



Armadillo
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Picture books

A Day by The Sea

Barbara Nascimbeni, pub. Thames & Hudson

Today is an exciting day. It is a day by the sea. And for Frido the dog it promises to be a day full of mischief and mayhem. Have you ever wondered how much mischief one dog can cause by the sea in one day? Wonder no more, as Barbara Nascimbeni reveals all.

While Frido's owner naps on the beach, telling Frido to be a good dog and stay with her, Frido is off. Frido has to look at the water, but the water is wet, cold and salty and although she likes to see the waves, they scare her and then drench her. Frido also likes to make new friends, but doesn't like to share. The adventure really begins as Frido jumps onto a paddle board and falls into the sea, then fights inflatable sea monsters. Finally she makes some human friends, enjoying sea dances (and you can join in too), building sandcastles, taking selfies and of course eating ICE CREAM. Still Frido's owner is asleep, never suspecting the secret life of her seemingly well-behaved Fri-Frou sweetheart!

A Day by the Sea is full of excitement as Frido enjoys everything about being by the sea and discovers some things that aren't quite what she thought. A beautiful book, with a simple and cleverly crafted story that can be embellished upon as it is read to fully soak up the experience of being by the sea.

Simon Barrett

A Pair of Pears and an Orange

Anna McGregor, pub. Scribble

Friendships can be tricky to navigate whether you are a child or an adult. It is common for books to feature children having friendship troubles and resolving them, but Anna McGregor's *A Pair of Pears and an Orange* takes a novel approach to the difficulties of when two friends become three.

Anna McGregor steps outside the norm in her book about friendship because the characters are pieces of fruit – although three peas make an appearance too - Big Pear, Little Pear and Orange. The Pears are a perfect pair and games for two are always straight-forward whether rocking on a see-saw or riding a tandem. But when Orange comes along it is no longer the same, and games made for two are no longer fun for Big Pear. Big Pear finds it all very difficult and tries to find new friends. Hurray for peas! Big Pear however learns that you can play different games with more people and, because Big Pear misses Little Pear and Orange, Big Pear hopes that can all make up.

Packed with hilarious fruity puns that will have adult readers laughing out loud (and possibly explaining to their children why they are laughing), Anna McGregor has created a book whose words slide of the tongue, with adorable pictures and whose message is a timeless one told in a new and vibrant style. I loved it. I hope you will too.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Five Bears: A tale of friendship

Catherine Rayner, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Five Bears is a beautifully illustrated story of friendship and looking past differences. Bear starts walking alone, but as the reader journeys with them through the story, Bear encounters other bears. Each bear looks different, but Bear is unwaveringly kind towards them even when they treat Bear with suspicion. Kindness and friendliness spreads as each bear joins Bear and friends on their walk until, eventually, they meet a bear who is stuck. The team of bears work together to help this bear down from a tree. The bear however is baffled by their willingness to help and questions their motives and why they are together even though they look visually different. The bears reply with the simple answer, “We all just like each other!” The five bears then spend the day laughing, talking, listening to each other, and learning about each other.

With beautiful watercolour and ink illustrations, Kate Greenaway winner Catherine Rayner encapsulates the simplicity of true friendship in this endearing tale. I noticed that in this anthropomorphic tale the bears’ genders were unspecified. Interestingly, I thought they were male, it was only when I double checked that I realised my error. I know that this is a typical assumption, and that unless female characters have a different ‘maker’ such as wearing a dress or being the colour pink, we generally assume they are male.

However, I do not want my child to internalise the idea that to be male is the rule and to be female is the exception, so when reading this book and discussing with her I ensure I do not assign male pronouns to the ungendered bears. I’m glad that Macmillan did not make the bears male (as they typically are) and thus enables me to play my part as a parent in smashing gender stereotypes.

Pauline Bird

The Great Hamster Getaway

Lou Carter, illus. Magda Brol, pub. Bloomsbury Children’s Books

“Raffleton Grey was as bored as could be, with nowhere to go and nobody to see.” His hamster wheel doesn’t go anywhere, he doesn’t like his house, food, or his bedding, which gets up his nose. He

dreams of the places he'll go, and finally decides to escape. He cleverly puts a sunflower seed in the lid of his ball, so that it doesn't quite fit, and with a nudge from the cat and a bump from the chair, the lid comes off and he is free, making a daring flight out of a window.

Almost immediately, he meets another, scruffier, hamster called Puckerford Brown, who has also run away, and together they set off for adventures. They have a lovely time at the fairground, but at night they are pursued by bigger animals, don't get any sleep, and it's all very scary. Raffleton Grey declares that he knows a place where they can be warm and safe, with lots of food, and they engineer a return to his house which is almost as daring as his escape. Raffleton declares that he doesn't want the things he thought he wanted, but was "lonely and wanted a friend, so everything turned out all right in the end."

Lou Carter is a former primary school teacher, and her books include *There is no Dragon in this Story*, which this reviewer much enjoyed. Magda Brol changed careers, from being in business in the City of London to children's illustration: her illustrations are full of detail, and the two hamsters are great characters. This is a partnership that works and this picture book is fun to read and share.

Diana Barnes

I Am Angry

Michael Rosen, illus. Robert Starling, pub. Walker Books

The cover of this picture book shows a frowning kitten of indeterminate gender with its front paws folded, and the first two endpapers reproduce just the eyes, with a dark frown. This poem, written for one of Michael Rosen's own children, shows that he understands only too well the sudden but brief anger of a young child. Robert Starling makes good use of increasingly large fonts and spacing as the kitten declares, "I am angry. Really angry. Angry, angry, angry! I am so angry, I'll jump and down, roll on the ground, make a din...throw you (his toy rabbit) in the bin..." and on it goes.

The kitten's angry rant includes boiling words, grinding up games, bursting balloons, squashing the moon - all nonsense, but great fun to see illustrated, especially the kitten in a space suit with an enormous hammer, smashing the moon! The kitten threatens to turn the sky red, and we see that it has made a start painting a huge double-page spread, but on the next page, the painting has been abandoned, and the kitten is walking away, yawning, having trodden in the paint. We follow red paw prints to the next page, to find that the kitten has rescued the cuddly toy and is fast asleep in bed. A smiley face on the final endpaper shows that all will be well after a nap...

This will be useful for parents of 'terrible twos, or for those helpful websites about 'books that might help'.

