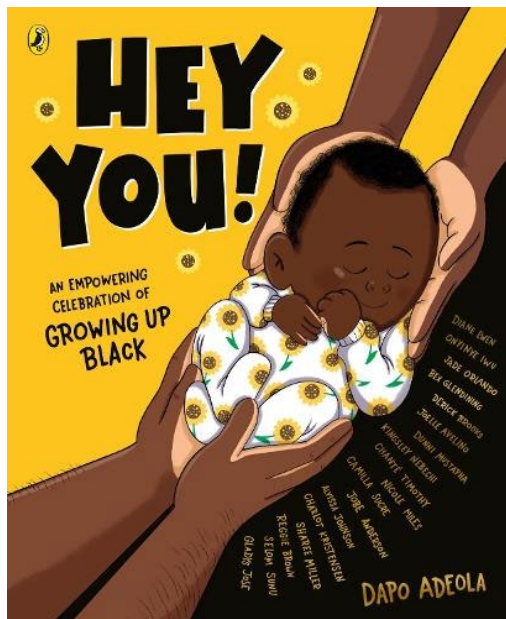
Two Hoots (9781529066319)



This is another extraordinary piece of picturebook magic from the team that brought us 'Last Stop on Market Street'. In this, Milo rides the subway with his sister and as each passenger joins the carriage, he imagines their world, doodling in his sketchbook all of his thoughts about where they might have come from and where they might be going... until as he reaches his destination he suddenly realises that he might be making assumptions about these strangers' lives and starts to imagine other possibilities.

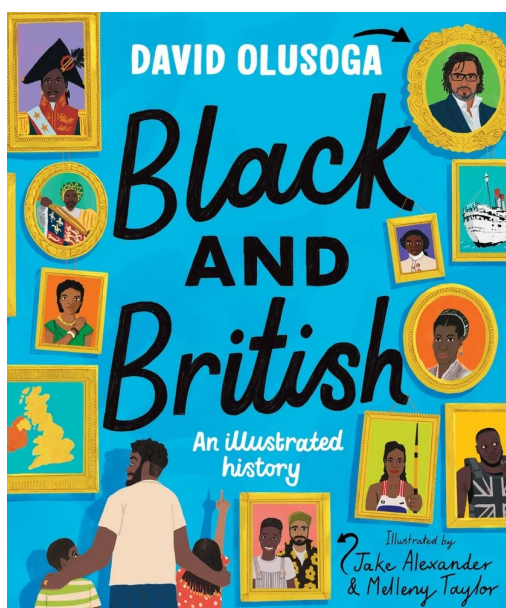
The book gifts us space and time to think about the ways in which we judge others based on first impressions and invites us to consider alternate views. Later in the book, Milo catches sight of his own reflection and wonders: "What do people imagine about his face? Can they see him...?" Matt de la Peña's words and Christian Robinson's illustrations work together perfectly, conjuring up the dynamism and excitement of the big city effortlessly. Milo is a tremendous creation, described perfectly in the text as "...a shook-up soda. Excitement... stacked on top of worry on top of confusion on top of love." And we see that in every glance, every interaction and every expression that passes his face. It's also wonderful to see the way that Milo makes sense of and interrogates the complexity of the world around him through his drawings. Many young readers will benefit, like him, from using drawing as a precursor to talking or writing about their thoughts and feelings. A must-have for every classroom bookshelf.

