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BOOKCHAT

NEWSLETTER

If you wish to pass this newsletter on to others, please feel free to do so. It is encouraging to note that there are already well over 50 subscribers.

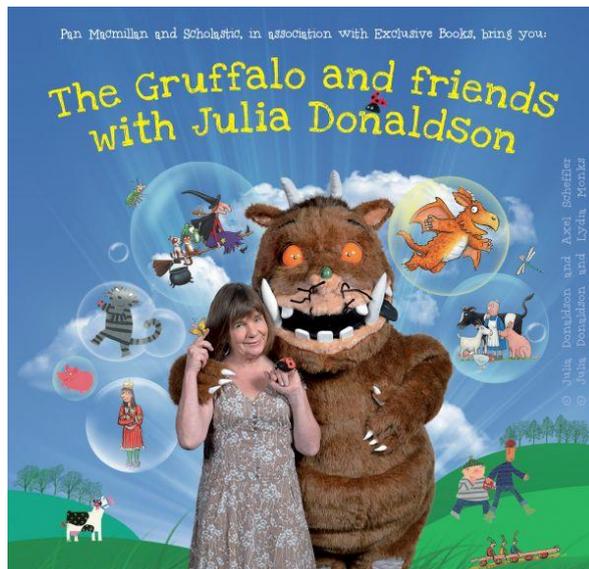
SELECTED HEADLINES



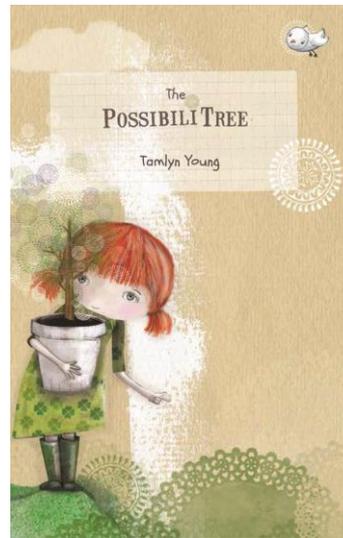
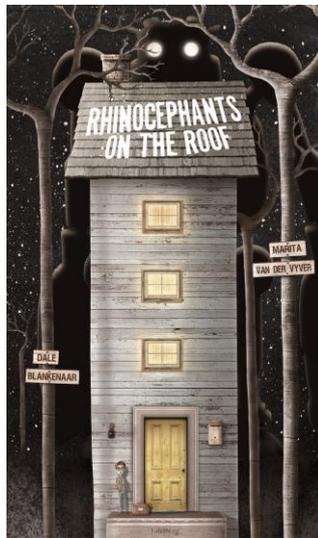
- Part of the New Year message from Wally De Donker, President of IBBY:
“Jella Lepman, founder of IBBY, wrote in honour of the first international children’s book fair in Munich in 1946, that children hold no responsibility for war, regardless of the side they are on. IBBY continues her work by working to protect the rights of the child on all sides.”
- IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People has announced the shortlist for the 2016 Hans Christian Andersen Award – the world’s most prestigious children’s book award:

Authors: **Cao Wenxuan** (China), **Louis Jensen** (Denmark), **Mirjam Pressler** (Germany), **Ted van Lieshout** (Netherlands) and **Lois Lowry** (USA).

Illustrators: **Rotraut Susanne Berner** (Germany), **Pejman Rahimizadeh** (Iran), **Alessandro Sanna** (Italy), **Suzy Lee** (Republic of Korea) and **Marit Törnqvist** (Netherlands).



- **Julia Donaldson**, author of *The Gruffalo*, *Cave Baby* and 120 others, Children’s Book Laureate in UK – need I say more? I was unable to meet Julia in person, but hundreds of people in Cape Town and Johannesburg had that pleasure.
- In my humble opinion, **Jay’s Best SA Books of 2015** are:



RHINOCEPHANTS ON THE ROOF by Marita van der Vyver, illustrated by Dale Blankenaar (Tafelberg 2015)

THE POSSIBILI TREE written & illustrated by Tamlyn Young (Bumble Books 2015)

Both books have stunning artwork by artists whose work I hope to follow in the years ahead. *Rhinocephants* is spooky and imaginative; *Possibili Tree* is creative and imaginative.