Diana Barnes

The Invention

Julia Hubery, illus. James Munro, pub. Graffeg

Fili's daddy is a caretaker, looking after an apartment building, but who looks after the people? Other than an occasional good morning or hello, no seems to speak. So Fili decides to make a something, an invention.

If anyone asks 'How does it work?' or 'What does it do?' Fili honestly can say she does not know. It is an invention. Curiosity grows and so too does Fili's invention, until everyone is invited to a special unveiling. Still no-one knows how it works, until Fili adds the missing piece, that people have to work together to help it start and soon everyone is busy talking and fiddling. Using her imagination has helped to bring her community together.

The Invention is a wonderful story, full of word play by Julia Hubery, cleverly illustrated by James Munro with almost-line drawing in a shade of blue with specks of yellow drawing the eye in. The text and the pictures all inspiring the reader to want to turn the pages and follow the story. It is also a perceptive message about how people make things work and that we should maintain communities as much as the buildings we live in.

This is an utterly charming story about the difference that can be made with a sprinkling of imagination.

Dawn Jonas

Katerina Cruickshanks

Daniel Gray-Barnett, pub. Scribe

Katerina is the life and soul of any party and goes from morning until night. They love loudness, brightness, and cartwheels. They are wild, tricky and bold and their friends love them so much...until one day they go too far and a vote is taken. No more shenanigans from Katerina. A resounding "no more" echoes from everyone!

A rollicking and dynamic rhyming story, Katerina is bold and fierce. When days pass quietly and without chaos, Katerina's friends and family decide they have gone too far and try to make amends. Will Katerina listen to them after they have treated her so wrongly? A bold tale of being true to yourself and finding friends who accept and love you for being you. The bold use of colour across every page creates a chaotic feel to Katerina and her fun. I was reminded of *Pippi Longstocking* while

reading this. Another feisty female just wanting to be herself, regardless of how strange they may be regarded.

What a fun story this was to read aloud with varying opinions about Katerina afterwards.

The use of the pronouns 'they' and 'their' allows readers to consider Katerina as not one gender over another but to further share the message of acceptance and love.

Erin Hamilton

Milo's Monster

Tom Percival, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Milo has a very happy life with his family and his best friend Jay, who lives next door. But things change when a new person called Suzi moves into the house across the road. Suddenly Milo feels as if he has lost his friend and then a new and really unwanted 'friend' appears; only this is not a real person, it is a green creature otherwise known as jealousy. The question is whether Milo can tame this monster and re-establish his friendship with Jay?

This series of books by Tom Percival are aimed at a very young audience and helps them understand a range of emotions that they come into contact with as they start to grow up, meet new people and experiences and then go to school. In this book, we get to look at the subject of jealousy, something that everyone feels at some time. The old saying that "two is company and three is a crowd" applies to all generations, but hopefully as adults we understand that friendships are very flexible things and that they are not limited to just a fixed group. Milo learns that he can control these feelings because they are not just hurting him, they are also hurting Jay and Suzi.

This is a great book for discussion, and it allows young people to think about their feelings and to understand that it is best to discuss these issues before they turn into 'green monsters'. A must for Foundation and Reception level children.

Margaret Pemberton

The Missing Piece

Jordan Stephens, illus. Beth Suzanna, pub. Bloomsbury

When I first saw *The Missing Piece* I loved the colour palette on the front cover with an illustration of a little girl hugging her grandma and holding tight to a puzzle piece. This loving image paired with the beautiful texture of the book made it so enticing to open and find out more. The book is a stunning

explosion of colour, each page rich with warm hues which follow the Granddaughter, Sunny, on a journey.

More than anything else, Sunny loves puzzles. Especially the warm, happy feeling she gets when she slots the final piece into place. She wonders if anything else could ever make her as happy as completing a puzzle. When Grandma presents her with the largest puzzle she has ever done, she realises the final piece is missing. This leads Sunny on a wonderful journey, on which she realises that there are other ways to get the warm, happy feeling she gets when completing a puzzle.

The writing by Jordan Stephens is beautifully descriptive, and compliments the richly coloured illustrations perfectly. The story left my son and I with a warm happy feeling.

A heart warming story which depicts the importance of friendship in a fun, playful way.

Sarah Lovell

The Perfect Rock

Sarah Noble, pub. Flying Eye Books

Ollie, Bea and Ula are three otter cubs who are learning all the lessons they will need to survive in the wild. Their mother has been explaining what makes the perfect stone, that they will need in order to crack open the shellfish that they catch. The three siblings set off to find their stones, but when they do, there is only one and when they start squabbling over it, it is stolen by a seabird. When the weather turns stormy, they manage to survive by huddling together and working as a team; a life lesson that they will never forget.

This is a lovely story that not only looks at the relationship between young siblings, but also gives us insights into the lives of sea otters. The illustrations beautifully capture the strength and agility of the cubs as well as the close relationship between them and their parents. The underlying messages here are about not being selfish, the importance of family and teamwork and above all having the strength to say sorry and make up after a disagreement.

This story can be read and enjoyed as a picture book, but it can also have a wider range of uses within the classroom, both when looking at nature and also wellbeing and emotions.

Margaret Pemberton

Sid's Big Fib

Roo Parkin, illus. by Irina Avgustinovich, pub. Maverick

This book could equally have been called, 'Sid's Big Fib That Gets Even Bigger' or 'Sid and Lulu's Big Fibs' because what starts as really quite a small white lie, becomes a whopping great big untruth that causes rivalry between friends. Roo Parkin's book begins in the school playground where Sid explains to his friend, Lulu, that his dad had made a chocolate cake so big that they had to eat it for every meal for two days! Lulu retorts that her dad made a cake so big that they now live inside it!! This banter goes back and forth, with each fib getting more and more elaborate until Sid is found out, with chaotic consequences!

Could Sid ever keep up with Lulu's ever increasing monstrous lies like 'I cosmically colly-wobbled so fast bits of my brain flew out of my nose.'? Well, he thinks he can! This is the part of the book where the fib takes on a persona all of its own as it 'whizzed up his (Sid) throat and bounced around his mouth.' Not to worry – Sid can surely stop it from coming out of his mouth! Well, you'll have to read this delightful, funny book to find out. This book really demonstrated how something so small and innocent, like a little fib, can snowball and get out of control as you try to keep up with your own lie. Things can get complicated, and you start to worry about how you can get out of it. Sid learns that the only way to sort out his mess, is to apologise and make it up to all the friends he has lied too. It is wonderfully written, with humour, and the illustrations are bright and colourful. You will love the very expressive faces of the characters – showing what they are thinking and feeling.

