



Published by Wide Eyed Editions, 2026

Illustrations © Violaine Leroy



Young Discoverers

Dig into this inspiring anthology of true stories about children who made extraordinary discoveries, by **Stephen Davies** and **Violaine Leroy**

STEPHEN DAVIES

One scorching summer afternoon in 2018, an 11-year-old Swedish girl called Saga Vanecek was skimming stones in a lake. It was the day of the World Cup final – Croatia versus France.

Saga was feeling along the lake-bed for one more stone, when her hand brushed against something long and rough.

What could it be? A broken branch, perhaps? She grasped the object and hauled it up out of the water...

Children are natural discoverers. They notice things that adults often

miss: a strange shape in the ground, an unexpected glimmer, a smell that doesn't quite belong.

Young Discoverers celebrates this innate curiosity through 12 true stories of children and teenagers who stumbled upon something truly extraordinary.

The book spans continents and centuries. It includes a 10-year-old American who sparked a gold rush, a nine-year-old South African who found a trove of hominid fossils, and a group of French teenagers who scrambled head-first into a narrow hole and found themselves surrounded by bucking, stampeding

animals – the Lascaux cave paintings. The research for the book was by turns stultifying and electrifying. Dreary hours trawling through newspaper archives in multiple languages were rewarded by occasional flashes of gold. *There! This one is a corker!*

These almost unbelievable stories are matched by magical illustrations from French artist Violaine Leroy, who is known for her soft colour palettes and loose, lively linework. Her rendering of the Northern Lights on page 68 is so gorgeous and dramatic, it made me gasp out loud when I first saw it.





Activities Vocabulary

Discoverer is a clunky word (that awful ‘-erer’ ending!), but useful nonetheless. Discuss with your class who or what might be a ‘discoverer’, including people whose job is to discover things. Relevant vocabulary includes *archaeologist, palaeontologist, fossil-hunter, explorer, metal detectorist, geologist, astronomer* and *researcher*.

Encourage children to talk with a partner about accidental discoveries and to imagine five places where somebody might make an accidental discovery. *Hiking in the woods? Digging in your back garden? Looking through binoculars or a telescope? Snorkelling? Walking the dog in the park?* That last one might lead to the question ‘Can an animal be a discoverer?’ and to the rich seam of comedy that is truffle pigs.

Four senses

All 12 children in the book made their discovery because they were alert to the evidence of their senses.

Have pupils flip through the book and sort the discoverers into groups. Find seven children who made their discovery because of something they saw, two children who heard something, two who felt something and one who smelled something.

Sight – Conrad Reed (gold nugget), Mary Anning (ichthyosaur bones), Hussein Abdel-Rassoul (the top step of Tutankhamun’s tomb), Roy Spencer (star sapphire), Matthew Berger (hominid fossils), Kathryn Gray (supernova), Daisy Morris (pterosaur fossil).

Sound – Marcel Ravidat (Lascaux cave paintings), Muhammad Ahmed Al-Hamed (Dead Sea scrolls).

Touch – Jacob Eliahu (Siloam inscription), Saga Vanecek (Viking sword).

Smell – Zhenya Salinder (a woolly mammoth poking out of melting ice).

Group work

Split your class into 12 groups, and assign one of the discoverers to each group (for smaller classes, six groups could cover two discoverers each). Have each group write on a postcard the key information about their discovery, then pin it on a map of the world (you can display this on an interactive whiteboard, or a map on the wall). Labels could include the discovery itself, the name and age of the discoverer, and the place and year of discovery. For example, *Prehistoric cave paintings, Marcel Ravidat (and Robot the dog), France, 1940*. Children could



“Young Discoverers celebrates children’s innate curiosity”

also mark the age of the discovery itself on a timeline below the map. Those Lascaux cave paintings, for example, are a jaw-dropping 17,000 years old.

Have each group present their young discoverer to the rest of the class. Pupils could prepare a drama of the discovery or a motionless tableau of one key moment. Hot-seating is another option: “So, Roy, when did you first realise that the lump of black rock you were using as a doorstep was actually a priceless sapphire?”

Take it further → → →

FINDING FABERGÉ

Over a hundred years ago, a jeweller called Peter Fabergé made 52 extraordinary Easter eggs for the empresses of Russia. Each creation was crafted not from chocolate but from gold, rubies and diamonds. Forty-five of these beauties are in museums and millionaires’ mansions. Another recently turned up in a jumble sale. The other six are missing... at least for now. Tell your class about Fabergé, then get them writing imaginative stories about a child who discovers one of the missing eggs in an unlikely location. As you prep them for this task, encourage them to zoom in on the

moment of discovery itself. Model on the board how a few seconds of real time in a story can be expanded to three or four paragraphs of writing. I remember my old English teacher Mr Flower pacing our classroom, stroking his toothbrush moustache and chanting his favourite mantra: “Write more about less! Write more about less! Write more about less!”

THINKING LIKE DISCOVERERS

Eleven of my 12 young discoverers were outside when they made their momentous find. Encourage pupils to think like discoverers in their own environment.

What *could* be discovered locally?

