

UNDISCOVERED VOICES

from SCBWI British Isles and Europe

SPONSORED BY WORKING PARTNERS



A PROJECT OF SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

What will you discover?

UNDISCOVERED VOICES 2024 is the ninth anthology presented by the SCBWI-BI featuring novel extracts by unagented and unpublished writers in the UK and Europe. From the eight previous anthologies, the selected authors and illustrators have received publishing contracts for over 440 books published around the world, winning and receiving nominations for too many awards to list. Please enjoy these extracts and, if you like what you read, contact information for the authors is available at the end of each one. With your help, these voices won't stay undiscovered for long.

UNDISCOVERED VOICES 2024 INCLUDES:

THE UNDEAD JOURNALS OF ALEX ABBOTT by Louise Austin

PICTURE THIS by Stephen Daly

THE GREAT SHEEP SWAP by Natalie Rutherford

BRIONY CALDERWOOD AND THE WATER WITCHES by Sarah Fulton

LEGAL WALLS by Jo Howard

WAZEERAH AMEERAH & THE STOLEN ASTROLABE by Eiman Munro

THE TRAITOR'S MOON by Henry Coles

DROWNING IN PEA SOUP by Richard Parker

THE BOOK OF MARIONETTA STONE by Catriona McLean

SUPERS by Maggie Womersley

THE HIDDEN LIFE OF SUNIL PANDYA by Priyesh Shah

AS DREAMS ARE MADE by Elizabeth Fowler

HIGH ACHIEVERS by Allison Mandra

ALL YOUR NUMBERED BONES by Sarah Bates

CINDERS AND STARS by Esther Scherpenisse

THE TOTALLY UNSOLVABLE MYSTERIES:

LET SLEEPING PHONES LIE by Natalia Godsmark



SCBWI



www.undiscoveredvoices.com

UNDISCOVERED VOICES

2024 EDITION

The ninth anthology of unpublished
children's fiction by SCBWI British Isles
and Europe members

published by

The Society of Children's Book
Writers and Illustrators British Isles
and
Working Partners Ltd



CONTENTS

FROM SARAH GRANT, HONORARY CHAIR	4
FROM SCBWI BRITISH ISLES	7
FROM WORKING PARTNERS	9
FROM OUR FRIENDS – ALL STORIES	10
FROM OUR FRIENDS – MEGAPHONE MENTORING	12
SPECIAL THANKS FROM THE UNDISCOVERED VOICES COMMITTEE	14
THE UNDEAD JOURNALS OF ALEX ABBOTT by Louise Austin	17
PICTURE THIS by Stephen Daly	27
THE GREAT SHEEP SWAP by Natalie Rutherford	37
BRIONY CALDERWOOD AND THE WATER WITCHES by Sarah Fulton	47
LEGAL WALLS by Jo Howard	56
WAZEERAH AMEERAH & THE STOLEN ASTROLABE by Eiman Munro	66
THE TRAITOR'S MOON by Henry Coles	76
DROWNING IN PEA SOUP by Richard Parker	85
THE BOOK OF MARIONETTA STONE by Catriona McLean	94

SUPERS by Maggie Womersley	103
THE HIDDEN LIFE OF SUNIL PANDYA by Priyesh Shah	111
AS DREAMS ARE MADE by Elizabeth Fowler	121
HIGH ACHIEVERS by Allison Mandra	130
ALL YOUR NUMBERED BONES by Sarah Bates	139
CINDERS AND STARS by Esther Scherpenisse	145
THE TOTALLY UNSOLVABLE MYSTERIES: LET SLEEPING PHONES LIE by Natalia Godsmark	154
HONORARY MENTIONS	164

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: All works contained herein are copyrighted by their respective authors. No reproduction of any kind is permitted without the owner's written permission.

FROM SARA GRANT

Honorary Chair

For the past eighteen years, *Undiscovered Voices* has been a significant part of my life – from the early years with my dear friend Sara O'Connor when we conceived the idea to organizing and reading thousands of submissions over the years to planning meetings, workshops, mentorships, and parties every year. I've loved every minute of it! A new *Undiscovered Voices* committee – made up entirely of previous *Undiscovered Voices* writers – has taken the reins this year. It's been such a pleasure to see how these amazing writers are paying it forward and taking this project to the next level. I was honoured and overwhelmed when they asked me to be this year's honorary chair.

There are so many lessons I've learned both as organizer and beneficiary of *Undiscovered Voices*. Here's my advice for writers in this year's anthology and my hope for the agents, editors and pre-published writers who read these now discovered voices.

To the writers in the anthology

Sixteen years ago, I was right where you are. An extract of what would become my debut young adult novel *Dark Parties* appeared in the first *Undiscovered Voices* anthology. I met my agent Jenny Savill at the party and was her very first client. I've had ten novels published by wonderful publishers such as Little, Brown, Orion and Scholastic. I hope *Undiscovered Voices* will be the first step on your path to publication. I offer three words to help you on your way!

Tenacity. Every writer is unique, and their journeys varied. From the age of eight, I wanted to write stories. But I was just an ordinary kid from a small town in the Midwestern United States. What chance did I have? I started taking my writing seriously in 1994. After seventeen years of writing, revising and rejection, I received my first book deal. Getting published can be a rollercoaster, but don't give up! Some writers in this anthology will be

courted by many agents. A book deal might come quickly for others. But all you need is that one agent and one editor who see the brilliance in your story and believe in you. Which brings me to my next point . . .

Collaboration. Being a traditionally published author means collaboration. Find professionals – an agent and editor – who you trust and respect and listen to them. That doesn't mean agreeing to every edit but being open to letting others into your writing process and pick your battles very carefully. I'm lucky to have worked with some of the best in the business. I listened and learned. I signed my first book deal with Alvina Ling at Little, Brown because before she made an offer, she gave me editorial notes. Her keen observations and editorial prowess nailed what wasn't working *Dark Parties*. She made it a better book and me a better writer.

Joy! When my first book was published, I was a nervous wreck. Yes, I'd achieved something I'd dreamed about since I was a kid. But in addition to the fear of what people would think of my book, I had blogs to write, schools to visit and the 24-7 world of social media. My lovely husband sat me down and said that I had achieved something few people ever do, something I'd always wanted – and yet I wasn't enjoying it. He was right. From then on, I decided to enjoy every minute of this crazy ride for as long as it lasts.

If the stars collide and your book finds a publishing home, wonderful. If you are on award lists, brilliant. If you become a bestseller, amazing! But if not, celebrate that you've done a rare and brave thing by committing your unique and wonderful story to the page and sharing it with us!

One of the best parts of being included in this anthology . . . You are now a part of the *Undiscovered Voices* family. It's our privilege to be one of your first champions. You have nearly a hundred mentors here to support you and cheer you on – me being your number one fan!

To agents and editors

You are in for a treat! I'm always proud of the talent *Undiscovered Voices* uncovers each and every time, but this is quite possibly the most varied and distinctive voices in an *Undiscovered Voices* anthology ever.

What follows are kid vampires and detectives, deals with the devil, girl

blacksmiths, graffiti artists, water witches, deadly diseases, time snatchers, super recognizers and apprentice wizards. There are mysteries, sci-fi, comedies, romantasy, magical urban tales, fantasies, and thrillers. We've got everything from gentle coming of age stories to dark disturbing dystopia.

I hope you find something that sparks your interest, and you'll help share these wonderful writers and their stories with the world.

To the readers of the anthology

The extracts in this anthology are a masterclass on how to hook your readers from the opening pages with a distinctive voice, an intriguing mystery, or an engaging atmosphere. If you are pre-published, study these extracts and learn how to make the opening pages of your novels even better.

And finally, the only really horrific thing about *Undiscovered Voices* . . . and this crushes me every single time . . . we get to read the starts of these magnificent tales then we have to cross our fingers that they are published so we can discover what happens next!

Let's hope our wait won't be too long!

Sarah Grant

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

FROM SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

Welcome to *Undiscovered Voices 2024*, SCBWI-BI's ninth anthology of undiscovered writers. Congratulations to all the longlisted and shortlisted authors! The high-calibre submissions are a testament to the huge, diverse talent of our members in the UK and EU.

SCBWI is a global professional community for the exchange of knowledge and ideas amongst writers, illustrators, translators, editors, publishers, agents, librarians, educators, booksellers and others involved with literature for children and young people. With over 24,000 members worldwide in over seventy regions, SCBWI aims to support the creation of an abundance of quality children's books, so that young people everywhere have the books they need and deserve.

SCBWI-BI is proud to offer a myriad of professional development, networking and marketing opportunities to writers, illustrators and translators, also a welcoming, diverse and supportive community. Getting discovered in today's competitive marketplace is a challenging proposition, so it is our aim to uplift and support emerging voices through this innovative competition.

Authors and illustrators from the eight previous *Undiscovered Voices* anthologies have received publishing contracts for more than 440 books which have been published around the world. These have been honoured with nominations and featured on prestigious literary lists, including the Blue Peter Book Award, the Barnes and Noble Top Teen book, the American Library Association Best Book for Young Readers, the Borders Book of the Month, the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the Crystal Kite Award and the Branford Boase Award.

The anthology project is entirely run by a team of enthusiastic, hardworking volunteers, with the kind and valuable contribution of our judges' time and publishing insights. Working Partners have also unfailingly believed in this exciting project from the beginning, contributing their support and extremely generous support funding. Thank you!

Within these pages, you will read the voices and stories that grabbed the judges – and that will hopefully now also hook YOU in. These are stories that the world wants and needs to hear, and we thank you in advance for helping to connect readers with these authors by believing in them!

Natascha Biebow and Alison Gardiner

Co-Regional Advisors (Co-Chairs)

SCBWI, British Isles region

www.scbwi.org/regions/british-isles

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

FROM WORKING PARTNERS

The 2024 edition of *Undiscovered Voices* is a landmark edition. 20 years ago, Sara Grant and Sara O'Connor first dreamed up this wonderful initiative. This is the first edition not to be overseen by Sara Grant and her wonderful, hard-working, and selfless team of volunteers.

It is so exciting to have Sara take on the role of Honorary Chair for the 2024 anthology.

Imogen White has risen brilliantly to the task of leading a new and equally devoted team composed entirely of writers from previous anthologies. Thank you to Sara, Imogen and all the volunteers for everything you have contributed and continue to contribute to *Undiscovered Voices*. Thank you also to the team of judges who give up so much of their time to select the featured entries.

This extraordinary SCBWI initiative continues to be one of the most productive vehicles for the discovery of writing talent by agents and editors across the UK children's publishing industry. Congratulations and the very best of luck to all the writers in the 2024 edition of *Undiscovered Voices*. Many of you will become published authors and we shall look forward to reading your books and following your careers in the years to come.

20 years on, it remains a privilege and a pleasure for Working Partners to sponsor *Undiscovered Voices*.

Chris Snowdon

Managing Director

Working Partners

www.workingpartnersltd.co.uk

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

FROM OUR FRIENDS

Catherine Coe, founder of All Stories

Congratulations to all the talented writers selected for *Undiscovered Voices 2024*! I wish you all the very best and will be cheering you on in the next steps of your writing journeys.

I have been involved with this incredible initiative since its first year, when I was a judge, and since 2012 as a committee member. I am no longer on the Undiscovered Voices committee, but for what I hope is a good reason – I am dedicating as much time as possible to the All Stories programme, which I founded in 2021. All Stories aims to improve diversity in children's books through supporting writers from underrepresented groups – in particular, those who don't have the financial means to pay for help to develop their work and their writing talent, aiming to level the playing field with those who do.

All Stories began as a mentorship programme for unpublished and unagented writers of children's books – from picture books all the way through to young adult novels. In the upcoming 2024 programme, picture book and young fiction writers will be supported, with ten mentorship places available. Each writer is chosen and mentored by a highly experienced freelance editor for a minimum of six months, while also participating in monthly webinars presented by top in-house editors that help to demystify the industry and discuss aspects of writing craft.

Since 2022, the project has also involved outreach – a hugely important element when aiming to improve the diversity of children's book authors. This outreach includes offering writing-for-children workshops and writing groups to people from underrepresented groups with the aim of encouraging them to consider writing for children and to build a writing routine, support network and community. Excitingly, the plans for 2024 involve offering these across the whole of the UK, as well as online.

I am extremely grateful that the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators has supported All Stories from its inception, which has included giving each mentee a year's free membership. SCBWI is such an important organisation that can make a huge difference to writers – offering a wealth of support, events and a friendly community – and its Undiscovered Voices initiative is something unrivalled in the industry for its success and the way it offers writers a route to visibility and, ultimately, publication. It is heartening that many of the writers selected for this year's anthology are from underrepresented groups, giving hope that one day children's books will be fully representative and inclusive.

Catherine Coe

allstories.org.uk

catherine-coe.com



► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

FROM OUR FRIENDS

Megaphone Mentoring: making space for writers from ethnic minorities

In the decade from 2007–2017, fewer than 2% of children's authors were British people of colour. The Megaphone Mentoring Scheme was set up in 2016 by author Leila Rasheed, with the intention of changing this by supporting new children's writers of colour to grow and thrive creatively, in a space where they were not tokenised or marginalised.

Since 2016 the scheme has grown from five mentees to eight, but we offer much more than the 1-1 mentoring, which is awarded on merit. Every applicant so far has been offered membership of Megaphone Community, which is run on a voluntary basis by editor Stephanie King. This is a closed, moderated forum, through which we provide writing workshops, book clubs and Q&A sessions with publishing professionals.

An important aspect of the scheme is that authors, who themselves have gone through the process of writing a novel to a publishable standard, provide the 1-1 mentoring. That gives them a unique insight into the questions emerging writers have, and an ability to help that is born of practical experience. Our previous mentees include Danielle Jawando, Maisie Chan, Joyce Efi Harmer, Nazima Pathan and Iqbal Hussain, some of whom have come back to the scheme as mentors and workshop leaders. Feedback from mentees and Megaphone Community members includes:

**“Megaphone has been a wonderful safe haven,
both friendly and informative”.**

“I have never been on a writing scheme where there has been so much support and guidance“

“This is such a supportive community.”

“Leila and Stephanie have transformed my confidence, my writing and my ability to tell a story.”

We are especially delighted that Megaphone Community members have this year been selected for the *Undiscovered Voices* anthology – congratulations to you all!

www.megaphonewrite.com



▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

SPECIAL THANKS

Undiscovered Voices is one hundred percent volunteer driven – with this year's committee comprising of many previous finalists, who know the power of UV first hand, and who wanted to pay it forward and celebrate and support UV2024. Each anthology can only be presented to you thanks to our generous sponsor and team of dedicated volunteers.

HUGE thanks to . . .

- **Working Partners** for funding and supporting this project from the start – nearly twenty years! **Chris Snowdon**, thanks for your enthusiasm, kindness, and generosity. **Rosie Best**, thank you for being our Working Partners Liaison for well over a decade, you are moving on now, and we wish you every future success. Thank you too to **Elizabeth Galloway**, **James Noble**, **Samantha Noonan** and **William Severs** who reviewed so many of this year's entries.
- Our Honorary Chair **Sara Grant** – not only an outstanding literary talent with countless books published, but also our UV co-founder. Since establishing UV in 2006 with Sara O'Connor, Sara has championed countless new authors, providing an ingenious platform to showcase new talent, getting authors noticed, agented and published. With an astounding 440 books published by previous UV finalists and counting – Sara's ongoing legacy holds no bounds. Esteemed within literary circles, Sara Grant is a recognised ambassador for children's writers everywhere. An incredible teacher, inspirational speaker, and mentor. On behalf all the writers you have shone a light on, thank you for your passion, guidance, humour, and kindness – and thank you for agreeing to be the UV2024 Honorary Chair.
- We would like to say a special thank you to the previous UV committee members, whose skill and thousands of collective hours of volunteered time has made this competition thrive year on year. **Rosie Best**, **Catherine**

Coe, Jenny Glencross, Simon James Green, Benjamin Scott (who also ran a brilliant masterclass this year!) and of course, the wondrous **Sara Grant**. This team worked tirelessly to deliver UV for so many years and have passed to the new committee such a well-oiled blueprint to follow.

- To the new committee, thank you for your dedication and innovation and making this year's competition such a success: **Laura Warminger, Claire O'Brien, Victoria Benstead Hume, Susan Brownrigg, Adam Connors, Katrina Morgan, Rosie Best, Elizabeth Brahy** and **Imogen White**. (Also, to **Sara Grant** for her ongoing mentorship to the UV committee.)
- **Sara O'Connor** who co-founded this project in 2006 and who continues to champion it and read submissions.
- Our friends at Megaphone and AllStories, for your words of wisdom and encouragement, and to the readers who volunteered to review submissions, who included **Catherine Coe, Lui Sit, Zareena Subhani** and **Abimbola Fashola**.
- Our SCBWI EU volunteer, **Elizabeth Brahy**, for advising and attending meetings and reviewing so many entries.
- The Undiscovered Voices alumni, who each paid it forward and mentored one of this year's writers **Anna Brooke, Yvonne Banham, Katrina Morgan, Sophie Cameron, Adam Connors, Sue Cunningham, Dave Cousins, Alison Clack, Claire Fayers, Victoria Benstead-Hume, Claire O'Brien, Michael Mann, Maureen Lynas, Bryony Pearce, Nicola Penfold** and **Serena Patel**.
- **Natascha Biebow** and **Alison Gardiner**, co-regional advisors of the SCBWI British Isles region, supporting innovative projects. And to the incredible volunteers at SCBWI-BI **Ashley Taylor, BB Taylor** and **Anita Loughrey** for supporting us with announcements, online events and administration.

- **Our readers** for their dedication in reviewing the submissions in support of the UV committee: **Abimbola Fashola**, **Catherine Coe**, **Claire Fayers**, **Elizabeth Galloway**, **Jenny Glencross**, **Karen Ball**, **Lui Sit**, **Michelle Schusterman**, **Samantha Noonan**, **Sara O'Connor** and **Zareena Subhani**.
- The esteemed judging panel, for sharing their passion, experience and wisdom when selecting the longlist and finalists.

Zoë Plant, literary agent at The Bent Agency

Amber Caravéo, literary agent and Director of Skylark Literary

Jenny Savill, literary agent and Managing Director of

Andrew Nurnberg Associates

Saffron Dodds, Associate Agent at ASH Literary

Louise Lamont, literary agent at LBA

Sarah Stewart, Senior Commissioning Editor at Usborne

Linas Alsenas, Editorial Director for Puffin/PRH

The entire Undiscovered Team is incredibly proud of what we have collectively achieved.

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE UNDEAD JOURNALS OF ALEX ABBOTT

By Louise Austin

Tuesday 16th January

1.30am

Even though I've been dead for three months, two weeks and four days, Mum still drags me out of bed every morning to go to school. It hasn't got me out of doing homework either. You'd think she'd have some sympathy for her only child, what with me having been tragically killed and everything. NOPE.

I got one measly day off sick before she was all, 'Alex, I hate seeing you mope about. I think it'll be good for you to carry on as normal.'

If she hated seeing it so much, she didn't have to watch me chilling in my jammies and trying to figure out whether things on YouTube are cake or not¹. Anyway, today Ms Wilson is giving us a maths test, so I'm not exactly looking forward to it.

Hardly anyone knows I died, and Mum says it should stay a secret, because people wouldn't understand. I haven't even told Archie or Mia, my two best friends, so I have to be really careful to act like a normal, alive person all the time, which can be tricky, especially at lunchtime. Being dead, I can't digest food. It means I won't grow or change, while my friends keep getting bigger. Soon they'll all be riding the *Terrorcoaster* while I'm stuck holding the bags.

'We'll cope with it one day at a time,' says Mum, so I'm trying not to think about the future too much. But my last growth spurt was AGES ago,

¹ Apparently this was NOT what she meant. Cost me 20p off my pocket money for 'being so cheeky'.

which means I was already one of the smallest in my class even though I turned eleven back in September. I'll be miniscule at secondary school, and that's only eight months away.

Dad's more worried about my *emotional wellbeing*.

'You're repressing your feelings,' he says, you know, about the whole being dead thing. Dad's a psychologist so he's REALLY big on mental health. Sounds good, right? Well it's NOT, because he's making me fill this *whole* diary. I expressed some *very* strong feelings about having to do extra work just because I died—surely I've been through enough—but apparently I need quiet activities now I no longer need to sleep.

'What about gaming?' I suggested helpfully. But he was having none of it, even though it was a sound idea and *way* better than his.

'Alex, you need to process your trauma, and journaling can be a really healing way of doing that.'

Yawn.

'But gaming would be *perfect*. It's not like I need to worry about ruining my eyesight or anything; I've already died, so things can't really get much worse for me health-wise.'

He shook his head. 'You're in denial, Alex. You need to work through your feelings about your death if you're going to make peace with it and accept yourself.'²

I've tried reminding him I'm not *dead* dead. That I'm undead and I can still do most of the stuff I did when I was alive. I've even admitted I'm upset about it. I tell him it's agony to see hot, crispy chips or towering ice cream sundaes knowing I can't eat them. That it's lonely wandering about at night now I don't sleep.

But I can't bear even trying to put the whole enormous, horrible truth into words.

How scared I am about Mia and Archie growing up and leaving me behind.

About him and Mum growing old.

Getting old and dying.

² I still think gaming would bring me more peace and acceptance, but as *I* don't have a *doctorate in clinical psychology*, it seems my opinion doesn't count.

Meanwhile I'm stuck like this—between life and death—FOREVER.
Alone.

No amount of *journaling* will make that okay.

But that's all ages away, so for now it's easiest to keep pretending everything's normal. Sometimes I even manage to forget for a few minutes.

It's about 2am now and my parents are asleep—they're in bed for ages and get really grouchy if I make any noise. I can't exactly tell anyone else about what happened, so I guess I might as well write about it:

My Death **by Alex Abbott**

It was a Tuesday breaktime. Mum had given me one of the chocolate chip snack bars because she'd run out of the healthy ones the school recommends, which was lucky, as it was the last proper food I ever ate. A whole bunch of us were playing dodgeball, and our laughter drew the attention of Jessica King. Eyes fixed on our fun, she stalked over.

'Hi guys, can I play too?' she asked, eyelashes fluttering.

'It's Zac's ball, so it's up to him,' said Archie³.

'That's okay with you, right Zac?' she said, snatching the ball before he could answer.

He took a step back, hands raised in surrender. 'Uh, sure, I guess.'

As soon as the game stopped going Jessica's way, her face twisted into this evil grin. If you'd blinked you'd have missed it, because she was all wide-eyed innocence as she chucked Zac's brand new ball over the fence.

'Oops!' she said with a little giggle. 'Zac I am *so* sorry!'

I couldn't keep quiet, the words just came bubbling out of me. 'Why did you *do* that? You've ruined our game!'

'It was an accident, *Alex*.' She shot me one of her glares, then turned and took Zac's arm. 'Zac understands, *don't* you Zac.' It wasn't a question. Zac nodded obediently.

Hot anger rose from the pit of my stomach until my cheeks started to

3 Archie loves a playground rule.

burn. Mia took one look at my face and steered me away, Archie trailing behind us.

‘Don’t argue with Jessica King,’ she hissed under her breath. ‘It always ends badly!’⁴

‘Ugh.’ My hands balled into fists. ‘She gets away with *everything*. I wish we could do something to make Zac feel better.’

At some schools, I bet losing your ball over the fence doesn’t matter, but at Draihampton Primary it’s a **DISASTER** because we have horrible neighbours. You’d think people who hate kids would avoid moving next door to a school, but ours attracts kid-loathing weirdos.

Old Mr Tilbury pops our balls *on purpose* and throws them back all sad and deflated. The playground’s always strewn with their corpses when we arrive on a Monday morning. Mr Tilbury watches his garden like a hawk and he’d be on the phone to Dr Forbes if we bent a single blade of his manicured grass. The whole school would be mad, because it would mean *another* boring assembly on how ‘kindness is our core school value, which means we must always be considerate to the neighbours.’⁵

The Hill family hooligan, Lyall, spray paints our balls to look like heads, then impales them on the spikes they’ve added to their section of the fence. They peer over all creepy and weird until Dr Forbes asks the caretaker to take them down. Lyall Hill was a pupil at Draihampton Primary years ago and people still talk about him now—he got kicked out at 7—imagine what he’s like now he’s 15 (☉_☉).

⁴ Zac tried standing up to Jessica King when she took his scented water bottle in year 5. He only asked her to give it back, but she made such a fuss, he was the one kept in at breaktime for bullying.

⁵ Even though they never give our balls back. I guess the kindness rule doesn’t apply to *them*.

But Jessica King didn't throw Zac's ball into those gardens; she threw it into the third one. The untended, forgotten one, with the house that has *actual* bars on the windows. That house stars in all our Halloween stories because it's *clearly* haunted. There's never any sign of a living person there and its overgrown, weed-covered garden is a total ball-graveyard. My brain started whirring.

'Maybe we can make everything better *without* having to deal with Jessica King . . .'

Mia raised an eyebrow at me. 'Is this one of your plans?'

'No! Well, yes,' I admitted, 'but it's actually a really good plan!'

Mia sighed. 'Is it the kind of plan Archie can hear?'

'Good point. Archie, we're about to break the rules.' His eyes got all big and his hands flexed and straightened. 'Only to help Zac,' I explained. 'But if you'd rather not, we could meet you at the benches in ten minutes?'

Archie looked at the ground. 'Can I help in some other way?'

Mia leaned in and whispered in my ear. I grinned. 'Look Arch, Mr Douglas is on duty. I bet you've got loads of questions about tonight's match . . .'

Mr Douglas was our class teacher in year 5, and he's actually pretty cool.⁶ He's also our hockey coach so Archie marched across the playground to talk tactics.

'Distraction sorted. What's the plan?' asked Mia.

'I'm going over the fence.' I waited for her to gasp at my brilliance, but instead she put her hands on her hips.

'What? That's not a plan, that's ridiculous. It's way too high.' Mia's the practical one in our trio. I should have listened to her, but I didn't.

'You can give me a boost. Come on—Zac's our friend. And I wouldn't just get *his* ball; there must be thirty or forty over there and we'll be heroes for chucking them all back.'

When the caretaker goes up on the roof of the school hall twice a year to clear all the balls and frisbees, everyone crowds round to watch. He's more popular than that TikTok where they open up a watermelon and

6 For a teacher.

there's a puppy inside wearing sunglasses, even though he has a bushy beard and smells of boiled cabbage.

'How will you get back over?'

I grinned—Mia was thinking about the details, which meant my plan had totally won her over.

'Who leaves forty balls in their garden and has that many brambles? Nobody. It's *obviously* abandoned, so I'll have plenty of time to poke around and find something to climb on.'

Archie was still keeping Mr D busy, so I dragged Mia to the far side of the playground and made her give me a leg up. I pulled myself onto the fence using one of the spikes at the corner of the Hill garden and perched on top. The harsh caw of a crow made me glance up. It gloated at me from a wonky chimney pot, before flapping clumsily into a nearby tree. The fence wobbled and I grabbed the spike to get my balance, heart racing.

'Careful!' called Mia. 'It's not safe up there, come down.'

'I'm fine, chill out,' I said, shaking my head at her. 'Just got to find a good landing spot.'

I'd never seen the whole haunted house before. Its crumbling brickwork was hidden by a wall of creeping ivy and murky windows glared out between rusting metal bars. The sun disappeared behind a cloud and a shiver rippled through my whole body, standing all my hairs on end. That's when I saw the face pressed to the glass. Its ghostly skin glowed almost white against the shadows and its eyes were accusing voids of darkness that bored right into me.

The shock stole all the air from my lungs and my legs turned to jelly. Mia screamed as I toppled head first into the garden. Pain burst through my head and everything went black.

Wednesday 17th January

10pm

My next assignment from Dad is to reflect on what being undead means to me—I'm sure it's meant to be an angsty account of my feelings, but so far the things that actually matter are:

Awesome things	Rubbish things
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can run super fast (as in, I'd leave Olympic champions in the dust) • Can jump incredibly high (all the way up the stairs in one leap) • Can lift really heavy stuff (I'm talking like a piano, not just some potatoes) • Can see and hear from miles away • Never get tired • If I fall over, it doesn't hurt • Won't get old and wrinkled • Won't ever die (I already have) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Won't get any taller • Can't have food or drinks except the weird soup my parents make for me • Nights are boring and lonely • Can't flex about my new powers as they have to be kept secret • Still have to do schoolwork • Do I still get birthday parties? • No chocolate EVER again • Extra work, like this boring journal • Everyone else will get old and die

I don't understand what I am. Or how I went from *dead* dead to *undead*. I've not worried about that till now, so maybe Dad wasn't COMPLETELY wrong about the whole denial thing. Anyway, it's about time I figured out how I became undead in the first place.

