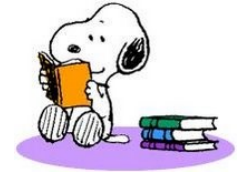




RGS: Bonkers About Books!

January 2023



Happy New Year!

It feels a little late to be saying that but this is the first reading newsletter of the year! I hope your year has begun with some excellent books. In school, we certainly got 2023 going in style with a visit from author Abi Elphinstone. It was wonderful to see so many of the children enthralled by her talk and also a joy to see children now using her writing tips as well as enjoying her books. We have another author lined up for next half-term and news of that will follow shortly. For now, though, there are a wealth of new books coming out, so grab a cuppa and see which of the books below grab your attention.

Happy reading!

Mrs Wall



Alice Éclair Spy Extraordinaire: A Spoonful of Spying - Sarah Todd Taylor

Alice is back and this time she is working with Claude, a fellow spy, and they are on the hunt for an unknown enemy agent who is intent on stealing plans for a new plane called The Daedalus, which will be able to fly further than any other plane on one tank of fuel. The plans are top secret for fear of them falling into the wrong hands but agents are going missing and action needs to be taken. It is believed that something will happen at the World Fair due to take place in Paris, so Alice and her unsuspecting mother are given prime spot in the Tastes of the World Pavilion for their pâtisserie *Vive Comme L'Éclair*. From there, Alice will be perfectly positioned to look out for enemy spies. But who exactly are these spies? How will Alice spot them? And will she be able to do so before it's too late?



I have a serious weakness for books set in Paris and savoured *A Recipe For Trouble* whilst visiting Paris in August. I adored the book, delighted in Alice as a character and was left with a desperate desire to know what she would get up to next, so I was absolutely thrilled when I was sent a copy of **A Spoonful of Spying** so I dived straight in.

From the very beginning, I was transported back to Paris on board a bateau mouche where we find Alice and Claude in the thick of things. Alice is just as I remembered her: independent, determined, head-strong, full of the most wonderful cake creations and somebody who doesn't always get things right (I love that about her). Her desire to bake the most delectable creations is woven into the plot throughout and the descriptions of her creations will leave you drooling and hungry in equal measure!

I loved the World Fair setting which allowed Alice to combine her love of baking with her spy mission. Combine that with the glamour of Parisian catwalks awash with oceans of delicate fabrics and beading turned into dresses to die for, and you have the perfect setting for an adventure. Alice is quickly on the case and the plot will have you gripped - it certainly kept me guessing until the end!

I have to mention the fact that this book is full of wonderful female characters, not just Alice, and the messages about not underestimating people just because of their age or gender are brilliantly highlighted. The idea that you can be anything you want to be shines in this book, whether it's a teenage spy, a genius baker, a female engineer or a model who doesn't quite fit in with the expectations of the other models. I absolutely adored these messages and I know readers will be heartened by them as well.

I gobbled **A Spoonful of Spying** up in one sitting and it was utterly delicious!

The Wildstorm Curse - Eve Wersocki Morris

Kallie loves nothing better than to write and perform plays, and now she's off to spend part of her summer at a theatre summer camp it feels like her hard work is paying off. After arriving late, Wildstorm's camp director, Jackie, shows her to her tent and instructs Kallie to get a good night's sleep. However, Kallie finds herself experiencing a very strange and vivid dream. She tries to shake this, quickly making friends with Emilia. Along with the rest of the cast, Kallie hears that they will be performing a play that was written in the 17th century by a witch called Ellsabet Graveheart. Is it a coincidence that strange and scary things begin to happen? Could they be linked? And what is the shadow that has woken in the forests on the edge of the camp?



The Bird Singers was a wonderful debut novel last year and I thoroughly enjoyed it (as did my class who chose it as one of their daily reads last year), so I was very excited when a copy of **The Wildstorm Curse** arrived for me.

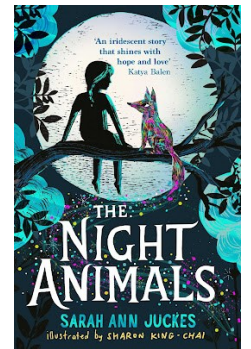
I adored Kallie as a main character: she is determined to follow her dreams but is by no means a perfect person; she is human and has worries and makes mistakes, and readers will be able to resonate with that. I also loved that she doesn't allow her dyslexia to get in her way: woven into the plot are mentions of challenges she faces (reading aloud and getting her mum to check her spellings for example) but her determination not to let it define her is evident and will be wonderful for children with dyslexia to read.