It is such a joy to read and has a very important message about honesty and truthfulness. A must for any bookshelf – at home or at school!

Claire Webb

Too Heavy, Elephant

Tony Neal pub. Oxford University Press Children's Books

Elephant is too heavy to play with mouse on the seesaw. Their friends try to help. See what happens in this rib-tickling introduction to the concept of weight. What better way to learn than whilst laughing. Firstly, we kick off with some tips for parents as they read along with their children. Questions to ask them, concepts to discuss and finally at the back some activities for learning about lightest and heaviest and what lies between. This will come as a welcome aid to parents who find it difficult to engage with their children in an educational way.

Mouse asks elephant if they can play together on the seesaw, but they quickly establish that elephant is too heavy and mouse too light. So, rabbit comes along and hops onboard swiftly followed by frog, and then squirrel at which point the seesaw begins to rise. Finally monkey joins them and it balances. But disastrously daddy elephant jumps on to support his son and 'boing' the folks at the other end are sent flying. You are left in no doubt about the heaviest and the lightest.

This is a delightful little book that teaches the concept of weights through pictures. Tony Neal suggests that the children are asked to describe what is going on, as this participation will assist their understanding of the principles involved. Tony is a graphic artist who is inspired by the quirks of things that surround us in everyday life. He creates endearing characters in funny scenes that tell their stories through his illustrations. He has many well-known clients in the children's publishing world requesting his skills. A resourceful little book which will educate and entertain simultaneously.

Elizabeth Negus

What Do You See When You Look at A Tree?

Emma Carlisle, pub. Big Picture Press

This book is a stunning celebration of all things tree and we loved it. The rich and evocative illustrations have been created using a beautiful matte palette which really brings each page to life with autumnal warmth and summer shine.

The words, which rhyme for the most part, are kept minimal; along with the gorgeous illustrations, Emma Carlisle deftly takes us on a reflective and respectful journey. We follow a lovely little girl as she interacts with the different environments that feature in her world. We see snapshots of her relationships with family members unfolding under the shade of the trees which provide the elegant framework of each scene. Trees are in many ways the shape of our landscapes and Carlisle encourages the reader to consider their own relationships with the trees that form such an important part of our daily lives. She captures the aesthetics of the changing seasons and explores the diverse forms of trees. She shows trees as habitats for animals, microcosms of life, and as having a particular affinity with children, capturing something special in the young imagination.

Our favourite section was at the back of the book where we learnt about the wood world web and how trees communicate with one another through their root systems. We also loved the pages on 'How to be more like a tree' which gives invaluable advice for us all such as 'Spread your roots' and 'Take your time'.

This is a beautiful, must-read picture book for any nature lovers, and aspiring artists. It will undoubtedly provoke many warm, wonderful moments shared between parent and child as we marvel at the abundant variety and spectacular beauty of the trees which thankfully, grace and enrich our world.

Stephanie Robertson

When Little Owl met Little Rabbit

Przemysław Wechterowicz, illus. Emilia Dziubak, pub. Floris Books

Little Owl and Little Rabbit both live in the old oak tree. But they have never met because Little Rabbit is awake when the sun shines and Little Owl is awake when the stars shine. There is a pleasing symmetry in both text and illustrations, as we follow the playful explorations of the two baby animals.

One evening, when the moon is full, the baby animals meet at last, and the new friends play hopping and swooping together. Most days though, one is asleep when the other is awake. Because they can't play together, they leave gifts for each other instead. One night, their parents wake them to watch a shooting star. Both animals make the same wish - to be together. The wish is granted in an unexpected way – from that moment on, Little Rabbit has a Little Owl-shaped shadow, and Little Owl has a Little Rabbit-shaped shadow. In the day, Little Rabbit plays with Little Owl's shadow. At night, Little Owl plays with Little Rabbit's shadow. And once a month, when the moon is full, "they swoop and hop together for real."

Polish illustrator Dziubak gives us cute characters, stylised scenery, and sweet details. (Little Rabbit's toys include a walnut shell boat and a stag made from twigs and leaves, for example - simple home-made toys readers may find satisfyingly familiar.)

Dawn Casey

The Worry Jar

Lou John, illus. Jenny Bloomfield, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Frida is a worrier, she worries all of the time. Her worries can be big, small or all-the-time ones and they all feel heavy, just like the pebbles she picks up everywhere she goes. This means she collects pebbles most days, after all there are so many things to worry about.

Before school Frida worries that it might rain, or quite the opposite, it could be too sunny. Should she wear wellies or a sunhat? The worries of course do not stop there. Going to school also means packing a bag and worrying that she has packed everything. All the time Frida is collecting worries and pebbles, all of which are heavy. There is hope though, on Sundays, Frida's granny always comes to and it is joyous to see the illustrations change as Frida listens to her grandma's advice: to keep her pebbles in a jar. This way her worries will stop weighing her down.

Lou John writes with a unique sensitivity, her words gently encourage children to understand their everyday worries, why worrying can be difficult and how we can cope. Accompanied by the beautiful illustrations of Jenny Bloomfield that so clearly show Frida's worries dispersing and that she is happy.

The text and illustrations combine to create a gentle and beautiful story about learning to manage your worries.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Junior Books

21% Monster

P. J. Canning, pub. Usborne Books

In *21% Monster* we meet 12-year-old Darren Devlin for the first time, this will not be the last time for this is the first in a brand-new series and it will have you hooked.

P. J. Canning opens with a prologue in which we learn that a video of a young schoolboy in the back of a police van, the video has gone viral, and we soon learn this this is not just any young boy, we soon learn, but one who has with blueish-bond hair and amber-yellow eyes, is handcuffed. This young boy appears to be in the hands of the police, but the dialogue of the prologue suggests that someone else is after him. These others have identified him as 12-year-old Darren Devlin, a Triple E. Extract.

Evaluate. Eliminate.

Turn the page and turn back the clock 24 hours. Darren is at school and is being teased ruthlessly by some Year 11 students. His friends want to be there for him, his parents want him to be more 'normal' but Darren knows he is different and before long we do too for we are about to witness him being arrested for destroying the school he hates with a vengeance, with his bare hands! The police arrest him but it is Marek Masters, 14 year old 19% alien that we need to meet next and who is about to turn Darren's world upside down. Marek is also the most intelligent and most wanted 'almost human' alive. He is also here to tell Darren a truth. Darren is 21% monster and together the pair need to take down the secret organization that created them. Wanted, powerful and dangerous the pair are embarking on payback.