- **South African Children's Books** (in English). These figures are based on the number of review copies I have received. They are not, of course, all the books published – but as they came to me, they do exist.

| Year | Pic bks | Primary | Teen & YA | Non Fic | TOTAL |
|------|---------|---------|-----------|---------|-------|
| 2014 | 23 | 19 | 8 | 13 | 63 |
| 2015 | 4 | 9 | 1 | 6* | 20 |

* = 4 received of 14 in the Heritage "Our Story" series

- *The Lie Tree* by **Frances Hardinge** (a YA Victorian murder mystery) has won the Costa Book of the Year – the only other YA book to do so was Philip Pullman's *The Amber Spyglass*.
- Sadly, we salute the passing of British children's author **Peter Dickinson** who won the Carnegie Medal twice – for *Tulku* (1979) and *City of Gold* (1980). My favourite was *The Weathermonger* which gave an angle on science fiction I had never considered.
- An unknown story by **Beatrix Potter**, *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots*, will be published later this year, with illustrations by Quentin Blake.
- During 2015, **Bibliodef** donated 106 thousand books to schools in need.
- A children's picture book titled *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* has been withdrawn by publishers **Scholastic** because the book "may give a false impression of the reality of the lives of slaves".

Editorial : *Protect our readers!*



According to Professor Grayling in UK, university students in America are now demanding to be warned in advance if course material contains references to subjects that could distress them. "They want to be exempted from reading texts that touch on such matters as sexual abuse, divorce and suicide." Texts must carry 'trigger warnings' to help students avoid difficult

topics. Apparently, on some campuses, students have set aside 'safe spaces' with cuddly toys and puppy videos where those stressed by uncomfortable topics can avoid them. (*The Telegraph*: December 2015)

So what about the texts they might encounter in earlier years? Much of our current South African youth literature would clearly horrify them – with reality tales of not merely abuse and divorce, but murder, rape, alcohol, drug addiction and gang warfare. So much safer to stick to Enid Blyton, teddy-bear tales and sugary happy endings.

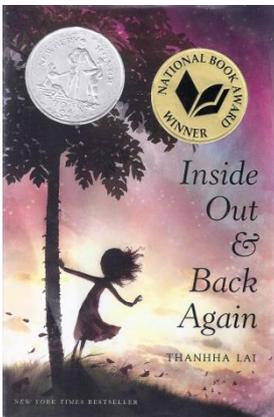
I am utterly confounded. I believe that young readers should meet reality in their reading and thus learn how to handle it. That's why Jan Mark writes of a mother (in *Thunder & Lightnings*) saying, "There's no such thing as fairness. It's a word made up to keep children quiet." That's why Katherine Paterson wrote *Bridge to Terabithia*, about coping with death. That is probably why *Charlotte's Web* has retained its long popularity. Read Lesley Beake's *Jakey* or Peter Slingby's *Jedro's Bane* or Jenny Robson's *Granite* and you will find matters that could distress readers far younger than timid USA university students.

A heartfelt thought from a SA publisher:

"We pray that sales will now grow from strength to strength as we hope that the insanity of publishing core textbook material will become a distant memory."

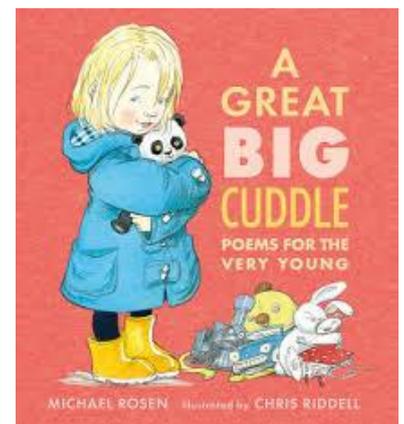
BOOK REVIEWS

The policy of Bookchat has always been to review all South African books, and the best of those submitted from overseas publishers.



INSIDE OUT & BACK AGAIN by Thanhha Lai (Harper 2011)

Somehow I missed this, a *Newbery Honor Book* and a *National Book Award* winner from only 4 years ago. So I thank Lesley Beake for drawing it to my attention. (She wants it back fast, because it has scores of coloured stickers indicating passages she uses in CBN workshops.) One reviewer calls it a novel, and it does indeed trace a story. I call it a collection of pithy, thoughtful, often searing poems forming a narrative. Hà is a refugee girl from South Vietnam. She and her family escape, go on board a rescue boat, choose USA as their destination. So far, all fairly good. But she then has to go to school in a country where nobody knows her language or understands her customs or food preferences. Brothers and mother help, but it needs something special inside Hà to keep fighting on and eventually makes some friends. Evocative and moving.



