The Giddy Fun of Telling a Story

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 abecedarium doesn't have a reheated feel.

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 vary the styles and sizes of typeface to 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-named 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 Emily Fox

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 dragged into serving as a judge alongside two quarrlesome 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." Suspensful and sometimes droll, "Changeling" is a promising start to a planned series.