The House with Chicken Legs is a breathtaking reimagining of a Russian folk tale from new talent, Sophie Anderson that Kiran Millwood Hargrave, describes as “enticing, a little bit dangerous, and thrumming with possibilities.”

Publishing this April from Usborne and aimed at 7-12 year-olds, the story centres on 12 year-old Marinka who faces a lonely destiny as a guardian of The Gate between the living and the land of the stars. She dreams of a normal life, where her house stays long enough for her to make friends. But her house has chicken legs and moves on without warning. The only people Marinka meets are dead and they disappear when her grandmother, Baba Yaga, performs the nightly guiding ceremony with warmth and kindness as a kind of midwife of death. The book deals with some serious themes in a refreshing way and with comfort, positivity and hope.

Sophie says, “The idea of death as a journey is an ancient one in lots of different cultures. I wanted that process of the death journey to be positive, the idea of the music and food, reflecting on your life. I was trying hard not to make it a scary thing.”

“It may be moving, it may be sad but essentially I want there to be a feeling of hope, that death is part of life, that even when people pass over we have memories of them which are important.”

Sophie was inspired to love stories by her Prussian grandmother, who fled her homeland during WW2, losing her family in the process. She carried in her soul the stories, music and food of her home and brought them with her to Wales…and to her granddaughter Sophie.

“I adored listening to my grandmother tell fairy stories. On the surface they were just fun, short stories, but I knew they had deeper meanings. They offered me a safe space to explore some difficult ideas, and they set my imagination racing.”

Growing up it was the tale of the chicken-legged house that captured Sophie’s imagination the most. She thought it would be incredible to live in a house that could take you on adventures, to see new places or to visit the homelands of ancestors.

Why not use this story starter based on another of Sophie's favourite fairy tales to write your own story...

My father, Koschei, has no soul. I used to think he hid it so he could be ruthless as frostbite, and live forever with his gold. But yesterday I found out the truth...
Sophie Anderson’s Prussian grandmother had to flee her homeland WW2 but she carried in her soul the stories, music and food of her homeland and passed them on to her granddaughter Sophie.

Here Sophie shares one of her grandmother’s recipes…

**Blitzkuchen** (lightning cake - because it is quick to make and quick to eat!)

A soft cake with a sweet, crunchy, flaked almond crust.

**Ingredients:**

*For the cake:*

1 stick butter

1 cup granulated sugar

4 eggs

1 cup milk

2 cups flour

3 teaspoons baking powder

*For the topping:*

½ stick butter

½ cup sugar

2-3 cups flaked almonds

**Method:**

- Preheat oven to 180°C
- Mix together all the cake ingredients in the order given
- Pour into a shallow baking pan (16" x 12") and cook for 15-20 minutes
- While the cake is cooking, make the topping by mixing the sugar and flaked almonds, melting ½ stick of butter then stirring the butter into the sugar/almond mix
- Pour the topping onto the cake and bake for another 5-10 minutes
Reading Group notes for *The House with Chicken Legs*

1. In *The House with Chicken Legs*, Marinka lives in a house with chicken legs. If you could live in a home with legs:
   a) What would it look like?
   b) Where would it take you?

2. Read the prologue of *The House with Chicken Legs*.
   a) What words or sentences give you an idea how Marinka feels about living in a house with chicken legs?
   b) What is missing from Marinka’s life, and how is the house is preventing her from getting this?

3. In *The House with Chicken Legs*, death is portrayed as a journey. Marinka’s grandmother, Baba Yaga, acts as a guide on this journey – helping souls move from this world to the next through ‘The Gate’.
   a) A soul can be thought of as the part of an individual separate from their body. Try drawing a picture to represent your soul.

     As souls pass through The Gate, Baba Yaga recites ‘the death journey words’:
     ‘May you have strength on the long and arduous journey ahead. The stars are calling for you. Move on with gratitude for your time on earth. Every moment now an eternity. You carry with you memories of infinite value. Peace at returning to the stars. The great cycle is complete.’

   b) What do these words mean to you?
   c) How do you think these words might help souls on their journey?
   d) Try to write your own ‘journey words’ to help a soul about to embark on a long and unfamiliar journey.

   Each time Baba Yaga guides a soul, a small sentence is added to the death journey words, to describe what the individual has gained from their life. For example; it might be the love of family or friends, the power of music, the excitement of discovery, or the light of hope. e) What would you like to gain from your life?
4. In *The House with Chicken Legs*, foods, music and clothing are often used to create a sense of culture. What types of foods, music, and clothing do you associate with your culture?

5. Baba Yaga often quotes proverbs when she talks to Marinka. (Proverbs are short sayings that contain traditional wisdom or advice.) Here are a few of Baba’s proverbs - what do each of them mean to you?

   - *It’s not how long a life, but how sweet a life that counts.*
   - *Beware the goat from the front, the horse from the rear, and the living from all sides.*
   - *The morning is wiser than the evening.*
   - *The nightingale that sings finds a song.*

What other proverbs have you heard, and what do they mean to you?

6. Marinka’s journey in *The House with Chicken Legs* involves a search for a way to break free of her destiny and control her own future. What are your thoughts about destiny? Do you believe we have a set destiny? Or that, through our choices and actions, we are able to control our own futures?

**For more information on Sophie Anderson and for further ideas for how to use *The House with Chicken Legs* in a reading group or classroom setting please visit sophieandersonauthor.com**

**Follow Sophie on Twitter @sophieinspace**