A GREAT BIG CUDDLE by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Chris Riddle

Poems for the Very Young. (Walker Books 2015)

The happiest, most wrigglesome, most cuddlable book I've encountered for ages. New poems by a famous poet who loves playing with words – and pictures by an articulate artist with a huge sense of humour and atmosphere.

Once upon a plom
There lived a poor little mom
Along with her children three.
There was a great big Gom
A Flom and a Chom
Who all sang, "Me, me, me."

Blue hairy creatures, they are! But they soon deal with the terrible Berrible. That's a sort of story poem. Many of Rosen's verses just sing with rhythm and sounds, like "Mango, Tango" or "Mippy-moppy Mop, mop, mop" or "Wriggly giggly". Happy pages with masses to go back and look at again, and read again, and wonder a little about ...

"Our Story" series (Heritage Publishers 2015)

The People, Clans & Events that shaped Southern Africa

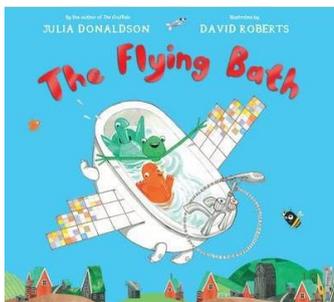
Each 48-page booklet starts with the same Introduction: "The story you are about to read is true." A pity that it does not set the place of each booklet amongst the others in the series. The map that is reproduced and the cover design and sepia ink give the impression of old colonial printing, which seems a pity in such a well-intentioned recreation of live history.

HOPE'S WAR

As the Introduction explains, what is called Hope's War (in 1880) should really be called Mhlonlo's War. Although the magistrate Hamilton Hope was killed in the fighting, it all began and ended with Mhlonlo, King of the amaMpondomise. This is the story presented – in clear English and accompanied by particularly good line drawings. Plenty of interesting details, but there are just far too many kings and clans that need to be mentioned, so few of the characters come to life. The atmosphere of continued rivalry and uprising (mostly against the colonising British) in the Eastern Cape is a complex story, and this useful retelling does not manage to reduce its complexity.

THE BATTLE OF MHLATUZE RIVER

Most of this book covers the early years of Shaka, with the great battles of Qokli Hill and Mhlatuze River. The early part of the book has the same trouble as much of this series: too many names, so it is hard to follow the thread of the narrative. But once the battles are put into action (with Shaka's training of his men) it reads well and with plenty of excitement. The illustrations are indistinct in places and the figure drawing is not all that skilled. In the copy sent to me for review, pages 33 to 40 were printed twice.



THE FLYING BATH by Julian Donaldson, illustrated by David Robert (Macmillan)

This is one of those inspired co-creations of author and artist (like Wendy Hartmann and Joan Rankin in SA), although it is really the clear-cut genius of David Roberts that gives this book wings. Three bath-tub pets, using the shower head as a telephone, fly off to assist water-caused problems around the world. To a child: a thirsty kangaroo, a bee whose flowers are drooping, a muddy piglet, a baboon whose home tree is on fire ... But the astute will notice such details as invasive cactus, houses with grass growing on the roof, tree branches lopped off. Food for thought, while "Wings out, and off we fly. The Flying Bath is in the sky!" Very simple verse from Julia, Clear, clean, skilled world-aware artwork from David. A most worth-while picture book.



GOODBYE STRANGER by Rebecca Stead (Andersen Press 2015)

This author's *Liar & Spy* won the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, and *When You Reach Me* won the Newbery Medal. I don't think *Goodbye Stranger* is going to win anything. It's too episodic and jumps around in time distractingly. The heroine survives a terrible accident which causes a nurse to say, 'Thirteen broken bones and a punctured lung. You must have been put on this earth for a reason, little girl, to have survived.' The girl doesn't seem to suffer much as a result, though we know there must be a denouement. It takes so long to arrive. Instead, an insubstantial pageant of throbbing teenagers (7th grade, USA) with cell-phone hang-ups, guarded secrets, but no real action – not until the gulp-worthy end when we realise what it's all about. I guess teen girls will empathise. It felt real enough, but often trivial, the way life can be.

