

Reading with **MOUSE & MOLE**

Joyce Dunbar and James Mayhew



GRAFFEG

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Illustrations by James Mayhew

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'Talk to me,' said Mouse.
'What about?' said Mole.
'Anything,' said Mouse.

Creating Mouse and Mole

Early on in my career, a writer friend recommended me for a slot writing stories for Radio 4's *Listening Corner* – a follow on from *Listen with Mother*.

The texts were very prescribed: five-minute stories of 500 words for five-year-olds – 5 x 5 x 5. I had already published four stories for Ginn's innovative 'real stories' reading programme in the 1980s, but was in two minds about it – I didn't want to write by diktat, and nor was I sure that I could, even if I was willing, but common sense prevailed.

My own children were learning to read at the time, using a reading scheme about Roger Red-Hat and Billy Blue-Hat (or Roger Ruddy Red-Hat and Billy Blooming Blue-Hat, as they became known in our household). They were likeable but shallow, lacking in narrative drive, a bit mechanical in their progress. I'm fond of them nonetheless, because they bring back the memories of those first stumbling steps of my children learning to read.

There are many other such schemes, the Oxford Reading Tree being one of the best, but most successful of all in my view was the I CAN READ series, published by Heinemann, real stories by different authors and illustrators. My favourites amongst these were The Little

Bear books by Else Holmelund Minarik, illustrated by the celebrated Maurice Sendak (1957), and the Frog & Toad books (1979), written and illustrated by Arnold Lobel.

Both series are written mainly in dialogue, and I marvelled at their simplicity, directness, depth and humour. So when it came to writing *Mouse & Mole*, a few years and many published books later, I had this grounding in stories that were ‘real’ as well as accessible to early readers, with a controlled vocabulary and other stipulations.

The vital ingredient for ‘real stories’ is emotional content, with character development and interaction emerging from their response to plot or structure.

The meaning of the story – its message – is not explicit, but hinges on incident and the way things turn out. In this way the inner life of the characters, rather than external events, is at the heart of the stories, thus engaging the inner life of the reader – not easy to achieve in such a short work.

They are not so much ‘adventures’ as dealing with everyday dilemmas, predicaments, frustrations, quandaries, which are as common in adult life as in childhood. If this sounds dull, our comedy programmes and newspaper columns show that there is much merriment to be found in our small vexations.

'I can see a cloud!' said Mole.

'It's only a little cloud,' said Mouse.

'It will soon go away.'

'It might get bigger,' said Mole.

'It might be a rain cloud.'





'What sort of snow something is it?' asked Mole.

'You'll see,' said Mouse, adding a few finishing touches.

'There! Done!'

'Oh Mouse, gasped Mole, 'a Snowmole. Isn't he wonderful?

I feel I've known him all my life.'

The first Mouse & Mole book was published in 1993, for ages 6-9. When you write for this age group, you are also writing for the adults who read them to children. This proved the perfect format for me, because I could write on two levels at the same time: on one level within easy reach of the beginner reader, on another allowing for a subtext which they could 'grow into' at their own rate. The subtext is the space between the words – to do with timing, juxtaposition, overall design and the way the words work with the illustrations. The subtext is also breathing space.

Each Mouse and Mole story is between 450 and 650 words long; they include a few difficult words, like 'preposterous' in 'Preposterous Puddle', because children delight in the sound of words; even if at first they don't know their meaning, they soon learn this from context. There is also a lot of repetition, which child readers need, because in an entirely natural way the characters echo each other in their conversations. The stories have the same basic structure of beginning, middle and end and are standalone, but linked by deepening themes. Book II, *The Last Thought in the World*, has a drawstring ending, which brings them all together.

In James Mayhew, they found the right illustrator. I don't much like writing description, but that was all done by James, in exquisite detail and beautiful colours, from the way they dress to their house, garden and domestic objects.

He creates the world of Mouse & Mole, with no decree of any sort from me or anyone else. With just as much sensitivity, James also picked up on the inner lives of the characters, expressed through facial expression and body language, leavened with gentle humour. Children are not just reading the words, but interpreting feelings, thus encouraging emotional intelligence.

James once said that he ‘inhabits’ the characters, especially Mole – childish, selfish, but endearing. Mouse is the adult of the pair, sensible, practical, kind, but with a streak of passive aggression. ‘The child is father of the man,’ wrote Wordsworth.