Farrah



***Hey You! An Empowering Celebration of Growing Up Black***  
 by Dapo Adeola, illustrated by: Dapo Adeola, Diane Ewen, Onyinye Iwu, Jade Orlando, Bex Glendining, Derick Brooks, Joelle Avelino, Dunni Mustapha, Kingsley Nebechi, Chante Timothy, Nicole Miles, Camilla Sucre, Jobe Aderson, Alyissa Johnson, Charlot Kristensen, Sharee Miller, Reggie Brown, Selom Sunu and Gladys Jose  
 Puffin Books (9780241521946)

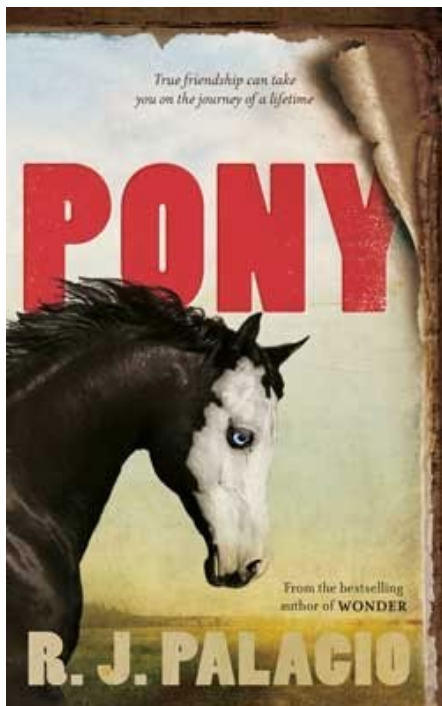
*Hey You!* is more than just a picturebook; it is a beacon that shines a bright light on a rich range of talent, who through their beautiful, dynamic, creative and thoughtfully crafted contributions offer a touching love letter to Black readers and a gift to all readers young and old. Every life-affirming illustration is infused with love, tenderness and joy. Diane Ewen, Onyinye Iwu, Jade Orlando, Bex Glendining, Derick Brooks, Joelle Avelino, Dunni Mustapha, Kingsley Nebechi, Chante Timothy, Nicole Miles, Camilla Sucre, Jobe Aderson, Alyissa Johnson, Charlot Kristensen, Sharee Miller, Reggie Brown, Selom Sunu and Gladys Jose are all names that I'm sure we will continue to enjoy seeing on our shelves in the coming years. Since young Rocket blazed onto the picturebook scene in Bryon and Adeola's debut title (*Look Up!*), Dapo Adeola's contribution to the art, creative space and discourse in the world of children's literature has been truly awe-inspiring. The heart and vision of *Hey You!* are testament to Dapo's commitment to the craft and fundamental understanding of the importance and value of being seen and truly seeing yourself in the pages of a book.



***Black and British: An Illustrated History*** by David Olusoga,  
 illustrated by Jake Alexander and Melleny Taylor  
 Macmillan Children's Books (9781529052954)

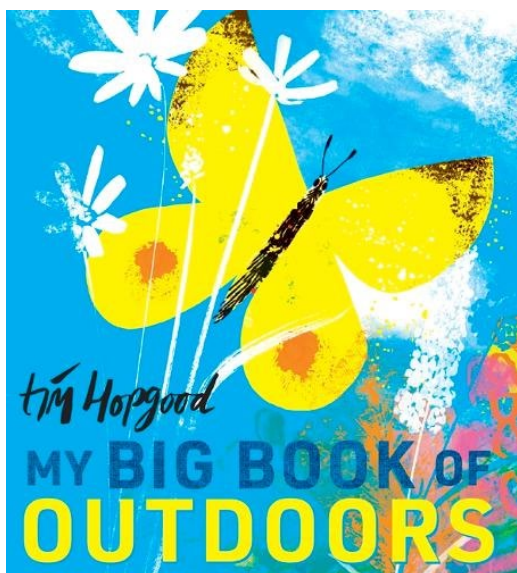
*Black and British: An Illustrated History* is the complementary illustrated hardback edition of David Olusoga's, award winning title, *Black and British: A Short, Essential History*, both of which are very welcome and important additions to the book shelf. The first title was my pick of 2020 because crucially it was both timely and necessary in plugging gaps in knowledge and providing children with a comprehensive and accessible insight into the richness of Black British history. It was more than just a book; it was a radical act of love. To distil such important information and insights of a breadth of historical figures, eras and themes for a young readership is a very challenging undertaking. This new highly illustrated edition, which incorporates a range of primary sources interspersed with lively, vibrant and engaging illustrations by Jake Alexander and Melleny Taylor, makes the content really accessible and easy to digest. As with the first title, this important new edition has the scope to elevate the quality of history teaching, making it an invaluable and exciting book for young readers and historians.