I did some sleuthing at school and nobody remembers that break time. *At all.*

'Even Jessica King wouldn't be *that* mean,' said Archie. He likes to think the best of people.

'Sounds like something she'd do,' said Mia with a shrug, 'except we haven't played dodgeball since year 5.'

And poor Zac thinks his brand new ball went missing before he ever got to play with it. 'Mum won't let me bring stuff into school anymore.' He sighed. 'Must've been nicked.'

So I'm no closer to the truth.

When I first came round after the accident, I was tucked into my own bed.

'Mum? Dad?' I croaked. 'What happened?' Their eyes were all glassy-looking with red rims. I sat up. 'What's the matter?' I asked. 'Is it Gramps?' Mum buried her face in Dad's shoulder and my insides felt all heavy. Something was VERY wrong.

Mum took a deep breath and held my hand.

'Sweetheart,' she began. 'There's . . .' She had trouble getting the words out. 'You're . . .' A tear escaped down her face and she dashed for the

bedroom door. 'I've just got to check on something,' she choked, and ran down the stairs.

Dad had to explain. And I probably didn't listen as well as I should have. When someone tells you you've died, it's hard to focus on anything they say after that. Plus my new super-hearing (a perk of being undead), meant I could hear Mum sobbing as she made herself a cup of tea.⁷ It's been months and she still cries every night. I'm an only child, so as well as being dead, I've ruined her chance of having grandchildren. It's not like I'd thought much about having a family one day, but I might have liked that. -_(') _/-

But maybe there's still a way to fix me. After all, I had no idea being undead was even a thing, so maybe I can be brought back to life again. Gotta be worth a shot, right?

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

⁷ Mum thinks tea can solve any problem, which is ridiculous, because tea is just gross leafy water.

THE UNDEAD JOURNALS OF ALEX ABBOTT

by Louise Austin

PITCH:

Alex Abbott never wanted to become a misfit kid-vampire, so meeting a fire demon who can grant renewed life seems a stroke of luck. But making deals with demons rarely turns out quite as planned.

SYNOPSIS:

When ordinary kid Alex Abbott (11) has a tragic accident and can't be resuscitated, a kindly vampire tries to help. But Alex hates being undead and, despite fearing an eternity all alone, pushes everyone away. Garlic poisoning is the last straw, so Alex blunders into the supernatural world seeking a cure, and accidentally extinguishes the fire sprites who cloak supernaturals from humans. Alex must seek fire demon Belial to reignite the sprites and release the frustrated supernaturals from hiding.

Alex takes a road trip with an emotion-sucking demon, a bone-crunching troll and two insta-vampires. They warn against asking favours from Belial, a living fire with no sympathy, but then one of them betrays Alex, whose isolation deepens. When Belial reignites the sprites, desperate Alex rushes into a deal for renewed life.

Pompeii demonstrates the scale of Alex's mistake, but the countdown to an eruption at home has already begun. Alex confronts Belial, but it seals the town so everyone will share the death sentence.

Devastated, Alex stops acting rashly and turns to friends for help. Belial's tricked by Alex's decoy plan while friends cool the lava and release the building pressure. Before Belial can muster enough energy to obliterate the town, the deal expires, Belial is banished, and Alex's new life begins. As a parting shot, Belial tricks Alex into a fake fire rescue. Alex dies and becomes a vampire once again. This time it's different because Alex accepts the support of both communities. Embracing undeath, Alex finally finds self-acceptance.

BIOGRAPHY:

Louise Austin is a reformed lawyer from Kent, who is raising a teen, a

tween and a recent discoverer of chapter books. When not immersed in stories, she is chair of governors at her local primary school and the devoted servant of a fluffy, white cavapoo. Her writing won the Cornerstones PWA prize for most promising longlisted manuscript in the Bath Children's Novel Award 2022 and second prize in the WriteMentor NID Awards 2022.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'The voice is perfect; I loved it!'

Contact: austin.louise@gmail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

PICTURE THIS

By Stephen Daly

Chapter One

I check Ben's message for the millionth time in case it has magically changed in the last two minutes.

I'm going to miss you

My stomach flutters. This was an incredibly direct message from him. He didn't even say 'mate' in it. He's going to miss me. Does that mean? I don't know. But maybe.

No harm in getting a reply ready.

I'll miss you too!

What am I doing? He never wanted anything serious. Plus, I'm leaving, I've left.

I delete my reply.

There is still no signal anyway, and the Wi-Fi on the ferry is awful, as is the view. I was hoping to see Belfast as we approached the city as I've never seen it from the sea before, but pretty much everything around me is swallowed in fog. I'm freezing. It's July and I'm surrounded by grey nothingness. I shiver.

Welcome to my new life.

A seagull screeches as it circles the boat. It's small, with a black crescent on its jaw, showing the outline of its head. A black-headed gull. Dad's facts about the bird come back to me. I am eight, listening to every word he says back when he took photos, back when he was happy, back when we spent time together. The black curved circle is their summer plumage. By winter their head will be shrouded in black feathers.

So according to the bird, it is actually summer.

You should tell the sun, babes.

The seagull hovers effortlessly on the winds, one eye on me. Presumably to see if I have any food, but I feel like she (no idea how I would know its

sex, but I go with she) – I feel like she wants me to take her photograph. She's showing off.

Sorry, not my thing. Not anymore.

I can understand that she might be confused as I do actually have a camera hanging round my neck. But that's just to get a shot of Belfast approaching for my nan.

The seagull is persistent. A natural model. She flaps her wings; they arch, and her body holds steady in the air. They are like an angel's wings in an old painting, majestic and noble. She's vivid against the lifeless clouds above the sea.

She looks directly at me. Challenging me not to find her stunning.

Fine.

I take a pic. It's not bad. There's a black line or something in the top right corner of the shot, but I can edit it later.

The seagull screeches like . . . well, like a seagull, shattering the angelic illusion. She swerves off to find food or maybe a better photographer.

"You look just like him, Michael; snapping away." Mum is standing behind me on the viewing deck, hugging her arms in her super long cardigan. Her eyes flicker to my head and she frowns. This could either be because my hair (red like hers, but straight like Dad's) is way beyond the point of what you might describe as windswept or more likely that I didn't take her advice to wear a beanie. I'm not wanting to discuss either option, and I'm definitely not in the mood to talk about my similarity to Dad. Not when she's refusing to tell me the truth about what happened to him.

"It was just a seagull."

She smiles, the corners of her mouth twitching the tiniest bit. It's her in-between happy and sad smile, a sign that she wants to have a serious talk. She tucks some of her mostly red curly hair behind her beanie and I see a tear glint in the corner of her eye.

A numbness seeps into my fingers that has nothing to do with the chill of the Irish Sea. She already cried on the way to the port.

It's too early for this.

"Can I have a hot chocolate, please?" I wiggle my fingers with a smirk. "For the frostbite."

She lets out one of her short snorty laughs that always seem to take her by surprise. Her face softens. "Of course."

That's better.

* * *

The morning ferry from Cairnryan to Belfast is weirdly busy. The bar and restaurant areas are rammed, but we find a table in between a man with a thick grey beard eating a greasy smelling fry up that makes me both hungry and nauseous, and a guy a bit older than me who is slumped over his table. Dead or hungover. It's not clear.

"MICHAEL," Mum calls from the counter. "WOULD YOU LIKE A MUFFIN AS WELL, LOVE?"

I shake my head, jaw clenched.

The slumped guy sniggers.

Not dead then. Good for you.

Mum shrugs and turns back to the counter. I take a deep breath, reminding myself not to get cross with her.

It's a difficult day for her too.

Still no signal on the phone. But I check the photograph of the seagull. She's really beautiful. Feathers spread, beak parted, eyes glinting despite the lack of sun. I have caught the angle well. That black line though, what is it? I zoom in.

I gasp and sit back in the seat.

It's a feather. A jet-black feather caught in the wind. I don't remember it being there.

The seagull is looking upwards at something out of shot.

I remember that screech she let out. What could she see?

I smile. The image is no longer a picture of a bird.

I hear Dad's voice.

You're telling a story.

He would've loved this.

I'm nine years old and I have taken a photo of a honeybee on Dad's old camera. He is at his desk. He pats my shoulder.

A warm kiss on the top of my head. He smells like coffee and woody aftershave.

“Ah, well done son. Proud of you.”

I hug him.

I lurch myself forward, turn off the camera and drum my fingers on the plastic table as Mum arrives with two hot chocolates and a muffin.

No, there are two muffins.

I frown.

“I got you one anyway,” she smiles, sitting opposite.

“But I . . .”

“Well, if you don’t want it now, you can have it later.”

There’s a tremor in her voice that stops me speaking. My fists clench under the table and I want to explain that while I appreciate the gesture of the muffin, I specifically said I didn’t want one. I was pretty clear about that and yet, once again she is ignoring me. I am not a child. I don’t need hats and little cakes. I can decide these things for myself. I want to ask why she can’t bring herself to actually listen to me. To trust that I might know whether or not I want a muffin.

But I don’t want to fight today and push one of us over the edge so I mumble a thank you.

The hot chocolate warms my hands. I take a deep glug and watch it swirl about the inside of the mug. I hold it there so I can hide in a sweet-smelling cave and remember a childhood fantasy of swimming in a pool of chocolate.

Would be a nightmare to clean up though.

And with that I set down the mug and I’m back on the ferry.

Mum’s pale blue eyes on me.

“Enjoying that?”

I force a smile.

“Yeah, not bad.”

She frowns and I push a flash of anger away.

We sit in silence as the weight of guilt settles between us.

Why is it that everything she does annoys me so much? She’s sad and she’s hurting and it’s like she wants us to be on some emotional journey together. But we can’t be because one of us is keeping the truth from the other.

For six months she has changed the subject when I’ve asked what

happened to Dad. I've learned to avoid arguments because I am afraid that she'll get upset. She's tried to get me into counselling, saying I should talk about my feelings when all I want to know is the facts of what happened. My feelings don't matter. And now she's moved me from everything I've known because she can't handle being in our home, in the life she lived with Dad. She —

I dig my nails into my palms.

Stop it! She's your mum and she's in pain.

Breathe.

We'd spent the last day in London packing up the house. Things had been going well. The delivery company had arrived early in the morning to collect everything that was going into storage in Belfast while we found somewhere to live. All that was left was our clothes, a few essentials, and a single cardboard box.

The box was full of Dad's clothes, the ones that he hadn't taken with him. Shirts, trousers and an old REM hoodie that was pretty much falling apart. It had been Mum's idea to give everything away, but when the woman from the charity shop arrived to collect them, things got weird. Mum had gripped the box and let out at a little gasp when she eventually let go. I heard the box being opened and saw Mum quickly stuff the hoodie into her bag after the woman left.

"You okay, love?" Mum asks, eyebrows knotted as she taps her hot chocolate.

I nod. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking about something."

"Want to talk about it?" There is a flicker of a hopeful smile. I squirm in my seat. There was a time when I would tell her everything. When I was hurt, when I felt embarrassed, when I got picked on. No matter how big the problem was I could tell her.

It's gone now.

Broken.

And anyway, what's the point, she won't want to talk about Dad anyway.

I shake my head. "No, just thinking about the move."

Mum sighs. "Okay, love."

She knows I'm lying. She always does.

My shoulders tense.

Still no signal.

Mum takes my hand. Her skin is soft and warm, and my hand relaxes in hers, remembering the comfort that used to be there. “Son, I know this is difficult. You’re nearly seventeen and this is a big move. I know what you’re leaving behind.” She squeezes my hand. “I know *who* you are leaving behind. Your friends . . . Ben.”

I flinch.

“He can come visit anytime . . .”

Wind roars in my ears.

“And if you need to tell me anything you know you can . . .”

A lash of pain whips across my forehead.

She lets go of my hand and I stand up so quickly I nearly knock my mug over. “I’m going to take a few more photos before we get in.”

Another lie.

Before she can say anything else, I grab my camera and head back to the viewing deck.

The wind has settled and it’s less chilly. Two old men walk towards me. I look ahead and stick my hands in my pockets.

“We’ll be docking soon, son,” says the older in a warm Belfast accent.

“Yup, thanks.”

Alone on the deck, I walk to the rail. The sun has decided to make an entrance and I can see we are well into Belfast Lough now. Just ahead, beyond the churning waters of the Irish Sea I spot the first outline of the city; a tiny strip of grey buildings surrounded by green mountains.

My new home.

The place where Mum and Dad grew up.

Land of the Troubles and the Titanic. Growing up, the Troubles were never talked about, but the Titanic came up. A lot. Memories of rainy childhood holidays with Nanny Bet come rushing back. My great-great-great-great (too many greats?) Grandfather Patrick worked on it as a riveter. I think of Nanny Bet’s proud smile as she spoke about him. “It was unusual for a Catholic to be working at the docks back then you know.”

He left on the ship too, wanting to start a new life for the family in America, and well, we know how that ended.

I promised my nan we’d go to the Titanic Museum to learn about

my family's history. Nanny Bet was excited to have me move over and no doubt there would be lots of trips coming up. I love Nanny Bet. She's easy to talk to, and I'm not going to lie, there are upsides to being someone's only grandchild.

"She spoils you," Dad mumbled, clutching a glass of wine when my birthday present arrived last year.

Yeah well, at least I talk to her. I'd wanted to say. But didn't. As always, when Dad got like that, I would take myself away and try not to get on his nerves.

Where are you, Dad?

The chugging of the ferry's engine offers no answer. He's out there somewhere. Dealing with his problems, and we are heading to Belfast, leaving ours behind.

My head is aching from the chill. I should get back to Mum and see if she has any painkillers. The pain prickles behind my eyes and I see a flash of light from the direction of the city.

A ray of light shines down and hits the sea as the pins and needles in my forehead intensify.

The column of sunlight burns in the morning sky like a spotlight shining in front of a curtain of grey. Through it, the squat buildings of the dock are shimmering and swaying in the golden light.

The light gets brighter and pain blisters and blooms behind my eyes, and I can't look away. The buildings in the light are clouding over, like smoke flowing into a glass pipe, until I can't see them anymore.

I grip the railing as the pain catches my breath.

The swirling column of light burns fierce and bright, and I make out something in it that sends my head swimming.

The giant, towering outline of an ocean liner is heading straight for us.

I want to scream a warning, to let the captain of the ferry know we're about to be smashed to pieces by some idiots on a luxury cruise.

But then I recognise the boat.

It can't be. What the —

The impossible word forms in my head as my senses scream in pain.

Titanic.

My vision flickers but there are people lined along the top deck. I can

make them out. Men mostly, looking across the sea or back at Belfast.

My hands shake as I take out my camera, raise it up and aim at the ship.

Snap.

A foghorn blows and people on the boat cheer.

But above it I hear a woman screeching and my hands fly to my ears. My camera drops. A shadow beside me and there's a man there. Holding a camera. No, not a camera, it's a little wooden box. I look closer, then the man shakes some hair from his eyes.

It can't be.

He aims the camera at the ship. "Dad?"

I lurch forward but the light surges behind the ship and blinds me.

"DAD!"

My tongue goes numb.

A bird screeches.

Everything goes dark.

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

PICTURE THIS

by Stephen Daly

PITCH:

When his dad vanishes, 16yo Michael has visions of the past showing the horrors of the Troubles. To reunite his family, he must confront the Goddess of Death and unearth their traumas that haunt them.

SYNOPSIS:

When his dad goes missing, gay teen Michael moves to Belfast for a fresh start. As soon as he arrives, he begins to have visions of the past. His grandmother (his dad's mum) witnesses one of the visions and tells him she can also see the past, but then burns the written account of it and wipes his memory.

Michael's cousin brings him to a party where he meets a mysterious girl called Meg, who reveals she is also queer. They become friends immediately and when she witnesses Michael having a vision, she helps him to harness his power by using an old pinhole camera that belonged to his dad. They start to see visions of the Troubles and a mysterious young girl. When they develop the pictures, they see each one features a woman in black.

When his father is found in a coma in a hospital Michael and Meg discover that Michael's power has been granted to his bloodline by the tripartite Irish goddess of death, the Morrigan: it's the woman who appears in his photos. His strange bond with Meg is explained when she realises she is the human-born embodiment of Macha, one of the Morrigan. The young girl in his visions was his aunt, she was killed as a teenager in a riot. Michael's grandmother wiped his father's memories to protect him from the trauma but left his mind trapped in the past. With Meg/Macha's assistance Michael enters the past and rescues his father.

BIOGRAPHY:

Stephen Daly is a queer writer from a working-class community. Following his degree in psychosocial studies and MA in Creative Writing, he is interested in writing about the social and cultural issues young people experience. Picture This has personal resonance. Stephen grew up as a

queer young man during the Troubles and left the country at eighteen to try and be himself. He believes it's time to tell more queer Irish stories. This is one.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'We trust the writer from the outset. An unusual voice with conflict from the beginning.'

Contact: stephendalywriter@gmail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE GREAT SHEEP SWAP

By Natalie Rutherford

Chapter 1 – A puff of smoke

If I'm totally honest, I didn't notice Mum was missing at first. I mean, not for MONTHS or anything, but for a good few hours.

I just thought she must be out on one of her walks. She loved going for a walk.

‘Why don't we go for a walk?’ she'd say.

‘Again?!’ I'd groan. ‘We went for a walk last week.’

‘But it's so BEAUTIFUL around here,’ she'd say with that weird, dreamy look on her face. ‘Aren't we LUCKY to live here?’

And I'd roll my eyes and prepare myself for yet another lesson on why the countryside was so brilliant, even though there was no bowling alley or swimming pool, and not even a Mega Burger without driving in the car for about 100 miles or something. And no buses or trains. She makes ‘going for a walk’ sound like a super fun hobby, when actually it's the only way to get anywhere around here.

Anyway, what was I saying?

Oh yeah. So we – me and my little sister, I mean. Elsie. Noisy little beast. Hair like a blackbird's nest, permanent candlestick from her nose. Fine when she's asleep – we'd been playing Zombie Unicorns for, ooh, I don't know . . . Three hours, maybe? We'd got to the Enchanted Graveyard of Eternal Sparkles, which we'd NEVER got to before.

I was starting to feel a bit peckish and I could hear Elsie's belly rumbling. She isn't really meant to play Zombie Unicorns because she's only five and she gets nightmares. But she loves it because, you know . . . ZOMBIE UNICORNS!! What's not to love?!

So Elsie didn't want to stop playing even though it was HOURS since lunch. But eventually the rumbling was so loud, she went off in search of Mum and/or food.

She came back empty handed and alone.

‘Dougiiiiieee? Where’s Mummyyyyyyy?’

‘Hmmm, she said she was just popping out for a minute,’ I said. ‘Something about sheep?’

But then I thought about the fact that we had made it all the way to the Enchanted Graveyard of Eternal Sparkles and realised Mum must have been gone for quite a bit longer than a minute.

Even then, I can’t say I was worried. The thing about Mum is, she’s awesome and loves us very much and everything but she isn’t always great at the parenting stuff. Like checking which video games we’re playing. Or making sure we get to school on time. Or buying food.

And she is ALWAYS losing track of time. So the obvious answer was that she’d meant to pop out for a minute and got carried away because she was having so much fun WALKING.

‘Come on,’ I said, tossing my controller onto the sofa. ‘Let’s go and find her.’

I grabbed the remains of a packet of chocolate digestives from the kitchen (corner cupboard, second shelf up, just out of Elsie’s reach) and we shared them as we put our trainers on and headed outside.

We were never allowed out on our own in Grimley, the town where we lived until last year. We lived on a MASSIVE road, for starters, with ginormous juggernauts and double-decker buses whizzing past every two seconds. Here, Elsie and I could go out as long as we were together, and told Mum first.

But seeing as we had no idea where Mum was, we agreed not to worry about the second bit. We did consider calling Dad but both thought that was a Very Bad Idea and decided we’d be okay so long as we were careful.

Our house is on the edge of the village. To our left and in front of us are fields. Behind our house is the school field with our school at the other end of it. And to our right is the lane leading to the rest of the village.

As we stood at the end of our path, trying to decide which way to go, we heard a voice calling to us from along the lane.

‘Yoo hoo!’

It was Mrs Stump, our neighbour. Our only neighbour, really. Not like

in Grimley, where we had loads of neighbours. Although we didn't really know any of their names, or ever speak to them.

'Is your mum okay, dears?' Mrs Stump called.

'Er, we . . . think so,' I replied, as we jogged up the lane to where we could see her head poking over her hedge. 'Why?'

'Oh I'm sure it's nothing. Only, I was upstairs earlier, changing my net curtains, and I could have sworn I saw your mum at the edge of that field over there. One minute she was chatting away to the sheep . . .'

Elsie giggled.

'Ooh yes, I often see her having a good old chinwag with the flock,' said Mrs Stump. 'Putting the world to rights, no doubt. Anyway, one minute she was there and the next, she had vanished. All that was left was a puff of smoke.'

'Our mum vanished in a puff of smoke?!' I said.

Elsie burst into tears.

Chapter 2 – The world's noisiest sheep

I mean, it's nice having friendly neighbours and all that but sometimes I think it was easier in Grimley, where no one made eye contact, and they certainly never told you your mum had vanished in a puff of smoke.

I managed to calm Elsie down with an ancient toffee I found in my pocket, Mrs Stump apologising the whole time.

'Honestly dears, you know what my eyes are like. I didn't mean to upset you. It was probably just a bit of fluff in my eye, not a puff of smoke after all. In fact, it probably wasn't even your mum. I bet she's at home right now, making you something lovely for your supper.'

At this Elsie looked like she was going to cry again, as we both knew very well that Mum was neither a) at home nor b) making us anything for supper, lovely or otherwise.

'Come on,' I said. 'Let's go for a walk.'

'A walk??' Elsie looked like I'd suggested juggling 15 chainsaws. Standing on a shark. 'But you HATE going for a walk!'

'Ssshhh,' I hissed, guiding her away by the elbow. 'Thanks Mrs Stump,' I called over my shoulder. 'See you!'

I turned to look at Elsie: ‘Listen. I’m sure Mum’s fine. But we ought to go and have a bit of a look for her. Before it gets dark.’

Elsie’s eyes widened. ‘Is that when the Zombie Unicorns come out?’

‘No! There are no Zombie Unicorns, okay? That’s just a game.’

We walked along in silence for a bit until the unmistakable sound of baaing grew louder and louder.

‘Dougiiiiieeee . . . This is the way to the sheep, isn’t it?’

‘I’m sure it wasn’t Mum that Mrs Stump saw. But it’s as good a place as any to start looking.’

There was something tickling the edge of my brain. Something woolly. What was it Mum had said about sheep, as she was ‘popping out for a minute’?

We quite often go to see the sheep, when we’re on one of Mum’s walks. I mean, there isn’t a lot else round here so in terms of sightseeing, the sheep are probably up there in the top three attractions, along with the duck pond, and the spooky tree that has half the trunk missing where it was hit by lightning.

As we got near the field, one of the sheep came running over towards the fence, poked its head through and started the loudest BAAAAAAA-ing I’ve ever heard. Non-stop.

‘BAAAAAAAAAAAAA-BAAAA-BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AAAA-BAAAAAAAAAAAAA.’

On and on.

‘BAAAAAAAAAAAAA-BAAAA-BAAAAA-BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-
BAAAA-BAAAAAAAAAAAA.’

And then:

‘BAAAAAAAAAAAAA-BAAAA-BAAAAA-BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AAAAA-BAAAAA-BAAAA-BAAAAAAAAAAAA-BAAAA-BAAA
AAAA-BAAAAAAAAAAAA AAAAAAAAAA-BAAAAA.’

You get the idea.

‘Is it hurt?’ Elsie said, looking like she might cry again. She cries a lot when she’s hungry.

Now, I’m no sheep expert but I honestly thought this world’s noisiest sheep wasn’t in pain but was trying to tell us something. Unfortunately, as I don’t speak sheep, I hadn’t a clue what.

‘No, I don’t think it’s hurt. Come on, let’s head home. Mum’s probably back by now and mad at us for going out without telling her.’

We wandered back down the lane and as our house came into view, we saw someone was standing on the front path.

It wasn’t Mum.

It was a girl, probably about my age (which is 11, by the way).

When she spotted us, she started waving. She had a mad grin on her face, like she was super happy to see us. Which was a bit weird. I mean, I know people round here are friendly but this seemed a bit of an overreaction from a total stranger.

‘Hello!’ the girl called. ‘I’m so glad I found you two.’

‘Hi,’ I said. ‘Er, do we know you?’

‘Oh sorry. I feel like I know you so well. You’ve been to see me so many times.’

‘We have?’ I said, racking my brains.

‘Silly me. You won’t recognise me.’

She pushed a curl off her face.

‘This is my first day in a human body.’

Chapter 3 – Third field on the left

I didn’t really know what to say to that.

But Elsie did. She’s never short of a question. I think she’ll be prime minister or something when she’s older.

‘Are you a ghost?’

Not a bad question, actually, for a five-year-old.

‘No, I’m definitely alive,’ grinned the girl.

‘Are you an alien then?’ Elsie was clearly working her way through all the creatures she thought might be able to take possession of a different body.

‘An alien?! No, I’m a human – look.’

The girl waved her arms in the air and waggled her knees from side to side, in what she seemed to think was the most human way possible. Elsie’s bottom lip started to tremble.

‘Are you a Zombie Unicorn?’ she whispered.

‘Elsie, she doesn’t look anything like a Zombie Unicorn!’ I said. ‘Anyway, there’s no such thing, remember? It’s just a game.’

‘Is she a robot then? A Zombie Space Robot?’

I was beginning to see that having a five-year-old on the case was not helping us get to the bottom of who this strange girl was and how she claimed to know us.

‘Elsie, why don’t you go on the swing? Then maybe – sorry, what’s your name?’

The girl looked confused. ‘Oh, I’m not sure. I don’t think I have one.’

Elsie laughed. ‘You must have a name! Everyone has a name – even Zombie Unicorns. There’s Rita Brain-Eater, Cosmic Crusher, Princess Oblo . . . Oblov . . .’

‘Oblivion,’ I said, helping her out. As I said, it isn’t really meant for five-year-olds. ‘Swing?’

‘Yay, swing!’ she said, running over to the rickety plank attached to two fraying pieces of rope, hanging from the oak tree in our front garden.

‘What does that do?’ asked the new girl.

‘What does it do?’ I repeated. ‘It’s a swing. It, er, swings? Backwards and forwards. That’s it really. Elsie can’t get enough of it.’

‘Oh wow. THAT’S the swing? That’s it??’ ‘Please can I go on the swing again when we get home? Pleeceeeaaase???’ The way she goes on about it, I was expecting something a bit more spectacular.’

‘Sorry – I just really don’t remember meeting you before. Is it Elsie that you know?’

The girl smiled. ‘Both of you. I know all about you. I know you’re Dougie and you’re 11. Elsie is five . . .’

‘I’m nearly six!’ Elsie piped up, as she whizzed through the air.

‘Sorry yes, you’re nearly six. You like doing cartwheels, eating biscuits and going on the swing. Dougie likes playing Zombie Unicorns . . .’

‘I do too!’ said Elsie.

‘But you aren’t meant to because it gives you nightmares. ‘You moved here last year with your mum from somewhere called Grimley, where there’s more things to do that are fun but it’s really dirty and smelly . . .’

‘That’s not a very nice thing to say!’ This time it was my turn to interrupt.

‘Oh sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. I was just thinking of how the fumes used to bring on Elsie’s asthma . . .’

How could she know that??

‘Are you . . . a spy? Or, like a detective or something?’ I felt like a right idiot as soon as I said it. She was no older than me. But then how else did she know so much about us?

‘I don’t think so,’ the girl said, slowly. ‘I’m not really sure I know what they are. I think I’m just . . . a human. A child human.’

‘Well then you’re going to have to tell me where we’ve met, or how you know so much about us,’ I said, starting to lose my patience. I like to think I have a pretty good memory but I honestly did not remember meeting this girl anywhere before.

‘You come and visit me when you go for a walk with your mum,’ the girl beamed. ‘Me and all my family. Just down the lane there. Third field on the left.’

‘You live in a field?’ said Elsie, leaping off the swing mid-flight. ‘Cool! In a tent? I love camping. Mum says we can camp out in the summer holidays – which is next week. Yesss.’ And she pumped the air.

I, meanwhile, had been drawing a map in my mind.

‘Third field on the left? You live with the sheep?’

‘Well, yes.’

She grinned. Sheepishly.

‘The reason you don’t recognise me,’ she said, ‘is because last time you saw me . . . I was a sheep.’

Chapter 4 – An actual, human house

‘I think you’d better come inside.’

I didn’t know what was going on but this girl was clearly not very well.

