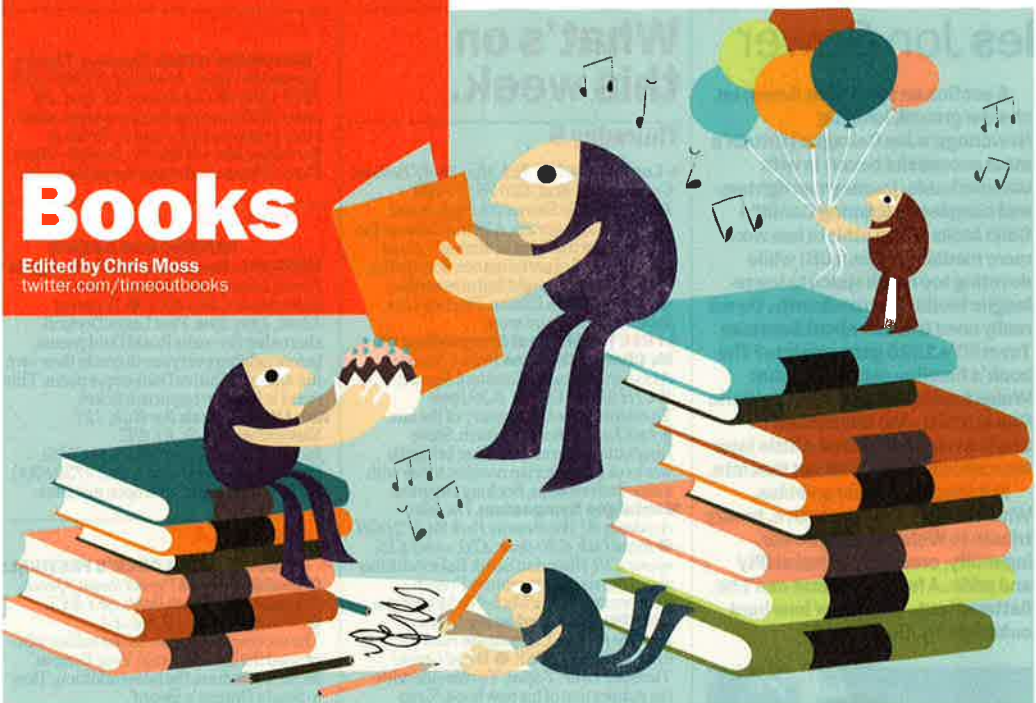


Books

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Kids love reading: it's official!

There might be gloom and doomsaying in the adult book world but, as **Wayne Gooderham** reports, there's plenty to get excited about at this year's Imagine Children's Festival on the South Bank. Illustration **Åh**

Amid the Booker bickerings, the *Death of the Novel* (again) and the battle lines being drawn between the pro- and anti-e-book factions, beleaguered bibliophiles will find comfort in the knowledge that there is at least one area of old-school publishing in unequivocally rude health right now. Yes, thanks in no small part to a successful franchise involving this week's guest editor, sales of children's books have been rising steadily over the last decade.

In the last two years Foyles has seen sales of books for pre-schoolers (under-fives) rise by an impressive 41 per cent and young fiction (six to 11) rise by 32 per cent. Indeed, it's been difficult of late to switch on the telly, step inside a cinema or take a stroll through Theatreland without encountering hobbits, war horses or various members of the Gruffalo family vying for our attention. And with household names such as David Williams, Mackenzie Crook and Ricky Gervais turning their hands to children's fiction, as well as established writers such as Jacqueline Wilson, Michael Rosen and Michael Morpurgo fast becoming household names, this area of publishing is pervading our culture like never before.

And so, eschewing any laurel-resting, this month sees the Southbank Centre (already an unofficial crèche for culturally savvy parents) devoting

itself almost exclusively to a child-friendly programme as the Imagine Children's Festival makes its welcome return. Over a decade old, this year's Imagine is the biggest yet – with something that should please anyone aged between 0 (opera for babies) and 14 ('From Pip to Potter' – a discussion on the portrayal of children in care in literature).

While the festival has grown in recent years to encompass music, comedy and theatre, books and storytelling remain at the heart of Imagine. Young book lovers will find much to keep them busy: poetry workshops based around the works of Roald Dahl, a London Children's Book Swap, dramatic performances (including Michael Morpurgo's 'Private

Peaceful' and the Mulberry School for Girls production of 'The Comedy of Errors') and readings and signings by the likes of Chris Bradford, Jeremy Strong, Francesca Simon, Cressida Cowell, Andy Stanton, Mackenzie Crook, Jacqueline Wilson and Cathy Cassidy. If these names mean nothing to you, try running them past your children. As in past festivals, these authors will be treated like bona fide superstars by their young fans – with queues for signings stretching far into the distance. But the children get the chance to give something back too: for five days of the festival, 90 children will

help to run it, manning cloakrooms, guiding visitors to their seats and making sure the shows start on time; young critics are also catered for as Imagine hosts the prestigious Redhouse Book Awards 2012 (the only national book award voted for entirely by children).

Meanwhile, a star-studded industry gala will see celebrity authors donating their favourite childhood book to the Letterbox Club – a charity that delivers books to children in care. With more than 60,000 children in care at any one time in England and their academic achievement far below that of their peers outside the care system, the importance of reading cannot be overstated. Given the transient nature of many of these children's everyday lives, having a book to call their own and keep them company throughout any upheavals can perhaps make things more bearable.

With campaigns to save libraries and promote literacy among the hot political topics of the moment, it would seem that one of Imagine's central goals – to get people to take children's literature seriously – is imminently attainable. Self-evident it might be but the readers of today are the writers of tomorrow, and if festivals like Imagine are anything to go, perhaps we adults needn't worry too much about the future of the book industry after all.

The **Imagine Children's Festival** takes place at the Southbank Centre **Sat Feb 11-Sun Feb 26**. See www.southbankcentre.co.uk.

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Thanks to this week's guest editor, sales of kids' books keep rising