## Jonny

**Pony by R.J. Palacio**

Puffin Books (9780141377056)

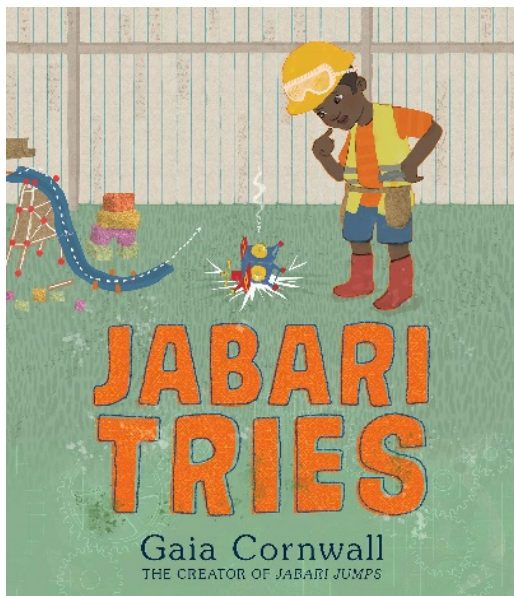
The huge success and popularity of *Wonder* and the multiple perspectives on the life of August Pullman that followed meant that *Whatever-Came-Next* always ran the risk of being the ‘difficult second album’. Fear not. *Pony* stands on its own. Entirely different from *Auggie*, Silas Bird is every bit as extraordinary. Struck by lightning as a boy, he lives with his bootmaker-photographer father and imaginary friend Mittenwool, a ghost. Mittenwool wakes Silas as riders arrive to take his father away; Silas takes the return of one riderless pony as a sign for him to follow his father, setting in motion an extraordinary journey across the wilds of the early C19<sup>th</sup> Mid-West. Different setting, different characters, different themes, but the same compelling storytelling and deeply satisfying reader experience: a novel you want to finish to find out what happens, but don’t want to finish because it means leaving that storyworld and the friends you’ve made in the book. I loved the completely assured feel of the book and the entirely convincing world R.J. Palacio creates — in the author’s note she says “I spent many years researching this book, and I hope none of it shows”; it doesn’t. If you like a book with gasps — and I do — you’ll be happy. Two of my favourites are in Susan Cooper’s *Ghost Hawk* and Kereen Getten’s *When Life Gives You Mangoes*; and there are two or three here that keep you hooked to the very last word.

**My Big Book of Outdoors by Tim Hopgood**

Walker Books (9781406384826)

Some years ago I was lucky enough to support author-illustrator Tim Hopgood on CLPE’s Power of Pictures project, and although I already knew his wonderful books, I really enjoyed finding out about his creative process and seeing him interact with the lucky pupils gathered at Seven Stories in Newcastle. He’s a really lovely man and very good company! At the time he told me he was just starting a new project, a non-fiction title for Walker, and this is the fruit of his labours, a labour of love. The publisher calls this magnum opus a treasury, and that’s such a fitting description: gems on every page — poetry, observations, activities — and all exquisitely and evocatively illustrated with a delightful lightness in a beautifully designed and presented book. It’s probably targeted at someone rather younger than me, but I believe that whatever our age we are all becoming increasingly aware of the delights, benefits and importance of the natural world; Tim dedicates the book to “everyone who stayed indoors in 2020”, and the book is a wonderful and irresistible invitation to walk through the seasons in his company with all your senses on high alert. I defy any reader not to pick it up at any time of the year and find something to enjoy and appreciate.

