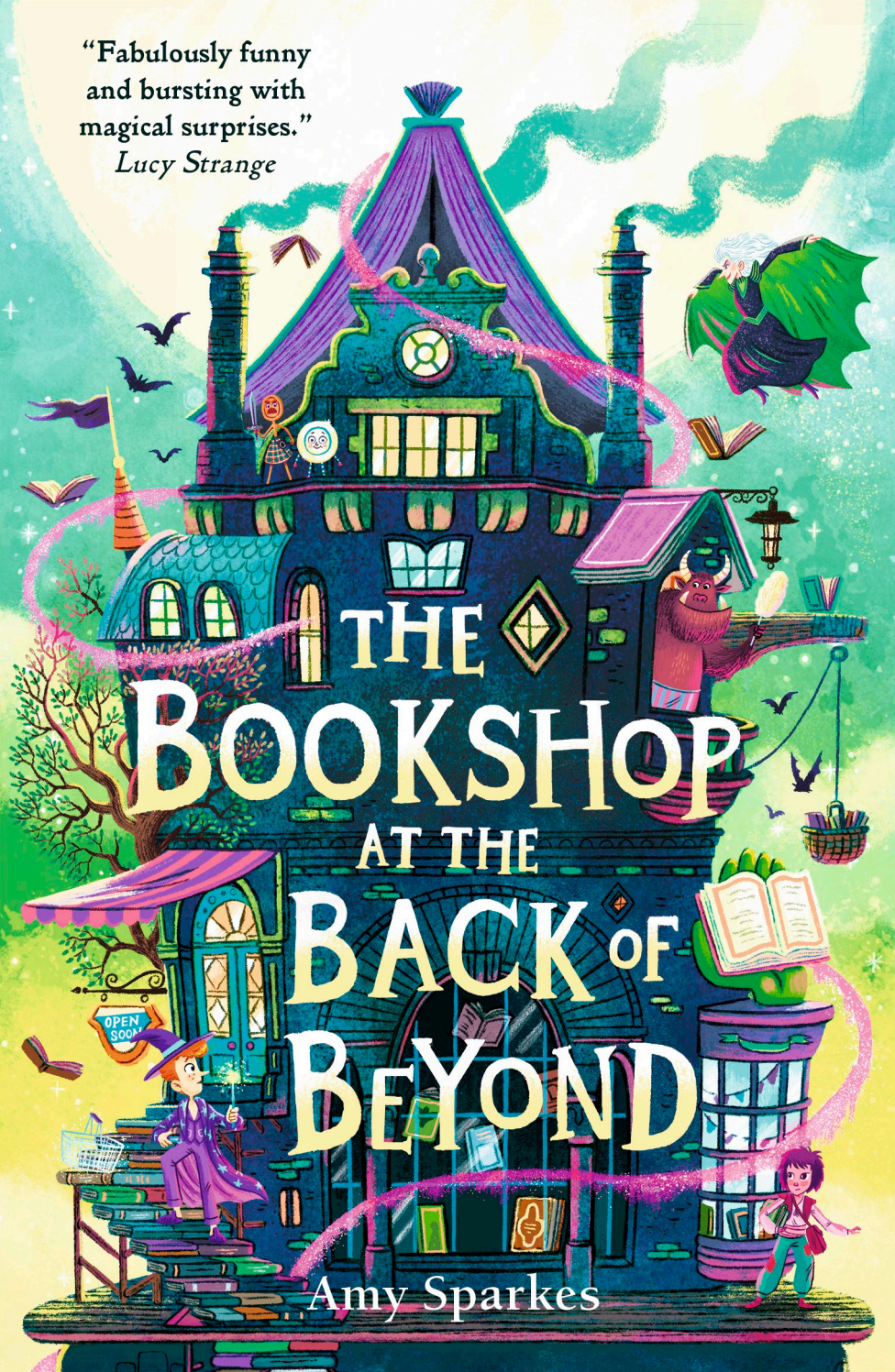
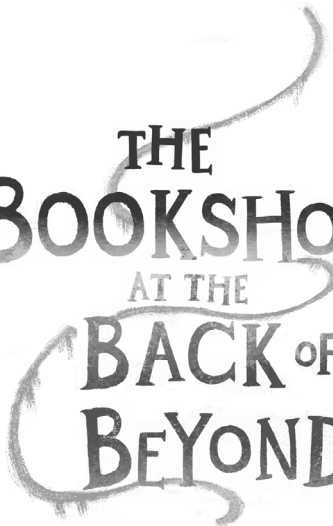