A thrilling and gripping fast paced and very high-octane adventure that is only just beginning, this is a brilliantly imagined and crafted story that will leave you wanting more.

Antoinette Montague

Alex Neptune, Dragon Thief

David Owen, pub. Usborne Books

It has been a long time, but Alex Neptune is convinced that the ocean is trying to kill him. There are plenty of clues that point to this fact and, as we dive into the first book of what promises to be an action-packed new series that will be perfect reading for fans of Percy Jackson and *Malamander* by Thomas Taylor, we are assured of adventures beyond our wildest imaginings.

Having learnt that Alex thinks the ocean is trying to kill him some more context could be important here. Alex also has the power of the ocean at his fingertips, as you may have guessed from his surname, and is no ordinary boy. He also lives in a fabled seaside town, full of myth and legend, oh and of course danger. David Owens has packed it all, and more besides, into this first story, setting the scene for the series to continue and yet giving us a brilliant stand-alone story too.

When we meet him, Alex is not happy and his unhappiness grows when he is dragged by a group of sea creatures to the abandoned aquarium on the hill. Why? Because they want Alex to free the water dragon imprisoned there. How can he possibly say no to such a magical myth. Along with best friend and tech genius Zoey, legend loving friend Anil, an octopus with alarmingly good sharp shooting skills some acrobatic otters and a thieving seagull (stereotypical?) Alex and his motley crew plot to break the dragon out.

A brilliant and action-packed book full of exciting adventure, great new characters to get to know and a new world that is full of promise.

Colin Paterson

Alte Zachen: Old Things

Ziggy Hanaor, illus. Benjamin Phillips, pub. Cicada books

11-year-old Benji and his elderly grandmother Bubbe Rosa are shopping for the ingredients that they need for their Friday night Shabbat meal. While it seems straightforward Bubbe remembers a different city, in which she grew up as a Jewish immigrant, fleeing Nazi Europe.

At first nothing is quite as Bubbe remembers it but much of what she sees brings back memories, happy as well as sad ones and even some that make her angry, even many years later. Cleverly the palette of the graphic novel changes as she remembers from muted watercolour greys of the contemporary city to more vivid reds, yellows and blues, perhaps reflecting the intensity of her memories. But as the memories converge on her she begins to get angry whilst Benji continues to look at the very same city, the world around him and his grandmother with a clear-eyed acceptance. Every shop, the people they meet, everything brings back memories and as Bubbe shares these Benji begins to see his grandmother's life, he pieces together her school memories, her memories of food and some of the harrowing memories she has of having to flee to reach America.

The title is Yiddish and means Old Things. The story is one of Jewish identity, of the divides between generations, of the difficulty of difference and of a city constantly changing. It is the story of people, of memories, of old things. Beautifully told as a graphic novel with illustrations in a muted but colourful palette this is a moving, heart wrenching and heart warming story.

Dawn Jonas

Dead Good Detectives

Jenny McLachlan, illus. Chloe Dominique, pub. HarperCollins

Sidonie May Jones, Sid, and her best friend Zen like to play in the graveyard of Fathom, their coastal town. Sid enjoys chasing imaginary ghosts and zombies, until unintentionally conjuring the ghost of pirate Ezekiel 'Bones' Kittow, captain of the Black Gannet. Since the ship sunk three-hundred years earlier on the shores of Fathom, Bones and his shipmates have been held prisoners in Halfway House, a place of lost souls. Only finding a hidden treasure will allow them to move on. Reluctantly, Sid eventually agrees to help but has only a few days to complete the mission.

Feeling unable to confide in her dad or Zen, Sid tries to unravel the mystery by herself, but Zen confronts Sid and is soon bought in on the secret. The children join forces, undertaking a risky trip following the clues on a treasure map. Their efforts are in vain, not even the dramatic finding of a precious object seems to help Bones, whose fate appears sealed. The adventure is set to go on, but the mystery deepens, after a final revelation...

Jenny McLachlan has created a thrilling story with inter-woven themes of a treasure hunt, family life, loss, bullying and friendship. Sid is an orphan, having lost her mum at a young age. She finds solace in her map drawing skills which offer her a safe refuge when life is challenging. The relationship created between Sid and Bones is developed skilfully, with dialogues alternating gentler and meaningful moments to upbeat and funny ones. Besides, it is interesting to learn Sid's backstory while Bones' tale becomes clearer too, with the pirate often using his experience to encourage the young girl. McLachlan effectively sketches all the characters, even the ghosts in the Halfway House, building connections between the reader and those who will presumably be the protagonists of the next adventures.

The hook at the end of the story is effective, the brief insight into Sid's special powers, and the earlier hint to another character, a mysterious girl spotted by Sid and Zen on their way to Gull Island, create further interest in the developing series.

Laura Brill

The Dragon in the Bookshop

Ewa Jozefkowicz, pub. Zepher

Two of my favourite things are dragons and bookshops so when I discovered them combined in this book that I was to be reviewing, I knew I was in for a treat...I was right and I know you will be in for a treat too.

Since the death of Konrad's dad he has stopped talking, to anyone, and is holding in a lot of anger. There is one place where he feels he can still be close to his dad and that is the family's bookshop. Unfortunately, since his dad's death, his mum has struggled to run the bookshop and has decided it would be for the best if they sell it. This isn't what Konrad wants. There is another place where Konrad feels close to his dad and that is his dad's favourite part of the beach, and it is there that he meets Maya. Maya has her own problems at home, she speaks but nobody listens to her. Maya and Konrad make the perfect pair, she talks, he listens. Together the pair make one last visit to the bookshop where they find themselves drawn literally into Konrad's favourite folk tales book.

That is the bookshop part of the story and I know you are wondering where the dragon comes in? He is part of the folk tales book that the pair have found themselves in and with their newfound dragon friend Konrad and Maya go on a daring quest.

This is a heart-warming book that will have you reaching for the tissues. Not only is it a beautifully written and captivating read but it also deals sensitively with important issues such as grief, courage, friendship and finding your voice. Ewa Jozefkowicz has written a wonderful story for readers to immerse themselves in and also provided children with a book that will give them important life lessons. Her writing style encourages you, as readers, to become invested in the characters. You worry about them and find you can't put the book down. An important book waiting to be shared, one I highly recommend.