I loved the idea of a summer camp and the notion of ancient curses awakening; the plot is gripping and scary enough to keep readers hooked and is a perfect read for any time of the year. Interwoven into the main plot are chapters of the 'creature' awakening which helps to build the sinister feel that leaves questions in the reader's mind. As the plot progresses, you will find it hard to put the book down.

With friendship, magic and the power of stories at the forefront of **The Wildstorm Curse**, this is a book that will be perfect for chasing away the post-Christmas blues.

The Night Animals - Sarah Ann Jukes

Nora lives with her mum who is a paramedic but who is off work due to PTSD. She has good days and bad days, and Nora never knows what sort of day it's going to be, but recently there seem to have been more bad days than good, with Nora coming home from school to find her mum in bed and a note on the door. Recently Nora has started seeing ghost animals that appear to be guiding her in some way, she just doesn't quite know how. Along with her new friend Kwame, can Nora discover exactly what the ghost animals are trying to tell her?



I'd heard great things about **The Night Animals** and, having loved *The Hunt For The Nightingale* (you can read my review [here](#)), it felt like the perfect book to start the new year, especially as it has just been announced as Waterstone's Children's Book of the Month for January.

From the start, I need to say that this is a beautifully written and heart-felt book full of love and hope in so many different guises and what started out as reading a couple of chapters whilst having a lie-in, ended up being a book I read in one sitting. Nora clearly feels alone but doesn't want to ask for help; it can often be a difficult thing to do, especially as she feels she needs to be strong for her mum. She is struggling at school as well as at home to keep her emotions in check and feels that isolating herself is better; 'fine' is a word she uses a lot through the book - at so many points during the story, I wanted to reach into the pages and hug Nora. The ghost animals are her lifeline but she is the only one who can see them so she is reluctant to tell anybody about them. That is until Kwame comes along, and it is he who I think is my favourite character: he is hiding from the school bully when we first meet him and seems determined to blend in instead of standing out, yet he is persistent in his quest to become Nora's friend. He is kind and caring in so many ways and a real hero in my eyes.

The Night Animals is a powerful and thought-provoking journey of discovery that is brimming with empathy. It's a book that reminds us that it's ok to ask for help and that mental health is never something to be ashamed of. It's about family, friendship, hope and love ... lots and lots of love ... and I promise it will leave you wanting to hug the book once you have finished reading it.

Valentine Death and Mr Crow - Jenni Spangler

I talked about Jenni Spangler in assembly last week and how she taught herself to draw in order to illustrate this book. Here's the review of the book: Valentine Crow was orphaned at birth; however, his mother's dying wish was that he be taken to the Foundling Hospital where he would be brought up with a chance of having a decent future. Now, at the age of twelve, he and his best friend, Philomena, are about to see where life will take them next as they are to be sent into the world to become apprentices for the next seven years. However, little does Valentine know that signing his apprenticeship papers will change his life in more ways than he could ever imagine, for a spelling mistake results in Valentine becoming apprentice to Death.



It's an interesting beginning with both Death and Valentine having to adapt to their new situation; however, Valentine quickly learns how to collect souls as they are ready to leave this world. Eventually, Death gives Valentine his own pocket watch which will help him find the souls he needs to take, with Death showing him exactly what to do and where to take them once they have been collected. There is much to learn but Valentine is keen to get things right. However, when Valentine's first solo collection finds him having to collect Philomena's soul, he finds himself in an impossible situation. Will he go through with the collection and if he doesn't, what will happen then?

Ok, I'm going to start by saying that I devoured this book in one sitting, falling completely under Valentine and Death's spells (gosh, perhaps I shouldn't be saying that I fell under Death's spell!). The pair make an unlikely duo but are characters I already know I want to see more of. (Please tell me there will be another book). Valentine has lived his entire life in the Foundling Hospital where he was never alone. Along with Philomena, who arrived on the same day as he did, this is the only place he has ever known. He seems excited at the prospect of a new adventure and learning new skills but I don't think he would have ever expected to be collecting souls - I was struck by how caring and gentle he was.

