

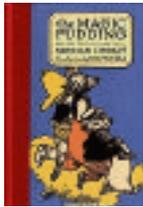
READERS' LIVES

Books and the story of my life

Vicky Arthurs is a Newcastle-based writer, editor and performer. Her first poetry book, *Limehaven*, will be launched at the Eclectic IRON Festival

The Magic Pudding by Norman Lindsay (1918)

We had no telly when I was little, so I grew up reading. Books were portals into other worlds: passports to adventure. My mum read to me too, bringing stories to life. I loved listening to her voice, hearing words as rhythm, language as song. One of my favourite books was *The Magic Pudding* by Norman Lindsay. It has all the ingredients that still delight me: brilliant illustrations, cartoon humour, wild stories and boisterous ballads.



The book follows the adventures of a band of travellers and their magic puddin'. The puddin', whose name is Albert, is a cut-an'-come-again puddin' – no matter how much they eat, he remains whole. Sometimes he's a rich steak and kidney pud, sometimes boiled jam roll, sometimes apple dumpling. Whatever his flavour, he's always a rascal, inciting punch-ups with puddin' thieves and landing his owners in court. Philip Pullman describes the book as "the funniest children's book ever written". So do I.

Counting Stars by David Almond (Hodder Children's Books, 2000)

David Almond is an inspiring writer, so singling out one title was hard. I shortlisted five novels, but finally chose this book of short stories. Like his books, David Almond is rooted in the North East, and we're lucky to have opportunities to hear him read and talk about his creative process.

These stories are drawn from his childhood. They were written with love for a small audience – his brothers and sisters. I've heard him say that writing the book cleared something for him. The moment he posted the manuscript for *Counting Stars*, the idea for Skellig popped into his head.



I stored this little tale away in my heart. When my writing was going nowhere, I looked for the love in my own childhood. I found it embodied by my grandparents and wrote *Limehaven* in their memory. That's the thing about great writers: they show others the way.

The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle (Hodder & Stoughton, 2001)

Writing poetry requires inner stillness. You have to quieten down to see what you are looking at and hear the words that suggest themselves. This has never come easily to me. Mine is a monkey mind, so discovering I didn't need to pay attention to its antics was a revelation. I first encountered this idea when I read *The Power of Now*.

Eckhart Tolle writes with clarity about the insanity of the human mind. He points to the possibility of living fully in the moment, free from past conditioning and fears about the future. As a writer, I'm fascinated by his ability to use words to evoke a wordless state.



His work divides the crowd. You'll either let it carry you into stillness or you'll scream "Poppycock! Balderdash!" and fling the book across the room. Still, I invite you try it. It might open a door for you, as it did for me...

The Ode Less Travelled (Unlocking the Poet Within) by Stephen Fry (Hutchinson, 2005)

"I have a dark and dreadful secret. I write poetry." So begins Stephen Fry's brilliant book on writing poetry. Forget the creative writing MA, get down to Waterstone's and buy a copy! For less than a tenner you can enter the class of one of the best poetry teachers you'll ever have.

He's passionate about poetry and patient with beginners. You'll learn all you need to know about metre, rhyme and form, and enjoy a romp through some fine (and less fine) examples of poetry from medieval to modern times.



I've developed a deep fondness for Mr Fry. His writing is so vivid, his instruction so clear, I find it impossible to believe I've not actually sat in his classroom. (Let's hope we never meet on a train, lest I'm tempted to greet him as my long-lost mentor. I studied Engineering rather than English Literature, so have been most grateful for his tutelage.)

The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake by Aimee Bender (Windmill Books, 2011)

Novels featuring food always intrigue me and this one is exquisite. A few days before her ninth birthday, Rose Edelstein bites into a piece of chocolate lemon cake and tastes her cheery mother's despair. From that moment on she can taste the emotions of the person who made her food. It is a gift she doesn't want and she can't make it go away. Every meal is a minefield, revealing secrets and lies she cannot share.

The novel follows Rose through adolescence as she unravels the feelings her family won't express and slowly comes to terms with her extraordinary palate. It's a beautiful, weird book: an imaginative depiction of a sensitive child who grows up knowing more than she can ever tell. It's a survivor's tale too: a book about forgiveness and courage, about the choice between embracing your gifts or turning away from them in fear.

Vicky Arthurs' *Limehaven* (IRON Press), celebrating the bond between young and old, will be launched on June 7 (4.30pm, RNLI Cullercoats) at the Eclectic IRON Festival, www.ironpress.co.uk/eclectic Vicky's website is www.vickyarthurs.com

