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## Dark secrets of the pawn shop

Reviewed by Amanda Craig

### THE BLACK BOOK

#### OF SECRETS 10+

by F. E. Higgins

Macmillan, £8.99; 320pp

IN THE ETERNAL BATTLE of children's books versus computer games, nothing beats a cracking start. If you find a first sentence such as: "When I opened my eyes I knew that nothing in my miserable life prior to that moment could possibly be as bad as what was about to happen," in F. E. Higgins's *The Black Book of Secrets*, you know that you are in for a terrific read.

Ludlow Fitch has a pair of monstrous parents who are about to sell him to Gumbroot, "the notorious tooth surgeon". Escaping by the skin of his teeth, he is chased through the City and clings to a carriage bound for the dismal village of Pagus Parvus. Ground down by the evil Jeremiah Ratchet, it clings to a mountainside, impoverished and hopeless. Until, that is, a mysterious stranger named Joe Zabbidou sets up shop as a pawn-broker with a frog in his window.

Zabbidou takes young Fitch on as his assistant. He buys worthless junk from the villagers - and persuades them to tell him their deepest secrets in his back room at midnight. Ratchet is furious when the villagers are suddenly able to pay back the debts that cripple them. Fitch, however, is deeply suspicious of his master. What use can the Black Book be, if not to blackmail those who have confessed to him? If this were by Roald Dahl, that is what would happen, but, like Joan Aiken, whose comedic verve and astringent compassion Higgins shares, *The Black Book of Secrets* is as much about the growth of a child's soul as about a fight between good and evil. Fitch is like Aiken's Dido Twite - betrayed by those who should have cared most for him, accustomed to theft and on the verge of total corruption.

Ludlow's tale is told both in the first person and the third, and this allows us to see the vices of village life and the thoughts of the benign Zabbidou. He works no magic but tells the anguished to be patient; when they acquire confidence, however, they turn on their confessor, rather like the villagers in Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*. The fierce, yet sophisticated, denouement of this excellent debut leaves you longing for a sequel.

Mulumbe, too, is a disenfranchised child who journeys from country to city. A teenage girl of the Tonga tribe, she flees into the forest with her wise grandmother on the first page, after marauders attack. Hunger and sickness follow, and once her beloved brother Tom goes to the City of Gold, Mulumbe is left prey to the thuggish Olinji, who wants to marry her.

### I AM A CLOUD, I CAN

#### BLOW ANYWHERE 11+

by Jonathan and Shirley

Tulloch

Egmont, £6.99; 192pp

Jonathan and Shirley Tulloch know Zimbabwe well, and in *I Am A Cloud, I Can Blow Anywhere* have

forged a captivating and moving story with many elements of classic African fairy-tale.

Mulumbe's clear, courageous voice is one you love at once, and readers of 11+ will cheer her on through her adventures. She outwits her persecutors, escaping Olinji and the cruel men who capture her and ultimately those who try to keep her from a new life.

Many children's novels about African children, such as those by Elizabeth Luard, bring them to our attention as people living in almost unimaginable desperation and privation. While this is sadly accurate, it underestimates the resilience and courage of those who do survive, and children hate the pervasive despair. (It's no surprise to find that Alexander McCall Smith's sunnier depictions of Africa are hugely popular among older children, who love his Mma Ramotswe just as much as parents do.) Mulumbe's adult guide and saviour, unlike Ludlow Fitch's, dies. Yet her story, for all that it lacks the wit and optimism of Higgins's novel, is no less gripping. From start to finish, these are two adventures worth catching as they fly off the page.

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