Lara

***Jabari Tries* by Gaia Cornwall**

Walker Books (9781406399844)

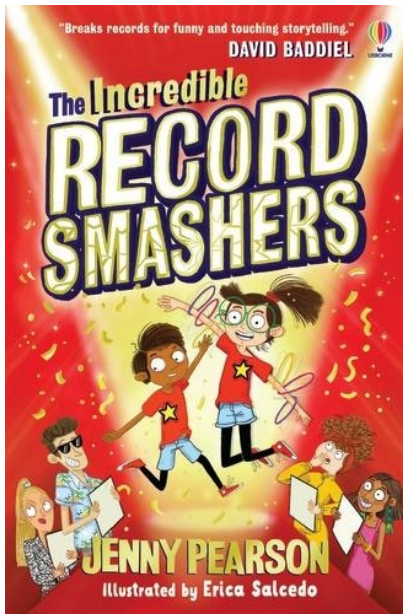
*Jabari Tries* is a tale of perseverance through the eyes and mind of a young learner. Through the patterned collage-style illustrations, and text that runs around the page, the reader goes on an emotional journey alongside Jabari as he attempts to construct a flying machine to fly across his garden. Jabari is an inquisitive inventor, engineer and scientist who looks to other important contemporary and historic figures for inspiration, such as Lewis Howard Latimer and Roy Allela. Through illustrating Jabari's influences, Cornwall invites young children to investigate inspirational people they may not yet have encountered, but also to consider the role-models who reflect their own reality and inspire them across their lives. At the heart of the story, it is also an endearing demonstration of sibling dynamics between Jabari and his younger, and very enthusiastic, sister called Nika. Jabari's journey through trial and error is supported by his amazing father who acts as the perfect model of co-regulation throughout Jabari's frustration and struggles. I chose this book because the author dedicates it "For all the Jabaris, young and old, in name and spirit..." and I think every reader will be able to think of a creative, reflective and resilient 'Jabari' in their own lives whom they cherish.

***Big Green Crocodile: Rhymes to Say and Play* by Jane Newberry, illustrated by Carolina Rabei**

Otter-Barry Books (9781910959619)

*Big Green Crocodile* is a joyful collection of sixteen action rhymes for young children and babies. It is a great text for engaging parental or adult-to-child interactions, as each rhyme is thoughtfully accompanied by an invitation to play through a 'Let's Play' section, containing actions which children can perform with a supporting adult. I have chosen it because I feel it is a perfect introduction to poetry for young children. It is playful, colourful and meaningful to them, drawing on their fascinations and lived experiences: wild animals, rockets, playing with sticks, and having birthday parties with their friends. Each poem is accompanied by whimsical, textured and bright illustrations to capture young children's imaginations. The anthology ends on a great big crocodile laying down for a nap, and invites your child to curl up with a furry teddy beside him, making it just as ideal to share at bedtime, as it is as a wonderfully rich poetry resource for use in the Early Years classroom.

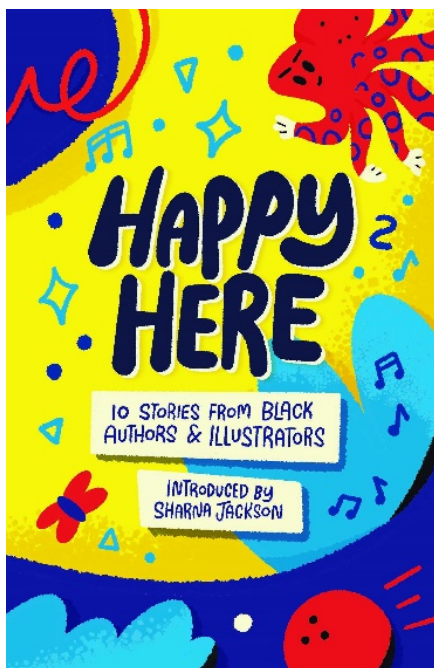
Louise



***The Incredible Record Smashers* by Jenny Pearson,  
illustrated by Erica Salcedo**

Usborne (9781474974059)