Helen Byles

Free Kid to Good Home

Hiroshi Ito, pub. Gecko Press

When a little girl is presented with her new baby brother Daichan she is distinctly unimpressed. 'He looks just like a potato.' What's more, Potato-Face does nothing but cry, poop and eat. He isn't remotely cute, whatever her mother says. Even so, her mother only has time and attention for him. 'I'm going to run away', she tells her mother. 'Yes dear' is the distracted response, so the girl packs her most important things. She will get new parents and a wonderful new home where she will be the much-loved only child. She comes across a box, writes 'Free Kid' on it and sits in it, waiting for the perfect parents. But the only interest she gets is from a lost dog, then a stray cat and finally a turtle.

With each arrival the sign on the box gets longer; 'Free Kid + Dog + Kitty + Turtle'. It gets shorter again as first the turtle finds someone to look after it, then the cat, and finally the dog, whose owner is

delighted to be reunited with it. The little girl hides her face in her hands. 'Look there's a very cute free kid over here' says a voice. 'So there is. She would make a perfect sister for Daichan' says another voice. The little girl is asked if she would like to come home with them. 'Yeah' she says, very quietly. 'So I gave up being a stray kid to be a big sister for that little potato.'

This is an English translation of a Japanese bestseller. The sparse but cleverly crafted first person text is wittily illustrated with numerous expressive black and white line drawings, each of them energized by flashes of red. We are left in no doubt about the little girl's feelings, or indeed those of the dog, the cat and the turtle. Books that explore the jealousy, displacement and upset experienced by many children when they first become siblings are important and useful. The sophisticated nature of the text and illustrations of this one, and the fact that it is in paperback format rather than a picture book, make it appropriate for five-to-eight-year-olds rather than a very young audience.

Anne Harding

The Kingdom of NOTHING

Ronald Wohlman, illus. Dylan Hewitt, pub. Quarto Books

The Kingdom of NOTHING is a rather enchanting picture book about a Queen and a King, a Princess and a Prince who, despite having absolutely nothing and I mean categorically nothing, no castles or crowns; no video games or computers; no toys or pets, not even a magical frog for a distraction, still manage to be the happiest family in the land. Now this is very much a story with a moral tale, but the playful nature in which the text invites the reader to explore Ronald Wohlman's heart-felt message fully draws you into this world of nothing. It challenges you to see how nothing can become something, that time spent with your family without distractions reveals the worth in their smiles and their love, and that when you take the time to really stop and look up, you will see the beauty in the sky above you.

Dylan Hewitt had a difficult task of illustrating a book about nothing and yet his illustrations with their bold block colours will grab children's attention. They will delight in how these characters (and even the NOTHING!) are so cleverly brought to life with simple brushed lines and cut-outs that bring an added whimsy and charm to the story.

Importantly *The Kingdom of NOTHING* though heart warming, has an abundance of play and that is essential in a book with a modern morality tale. It is also perfect picture book writing, easy text for very young children to follow, with plenty of opportunity for them to interject and finish sentences when they can predict what is coming next. This is a book they will be drawn to share, and that very much ties in with Ronald Wohlman's premise, that this a story about spending quality time with your family and appreciating the love of those you have around you.

Matilde Sazio

The Light Thieves

Helena Duggan, pub. Usborne Books

The whole world is in danger. The Earth has shifted on its axis and a mysterious dark spot has appeared on the sun. Who will we trust to save life as we know it? A superhero or a tech billionaire? Of course we would trust the superhero, after all the billionaire is very likely to be a baddie. Helena Duggan however has cleverly crafted the superhero vs bad boy billionaire trope into a brand-new story of fearful fun with an eco-twist.

Meet Grian, a young boy who does not get along with his sister. He however is still worried when she disappears, apparently brainwashed into thinking that a new city created by the handsome billionaire Hansom is the place where they can all save the world. When Grian, along with friends Jeffrey and Shelli track down his sister in the new city, they find that things are not at all what they would seem. There are far too many secrets, including a mystery Area 13, and it is still unclear why Grian's sister and all the other people were lured to this new city. The days are getting darker, the world needs to be saved but something more is happening to the sun. Can Grian and his friends solve all the mysteries before it is too late?

Quirky and imaginative, this is a pacey new adventure and the start of a brand-new series featuring these characters, exploring some interesting themes, not just ecological but also technological, in a child-friendly and approachable style. A great all-round read.

May Marks

The Little Captain

Paul Biegel, illus. Carl Hollander, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

What a delight to have discovered this book! Originally published in Dutch in the 1970s the book comprises 3 stories; *The Little Captain*, *The Little Captain and the Seven Towers*, *The Little Captain and the Pirate Treasure* which have been republished together with original illustrations for a whole new generation of readers to enjoy.

The morning after a storm the people of the harbour find a strange ship named the Neversink stuck atop of the dunes. There it stays until one day a small boy in a large captain's cap crawls out from the cabin. The stories tell of the adventures of the Little Captain and his crew, three children of the harbour town, as a giant wave sweeps the Neversink away and they set sail for the island of Evertaller where legend claims children can turn into grown-ups overnight and never have to go to school again.

What follows is a wondrous tale of adventure, fun, bravery and friendship. With every turn of the page a new a new land awaits them, filled with dragons, pirates, and a whole fantastical cast of characters. There are tales of ghost ships, of course there is buried treasure to be found and there are even plenty of pancakes!

A wonderful escape back into magical childhood days when anything was possible this book is a timeless classic and the short chapters are perfect for bedtime reading with all the ingredients needed to keep you wanting to turn the page.

Tracey Corner

Mia and the Lightcasters

Janelle McCurdy, illus. Ana Latese, pub. Faber Children's Books

Mia and the Lightcasters opens a brand-new series, *The Umbra Tales* and introduces us to author and gamer Janelle McCurdy. This story and the series have been born from her love of a combination of gaming, anime, and fantasy stories which she wants her readers to enjoy for the story and to take from the message that they are stronger than they think. It is a world they can get lost in - I did and nearly missed my train stop - and it is a world that allows imaginations to run wild.