The thing is, I’ve had a bit of experience with people who have lost the plot. After Mum and Dad split up, Mum kind of went a bit crazy for a while. I mean, she never claimed to have been a sheep or anything but she did seem to forget who she was sometimes.

Anyway, I knew EXACTLY what this situation called for.

‘I’ll put the kettle on.’

I opened our bright red front door and waved the girl inside. The hallway was a bit of a mess. A sea of football boots, flipflops, trainers and school shoes flowed down a shoe rack volcano. Small, chocolatey handprints marked the once white walls. A stack of pizza delivery leaflets and charity shop bags hung over the edge of the hall table.

As I reached the kitchen, I turned back to see the girl wasn't following me. She was rooted to the spot, just inside the front door.

'Wow,' she breathed. 'A house. An actual house. I'm inside an actual, human house.'

Her eyes shone as they locked onto mine.

'It's beautiful,' she said. 'Please can I live here?'

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE GREAT SHEEP SWAP

by Natalie Rutherford

PITCH:

Dougie thinks his new life in the country is super dull until his mum vanishes in a puff of smoke and a girl turns up on his doorstep, claiming to be a sheep.

SYNOPSIS:

Adjusting to life in the country is hard enough, but when 11-year-old Dougie's mum fails to return from one of her walks, things start getting a whole lot weirder.

Like when a girl (Baarbara) turns up at their house claiming the Supreme Sheep has just turned her from sheep to girl.

But Baarbara's story is corroborated by the Supreme Sheep, who admits she swapped the girl and Dougie's Mum, fed up with their constant 'grass is greener' moaning.

Reeling from the news that his mum is now grazing with the rest of Farmer Woolly's flock, Dougie begs the Supreme Sheep to change her back. But she doesn't do reversals.

Dougie works out the only way to get his mum back is a double reversal, meaning Baarbara must swap back too. She REALLY doesn't want to – cheesy puffs taste SO much better than grass – but eventually agrees, on the condition that she can have one fun-packed week as a human first.

A trip to the seaside, multiple Zombie Unicorn battles and endless cheesy puff sandwiches later, Dougie is torn. He wants his mum back AND to keep his new friend.

At the moment of the swap, Farmer Woolly appears, revealing he's a former Supreme Sheep and has the power to do a one-way swap. He agrees to change Mum back on the condition that the family promises to a) help mow the grass, now he's one sheep short of a full flock and b) welcome Baarbara into their human home.

BIOGRAPHY:

Natalie is a walking midlife crisis. Current obsessions include learning

to play the trombone, swimming in icy lakes, and becoming a children's author. Originally from the West Midlands, Natalie now lives in rural Cumbria with her husband and two children, where she works for a charity. She falls asleep to the sound of sheep most nights.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'I loved the crazy humour and vivid characters.'

Contact: rutherfordnat@googlemail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

BRIONY CALDERWOOD AND THE WATER WITCHES

By Sarah Fulton

Chapter One

Standing on the swaying deck of Mum's boat, Briony Calderwood was hit squarely in the face with a dead fish. A salmon, to be precise. She scooped up the fish, laughing at her blunder. Wiping its iridescent scales with the sleeve of her jumper, Briony placed it carefully on the ice next to the others. They had to be kept fresh until they could be sold off at the Chestnut Bay market later that morning.

"Heads up!" Mum flashed a warm smile as she tossed her another fish. Briony raised her arms to catch it so that this one wouldn't fall splat on the cedar deck boards.

By the time they dragged in the final haul, the morning sun had only just risen, spilling orange and pink light over the waves. Dawn was Briony's favourite time of day. Being out there far from shore, the whole vast ocean stretching out to the endless horizon, felt as right as anything could. Briony belonged here. Just like Mum did. When she was younger, Briony had only been allowed quick spins around the harbour to empty the lobster pots, but now that she was nearly thirteen Mum had finally let her come aboard the fishing vessel for proper sea voyages.

Briony glanced over to where Mum was preparing their daily ritual. She wrote the note on a thin scrap of paper and rolled it up, slipping it inside a glass bottle no bigger than the palm of her hand. Briony did not have to ask what was written on the note – it was always some version of the same thing: a word of thanks to the sea god, Havelock, for providing such a bountiful catch, a wish for calm seas tomorrow.

"Can I sing it?" Briony asked as she leaned on the railing next to Mum.

"Of course you can. You've always had the better voice of the two of

us. Old Havelock must be tired of hearing my croaking.”

Briony cleared her throat, then sang the ancient melody handed down from generation to generation, “As the mighty wind doth blow, as the tides froth and flow, so the gifts of Havelock go. Our luck is decided fathoms below, carry our wish to those who bestow.” Her lilting tune drifted out over the waves, echoed in the distant sea bird calls.

“That should do it,” Mum said, then with nimble fingers she tossed the bottle into the water. The tiny glass vial floated along, so dwarfed by the enormity of the sea that Briony wondered if it would fail to be noticed, if it would just drift onward until it washed up on a beach somewhere unread. But then the water surrounding it flashed an electric green, like a lightning storm, and their note was sucked below into the depths. With wonder, Briony watched the bottle sink down and down, until she could no longer see it. What was down there, in the mysterious undersea realm, the place where humans didn’t tread?

* * *

A couple hours later in the village square, Briony and Mum changed out of their grimy aprons that were covered in fish guts. They put on their more presentable black Calderwood Fishmongers aprons, helping each other to tie the strings around their backs. Cheery colourful bunting fluttered in the breeze above their heads. It was a bright September day, the kind where summer and autumn seemed to exist side by side. Before long, chatter and laughter filled the market. With a queue winding way off into the distance, Briony had to work double speed to shuck oysters and wrap fish in brown paper.

Mr. Mayhew arrived, peering into the bucket of giant live lobsters, their claws ready to pinch anyone’s fingers that strayed too close. “Good catch today?”

Briony nodded coolly. “The sea provides.”

“Glad to hear it. Wouldn’t want the waves to dry up on you,” he sneered in a way that told Briony that’s exactly what he wanted to happen. She scowled at him. He was a tall man whose broad shoulders once had been strong but had started to stoop slightly with age. He had come to their village from the mainland ten years earlier, so there wasn’t a time that

Briony could remember without his snide presence.

“I wonder why you even bother with this local market, Ignatius,” Mum said. “What with all your flashy fishing boats cluttering up the harbour and draining the waters of more fish than your fair share.”

“Maybe I just like to see you squirm, Maggie,” he said before sauntering away back to his own stall, which was plastered with garish logo-covered banners and stacked with seafood of dubious freshness.

At the stall next to Briony’s, the owners of the village’s one and only bakery, The Golden Crust, were assembling a tower of donuts that seemed to defy the laws of gravity. The sweet scent wafted across the whole square, making Briony’s stomach grumble. Her best friend, Fletcher, plucked a donut from the top of his parents’ impossibly tall stack and tossed it to her.

“On the house,” he said with a wink.

“Thanks!” Briony bit into the pillowy, perfectly fried dough, devouring the whole thing in three swallows. She licked the delicious remnants of sugar off her lips.

Fletcher was wearing a fedora, his unruly tawny curls sticking out from the rim.

“New hat?” Briony asked.

“Aye. I think it makes people take me more seriously.”

Pinned on his lapel was a red ribbon badge that read Chestnut Bay Junior Deputy Councillor. He would be too embarrassed to admit it, but Briony suspected he had the badge specially made up rather than it being something the council gave him. He hurried off to hand out leaflets as more shoppers filled the village square. When Fletcher was in campaign mode any attempts to talk to him were futile.

“He’s really taking his internship seriously. Poor lad,” Mum said.

Briony could only laugh as she watched Fletcher shake hands with all the villagers and even attempt to kiss a wailing, squirming baby.

* * *

Later that evening, cosy in their pyjamas, Briony and Mum sat at the little table in their boat, counting out the day’s earnings. They lived in an old fishing boat that was no longer seaworthy enough to be out on the ocean. When Briony was born, Mum ripped everything out of it – the engine and

the steering wheel – and turned it into a proper home. And that’s where they had lived all of Briony’s life, moored in the harbour.

With autumn creeping in, and a shrinking local fish population, these market earnings needed to go toward firewood to keep their wood-burning stove ablaze through winter. Mum pointed out that Briony also needed a new jumper. “You grew like a weed this year. Look there, that one’s an inch short on your wrists.” Briony pulled at the jumper’s seams to try and stretch it out.

After portioning out the money for necessities, Mum dropped a few spare coins into their wish jar, which was decorated with homemade cut-out stars. They reckoned that when they couldn’t fit any more coins inside, they would have enough for the next wish.

“It’s your turn. What’s it going to be?” Mum picked up the heavy jar and shook it so that Briony could hear the coins tinkling against the glass.

Briony had spent all summer thinking about her next wish. “There’s an expert forager coming to the island soon, offering a nature expedition. He does talks at universities all over the mainland.”

“Foraging, eh?” Mum furrowed her brows, causing a wrinkle to form between them. “Like collecting twigs and leaves out in the woods and then eating them?”

“No, not twigs! Things like delicious blackberries, rare herbs and mushrooms. All free, if you know where to look. It’s like a kind of magic.”

Magic was always a tricky subject to bring up. Mum had been raised by the famed water witches on the far side of the island, but she rarely spoke of her time with the coven. All Briony knew was that Mum’s powers had never manifested and she’d eventually left, blazing her own path.

“You wouldn’t rather have a day at the Cairnkirk Adventure Park, riding roller coasters until you puke?” Mum asked. “Or a sightseeing trip in a hot air balloon?”

“Nope!”

Mum cocked an eyebrow at her. “If that’s your wish, that’s what you’ll do.”

Mum yawned, her mouth stretching wide like a roaring lion. She picked

up the hair brush. “Right. We’ve put this off long enough. Let me at that tangled mess you call hair.”

Night fell and soon Briony was tucked into the top bunk of their stacked bunk beds. “Can we listen to the shipping news?”

On the radio, a man’s monotone voice was reading out the storm conditions that the giant cargo freighters and smaller fishing vessels would encounter on the North Sea the following day. The reporter’s voice was one of her favourite sounds and usually she couldn’t fall asleep without it on in the background.

The voice on the radio read, “Northam, Carlton, Chestnut Bay, southeast winds at gale force 6, occasionally 7, later 8. Visibility moderate, occasionally very poor. Thundery showers.”

Briony yawned. “Sounds like a big storm’s coming.”

That night she had vivid dreams, featuring foam-topped waves and an angry sea god, his face as pale as the moon. In the morning, Briony woke to find she was alone in the boat.

Chapter Two

The storm had reached Chestnut Bay – rain fell sideways in sheets and the wind whistled around the stone buildings. Big, angry waves crashed beyond the harbour. Dark clouds blotted out much of the sky’s light.

There was a prepared pot of porridge on the stovetop, cool to the touch. Mum’s yellow fishing mac was missing from the hook by the door.

A notepad sat on the table, flipped open to a fresh sheet, with her mum’s scrawled handwriting.

Decided to go out on the boat after all – the bad weather isn’t meant until later so I should have a good few hours. Be back for lunch. Xo – M

Briony sighed, pushing down the worry. Mum fancied herself an invincible maverick, laughing at squalls and rarely missing the chance to venture farther for a premium catch.

Mum’s been a sailor for twenty years. She knows how to take care of herself on the sea.

Besides, there wasn’t anything Briony could do about it; the boat would be far off shore already.

As lunch time approached, Briony put some mushrooms to fry in the pan, their orange trumpets turning a mouth-watering golden brown. Soon, the entire boat smelled of garlic and butter. Mum would come in through the door at any moment, carrying a crate of freshly-caught prawns in her strong arms.

Instead, two huddled figures in raincoats hurried down the harbour path, their hoods up and scarves pulled over half their faces to protect against the lashing wind. Out of habit, Briony fetched the kettle, filled it with water at the sink and started it boiling. She popped three tea bags into mugs.

They knocked on the door of the houseboat and Briony threw it open to find the town's provost, Mr. Bell, and the stalwart constable, Mrs. MacGregor, standing there shivering.

Mr. Bell spoke first. "Sorry to trouble you. May we come in?"

Briony froze, fearing that whatever news they brought was not anything she wanted to hear. The two village officials stepped inside onto the rug, rain dripping off their coats. Both the provost and the constable unwrapped their sodden scarves and hung them on the coat hooks.

Mr. Bell solemnly removed his wool cap and held it awkwardly in his hands. He opened and shut his mouth a couple times, seemingly at a loss for words. While he dithered, Briony began pouring the water into the mugs. Her hands shook. At last he spoke. "It pains me to have to be the bearer of this tragic news. Some wreckage has washed up. It is unmistakably from the Calderwood boat."

Briony's chest constricted like someone had punched her and it was impossible to take in breath. She was still pouring the tea, right up to the top of the mug, until it overflowed the rim and scalded her fingers. She could feel the blood rush out of her head and she thought she might faint. She must have wobbled because Mrs. MacGregor reached out to help steady her and gently prised the kettle out of her hand. Briony couldn't believe that any of it was true. Mum was an expert fisherman. She'd sailed through worse storms than this. She knew all the sea's tricks. She wouldn't have allowed the boat to crash.

"Where's Mum?" she asked.

There was rarely a need for Constable MacGregor to handle matters

of real significance. Petty vegetable theft at the market and missing wheelbarrows were more her speed, so her voice wavered as she said, “We have not, um, recovered a body. The island’s search and rescue volunteers are out trying to find her now.”

“We have to be prepared for the worst,” Mr. Bell added. “With that level of wreckage the odds are high that your mother has perished at sea. I’m so very sorry.”

“You’re a liar!” Briony shouted. Her heart pounded wildly. It took all of her self-control not to lash out at him. Briony wanted to scream so that she wouldn’t have to feel the other swirl of emotions just below it, threatening to bubble up and consume her.

The sharp acrid smell of burnt garlic filled the air and dark smoke was rising from the sizzling pan of mushrooms. She had completely forgotten the cooking.

Before they could stop her, Briony dashed out the door and onto the path. Raindrops pelted her, but she kept running all the way to where the curving stone harbour wall met the turbulent sea. The waves were breaking hard against the wall, soaking her in seawater. She collapsed onto her knees.

Briony knew she was crying, but she felt detached from her body, her soul reaching out toward the choppy waves, out to the grey horizon. She looked for any sign, but of course there was nothing.

Just then, she remembered the tiny dingy tied up nearby. Briony rushed to it and hopped in, getting herself situated and ready to set sail. The sea was so unthinkably vast and she’d never been allowed out on her own before, but none of that mattered now. She had to find Mum.

Before she could untie the rope, a hand gripped her shoulder. She looked up to see Mrs. McGregor, a deep frown dimpling her chin. She shook her head. No.

Briony’s heart shattered as her mind latched onto the words she did not want to accept.

Mum is gone.

BRIONY CALDERWOOD AND THE WATER WITCHES

by Sarah Fulton

PITCH:

Briony loves fishing the seas until her mother is lost in a shipwreck. Joining forces with a coven of water witches, Briony must outsmart the sea god, Havelock. Is there time to save Mum?

SYNOPSIS:

Descended from a longline of water witches, all **BRIONY CALDERWOOD** wants is to run the family fishmongers with **MUM** in the remote island village of Chestnut Bay. However, their peaceful life is threatened by **MR. MAYHEW**, a rival fisherman who is polluting the harbour and overfishing the local waters. When Mum's boat is shipwrecked in a storm, the villagers assume she is lost and blame **HAVELOCK**, the sea god, for the tragedy.

Briony meets **ROWAN**, who takes her to live with a coven of witches in a ruined fortress on a windswept cliff. Briony struggles to find her place within the coven, but with Rowan's help she learns to embrace her identity as a water witch. She attends a ghost sailors' ball, learns to wield a divining rod and is initiated into the coven, gaining the protection of the sisterhood.

Briony discovers that Mr. Mayhew has stolen Havelock's conch, giving him control over the sea god's actions. Despite being under Mayhew's command, Havelock couldn't bring himself to harm Briony's mother, who is alive in the underwater kingdom. Time is running out to save her.

When Mayhew orders Havelock to destroy Briony, her coven rallies behind her. An epic showdown takes place in the village during a storm of the century. Briony seizes the conch and returns it to Havelock. The sea god dashes Mayhew's fleet of boats on the rocks. Peace is restored to Chestnut Bay, and Briony is joyfully reunited with Mum.

BIOGRAPHY:

Originally from California, Sarah moved to the UK to pursue her master's degree in creative writing from the University of Edinburgh. She continues

to live in the city, where she works as a wedding photographer. Her previous writing was longlisted for Undiscovered Voices 2020 and Mslexia Children's Novel Competition.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'Evocative writing. The opening is beautifully done.'

Contact: sarahdkfulton@gmail.com

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

LEGAL WALLS

By Jo Howard

Chapter 1

Prince Diego of Levenshulme

I'm at Cornbrook by the canal, watching Dad sketch out a piece. His arm swoops and glides. Wildstyle. Effortless. A guy totters towards us. I turn to block his view, as if my skinny body could block anything wider than a lamppost, but no, he's determined to engage.

"That is sick, man!"

"Thanks, mate!" Dad puts down his spray can and grins. The guy looks shady; daytime drinker, missing tooth.

"Better than a' art gallery along here!" He waves his tin of Foster's at the graffiti-covered walls. He's not wrong. Bare pieces all along the towpath. All the colours, all the styles. Dad says it's the biggest public artwork in Manchester, although technically this is Salford. The guy meanders towards the canal, bounces off the railings and wanders off, muttering. Dad nudges me and giggles.

"Why you always so nice to randoms?" I say.

"You have to talk to people, be confident. Otherwise they think you're committing a crime."

I can feel Dad's eyes on me as I spray the neon letters of his piece. He lets me fill in, like training. Dad's a king. A graffiti master. Back in the day he was the best in Manchester, painting train cars with his crew. Sick styles. Proper illegal stuff. Got arrested and everything. Now he just paints legal walls, or so he tells Mami.

"Heeeey, it's Prince Diego of Levenshulme!" Dad's mate Matty comes up behind and makes me jump. I hate it when he calls me that.

"Matty, you fool! You've made him go out the lines!" says Dad. It's true, I've sprayed over the edge of a letter. I focus on painting as they clap each other on the back.

“You have to learn to zone out, D,” says Dad. “Can’t be jumpy. There’s always gonna be distractions. Only thing that matters is if your watcher sees the fed, right Matty?”

“Aw man, remember that time up that industrial estate in Stockport?”

I know this story. They got chased by a cop and had to jump a 20ft drop off a roof. Dad broke his ankle but didn’t even realise till the next day when it swelled up like a balloon. Classic.

“Not like these days, eh Sean?” Matty concludes, “Look at D here, all nice legal stuff. Bet you’ve never even been bombing!”

Bombing – spraying your tag in as many places as you can, marking your territory. Definitely not legal. No, I haven’t been bombing, haven’t got a crew. I did a wall at this skate park in town last year. At the time I thought it was sick. Now I look at it and it looks trash. Already covered in tags, which means shade from other writers.

What Matty’s saying is, I’m a toy, never done a piece that’s not legal. That’s how you get respect. The biggest deal is doing wholecar like the OGs in New York. Legends like Dondi, Skeme and Lady Pink. They would sneak in the train yards at night and paint subway cars, then watch them roll the next day, taking their art all over the city. Imagine the buzz!

“Nuria would kill me!” says Dad. Nuria is Mami. She’s threatened Dad won’t get to see me if I get caught doing illegal stuff. I couldn’t deal with that. I love spending time with Dad. I just wish Matty didn’t always have to come along.

* * *

We get the Metrolink back to Piccadilly and Dad waits with me on platform 13 till my train comes. I stare out across the city. The sky is white; a blank canvas, although it’s June and we deserve a bit of blue. “EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED” says the light-up sign on the grimy old building opposite. It’s not lit up now.

“Fancy staying a bit longer next time? We could meet Daisy, go for a Chinese.”

“Yeah, calm, Dad.”

The train comes and he hugs me too hard, squishing my face into his

collarbone. I can smell tangy armpits, peach tea vape, Daisy's eco washing liquid. It feels wrong that he doesn't smell like home.

Coming back from writing with Dad, my head is always full of colour; like a graffiti montage in my brain. In the train, I close my eyes and vibe off the shades and shapes. Sometimes I feel like they could morph into a vision, a piece I could create that would be next level. But before I know it, I'm back in Levenshulme, dodging dog muck and kicking laughing gas canisters along the gutter.

As I open the front door, Mami stomps down the stairs, shaking her mobile like she wants to throttle it.

"¡Yo flipo!" she hisses. So yeah, Mami is Spanish and since Dad left, that's what we speak at home, but don't worry I can translate. "¡Yo flipo!" is like, "I'm freaking out!" It can in a good way, but this time it's definitely bad.

"That Pilkington has got a nerve!" she rants, "The guy won't read emails; has me printing everything out like it's 1986, but on a Saturday night he emails me stuff to do for Monday!"

"Don't worry," I say, and then I have to repeat myself because my voice keeps cracking; see-sawing between a deep growl that makes me sound like I'm possessed by a demon and a high-pitched squeak like a toddler on helium. "Don't worry, Mami. You're gonna boss your interview. Then you can walk out and be like, 'In your face Pilkington!'"

"I wish!" she says, "You really think I'm gonna get the job?"

"Course you are!"

Mami's boss, Nigel Pilkington of Pilkington and Spinks solicitors, is so toxic that when he dies, they'll probably have to encase him in concrete and chuck him in the sea. It's not just the printing emails thing. She's the legal secretary, he's the lawyer, but he makes her do all his work and then blames her if stuff goes wrong. Plus, he never pays on time. She's so desperate to leave she's been sending her CV to every firm in town, but so far, she's only got this one interview.

"Diego," she says, "I took my lucky suit to the dry cleaners. Can you pick it up after school on Monday? I need it for my interview on Tuesday morning."

She gives me £12.99. Actual £12.99 in cash with pennies and

everything. That's gonna be fun, carrying that round all day. I put it in my school backpack.

"Sure, Mami," I say, "I won't forget!"

Chapter 2

"Oy, Spanish!"

I leg it across the road. Chid's waiting for me on the corner with his backpack on his head, trying to keep the rain off. It's not working. He looks soaked. Did I mention it's June?

"Hurry up bro, I've been stood here for like TEN HOURS!"

Chidozie Nwachukwu, my best mate and the world's greatest exaggerator.

"It's not my fault you're always early!" I say, "Anyway, I brought tortilla!"

Spanish omelette that is, the real deal – none of this chunks of potato in a bit of egg finished off under the grill – Mami's tortilla is about seventy percent olive oil and twenty percent salt and it tastes amazing. I hand him a foil-wrapped parcel and we set off towards school, Chid inhaling the tortilla, and moaning in a way that sounds well sus. Some Year Tens walking past hoot with laughter.

"So, did you do graffiti with your dad?"

"Yeah, wanna see?" We duck into a bus stop while I scroll through my photos. I have to share them face to face because Dad's made me swear not to put them online. He's paranoid about the cops.

"Check it, man! That is SICK!" Chid's eyes have lit up.

I gaze at the tiny screen and I can't help grinning: a massive wildstyle masterpiece in red and orange with black shading. If you know Dad's tag, you can just about make out the letters, accented by his signature blue and white icicles: FR33ZE.

"Which bits did you do?"

"Just the fill-ins and he let me do a bit of the white outlining."

Chid strides on towards school, "Sooner or later you're gonna have to do your own piece."

"Sez you!" I stamp in a puddle to splash him.

He barges me with his shoulder so my foot goes deep into the next puddle.

“What the hell?” I howl, as muddy water squidges out with each step. “Anyway, I mean it. You’re the one who’s top of art. You would boss graffiti.”

“Nah,” he says, “Not my thing.”

* * *

First lesson on a Monday is DT and this term it’s woodwork. We’re making nesting boxes. I am psyched for the lucky birds that get to stay in my kickass birdie hotel! Should be the dream start to the week, but no, I have to be in the same class as Mason Brewer. Sadist. Built like a fridge. So far this lesson, Mason and Kyle Fenton have been taking it in turns to put their hands on a piece of wood and knock nails in around each other’s fingers. If you move your hand, you’re a pussy. Mr Wolfson just confiscated the hammer and now they’re bored.

“Hola, soy Diego!” Mason puts on a squeaky cartoon voice. The Dora the Explorer routine. Classic. I ignore him and focus on measuring the roof of my bird box.

“Oy Spanish, I’m talking to you!” He throws some offcuts of wood. One bounces off my forehead.

“Leave it, Mason!” I say and my voice chooses this moment to do squeak-growl, making me sound like a total freak. Mason sniggers.

“Nice scrunchie! Did Mummy take you to Claire’s?”

“It’s not a scrunchie, it’s my spiral hair tie!” says Saniya.

Of course, I had to forget to bring a bobble the day I’ve got woodwork. Apparently, my long hair is a hazard and must be tied back at all times. Hence the spiral hair tie. Purple. Leopard print.

“Aw that’s cute, your girlfriend lending you her hair tie!” Mason coos.

“They must be lesbians!” grins Kyle. Mason cracks up laughing.

You can see their logic: I must be a girl because I’ve got long hair and we share accessories so we must be dating. Genius!

“Well, are you?” Mason does gross finger gestures in Saniya’s face.

“Stop it, Mason!” she says.

“Stop it, Mason!” he repeats in a whiny voice that sounds nothing like Saniya.

My stomach clenches. I should say something to defend her. She’s the

only nice person in my Technology class and I've known her since primary school. Where is Wolfman Wolfson? Always interfering when you're doing fine, but when you actually need him, he's AWOL.

"Why don't you kiss your girlfriend, Diego?" Mason grabs our ponytails and starts pushing our heads together.

"Leave us alone, Mason!" I try to wriggle out of his grasp, "Why do you have to be such a prick?"

Mason lets go of Saniya's hair and yanks my ponytail right back, "What did you say?"

This is the moment when I should back out and say I was joking, but he's got me riled. "I said, you're a prick!"

"Naaah!" says Kyle, "You gonna take that, Mason?"

Mason puts both hands round my neck and starts squeezing. I try to pull them away but he's too strong. My breath won't come. Eyes bulge. Face is burning.

"Stop it! You're gonna strangle him!" Saniya screams. I can hear other kids shrieking and jeering.

"Mason! Stop that now!" the Wolfman finally shows up. Mason drops me and I fall backwards off my stool and scramble to my feet, gasping.

"Are you OK?" the Wolfman asks.

I nod. I can't even talk. I open my mouth and a strangulated squeak comes out. This is worse than when I have an asthma attack.

"I'm calling recovery for you, Mason Brewer. Everyone else back to your places!"

I slide back into my stool. I'm shaking. I might puke.

"You alright, D?" Saniya whispers.

I take a deep breath. The moment when someone is nice to you is the moment when you can lose it and start crying. I won't give Mason the satisfaction. I look Saniya in the eye, "I'm fine."

Mason's not even bothered when he gets carted off to recovery, "Watch at lunchtime, yeah?" he hisses as Mr Crayfield, head of Year 9, leads him out.

* * *

Lunchtime. Lunchtime is fine. To avoid Mason, I go to the toilet as soon

as the bell rings, so I end up at the back of the dinner queue. Mason always pushes in. He will have troughed his food and headed outside way before I get served. The canteen smells of cabbage farts and burnt cheese. It makes me feel sick, but I force down the cheese whirl and beans. Chid is at football practice. There are a couple of other guys I hang out with, but they must've been ahead of me in the queue. I perch on the end of a table of Year 8 girls. They keep squawking with laughter but it's OK. It's not about me.

* * *

Last lesson is English. We're reading 'Lord of the Flies'. It's about these boys stranded on a desert island. They could be having a time but instead they act like a bunch of idiots, fat-shaming Piggy and breaking his glasses, when it's the only way they have to make a fire. Stupid. My mind wanders. I've got this epic idea for my tag. DFM. My initials. I keep sketching it, but it won't come out right.

"Diego! Diego Freeman Munnozzzzzz!" Ms Mitchell buzzes like a little Manc bee.

Muñoz is meant to sound like Moon-YOTH, but the only teacher who gets that right is Ms Alvarez and she's actually Spanish.

"What's this?" Ms Mitchell snatches my English book and holds it up to the class.

"Sorry, Miss."

"Sorry? It's a bit late for sorry when you've already defaced your book, Diego! You're supposed to be making notes about the boys' leadership qualities, not doodling . . . what is this?"

"It's his tag, Miss." says Chid, helpfully.

"Thank you Chidozie," she shoots him an icy glare. "Diego, you do realise you've got assessments coming up? I'm going to be deciding your groups for Year 10. Do you want to end up in Nightingale?"

"No, Miss."