This book really illustrates the power of the funny for me. It had both me and my eight year old niece crying with laughter at Lucy and Sandesh's ridiculous exploits as they try and get on the Record Smashers TV show. It's a classic slapstick adventure story which encapsulates all that is good about middle grade fiction, but it is on my list of the year because it does so much more than that. Lucy's mum is ill with depression and her exploits are driven by a poignant need to sort things out and fix things for her mum. Such a raw and real feeling for any children living with an adult who is ill, and dealt with in a way that is realistic and sensitive but not maudlin or mushy. This is a book about friendship, about family and about acceptance but it is also about smashing your head against a watermelon, hurdling in flippers, some kumquats – and about having fun.



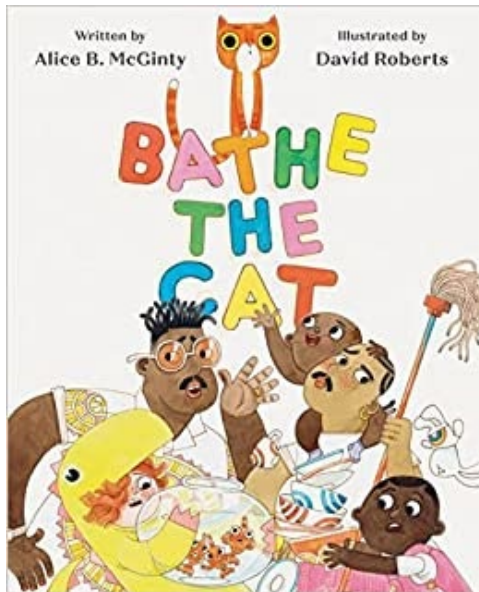
***Happy Here: 10 Stories from Black Authors & Illustrators*  
by Sharna Jackson, Alexandra Sheppard, Joseph Coelho,  
Theresa Lola, Kereen Getten, E.L. Norry, Clara Weze, Dean  
Atta, Jasmine Richards, Yomi Şode and Patrice Lawrence,  
illustrated by: Dorcas Magbadelo, Selom Sunu, Mohamed  
Fadera, Lucy Farfort, Chanté Timothy, Camilla Ru, Olivia  
Twist, Wumzum, Willkay and Onyinye Iwu**

Knights Of (9781913311162)

This has to go on my list this year. Pre-pandemic, right at the very beginning of 2020, Jill Coleman from BookTrust and I sat in a café and talked about a dream that we had of creating a joyful, inclusive and brilliant book written and illustrated by Black authors and artists – and putting it into every book corner in the country. At the time it seemed an impossible ask but *Happy Here* is the result of that initial conversation and I am so happy that it happened in 2021. This is a great collection of stories that are comedic, fantastical, poetic, and joyful; every one is high quality and there is something in this book for every taste and preference. Knights Of have done an amazing job of gathering together a brilliant range of talented authors and artists and to know that every school in England has a copy of this book makes me incredibly proud, and happy.



## Phoebe



***Bathe the Cat* by Alice B. McGinty, illustrated by David Roberts**  
Chronicle Books (9781452142708)

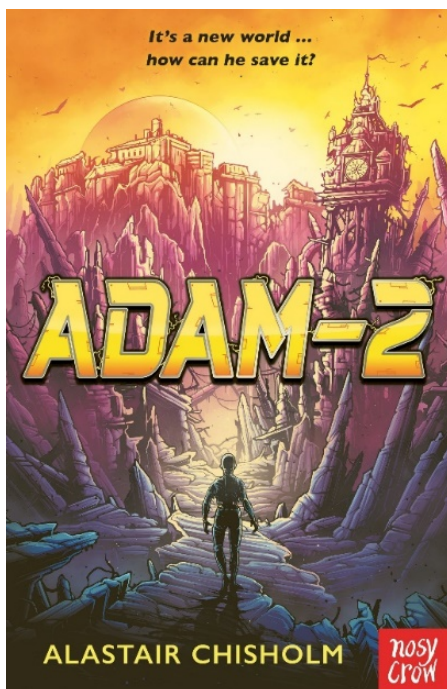
This joyously chaotic picturebook was a late entry, published in mid-November, yet instantly cemented itself as one of my top picks of the year. ‘Bathe the Cat’ stars a family desperately trying to clean the house and finish their chores before Grandma arrives, but their attempts are sabotaged at every turn by the family cat, who will stop at nothing to avoid having a bath. Daddy attempts to maintain order by keeping a list of chores spelled out in fridge magnets, but repeated double-page spreads reveal a cheeky cat’s paw reaching in to scramble the letters – soon the family find themselves sweeping the dishes, mopping the fish, and much else besides.