ADULT BOOKS that I have enjoyed

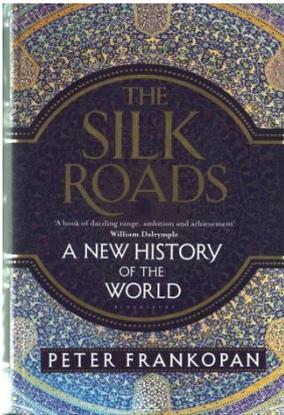
LANDMARKS by Robert Macfarlane (Hamish Hamilton 2015)

Absorbing, fascinating, rewarding. A book to be read a little at a time, with relish. The author visits (physically and in a literary sense) various natural areas of England – woods and water, the far north, woodlands – "fascinated by the connection between literature and landscape".

Between each chapter is a Glossary of local words. Did you know that *eawl-leet* (owl-light), *mirkshut* and *dimmit* are all names for twilight?

In the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*, such words as *acorn*, *catkin*, *conker*, *fern*, *heather*, *nectar* have made room for *attachment*, *blog*, *broadband*, *cut-and-paste*, *MP3 player* and *voice-mail*? Apparently, such a dictionary needs to reflect the consensus experience of modern-day childhood. Have they lost the nature world already? In Macfarlane's final chapter, he pays close attention to the way children perceive landscape. "Children are generally uninterested in grandeur, and rapt by the miniature ... a teeming ants' nest, a chalk pit, moss jungles". He

praises such works as *Stig of the Dump*. He notes how in children's literature, doors keep opening ... through a wardrobe to Narnia, through air to Philip Pullman's shadowlands, into hobbit holes. He calls Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* "the eeriest novel I know". I agree – and it is strongly linked to the Thames valley landscape. One of his (quoted) conclusions: "If children are not permitted ... to be adventurers and explorers as children," then "what will become of the world of adventure, of stories, of literature itself?"



THE SILK ROADS : A New History of the World by Peter Frankopan (Bloomsbury 2015)

Recommended strongly, while at the same time warning that it is heavy going in places. A retelling of history with "the East" (meaning Persia, Mongolia, India, China) as historical mover and shaker. Not Rome. Not even England! A land through time linked by the great Silk Roads – so more social and economic history, though warfare is unavoidable. The Vikings travelled south-east to the Black Sea. The Black Death was spread by camels as well as rats. Ibn Battuta crossed the Sahara to visit Mansa Musa, the richest king in the world, and was disappointed at his lack of generosity. Timur (called Tamberlaine by Marlow) bought the finest silks from China, as well as musk, rubies, diamonds and rhubarb. Some of the myriad fascinating details in this wide-spread, incredibly researched spread of history from "the beginning of time" in Mesopotamia to the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, announcing a New Silk Road. [At the time of writing, China has made a new "financial understanding" with Iran.]

I wish heartily that I had owned *Landmarks* when I was still a teacher. It would have transformed my teaching of word usage and poetry – just as *The Silk Roads* would have done to my understanding of history.

ABSOLUTE PANDEMONIUM by Brian Blessed (Sidgwick & Jackson 2015)

A Memoir. I like reading actors' reminiscences – and all actors enjoy talking about themselves! One gets the impression that Brian Blessed has always been larger than life, physically, vocally and in generosity of spirit. He shares memories of the Old Vic Theatre School in Bristol (where my brother trained), of the real Peter O'Toole (memorable whether drunk or slightly sober), of *Z-Cars* and *Flash Gordon*. He played a fine Duke of Exeter in Branagh's excellent *King Henry V*. This isn't polished prose: Brian has about as much subtlety as a friendly brontosaurus. But it's real theatre-land. I enjoyed it.

*Tom got into a book, crawled and grovelled between the covers,
tunnelled like a mole among the thoughts, and came up
with the book all over his face and hands.*

A lovely description of a reader ~ by John Steinbeck

☺ There is no charge for this newsletter.

The next issue will be sent out in mid-April 2016.

New subscribers are most welcome.

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