

The Giddy Fun of Telling a Story



CHILDREN'S BOOKS

MEGHAN COX GURDON

A new work from Shirley Hughes, who at 92 still shares her joyful art with young readers.

WHEN ILLUSTRATOR Shirley Hughes approached a publisher in 1960 about creating a picture book, she received a cautious response. "I was told at the outset that my drawing was far too quintessentially English to be accepted abroad," she once told an interviewer. "But the publishers were proved very wrong."

So they were, if we are to judge from the 11 million Shirley Hughes books sold in the decades to follow. It is true that Ms. Hughes's work has a strong English flavor (or "flavour"), which comes from how her characters live and dress, but in the exuberant vitality of her figures she also captures universal qualities of childhood. She gives babies and toddlers their natural adorable proportions—plump cheeks, large heads, innocently perfect posture—without straying into the sugar swamps of sentimentality. If anything, Ms. Hughes's characters look a bit scruffy: Hers are children who throw themselves whole-bodied into whatever game they play.

The latest from the celebrated 92-year-old features a little girl named Katie and her baby brother, Olly: "**My First ABC**" (Candlewick, 30 pages, \$16.99). According to custom, each letter in this sweet collection for children ages 1-5 appears in its capital and lower-case form ("Aa" is for airplane, "Bb" for bouncing ball), and each gets its own page with an illustration and a short passage for reading aloud. Though most of the art comes from Ms. Hughes's previous works, this abecedarly doesn't have a reheated feel,



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just a warm one. "Nn is for noise," we read, as a beaming Olly bashes a spoon on an upturned saucepan and Katie dances around. Later, with "Ww is for wellies," Olly flaps his arms in delight as Katie hits the wet ground with a stick and explains: "Olly and I need our wellies when we go out and splash in puddles."

Sally Lloyd-Jones, another Englishwoman, offers education and inspiration to young writers in "**Look! I Wrote a Book! (And You Can Too!)**" (Schwartz + Wade, 38 pages, \$17.99), a story-telling anatomy lesson masquerading as giddy fun. To write a book, the author explains, "you need a Good Idea" and to know something of your subject. You need to imagine your reader, and tailor your work accordingly: "If you're writing a bedtime book for babies, you can't have scary monsters inside or they will be screaming and not sleeping," Ms. Lloyd-Jones points out. "Plus you can't use big

words like *fragile* or *hilarious* because they won't understand. You have to use only small ones like *blocks* or *bug*." Wild comic illustrations by Neal Layton and varying styles and sizes of typeface amp up the excitement of this charmer for children ages 4-8.

For adults, the name Fabio may forever be linked with a certain tawny-maned male model. For children ages 5-8 the name may become associated with the slim pink sleuth they will meet in "**Fabio,**

the World's Greatest Flamingo Detective: The Case of the Missing Hippo" (Bloomsbury, 134 pages, \$16.99). Written by Laura James and illustrated by

THIS WEEK

My First ABC

By Shirley Hughes

'Look! I Wrote a Book!'

By Sally Lloyd-Jones
Illustrated by Neal Layton

Fabio, the World's Greatest Flamingo Detective

By Laura James
Illustrated by Emily Fox

The Oddmire: Changeling

By William Ritter

Emily Fox, both of whom are, yes, English, this first book in a new series finds Fabio and his giraffe sidekick, Gilbert, in the glamorous environs of a grand hotel, where the staff is preparing to host a talent show. Fabio gets dragooned into serving as a judge alongside two quarrelsome animals, a used-car salesman (he's a snake) and a retired ballerina (a long-legged bird). During the auditions, just as everyone is about to enjoy the talent of a hippo-chanteuse named Julia (see left), the room goes black. When the lights come on again, the hippo has vanished! Shifty characters, clues hiding in plain sight and a

big reveal make for a satisfying introduction to the detective genre in this neon-bright caper for children ages 5-8.

William Ritter, who is not English but American, draws readers ages 8-12 into an enchanted forest prowled by all manner of sinister and peculiar beings in "**The Oddmire: Changeling**" (Algonquin, 264 pages, \$16.95). We know from the outset that there's been a tear in the veil that separates the human and magical worlds, and also that a goblin named Kull, attempting to steal a human infant and leave a goblin replica in its place, has made a blunder. Surprised by the human child's mother, the formidable Annie Burton, the goblin sprints off, leaving two identical babies where there's meant to be only one. Unable to tell the boys apart, Annie raises them as twins, though she knows, as do they, that one is not human.

Thirteen years on, for reasons having to do with the sustenance of magic, Kull has to reclaim the changeling. Soon the boys are lured away from home into the witchy depths of the Deep Dark, a place of shape-shifters, carnivorous vines and a hungry, shadowy Thing that finds "a feast of torment in breaking apart families." Suspenseful and sometimes droll, "Changeling" is a promising start to a planned series.