McGinty’s bouncing rhymes and the ticking-clock of Grandma’s imminent visit propel the story towards its conclusion, while Roberts’ energetic and expressive illustrations add to the slapstick comedy – the cat’s facial expressions, ranging between shocked, sneaky and smug, are sheer perfection. The character design, featuring bold colours and shapes, captures the individuality, yet undeniable family resemblances, of this loving, interracial, same-gender parent family.

This is a book made to be read aloud – the rhymes and the word scrambles are a phonetic delight. A worthy successor to ‘The Tiger Who Came to Tea’ in the rich tradition of feline-centric household chaos.

***Adam-2* by Alastair Chisholm**

Nosy Crow (9781788006101)



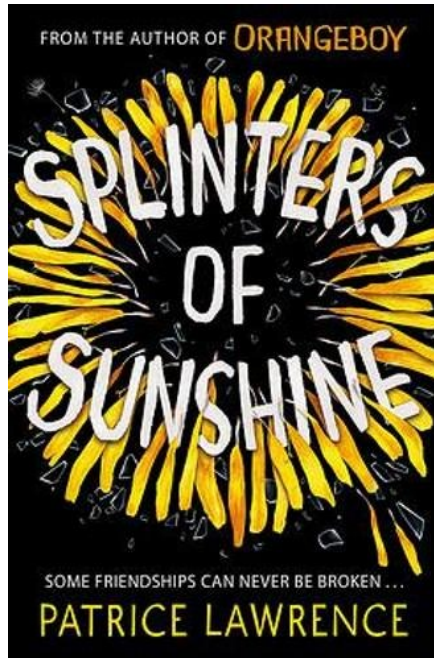
I’ve always been fond of science fiction, and was thrilled by this Upper KS2 novel that puts an entirely fresh spin on the classic ‘humans vs. robots’ narrative. ‘Adam-2’ takes place in post-apocalyptic Edinburgh, in the midst of a centuries-long war between humans and artificially intelligent robots. The titular Adam, a robot who was never taught to hate humans, finds himself caught between allegiances and called upon to restore peace to a world that seems hell-bent on destruction.

The narrative is split between two third-person perspectives: Adam, and Linden, a teenage human deeply mistrustful of robots. Linden is both dual heritage and non-binary – hir pronouns are established early on in a casual, conversational manner and are used consistently throughout (notably, the audiobook is also recorded by a non-binary performer). Through Linden’s eyes we hear of what has been lost and what is at stake, while Adam’s innocence steadily introduces us to this new world and what the future may hold.

This evocative and sophisticated novel is a compelling read, with a number of genuinely unexpected narrative twists (and a hidden ‘Trainspotting’ reference that will delight adult readers). It touches deftly on some considerably heavy themes around morality and ethics, grief and remembrance, war and peace, and what it means to be human. Moreover, what I found particularly engaging is that there are no easy fixes in ‘Adam-2’; Chisholm takes care to acknowledge the effort it takes to try and make a better world. Even the ending is not uncomplicatedly ‘happy’, but gently hopeful. A really special novel.