Mia is the daughter of two of the most talented people in her city and she dreams of being an umbra tamer herself one day. Along with her best friend Miles she sneaks through the city to its outer walls where they have been preparing a route under the walls. They are sneaking out to the Nightmare Plains where Mia is hoping she will be able to catch and tame a wild umbra. She is confident. Ever since she has been able to she has been devouring information about the umbra but when she finally comes face-to-face with a real life wild one her best laid plans soon go awry. Since that day she keeps to the city, safe within its walls. Safe that is until a surprise attack takes her best friend and her parents away from her, captured. Mia's only hope is to travel to the City of Light and find help. With only her little brother, two friends and a single tamed umbra it all feels impossible. Mia has to overcome her fears, she has to harness the skills she has buried within her or she will lose her soul, her family and her city.

This story is not one of doom and gloom, far from it, this is a story of light, of hope, of magic, of the power of believing in yourself. The artwork is immersive, adding to the atmosphere and generating a story that it is incredibly easy to get lost in!

Colin Paterson

Neon's Secret Universe

Sibéal Pounder, illus. Sarah Warburton, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Have you been told that unicorns don't exist despite all the evidence to the contrary? Sibéal Pounder would like to once more prove to us all that unicorns do in fact exist but there is a secret, they do exist, but they are just not what you have been led to believe. They are not in fact a horse with a horn, nope that was a story the real unicorns made up so that they could distract the humans. I am however getting ahead of myself and probably want to know more about the story and about the secret universe of Neon.

Neon is about to turn 10. She and her family have moved again, and Neon has decided it is time for a change. Everywhere she has lived she has been considered weird. This time she is determined that she is going to be normal, to fit in. No more colourful clothes for Neon, nope, everything is now going to be black because, after all, you can't go wrong with black but whilst this part of her change seems to be working her parents seem to be scuppering her plans at every turn. Finally finding some time to spend in her room Neon is dusting when she finds a unicorn, one that reveals a secret compartment and some neon green lipstick with a secret message. Neon's life is about to go from normal to absolutely out of this world unusual when she finds herself travelling via a portal to a parallel universe, a secret world of unicorns where some magic goo and their strange rules could change her life forever.

In Neon Sibéal Pounder has created a girl who is quite possibly the most unreliable heroine you will ever meet. In *Neon's Secret Universe* she has created a hilarious story packed with colour, magic, unicorns and goo. Packed with Sarah Warburton's brilliant illustrations this book is a fantastic read.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Orla and the Wild Hunt

Anna Houghton, illus. David Dean, pub. Chicken House

An emotional middle-grade quest, taking inspiration from Irish folk tales, myths and legends and brimming with magic and suspense. The cover by David Dean is beautiful. I particularly like the fold out flaps giving a visual impression of the magical Fairy Kingdom in Tangled Woods inside the front cover and the underwater City of the Merrows inside the back cover, which matched Anna Houghton's descriptions perfectly.

Thirteen-year-old Orla, grieving the death of her mother, gives the story its perspective. She no longer sings as music reminds her of mum and everything she's lost. She has rejected everyone and is wallowing in grief unable to move on, making her bitter and unhappy. She is especially angry at her younger brother, Apollo. She has happy memories of holidaying in Ireland with her Gran before her Mum died and reminisces about the freedom they had, old-fashioned games they played, listening to Gran's stories of the magical creatures of the Tangled Woods near her house, and best of all Gran's

home-cooked meals and cakes, especially the tiffin. This motivates her to choose to visit Gran in Ireland. She is surprised when her brother Apollo wants to come with her. It riles Orla even more when they arrive in Ireland and her Gran is acting different. Apollo seems to have a special bond with her and Orla feels like an outsider. She can't understand why Gran insists they keep the doors and windows locked and won't let them out after dark. It is the total opposite of what she used to be like. She discovers people have been going missing but believes Gran is keeping secrets and is hiding something in the shed.

When Gran sneaks out one night, Orla climbs out the window and follows her to the fairies' midsummer festivities discovering the truth behind the Irish myths and legends of Gran's stories. The thing stealing people away in the night is the Wild Hunt. Gran asks the fairies to help her stop it. They refuse. Orla wakes the next afternoon back in her bed and does not know how she got there. Gran is missing and Orla believes it is her fault. Together with Apollo, a mysterious and rude pooka boy who claims he's a friend of Gran, she embarks on a wild adventure to save Gran.

Anita Loughrey

Rosie Raja: Churchill's Spy

Sufiya Ahmed, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

This is a story about a young Muslim girl who spots a chance to encounter a high-risk lifestyle set against the backdrop of the Second World War, the French resistance, and their British Allies.

Rosie unexpectedly learns that her dad is a spy for the British government and decides to secretly stow away along with him and two other colleagues on their small plane heading for France. Rosie, a princess, is the granddaughter of a maharajah, who reigns over a small kingdom in India, which is ruled by the British Empire or Raj until 1947. Her father is a captain in the British Indian Army, but he is suddenly recalled to England. Prior to this Rosie's mother had been very ill. He has to leave whilst she is ill and shortly afterwards, she dies. This requires Rosie to leave India and join her father in England where her adventures begin. As the story progresses it serves to raise awareness of the aims of the British Empire at the time of the Raj, and it challenges this ethos by reflecting and contrasting a more liberal ideology that fully endorses amongst other things, human rights.

Who better to do this than Sufiya Ahmed a well-established children's writer with experience in advertising and working in the House of Commons before becoming an author? Her books include *Under the Great Plum Tree* which was endorsed by Amnesty International and long listed for the UK Literacy Association Book Awards. This story's momentum bowls us along whilst introducing some biggies in the philosophical and moral world that can be gently reflected upon within the context of the page turning story. Themes include guilt, authority, trust, fairness, equality, grief, death, torture,

right vs wrong and many more. Sufiya Ahmed has created a skilful and intelligent story with something fundamental to say.

Suitable for 8 - 12-year-olds and a good book for the school library or group discussion. It asks to be debated. And with the added fun of code breaking and learning morse code there is no time for boredom.

