

On the hunt for new storytelling talent

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The shortlist for our children's fiction prize is here, reveals Amanda Craig. But who will win the publishing deal?

The *Times*/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition has become an annual treasure hunt for talent. Barry Cunningham was famously the one editor at Bloomsbury who accepted a manuscript from the unknown J. K. Rowling. Now with his own successful publishing house, he has joined forces with *The Times* to find other new children's authors to publish alongside the likes of Cornelia Funke, Heather Dyer

and Kevin Brooks. There is nothing quite like this competition, which gives budding authors the chance to leap-frog the daunting slush-piles of manuscripts on agents' and publishers' desks, and secure a worldwide publishing contract.

Each year Barry and his team go through about 2,000 entries from a huge number of different age groups and professions to draw up a shortlist of five potential winners. Then us judges (seven children's literature experts, including the top agent Neil Blair and the beloved *Gruffalo* author Julia Donaldson) read the five manuscripts and meet up for a day of heated debate, not leaving the room until we have a winner.

So far, we have struck gold every year. First, we had the gripping post-apocalyptic fantasy *Flood Child*, by Emily Diamand, then Sophia Bennett's *Threads*, about a young African refugee's adventures in fashion, and last year, *Muncle Trogg*, Janet Foxley's witty story of an undersized giant, which was recently selected for Richard



and Judy Children's Book Club. Diamand and Bennett have already published sequels, and Foxley is busy turning Muncle's exploits into a series. Even our runners-up have made waves: Pat Walsh, shortlisted for the 2008 prize, is about to publish her second novel, *The Crowfield Demon*.

Now we have five more hopefuls — you can read extracts from their novels at thetimes.co.uk/chickenhouse and leave a comment to tell us what you think. Will your favourite win? You'll have to wait until March 19 to find out.



The author Sophie Green
The book *The Last Giant*

This is an atmospheric thriller about a clumsy overgrown boy called Howard Bloom, who discovers that he has been linked to a grumpy gargoyle and charged with finding the all-important Bloodstone. A new home, a wise raven, twins and a creepy house all deepen the mystery.

Sophie Green, a librarian and formerly a zoologist, found inspiration by reading "amazing children's books each day".



The author Astrid Holm
The book *My Canterbury Tale*

Chaucer's most famous work is taken as a starting point for this dramatic historical romance. The narrator, Rosamund, is Chaucer's niece by marriage, but her life is blighted by bastardy, and a cruel half-brother. When her sister Alyson marries Chaucer's brother, Absalom, she hopes to find freedom and love in London.

Astrid Holm has always been fascinated by the medieval period and, like her heroine, grew up by the River Severn.



The author Kate Griffin
The book *Ptolemy's Secret*

Ptolemy's Secret is an absorbing magical tale, set in the time of Charles II, in which 11-year-old Jem and his mysterious, mind-speaking friend, Ptolemy, battle sinister aristocratic forces.

Kate Griffin was inspired by passing St Paul's Cathedral one snowy night and wondering about what had been there before the Great Fire, and also by working part-time in Sir John Soane's Museum in London. She works for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.



The author Kieran Larwood
The book *Plumpscuddle's Peculiars*

This is another tale set in long-ago London. Its hairy heroine is bought for Plumpscuddle's freak show, but the troupe has a secret life as detectives investigating mysterious disappearances along the Thames. The bond of sympathy between the Peculiars stands them in good stead, as they realise that they are up against two enemies in an unusual mystery.

Kieran Larwood is the only male teacher in a primary school on the Isle of Wight — his atmospheric tale is no doubt informed by being an odd man out.



The author June Taylor
The book *Lovely Me, Lovely You*

Lovely Me, Lovely You is for teenagers, but the heroine, Nathalie, has more problems than most. Not only does she hate her work-obsessed, attractive mother, but she is in counselling after attacking another girl at school and shaving her hair off. The only bright spot in her life is her disabled brother, George, but as the novel progresses we learn that there is something even odder about him than indicated.

June Taylor has an MA in scriptwriting, a career in television and has also worked for ChildLine. Her portrait of adolescent anguish makes for a haunting tale.



Read extracts from the five books shortlisted for the 2011 *Times*/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition
thetimes.co.uk/chickenhouse

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