## The children of CLPE staff have also been enjoying some good books this year.

*Lana* (Anjali's daughter, aged 12)



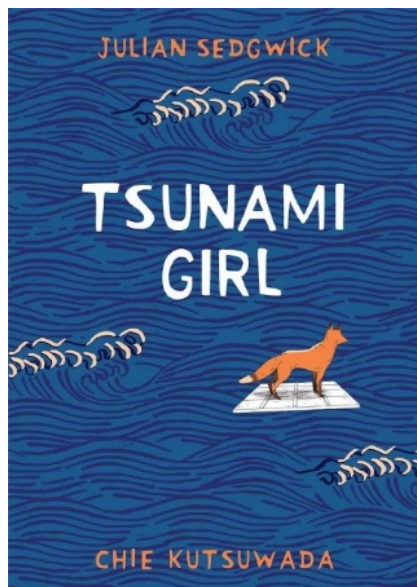
### ***Splinters of Sunshine* by Patrice Lawrence**

Hodder Children's (9781444954777)

'Splinters of Sunshine' is about a boy called Spey on a journey to find his childhood friend, Dee, after receiving a package containing a collage which they made together in nursery – which makes him think that she is in danger. He has no choice but to ask his dad for help, the man who was in and out of prison since he was born and turned up on his sofa on Christmas day with a box of trainers and an apology.

Patrice Lawrence uses different perspectives every chapter from each character to show how everyone feels about the same situation, and to better express their emotions and point of view. We also see the letters Spey's dad wrote for him whilst in prison.

I loved this book because you feel like you really know the characters and are really inside their heads, as if you have known them your whole life. You feel their desperation to find each other and their relief and happiness when they do eventually. It makes you more aware of real people that have to go through these things and that you can help. It can expand your view of the world in a way that you could never imagine.

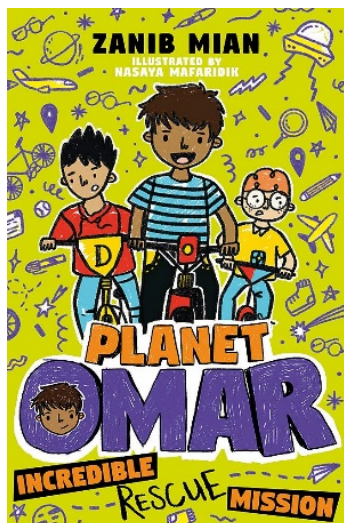


### ***Tsunami Girl* by Julian Sedgwick, illustrated by Chie Kutsuwada**

Guppy Books (9781913101466)

When a tsunami hits Japan, fifteen year old Yūki's life is changed forever. This book moves you, carrying you alongside Yūki as she tries to find her way back from the darkest of places. I particularly loved the way the manga-style graphics are interspersed with the story. It's such a unique book and a brilliant story. I'd really recommend it.

Sonny (*Anjali's son, aged 10*)



**Planet Omar: Incredible Rescue Mission** by Zanib Mian,  
illustrated by Kyan Cheng  
Hodder Children's (9781444951295)

I love the Omar books. Omar is really funny but he also looks out for people which I like. And I love the illustrations. In this latest adventure, a supply teacher arrives which can mean only one thing – their real teacher has been abducted by aliens! Or has she?

Lily (*Charlotte's daughter, aged 16*)



**The Pizazz series: Pizazz, Pizzaz vs The New Kid and Pizazz vs Perfecto** by Sophy Henn  
Simon and Schuster (9781471193989, 9781471194153, and 9781471194177)

When my mum brought these home, I picked them up immediately as I absolutely loved the character design. I do graphic design as a GCSE and the pop art style really appealed to me.

When I read the books I also loved the way they are laid out, part narrative and part graphic novel. The fonts and layout really add to the reading experience.

When I was younger, I used to love books in series, like Alex T. Smith's Claude books and I really wish these books had been around then. I think that kids would really enjoy them, they're different, quirky and really fun stories. They also talk to lots of issues that children would relate to like trying to fit in at school and the pressure to be seen as popular.