I think in life we often imagine Death as a heartless and cruel character and one that everyone fears, I mean, nobody really wants to see Death coming do they, let alone want to get to know him; however, it quickly becomes apparent that he is far from that here: he is caring and thoughtful when collecting souls and treats them with respect - there is a definite warmth to his reaping. He adopts a similar attitude to Valentine, determining to do his best by the boy. Death made me chuckle on more than one occasion and was a character I enjoyed getting to know.

One of the biggest themes of the book is obviously death. The older we get, the more we experience loss due to Death and it's something that is familiar to many children as well, whether that be due to the death of a pet, an elderly relative or, tragically in some cases, the death of a parent or sibling. **Valentine Crow and Mr Death** made me think differently about the process of dying, especially later in the book when Death is reliving his time in the tree (I won't spoil things for you). Both Death and Valentine will make readers think about the process from a different angle and I love that about this.

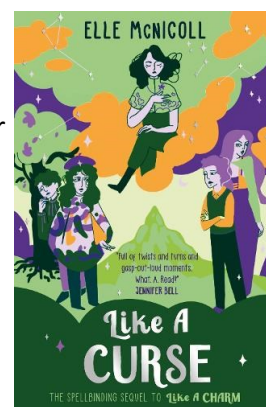
Jenni's writing is inviting and friendly, the book is the perfect balance of humour and warmth and I know that readers of all ages will fall under the spell of the characters. With wonderful illustrations peppered throughout the book by Flavia Sorrentino, this is the perfect post-Christmas read - I said it earlier, but I'll say it again here: I'd love to see more of this duo in future books.



February 2nd is a popular day for publishing children's books. Below are some of the ones I've read and recommend (there are still some on pile to read!)

Like A Curse - Elle McNicoll

Ramya is back ... and so is the Siren Portia who takes over Edinburgh, causing Ramya's family to retreat to their home on the banks of Loch Ness. Frustrated by her aunts' and Mum's apparent lack of action, Ramya decides that it is up to herself and Marley to save the Hidden Folk and stop Portia before it's too late, but that involves having to get past her Aunt Opal and sneak out of the house as well as getting back to Edinburgh. Can the pair do what is needed before it's too late? Will what little magic Ramya has learnt be enough? Or will Portia finally get what she wants?



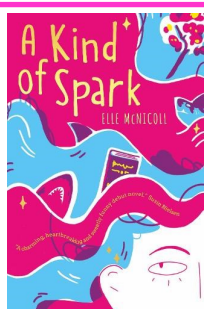
Like A Charm was the most amazing novel (you can read my review [here](#)) and as I started reading **Like A Curse**, I was torn between gobbling it up to find out what happens or savouring it so I could make it last. I started reading it on Saturday morning and had to tear myself away to get jobs done. It was late afternoon before I was able to curl up with a cuppa and get back to the book and it didn't take long for me to realise that the idea of savouring the book was just not going to happen! **Like A Curse** is a veritable rollercoaster of events that will have you gasping out loud and yelling at the book phrases like: 'What...?' 'Noooooo!' & 'Somebody else is going to have to make dinner!' Trust me, there are twists in this book that you will *not* be able to see coming (just look back at my Tweets from Saturday night if you don't believe me!) and I guarantee that you will be on the edge of your sofa as you read.

Elle's writing is superb and transports you directly to Scotland, starting at St Giles' Church and then quickly heading up to Loch Ness. As I read, I was reminded of the time I was there as a child with my family and declared with great certainty that I had spotted the Loch Ness Monster, at which point my younger sister promptly locked herself in the car and refused to let us in - if only we'd known... Throughout the book, the images conjured in my mind were vivid and I wandered the Lock and the streets of Edinburgh alongside Ramya - I love it when I can do that with a book.

As you read, you quickly find yourself back with familiar faces as well as being introduced to some new ones - the question is, who can you trust?

Ramya is the most wonderful character and a force of nature. She is true to herself and I love that she embraces who she is now she is away from her classroom. Elle is a true champion of neurodiversity and I know that her books help children to see themselves and also educate children on neurodiversity (both of which are important). The messages throughout the book are fiercely positive and Ramya's attitude is one I admire; however, it was this quote that I loved the most: 'I'm never going to be a neurotypical child. I was meant to be so much more.' This is a book full of messages like that that will help children; messages about resilience, not giving up, being yourself, staying strong, trust... and my copy is now peppered with post-its to remind me where all the quotes I want to share and remember are.

