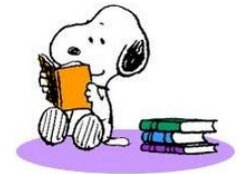




RGS: Bonkers About Books!

May 2022



Hello,

As you read this, I will be heading down to London with Year 6 for an epic two day trip, including a visit to the Warner Studios to immerse ourselves in all things Harry Potter. Meanwhile, you will be preparing for the half-term break and the Platinum Jubilee celebrations. In amongst all of the excitement, I hope that you all manage to find a bit of time to curl up and read, perhaps whilst eating a chocolate frog or a slice of jubilee cake! Wherever you read, and whatever your snack of choice, enjoy your books and don't forget to let me know what you are reading. Happy half-term and happy reading! **Mrs Wall**

The Secret Wild - Alex Evelyn

Fern lives a very nomadic life, moving from country to country, exploring rainforests in the quest and she loves that she can spend her time talking to the plants and trees, and living free. However, one day, her parents decide that she needs to go to school: she needs a more conventional education and to make friends with other children, so she is sent to London to live with her Uncle Ned who is a slightly eccentric writer. Whilst on the flight over, she encounters a rather formidable woman and her assistant who are transporting numerous boxes of plants. Restless during the flight, Fern sets off to explore and discovers the assistant watering the plants; however, one falls free of the container, landing at Fern's feet. Instinct leads her to talk to the plant who seems to understand her and she bundles it into her bag and takes it with her to Uncle Ned's. As she begins to acclimatise herself to her new life, she names the plant Secret and grows very fond of it. However, strange things are happening in London and the work of a guerrilla gardener seems to have gone into over-drive: plants are slowly taking over London and causing havoc. There are roots bringing the underground to a stand-still; lily pads are creating new bridges over the Thames and things are only getting worse. When Secret starts to look unwell, Fern realises she needs to get food for it, fast, but where is she going to get that? And can she discover what is happening to London?



Let me say from the get-go that I adored this book! The writing is warm and enticing whilst also hooking you in instantly with descriptions of the rainforest and Fern's adventurous nature leading her into trouble. And speaking of Fern, I guarantee that you will love her! She's spirited and loves to be free but there's a deeper side to her we see when she feels lonely when she's sent to London - she misses her parents, despite Uncle Ned's efforts (the only thing he can successfully cook is toast!), and having Secret as her new friend is important to her. I love that she refuses to wear shoes, even in London, and that she is her own person. Secret is a brilliant character in its own right and I loved watching as its personality grew - the relationship between the pair is a joy to read.

Clearly one of the primary themes of the book is wildlife and the descriptions are a joy to read; however, I also like the messages that are woven into the plot about respecting wildlife. The images of London changing had me mesmerised and I found myself picturing everywhere as I read with the addition of the fruits of the guerrilla gardener's work!

The Secret Wild is just all kinds of gorgeousness and is full of love, bravery and places you will want to explore, and is a book you need in your life.

My favourite quote from the book:

“Girls are *just* as brave as boys, and boys are just as un-brave as girls.
None of us are brave all the time.’

Firesong A Brightstorm Adventure - Vashti Hardy

The final instalment in the Brightstorm trilogy sees Arthur and Maudie decide where they are heading off to next with Harriet and the rest of the crew of the Aurora. Following information about their parents, they decide to head to the Volcanic North in search of the Brightstorm moth which is the explorer tattoo both Arthur and Maudie are proud to have. However, as they start their adventure, they begin to hear a song in their heads that is familiar to them. How can they both hear it and what does it mean?

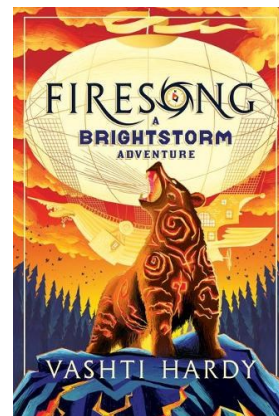
I'm deliberately keeping my synopsis short as I don't want to ruin anything for anyone; however, it's safe to say that this was a gripping finale to the trilogy and one that you won't want to miss.

I've been a fan of the Brightstorm books from the very beginning and it has been a pleasure to have watched the twins grow into the young adults they are in **Firesong**. Although they are twins, they are very much their own people: Maudie is fierce and independent with a deep love of engineering and we see that from book one when we discover that she had created Arthur's prosthetic arm - we see her love of engineering grow further in this book. Arthur's love of exploring continues to shine and he spends a lot of time pouring over maps and planning expeditions - exploring is in his blood after all. Together, they make a determined and courageous pair, and it's been a privilege to have been able to share their journey with them.