Our head teacher, Mr Mistry, is an obsessive bird-watcher so all our groups are named after birds. Everyone knows Nightingale is the bottom set. I can't get moved down. Mami would kill me! But there's another

reason I can't end up in Nightingale. Mason Brewer. Imagine being stuck with him for English. That's five lessons a week! One hour in DT is bad enough.

"This means instant detention, I'm afraid, Diego!"

"Oh no, Miss, I have to pick something up for my . . ."

"You should have thought of that before you ruined your book!"

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

LEGAL WALLS

by Jo Howard

PITCH:

14-year-old graffiti writer Diego must step out of Dad's shadow, defeating school bullies and Mami's bent boss to become a legend in his own right. A voicy, fast-paced urban novel with a sprinkling of magic.

SYNOPSIS:

Diego's Dad is a king, a graffiti legend raised on the tough streets of Hulme, Manchester, in the 1990s. Diego's life with his Spanish Mami is much more sheltered, and as a young graffiti writer, he struggles to step out of his dad's shadow.

When Diego spends Mami's last pennies on a spray can, he discovers that the can has special powers and will spray any document you need straight onto the paper. D and his best friend Chidozie start a business forging other kids' homework for money.

For a while everything is great, they are raking it in and becoming more popular at school.

But Diego's new friendship with graffiti-obsessed, non-binary Ro, threatens the bond between Diego and Chid.

Then the spray can runs out at the worst possible moment. Chid needs help with immigration papers, while Diego must complete a science project for school bully, Mason Brewer, or have his head mashed against the sander in woodwork.

To make matters worse, Mami's bent solicitor boss owes her two months' wages and she is convinced he's involved in money laundering for a criminal gang. Diego must use the power of graffiti and summon every ounce of his creativity to solve his problems and defeat Mami's boss, the gangsters and the school bullies and come out on top!

BIOGRAPHY:

This book is a love letter to the grimy area of Manchester where Jo lives. Her husband is Spanish, they have three children and like Diego's, their

family is bilingual. Jo's goddaughters are Nigerian and face the same battles as Chidozie to gain British citizenship.

She's interviewed several graffiti writers to make Diego's language and challenges realistic. Two graffiti writers have done authenticity reads for her. She's had an authenticity read from a Spanish friend.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'Brisk writing and a distinctive setting pull the reader in. A great concept.'

Contact: joannuski@gmail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

WAZEERAH AMEERAH & THE STOLEN ASTROLABE

By Eiman Munro

Chapter ONE: The missing Box

Wazeerah tip-toed a peek at the top shelf of Baba's office bureau. It looked ordinary enough. The usual books lined up; The Book of Ingenious Devices, The Book of Animals, The Book of Misers and the Book on the Art of Keeping Quiet – her favourite. However, one book was missing – The Book of Stars.

The Book of Stars wasn't a real book. It was a pretend book made to look like a real book with leather covered wood that was hollowed out to create a secret space for a secret Key. The Key was always kept locked between its hard covers. The thought of locking a key with a key was an amusing thing to Wazeerah.

And the key to the pretend book was always kept with Baba even in his sleep. If the pretend Book of Stars was gone then Baba was gone too. And there was only one place he would be: The Museum of History.

Without her.

Wazeerah stood a moment. Her mind at first went blank. Then noise erupted in her head and like chaotic scribbled questions whizzed about causing her to frown and feel hot.

Questions like . . .

Why did he leave without her? What happened to make him leave without her? . . . When did he leave without her?

Her palms moistened. Her heart thuds boomed hard and fast. It hurt.

She clenched her fists and closed her eyes . . . 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1.

Breathe.

New information took time to process and Baba leaving without her was new information. He had promised that they would go together

to the Museum. It was on her day's timetable. Scheduled at 09:30am after breakfast. It was going to be her first day back in the museum after so long.

Wait a minute or 28 minutes!

The living room clock with the gold-plated hands ticked at 9:02am. The trip with Baba wasn't scheduled until 9:30am.

He'll be back.

After a moment of slight relief, she jumped off the foot stool and stalked passed her empty breakfast tray and the kitchen door. Mama was nattering inside.

'... last night apparently,' Mama said cradling the phone between her ear and raised shoulder as she riffled through pieces of official looking papers with both hands. She hadn't noticed Wazeerah walk past the door. 'Yes, they're investigating right now. He left this morning as soon as Abu Salman alerted him of the news.'

So, Uncle Abu Salman, Baba's brother, had gone with Baba too.

They normally met at the Museum due to Uncle Abu Salman living across the Tigris River in the Old City. He would drive over Al Ahrar Bridge to get to the museum. Baba's journey was much more direct – through Nasir Street which led to the corner of Cairo Street and that's where the Museum of History was located.

Both brothers were one of the many Guardians of the Museum of History. This meant they each had an artefact that they were entrusted to look after.

Listening to the tone on Mama's voice left Wazeerah doubting her conclusion that Baba would be back by 09:30.

She climbed up to her room where Fez was eating his breakfast beside her bed. Fez was an adopted fennec fox, Wazeerah had found last year as a kit. She always wanted a dog but that was not allowed – there were no religious rules on foxes though.

Wazeerah stroked Fez's coarse head of hair briefly and walked to her desk. Her daily schedule was mounted clearly on the wall. To be sure, Wazeerah picked it up and went through the first half of the morning schedule.

08:00 Wake up.

08:15 Wash and dress

08:30 Eat breakfast.

09:30 Museum of History with Baba

I must get ready for when Baba comes back to pick me up.

She dashed about the room picking up her satchel and placing a pencil, a pen, a sharpener, a black crayon, 5 sheets of paper, 10 plain white cards, a leash, a pair of sunglasses, ear defenders and a set of outdoor visuals. Phew!

The visual cards had drawings of some of the antiques displayed in the Museum of History. Wazeerah was a proud artist. There were other useful pictures too, a toilet, a glass of water and various mood faces. All drawn by herself. She smiled.

Once everything was packed, she sat back on her bed and waited.

At 09:15 she put her shoes on.

At 09:20 Fez needed to go to the toilet.

At 09:25 she sat back on her bed with Fez on her lap.

At 9:30 she stood up and realised Baba wasn't coming.

And she knew what to do next. She would go to the museum with Fez herself.

Chapter TWO: A Stranger Encounter

Fez bounced about the room and around Wazeerah like an orbiting satellite.

As soon as she got hold of him, she clasped a leash around his collar.

There.

At least she wouldn't lose him when they were out.

She closed her bedroom door and opened the shutters to her window. There was a slope from the window to their courtyard and a small jump to the ground. Once they were on the ground it was a simple step across the lawn and through the main gate. The metal gate creaked so she slowly opened it wide enough to step through. She didn't dare close it again in case the noise made Mama notice.

She began the dusty walk to Cairo Street. The smell of fresh fish was strong this morning. Even from where they were, a few streets away from the river, she could smell and hear the hubbub of the market traders.

Street cars criss-crossed about, their engines roaring, pedestrians chattering, the sun glaring – Wazeerah forgot what it was like to walk outside. Her heart pounded and head swirled with information of all the shapes and sounds and movements. She stopped and pulled out her sunglasses and her ear defenders. She put them on. It helped.

Fez took the opportunity to whoosh ahead of her. Closing her satchel and hooking it across her shoulder she dashed after him.

He sniffed about slowing his pace enough for Wazeerah to grab hold of his trailing leash and pick him up this time. Fez stayed in her arms and didn't wiggle too much for the rest of the way. His fluffy tail got under her nostrils a couple of times. She itched it and tucked his tail gently underneath him. He made a sound that said he was none too impressed.

She stroked his coarse fur assuring him. *Nearly there.*

A few more yards and they were standing at the corner of Cairo Street looking across the road to the main entrance of the Museum of History.

Wazeerah frowned and a lump in her throat grew hard. There was a hole above the entrance. A large hole like it had been drilled with a canon. Her skin froze as an armoured tank came in sight. Standing still she bent down a little lower. The tank was stationed there guarding the entrance.

What has happened?

A slight movement caught Wazeerah's eye behind the tank. A person was approaching. Not from the main street but from the gates enclosing the museum. An elderly lady was looking directly at Wazeerah and walking towards her. She wore a long thick quilt over her shoulders. Something that would be considered too hot for the weather at this time of year. The soldier sitting atop the tank paid no attention to this old lady that was in clear sight.

Wazeerah didn't move and stayed behind the corner of the street peeking behind the building at the old woman. Maybe she wasn't looking at her but elsewhere. Breathing hard now, Wazeerah glanced over her

shoulders to see if she could dart back the way she came.

The old lady was close now. Fez kept still looking over her fingers. His soft warm tummy rhythmically breathing in her palms. And then his ears twitched. Wazeerah looked back on to the street. No sight of the old lady! The guard now off the tank and leaning against it. Wazeerah's brow furrowed intensely. Had she imagined an elderly woman walking directly towards her? A mirage?

A soft wind blew her headscarf across her cheek. Fez turned his head around. His bowl-sized eyes widened more than usual. Wazeerah caught her breath as she followed his gaze.

A hand grabbed Wazeerah's right arm turning her fully around. There she was, the old lady staring straight at her.

Wazeerah froze. Her eyes locked with the woman's. A constellation of lines framed those eyes and streaked all over her face that you could hardly make out where her mouth was.

'The flying carpet will save your father,' The old woman whispered. The warmth of her breath caressed Wazeerah's cheek. The smell of cardamom lingered. Finally, she released Wazeerah's arm and backed away into a dark alley fading into it. Gone.

Wazeerah let out the air from her lungs and sunk to the ground. Her hands rested on her lap and Fez sat on her crumpled skirt. He was uncertain what to do and didn't scramble about either. He placed a paw on her arm.

Chapter THREE: Into The Museum Chambers

Did I imagine that?

It took a few minutes for Wazeerah to recover from the encounter with the old woman. What did she mean by a flying carpet saving Baba? Her heart thumped hard. 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1.

Fez jumped off her skirt as she stood back up, brushing the street dust off her skirt. *Baba!* Something must have happened to him. A sudden pang of pain hit her in the stomach, and she felt sick. Thoughts crossed her mind about Baba and if he was safe. She scooped Fez up and looked around the entrance to the museum.

We must find Baba.

Fez, in her arms, turned to her and she thought that he knew what she was thinking. Was that a nod? Although Wazeerah knew it was impossible for him to hear her thoughts, she did think they had a connection.

Turning back to the Museum entrance, the guard had now come off the tank and sat with his back against it. He looked like he had dozed off, but Wazeerah knew better than to think that. These soldiers were invaders, and they were always alert despite this one looking relaxed with sunglasses covering his eyes.

As soon as Wazeerah was certain he was facing away from them she darted towards the arched entrance of the Museum pausing only at the palm tree at the front of the gate to hide herself for a moment. Holding Fez tightly now and thinking of nothing else but to keep quiet and get inside the museum to find Baba.

Two winged-bull statues with human heads flanked the entrance to the Museum of History. They were one of the first drawings she drew when she first visited the Museum when she was five. Lamassus, they were called, made to guard against evil from entering through their gates a long, long time ago. Their protective effects must have faded through the passage of time.

Placing Fez down, the two stalked between the ten-foot-high beasts. There was a slight crack at the base. Wazeerah frowned. How awful to see a historic structure damaged. Something Baba would have to put right immediately. As soon as she found him.

The crack on the base was soon forgotten as Wazeerah marched inside. She gasped, even Fez stopped moving. The devastation around the main foyer was awful. Broken casings, shattered glass covering areas of floor tiles. Many of the artifacts had been handled and moved about. Handled! With hands!

More than that, some were even stolen. The skeleton that once laid with decorations adorning it with ancient jewellery, had now been emptied and left with its bones in disarray. Its limbs were bent at awkward angles. It made Wazeerah's insides squirm too.

The vases that were just found in the Southern Sites were missing or shattered. Wazeerah took care not to step on any terracotta chips of clay.

She stopped and opened her satchel taking her outdoor visuals. They

included her collection of illustrated items she'd been working on every day visiting the Museum of History. Today was the day Baba and Wazeerah were supposed to open a new exhibition and she had been ready to draw some of them. She browsed through each of her illustrations. The first one she held up was a drawing of the Lady of Warka, it was a mask that used to be encased as a centre piece in the main Foyer. It showed off the Mask of Warka, as it was officially called. But now the casing was shattered, and the mask was gone. All that was left from that display was an upturned wooden plinth the mask used to rest upon.

The next illustration was the bust of Poseidon – the god of the sea. She ran to the room of Greek history. There on the floor was the bust of Poseidon. Broken but it was there. Maybe they could restore it.

She continued flicking through each card and checking to see what had remained and what had been stolen. One by one, room by room, tear after tear. Many of the items had been destroyed and some had gone. Wazeerah stopped at the hallway where the staircase to the chambers were.

Voices distracted her and she stopped. *Baba!*

She ran down the steps to the storage chambers, Fez clipping down at her heels. The wooden door that locked the more valuable treasures, was already smashed open. The splintered hole was made large enough for a grown adult to climb through. A single light bulb illumined the darkness. Inside Baba and Uncle Abu Salman were tearing through boxes.

'They've taken it.' Baba's voice dripped with sorrow.

Wazeerah ran to him and squeezed him tightly.

'Wazeerah! Habeebty, what are you doing, you're not supposed to be here.' He hugged her back despite his surprise.

She pulled out the Museum of History picture.

'I know we planned to come here but I should have told you to stay home. I'm sorry.' He gave her shoulders a squeeze. But she couldn't help but sense his own sorrow no matter how hard he tried to cheer her up.

Uncle Abu Salman stood behind Baba. He didn't seem too bothered with her presence as much as he was about rummaging around one box after another tossing them off the shelves if they were empty. His face was red and his words were urgent. 'It's got to be here. It's the oldest in the world.'

Wazeerah took out another card. This one had an astrolabe on it. The artifact that Baba was Guardian over. Baba nodded.

‘Yes, we are looking for this.’

Footsteps approached from above. Baba put a finger over his mouth.

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

WAZEERAH AMEERAH & THE STOLEN ASTROLABE

by Eiman Munro

PITCH:

Wazeerah and Fez must save Baba from Time Snatchers. They portal into Baghdad 1258 A.D and must recover the stolen astrolabe before they, too, will be erased from all of history.

SYNOPSIS:

Ten-year-old Wazeerah is an autistic Iraqi living in Baghdad with her family and her fennec fox, Fez. Baba is one of the Guardians of the Museum of History. He is arrested when the astrolabe is stolen.

Wazeerah searches the museum with Fez and ends up in a room filled with tapestries. Suddenly, she is transported into the past: Baghdad, 1258 A.D. She meets ABU KANTOOR, who teases her with riddles and gives her a clue to get back home.

Through a labyrinth of pathways, she meets the Banu Musa brothers, Ibn Haytham, and Al-Jahiz. Each gives her a piece of an astrolabe when she solves their riddles.

But with all the pieces she still needs to put them together. A wrong turn takes her into a dark ravine. Wazeerah manages to escape into a workshop belonging to Mariam Al-Ijliyah – the Astrolabe engineer. Mariam fixes the astrolabe parts into a whole new one for Wazeerah.

The room darkens as Time Snatchers catch up and swallow everything around them. Wazeerah finds another tapestry but Abu Kantoor snatches the restored astrolabe from Wazeerah's hands and throws it into the shadows.

Wazeerah spots a chain around Abu Kantoor's neck; The original astrolabe dangles from it. She yanks it and runs through the tapestry portal, landing herself back in her own time. Climbing down the steps, she hands the astrolabe to the Director of the museum, who smiles and tells her they will save Baghdad "one artefact at a time."

BIOGRAPHY:

As an autistic British-Iraqi migrant, Eiman enjoys creating middle

eastern characters with authentic autistic presentations. Her background is teaching with specialism in serving autistic students aged 8 to 25. She is actively involved as a co-facilitator with the National Autism Trainer Programme and presents workshops for NHS professionals. She has also contributed a chapter to 'Learning from Autistic Teachers' which came out in 2022 published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'Energetic and self-assured writing.'

Contact: eiman.munro@gmail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE TRAITOR'S MOON

By Henry Coles

1. The Loophole

Haskell's father was in the Receiving Room, talking about him with a man who should not be there.

The Receiving Room was gold. Fine art and ancient tapestries. A loud declaration of wealth to intimidate a visitor, or make them feel at home. For a man like the one Haskell had seen welcomed in—low and insignificant, dressed in dusty travelling clothes—there was the back entrance and the servant's floor.

Haskell paced the carpet outside, imagining how the discussion could concern him. Why had he been summoned?

Long-dead ancestors glared down from portraits of flaking paint. Not Haskell's ancestors. Not Smythes. The largest, brightest and newest of the pictures were of his own father and grandfather, but the rest belonged to someone else. A procession of dead strangers that culminated in the down-on-his-luck Duke who had sold them to Haskell's father, along with the house and grounds.

The door opened and Valence, Haskell's second eldest brother, peered out, dressed in his captain's uniform.

"You can come in now," he said.

Haskell stepped through the doorway. The visitor had gone, spirited away through one of the side entrances.

Haskell's father was sitting in the Grand Chair, a construction of wood and gilt he had brought back from India on one of their ships. A throne in all but name, from which he liked to greet his visitors. He ignored Haskell, busy with a document. Mr Slinger, the head of the family's lawyers, was sitting to his left. He nodded to Haskell and smiled.

Valence perched himself on the edge of a high side table. Haskell's eldest brother, Jarle, emerged from the shadows at the back of the room

and stood to his father's right. He regarded Haskell with a frown.

Everybody waited.

Haskell's father turned a page, then glanced up at Haskell.

"Tell me," he said. "What happened to the Dart last year?"

Not long ago, such an unexpected question might have thrown Haskell into confusion and stuttering, but for the last six months his latest tutor had thrown questions at him in English, Latin and Greek, striking with a cane if he showed any sign of hesitation.

"Nothing, sir. She arrived safely into Bristol."

"She did. And what price did we get for her cargo?"

"I don't remember, sir."

"It was poor. Lord Cantwell's Albion sailed the same route. She departed later, but arrived days ahead of the Dart and sold her cargo at twice the price. How do you think she beat the Dart to the prize?"

Haskell swallowed. His father never asked him impossible questions like this. How was he supposed to answer?

"Perhaps the Albion's captain is especially—"

"The captain of the Albion is an inbred idiot," his father snapped. "The Dart was crewed by our best. What about the Doddington the year before?"

"The Doddington was wrecked off Bird Island, sir."

"She was. Wrecked in calm waters. Lord Cantwell's Antelope came into the Lyver Pool carrying sugar and tobacco two weeks later, and made a handsome profit. Why do you think Lord Cantwell has such luck while our own runs poor?"

Another impossible question.

"I don't know, sir."

"Because it is not luck. Which brings us to the order of business. It is time we talked about your future, Haskell."

"I don't understand. What does my future have to do with the Doddington and the Dart?"

His father rose from his chair and poured himself a drink, waving away the servant who rushed to help.

"You are fourteen now, Haskell."

"Twelve, sir."

“What?”

“I am twelve, sir.”

Haskell’s father held him with a stare. For a moment Haskell thought he had triggered one of his father’s rages, but the dark look passed.

“Twelve then. It is time to think about what you will do for the family. You must have a purpose. You cannot continue to play with your books and ride on the work of others.”

Haskell pressed his teeth together firmly to ensure he would not speak.

“Have you thought about how you might become useful?”

Haskell hesitated, unsure if he was really meant to answer. “I thought perhaps I could captain a ship, like Valance.”

Valance and his father exchanged a glance, and Jarle laughed.

“We have spoken about this before,” his father said. “You do not have the qualities of a seaman, let alone a ship’s captain.”

“Or I—”

“And you are quite unsuited to a position at the helm of the business, like Jarle. These things are out of the question and will not be discussed further.”

Haskell pressed his teeth together again, harder this time.

“Your tutors say you have shown an aptitude for numbers. We had thought you could help with the accounts—”

Haskell shuddered. This had also been discussed before, and he had endured dull afternoons while the books and accounting were explained to him.

“—but another possibility has arisen.”

Haskell recognised the set of his father’s face. Whatever this was, it was not a possibility. A new certainty was about to enter his life.

“Cantwell does not have better luck than us. The game is rigged in his favour, and that of the other titled families.”

This was a favourite topic of his father’s, and Haskell knew his lines.

“A title gives the right to birth debts,” he recited, “and indentured labour is all but free.”

“Quite right, son”—his father nodded approvingly—“but workers trapped by birth debts are not the only way in which those with titles are kept ahead of us. With a title also comes the right to consult a wizard.”

Haskell shifted uneasily. Wizards were seldom spoken of. There was

something unsavoury about them. Something that made them dangerous to discuss.

His father nodded to Mr Slinger, who cleared his throat with a dry rasping sound before he spoke.

“A man can gain great advantage by commissioning an act of magic,” he said. “But there are restrictions. There is a large—and detailed—body of law. They might ask for a fair wind to be put in a ship’s sails, as Cantwell did for the Albion, but may not sink a rival’s vessel. The Doddington was a crime—”

“But we cannot prove it.” His father’s lips twisted into a snarl. “So I have decided that we shall beat Cantwell at his own game.”

“But how?” Haskell asked.

“There is a loophole,” Mr Slinger said, his face lighting with satisfaction. “If a wizard were to perform an act of magic without money changing hands, because his interests were aligned with our own, it would be within the letter of the law. Cantwell might challenge it, but the Supreme Court has become bold of late. It decided against the king himself last year. I am confident it would find in our favour.”

Haskell’s father finished his drink and held out the glass for a servant to take.

“You have been a disappointment to me, Haskell, but now is your chance to prove your value. I have agreed a price for your apprenticeship.”

“Apprenticeship? I don’t understand.”

Haskell’s father placed a hand on each of Haskell’s shoulders and smiled at him for the first time.

“You are to be apprenticed to a wizard,” he said.

2. The Traitor

Water flowed out of the millrace, fast and angry, foaming against the paddles as it turned the wheel.

Agatha spat and threw another stone, the ghosts of her missing fingers complaining as her hand whipped through the air. The stone fell short, disappearing into the spray.

“You girl, don’t you have work to do?”

The shouting man was Joseph Hawtin. He knew Agatha's name well enough, and had no business calling her 'girl'.

She was about to yell as much back, but saw the man standing behind him: the bookkeeper. He wouldn't know Agatha from any other child in the village, but he'd find her name in his book soon enough, if someone were to shout it out in front of him.

She said a silent thank you to Joseph for the warning, slipped from her seat on the wall, and quickly made herself be elsewhere.

There was work she should be doing. Right now, as far as his Lordship was concerned, she should be combing wool. It was a family tragedy that Agatha had been sent to the combing shed, which paid half as much as the mill, but she liked it there. The mill had been deafening, full of choking dust and danger. The combing shed was quiet and calm, and the overseer liked to 'steal a little back from his Lordship' when he was confident no one would get caught, or in a dark enough mood not to care. Today he'd let it be known that he might not notice if she went missing for the afternoon. Normally that would be unthinkable, but it was the Traitor's Fayre tomorrow, and everywhere rules were starting to relax.

The carnival folk had arrived already. Tomorrow there would be plenty to see: acrobats and jugglers, traders' stalls and games of chance. The Recruiting Sergeant had arrived early too, and was now marching a squad of soldiers back and forth across the village green, medals jangling. Agatha's brothers had strict instructions to go nowhere near him.

His Lordship's men had erected a tent at the edge of the green. Tomorrow Agatha would have to visit it. Everyone in the village would. The bookkeeper would be waiting inside. He'd read out what you had owed at the start of the year, what you had paid, and what your debt to his Lordship now was. Sometimes the number went down. Sometimes it went up. If it went up, you could argue, but for that you'd spend a night in the cells, and that would have a charge. You'd see it listed in the book next year, along with interest and other fees that the bookkeeper would perhaps explain. Or perhaps would not.

It was best to stay quiet and make your mark on the line the man pointed to and hope not to see him again for another year. Life could be hard if you got on the wrong side of the bookkeeper.

* * *

Agatha perched on the wall by the village green and watched as the innkeeper, Mr Swales, dragged the Traitor from the cart he'd arrived on.

Last year the Traitor had been dressed in normal work clothes, but with a dead cockerel held to his shoulder with wire. Agatha's mother had explained that the cockerel was the symbol of the enemy France, so the Traitor must be a French agent.

This year, he was dressed in a bright red tunic and ruffled shirt. The clothes looked quite fine at first glance, but up close, the material was rough and poorly stitched. As always, a traitor's half-moon was sewn to his front. There was a note pinned to his back. Mr Swales pulled it off and read it aloud.

"Lord who withholds taxes from the king"—he drew in breath, making a whistling sound—"his Lordship won't like that one bit. Still, better get him stored. You're in for a warm evening, my friend."

He addressed this last part to the Traitor, who did not reply as he was made of straw.

He'd been constructed and clothed in a town ten miles away. Tomorrow they'd hoist him on a pole and parade him round the village. As dark drew in, they'd set him alight on the pile of wood they'd heaped on the village green in preparation.

The village's own Traitor had been tied to the top of it for the past week, but had been cut down that morning and sent by cart to a village further down the valley. Most years they dressed him according to his Lordship's favourite theme of 'Idle Worker', but this year he was a 'Traitorous Judge'. Mr Swales said the suggestion had arrived in a letter with the royal seal.

"Going to be a tight year," Mr Swales announced. "His Lordship will be squeezing us a little tighter if the king is squeezing him. You might as well get the word about since you've got nothing better to do, Agatha Pighills."

He turned to face her as he said her name, and Agatha started guiltily.

"I'm on an errand."

"I'm sure you are. You'd be a damned fool to be gawping there in plain sight if you wasn't." He lowered his voice. "And while you're about it, you

can warn folk about him.”

He nodded towards a one-horse cart stopped outside the inn. It stood out from the brightly coloured trailers of the Fayre folk by being drab and uninteresting. The owner, tending to a horse tethered on the grass, was easy to match to it, dressed in a worn travelling cloak over a woollen jacket and breeches.

“Says he’s recruiting wizards,” Mr Swales said.

“Wizards? I’ve never heard of anyone recruiting wizards.”

“Me neither. Told him he’s wasting his time looking for anything here but sheep and fleas, and he says to me ‘sheep, fleas and children’. I’d be steering clear of him if I were you.”

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE TRAITOR'S MOON

by Henry Coles

PITCH:

Thirteen-year-old mill worker Agatha, and privileged merchant's son Haskell are apprenticed to a wizard who will not teach them. They must somehow learn his secrets or face the full wrath of the king.

SYNOPSIS:

When mill worker AGATHA (13) is apprenticed to the wizard TITUS, she hopes to pay her birth debt and escape from poverty. Privileged HASKELL (12) hopes only that his apprenticeship will please his domineering father, who wants access to magic for his business empire. But Titus and his ruined castle are not what the children expect. Agatha is treated as an unpaid servant and Haskell's lessons in magic are a sham. They are forbidden from speaking to each other, but still manage to argue and fight.

Everything changes when the king's sorcerer, SEPTIMUS, visits the castle. He is looking for something secret and valuable and will stop at nothing to find it. He attacks Agatha, but the seemingly timid Titus defeats him with incredible magic, then hides away to brood.

Agatha and Haskell must quickly learn to work together before Septimus returns. They teach themselves magic and uncover Titus' secrets. He is impossibly old and has been hiding The Mute Book, which holds the secret to eternal life. He has been working in secret to use magic to build a fairer world. Septimus and the king must never be allowed to have the book. A world where the rich live forever would be even more unjust.

The king's soldiers arrest Titus and the children. The children use their newfound magic to outwit the king, but Titus is killed protecting the book. With the book safe, the children return to the castle to continue Titus' work.

BIOGRAPHY:

Originally from a small village in Yorkshire, Henry now lives in Edinburgh with his partner, children and cats. He is one of the 2023 Scottish Book Trust New Writer Awardees and has been shortlisted and longlisted in

various competitions including the *Times* Chicken House IET150 prize and Bath Children's Novel award.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'Amazing! Authoritative writing.'

Contact: henry.coles@googlemail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

DROWNING IN PEA SOUP

By Richard Parker

Chapter 1

Big Ben rattled and the clock tower fell apart, the great hands crashing to the ground. Then the earth around Kyrie rumbled and the entire Houses of Parliament collapsed in a great cloud of rubble. A rush of wind and dust hit him where he stood on the other side of the square and knocked him to the floor, unconscious.

When he awoke, he saw a line of faces peering down at him.

“Are you ok, Kyrie?” said Mrs Berry, a podgy finger pressing her glasses to stop them falling from her nose.

“Wire Wool’s had one of his turns,” a girl whispered somewhere behind him, and Kyrie realised, with a sense of familiar gloom, that nobody had witnessed the disaster but him. He glanced to his side. The Houses of Parliament stood pink and postcard-perfect in the late afternoon sun.