How can this be? Because the child has been around for longer than the man. I was born in 1944, a year before the war ended, and like a lot of people experienced harsh conditions as a child, so these stories are my adult self comforting the child that I was. This duality, two archetypes, the child and the adult, exists within all of us.

Because they were so spontaneous, rolling off the pen with neither planning nor forethought, I have often wondered about other influences, probably unconscious. An obvious one is Alan Bennett, a forthright northerner like me, who writes about ordinariness and tedium in that singular voice of his so that the work is lifted into the extraordinary.



'Here I am!' said Mole at last. 'Ready to face any weather! I have my woolly things on top, and my rain things underneath, and my sun things underneath that. And guess what, I've remembered my swimming things as well.'

'But you don't like swimming,' said Mouse.

'So I don't,' said Mole, 'I forgot.'



'Look at the date, Mole. It will soon be Christmas.'

'How soon?' asked Mole.

'Only twenty-four days to go,' said Mouse.

'I don't think I can wait that long,' said Mole.

'Can't we make Christmas come sooner?'

So much of the material for children strives at frantic extremes of excitement, or scatological stuff. You have only to mention underpants to have children in stitches. There is no quietness, no stillness. I'm all in favour of excitement, but it can become an addiction, you can never get enough of it. Calm and stillness are quite useful to children and have been useful to me as a writer.

You can travel the world and feel nothing, just as you can read a book and comprehend little. When the first humans landed on the Moon, it was the emotional impact that was so memorable. 'We read to know we are not alone,' says C. S. Lewis in *Shadowlands*. Reading is brain food, mind expanding, taking us into other times and places and into the minds and hearts of other people. We learn from their failings, and shape goals of our own from their triumphs.

The Mouse & Mole stories are mostly in dialogue, which is more immediate than narrative and intrinsic to the plot. The characters are the plot – in a word, dramatic. In 2008, David Farmer turned them into scripts and took them on a thirteen-week tour all around the country with his company, Tiebreak.

They were also picked up on by Joy Whitby, founder of Jackanory and director of Grasshopper productions. She secured the services of three of our finest actors and comedians, Alan Bennett, Richard Briers and Imelda Staunton. This eventually became a fifty-minute animation, produced by Grasshopper, and was aired for ten successive

years on BBC CBeebies, until the books fell out of print due to unforeseen circumstances.

The simplicity of the stories, the relatable characters in which we can all recognise aspects of ourselves, the clarity of plot, make them negotiable, yet sophisticated. With a little direction, children can produce their own mini-dramas,, whether acting or using puppets.

Reading schemes have their place alongside real stories, and are essential in meeting the requirements of the National Curriculum and helping busy teachers to tick the necessary boxes, often to the point of absurdity. But they are written by teams, they don't have their roots in the imagination and experience of the individual writer. They are carefully measured and phonic-based, and lack the impetus that gives depth and pace. They don't spring from creative impulse, and therefore have no pulse.

'Most of life is so dull that there is little to be said about it,' said E. M. Forster. Most of us live ordinary lives, with ordinary predicaments. But nothing is ordinary to a child. The world is a place of wonder. Around the age of seven, the sheen begins to wear off. Children adapt to grown-up demands and restrictions, or, sadly, succumb to neglect. Often, defeated by vacuous schemes, they give up on reading for pleasure for ever. But there is magic beneath the ordinariness, glints and gleams, laughter as well as tears. Books are a great way of staying



'We see too much of each other,' said Mole to Mouse one day.

'We take each other for granted.'

'Do we?' said Mouse.



'We can take these sacks on the motorbike,' said Mouse.

'Whose turn is it to drive?'

'Mine,' said Mole, 'same as last time.'

connected to the magic and finding it within oneself. Mole loves comics, which also play their part.

I loved Aesop's Fables as a child, which often feature animals, but not dressed up in clothes. Some critics object to this anthropomorphic treatment, but we have this great tradition in England where woodland animals can be grown-ups in disguise. This travels well, across borders, cultures, age range and time spans.