Elizabeth Negus

The Secrets of Cricket Karlsson

Kristina Sigunsdotter, trans. Julia Marshall, illus. Ester Eriksson, pub. Gecko Press

An unusually widely travelled novel for middle grade readers, Kristina Sigunsdotter and Ester Eriksson's engaging story was originally published in Swedish, but the English translation by Julia Marshall has travelled here via a New Zealand publisher! Marshall lived in Sweden for a number of years, but is also the founder of Gecko Press, so *The Secrets of Cricket Karlsson* is doubly important. Very few children's books in other languages are translated into English, and in an interview for *Words Without Borders* Marshall says, 'I decided to concentrate on books by the best writers and illustrators in the world, books excellent in terms of story, illustration, and design. There is an indefinable something that unites Gecko Press books... They clearly come from other places.' Marshall goes on to say 'we try to choose books with emotional substance, where several stories are being told if you care to look for them, because a good story can operate on many levels. We don't choose stories that feel patronising or that are really for adults. The child comes first... We also look for books that are as we say, curiously good—original, contemporary, and offering a new way of looking at something.'

The Secrets of Cricket Karlsson story meets all these essentials admirably. Eleven-year-old only child Cricket, since being confined to home for two weeks because she has chicken pox, sees that her best friend Noa appears to have ditched her for a group of horse-mad silly girls. Cricket's only other best friend is her Aunt Frannie, but Aunt Frannie is in hospital suffering from depression, and Cricket feels lost, abandoned, and unloved. Nevertheless, her diary, this book, is full of dry humour, all of which is expanded through her lists and Eriksson's illustrations. The illustration skilfully engages readers with their eleven-year-old's style and content. Cricket's many lists are equally perceptively drawn up, comic, thoughtful (such as 'psychiatric illnesses I don't want') and often achingly sad.

Perfectly expressing an eleven-year old's anguish, Sigunsdotter's novel is funny, deep, and heart-rending, but for Cricket, and her readers, resolution comes in the last half dozen chapters. An excellent, truthful, unmissable novel.

Bridget Carrington

The Stolen Prince of Cloudburst

Jaclyn Moriarty, illus. Karl James Mountford, pub. Guppy Books

Being the middle child means you are always going to be the one who is sandwiched between siblings. In Esther's case she has been sandwiched between two unfairly talented sisters. Luckily Esther doesn't mind being ordinary and, when it is time for term to begin again, she is just excited to be reunited with her boarding school friends. Nothing however is going to go to plan for Esther who arrives back at her school to discover that there are big changes afoot. Her friends have disappeared, and a new teacher has arrived. Not yet knowing if these events are connected the reader, and Esther hear the rumour that the new teacher is in fact an ogre.

Just when we think that all the surprises Jaclyn Moriarty has for us have been unveiled there are more. Esther's boarding school life is about to become dangerous. Shadow Mages crowd the mountains around the school and everyone, yes everyone who might be able to help has gone missing. Esther soon realises it is up to her to act but can someone so ordinary be extraordinary?

A fantastic fantasy adventure story this book skips along at a good pace, the storytelling and world-building are astounding and the varied cast of characters, I must remember to mention the stolen prince of the title, are wonderful. The prince was on the other side of the kingdom when he was stolen by a Water Sprite, but found his way home and is looking forward to a huge welcome home party although somehow he seems to be connected to the unfolding mystery.

If you happen to have read *The Extremely Inconvenient Adventures of Bronte Mettlestone* some of the characters we meet in this story will be familiar. Don't worry if this is your first Jaclyn Moriarty book for it is equally readable as a standalone and what a fantastic story she has crafted. We must not forget that it is wonderfully illustrated throughout by Karl James Mountford too.

A delightful story packed with quirk and wonder!

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Young Adult Books

Belladonna

Adalyn Grace, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

Signa Farrow appears to be jinxed. Why? Because for her whole life the people who have been in her life have fallen, died. It started when she was just a baby, her parents and many of their guests died leaving her orphaned to live a life of being moved from one home to another as various guardians took her in. Each of them more interested in the wealth Signa was due to inherit than they were in her wellbeing and the penultimate, an aunt meets an untimely end at the start of the story leading us to follow Signa into the guardianship of the elusive Hawthorne's, the most recently deceased of these being her aunt.

A mystery has already begun to unfold before our eyes as the story opens and it only deepens, quickly too. From the mysterious deaths, the idea that Signa can see death himself is she consumes belladonna berries to the even more mysterious, aloof, and yet charming, the Hawthorne's stable boy who comes to collect her to take her to a new home, there are layers of mystery in this book that even by the end we are only just beginning to unravel.

Signa's uncle she soon discovers, is mourning the death of his late wife Lillian by throwing wild parties and drinking to forget. His son, Signa's cousin, is grappling for control of the family business and hoping to improve the waning reputation of the family whilst his daughter appears to be dying, afflicted by the same illness (or was it a poisoning) that took her mother. Into this mix Signa arrives and soon realises she is being haunted by the ghost of her late aunt who wants Signa to uncover who her potential murderer was. In grave danger and only just beginning to realise, and accept, her unusual abilities, her need to make an alliance with Death himself, Signa draws us into a richly imagined gothic world where wealth, greed and love fight for precedence.

Belladonna is a richly imagined web of intrigue, a rich gothic romance, dark and spectacular.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Dogs of the Deadlands

Anthony McGowan, illus. Keith Robinson, pub. Rock the Boat

It was Natasha's seventh birthday and her dream of owning a puppy came true, a white Samoyed puppy, she called Zoya. At 1.30 am the nightmare began as Reactor Number 4 at the Chernobyl nuclear plant exploded. Forced to evacuate, Natasha tried to smuggle Zoya into the waiting bus, but

once discovered, Zoya was taken from her and left behind, running after the bus until she was too tired and the bus disappeared in the distance. But this is not Zoya's nor Natasha's story. It is Misha's story, one of Zoya's few surviving pups.

Born wild, Misha and his brother Bratan are taught by their mother to survive in the forest, learning how to hunt and catch insects, small animals and if lucky feast on the carrion of large animals. They are taught to be wary of danger as there are many predators that could kill a dog: bears, lynx and wolves. Sadly, the happy times, care-free and full bellies are short-lived in the wild. The dogs are hunted down, fighting and running for their lives across the green and the red, dead forest in the exclusion zone surrounding Chernobyl.

Dogs of the Deadlands is told from the perspective of the dogs, describing the scenes as well as the scents, gaining additional information about the presence of other animals in the forest. Moreover, the dogs' behaviour is convincingly authentic. McGowan explains the behaviour of the dogs, noting how the dogs' instincts have changed because of domestication compared to that of its ancestors, the grey wolf. For example, at the centre of the story is Misha's relationship with his brother Bratan, born with deformed legs, and despite sometimes their desperation, Bratan is not left behind. At other times the two brothers are too trusting, too playful, and the story could easily have been cut short. Another sustained relationship throughout the book is that of a nemesis, an alpha female wolf called Cross-face, whom eventually Misha must duel alone.