“We should get you to a doctor. Can you get up?” said Mrs Berry. Kyrie closed his eyes and imagined sinking deep into his mattress, fast asleep and away from everything and everybody.

When his mum picked him up from the surgery in the early evening, she looked more haggard than usual.

“I never get a day of peace,” she said as she dragged him to the car. “If only you would speak to me, but there’s not a chance of that, is there?”

Kyrie had given up speaking a long time ago. Life was just simpler that way. Speaking had done nothing to help his many problems at school. By living in silence, he could retreat into his own world and ignore the never-ending taunts, which these days mostly revolved around his crazy hair; Wire Wool, Groot Head, Hedgehog Boy, Professor Brush.

“Did you decide it would be funny to lie down and play dead on a school trip?” said his mum. His mum had tried silence, staring, sighing, crying, and huffing but nothing had worked. Kyrie would not speak. Now

she had mostly given up, and taken to grumbling at the kitchen clock over supper.

“You’re to go straight to bed as soon as we get home.”

Kyrie didn’t mind. His bed was his favourite place in the world. When he arrived home, he pulled off his shoes and rushed upstairs. He fell face first on his Jedi brown duvet and glanced over at his Star Wars collection, all perfectly arranged in a neat line on one shelf. His world.

“Make sure you wash your face and clean your teeth before you get into bed,” his mum shouted from downstairs. He sighed, pulled himself up, and plodded into the bathroom to get himself ready.

He saw the collapsing Houses of Parliament again that night, this time in his dreams, and screaming people were fleeing all about him in panic. He awoke with a start, his face dripping with sweat.

“I’ve found you,” said a deep, slow voice.

Kyrie reached over to his bedside lamp and switched it on. A thing sat perched on the end of his bed. An earthy blobby thing. A half-humanoid thing; mud, mossy wood, and roots twisted and squeezed together to form a living creature.

“You must be the marriage counsellor,” it said.

Chapter 2

Kyrie knew that his imagination could stretch well beyond the normal, so he told himself this was just another one of those moments his mum called a Kyrie Special. Soon enough, this odd mud blob thing would disappear. He sat up and stared at it, long and hard.

“I don’t know this staring game. I assume it is a game, or is it a new form of greeting?” It paused as if waiting for a reply. “Forgive me, but I am rather foggy, being such a newly made messenger.”

Kyrie wondered if he had spent too much time in his inner world as he had never conjured anybody or anything this real. The thing was staring back at him now with two coal-black eyes, or were they real bits of coal?

He’s not going to outstare me, thought Kyrie. Nobody can outstare me, especially my own imaginary creature. Downstairs the loud grandfather clock counted down the silent duel.

“Mmm. I think you are well-practised in this game,” said the thing. “Is it a counsellor’s game? I am happy to admit defeat and move on to business. I have something for you from the wise Mage.”

Kyrie did not reply. He stared again, then blinked twice. The thing was still there.

“Mmm,” said the thing. “This is hard for me. You see, I am a new messenger and not yet accustomed to the ways of this life, but I am also very old. In the fog, I sometimes have glimpses of another life.” It tipped his head and stared down at its feet. “I am both the young acorn and the old oak tree. Then sometimes I feel as if the acorn has been cut loose.” It paused. “My mind is foggy, and I can ramble.” It looked up at Kyrie. “A counsellor was something different in my other world. Never a young man, although you are unlike other young men, I see that. Mmm.”

It fixed its coal eyes once more on Kyrie, who glared back.

“I have two photographs for you.” He laid them on the wooden stool by Kyrie’s bed. They both showed a huddle of graves in a traditional old church graveyard, thick with moss and lichen. Ancient grey tombs stood in clumsy lines, mottled with green and red. To Kyrie’s eyes, the photographs looked identical.

“What do you see?” said the thing. Kyrie did not reply.

“I did not see much when the Mage first gave them to me. Then he explained. The picture on the right was taken one week before the one on the left. Look carefully. An important shift has taken place.”

It now stretched out a coiling root that fixed on three graves in one photograph before passing onto the same sequence in the second. Kyrie could now see that three gravestones stood in a straight line in the first image, while the middle gravestone in the second had fallen sideways and was now pressing on its neighbour. Either the earth had collapsed around it, or some great force had hit it, but it had definitely sunk and shifted so that its companion now propped it up.

“You see now, yes?” The thing waited for a reply, then muttered something to itself, as if trying to understand the peculiar boy confronting it.

“Two of the stones belong to Jeremiah and Eloise Pensworth. They

are married, but Eloise has eloped with her old friend, Heston Ailsworth. Her gravestone has fallen onto that of her new love. It is almost as if the stones are now kissing one another. The Mage told me that such affairs of the heart are not normally of concern, but Jeremiah is an Earl, and this affair has caused quite the upset in our world. That is why a marriage counsellor is needed.”

The thing peered at Kyrie, who couldn’t comprehend what he was being told. These photos, after all, were of dead people. Dead people didn’t marry or elope or anything. They were just dead, plain and simple.

“I hope your silence is the silence of agreement and you will help us. The wise old Red Mage was most definite that it must be you,” said the thing. “I am sure I am not mistaken in my task.”

The thing pressed its chin down on its long root as if deep in thought, and stayed like that for some time. Kyrie heard cracking and oozing sounds emanating from inside it, and glimpsed a green mossy substance crawling about it, as if constantly repairing the creature.

Imagination’s really working overtime today, he thought, wondering when the muddy blob would finally leave him alone and stop talking to him about graveyards and marriage nonsense and a load of crazy dead people. The thing let out a deep sigh.

“Mmm,” it said. “You are a meditative counsellor, like the Wisened Wolenburg who meets the new,” and he laughed, an aching, painful laugh. “I can see my joke does not amuse you.” He waited again, chin on root, eyes fixed on Kyrie.

“Well then, I think I ought to be on my way. The Mage told me you will need help.”

It put the photographs back into his muddy pocket, then drew out an old knobbly potato and placed it on the stool.

“This is Janus, a network specialist. He will be your guide. I pray you do help us. I am told you are an expert counsellor.” It stretched one of his roots and scratched the top of his head. “So, I think that’s everything. It’s been my pleasure to meet a young man of such renown. I bid you farewell and hope we’ll meet again.”

It stood up, its whole body creaking with the effort, and plodded out of the room.

Kyrie laid his head back and shut his eyes, hoping that tomorrow would be a more normal sort of day.

Chapter 3

A knock on the door woke Kyrie with a start. He jumped up, wondering if this was another Kyrie Special. A soft morning light framed the curtains of his bedroom window.

“Hi Kyrie. Can I come in?” It was the voice of Sally, his Social Worker, or Helpful Sally, as his mum called her. She rarely came anymore. His mum said this was due to government cuts. In Kyrie’s eyes that was a blessing. He sighed and waited. After a few moments, Sally poked her head around the door.

“Hiya. You ok?” she said, creeping in and sitting on his Yoda poof. “I heard about the school trip. Poor you, eh?” She paused, glanced down at the potato, then looked up at him with a puzzled expression.

“So you have a potato?” she said.

Kyrie knew she couldn’t work out why it was there and he couldn’t help but laugh inside. It was placed so centrally on the stool, it looked as if it was a statement of some kind. Then it struck him that Sally really was seeing the potato. That meant it was real, and so it followed that the blob thing did visit him. *How could that be?*

I am very much here, said a voice. Kyrie looked about the room in confusion.

I’m on the stool. The voice felt as if it was inside him. Was he imagining voices now? He peered at the potato.

You got it, said the voice.

One of Kyrie’s many doctors had taught him a breathing technique. He tried it now, shutting his eyes and attempting to still his mind.

You can’t breathe me away, said the voice. *I’m Janus, the rag and bone man, top in my field, though I say so myself.*

“What’s rag and bone?” said Kyrie in his head.

Rag and bone – phone, said Janus.

Kyrie wished the voice understood how much he disliked riddles.

“I’ve brought Boggle,” said Sally, bringing the game out from behind

her back and shaking it, as if the sound might appeal to him. “Thought it might be a good game for us to try.”

At that moment, Kyrie’s mum barged into the room.

“How’s it going?” she said.

She peered at Kyrie, and then the potato, her tongue making odd flicking movements on her lips.

There’s a lot of staring in this family, said the voice of Janus in Kyrie’s head.
It’s quite unnerving.

No more riddles please, said Kyrie. *Just say phone rather than rag and bone.*

It wasn’t a riddle. It was cockney rhyming slang. Reminds me of my roots. Haha.
Roots get it?

What’s funny about roots? said Kyrie

Well I don’t have any, do I. That’s the joke.

It’s not a joke, it’s just a fact, said Kyrie.

“What’s he doing with a potato?” said Kyrie’s mum. She had a ragged look, her face creased on one side, her hair dishevelled, her clothes hanging loose on her, as if she had leapt out of bed and thrown herself together. “Do you think he’s trying to communicate something?”

“I couldn’t say,” said Sally. “I’ve only just come in.”

Can you get out of my head? said Kyrie, wishing everybody would leave his room. It was HIS room after all.

That’s no way to treat a guest, said Janus.

Can you get out of my head PLEASE? said Kyrie.

Nope.

Kyrie climbed out of bed, picked up the potato and placed it carefully in the drawer, wrapping it in a roll of t-shirts, aware that adult eyes were following his every move.

I’m still here, said Janus. *Once I’ve made it into a network I’m very hard to dislodge. Here’s a fun fact for you. Brain networks and fungal networks are surprisingly similar. You wouldn’t believe just how much.*

“He’s trying to tell us something, don’t you see?” said Kyrie’s mum, inching towards her son, gawking at him as if he were an intriguing stranger who had just turned up in her house. “He’s using that potato as some kind of communication tool.”

“I really don’t know,” said Sally, staring at Kyrie in bemusement.

“I think we should go downstairs and talk. Remember. Safe spaces. We want to build safe spaces.”

You have to get out of my head, said Kyrie, wondering if he might bury the potato under a pile of washing. *It's my head. It doesn't belong to anybody else and I am very happy inside it on my own.*

“Kyrie looks so animated,” said Kyrie’s mum.

“Let’s go downstairs. Come on,” said Sally.

She gave Kyrie’s mum a reassuring pat on her shoulder and guided her out of the room.

Why don't we try and be friends? said Janus. *We've got a lot in common. You have an interesting brain and I understand interesting brains. I'll admit it has some mushy parts. Just found a patch that could do with a good clean.*

I'm not good with people, said Kyrie, as he unrolled the t-shirts and brought the potato out again, trying to think up a new plan.

I'm not a person, said Janus.

I know that, said Kyrie. *You're just my imagination playing tricks on me.*

He put the potato back on the stool, pulled off his pyjamas and slung on some clothes. Then he picked it up again and marched out of his room and down the stairs, holding it out in front of him, away from his body, as if it were infected. He heard Sally in the main room, talking rapidly into the phone. He passed his mum in the kitchen. She didn’t notice him. She was too busy chatting with the clock about boys and potatoes.

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

DROWNING IN PEA SOUP

by Richard Parker

PITCH:

A reclusive boy's relationship with a potato is Britain's only hope against a rebellion of the dead.

SYNOPSIS:

Ten-year-old Kyrie is haunted by premonitions of the future and has retreated into his own world to escape the sneering of his peers. His quiet life is disturbed by a voice in his head emanating from a potato that calls itself Janus. Janus is connected to the world of the dead and drags Kyrie into a quirky underworld of stick and mud souls, known to its inhabitants as Pea Soup.

Agitated by a mining project that threatens to disrupt their community, the inhabitants of Pea Soup are plotting to rise up and attack London, an event Kyrie realises he has foreseen. He also learns that he has a gift; the ability to manipulate the magic of the great fungal networks below the ground, and he alone has the power to stop the catastrophic mining project.

A network of assassins and spies, the many enemies of the dead relentlessly pursue Kyrie as he struggles to progress in his quest. Reliant on the support of the potato and his friend Martha, a wild girl from the woods, he eventually learns to hone his skills and devise a plan. Tracking down the Prime Minister, Kyrie breaks into his mind and makes him announce an end to the mining project, just in time to prevent the rebellion of the dead.

BIOGRAPHY:

Richard has lived in Spain, Portugal, Brunei and Hong Kong and has now settled back in London as the headteacher of an International School. Over the years, he has taught many students in the middle grade age bracket. Richard has written a number of novels for children and young adults.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'Wacky, quirky writing. Written with great brio.'

Contact: parkerbouvet@gmail.com

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE BOOK OF MARIONETTA STONE

By Catriona McLean

Chapter One: Fractures in the Bones of the House

Every morning, Etta crept through the house to check whether any new cracks had appeared in the walls.

She leaned inside the hearth and peered up the chimney. She ran her fingertips around the nook under the stairs. She slid her bare feet along the hall; the ancient, worn floorboards were warped by the seawater that hung in the air, but they were still whole. The living room ceiling was a maze of fissures, but they were old and familiar. She rolled back the rug and levered the sofa away from the wall.

There was nothing but an odd sock that probably belonged to Michael.

She slipped out the back door. When they'd first come to live here, when Michael was a baby, the house had been weathered but cared for. Now moss peppered the roof and greenery spilled from the gutters. Then, a few weeks ago, a crack had struck through the stone and splintered the window frame of Mum's bedroom.

Etta circled the house, but there were no new cracks. Today, at least, would be a Good Day.

Clouds sulked along the horizon, but the sky was otherwise blue. She wandered through their garden, which was really more of a wilderness these days. Long, dew-damp grasses brushed her palms and poppy seed heads rattled as she passed. She stopped where the ground crumbled to a tumble of rocks and fell into the sea below.

Theirs was the last house at Land's End before all the world's wide oceans: they had no neighbours and the ocean could be seen from every window. When Etta went back inside, the pulse of breaking waves followed and settled in the walls like a heartbeat.

She snuck upstairs to wake Michael. She traced the old crack in the wall that spiralled up to the landing from the hall. It forked just before it got to Mum's bedroom and seized the doorframe with jagged fingers.

The cracks followed Mum out of her dreams. They crawled from her room and crazed the surrounding walls. Etta's bedroom was next to Mum's, and they were starting to invade there, too. It used to be Michael's room but Etta had made him switch so that he could sleep somewhere that was still whole and unbroken.

She clambered into Michael's bed. An oblong of sunshine was falling through his window and warming his pillow. She pressed her feet against his shins and he woke with a yelp, then shoved her away.

'You're freezing,' he complained, which was true. Her pyjamas were too short, and her feet felt like she'd been standing in seawater up to her ankles.

Michael tucked the duvet under his chin. 'Did you check?' he whispered.

'Yep,' Etta said. 'No new cracks today.'

'None?' he said. 'Today is safe? Mum won't get stuck in her dreams?'

'We're safe,' Etta confirmed. Michael relaxed. She ruffled his brown hair and he scowled and tried to shove her off the bed. Etta laughed. 'Go get the breakfast stuff ready,' she ordered. 'Me and Mum will be right down.'

Michael thundered off and Etta pushed Mum's door open. Her bedroom had so many cracks it looked like it had once been smashed and then glued back together. When they had first appeared, Etta had thought it was just paint flaking, because their house was so old and damp. Then came the fissures in the ceilings and the crevasse under the kitchen table. She wasn't sure how long they had before the entire house crumbled.

Etta shook Mum awake.

'Etta,' Mum mumbled, and a tiny thrill zinged up from Etta's stomach into her chest, as it did every time Mum remembered her name.

'Hi, Mum,' Etta said. She hesitated. 'Did you sleep okay?'

Mum rubbed her eyes. 'I had the strangest dreams,' she murmured. Etta winced. It was always better when Mum didn't remember her dreams. 'I lived on an island,' Mum went on. 'I was playing by the sea. There was—'

'Silver grass on the beach,' Etta finished. Mum blinked. Her eyes were

still glazed. 'You've had that dream before, Mum,' Etta said. She glanced at the walls, but they were safe. It was easy to spot a new crack. They bled.

'I don't remember,' Mum said. She sat up and rubbed her forehead. 'It's all slipping away.'

Etta let out a breath. Good.

'C'mon, Michael's getting breakfast.' She helped Mum into her dressing gown and slippers.

'He doesn't need to do that,' Mum protested as Etta led her onto the landing. 'I should be the one looking after you.'

She thumbed at the deep crack in the wall over the stairs that had appeared on the same day Etta nearly drowned. The wall was still streaked with faint stains where dark liquid had seeped out, even though Etta had scrubbed it until her elbows ached.

Mum frowned. 'This old place is really falling apart.'

'It's fine,' Etta lied, as she followed Mum's slow shuffle to the kitchen.

Michael had laid out all the breakfast stuff on the table. He watched as Etta doled out cereal and milk, then he seized a bowl and started scarfing. At least Etta didn't have to feed Mum today, though she still ate slowly, and Michael's spoon was rattling in his empty bowl before Mum had finished three bites.

'I'm hungry,' Michael whined. He draped himself over the table as if he were dying.

Etta sighed. Michael was always hungry, which was amazing, really, given how titchy he was compared to all the other kids in his year.

All she could do was distract him. 'What do you wanna do today, anyway?'

'Crabbing,' Michael said. He was obsessed. At least there were still plenty of tourist kids around for the summer holidays; she wouldn't have to keep him company on the pier.

But Mum stilled. Milk dripped from her spoon onto her dressing gown. 'I don't think you should,' she said.

Etta frowned. 'I know you worry, Mum, but we go into town all the time. We'll be—'

'No,' Mum insisted. She dropped her spoon back into the bowl. 'No, not today. There's a storm coming. Can't you feel it?'

Etta peered out of the kitchen window.

The clouds had billowed up into battlements, but they were still miles away. 'It's blue skies here,' she said.

'You shouldn't go out in a storm,' Mum insisted. 'In my dream—'

'Michael,' Etta interrupted, 'why don't you go get dressed?' She squeezed Mum's hand and waited as Michael sloped upstairs. 'Your dreams aren't real, Mum,' Etta soothed. She pushed Mum's hair back from her forehead. It was the exact same white-blonde as Etta's own and nearly as long, but Mum's was tangled and darkened at the roots with grease. 'You know how you get. We'll be fine, I promise. We'll go see Derek and Mark, first, so they know we're in town. And we'll come straight home if a storm blows in.'

'Well . . . alright,' Mum whispered. 'Just promise me you won't go sailing.'

'You always say that,' Etta grumbled. 'I've never even been in a boat.'

'And stay away from the Whale's Back.'

Etta rolled her eyes. Even the tourist kids knew to stay away from the Whale's Back: a tidal sandbar that extended from the beach below their house and into the ocean. On a clear day at low tide, the water was shallow enough that she could make out the pale curve of the Whale's Back from the living room window. But then the tides would turn, and the Whale's Back would submerge once more, and anyone trying to walk that pale path beneath the waves would be drowned.

She made sure Mum was settled in her usual spot on the sofa where she could stare out the living room window. 'A boat with yellow sails,' Mum murmured, 'and silver grass on the beach.'

Etta looked at her. Even on Mum's best days, when she could get herself out of bed and do the food shopping and tell dreams from reality, she was always drawn to the ocean.

'We're going now,' Etta said. Mum said nothing. She didn't turn to watch Etta leave.

Etta chivvied Michael out the door and tried to ignore the strange pressure in the air. It was as if the world was being compressed inside a shrinking sphere. She glared at the sky as they wandered down the overgrown lane that met the new road going into town. The clouds were darkening, but they were still a long way out to sea. She was determined

that today would still be a Good Day: the storm wouldn't blow in; Mum wouldn't get lost in her dreams; and there would be no new cracks in the walls of their home.

Chapter Two: Familiar, Glazed Eyes

The road sloped into town and from up here they could see everything: rooftops that stepped down like a giant's staircase to the terraced seafront; TV aerials fringed with shuffling seagulls; telephone wires looped between houses, shops and pubs; and, beyond all of it, the sea that hung from the horizon like a glittering sheet.

When they reached town, the high street was crowded with tourists in their bright clothes and over-stuffed beach bags. But Etta and Michael knew every shortcut and secret way in Land's End. They snuck down a cobbled alley and through an unmarked gate, which opened onto the courtyard behind the Cornish Arms. They leaped onto an empty keg and vaulted over the wall to drop into Derek and Mark's garden behind their fishmonger's shop.

'Oh, cool!' Michael exclaimed as he hefted a small, acid-green bike from the grass. The bike probably belonged to Jacob or Lilah. They had so much stuff and were always leaving it everywhere.

'S'not yours, Michael, put it back,' Etta muttered, even as she drifted over to get a better look. They'd never had a bike of their own. The wheels made a cool ticking sound when Michael spun them.

The back door to the flat over the fishmonger's banged open and Etta jumped away from the bike.

'Oh, it's only you two,' Mark said as he leaned over the staircase. A lone cloud covered the sun and dimmed the sky. Mark glanced up. 'Looks like rain, if I'm any judge. You troublemakers alright?'

Etta scowled. 'Fine,' she said. 'D'you reckon Derek's got any scraps?'

'More?' Mark threw up his hands. 'Don't these crabs get a moment's peace?'

'They *like* it,' Michael insisted. 'It's food. Anyway, we let them all go again, after.'

'You should be bringing them here, so we can sell them,' Mark said with

a wink. 'Derek's in the shop,' he said, then winced when a crash and an outraged squeal came from their flat.

Etta followed Michael through the fishmonger's back door. There were already a few customers milling about in the shop. Derek was weighing a fillet behind the counter. He rolled his eyes when he saw Michael and leaned over the neat rows of dead fish resting on ice to snag a little plastic bag. Michael reached to grab it, but Derek held it high in the air.

'What're the rules?' he asked.

'Don't let anyone else have it don't eat it don't put my fingers in my mouth or wipe them on my shorts wash my hands straightaway after,' Michael recited. Derek started to lower the bag. 'In the sea,' Michael added. Derek frowned and pointed at him.

'With soap,' he said.

Michael grinned and snatched the bag. 'Are you coming?' he asked Etta with a hopeful smile. He had a dimple on his left cheek that let him get away with murder, and he clutched the bag to his chest as if some dead fish scraps were the most precious thing in the world.

'Maybe later,' Etta said. She tousled his hair to make him scowl so she didn't have to watch his face crumple.

'Just you be sure to come away if the weather turns,' Derek warned. 'Something's brewing out there.'

'He'll be fine,' Etta insisted as Michael raced out of the shop. The pier would be swarming with kids by now, but Michael would catch the most crabs. He always did. Only Michael was allowed Derek's scraps and they worked a hundred times better than the pricey packets of dried meat that got flogged to the tourists.

'I'm helping out here today,' Etta announced as Derek wrapped a fillet.

'Fine by me,' Derek said. 'Could use the free labour.' He winked and Etta stuck out her tongue. Derek and Mark gave Michael pocket money almost every week. She had to pay them back somehow.

She snagged a clean apron and looped it over her head. Her hair was long enough that she could gather it all up and tie it in a knot. She gave her hands a quick rinse then grabbed some Windolene and blue towel. She wormed in between the customers crowding the fish counter and cleaned smeared handprints off the glass. The ghoulish fish stared up at

her with familiar, glazed eyes.

Afterwards she swept the floor, then sidled over to the tank in the window. She dipped her hand in and tickled the lobsters, which were mottled blue before they were cooked. They snapped their claws in agitation.

‘Marionetta Stone, get your fingers out of there or they’ll have ’em,’ Derek said. He was right behind her. Etta whipped her hand out of the water. He had full-named her!

‘It’s Etta,’ she said.

Derek grinned. He had a dimple on his left cheek, just like Michael. It appeared every time he smiled. She always noticed. If a stranger walking by had Michael’s sticky-out ears, or her storm-grey eyes, she noticed. Sometimes they caught her staring and fidgeted or edged away. It was a stupid, childish habit from when she used to dream that one of their dads would turn up and make everything better.

‘What?’ Derek asked. ‘Do I have something on my face?’

He scrubbed at his cheek and Etta glanced away. ‘Sorry,’ she muttered. Derek and Mark had already adopted Jacob and Lilah. They didn’t need Etta and Michael, too.

‘You’re not,’ Derek teased. ‘Never known one like you for doing whatever you want.’

That seemed unfair. Etta narrowed her eyes, but Derek went on. ‘Your mum at home, then?’

Etta stiffened and jerked one shoulder in a shrug. Derek gave her a long look, then wiped clean the knife he was holding and slid it into his apron string.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘Do you three . . . do you get on alright? You’re so far out of town in that old house . . .’

Etta clenched her fists. ‘We’re fine,’ she said, but her answer had come too fast.

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE BOOK OF MARIONETTA STONE

by Catriona McLean

PITCH:

Inkheart meets *Over Sea, Under Stone*: a fantasy adventure about coping with loss set on an island off the Cornish coast. If your story could be re-written, what would you change – or erase?

SYNOPSIS:

ETTA STONE has always taken care of her dissociative mum (PEARL) and her brother (MICHAEL). So when a man with no eyes (THE KEEPER) uses a book to send Mum into a permanent sleep, Etta must follow him to a forgotten island to steal the book and break his power.

However, none of the islanders can remember who they are or why they are so sad. The only islander who seems normal is BO, a boy who befriends Etta because no one else on the island can see him.

Etta meets a bookbinder called ENHEDUANNA who tells her about true books, which record a life as it is lived; in turn, anything that is written in a true book will become real. The Keeper stole Enheduanna's true books and is re-writing them.

Etta helps the islanders recover some memories and learns that the Keeper's name is AMBROSE. Ambrose grew up with and loved MARION, so when Marion later drowned, the heartbroken Ambrose used the books to create the illusion that Marion is alive.

Etta forces the Keeper to confront his grief. He confesses that he tore pages from his own book in an attempt to excise his grief. This fragment of the Keeper's story took on independent life: Bo is the child version of Ambrose.

Etta and Bo burn the pages added to the islanders' books. Defeated, the Keeper throws his book into the fire and dies. Everyone is revived, and Bo goes to live with Etta, Michael and Mum.

BIOGRAPHY:

Catriona McLean works in publishing and her recent projects include *Northern Dreaming* – a children's anthology co-published by LEEDS 2023

and the British Library that was gifted to every child born in Leeds in 2023. In 2022, she won a Develop Your Creative Practice grant from Arts Council England to complete *The Book of Marionetta Stone* with mentoring from Cornerstones Literary Agency.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

‘Very atmospheric and a great concept.’

Contact: catriona.florence@gmail.com

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

SUPERS

By Maggie Womersley

Chapter 1

I'm on a beach surrounded by faces. Wherever I look there are people, mostly young like me, but some older ones carrying children. Unlike me, they are all dressed for the weather in swimwear, sarongs and cheap straw hats bought from the wandering beach sellers. Their sunglasses reflect the white glare of the sun into my eyes, their teeth glint as they smile at each other, I can see their laughter and their happy expectation. It's going to be a great day, these faces say; there will be music and sunshine and togetherness. And I really hope they're right, because if the man who's come to kill them is here, I haven't found him yet.

*

It's not quite the middle of the afternoon but there is already music coming from the far end of the beach. I aim my binoculars, scanning the glitter of the sea, the multi-coloured mass of the crowd. Beautiful girls in bikinis sway past so close that I can smell the coconut oil on their skin, lads swagger behind, admiring the view. There are hippie mums with babies tucked into slings, and guys pulling trollies heaped with beach gear. All colours, all nationalities. I hear their different languages, smell their food, and sift through their faces – each and every one of them.

A little girl wearing face paint and butterfly wings breaks free of her adult's hand and bumps into my legs. I bend down to catch her before she falls, scanning her little face with its button nose, blue saucer eyes and smears of glitter. A moment later her adult picks her up and puts her on his shoulders, smiling at me and apologising in a language I don't recognise. His face is like hers, I can tell they're related. Then they're gone, diving back into the crowd, the kid twisting round to take a last curious look at the pale girl in the wrong clothes holding binoculars.

There is not a cloud in the sky but for some reason I shiver, and there

are goose-bumps mounting an attack up both my arms. Shaz, the event organiser, told us they were expecting sixteen thousand. “It’s been sold out for weeks,” she said, face going pale under the fake tan, pupils dilating. The headline act and his entourage have already arrived, the live stream is switching on in ten minutes and the local police have told us there is no way they can clear the beach without a major incident being declared. And for that they need more evidence than a fuzzy image lifted from some three-year-old CCTV footage. That little meeting happened about an hour ago and apart from my handler, Paul, I’d never met any of the others before, but I recognise Shaz. She was on the same Central Line tube as me about two years ago. ‘Small World,’ I said under my breath to Ellie and made our secret ‘Sisters Forever’ sign behind my back. Two years ago, Shaz had different hair, a lot less tan and a much bigger nose, but I still recognised her.

“Anything?” Paul, says, for what must be the sixtieth time in as many minutes.