I have to also mention the other members of the Aurora crew, in particular Harriet who is a warm and caring captain of the Aurora (I still love the fact that the ship is part of her home and launches from the roof - I would love to have been in Lontown to see that in person), and also Harriet with her lucky spoon - she's warm and caring, and somebody I would love to have onboard any sky ship I travel on. **Firesong** shows us that family comes in all shapes and sizes and the Aurora crew have definitely become family to the Brightstorm twins over the years.

Throughout the series, the attention to detail has been wonderful to read, and this is no different in **Firesong**: the lands, the sky ship and the animals are immersive and help the reader to imagine they are travelling alongside the twins.

The Brightstorm trilogy has been a truly wonderful set of books and I have thoroughly enjoyed exploring new worlds on board the Aurora. **Firesong** is a thrilling and fitting final instalment, full of twists that meant I absolutely could not put it down. I smiled, I cried and I hugged the book at the end; you really will experience every emotion!

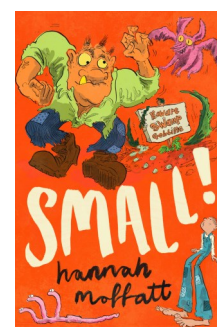


Small - Hannah Moffat

Harvey is small but on his birthday his mum buys him a pair of stilts and a very long pair of trousers and ships him off to Madam Bogbrush's School for Gifted Giants. Although he's terrified, he goes and must hide who he really is from his classmates, especially when he discovers that the first school rule is that people will be stomped into a sandwich if they are small. And, as if that isn't bad enough, a school inspector arrives who seems hell-bent on closing the school. But can Harvey and his classmates save the school and can Harvey make them accept him for who he really is (without being stomped on)?

Small is a funny book that will make readers chuckle from the very beginning, from Harvey trying to learn how to walk on his stilts, to the comments the inspector writes during her inspection, and the silliness will go down well with readers of all ages. However, hidden in amongst the humour are some very powerful messages: that of friendship and being accepted for who you are; for not needing to hide your true self and about finding friends where you may least expect to. One of the most powerful messages though, is Harvey's realisation that he is not responsible for the break-up of his parents' relationship. He begins to understand that his parents are happier apart and isn't anybody's fault. It's a very powerful message for children in a similar situation to read.

With wonderful illustrations from Rory Walker which help to enhance the story, **Small** is a book that will appeal to children in Year 3 or 4 and will be released on the 16th June.



Sister To A Star - Eloise Smith

Evie and Tallulah Allerby are twins, but have very different goals in life: where Evie is desperate to fence, Tallulah is reaching for the stars and the bright lights of Hollywood as she (urged on by her mum) pursues her acting career. When an American producer casts Tallulah in the lead role in Evie's favourite book (Z for Zoe), their mum insists that Evie travel with them to America so she can be Tallulah's number two and her stand-in. Evie is dead against this and it's clear she doesn't want to go but when a chance arises for Evie to pursue her dreams of fencing, things begin to look up; that is, until Tallulah goes missing.

From the blurb, **Sister To A Star** had all the makings of an enticing book: sibling rivalry, the bright lights of Hollywood, sword fighting and a sprinkling of glamour, and I wasn't disappointed. I have to say that this is the first book I've read where fencing takes such a starting role (can I count *The Scarlet Pimpernel*?) and I loved the details that Eloise was able to include. It is clear that she is an experienced fencer (she has three Commonwealth gold medals to her name) and this made the descriptions all the more real. I think the book will definitely help to interest children in the sport.

Evie and Tallulah are very different characters: Tallulah craves the limelight and spends her time focusing on her appearance as well as her acting, whilst Evie is quieter, preferring to spend her time learning how to fence with her grandma. Evie sits very much in her twin's shadow and it is evident from the start of the book that their mum's priorities clearly lie with Tallulah. From the beginning I felt for Evie and wanted to reach into the book and hug her. Thankfully, she has her grandma to turn to and she seems to be a driving force in her life.

The plot builds nicely to an action-packed ending that wouldn't be out of place in a Hollywood film - kidnapping, near-death experiences and a chase across Tinsel Town that will have readers on the edge of their seat! It's gripping and exciting and I know that readers won't be able to put the book down.

I was lucky enough to host Eloise on my blog recently where she wrote about how *Sister To A Star* came to be. Here is what she said:

It was the Spring of 2020, as the pandemic closed in, and I had just put the phone down to my publisher. My debut, due out in May, had just been cancelled. It had been two years in the writing and a year in editing. I'll admit, I cried.

However, as the lockdowns took full force, it felt like we all had bigger things to worry about. It's easy to forget the fear of the early days. As an asthmatic, I was terrified. I wiped down bags of pasta, held my breath passing people in the street and washed my hands until they were sore. So the idea of writing a new book from scratch didn't feel daunting. It felt like a beautiful escape from worries about home schooling, vulnerable parents, WFH and food shortages.