"Fabulously funny
and bursting with
magical surprises."
Lucy Strange



THE BOOKSHOP AT THE BACK OF BEYOND

Amy Sparkes



THE
BOOKSHOP
AT THE
BACK OF
BEYOND

THE
BOOKSHOP
AT THE
BACK OF
BEYOND

Amy Sparkes



WALKER
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published 2023 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2023 Amy Sparkes
Cover and interior illustrations © 2023 Ben Mantle

The right of Amy Sparkes to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Berkeley Oldstyle

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-0566-5

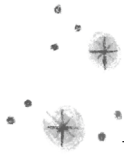
www.walker.co.uk

The author will donate 5% of her royalties
for this book to ICP Support

www.icpsupport.org

Registered charity number: 1146449





For Merrianna

Everyone has secrets, do they not?

*Sometimes deep, sometimes dark,
sometimes well-meaning or long forgotten – buried
in hidden places.*

But secrets will sleep and bide their time.

*Because one day, sooner or later, they will wake –
and there will be consequences.*

The secrets will come out to play.

*And those who patiently wait in the shadows, who
watch from the windows,
they gather the secrets.*

And soon ... the game begins.





CHAPTER
1

There was surely a point when life couldn't get much stranger, but Nine wasn't completely convinced she'd reached it yet.

She narrowed her eyes and slowly, carefully, crouched down in the plum-carpeted hallway of the House at the Edge of Magic, facing the front door. The satchel she wore across her body brushed the carpet, her precious music box tinkling inside.

Focus. Just like a cat, Nine was sighting her prey, stalking it quietly, ready to pounce at the right moment. She clenched her fists, stretched her fingers – her pre-pounce ritual.

Nine glared at the little creature, which was almost within reach. It was the size of a small rat,

with large, round eyes and a body that looked like a blue ball of wool. It sat back on its little hind legs, using its front legs to hold – and nibble – a prize of its own. A prize it had stolen from Nine’s plate. But not for long.

Nine was on in three...

Oh, she was going to get her flippin’ toast back.

Two...

If it was the last thing she did.

One...

Nine leapt forwards with the determined spring of an experienced pickpocket, her satchel flapping against her hip. But her target seemed equally determined and experienced. The creature gave an indignant squawk, hastily stuffed the toast in its mouth and scrambled away from Nine’s outstretched fingertips – as she landed face down on the carpet.

Nine turned her head right to see the blue ball of wool on legs scurrying and leaping up the main staircase.

“Oh no you don’t!” she cried, jumping to her feet and making a dash for the stairs.

“Er ... Madam,” came the voice of a young wizard from the other end of the hallway, “is everything under control?”

“Yes, Flabberghast!” snapped Nine, as she half fell up the stairs, the little blue creature escaping her fingertips again. “Perfectly under control!”

“Ah, good, marvellous,” said Flabberghast, his tone a little nervous. He wore indigo pyjamas, a pointy indigo hat and fluffy purple slippers and leaned against the kitchen doorframe.

Nine leapt again at the creature, this time half falling *down* the stairs with a not-entirely-perfectly-under-control thump.

The wizard twisted his mouth doubtfully. “I could simply request that Eric makes some more?”

Nine scowled as the blue ball of wool scurried further up the stairs and onto the main landing. She turned her scowl to Flabberghast and pointed her finger at him. “Nobody,” she said, “steals my toast.” She leapt to her feet once more and hurtled up the plum-carpeted stairs.