“Nope,” I reply, scanning the horizon through the binoculars, looking away from the faces – just for a couple of seconds. Dr Feldman taught me to do this to refresh my concentration when things get too intense. And today is intense – six hours ago I was sitting in a lecture screening on 1980s horror films. I’d never even heard of this island, wasn’t carrying my passport, and actually needed a pee. Then Paul was there, barging his way into the screening room, ignoring the indignant comments from the lecturer and the exploding head projecting onto his chest. Ten minutes later and I’m in a police car, heading for the airport with the blue lights flashing. It’s 38 degrees here and I don’t even have sun-screen.

*

“I think we should go back to the cabin, check the feeds again. Maybe you missed something,” Paul says, from just behind my left shoulder. He has a distracting way of positioning himself directly behind me so that he’s out of view but practically breathing down my neck. I’ve asked him not to do this, but he always forgets. I think he’s trying not get in the way of my ‘super gaze’ as he calls it, but it just feels creepy.

“No,” I reply. “It was way too hot in there. And if he’s on the beach now, it’s too late for the CCTV.”

Paul shifts position, he's sweating under the leather jacket and his bald head is going pink. It'll be flaky tomorrow if he doesn't watch out. At least he's got a bottle of water – I left mine somewhere in the rush. I can tell he's feeling the pressure even worse than I am. We've only been working together a few months and this is our first big job outside the lab. He hasn't said anything but I get the distinct impression he doesn't like this new phase in his career – babysitting a freaky neuro-science experiment.

"Do you want to see the picture again?" he says, reaching into that leather jacket he loves so much. I shake my head and take a baby step away from him. As I move I look at the faces all around us, taking in each one, running it through my memory, then casting it into the imaginary filing cabinet my sister invented for us, a long time ago. The face I need to match floats in a different part of my memory. If I close my eyes I can see it in acute detail – it's the most important face in my entire world – at least for today. If I had to write down a description of this face I would need a week and a lot of pens. Words don't even touch the surface when it comes to conveying the intricacies held in every human face – and worse luck for the police I'm rubbish at drawing. So, for now let's just say it's the face of a man, about thirty years old, European, light-coloured eyes, pinky-orange skin tone, pale eye lashes to match white-blond cropped hair, a pattern of moles like a constellation of stars on the left cheek, a chicken pox scar on the right. We think his name is Friderick. It means 'Peaceful and Powerful', which is ironic considering why we're here now. I Googled it for Ellie while we were waiting for the plane to take off, she's always more interested than me in the people behind the faces.

Paul is talking on his walkie to the head of security. He's letting them know that there's nothing to report – the anti-terrorist super weapon flown in from the UK at great expense is feeling hot and cranky and needs the toilet again. I know that there are specialist undercover police in among the festival goers and I think I spot a pair straight ahead of me. They're wearing crisp navy shorts, mirror sunglasses and grim expressions. Then I see the holster-shaped bulges under their jackets and feel smug for guessing right.

'Oh well done, five points to you,' Ellie says.

The two cops disappear into the crowd, and I take another step away

from Paul, letting myself drift on the tide of happy faces. Paul doesn't notice; he's distracted by a woman on stilts wearing a yellow thong bikini. The crowd parts to let her through, and as it closes in her wake, I'm on the other side of a big group of French boys kicking a beach ball. I stop for a moment and bend down to unlace my Converse – they're filling up with sand, making it hard to walk. It's when I stand up again, light-headed and wobbly thanks to a distinct lack of lunch, that I see him. He's walking quickly, and it's the profile of his chin I recognise first. He's taller than I expected, and that throws me for a second. Also, the part of his face I can see looks older than the picture I have stored in my head. He's wearing a dirty red baseball cap and the hair underneath it is long, gathered together in a messy pony tail. The man in the CCTV grab was dressed for a Nordic winter, whereas this man is wearing shorts and a surf brand t-shirt and he's carrying a turquoise cool box on his shoulder – the kind the beach sellers use to flog cold drinks to tourists. My heart skips a beat; if he'd been left-handed the box would have been on the other shoulder obscuring his face, and however good I am at this I just wouldn't have seen him. But is this the face I'm looking for? Doubt sniffs around me like a lost dog – if I get this wrong and they cancel the concert, sixteen thousand people will be baying for my blood.

But what if I'm right?

I glance round for Paul, but he's lost in the crowd, or rather I am, but I can't worry about that now, the man with the cool box is moving towards the stage. I dodge through a group of couples holding hands, and get yelled at in the process, but I don't apologise or even look back, because my target is getting away. All I can see now is the back of his head. I wonder why I haven't been given a radio too.

'You should raise that later at the debrief,' Ellie says.

"Yup," I say, through gritted teeth, and for the first time today I wonder how this man is planning to do it – will it be guns, or a homemade bomb packed with nails? Or maybe it's some kind of bio-hazard – silent and deadly. I almost knock over a little kid as I pick up my pace. The sand shifts under my bare feet and the sun scorches the top of my head as I trip over picnics and bump into warm flesh. People are telling me to chill out and watch where I'm going. One bearded guy with a gold tooth cries out "Hey

beautiful, what's the rush?" in an Australian accent and I'm stupidly a little bit pleased.

'*Focus*,' snaps Ellie, and I plough on, my eyes fixed on that cool box as it floats ahead.

The music is loud now, a band has come on stage and the vibe switches up. More and more people are trying to move forward and I'm not really used to crowds – spying on them from a safe distance maybe, but not up close and personal like this. My heart is thumping in my chest and my mouth has gone completely dry. I'd kill for a bottle of water. I push myself forwards, toward the cool box, if I can just get in front of it, in front of *him* – I'll know for sure.

A voice booms out across the beach, "Hello Tinos! Are you ready to dance?" And a huge roar erupts from the crowd. Around me people throw up their arms and start clapping, they sway into the music, crane their necks for a better view, and push me off course. I struggle to steer towards the cool box and even as I'm staring at it, it disappears. And now I'm really forcing my way through the crowd; parting couples, separating friends, pushing forward. And just as I think I've lost him I see that dirty red cap and I'm closer than I realised. He's right in front of me, looking towards the stage. Just standing there as still as a mountain even though everyone around him is grooving away to the music, and that cool box is at his feet as if he's forgotten all about it. Maybe it is just a cool box and this isn't the man they're looking for.

I stretch out my hand to touch the man's arm. He doesn't react straight away, but I notice the hairs on his bare skin lift a little, as if ice just dripped down his back. And then something weird happens. The world goes into slo-mo, the crowd around us fades out of focus, and the music becomes a muffled roar in my head. The man is turning to see who's touching his arm, and slowly the side of his left cheek comes into view, and I see it – a pattern of moles like the big dipper.

"It's him," Ellie and I say in unison. And then he's facing me and I recognise every centimetre of his face, every crease and contour, every blotch and bump, wrinkle and hair follicle. It's a triple jackpot going off behind my eyes, the Big Prize, the great Ker-ching. But what I'm not expecting is what happens next. The man looks at me and recognises me

right back. He knows exactly why I'm there and he smiles – like I'm an old friend. And that's when I see his thumb hovering over a red button.

'*Not good*,' squeals Ellie, and I'm about to scream too but the breath is suddenly sucked out of my lungs by someone grabbing me around the waist and pulling me backwards. I find myself staring up at an ever-decreasing patch of blue sky whilst all around me cheers turn to screams and faces blur. Just when I think I'll never take in air again, whoever has hold of me loosens their grip and I bump to the ground. All I can see now are peoples' feet dangerously close to my face. Then the inevitable happens – somebody kicks me in the head and everything goes black.

Chapter 2

My name is Mae Thornhill, I'm seventeen-years-old and I'm a super recogniser. It's a real thing – you can look it up on the internet if you don't believe me, it's right up there with a load of other neurodiverse stuff they're still inventing names for. Some scientists worked out that the average human brain can remember up to five thousand human faces, and that different parts of the brain are responsible for remembering different parts of a face – the nose for example, eye colour, cranial symmetry, skin tone – all those features the scientists call our 'facial vocabulary'. But a super recogniser can recognise ten times that amount, and in some cases – me for example – fifty times. Ellie, my twin sister was even better than me, and as little kids we would lie awake at night testing each other. I guess I should explain that Ellie's dead. Has been since she was knocked down outside our old school four years ago. She's still here though, in my head, and we go everywhere together – Sisters Forever.

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

SUPERS

by Maggie Womersley

PITCH:

To solve her sister's murder, super-recogniser Mae must confront her deepest fears and go undercover at The MarchMoth Institute; a research facility for gifted neurodiverse teenagers with super-hero abilities. Alex Ryder meets The Umbrella Academy

SYNOPSIS:

Mae is a facial super-recogniser with extraordinary ability who helps the police track down criminals and terrorists. However, she's haunted by the fatal accident that killed her twin-sister Ellie three years earlier, and a version of Ellie still 'lives' in Mae's head, commenting on her life, and nagging her to be normal. Desperate to remember the face of a crucial witness to her sister's accident, Mae becomes a research subject at the MarchMoth Institute where charismatic Professor Geraint Pyke is using controversial treatments on neurodiverse teenage 'Supers' like Mae.

At MarchMoth, Mae meets cute but flakey Leo; Pyke's ward and a super empath. She also befriends Symona who has synaesthesia. With their help she discovers that Pyke is chemically enhancing the teenagers' neurological anomalies in order to weaponize them, she gets close to Leo whose super empath powers have made him both dangerous and vulnerable.

Pyke agrees to regress Mae back to the memory of her sister's accident using a dangerous new method. At the last minute, Mae stops him, realising that her obsession with this memory has obscured so many better, happier, memories of her sister. With Pyke distracted she escapes from MarchMoth along with Leo and Symona.

The teens track down Mae's estranged father who she now knows was working with Pyke before Ellie's death. Father and daughter are reunited but Pyke's associates turn up with guns. The teens outsmart them at first, but as the MarchMoth heavies fight back Mae's police contact arrives with back up.

BIOGRAPHY:

Maggie Womersley grew up in the shadow of a haunted castle in Sussex. The oldest of four siblings, her early years were spent building dens in attics or abandoned chicken houses and reading a lot. After graduating with a degree in Film Studies, she worked as an archive film producer before leaving the TV industry to concentrate on writing and bringing up her neurodiverse son. Unlike her heroine, she has a terrible memory for faces.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

‘Hooky and commercial with really slick writing.’

Contact: womersleymaggie@gmail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE HIDDEN LIFE OF SUNIL PANDYA

By Priyesh Shah

1 The Big Question

Leaves lay scattered across the pavement, the colour of foxes and bark and honey. Sunil waited with his hands in his pockets, keeping them firmly away from the cold that nipped at his ears. Further down the road, his bapuji, which is Gujarati for grandpa, was trying his best to catch up, his cane tapping sharply on the pavement with each step.

tut

tut

tut

tut

Sunil watched him and felt a dull ache in his stomach. He hadn't meant to walk ahead. But he'd gotten lost on a trail of his own thoughts, and before he knew it, his bapuji was far away.

I should do it tonight, he thought.

But even the idea of asking his parents filled him with dread.

What if they say no?

They wouldn't.

They couldn't.

He was going to be in secondary school soon, and then he'd have to walk to school on his own anyway.

I'm not a little boy anymore.

His bapuji stopped in front of him, leaning on his cane to catch his breath. After a while, he took out his hanky and softly mopped his brow.

“It’s very warm today,” he said in Gujarati, looking up at the sky.

Sunil kept his hands in his pockets.

His bapuji put his hanky away, gripped his cane tightly and began walking again. Sunil strolled alongside him. He enjoyed this part of the walk when it was just him and his bapuji. He felt safe. And that meant he could think about whatever he wanted. Or nothing at all.

As they turned a bend in the road, the school appeared before them.

Ashcroft.

With its thatched roof, red walls and long windows. Sunil watched as other children walked through the main gates. And, as they got nearer, he began to recognise their faces.

He had reached the point where he could be seen.

“Okay, I’m going now,” he said, not turning around.

There was a moment’s pause. He guessed Bapuji had stopped to look up at him.

“Yes, be careful crossing the road, my child.”

“Yeah.”

Sunil sped up, crossed the road by the lollipop lady and went into school without looking back.

* * *

It was precisely 7.34 pm, and Sunil was feeling very pleased with himself. He had come up with the perfect plan. As he peered into the living room, the only light came from the glare of the television. His mum was in there, watching Eastenders. She didn’t like to be disturbed when she was watching Eastenders. Maybe if he asked her now, she would say yes, so he would go away.

He took a few steps into the room.

“Mum.”

Her eyes were glued to the television. “Hm?”

“Bapuji walks me to school.”

He waited for her to answer, but she didn’t say anything. This was perfect. She was barely listening. It was now or never.

“I need to walk to school on my own now.”

There. It was out.

The words hung thickly in the air between them like dark clouds before a great storm. He studied her face in the flashes of television light. Her eyes remained still as she stared at the TV. But her mouth squirmed as she chewed the inside of her cheek. She was thinking.

“Mum.”

Finally, she looked at him, but there was doubt in her eyes.

He hadn’t prepared for this.

“I’m in year six,” he blurted out. “Next year, I’m going to be in secondary school!”

She shook her head. “I don’t think you’re old enough.”

“I am!” Sunil cried. “That’s not fair! Everybody else walks to school on their own. It’s only me!”

He sensed he was losing the argument. He could feel it slipping away.

“I can’t walk to school with Bapuji anymore. It’s embarrassing.”

He felt bad as soon as he said it. Maybe because he knew it was true.

The television suddenly seemed very loud, and the silence between them even louder. He waited nervously, wondering whether he had managed to convince her. It felt like a long time before she spoke again.

“Have you asked Daddy?”

His heart sank when he heard those words, because it meant he had lost.

“No,” he replied, barely above a murmur.

“Go and ask him.”

Sunil knew he wasn’t going to do that. Quietly he turned away, left the living room and started walking upstairs. He thought he heard her call his name, but he didn’t respond. Before he reached the top of the stairs, he stopped. He knew his father was in the box room on the computer. He could hear the whirring of the computer’s fan. And he knew his father would see him when he walked by. He didn’t want to be seen by his father. He sat down on the top step.

Why was it always up to him? Why couldn’t she make up her own mind for once?

I shouldn’t be afraid. It’s not like he’s ever hit me. I should just go in there and ask him.

But he was afraid. And that made him feel even worse. You weren't supposed to be afraid of your father. Not wanting to think about it anymore, he got up, crossed the landing as fast as he could and went into his room, closing the door quietly. Walking over to his cupboard, he got out his stuffed elephant, Humphrey, and lay on his bed.

Humphrey was grey, with big floppy ears and black eyes made out of beads. He'd been given to Sunil when he was four, and he had named him when he was six. His full name was Humphrey Bogart.

Sunil knew he was probably too old for cuddly toys. And if any of the boys at school could see him right now, they would laugh. But he pushed those thoughts away. There was no one else here—except for Humphrey. And he held him even closer.

2 The Boys

Alex put his comic down and turned to Sunil.

"Who would win," he asked, "out of Batman and Iron Man?"

A tricky question. A good question.

It was lunchtime, and Sunil and Alex were sitting in their usual spot, with their backs against the redbrick wall of the school.

"Well," began Sunil, "they are both really rich and smart. So that's even."

"But Iron Man can fly," said Alex.

That was true.

"And shoot lasers from his hands," he continued.

That was also true.

"Plus, he knows all the Avengers."

Sunil shook his head. "That's cheating."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is. You said who would win out of Batman and Iron Man."

"So?"

"Not Iron Man *and* the Avengers."

"I'm just saying he knows them."

"It doesn't count. You said—"

"What are you guys talking about?"

The voice came from above.

Sunil looked up to see Will looming over them, a rolled-up comic in his hand.

Alex grinned. "Who would win out of Batman and Iron Man?"

Will grinned back.

"Easy," he said as he sat down on the other side of Alex. "Batman."

"Yeah?" replied Alex.

"Yeah. Think about it. Iron Man can fly and do all this cool stuff, but it's all powered by his suit. If Batman could hack his suit, then he could stop him."

"True," agreed Alex. "True."

Hearing them talk like this made Sunil feel uneasy. It was how he and Alex talked . . . how best friends talked. Ever since the start of the year, Sunil had seen them together more and more. Wherever he and Alex were, Will was now there too.

And it's all because of that stupid story.

Sunil was sure of it.

It had happened during the last week of school, before the summer holidays. Miss Graham had asked them to write a story about anything they wanted. And Will had chosen to write one about Batman. Sunil remembered sitting there, pen in hand, looking at his blank page, trying to think of something, *anything*, to write about. And he remembered looking up and seeing Will with his head down, scribbling away like he'd become possessed, as if the words were pouring out of him and couldn't be stopped.

When Miss Graham told the class they could put their pens down, he ignored her and kept going. Sunil couldn't believe it. He was sure Will was going to get into trouble. But the crazy thing was . . . she let him!

By day two, the whole class had begun to take notice. People were stopping by his desk, looking over his shoulder, asking what it was about. How could you possibly keep writing for two days straight? What was in there?

By day three, people had started taking bets on how long he would keep going.

By day four, he had become a legend.

It wasn't fair, Sunil thought. Why was he allowed to do whatever he

wanted? And why did Miss Graham let him? Instead of being angry (like she was supposed to be), she was happy. Clapping her hands and saying things like, “Isn’t it great? We have a writer among us!”. It just wasn’t fair. And now look what had happened.

“The new issue came this morning,” said Will with a smile, unravelling the comic in his hand.

ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN ISSUE 5

“Yes!” cried Alex.

Will opened the comic between them.

Sunil tried to lean in and read it too, but it was just a little too far away. He wondered if Will had done that on purpose. He guessed he probably had.

But what could he do?

If he said something, would it start a fight? What if he ended up crying? He couldn’t risk that happening. Not in front of Alex. And so he did the only thing he could do.

He pretended.

That he was reading it too, that he was one of them. And hope with all his might they didn’t notice.

3 Intruders

Hit him! Come on! Hit him!

This was it. The final boss. He was nearly there.

Just. A. Few. More. Strikes.

“Sunil!” called his mum from downstairs.

He ignored her. This time he had it.

“Sunil!”

But his health bar was dangerously low. One more hit, and he’d be dead.

“Sunil!”

C’mon! I’m so close!

“Sunil!”

“WHAT?”

“Come downstairs.”

“IN A MINUTE.”

“Come downstairs. NOW.”

“IN A MINUTE, I SAID.”

He heard her familiar footsteps coming up the stairs. *Why now?* Why did she always have to pick the exact worst time to disturb him? “I SAID IN A MINUTE!”

She opened the door and waited. He could feel her watching him. “There are people downstairs,” he heard her say. “Come on.”

With great pain, Sunil paused his game, pulled himself away from the screen and turned to the door. “What people?”

But she had already gone.

Now that he thought about it, he had heard the doorbell a while ago. And there had been voices. But what did they have to do with him? It was a Saturday morning. Nobody came to see him on a Saturday morning. Who was down there?

As he made his way downstairs, he noticed two pairs of shoes in the hallway. Shoes he did not recognise. One pair were large and brown, the other pair much smaller. Converse. Bright red.

Turning into the living room, he saw three people at once: his mum, Sophie and Sophie’s mum.

What was going on?

Sophie was in his class, and he knew that she lived only a few doors away. He would see her sometimes, walking past his house. She had a lisp and was bullied for that, because sometimes she spat when she talked. He wasn’t sure if she had any friends.

“Hi, Sunil,” said Sophie’s mum, smiling.

She had bright blue eyes and short brown hair. She looked young for a mum, Sunil thought. Sophie was standing behind her, looking sullenly at the floor.

“So,” Sunil’s mum began, “Me and Claire have been talking.”

Claire? Was that her name? It sounded strange to hear his mum speak like that.

“And we think it would be a good idea if you two walked to school together.”

Before Sunil had the chance to think or feel anything, he saw Sophie scowl and turn her head away, and he felt a rage go through him.

Why are you angry? What's wrong with me?

“What do you think?” asked Sophie’s mum.

Silence.

“It means you can walk to school on your own now,” said Sunil’s mum. “Like you wanted.”

The two children refused to speak.

“I think it’s a great idea,” declared Sophie’s mum.

* * *

They trudged along in silence.

It was Monday morning. The first day, Sunil thought, of many days where he would have to do this.

He glanced at Sophie, but she was looking straight ahead.

She acts as if I'm not even here.

With some effort, Sunil forced his feet to move faster.

And faster.

And *faster*.

Until a gap started to open up between them.

As he edged further and further away, he smiled to himself in victory. But then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of her. She was catching him up! He turned to her in surprise and saw her jaw clenched and her face set, looking straight ahead.

And before he knew it, they were side-by-side and racing.

As he felt the muscles in his legs stretching to their limit, a hotness began to build around his ears, and sweat dripped from his brow.

The school loomed in the distance.

But then Sophie started to move ahead. This took a moment for Sunil to understand. How could she – a *girl* – possibly be quicker than him? He tried to move his legs quicker, to use more force and generate more power, but it was impossible.

Gradually she edged away, and when there were a few feet between

them, Sunil finally gave up. Bent over, with his hands on his knees and gasping for breath, he looked up. The only thing he saw were her hands, which were gripped tightly into fists by her sides. He knew then she would not turn back to look at him.

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE HIDDEN LIFE OF SUNIL PANDYA

by Priyesh Shah

PITCH:

A coming-of-age story about a boy who becomes friends, in secret, with the class outcast and learns, through drawings comics, to overcome his fear of exclusion and save the only true friendship he's ever had.

SYNOPSIS:

Ten-year-old Sunil is feeling the pressure to walk to school on his own. But, after asking his parents, his plan backfires when they announce he's to walk with Sophie, the class outcast who lives on his road. Despite a frosty start, their friendship grows in secret. They end up creating a comic together, which Sophie decides to sell in school. Confronted by her bullies, Sunil denies any involvement and watches as she's humiliated. Afterwards, he feels too ashamed to apologise. Rather than admit his actions, he'd sooner let the friendship slip away. It's not until he feels compelled to create another comic, one that allows him to express the things he's pushed deep inside – that he was a coward, that he was scared, that he wasn't brave – that he's set free and able to apologise. He just hopes that it's not too late.

BIOGRAPHY:

Priyesh is an aspiring children's author living in Bristol. His middle-grade book is based on his experiences and memories of childhood – of being an only child, happy in his own world but, at the same time, being bullied in school and having nobody to talk to, and of being a second-generation immigrant.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'Beautifully explores the dynamics of friendship. Enjoyable and relatable.'

Contact: prishah86@gmail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

AS DREAMS ARE MADE

By Elizabeth Fowler

1.

Dusk has fallen by the time we leave Satisfaction. We judder our way out between skyscrapers washed in pink and gold light. Neon signs blink against the deepening sky. I press my face to the glass, feel the chilled air creep through my hood. My beautiful city, my home, is slipping away from me, and I don't know if I'll ever see it again.

The train gathers pace, propelling us into the suburbs. Not my suburbs—my family live north of the city—but one burb is much like another. On the far side of Satisfaction, my parents, brother, and sister will be sitting down to dinner in a house just like these. The same square box, with its white-fenced lawn doused by a regulation sprinkler. The same deserted streets. My family, living their lives without me.

I turn away from the window, biting my lip. At the far end of the carriage, two guards are gossiping like a pair of fishwives. I know one of them—he's the visor-wearing bastard who dragged me out of the Foundation at 5am this morning. The other I don't recognise, but he keeps looking at me. It's obvious they're talking about me. Are they that dim they think I can't see them through my hood?

'Gentlemen?' I call along the carriage.

They wince like two startled dogs. Unknown guard slips through the door into the next carriage, while Visor comes striding down the gangway, dripping sweat and machismo.

'Problem, Camino?'

'You tell me.' I look up at his glistening pink jowls. We've been acquainted less than a day, but he already gives me this feeling like ants are crawling under my skin. When he stares blankly, I explain, 'You were talking about me. I'd like to know what you were saying.'

An obscure look touches his face. I would have said nerves, but that

makes no sense. Why would he be nervous of me?

‘You’re paranoid, girl,’ he says, recovering himself. ‘Missing your meds, is it?’

‘No.’

‘Don’t worry, they’ll sort you out at the quara.’ His eyes drift across the carriage, falling on the girl opposite. He sweeps a languid gaze up and down her body, probing the corner of his mouth with his tongue.

The train lurches.

‘Jesus!’ Visor grabs a bench. With a volley of curses, he struts off into the next carriage.

I watch him go, my annoyance threaded with growing alarm. He’s not wrong about the meds. Yesterday’s tranqs must have worn off by now, and this morning’s prescription got lost somewhere in the chaos of our departure. The opposite bench is telescoping away from me, the demon panic starting to bite.

Damn.

Why did that bastard have to mention the quara? I can only cope with this journey if I put a total mental block on our destination.

Come on, Ariel. Get a grip.

I need to find an anchor: any ordinary object to bind me to the train. I close my eyes, breathe in for the count of three, out for five, open them again.

Still here. An ugly yellow strip-lamp flickers overhead. The partition door has been left open, and a cold wind blasts down the aisle, carrying the stench of dust and engine oil. The wooden benches are organised in pairs facing each other—two rows, one on either side of the carriage. Each pair could hold six people, but there is only me in my section and the one girl opposite. She’s watching me through her hood, seated upright like a ballet dancer, wearing a bright pink miniskirt over smooth, tanned legs. Dozens of silver and turquoise bangles clink around her hands, which are the most perfect hands I have ever seen.

The miniskirt is a bold choice for this journey, but I’m not about to judge. We all got dressed in a hurry. Besides, her perfect hands are the anchor I need. Panic ebbs away as I lean back in my seat, watching the sun sink beyond the city limits.

I must have fallen asleep for a while, as I come round groggily to darkness outside, the train racing along a cliff-top. Ocean stretches to the horizon, black except for the ribbon of light cast by an almost full moon.

Fear tasers me wide awake. Someone is standing at the end of the carriage.

Visor?

No, this person is wearing a hood. He's one of us. Only there's something about him that feels all wrong. His body is draped in a black cloak, like a shroud rippling in the breeze. I can't see his eyes, but I sense they're fixed on me.

I stand up, clasping the back of my seat to stop my knees buckling.

He doesn't move. Just hovers in the compartment door, watching, waiting.

Gripping each bench in turn, I advance along the aisle. My mind is a blizzard of white noise, but I keep going. Whoever he is, I'll meet him face on, and then—

'Hey!'

There's a boy on the bench beside me—a skinny black kid in a T-shirt and chinos, his body brimming with nervous energy.

'Are you OK?' he asks.

I look back down the carriage.

The hooded figure has gone.

'I . . .' I genuinely have no idea. 'Did you see someone just then? Standing in the doorway?'

The boy jumps up, studies the length of the carriage, sits down again.

'Nope.' He jerks his head at the opposite bench. 'Join me?'

This is highly prohibited; we're not allowed any kind of communication with each other until we reach the quara. Screw that. My heart is shuddering like a poisoned rabbit. With a quick glance over my shoulder, I duck down onto the bench.

'I could swear I saw someone. A guy in a black cloak and hood.'

'Hmm,' says the kid, like he's really thinking about it. 'Perhaps it was a hallucination? Did you get your meds this morning? I didn't.'

'No.'

He shrugs. 'That's probably it, then. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about.'

Could he be right? It would be my first proper hallucination in weeks if so. I usually recognise them for what they are, but I barely slept last night. Between that and the meds withdrawal . . . I could cry. Or laugh. It was just the drugs wearing off. Just an ordinary hallucination.

And now I feel like an idiot, freaking out in front of this kid I don't know.

'I'm Hemiunu, Hemi,' he says.

'Ariel, Ari. Sorry about that.'

'It's fine.' I can hear the grin in his voice. 'Happens to me all the time.' He pauses. 'You could always go to the toilet.'

'Sorry?'

'Bathrooms are calming, don't you think? Only, don't go to the nearest one. Someone threw up in there and the cleaners haven't been yet.'

'Ah.' I sniff the air. Above the sourness of my breath, I do detect a faint tang of vomit. 'Gross.'

'We'll be stopping tomorrow morning. They need to restock the train, and they'll let us off for showers.'

'Really?' A shower stop seems unlikely. I consider asking where he got his information, but the person on the far side of the compartment has pricked up their ears. Time to draw this peculiar conversation to a close. 'Thanks for the advice, Hemi. Catch you later.' I slip out through the partition door.

He's dead right about bathrooms. Even this poky toilet cubicle with suspicious stains on the floor helps me feel calmer. It's the one place I can be alone, unobserved. I press my palms against the cool door, breathing slowly but not too deeply.

It must have been a hallucination. That figure was so weird, his disappearance so fast. It's the only thing that makes sense, though I don't love that someone else realised before me. He seems like a smart kid, Hemi. I hope he's right about the shower stop.