My publisher wanted a book that drew on my experiences both as an Olympic fencer and as an advertising creative director. A story that combined sword-fighting and film sets? Hmm . . . A few Zoom calls later, we agreed on a thriller about child actors starring in a Hollywood swash-buckler action movie. I've always loved the backstage element of film sets – understanding how the magic is created – and so it was a pleasure to throw this knowledge into my writing. And as someone who's grown up with a sword in their hand, writing about sword-fights feels as natural as breathing.

As an obsessive planner, I plotted every chapter out before writing. For me, that's where so much of the hard, gristly work is done. So I find numerous ways to plot and re-plot until the story is really tight. I plotted on cards on the floor, on spreadsheets, in word documents, on a matrix of post-it notes on the wall. I followed Black Snyder's beat sheet, John Truby's 22 steps and John Yorke's five act structure. Until the story was bomb-proof.

And then the writing began. The most joyful part. When work and family allowed, I would escape down to my garden shed. One chair. One rickety table. A laptop. A blanket for cold feet. And no internet to distract me. Then it would be just me and the strange new London quiet, full of bird song and the absence of traffic. I wrote pretty fast, laughing at my own jokes, gasping at my characters' daredevil stunts and welling up at the soppy bits.

Perhaps because of the isolation of lockdown, very few people read my WIP book. Just my editor (Kesia Lupo), publisher and family. I actually loved the simplicity of this – sometimes too many opinions can suffocate your own. Four drafts later, [Sister To A Star](#) was ready for copy edit, then proof edit and type set pages.

Now, as I watch [Sister To A Star](#) go into the world, I feel so excited imagining kids' with their nose in my story. I can only hope they love reading it as much as I loved writing it.



Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun - Tolá Okogwu

Onyeka struggles with her hair which she finds difficult to control. It takes her mum hours to untangle it and it seems to have a mind of its own as we see in the opening chapter when even donning a swimming cap seems like an ordeal. But when Onyeka's best friend, Cheyenne, gets into trouble in the pool trying to save the cap, both Onyeka and her hair come to the rescue. Discovering that she can control her hair with her mind comes as a shock to her and seems to scare her mum who whisks them back to their homeland of Nigeria and to The Academy of the Sun. Here, Onyeka discovers that there are other children (Solari) who have superpowers and the Academy is where they live and hone their skills under the protective eye of Dr Dòyínbó who Onyeka's mum trusts.

Whilst Onyeka's mum goes out in search of her father, she stays at the Academy where she begins her Solari training. However, when her mum fails to make contact with her, she begins to worry, but can she and her new-found Solari friends discover what is going on?

I love everything about this book! The mystery at the beginning where you have an inkling that Onyeka's mum knows more than she's letting on; the rushed exit from London back to Nigeria, and the whole idea that the hair Onyeka has spent years battling is actually what makes her truly amazing and is the source of her superpower.

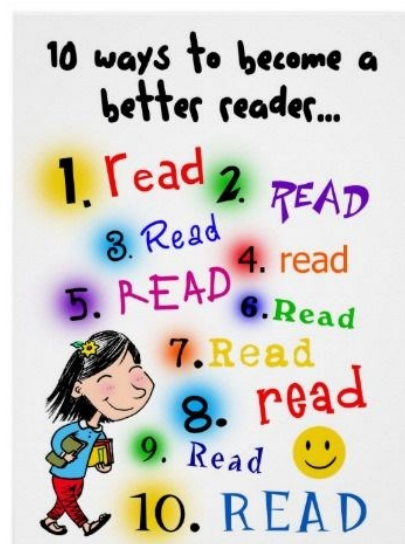
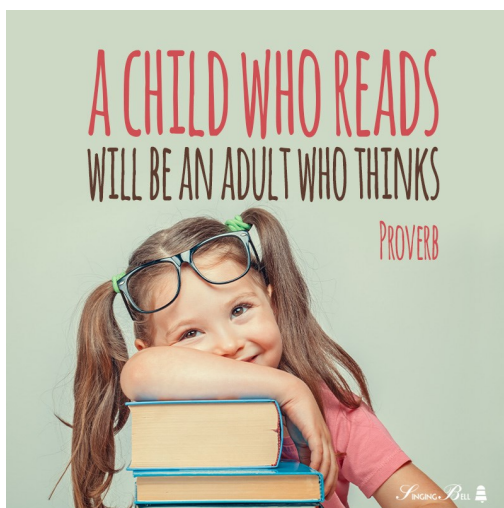
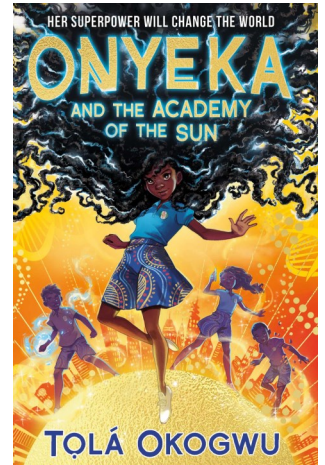
The Academy sounds truly amazing and the hi-tech nature of the place adds an element of excitement that is woven seamlessly with Nigerian culture and customs.