The many portraits of Flabberghast’s witch and wizard ancestors – all with the same flared nostrils and silvery-sparkling eyes – passed like a blur as Nine chased the creature to the main landing. When she arrived there, she scanned the area furiously.

Dozens of doors of every size and shape dotted the walls. Some were reachable by criss-crossing

staircases and landings, some by wooden ladders, and others appeared not to be reachable at all. The different floors were linked by a huge central spiral staircase with a rope handrail that snaked its way up to a distant ornately painted ceiling.

“Where *are* you?” whispered Nine through gritted teeth.

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Nine looked up to see the toilet giggling and hopping cheekily across a rickety landing. It had a frustrating habit of wandering about and disappearing, and – sure enough – Nine watched as a door opened and the toilet quickly hopped inside. She tutted and made a mental note of which door it was hiding behind in case she needed it later.

Then came the sound of tiny, toast-stealing, scurrying feet. Nine’s gaze shot to the right: a wobbly flight of stairs, which led to a silver door decorated with a curious golden question mark. Her mother’s old bedroom.

A cold piece of nibbled toast lay outside it, and a small blue ball of wool was now flattening itself almost entirely before sliding under the doorframe and disappearing into the room.

“No! You are *not* going in there!”

Nine ran to the stairs, her satchel thumping against her. She pounded up the steps so fast that they threatened to collapse. She thrust her hand out towards the iron ring handle that formed the dot of the question mark and twisted it sharply to the right.

As she burst through the door, Nine noticed the faintly familiar scent and took a quick, deep breath – but there was no time to dwell on it. She glanced around the room, searching for the creature. Every wall had a narrow bookcase filled with books, and was painted a bold turquoise. Empty picture frames hung on the walls and an unticking golden clock sat silently on a shelf.

A silver flash at the window beside the bed caught Nine’s attention. Outside, the blackness of the World Between Worlds was split by more flashes of silver strands, which rose, twisted together, and then exploded into fading stars. A little fanlight at the top of the window always stayed open – the window Nine had squeezed through once to get into the locked House. A window she had reached by climbing up the footholds and handholds that jutted out of the House’s brickwork. As if her ma had done that before her. . .

“You are absolutely *not* staying in here!” Nine announced to the room.

There was a tiny scrabble of defiance from under the bed. Nine cast her satchel off, causing a tinkle of protest from her precious music box. She dropped flat on her stomach and peered underneath the bed. There were some clothes, a little hooped fishing net on the end of a long wooden handle, and right near the wall, a teapot ... behind which poked out a little blue woolly bottom.

Got you.

Nine slowly moved her arm towards the fishing net until her fingers grasped the handle. One swoop and she would surely catch the creature... Her grip on the net tightened. She fixed her gaze. Her arm muscles tightened in readiness and—

“TEA CUPBOARD!” came Flabberghast’s distant voice.

No! Not the tea—

ZAP!

Nine was turned into a rocking horse with a dragon’s head and a pig’s tail. The blue ball of wool’s bottom turned into a bubble that grew bigger – and bigger.

The spell on the tea cupboard was a thoughtful hangover from the curse placed on the House at the Edge of Magic by Flabberghast’s sister – the very

same one who had imprisoned Flabberghast and the others inside and shrunk it to no more than an ornament when Nine had pickpocketed her bag and found it. The one who had tried on *several* occasions to kill them and who Flabberghast had made quite clear he wanted nothing more to do with. But now the curse had been broken, the witch seemed to have left them in peace, except for the brief reminders every time they touched the cupboard to get some strawberry tea.

The annoying spell began wearing off, as it always did. Nine became more Nine, and the bubble-bottom of the blue creature popped, releasing an eye-watering smell, and in its place once more was its regular woolly rump. The creature poked its head around the teapot. Their eyes met, and the little thing tilted its head on its side, as if it was thinking. Nine frowned, her grasp loosening on the handle of the net. The creature gave two quick sniffs in Nine's direction, and another in the direction of the teapot – and then bolted out of the bedroom door.