Back in my seat, dinner has arrived—a plastic tub of vegetable lasagne, curled and burned around the edges, stone cold in the middle. I manoeuvre a few forkfuls under my hood before giving up and falling asleep again.

This time I'm out until daybreak. I wake up to muscle cramps and an endless steppe of dry grass and dust outside. The sun has just broken the

horizon, but the train is already heating up like a glasshouse. The remains of last night's lasagne congeal in their tub on the floor, now heaving with cockroaches.

This train is a cesspit.

A server brings us breakfast. Using tongs, he delivers a hardboiled egg with green-ringed yolk and plastic-wrapped slices of bread into my outstretched hands. They taste as unpleasant as they look, but I'm too hungry to throw them to the roaches.

The temperature rises to just shy of intolerable. Further down the carriage, breakfast sounds give way to long sighs, the rustle of clothes being shed, and the thud of shoes being kicked across the floor. I strip down to my tank top and jeans but keep my trainers on for the sake of the girl opposite. She has removed her sweater and is perched on her bench in a tiny white vest, her perfect hands folded in her lap.

Outside, dust gives way to sand, pockmarked by lumpy cacti. The sky is an endless vault of blue. It must be a beautiful day in Satisfaction. A day for swimming at the city beach, or driving out along the coast road, three of us squashed in the back, Dad with his elbow hanging out of the widow, Mum singing along to the radio.

Do my parents know I'm being transported today? Have they even tried to find out? They love me, in their way, but what with the fuss of getting Dad to his chambers, Mum to Pilates, Ferdy to tennis and Mira to cello, they've probably forgotten all about me.

Such was my life.

2.

My name is Ariel Camino. I am seventeen years old, and I am a Diseased person.

I don't know how or when I became infected, but I remember the day I discovered I was not like other kids. I was twelve at the time, which put me three years below the average age of first episode and two years above the youngest ever documented case. Nobody gets the Disease in adulthood; the few reported cases always turn out to be people who have managed to hide their symptoms. People like me.

My parents weren't as crazy as some parents, but they enforced the law with vigour. No contact sports, no sharing of food, or clothes, or make-up. Strict infection control measures in school and no gathering in groups of more than four at any time. Curfew at seven every night. No physical contact with other kids. No kissing, no touching and absolutely no sex whatsoever until the age of eighteen.

At twelve, most of this meant nothing to me.

It was winter. Not a typical Satisfaction winter of torrential downpours and driving winds, but the kind of winter you read about in books from years ago, when the ground froze solid and sometimes it even snowed. My breath billowed in clouds above my head. The leaves of the palm trees lining the pavements shimmered with frost, and I was enchanted.

It must have been a Saturday; I'd been at the track and was still wearing my running kit as I walked home with Dad. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck, making me shiver. I don't remember where Mum was, or the car for that matter, but walking home was unusual. The streets carried a risk of bumping into other kids, and although most pavements were wide enough to pass at a good distance, you never knew how people would behave.

We saw barely four or five others that morning, all adults. Dad was in a mood about something or other. I think I was driving him crazy (*For God's sake, Ariel, it's just a bit of frost!*) but nothing could dent my happiness. It was Saturday morning, there was chocolate cake at home, and the street looked like something out of a picture book.

And then everything changed.

It's hard to explain this to someone who has never experienced it. Derealisation, depersonalisation, hallucinations—we all know the names of these things, yet I didn't recognise them when they happened to me. The world didn't become less real but more so. I could feel the earth breathing through the soles of my feet. The only thing that faded was the shape of my father walking a few paces ahead of me.

These symptoms are supposed to be frightening, but that was not how I experienced them. I felt blessed, euphoric. For the first time, I was seeing the world as it truly was.

I must have stopped walking. I was aware that Dad had turned round in

front of me. He was saying something, but I couldn't hear what. A stag had appeared behind him, strolling out across the road. It was brilliant white in colour, right down to its antlers. I knew it wasn't real. It snuffled at the ground for a while before looking up at me. It flinched as if surprised to see me, and then it was gone.

'Ariel, what's wrong? What's going on?' Dad was snapping at me with the kind of concern that sounds like anger.

'Nothing,' I managed to say. 'I feel a bit sick. I just need some water.'

I have no idea how that lie tripped off my tongue. It wasn't until several days later I realised I had experienced a Disease episode, but some part of me must have known better than to tell Dad the truth. I am eternally grateful to that part of me. It saved me from being snatched away from my family as a twelve-year-old child. It allowed me five more years of a roughly normal life.

Dad stared at me while I scrambled in my bag for my water bottle. If I had known what was happening, I think I would have given myself away. Not knowing, I managed to convince us both it was just dehydration. We walked the rest of the way home together, and the episode wasn't mentioned again. Not until five years later, when a softly-spoken doctor in a plush office dragged my life story out of me.

The first time I concealed an episode it was by accident, but every time after that was intentional. I put other kids in danger of infection and my parents at risk of prosecution, but what really was the alternative? The Foundation? The quara? How could any twelve-year-old cope with that?

I hid the truth about myself for as long as possible, but to contain this thing is to carry a stick of dynamite inside you. You know one day it's going to explode.

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

AS DREAMS ARE MADE

by Elizabeth Fowler

PITCH:

Are you the dreamer or the dream? Betrayed by those she loves and exiled to the desert, Ari (17) must question everything she knows to uncover the truth of the Disease before it kills her.

SYNOPSIS:

The Disease has ripped through Satisfaction city, infecting its teenage citizens with hallucinations, sensory overload, and dissociation from reality. Ari (17) has always managed to hide her symptoms, until a curfew-breaking night with her crush ends in a devastating betrayal.

Ari is snatched from her home, detained in an underground Medical Foundation, then shipped out by train to a quarantine town (quara) in the desert. Under the constant watch of jumpy armed guards, she finds liberation from the punitive rules that governed her life in the city. She makes new friends and becomes romantically involved with Elektra, a tough girl from a rough part of town. She also makes an enemy of the quara's alpha bitch.

However, a bigot with a grudge is the least of Ari's problems. A mysterious cloaked figure has stolen her medical records and stalked her to the quara. The doctors suspect she is complicit in the theft, perhaps even planning to sabotage their research programme. Meanwhile, her symptoms are worsening, and her new relationship is rocked by the discovery that Elektra is being abused by a guard.

With nowhere left to turn, Ari and Elektra stow away on a train back to Satisfaction, seeking answers at the Foundation. But the revelation of her stalker's identity, and news of his death six months earlier, threaten Ari's already fragile grip on reality. Has she fallen prey to a dangerous imposter, or is her entire world nothing more than an illusion?

BIOGRAPHY:

Elizabeth Fowler has been variously a Bookseller, TEFL Teacher, Publishing Assistant, and Neuropsychology Researcher. She currently lives

in Scotland with her wife, wrangles data for a living, and edits fiction for a literary journal for kicks. *As Dreams are Made* was inspired by her longstanding interest in the nature of consciousness. It was written during a global pandemic.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

‘Strong writing. A different voice.’

Contact: lizziefowler2003@yahoo.co.uk

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

HIGH ACHIEVERS

By Allison Mandra

ONE

Red

Red was first. They found him face down in the river that cuts through Barton Woods, too much alcohol running through his veins. Pooling might be more accurate. After all, his heart wasn't pumping anything anymore by the time they turned his body over. There won't be any investigation into foul play. He's just another drunk teenager that made bad decisions. I'm okay with that. The type of foul play involved in Red's death isn't the kind a police officer will understand.

Plus, he technically did make bad decisions. We all did. Me more than anyone. And yet, I'm still alive, and Red is gone. That's the part that hurts the most. Red didn't have to be the one to die.

Mom thinks I should see a therapist. *He was your oldest friend, Paige. You need to process it. You need to cope*, she says. She's probably right, but she's such a hypocrite that I can't take anything she says seriously.

Iris is supposed to talk to someone too. That makes more sense. For Iris, Red was a childhood best friend and high school sweetheart wrapped into one. It's safe to say she's not handling it well, which is fine.

For me though, counselling won't do much good. It's hard to cope when I know who's next.

TWO

Denial

The cafeteria smells like burnt cheese product and industrial cleaning supplies. I've got my earbuds in to avoid how quiet it is—like everyone sucked in their breath at the news, and now they've forgotten how to exhale. The whole school's been like that all week. Just hushed voices and sneakers

squeaking against linoleum rather than the usual thick chatter. It's early October, and outside there are half-bare tree branches churning in the wind. We learned in AP environmental last year that trees communicate with each other—warn each other of coming dangers. Sometimes, I wonder if all that frantic branch waving is them trying to warn us too.

I grip the straps of my backpack a bit tighter and scan the tables for Iris. I catch a few eyes staring at me before they quickly dart away. I shouldn't let it get to me. Everyone knows Red and I were close. But I've been on edge since the summer, and the knowledge I'm being watched like some curious grief machine isn't helping things.

Iris isn't sitting with the soccer girls or at the guy's lacrosse table—though there's no reason she would be there without Red. And she's not at the small round table the three of us used to claim when the two of them weren't putting in face time with their respective teams. Those were always the best lunches, even if I was a third wheel after Riley abandoned us.

Finding someone to eat lunch with is the least of my worries today. Even with an AP physics test waiting for me after lunch and a lit review for my senior capstone project due in a few days, all I'm focused on right now is finding Iris. She's been responding to my texts with one-word answers since Saturday, and this is the first time she's been back at school all week.

I'm actually a bit relieved she's not in the cafeteria. These watchful eyes and painfully fluorescent lights are making me nervous. A few weeks ago, Red said he felt safest when he was around people, but that didn't help him much on Saturday, and it just makes me feel exposed.

I take a steadying breath and start toward the exit when a hand grabs my arm just above the elbow. I flinch as I whirl around only to find Iris staring at me.

I curse under my breath and yank out one of my earbuds. "Did you have to sneak up on me like that?"

"I called your name like five times, Paige," she says, a hint of annoyance in her voice—like talking to me is the last thing she wants to be doing. Her eyes are swollen and red, and there are plum-colored crescents pooling beneath them that give away how tired she is. For some reason, they

make me think of Red and how he must have looked when they found his body—bloated and discolored. It’s a sickening thought, so I push it away and refocus on Iris.

“We need to talk—”

We both say it at the same time, and I can’t help but give her a relieved smile. Maybe Iris is finally taking things seriously. Maybe she’s finally willing to admit we’re in deep shit.

She doesn’t smile back but strides over to our usual table and tosses a brown paper bag onto it before clunking down into one of the seats. I take another breath before following her. I can put up with the cafeteria and its curious eyes a little longer if it means Iris will stop ignoring me.

“So . . .” I say, eying her carefully. I need this conversation to go right, but it’s not going to be an easy one.

Her black hair is barely brushed, and she’s got a bit of coral lipstick smudged off the side of her mouth. Frankly, she looks a mess, but I’m not one to judge. My hair has been thinning since the summer—long, dull brown strands shedding away at the slightest touch, clogging the shower drain every morning and clinging to my clothes throughout the day. The dermatologist chalks it up to stress. He says it’s common among ambitious high school students. And maybe he’s right. School, coding competitions, college applications. It adds up. But it’s obviously more than homework and extracurriculars that are causing my stress.

“So . . .” Iris repeats back at me with a grimace. “I guess this is where you try to blame my boyfriend’s sudden death on me?”

My lips part in confusion. “Of course not,” I say, and I mean it. If there’s anyone who deserves blame, it’s me. “I just want to talk about what happened and about what we need to do next.”

Iris huffs a bit of air out her nose and then bites her bottom lip. “Fine. Tell me what happened,” she says flatly. “You were at the party with him.”

I nod, my hands fiddling with the cling wrap on my sandwich as I search for the right words. This is my chance to make Iris finally face the truth, but there’s not much I can say without blatantly lying.

“Red was drinking a little. We all were. But he seemed fine.”

“And then?”

“I didn’t see it happen, obviously,” I tell her, hoping she won’t hold that

against me. “But I guess he walked off into the woods and . . . and he didn’t come back.”

“Why didn’t you go look for him?” Iris asks.

I hesitate, annoyed by the accusation behind her words.

“You’ve been paranoid and raving about us being in danger for weeks, Paige. Didn’t you wonder why he didn’t come back?”

“Of course, but—” I pause to collect myself. I could tell Iris that Madison Wright had been flirting with Red all night, and that part of me assumed he had snuck off with her, but I don’t want to make things between us worse than they already are.

“I assumed he had gotten sick of the party and left,” I say instead. “He couldn’t stop talking about how you weren’t there.” It’s not a full lie. He was complaining to me earlier in the night about Iris’s all-consuming soccer schedule.

Iris looks down at her sandwich, and I hope I haven’t just made her feel guilty for not being there.

“Krissy told me something interesting during first period,” she says before I can backtrack.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes and instead tilt my head as if I’m interested in what our school’s notorious gossip queen has to say.

“You know that new kid, Sam?” Iris says as she peels a bit of bread away from her sandwich and then lets it fall on the paper bag she’s using as a plate.

I raise an eyebrow and nod, my interest actually piqued.

“Apparently he was at the party, and Krissy says he was feeding Red shots even after it was clear Red was past the point of control.”

“Iris,” I say slowly. This conversation isn’t going in the right direction, so I’ll just need to be blunt. “I was there. Red wasn’t out of control, and I didn’t see anything like that.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Iris,” I say her name again because I need to drill this in. I need to shake her out of her denial. “We both know what was behind Red’s death. And it wasn’t too many shots.”

“I can’t believe you seriously think that,” Iris says, her lips twitching like they do when she’s about to cry.

"I know you're scared, but pretending this is all going to just go away won't do us any good."

"But you said yourself you didn't even see anything."

"I didn't need to. We were warned, we ignored it, and this is what happened."

Iris pushes her sandwich away and fixes me with a disgusted look. She hasn't taken a single bite, and even though she's clearly annoyed with me, I can't help but wonder how she'll have any energy for soccer later. It's the only reason she's back at school today. It's been her dream since she was eight years old: play division one soccer at Stanford, make the national team by the time she graduates. But she can't play if she's absent from school, and if she can't play, the scouts can't see her.

It might sound crass, but that's something I've always admired about Iris. She'd never let a guy get in the way of her dreams, dead or alive. That's also how I know we're going to get out of this mess, together.

"See, I knew it. You're trying to *I-told-you-so* Red's death before we've even had his funeral," Iris hisses at me in a low voice. "And for something as juvenile as a game we played in seventh grade."

"It wasn't a game." I grit my teeth. "It was an agreement. And I don't want to believe it's real either. But if it is—if we just let ourselves consider for a minute that we ignored all the warnings—"

"Some friend you are. You should be grieving with me. Not concocting wild conspiracies and turning Red's death into some horror story."

"That's not what I'm doing." There's a bite to my voice, but I try to calm it. It stings to hear her accuse me of being a bad friend, especially when I'm trying to keep us both alive. And to suggest I'm not grieving is just plain insulting. My grief might look different than Iris's, but it's there alright—like I've plunged through cracked ice, but instead of drowning in water, my lungs are filling up with guilt and regret. It's a combination that's slowly suffocating me. And the only way out—the only chance I have of finding my way back to the surface—is to keep moving. "I'm trying to be practical," I say. "Red was the first to sign his name—"

"—And I was second."

My eyes snap up. Riley is pulling a chair out next to me. Her brown hair is plated into a French braid over her shoulder, and she's wearing corduroy

overalls over a green lace shirt. This is the first time she's acknowledged us in weeks. At the beginning of junior year, she started splitting her time between us and the theater kids, and over the summer, when the first warnings came, she started ignoring us altogether. I guess Red's death was a wakeup call though. And rightfully so.

"I signed right after Red," she repeats.

"Not you too," Iris huffs, narrowing her eyes.

I try to keep my face neutral. I didn't expect to have Riley as an ally in this conversation, and I'm not sure yet if it's a good thing.

"You've got to admit it's all a little disturbing," Riley says smoothly, as if there's nothing out of the ordinary about her joining us for lunch. "I'm just not ready to shrug it off as a coincidence. And by the sound of your conversation, Paige isn't either."

"It's all connected," I agree. I'm still angry at her for disappearing on us, but it's not the moment to hash it out. "The messages we got over the summer were crystal clear," I add. As I do, Riley's right hand slowly grazes her throat and lingers there for a moment.

"I'm not having this conversation," Iris says, tucking her hands into the crooks of her elbows. "There was nothing sinister about Red's death. Paige is just paranoid and Riley, you're always looking for drama."

I can't help but roll my eyes at that. Riley is into theater, but she's anything but dramatic. She's all calm words and rational thinking—unflappable, even when things go wrong for her. It's not until she opens her mouth to sing that any emotions come rolling out, like she's been hiding them down deep until the right moment.

"Call me paranoid all you'd like, but you're the one in denial," I push back. "And every second we waste is a step closer to us meeting the same fate as Red."

"Red died because he passed out in the river," Iris says. Her voice is stretched and angry, but there's water welling in her eyes. I want to comfort her—hug her and say it's alright—like I did when she and Red went on a break the summer before junior year. But there's no time for that anymore. I need to get Iris on board with my plan, or I'll lose her. And that means harsh words and a reality check.

"Get it together and face the facts, Iris," I say, my voice as firm as it can

be without snapping. “Five years ago, we made a deal with the devil. Now, he’s coming for us.”

THREE

Commitment

It was the Saturday after Thanksgiving when we made our big mistake. Seventh grade. A week after Grandma’s funeral.

Mom was hungover, though you couldn’t tell just by looking. Hair blown out. Black turtleneck tucked into a pair of neatly pressed green slacks. She cleaned herself up just fine. It was the empty bottle of vodka in the kitchen that gave her away. Not to mention her usual rantings in front of the television the night before about missed opportunities and wasted life.

“Never get pregnant,” she had told me, and it wasn’t the first time.

I had sat on the fraying armchair in the living room, my lanky, changing body sinking awkwardly into a cushion pit that had formed after years of use, wishing the blue glare of the television would swallow me whole.

“Children change everything.”

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

HIGH ACHIEVERS

by Allison Mandra

PITCH:

Four friends made a deal with the devil. Now, it's time to pay up. Paige (17) must decide: trust her friends or watch her own back. If she chooses wrong, her soul is the collateral.

SYNOPSIS:

Four friends made a deal with the devil: do his bidding, and their dreams come true. But as senior year begins, they learn that the deal was real, and it's time to pay up. 17-year-old Paige is a straight-A student that overachieves to compensate for an alcoholic mother that never wanted her. The devil has been sending Paige and her friends harrowing messages since the summer, but her friends are in denial.

When one of the friends is found dead after a party in the woods, she's finally able to convince the others, Iris and Riley, that they need to act. They go on the offensive, hunting for a loophole in the deal, seeking the advice of a local psychic, and reluctantly turning to their fervently religious classmate for help. But as the devil's messages become even more psychologically and physically disturbing, the girls' friendships begin to unravel, giving way to suspicions that they may not all be working toward the same goal.

Paige needs to decide if she can trust her friends and work with them to escape the devil's clutches or if she should focus on watching her own back instead. If she makes the wrong choice, the devil will make good on his threats and claim her as his collateral.

BIOGRAPHY:

Allison strives to write the types of stories that captivated her when she was growing up. This means whimsical quests, wild adventures, and twists of magic or mayhem that can turn a seemingly normal world upside-down. When not writing children's books, you may find Allison writing about economics instead. And when not writing at all, you will likely find

her hovering over a puzzle, studying up on French, or enjoying a hike in the woods.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'A great hook. Strong commercial potential.'

Contact: allison.mandra@gmail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

ALL YOUR NUMBERED BONES

By Sarah Bates

Chapter 1

In the country, you're supposed to see the stars. Not in Moanmourn. The sky above is black and empty. We've been on the road for two hours. The street lamps are gone, disappearing behind us in the car's rear-view mirror. I want to stretch out my legs but there's no room with all the boxes, my backpack on my lap and the suitcase of clothes at my feet. The radio hums with voices, talking about politics and football scores and traffic collisions and all sorts of things I don't care about. Mum won't put music on. She says it makes her feel too jumpy, driving on roads like these. Roads that twist and turn in odd directions, where smooth tarmac gives way to dirt. I look out the window. Nothing but fields, empty except for a few skeletal trees. No sign of life.

We stopped for dinner about an hour ago, at a café off the motorway. The tablecloths were sticky plastic, and my cup had a tea stain along the rim.

'I'm sorry we didn't leave earlier,' Mum said, tearing the sugar packet with her teeth and stirring the granules into the murky liquid.

'I didn't think it would take so long to get everything into the car. We should have gotten rid of more stuff when we cleared out Gran's. Still, we'll have much more space in the new place. You're going to love your room.'

I speared a lukewarm chip with my fork and said nothing.

We still call the old house 'Gran's' even though it's not really hers anymore. It can't be, now she's dead. Still, it was hard to exist within the walls of 46 Rathbawn Road without thinking of her. How she was before she got sick, with her cloud of grey hair streaked with brown and those sharp eyes observing everything from behind her glasses. That's how I

like to remember her. Not like she was in the hospital, a skeleton in a paper nightie. Or when I last saw her, lying in the coffin. I hated how the funeral home covered her in makeup that made her skin look yellow and waxy. They'd done something to her mouth too, to make it look like she was smiling but it was all wrong. It looked nothing like the smile that had etched deep lines into her cheeks, that could make me feel like everything would be ok, even though I knew it couldn't be. Later, I realised they must have sewn her lips shut.

I hear my phone buzz and I feel around for it on the backseat, moving aside a bag full of old paperbacks and that horrible lamp Mum bought last Christmas in the sales. Mum likes to think she has a flair for decorating but sometimes her taste is questionable. My fingers find their way around the phone, and the screen glows green in the dark. A message from Emma: *'Are you at the new house yet? Text me your house phone number and I'll call you this week. Miss you at school Xxx.'* At least that's what I think it says. In Emma's texts, words lose their vowels or gain strange new consonants – 'are' is 'r', 'week' is 'wk' and 'school' becomes 'skul'. You'd never know English is her best subject.

Emma's trying to be nice but we both know that what she's saying isn't true. She won't call me during the week or miss me at school. She probably wouldn't even text me if she thought there was a chance that Michelle or Nicola could find out. For the last month before school broke up, they treated me like I'd contracted a particularly unpleasant disease, leaving the locker room as soon as I entered and overtaking me in the corridors. Emma couldn't come too close without risking contagion.

'We should be coming up to the village in a sec.' I look up from typing out my reply. If Mum hadn't said, I probably wouldn't have noticed. There's no sign welcoming us to Moanmourn. No sad little flower arrangement spelling out its name like we've passed in towns along the way. The village is just one street, a dull stretch of shops, pubs and squat pebbledash houses painted sickly shades of yellow and cream. We pass a shuttered takeaway, a butcher's, and a credit union. Blink and you'll miss it. Then we're back in the countryside again. The car climbs a hill and suddenly the landscape changes, the carefully maintained fields giving way to dark, wet marshlands stretching out as far as the eye can see. The bog.

‘That’s where that body was found,’ Mum says, lifting a finger off the wheel. ‘Prehistoric, or Celtic or something. I showed you the piece in the paper . . .’

I remember the picture. The body was a girl’s. Iron Age female, between 17 and 19-years old. The newspaper said it was the best-preserved specimen found in a century. Her skin had been tanned to leather and the acids in the bog had turned her hair flaming red, but her face was the same. Small nose, sharp chin, wide mouth, eye gently closed like she was sleeping. I didn’t like looking at her, crumpled the page up and threw it away. Something in the ground that long shouldn’t look so alive.

I wipe the condensation from my window so I can see out. It’s not like a bog you see in a schoolbook, ploughed into neat ridges. Tamed. It looks like it’s been abandoned. Yellow-green moss pokes out from the ground while twisted trees bow their branches towards the earth. A gentle breeze makes the long grass shiver, sending ripples across the pool of black water reflecting the face of the moon overhead. It is still and quiet, and for just a moment, the low thrum of my anxious thoughts is silenced. I know I can get through this year. Keep my head down, pass the exams, finish my application, and then I’ll be in London, at film school, making movies like I always wanted. September to June, nine months and I’m free. I’ll never have to come back to this nowhere place. Then I see it. The fire.

At first, I think my eyes are playing tricks on me. Like when you look into a bright light, and then have your vision clouded by spots. The longer I look at it, the more real it becomes. The flame isn’t coming up from the ground, but hovering above it, blue and ghostly. I watch as it dances back and forth, like a candle held by unseen hands. I reach for my camcorder. For me, it’s an instinct. It’s been that way ever since I was a little kid, when I first found Gran’s old Super 8 hidden at the back of a wardrobe. I’ve upgraded my equipment since then, of course. And my skills. I took out every book I could find on filmmaking at the library and spent the few pounds Gran would slip me every week on video rentals. Hitchcock, Kubrick, Lynch. I’ve seen them all. You have to learn from the greats.

I unstrap my seat belt and roll down the window, the wind whipping against my face as I lean out of the car. I press record and twist the lens to zoom. My first thought is that there’s someone out there. A person holding

a torch or maybe a lantern, their body swallowed up by the darkness and the black soil. What would they be doing out there, though? It's late, almost 10 o'clock. It doesn't even look like the bog is used for turf cutting these days. The rusty gates are chained shut, and the little outbuilding facing out onto the road has broken windows. As I look out through the viewfinder, I see there's not just one flame anymore, but many, swaying back and forth in the darkness, casting an eerie glow on the trees behind.

Suddenly, a car comes careening past us, speeding up to overtake. I barely have time to throw myself against the seat before it hits me.

'Jesus Christ!' Mum shouts from the front. She jumps forward, losing her grip on the steering wheel. We swerve from side to side. The discordant sound of a car horn pierces my skull. There's another car coming towards us, headlights boring through the windscreen. The road we're on is so narrow, they can't pass us. I can already see it happening. Our little car hurtling forward, the seatbelts straining to hold us back, the crash of metal on metal.

The driver presses the horn again, holding it down so it lets out an ear-splitting cry. Mum takes hold of the steering wheel, using all her strength to turn the car off the road. It strains and splutters but manages to mount the edge and collide against the hedgerow. The driver gives us a two-finger salute. Mum rests her head against the steering wheel, taking shallow breaths. I can still feel my heartbeat reverberating in my ears.

'What did you think you were doing back there?' Mum's trying to be angry, but all I hear is the fear in her voice. Her eyes are red and glassy as she turns to look at me.

'Do you know how dangerous that was? I told you I don't feel safe on these roads.'

'Sorry.' I keep my eyes fixed on my beat-up trainers. I don't have anything to say in my defence. To her, a few seconds of shaky footage isn't worth getting us killed. Mum shakes her head and turns back around. She turns the key in the ignition and the car rumbles back to life. I reach for my camera. It's ended up on the floor, the strap caught on the suitcase zip. I hope the lens isn't scratched.

I open up the LCD screen to playback the video. Maybe I can use it for something – B-roll for the short film I have to submit for my film

school application, now the move has thrown my first idea out the window. But something's wrong with the image on the screen. I can see the black expanse of peat, the half-dead summer wildflowers and through the canopy of gnarled and ancient trees to the empty fields beyond, but nothing else. The recording doesn't show the flames. Was there something wrong with the settings? I double-check but everything looks normal. It doesn't make any sense. The camcorder is brand new, a present for my 17th birthday. I watch the video again and again, half-expecting the picture to glitch and the fire to burst into life. It doesn't. It's like it was never there.

We're pulling into the driveway of the new house before Mum decides to speak to me again. By the entrance is a huge sign with a picture of a family – mother, father and a pigtailed little girl, all baring shiny, white teeth.

'Fenside Villas: modern country living, only sixty minutes from the city,' it screams in all caps. Most of the houses are still half-built shells, their vacant windows like eyes watching us as we drive down the solitary street.

'What were you doing with the camera anyway?' Mum asks. 'Did you see something?'

'No,' I tell her. Tell myself. 'It was nothing.'

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

ALL YOUR NUMBERED BONES

by Sarah Bates

PITCH:

A dark and twisty YA thriller inspired by ‘*The Blair Witch Project*’, for fans of Holly Jackson, Karen M. McManus and Kathryn Foxfield.

SYNOPSIS:

When 17-year-old Síofra moves to the isolated village of Moanmourn, she soon learns it’s a place where girls go missing. Like her new school’s golden girl, Katie Devlin, who vanished a few months before. It’s also a place where girls turn up dead. The body of a young woman has been found preserved in the bog, the victim of an ancient and brutal human sacrifice. Inspired by *The Blair Witch Project*, and armed with her camcorder, Síofra decides to document her investigation into Moanmourn’s dark heart. But here new friends can quickly become enemies and her closest ally, a clever and annoyingly attractive American exchange student, may not be all he seems. Can Síofra uncover the evil that lurks beneath the bog’s black earth, or will she find herself buried alive?

