

Reviewed by Brian Moses

For the last two years there has been something of a dearth of poetry books published for children and the space devoted to the genre in book shops has shrunk even more. 2011, however, seems to herald a new Spring for children's poetry: Frances Lincoln and Salt Publishing have both started up new lists, while Macmillan, Hodder, A & C Black and Caboodle are extending theirs. This is all very encouraging. All we need now is to see some solid promotion by all concerned. How about a Poetry Month like they have in the States or at least give National Poetry Day a real boost this year.

Frances Lincoln's new imprint has been set up by Janetta Otter Barry and the first two books are a reissue of Roger McGough's *Imaginary Menagerie* and *The Language of Cats* by Rachel Rooney. Roger's book gives us poems about all sorts of real and imaginary animals and, like all his books, contains some wonderfully witty wordplay such as 'Duffle Goats', 'Catapillows' and 'Aunt-Eaters'. Rachel Rooney is widely anthologised but this is her first mainstream collection, and a remarkably assured collection it is too. As a dog owner, I'm not too sure I should enjoy the title poem, and I'm tempted to write a reply, but she really does pinpoint a cat's characteristics and the wonderful way they have of doing everything in a slightly disdainful manner. There are a number of list poems in this collection that work very well and a poem about a Russian Doll that was obviously just begging to be written. And yet it takes a special sort of poet to take the subject and weave words around it in the way that Rachel does here. Once all the layers have been stripped away we find:

*And deepest down, kept secretly  
a tiny, solid skittle doll.  
The girl that hides inside of me.*

Carol Ann Duffy endorses this book, calling it 'A Box of Delights'. She is absolutely right.



The new collection of children's poetry by Salt is designed to build up into a library of the best writing for children. All the books are numbered and already we have numbers 9, *Here Comes the Poetry Man* by Fred Sedgwick and 10, *The Land of the Flibbertigibbets* by John Foster. The books are slightly smaller size than usual but the production is excellent. Both books contain old and new poems from the pens of two grand masters of the children's poetry world. A cat pads its way through a number of Fred's poems and the book signs off with a very moving 'Requiem for a Cat'. John's book contains some clever word play from reflections on the letter 'Z' to guidance on understanding 'Uncle Sam'. I particularly like his 'Geographical Definitions' which includes:

*'A meander is a boy and girl strolling along a river-bank.'*

My only concern, with this new series from Salt, is that the books may not be as widely available in book shops as they deserve to be.

Roger Stevens has a new book from Macmillan, *Beware of Low Flying Rabbits*. I have enjoyed Roger's poems for a number of years and this new book doesn't

disappoint. As a musician too, Roger has a strong sense of rhythm that filters through everything he writes. Both 'The Walking Bus' – spoken to a Bo Diddley beat, and 'The Most Important Rap' are great performance pieces for a class of children. There is a lot of humour in what Roger writes, humour that will get children laughing, and this is a book that will be read and enjoyed by many -

*Suspense haiku*

*It's unexpected.  
Midnight. A knock on the door.  
You open it. Oh . . .*

Another new book from Roger is an anthology published by A & C Black, *One Million Brilliant Poems – part one*. Lots of poems that have appeared in other collections are given a re-run here.

Also from A & C Black is an anthology of science poems edited by James Carter, *How to Turn Your Teacher Purple*. Science can be a difficult subject to make entertaining but generally James has chosen well. Poets include many familiar names, Wes Magee, Roger Stevens, Paul Cookson, Clare Bevan, John Foster. Tony Mitton's 'Snail Trail' is a highlight

*It seems to hold the magic of the moon.  
For, see, it shimmers with a silken light  
as if it stole it's radiance in the night.*

A good collection for teachers to keep close by when they're introducing new areas of science to their children.



Caboodle Press have added a number of new publications to their list. Two of the best are *Lip Hopping With the Fundi-Fu* by Adisa the Verbalizer, and *So You Want to be a Wizard* by Wes Magee. Adisa's book is a collection of his performance poetry which contains some profound observations about the multi-cultural society that we are all a part of, and about the notion of being a poet who comments on it:

*Ever wondered do poets have the answers  
to the many questions they ask.  
Ever thought am I who I say I am  
or am I just wearing a mask.*



There's a lot of material in this book with choruses that demand being spoken aloud – 'Mobile Mania' is about our addiction to mobile phones, 'Mama Always Told Me' is the advice Adisa received as a child, and 'Don't Hold Your Tongue' is one I wish I'd written. Several in here like that. A collection by Adisa has been long overdue. Wes Magee is a poet to rely on. A new book is always a treat and this is no exception. I defy any child not to crack a smile when reading 'What's Behind the Green Curtain?' Haven't we all stood in the school hall at some time in our lives and listened to the headteacher droning in assembly. And haven't we all imagined something ghastly reaching out from behind the curtain and pulling him out of sight. Wes Magee finds moments with which we can all identify in much that he writes.