Nicolette Jones, children's book editor of the Sunday Times, says the Mouse & Mole books are 'perfect for newly confident readers, – and far superior to standard reading schemes.' Any child who reads the stories from books I-II will know the characters and their environment so well that they could easily progress to the twelfth book, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, a 7,000 word novel. The Italian publisher of the series, Nomos Bambini, says they are 'perfectly pitched between a picture book and a first chapter book, filling a niche that very few series do.'

Mouse & Mole are childlike, often silly, always playful, as well as doing their own housework and laundry. They are flawed, lovable and engaging. Mole prides himself on being a thinker, to the point of catastrophising – often to have his anxieties comically soothed by wise Mouse. Within their cosy and inviting appearance, these books support reading skills, and, just as importantly, they develop understanding.

Joyce Dunbar

Joyce Dunbar was born in the steel town of Scunthorpe in 1944. She won a scholarship to the local grammar school and after a year of pupil teaching in a secondary school, went to Goldsmiths College, London University to do a degree in English Literature. She was also awarded a distinction in her teaching qualification.

She taught children of all ages for many years, but mainly adults in Further Education, and from 1979-1989 she taught literature in the drama department at the college in Stratford-upon-Avon. In 1989 she gave up full-time teaching in order to write, and since 1980 she has published over 90 books.

In 2001 Joyce was millennium writer-in-residence in Norwich Market, running a story stall. This resulted in *Voices & Visions*, a vox-pop book about the 1,000-year-old market. She still loves teaching, having taught creative writing courses on the Greek island of Skyros from 1998-2008 as well as being a creative writing tutor for the Arvon Foundation and a Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow at UEA from 2006-2009. She still does some mentoring, most notably with Rebecca Atkinson, the creator of the TV series *Mixmups*, which is the first all inclusive disability led animation programme, aired on Channel 5.

She loves animals and in another life she would like to be the owner of a goat, a donkey, ducks, some geese and a tortoise.

As a writer, Joyce's work has been published in twenty-two languages. She is perhaps best known for *Tell Me Something Before I Go to Sleep* (1998), illustrated by Debi Gliori. Following the Twin Towers disaster on 9/11, the book was recommended by psychologists as a story 'to help children feel safe again.' In 2002 Joyce and the illustrator went on tour to the United States. The book is still in print, and Joyce is still trying to help children feel safe.

Her story about a deaf prince, *Moonbird*, illustrated by Jane Ray, was performed in Singapore in 2006 by I Theatre, with the First Lady present. In 2020 she was invited on a six-city book tour to Holland with Petr Horacek, who illustrated their book *Grumpy Duck*, voted best picture book in Holland as well as in Spain that year. Her novel *Mundo & The Weather Child*, about the imaginary friend of a deaf child, was runner-up for the Guardian Award in 1986.

Joyce lives in Norwich, which is Unesco City of Literature. To celebrate this, in 2023 eight book benches were installed around the city inscribed with well-known titles. *Mouse & Mole* is one of them, alongside *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, and *Revelations of Divine Love* by Mother Julian, the first book to be written in English by a woman.

James Mayhew

James Mayhew is an acclaimed illustrator, author, concert presenter and storyteller.

His publications with Graffeg include *The Knight Who Took All Day* (adapted as a work for narrator and orchestra by Bernard Hughes), the Gaspard series with Zeb Soanes, *Koshka's Tales – Stories from Russia* and illustrations for the Mouse and Mole series by Joyce Dunbar, animated for television with the voices of Alan Bennett and Richard Briers. He is also the creator of the Katie art books and Ella Bella Ballerina series.

He has worked with many orchestras and musicians including the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, painting illustrations live on stage to performances of classical music, including *The Firebird*, *Scheherazade* and *Pictures at an Exhibition*. James was awarded the 1994 *New York Times* prize for illustration.