I could continue to gush about **Like A Curse** for so much longer and I can't wait for it to reach the book shops so that I can talk to people about it without spoiling the plot. But, for now, I'm just going to say that Elle's writing goes from strength to strength; **Like A Curse** is a completely gripping, gasp-out-loud story that will send you on a rollercoaster of a ride in the best possible way.



Did you know...

A Kind Of Spark by Elle McNicoll is being turned into a TV programme?

As soon as I know when it is due to be aired, I promise to let you know.

Villains Academy - Ryan Hammond

Bram Moon has been sent to **Villains Academy** in order to learn how to be bad; however, for the shy werewolf, things don't go quite as expected and he finds being evil rather more difficult than some of his fellow pupils. Can he enlist the help of his friends in order to become bad before he receives three strikes and gets sent home?

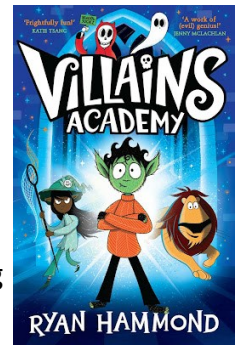
I started reading **Villains Academy** last Saturday evening on the way home from the Simon & Schuster brunch where I'd heard Ryan talking, and finished it the following morning. The book is a joy to read and is full of some of the most wonderful characters.



I can imagine Ryan having had the best time creating them and, without doubt, Master Mardybum has to be the best name for a teacher I have ever come across!

The writing is enhanced with illustrations throughout and the book will have readers chuckling at the events that unfold. From getting stuck in the toilet pipes to getting bottoms trapped in doors, the plot will have readers enthralled. However, alongside the laughs, there are important messages about teamwork, friendship, trust and being yourself woven into the book.

Due for release on the 2nd February, **Villains Academy** is bound to be a hit with readers and I just hope there is more to come from Bram and the rest of the class. Now, I wonder how evil I have to be to be awarded Villain of the Week...



The Song Walker - Zillah Bethell

A girl wakes up to find herself alone in the desert wearing one shoe and is clutching a locked case; she doesn't know who she is or how she got there. Not knowing what to do, she begins to walk and soon comes across Tarni who is First Country Australian and seems to be much more prepared for where they are - the Outback. Together the girls continue their journey, both with their own agendas and both looking for answers.

I could go into much more detail about the plot but to do so, I feel, would spoil the book in many ways and that's the last thing I want to do.

I have to admit at this stage that I have yet to read *The Shark Caller* (please don't shout at me!) but I've heard great things about it so I was excited at the prospect of reading **The Song Walker** when an early copy arrived for me. Despite being tempted to dive straight in, I knew this would be a book that would demand my attention so I waited until after the end of term before reading it, and by goodness am I glad I did as it grabbed me from the start and simply wouldn't let me go.

The two main characters are very different from one another; not least because Tarni knows what she's called and who she is. Her life has clearly been spent in and around the Outback and she knows how to survive: her skills are practical and she appears strong and independent; it is evidently clear that she is proud and respectful of her community and their beliefs and I liked that we, as the reader, grew to know more about this as the book progressed. The girl, however, is the polar opposite: unprepared for the desert and clearly lacking in survival skills, she is on the backfoot from the start and, despite knowing nothing about her, she instantly draws you into the pages, your curiosity piqued. Despite their apparent differences, it is clear that the girls need each other and their journey will entrance you. Together they face several dangers whilst forging the most unlike of friendships.

The Song Walker is a book that reveals itself to you slowly and carefully whilst at each stage leaves you with plenty to think about; you know that there are pieces of the plot that are just beyond your reach but they feel tantalisingly close so you can't help but read 'just one more chapter'. I found the book deeply moving, and the more I read, the more I felt this.

A simply stunning novel, **The Song Walker** is a book that deserves to be savoured - although, the more you read, the more you will simply want to devour it! Beautifully told and deeply thought-provoking, the writing lulls you in and you are instantly transported to the warmth of the Outback whilst also sharing the dangers the land has to offer. It will leave you breathless (and in my case with a serious book hangover) and lingering over its contents long after you have finished reading it.