Onyeka makes a wonderful main character: she doubts herself and gets incredibly frustrated with her hair, even once she knows what it can do. She has an inner strength that she begins to discover at the Academy and I can't wait to introduce her to the children in my class.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the other main characters in the book. Adanna, Niyi and Hassan are very different personalities but each are important in their own right. Niyi is the first Solari she meets and his friendliness is in complete contrast to Adanna who is rather off-hand and abrupt, but it's Hassan who I like the most of the 3: more gentle and I liked learning bits of Pidgin English that he spoke (there's a glossary of common words in the back).

Fast-paced, thrilling and with an ending that will absolutely leave you wanting more, **Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun** is a brilliant book that will be perfect for fans of Amari and the Night Brothers and X-Men. It would make an amazing film!

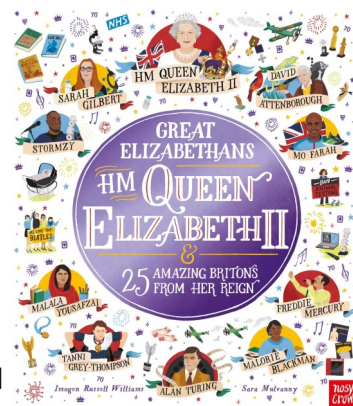
Due for release on the 9th June, **Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun** is the start of a thrilling new series that I guarantee will be a big hit. My copy has already proved popular amongst Year 6 and the book has been picked up by Netflix who is due to create a film adaptation.



Great Elizabethans: HM Queen Elizabeth II & 25 Amazing Britons From Her Reign - Imogen Russell Williams & Sera Mulvanny

As we get ready to celebrate the Queen's Silver Platinum Jubilee, I thought it appropriate to include this non-fiction book from publisher Nosy Crow in this edition of the newsletter.

Over the past 70 years, Queen Elizabeth II has seen some incredible changes in this country, inspired by people who were born in Britain or arrived on its shores. This book celebrates the life of Queen Elizabeth and 25 history-makers, including scientists, writer, athletes, activists and modern pioneers. Each person has a dedicated double-page spread with their story and illustrations woven together to tell their story. There is also an illustrated timeline, showing key events from Queen Elizabeth's reign.



A copy of this book arrived on my doorstep a couple of weeks ago and it's now in my office where I keep dipping into to whenever I have a few minutes to spare. This is a book to share with all the family.

The Last Bear - Hannah Gold

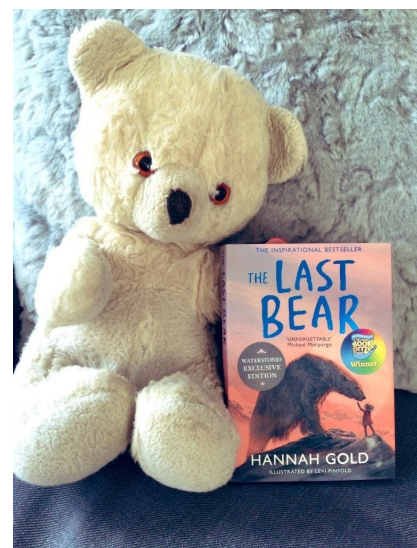
April and her father are spending six months on Bear Island, a remote Arctic outpost, to carry out scientific research. They are the only people on the island and April is told that there are no longer any bears there either. However, one day, not long after they arrive, she is out exploring, when she discovers a bear! Starving and alone, April is determined to befriend the bear and help him. But this is a mammoth task and she doesn't know whether she can do it alone.

People (including some students at school) have been telling me for a while now that I should read this book and a copy has been sat on my shelf at home since the paperback version was released, so the weekend before last, I curled up with my teddy bear and began reading it ... and couldn't put it down!

This is a wonderfully heart-warming story about a young girl who is feeling very lonely. Her father is lost in his work to try to deal with the grief of losing April's mum several years ago, so April is very much left to her own devices on the island. The relationship she and Bear develop is wonderful and the beautiful illustrations only enhance the story (with every illustration I reached, I sat and gazed at it for several minutes—the example below should show you why). But be warned: I experienced every emotion whilst reading this book, including shedding a tear or two whilst reading at the hairdressers!!



Now I've read the book, I know why so many people told me to read it and why it was chosen as this year's Waterstones children's book of the year. Next time I'm in town, I'll certainly be looking at Hannah's latest book, The Lost Whale.



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