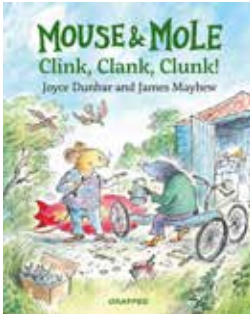


Mouse & Mole Books



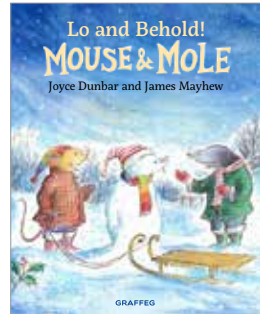
Mouse and Mole: Boo to the Who by Joyce Dunbar

- Illustrator James Mayhew
- Publication 17 October 2023
- Ages 4+
- HB, 32pp, 250 x 200mm
- ISBN 9781802580877
- Price £12.99



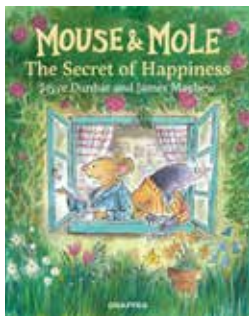
Mouse and Mole: Clink, Clank, Clunk! by Joyce Dunbar

- Illustrator James Mayhew
- Publication 22 September 2022
- Ages 4+
- HB, 32pp, 250 x 200mm
- ISBN 9781802580877
- Price £12.99



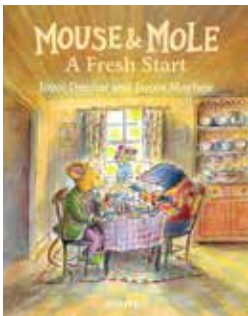
Lo and Behold! Mouse and Mole by Joyce Dunbar

- Illustrator James Mayhew
- Publication October 2021
- Ages 4+
- HB, 32pp, 250 x 200mm
- ISBN 9781914079658
- Price £12.99



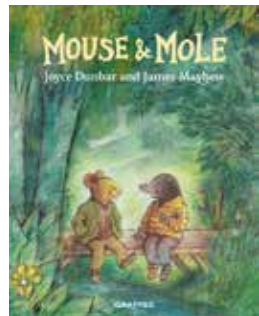
Mouse & Mole: The Secret of Happiness by Joyce Dunbar

- Illustrator James Mayhew
- Publication May 2021
- Ages 4+
- HB, 32pp, 250 x 200mm
- ISBN 9781913134839
- Price £12.99



Mouse and Mole: A Fresh Start by Joyce Dunbar

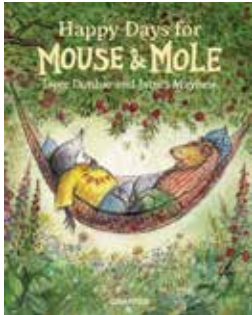
- Illustrator James Mayhew
- Publication October 2020
- Ages 4+
- HB, 32pp, 250 x 200mm
- ISBN 9781913134785
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Mouse and Mole by Joyce Dunbar

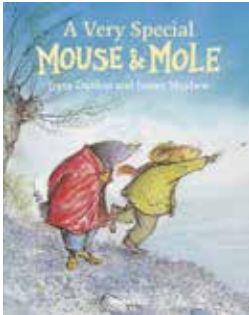
- Illustrator James Mayhew
- Publication May 2019
- Ages 4+
- HB, 32pp, 250 x 200mm
- ISBN 9781912050406
- Price £12.99

Mouse & Mole Books



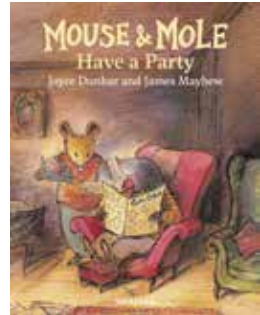
Happy Days for Mouse and Mole by Joyce Dunbar

- Illustrator James Mayhew
- Publication May 2019
- Ages 4+
- HB, 32pp, 250 x 200mm
- ISBN 9781912050383
- Price £12.99



A Very Special Mouse and Mole by Joyce Dunbar

- Illustrator James Mayhew
- Publication May 2019
- Ages 4+
- HB, 32pp, 250 x 200mm
- ISBN 9781912050987
- Price £12.99



Mouse and Mole Have a Party by Joyce Dunbar

- Illustrator James Mayhew
- Publication May 2019
- Ages 4+
- HB, 32pp, 250 x 200mm
- ISBN 9781912050390
- Price £12.99



Three new titles to follow in 2024-26.

‘What’s the matter, Mole?’ asked Mouse.

‘I’ve had a terrible thought!’ said Mole.

‘What terrible thought?’ asked Mouse.

‘I might fall off the roof.’

‘But you are not on the roof,’ said Mouse.



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published by Graffeg in 2024.
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