Nine gave a frustrated sigh and pulled herself out from the shadows. She sat back on her heels and looked around again at her mother's room. She wasn't sure who was the more astounded – her or

Flabberghast – when she had realised that her mother had once travelled with the House, and that the doorstep Nine vaguely remembered being left on with no more than a music box had not been a workhouse, or any old doorstep, but the House at the Edge of Magic. That had been before Pockets, the whiskery old gang-master, had stolen her away to be one of his pickpocketing thieflings, of course. It all seemed a lifetime ago...

“You had it all worked out for me, Ma,” Nine whispered to herself. “Why did it all go wrong?” Her heart burned to know what had happened.

She had asked Flabberghast so many questions. Some he had answered, some he had avoided. He had met her ma when she was selling flowers on the street, in the mortal world. He had walked past and had an atrocious bout of sneezing. When her ma had passed him a handkerchief, an unexpected friendship had grown quickly between them.

The wizard’s eyes had sparkled, all silvery and soft, when he spoke of the adventures they had shared. When Nine had asked why her ma had left, though, his eyes became dull and sad.

“People leave,” he had said sharply. “They always do in the end.” And he had refused to say any more.

Nine looked at the book that rested on her ma's bed. The golden letters of the title spelled out the title of her own favourite book, the one she always used to borrow from the library back home with Mr Downes, the best librarian in the world. *The Mystery of Wolven Moor*. Nine opened the front cover and traced her fingers over the handwritten name inside. Her ma's name. *Eliza*.

Nine peered again under the bed. Her ma's belongings. Things her ma would actually have touched. She lay down on her stomach again, reached for the fishing net and scooped up the teapot that the blue woolly creature had sniffed at. She brought the net out from under the bed and sat, resting against the iron bedframe. She looked at the delicate white china, decorated with golden stars. Nine stroked it thoughtfully. Had her mother made strawberry tea – the Finest Tea in All the Realms – in this very teapot? Why was it stuffed right underneath the bed? She lifted up the lid, peered inside ... and frowned

Inside were six pieces of ripped parchment. Nine reached into the teapot and pulled out the fragments. She turned them over in her hands. They had nothing written on them ... just pieces of plain parchment.

“Then ... why rip it up?” Nine murmured aloud to the empty room. She rearranged the pieces, fitting them together to form the sheet of parchment. As she slotted the last one into place, her heart skipped a beat. Words appeared in spidery handwriting across the torn fragments:

**Received with thanks,
The SAFEKEEPER**

There was a sharp KNOCKITY-KNOCK on the bedroom door.

Nine jumped – and as she did so, her hand brushed one corner of the torn parchment, dislodging it from the other pieces. Nine stared at the parchment as the letters swiftly vanished from view. She hastily grabbed the pieces and stuffed them back inside the teapot.

Flabberghast’s face peeped round the door, framed by his auburn curls poking out from his pointy, indigo hat.

“Madam? Ah! There you are,” he said, drumming his fingers on the door. He stepped into the room. A silvery light sparkled in his ancient blue eyes as he glanced around. “She was quite ... remarkable. A pity indeed that...”

The sparkle in his eyes faded instantly.

“What?” said Nine softly. She had to tread carefully. Her keen eyes watched him, searching for clues. “Come on. What are you not telling me?”

Flabberghast shrugged and his eyes looked sadder than before. “I suppose everyone has secrets, do they not?”

Nine said nothing, but the image of the torn parchment burned in her mind so strongly she felt Flabberghast would surely see it. She moved her hand slightly in front of the teapot.

What if the torn parchment was a secret Ma had kept from Flabberghast? Should I keep it? Should I say? Should I trust him—?

Flabberghast cleared his throat and brushed down his indigo pyjamas. “Although it was certainly no secret that she was fond of that wretched puffscuttler. The creatures live for decades.”

Nine caught the whiff of something earthy and peppery in the air and her heart sank.

Oh, no...

“I bring warning,” said Flabberghast, uneasily. “Eric is attempting to make up for your stolen breakfast by cooking you some pancakes.”