BIOGRAPHY:

Sarah Bates grew up in Ireland, but now lives in London, where she works in publishing by day and writes scary stories after dark. She is a 2023 WriteMentor mentee.

JUDGES’ COMMENTS:

‘Really atmospheric.’

Contact: sarahbateswrites@gmail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

CINDERS AND STARS

By Esther Scherpenisse

Chapter 1

I live for this: sweat pouring in my eyes, my fingers cramping, muscles pleasantly weary. I slide the red-hot metal toward me across the anvil and lift my hammer, striking the weld. It's taking shape now: the bell curve exactly how I envisioned it, the cooling metal only a few well-placed blows away from its final form. Once it's done, no one could possibly deny me.

"One more heat," I grunt, wiping my hands on my skirt. The fabric of my corset is so slick with sweat that the whalebone structure underneath has chafed the skin. "Make sure to keep it steady, all right?"

Niall nods. His brown curls stick to the skin at his temples. "We've got it. Don't we?"

Beside him, the spellbinder boy's eyes flash before he lowers his head in acquiescence. He's new; I'm sure he'll come around to this assignment. Niall treats the casters well. They get an extra meal from him on top of the two the spell masters provide, which is a generosity all of Ustad would mock him for if they knew.

I check the weld. Almost there, but not quite.

Outside, a clatter of hooves comes to an abrupt stop in front of the blacksmith's workshop. There's a thud as someone jumps off the horse, then a scramble of feet inside as Niall hurries to kneel and the spellbinder boy flattens himself to the ground in prostration.

"You shouldn't be here, sister," Alfirr's voice says.

I turn to where my brother stands with his arms crossed, the tails of his deep blue coat stiff enough not to be affected by the seasonal evening winds blowing in from outside. His formal attire: the one that says he spent the day as my father's representative, doing something dull, like meeting with the council masters or inspecting the Udin estate. Carrying on as if

he's already the next Earl. Best to go on the offensive. "Hello to you, too. Please stand aside."

Alfirr expels a hot breath, and my grip on the hammer tightens.

"You will have my full attention, brother, if you will just indulge me for one moment."

"It seems all I do is indulge you," Alfirr mutters, but he takes a step back. His gaze wanders over the char on my sleeves and my leather apron, and Niall who kneels beside the forge, supporting the metal skeleton of what will be a diving bell, once it's finished. Not that my brother would know. The glow from the forge tints Alfirr's bearded face the color of sunset.

Niall's eyes shoot back and forth from the anvil. "I beg your pardon, my honorable Lord Alfirr," he interrupts, bowing over his bended knee more for my brother's sake than mine, "my honorable Lady Kaisi. But . . ."

I nod, and he jumps up and tightens his grip on the frame. The set of his lips confirms it will need another heat, but I don't need to be told. I motion at the spellbinder boy, who scrambles up with one eye on my brother.

"One, two—" I start, and on three release the framework.

Just before it would have shattered on the ground like so much scrap metal, it shudders and is carried upwards instead as if by an unseen hand. The spellbinder boy frowns in concentration, his lips slowly moving as he whispers the words that send the diving bell toward the bright yellow coals of the forge. The acrid smell of burning penetrates the air, which seems to groan as it bends around the hot steel. Heat brushes my face as it passes. However many times I see a spellbinder work, I never really get used to it.

I shrug off my unease when the diving bell glows a hot white and floats back to the anvil, hammering until the weld takes. The boy lifts the frame again. His face is contorted now, lips trembling as they move. As soon as the diving bell thumps onto the workbench, he sinks to the ground and leans back against the wall, panting.

Niall retreats into the shadows to help him. Knowing Niall, he'll set the boy a plate and send him straight to bed after we're gone, and do the cleaning and oiling of today's tools himself.

I lower my hammer and right myself, breathing out as I turn to my brother. "Thank you."

“You should be at home, getting ready.” Alfirr speaks softly, though Niall’s too busy to hear us. Not that it would matter: he’s probably the only other person who knows about the silent dread creeping into my veins as my seventeenth birthday closes in. He knows why Alfirr has been indulging me. Which my brother would never do again if he knew what Niall knows.

I throw Alfirr my biggest smile and loosen my apron. “I will be ready.” If not, I will stand in front of the Circle in five weeks to pledge myself to a life of drudgery and abeyance. And most members of our esteemed ruling council will probably applaud me for it.

Alfirr taps a finger to the side of the workbench. His deep brown eyes survey the workshop: the forge smoldering and sending out intermittent puffs of smoke, Niall and the caster in the shadows. The boy sits back against the wall, his face blank as a frozen pond.

I stiffen. My brother’s far too observant. “You worry too much.”

“I will so as long you keep entertaining this—”, he waves a hand at the anvil, “this frivolous pastime. You know how important tonight is for—”

“—improving the position of Udin House.” I refrain from rolling my eyes: Alfirr calls it a child’s habit, and my case won’t be helped by him thinking of me as a child right now. “You’ve told me many times, brother.”

“Apparently not enough.” Alfirr’s always so sure he knows everything. ‘Frivolous pastime’. I’d like to see him apprentice to Ustad’s blacksmith. He wouldn’t make it a day, let alone four years.

I breathe in and out, timing myself by the angry thump of my heart in my ears. *Sona, give me strength. Aisne, warm my heart. Ayr guide my will. Eia clear my mind.*

It’s a spellbinder prayer; one I know our priests wouldn’t approve of, but it keeps my thoughts in my head instead of on my lips.

Alfirr turns earnest at my silence. “Sister, please: tell me you will not make a fool out of yourself or our House.”

Before I can reply, Niall steps out of the shadows. “My lord, I’m at fault. I should not have accepted her help on such an important day.”

Alfirr’s eyes narrow at the intrusion, and Niall lowers his head.

My brother looks back at me. “Next thing, it’ll be the caster coming to your defense.” He glances at the boy, who drags himself into prostration again, his forehead hitting the floor with a thump. “Though I suppose if a

spellbinder were so inclined, I could at least be sure they wouldn't act upon it." The boy's shoulders stiffen, and the corners of Alfirr's mouth turn up briefly. "Or perhaps this one would."

Niall steps in front of the boy, bowing deeply. "Forgive me, my lord. His bind is new. His powers stirred only a few weeks ago."

The boy's fists dig into the floor, but he keeps silent.

"Well," my brother says. "He'll grow into it. Some people could learn from that."

Is he suggesting Niall should be bound? A *craftsman*, dog-leashed as if he were a spellbinder?

Alfirr must read my indignation from my face, because he smiles, the rare kind that makes all the girls swoon over him and caused four of his handmaidens to be dismissed in as many years. Then he turns to Niall. "I apologize, patron. You know how highly our family values your master's work."

Niall inclines his head briefly, his expression inscrutable.

When Alfirr turns back to me, his smile disappears gradually as the evening sunlight, yet his tone remains soft. "I know you wish things were different, Kaisi," he says. "And I would love them to be, for your sake."

I'm taken aback, so I don't have a retort.

He places a hand on my upper arm. "But consider what opportunities lie in store for you once you tie yourself to a House as strong as ours."

I shrug off his hand. After years of apprenticing in secret, of getting up early and sneaking around and honing my skills as a builder, I should *rejoice* about getting to share the bed of some rube from the North? A vein in my temple throbs. "I have no interest in gaining a new title. Unless that title is master builder."

I have only a moment to savor the shock on his face before I register what I've just revealed, and my skin turns cold.

"Is that what you're . . .?" His eyes find the bell-shaped frame cooling on the workbench. "Are you working on some sort of . . . Argument to present to the Circle?"

"Why not?" I stick out my chin. "You've all done it."

"And you know all too well that is a man's prerogative, not a woman's." His lips press together in pity, and my stomach drops. He's not even angry;

he simply dismisses the most gorgeous thing I've ever built as though it's nothing. Just like they all will.

Nothing will ever change.

I quench the thought. "Once they see what I—"

Alfirr puts his hand on my arm again and squeezes it gently. "We each have our own duties to perform, sister. For the glory of our House."

I look down, my jaw clenching.

"Now," he says kindly, "let go of this fantasy. Clean yourself up. Come to dinner. I promise I will not tell Father."

I grit my teeth and nod, wordlessly going through the spellbinder prayer until the sunlight has swallowed him up outside and his horse sets off into a gallop up the city streets. Then I take a deep breath, hang my apron by the door, and plunge my head into the water barrel. The freezing cold is a relief.

When I come up, Niall stands at the door observing the crowd on the street, his round shoulders up against the door frame. People are closing up shops and lighting the lamps, which sputter to life behind their panes of glass. "You trust him?" The low sun highlights his curls with flecks of amber. "To not tell your father?"

I shrug, and a shower of cold water drips to the shoulders of my dress. Strands of wet hair stick to my cheek.

Niall pushes himself from the wall and hands me a towel, a twinkle in his eye. "I don't know what your brother was on about. You look ravishing."

I force a chuckle. "Careful. Or I might start holding you to protocol."

"I beg your utmost pardon, my honorable Lady Kaisi," Niall says, with a mock bow.

I wipe my face. The towel comes back covered in soot. Perhaps I *should* come to dinner like this; show the proctor from House Eld what they're buying. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"If you can't, I'll understand."

"I've seen what your master has on order." I wring out my wet hair. "You need me."

He waves away my words with a calloused hand. "That's not your problem."

There's an sudden uptake in the volume outside before the crowd

quickly moves to the sides of the street. I still at an approaching sound, which is simultaneously like the soothing murmur of a distant river and the subdued hiss of a den of snakes. A cohort of spellbinders passes, holding aloft a series of wooden crates stamped with the Udin family crest. Judging by the sweat on the spellbinders' brows, it's heavy. Another shipment of weapons, perhaps. I step behind Niall so their spell master won't recognize me. The man's hand is tight on his whip as he watches the edges of the crates, which skirt only inches past the first-floor windows. I'm sure anything the spellbinders break comes out of his profits.

When the crates' shadows have passed, the center of the street fills up again: tradesmen not fortunate enough to be allocated a spellbinder pushing carts, noblemen on horseback cussing everyone in their path. The Craftsman's Fifth always seems to come alive at closing time.

"Have you seen him yet?" Niall asks.

No need to ask who he's talking about: the rube. I make a non-committal sound.

"I could help." Niall's gaze is fixed on the red-tiled roofs that are about to plunge the side streets into the semi-dark.

"You're helping."

"I could do more. Look at how little time you have I—"

"You can't do more, or there's no point." If there even is a point. I swallow. House Eld's proctor was meant to arrive at the manor at midday. He will have been going over the contracts with my father all afternoon. It's as good as done. "I should let you get back to work."

"It's nearing Eventide. I'm done for the day." He shuffles his feet, shoving his big hands in his pockets. "And you don't have to act like you're fine."

He throws me a warm look of concern that brings a lump to my throat. I push it down with effort, and set my shoulders. "It's not final," I say, trying to convince us both. "Not for five weeks."

He doesn't reply, which is just as well.

Up the hill at the southern edge of the city, the lamps on the turrets of Udin Manor light up one by one, like early evening stars. The manor stands unyielding against the backdrop of the snow-capped Tissing mountains. Before long the actual stars will come out, followed by the swaying emerald

drapery of auroras in the sky, and I'll be expected to present myself at the dinner table.

Niall's char-blackened fingers graze my arm. His hand is warm, even through the fabric of my sleeve. "Anyone who's ever seen anything you build would be crazy not to accept you."

My throat tightens and I want to put my hand on his, but there are so many people on the street. It would be completely inappropriate, even discounting my impending nuptials. "Thank you."

"The ancestors will smile on you tonight," he says, his hand dropping down close enough to mine to almost feel his touch.

I swallow, and there's a dry click in my throat. "I'll let you know how it goes." I straighten to my full length, which is tall enough to look him in the eye. "Tomorrow."

The slightest grin cracks his lips, and he gives me one of his sideway glances that always makes my skin tingle. "If it pleases, my lady."

As soon as he retreats into the shadows at the back of the smithy, my shoulders sag.

Time to walk the line.

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

CINDERS AND STARS

by Esther Scherpenisse

PITCH:

Girl blacksmith with something to prove agrees to work for her father's killers to save her brothers from magical bondage.

SYNOPSIS:

Only five weeks until Kaisi is seventeen. Five weeks to convince her father and the ruling council she can do more than be married off to another noble family. Five weeks to use the blacksmith skills she's honed in secret to build something so astounding they'll have no choice but to make her master builder instead.

But then her father is killed, and everything changes.

The magic-wielding spellbinder caste breaks free from their bonds to the ruling families, hunting and capturing them all, including Kaisi's brothers. On the run and desperate to save what's left of her family, Kaisi offers her skills to a young spellbinder. To save her brothers' lives, all Kaisi needs to do is something that's eluded master builders for centuries: build a weapon that increases a spellbinder's magic.

It's a task impossible to resist, and not just for her brothers' sake: Kaisi will be a legend if she succeeds. But as she gets closer to a solution—and to her new spellbinder mistress hell-bent on revenge—finishing the weapon becomes harder to justify. Especially to the craftsman boy into whose char-blackened arms she ran when her father died, who followed her into captivity, and whose family might be the weapon's first victims.

Now Kaisi must choose how she will go down in history: as a legendary blacksmith, a loyal sister, a murderer . . . Or perhaps there are more ways than one to be remembered.

BIOGRAPHY:

Esther Scherpenisse is a writer, mom, and content marketer living near Amsterdam in the Netherlands. In the US, her fantasy story 'Long for this World' was published in Space and Time Magazine in 2018. The Dutch version of this story won the Harland Award for best speculative short

story. Besides writing she has a love for hiking, outer space, and musical theatre.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

‘Strong writing with great potential.’

Contact: esther.scherpenisse@yahoo.com

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE TOTALLY UNSOLVABLE MYSTERIES: LET SLEEPING PHONES LIE

By Natalia Godsmark

Things I have to explain EVERY SINGLE TIME I'm introduced to anyone new:

1. My name is Zosia, pronounced *Żo-SHA*. Not *Żo-Sah* and definitely not *Żo-see-ah*. It means Sophia in Polish – and since I was born in England, I've no idea why I wasn't just called that. Frankly, it would've saved me a bunch of hassle.
2. My mama is Polish, not bananas. The weird things she says are proverbs and phrases that honestly don't make much sense in Polish, let alone once they've been translated. They tend to stick, though – so much so that they're often the first thing I think of in any given situation. It does my head in.
3. Poland isn't in Eastern Europe. For some reason, everyone in England seems to make that mistake. It's actually right in the middle. Look at a map.

And now that's out of the way, I'll go back to what started this whole thing off: the world's most GIGANTIC argument.

1

Mówieczy byk pierdzi?

Am I talking or is a bull farting?

It was me who started the argument. It always was, I guess, and obviously,

I feel bad about that now. But if you'd told me a few weeks ago that Mama had a point when she was saying stuff like, "Phones can be dangerous, Zosia!" I'd have laughed in your face . . . then gone back to arguing with her.

It was the end of my fifth week of Year Seven, and I suppose I was feeling a teensy bit insecure about the number of friends I'd made so far (ahem – zero.) It wasn't that I was a total loser or anything – bullies didn't hang around school corridors waiting to shove my head in a locker – but my best friend had moved out of London when Year Six ended, and finding a new one was proving harder than expected.

What made it worse was that practically all my classmates had been given mobile phones when they started secondary school, and every five minutes there seemed to be a meme they found hilarious, or a viral dance they had to learn. It was like they belonged to some sort of secret society that I had no way of getting into.

Which is why, on the fifth Friday of term, I found myself gazing at one of Mama's many Jesus portraits at breakfast time, wishing the big man upstairs would help change her mind so I could finally get my hands on a phone.

"Am I talking or is a bull farting?" said Mama, jerking me back to the room. (This is a perfect example of one of Mama's weird sayings, by the way. I was pretty sure she made most of them up, but I stopped calling her out on it years ago because it always ended in a row.)

I pushed my glasses back up my nose. "What, Mama?"

"I asked if you wanted more applesauce."

I nodded, holding up my pancakes, and she dolloped another spoonful onto them.

"Mama, you know you said I couldn't have a mobile phone . . .?" I trailed off at the look on her face. Usually, I wished we were more alike; people said she had a 'remarkable face' because of her ski-slope nose and bright blue eyes. But just then, the only things worth remarking on were her pursed lips and furrowed brow. My eyes might be duller and my nose slightly longer, but at least I didn't look **THAT** grumpy.

She shook her grumpy head. "Stop drilling a hole in my belly; I won't budge."

"But I'm the only Year Seven without a phone. Everyone thinks of me

as that weird Polish kid who still lives in the 20th century. It's so uncool."

Mama's eyebrows knotted together. "There are more important things in life than being cool, Zosia."

"What about my safety? You're always saying London's more dangerous than your life back in Zalipie."

"Of course it is. The scariest thing in Zalipie was Krystyna Adamski's runaway goat. London's huge by comparison."

"Exactly." I tried not to look too triumphant. "London's dangerously huge. With a phone, I could call you if there was a problem."

"We're not in one of your Detective Dorota novels now, Zosia. There won't be a problem and you don't need a phone!" Mama swigged back the last of her coffee. Her eyes narrowed and a line formed between her eyebrows: it was the 'Mama glare' that should have told me not to keep pushing . . . but I was never great at taking her cues.

"I'm not asking you to pay for it. I saved my pocket money for months."

"You're throwing peas against a wall. I won't have you become one of those girls I see at the bus stop every day, staring at their phones like their eyes have been super-glued to the screens. When I was your age, we didn't need gadgets to entertain ourselves."

"You would have had a phone if you'd been raised here!" I yelled. "But you grew up in some stupid country where no one ever smiles. I bet they're all so miserable because their mamas won't let them have phones!"

I regretted the words the second they left my mouth. More than anything, my patriotic mama loathed the stereotype that Polish people never smile . . . and that was what took the argument from normal-sized to GIGANTIC.

For a moment, her mouth fell open like she was gobsmacked, and a tightness gripped my chest. Then . . . she let rip. About my not accepting who I am, about how using offensive stereotypes against her was NOT OKAY and about how if I wanted a phone, I had a funny way of showing I was responsible enough for one.

At last, she ran out of things to yell, and stormed out of the kitchen.

I picked up my school bag, not bothering to finish my pancakes. I shook so much as I crossed the road to the common between my house and school that for once, I was glad I had to walk to school alone. No amount

of Friday morning chit-chat would've helped me forget that argument.

But here's the thing: if I hadn't been so mind-numbingly furious, I wouldn't have crossed through the thicker part of the woods to avoid awkwardly trailing behind my classmates who didn't want me with them. And if I hadn't gone that way, I wouldn't have heard it.

Ping!

I stopped walking, whipping my head left and right, but I was completely alone in the woods. Still, I was certain what I'd heard: a mobile phone receiving a text.

The wind rustled the leaves on the trees and I set off again. Maybe it'd been in my head? Phones were all I could think about; maybe it was my brain's weird way of telling me I needed a new obsession.

Then I heard it again: *Ping!*

This time I knew it was real. Louder now, and much closer, it was almost like . . .

I looked down, frowning. Beneath my feet were several pebbles pressed into the earth in the shape of a cross. Or an 'X marks the spot'.

My heart sped up. This was like book five of the Detective Dorota mysteries, *Better Loot than Never*.

Checking there was no-one around, I bent down, reaching for a thick stick to use as a shovel. Then, I dug up the earth beneath the pebble cross.

Seconds later, I knew my instincts had been right. **NONE** of it was in my head. Poking out of my freshly-dug hole was the corner of a zip-lock sandwich bag.

With a gasp, I freed it from the earth.

How often do you wish and wish for something . . . only for it to fall into your lap?

Never?

Well, that's exactly what happened to me.

I let out a chuckle, shaking my head in disbelief. Inside the plastic bag was – you guessed it – a mobile phone. And it wasn't just any phone; this was the iDroid XD.

The phone of my dreams.

2

Kiedy wszedłeś między wrony, musisz krakać jak i one
When amongst the crows, caw as the crows do

So, the phone of my dreams had magically found its way into my life and there I was, standing in the woods like a pin in a fence. (I did say that Mama's phrases are always the first thing to come to mind in any situation. Don't ask me to explain them, though . . .)

I knew what I should've done with the phone. Everyone knows that if you find someone else's property you must hand it into the local police station. But something was stopping me.

It wasn't that it was the newest, state-of-the-art iDroid XD with bionic chips and 5G.

It wasn't even that my classmates had been talking about that model the day before. Robbie Charman said he'd suffer through six double maths lessons in a row to get his hands on one – and Robbie Charman HATES maths.

But that had nothing to do with why I wasn't trotting off to the police like the Good Polish Girl Mama had brought me up to be.

It was that I'd worked so hard to dig it out of the earth – but when I pulled it from the plastic bag and tapped the side button, the Home Screen came up straightaway. It wasn't password-protected.

It was too good a mystery to pass up.

I guess I should mention I've always been BIG into detective novels. Some kids love football, others fixate on influencers or popstars. For me, it's the *Detective Dorota* mysteries. There's something about the clues and plot twists in those books that I'm OBSESSED with – particularly because the main character, Dorota Dąbrowska, happens to be an eleven-year-old Polish girl with a somewhat highly-strung mother.

So, having stumbled across a mystery in my own life, there was NO WAY I was going to hand it over to the police without first figuring out what was going on.

I clicked on the contacts icon, but none were listed. There was nothing in the internet search history either, and no apps had been downloaded. If it hadn't been for the two pings I'd heard before, I'd have

assumed this was a brand-new phone.

But what was a brand-new phone doing buried in the woods near my school? Had it been stolen?

A siren howled from a distance and I jerked my head up. There was still no one about, so I glanced down again, my thumb hovering over the Messages icon. Wasn't it a total invasion of privacy to read someone else's messages? Or maybe that rule only applied when you knew whose privacy you were invading . . .

Taking a breath, I tapped the icon and two photos popped up onscreen: one of a tree with bright red leaves, and the other of a pile of books.

What the—?

I zoomed in to look more closely at the second photo. The books sat on a scratched, grey desk, which had square, metal legs like the ones we had at school.

School!

I'd been so absorbed by the phone that I hadn't noticed the time. On the first day of term, our form teacher, Mrs. Thomas, had gone off on one about how if we were late, she'd be sure to show us the same level of disrespect in return. We learned what that meant the next day, when Sam Adesina arrived two minutes after the bell rang: jokes at his expense, nit-picking everything he said, and belittling him ALL DAY.

I had enough on my plate without having to deal with that sort of embarrassment, so I legged it through the woods to the road opposite the prison. I sped down the road so quickly, I didn't notice a bald man running in the opposite direction until we collided. Picking myself up, I set off again, shouting a quick, 'Sorry' over my shoulder.

Then – just in time – I darted through the closing gates to the playground.

* * *

Panting, I reached my classroom, realising I was still holding the iDroid at the exact moment Selina Brown spotted it.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder like a dog might flick its tail at Crufts and said in the loudest voice EVER: "Tell me that's not the iDroid XD!"

My cheeks burned as I felt the eyes of all my classmates turn towards me. “It is.”

“No way,” Robbie Charman said, flopping back with a hand on his chest like he was fainting.

Sam, who sat in front of me, swung around. “Gimme a look.”

He took it from me, clicking the camera icon.

“The camera quality is sick.” He took a photo of Selina as she tripped over her chair to get closer.

Since joining Year Seven, not one person had chosen to sit beside me, let alone started a conversation – other than to talk about whatever assignment our teachers had set. Now, everyone was talking about MY phone, and I admit, it felt good. So good that at first, I didn’t notice Janek Nowak had joined us.

“You know,” he said loudly, “there are over 300,000 workers in the iDroid factory in Zhengzhou, China.”

Selina burst out laughing. “And the prize for Random Fact of the Day goes to *Google* Nowak.”

Janek sat down again, hiding his face behind his unfashionably long hair.

You might think that because Janek was the only other Polish kid at school, he was an obvious candidate to be my friend. Technically we had loads in common, what with our Catholic upbringings, the fact we both had to endure Polish School every Saturday, and that we spent more time than most people explaining our names (his is pronounced *Yá-neck*, by the way.) But in truth, he was so obsessed with facts – to the point where some of our classmates ACTUALLY thought his name was ‘Google’ – that I wasn’t sure there was anything more to him. So, although I was never flat-out nasty to him, we were definitely not mates.

Anyway, he sat down and I felt bad, and everyone else went back to talking about the iDroid – only stopping when Mrs Tyrant flounced in as the bell rang. Though I knew it wasn’t great to lie, I couldn’t help feeling chuffed that Selina had caught me with the iDroid.

A proverb Mama sometimes said shot into my head: *When amongst the crows, caw as the crows do*. I shook my head, annoyed I was thinking of it, but then realised it was right: I was trying to fit in. To become like the rest of

my classmates by having a phone.

So yes, I knew – absolutely – that I should have handed in the phone, but what with the awesome mystery surrounding it AND the fact my classmates were finally giving me the time of day because of it – well – I guess that's what made me decide not to.

And on reflection, it wasn't the best decision I've ever made.

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

THE TOTALLY UNSOLVABLE MYSTERIES: LET SLEEPING PHONES LIE

by Natalia Godsmark

PITCH:

Zosia LOVES detective novels, but her traditional Polish mama ensures her life is seriously unmysterious. Finding a coded message, Zosia can't resist investigating. But real-life mysteries involve real-life criminals, who threaten Zosia's and Mama's lives . . .

SYNOPSIS:

Eleven-year-old Zosia (Zo-sha) dreams of becoming a famous detective like Detective Dorota in her favourite mystery novels. Sadly, her traditional Polish mama is seriously overprotective, limiting any chance she might have for an adventure. When Zosia stumbles across a smartphone wrapped in plastic and buried in the woods by her school, she's thrilled. Scrolling through it, Zosia sees it's been wiped clean except for a photo of an unusual tree with a red cross over its roots.

Desperate to solve the mystery of what's buried beneath the tree, Zosia investigates with fact-obsessed Janek as her sidekick. The children soon discover that solving a mystery requires bravery, imagination and stealth – qualities Zosia feels she has in spades. Unfortunately, it also requires lying, forgery and apparently becoming the subject of viral memes . . . and all without Zosia's mama finding out and grounding her until her eighteenth birthday.

But Zosia and Janek aren't the only ones trying to solve the mystery. When an escaped convict and corrupt policeman discover what the children know, they threaten Zosia's mama's life if Zosia doesn't hand everything over to them. Zosia's read enough detective novels to know that would make her an accessory to a crime, so she must find a way to solve the clues fast and prove the policeman's involvement before they hurt her mama. In doing so, she must learn that life isn't a mystery novel – and it might not have a neat ending like the *Detective Dorota* books.

BIOGRAPHY:

Having been raised on a diet of dumplings and beetroot soup, and

surrounded by books throughout her childhood, Natalia combined these two aspects of her life – her half-Polish roots and her love for mysteries – resulting in a story about a Polish wannabe detective. Earlier this year she won the I am in Print MG/YA Novel Award and was long listed for the the Mslexia Children's Novel Award. She is currently a WriteMentor Summer mentee.

JUDGES' COMMENTS:

'A fresh, funny exploration of mature themes.'

Contact: ngodsmarkwriter@gmail.com

► [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

HONORARY MENTIONS

Although not appearing in this anthology, the following pieces received honorary mentions:

THE SUSPICIOUS BUREAU OF ACQUAINTANCES by Jules Aspinall

LUNA AND THE SKY GODS by Fran Benson

LIFECYCLE by Steve Blackman

HEATHER FIELDS by Jess Bleakley

STORM HEART by Kirsty Collinson

KINGDOM OF THE WILD by Jennifer Combes

PUPPET STRINGS AND INK-STAINED HANDS by Ruth Ennis

MARTHA MOONSTONE AND THE SIREN'S CURSE by Lorna Gill

THE LAST WITCH OF ATHERTON LANE by Elizabeth Goode

MOONCROSSED by Kirsty Hammond

THE THINGS THEY DON'T TELL YOU by Alka Handa

PEPPY PEGPICKER AND THE SPARKLE CHUNK

by Sharon Louise Hindley

THE GHOSTS OF PÈRE LACHAISE by Faye Holt

THE GHOST LIGHT by Claire Lomas

ABIGAIL AND THE GOLD OF THE ASANTE KINGDOM

by Melissa Quashie

SEA-BORN by Barrie D Stevenson

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



**Society of Children's
Book Writers
and Illustrators**

For more inspirational ways
to meet children's book writers
and illustrators, please visit

**[www.scbwi.org/regions/
british-isles](http://www.scbwi.org/regions/british-isles)**