A new collection by former Children's Laureate, Michael Rosen is always a cause for celebration and his latest book Michael Rosen's *Big Book of Bad Things*

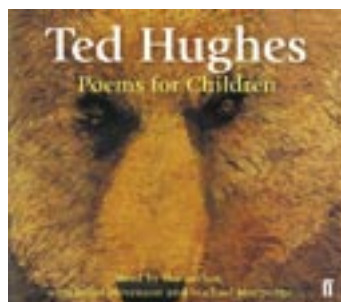




is crammed full of the sort of 'stuff' that we know we'll enjoy. Titles like 'Bob Dylan Once Said That He'd Let You Be in His Dreams if He Could Be in Yours' and 'The Stranger on the Road from Jack and the Beanstalk' let you know that we're in for more Rosen observations on a variety of strange and unusual subjects. But hidden within too is a final Eddie poem that just about says everything there is to say.

I'll wrap up these reviews with an audio CD from Faber:

**Ted Hughes: Poetry for Children.** Most of the poems are read by Hughes himself but there are contributions also from Juliet Stevenson and Michael Morpurgo. This is an excellent collection as we would expect, featuring poems selected from a number of books - 'Season Songs,' 'What is the Truth?', 'Meet my Folks' and 'Under the North Star'. There is also a reading of 'Nessie the Mannerless Monster'. It is bound to be a contender for the Spoken Word Award and is a brilliant introduction to the fascinating world of Ted Hughes.



One final thought is that poetry has won the Costa Book Award for the past two years so maybe it's time for a children's poetry book to win a major children's award?

- Imaginary Menagerie* Frances Lincoln £5.99 ISBN: 978-1847801661
- The Language of Cats* Frances Lincoln £5.99 ISBN: 978-1847801678
- Here Comes The Poetry Man* Salt £6.99 ISBN: 978-1844712960
- The Land of the Flibbertigibbets* Salt £6.99 ISBN: 978-1844712885
- Beware of Low Flying Rabbits* Macmillan £4.99 ISBN: 978-0230751903
- One Million Brilliant Poems - part one*  
A & C Black £4.99 ISBN: 978-1408123942
- How to Turn Your Teacher Purple* A & C Black £4.99 ISBN: 978-1408126486
- Lip Hopping With the Fundi-Fu*  
Caboodle Press £5.99 ISBN: 978-0956523921
- So You Want to be a Wizard* Caboodle Press £5.99 ISBN: 978-0956523914
- Michael Rosen's Big Book of Bad Things*  
Puffin £7.99 ISBN: 978-0141324517
- Ted Hughes: Poetry for Children* Faber £10.99 ISBN: 978-0571259496

Brian Moses has an anthology  
*The Best of Friends, The Best of Enemies*  
- poems from the pain of bullying to the  
joy of friendship from Hodder Wayland  
ISBN: 978-0750265690 £5.99 .



## NOW DON'T GET ME WRONG... Chris Powling

### Number 34: *The Vastest Things...*

...are those we may not learn. Or so claims a poem by Mervyn Peake – better known, perhaps, for his novels and illustrations than his poetry. I'd been reading *Titus Groan* to a group of eleven-year-olds and showing them Peake's wonderful black-and-white drawings of his own characters as well as his pictures for *Treasure Island* which we'd just finished. It was a self-chosen group of readers meeting in the school lunch hour – an able bunch – so I decided to try my luck with Peake's poem to show just how versatile he was:

*The vastest things are those we may not learn  
We are not taught to die  
Or to be born or how to burn  
With love.  
How pitiful is our enforced return  
To those small things we are the masters of.*

"Puts us teachers in our place, doesn't it!" I grinned.

"Does it?" said one of the group.

"You don't think so?" I asked in surprise.

"No, I don't," came the reply. "I mean, it just isn't true. What about the story you read to us in assembly, sir – *Gaffer Samson's Luck*. We learn about death from that, don't we?"

"Yeah," said another boy. "And what about that Posy Simmonds' book *Fred*? That's about death."

"So's that picture book *Badger's Parting Gifts*," a girl added.

Before long, they'd listed titles which covered the other 'vastest things' in Peake's poem – *Changes*, *Storm* and *Dear Nobody* for being born, *Guess How Much I Love You?*, *Danny the Champion of the World* and *Charlotte's Web* in the case of love (also death as someone was quick to point out). Admittedly, these were the school's oldest and keenest readers. And, of course, this hadn't happened overnight. Rather, it was the culmination of several years sustained attention to our reading programme which included input from the local library, from the authority's excellent schools' library service, from the weekly school bookshop run by parents, and from regular author-visits as a back-up to the skill and enthusiasm of our classroom teachers.

Will the effect of SATs and the late Literacy Hour be equally vast, I wonder? Or, as some of the above-mentioned resources diminish or disappear altogether, will the word "pitiful" be a more appropriate epithet for ...our enforced return / To those small things we are the masters of?