Nine’s shoulders slumped at the thought of the

grey, lumpy, bone-filled pancakes that the dear housekeeper troll was preparing. “And you didn’t talk him out of it?”

“Well, Madam, you know what he’s like,” said Flabberghast. “He was so pleased to help. And he’s...” The wizard grimaced. “He’s adding a new ingredient.”

Nine sighed. Eric was undoubtedly the best troll and the worst cook she had ever met in her life.

“Your sister has a lot to answer for. I can’t believe she left all his recipe books translated into Dwarvish. We broke the curse on the House fair and square,” Nine grumbled.

“Yes, well, I do not think *fairness* is my sister’s strongest feature.”

“But she is clever,” said Nine, knowing it would annoy the wizard.

“What she is,” Flabberghast said, “is a nightmare.”

Nine felt the teapot, cool against her slightly sweating palm. Flabberghast hadn’t recognised the teapot beside her. She was becoming increasingly convinced her ma hadn’t trusted Flabberghast with whatever this secret was. So perhaps *she* shouldn’t trust him with it, either.

“Madam?” asked Flabberghast, looking at her with a mixture of curiosity and nervousness. “You’re not ... *thinking* again, are you?”

“Well, one of us has to,” Nine retorted. She pushed aside the guilt and the doubt, and picked up her satchel. Then she walked towards the door and grabbed Flabberghast by the sleeve.

“Madam?” said Flabberghast as she dragged him towards the rickety staircase.

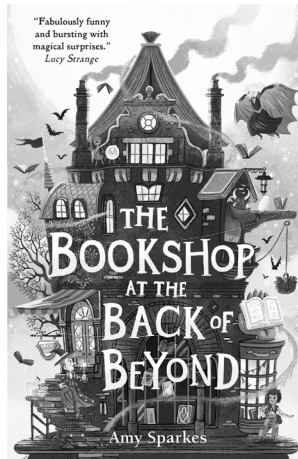
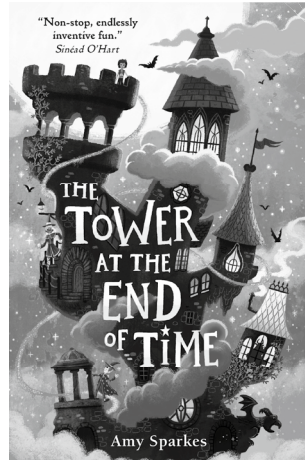
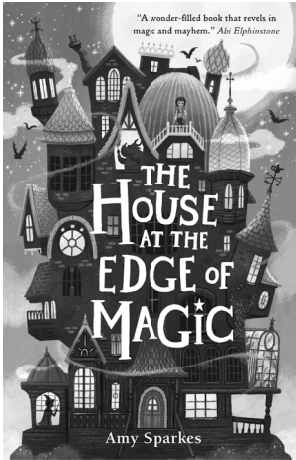
“If *I* have to eat the bone pancakes, then *you’re* going to as well.”

And she marched him back down the plum-carpeted staircase, towards the strange, peppery, earthy smell, deliberately ignoring the flash of smug blue wool she could see out of the corner of her eye.

About the Author

Amy Sparkes has been writing since she was five years old but only started taking it seriously after moving to south-west England and starting a family. Her books have appeared on CBeebies storytime and been shortlisted for several book awards, including the Roald Dahl Funny Prize and the BookTrust Best Books Awards for *Do Not Enter the Monster Zoo*. Amy is known as the Story Godmother and runs writing workshops for children's authors, produces the "Writing for Children" pages for the bestselling *Writing Magazine*, and co-founded the *Writing Magazine Children's Book Prize* for developing writers. When she's not writing, Amy enjoys adventures, discovering secret things which might possibly be magical, and drinking lots of tea.

Have you read the whole series so far?



More coming soon...

We'd love to hear what you thought of
The Bookshop at the Back of Beyond!

🐦 #BookshopBeyond
@WalkerBooksUK
@AmySparkes

📷 @WalkerBooksUK