Roman roads, old pottery, fossils, lost place-names, wildlife, old photographs, oral histories? Find an opportunity to get outside with your class and get into discovery mode. Link this expedition to a history unit, a museum trip or geography fieldwork. Alternatively, ask pupils to keep a discovery diary for a week. Tell them to jot down moments when they notice something new, puzzling or unexpected, even if it turns out to be nothing. The emphasis is on noticing, questioning and recording, not on finding something mind-blowing... although if they do end up finding the remains of an English king buried beneath a local car park, give them an achievement point.



Entry points

Each of the discovery stories in the book is full of drama and simple emotion, centring on a single ‘wow moment’ of delighted realisation: *I’ve found something!* You do not need to read the stories sequentially with your class. Instead, use them as exciting entry-points to particular units in history, geography or science. Use Hussein as a way into Ancient Egypt, Marcel as a time machine to the Stone Age and Kathryn as a shuttle into space.

I had to include Mary Anning in my book, but if years of teaching Year 3 Rocks and Soils have left you all Anning-ed out, then swap Mary for the more recent story of young Daisy Morris. In 2008, Daisy discovered a new species of pterosaur on a beach near her home on the Isle of Wight. Her find ended up in the Natural

History Museum, in a drawer right next to some of Mary Anning’s pterosaurs. She even got to have the new species named after her. *Vectidraco daisymorrisae* literally means Daisy Morris’s Isle of Wight Dragon.

Adventurous assembly

Need a quick assembly idea that is guaranteed to grab and hold the attention of a large group? Choose any story from *Young Discoverers*, then scan and crop it to isolate Violaine’s glorious illustrations. Project the images and retell the story in your own words. Let your eyes bulge and your voice quiver with emotion.

In a recent KS2 assembly, I shared the story of young Matthew Berger discovering a cache of prehistoric hominid bones in a South African cave network. Matthew’s route to the bones was a claustrophobe’s nightmare – inching through a narrow tunnel nicknamed Superman’s Crawl, across a series of sharp ridges known as the Dragon’s Back and down the dreaded Chute, a narrow shaft with an 18-inch pinch point. When Matthew finally reached the bones, he was so excited, his hands were trembling so violently that he had to wait five minutes before starting to take photographs.

Forgotten discoverers

The book ends with two young discoverers whose names have been lost to time. The first was a Scottish boy who was forced to spend an afternoon digging in his school’s potato patch as a punishment for bad behaviour. He dug up what he thought was a potato, then turned it over and saw that it was the head of an Ancient Egyptian statuette. The second was an eight-year-old

Loved this? Try these...

- ❖ *The Secret of the Forest of Lascaux* by Thierry Félix and Philippe Bigotto
- ❖ *The Fossil Hunter* by Kate Winter
- ❖ *The Street Beneath My Feet* by Charlotte Guillain and Yuval Zommer
- ❖ *Great Adventurers* by Alastair Humphreys and Kevin Ward
- ❖ *Footprints: Walk the Path of our Earliest Ancestors* by Stephen Davies and Kalina Muhova (coming Sept 26!)

Congolese girl who was playing in a pile of rubble near her uncle’s house and discovered an enormous diamond. The diamond went on a glamorous world tour and sold at auction for 12 million dollars, but the girl herself received none of the fame or fortune that should have been hers. These forgotten discoverers could inspire some wonderfully emotive writing from your pupils. Ask them to write a diary entry from the point of view of the Scottish boy or the Congolese girl, describing the moment of discovery and what happened afterwards. Alternatively, pupils could set history right by penning the newspaper article that should have been written to celebrate the momentous find. **TP**



Stephen Davies is an author, and enjoys visiting primary schools to conduct discovery-themed writing workshops.

 authorsabroad.com

GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

Many of the stories in this book could spark hands-on science or art activities. If you’ve been reading about Matthew Berger or Daisy Morris, borrow a table-top sandpit from Key Stage 1 and create an archaeological dig in the classroom. Hide bones, ammonites or terracotta fragments in the sand and give pupils brushes to uncover them.

If you’ve been reading about Marcel Ravidat and his dog Robot, get your class painting stags and bison on rough, textured paper. The stone-age artists of Lascaux used charcoal for black, berries for red, and wet clay for brown and ochre. Gather some (safe) natural materials and turn your classroom into a cathedral of dazzling cave art.

THE GREAT DEBATE

“Finders keepers, losers weepers!”

How many times have you heard that yawp of triumph ring out across the school playground? And is it always true?

Young Discoverers doesn’t just celebrate the moment of discovery, it also explores what happens next, raising thorny questions about ownership, responsibility and fairness.

When Marcel and his friends discovered the Lascaux caves, they swore to each other that they would keep it secret, returning day after day to cavort and picnic among the prehistoric paintings. But the magnitude of their find weighed heavily on them, and their secret lasted less than a week. Use this story as a springboard for classroom debate. Ask:

- Who owns a discovery? The finder, the landowner, or society?
- Should discoveries always go to museums, or do private collectors have a role?
- Should a discoverer’s age affect who should take responsibility for a find?
- Are there times when it’s better to keep a discovery secret?

Split the class into groups, each representing a different viewpoint (a discoverer, a museum curator, a government official) and let them argue their case. Encourage them to support their points with examples from the book and from real history.