Dogs of the Deadlands has been compared to Richard Adam's *Plague Dogs* - especially as the dogs often remain loyal to human companions - but also reminds me of Jack London's *Call of the Wild* amid the ruthlessness of the forest, kill or be killed.

A phenomenal story of survival despite, and because of, the desolation of a modern nuclear fallout.

Simon Barrett

Friends Don't Tell

Grace Francis and Nadia Mendoza, pub. Hodder Children's Books

This is a teenage/young adult novel told through the thoughts of the main characters, Jade and Lexi. The story is written by two authors and each chapter alternates between the two authors and the two characters. *Friends Don't Tell* is easy to follow and the story writing technique works really well.

Jade and Lexi were at the 'Get Lost' festival a year ago with a group of friends. Jade died at this festival. Headlines called it an unfortunate and tragic accident, but Lexi is finding it difficult to come to terms with this verdict. There is no evidence of murder, but Lexi is still uncomfortable with what has happened. Is somebody hiding the truth? Lexi is determined to find out what happened. This is a

story with lots of unanswered questions. It is about two friends, each battling through their own problems. Lexi is trying to piece together her own life, as well as come to terms with the death of her friend. She cannot get over that weekend. She is sure that somebody deliberately hurt Jade. Was it one of her friends? Who was it? Who is telling the truth? Who is lying? Who can she trust?

The story is about friendships, relationships, and mental wellbeing. Through the two main characters, we are reminded that it is alright to be strong but struggling, and to be afraid whilst being brave. Big issues of loss and grief, anxiety and mental health are tackled. The ups and downs of teenage friendship feature throughout the story. It is a heart-breaking and yet compelling read, tackling the problems faced by young people and it is a brilliant account of the highs and lows of teenage life. Lexi's relationship with her friends, particularly Jade, with her mother and her health carer are all covered. Her own mental health stability has been getting worse and she constantly fears that someone else close to her may die soon.

This is a novel which should help teenagers to come to terms with their own friendship anxieties and understand that others may be facing similar problems.

Gary Kenworthy

Her Dark Wings

Melinda Salisbury, pub. David Fickling Books

A fantasy adventure that captures all the drama and emotion of being a teenager. The love, the loss, the self-discovery, and, at the heart of it all, angst, feelings that Salisbury captures with a deft hand.

Like many teens before her Corey is struggling with heartache. Her best friend, or so she thought, does something unforgivable, before coming to an untimely end. But that's just the beginning of the story. Corey's world has been thrown upside down by loss, anger, and heartbreak. But this isn't where the world turning ends because it transpires that Corey's destiny lies far away from this mortal coil, something she only realises when the underworld comes calling. The question is whether she will ever find what she is looking for. The central character of Corey made a welcome change to normal teen protagonist. Rather than being preoccupied with being popular and doing things construed as cool, Corey loves gardening and growing her own vegetables. It made a refreshing change to see a teenager living her best life, despite what others might think of her.

While set in modern times this story is based on the Hades and Persephone myth. In this ancient tale Hades, Greek God and ruler of the underworld, falls in love with Persephone and kidnaps her. A similar story plays out here, after Corey finds herself looking for answers and finds herself pulled into a world beyond her wildest dreams.

This is a wonderfully imaginative tale that blends fantasy, myth, and legend. It is a journey into the unknown and a great gateway into the world of fantasy for any YA reader. It would also be a perfect read for any adolescent with a passion for history.

Rosie Cammish Jones

Hollow Fires

Samira Ahmed, pub. Atom Books

Samira Ahmed's *Hollow Fires* is a powerful story addressing some deeply relevant and timely issues: racism, immigration, social media, and factual reporting. Sounds dry – it is anything but with a compelling plot, thought-provoking discussions, teenage angst, and the very real difficulties of navigating our complex world.

Safiya Mirza, a high school senior, a scholarship kid, aspires to be a journalist and works as the editor for her school newspaper. Determined to report the facts and maintain her independence battling those, including the principal, who don't want the same. Several events, after the Christmas holiday, trigger some soul-searching and a determination to find the perpetrators, bringing them to justice no matter what the cost. Safiya thought she could coast through her final semester before heading off to university, but when the school newspaper gets hacked and the attack seems personal, she realises that she cannot sit back and be silent. When the smells and the whispering start after the disappearance of local 14-year-old Jawad Ali, she certainly can't hide without finding out what's happened.

Samira Ahmed's style of writing immediately draws the reader into the story and almost holds you in a stranglehold leaving you gasping at the unfairness and quite frankly, horror, of it all. The narrative swaps between Safiya and Jawad as the story progresses, handing out hints, truths and lies, investing the reader in the story, willing Safiya to seek out the truth all the while whispering to her 'be careful or don't trust x'. Early on the concept of a 'ghost skin' is introduced and this notion that someone can be hiding their true beliefs to infiltrate or remain undetectable becomes core to the whole story. Safiya is left wondering, after these attacks, if anything is true and anyone is as they present. It is a terrible question to face when you are trying to define yourself and what you want to become or be known for as a young adult. The one thing she does know is that she cannot rest until she uncovers the truth. Could you be that brave? Would you risk your scholarship, your university chances, your friendships and even your life?

Samira Ahmed addresses the challenges faced by young people in an age of bullying, racial slurring and attacks coupled with the prevalence of misinformation on social media. A compelling story with brilliantly honest and courageous characters that you cannot help rooting for from the onset. Be the change!

Sheri Sticpewich

Hurricane Summer

Asha Bromfield, pub. Faber & Faber

Hurricane Summer is a beautiful coming of age story exploring the power of discovering one's voice, the trials of first love and complex family relationships. The story follows 18-year-old Tilla as she visits her father's home in Jamaica for the first time in over a decade. For Tilla, who has spent her life desperately trying to make her father love her and the summer offers an opportunity to discover the island which draws her father away every six months. However, during her time there, she is exposed to the dark secrets of her family that lie hidden beneath the surface of paradise. The story is set to the impending hurricane, but it is not just the natural disaster that uproots Tilla's life and self as she knows it.

Bromfield offers a nuanced depiction of a country and culture often underrepresented in young adult literature. She expertly presents the differences in class and social attitudes between Canada and Jamaica, however, also highlights the natural beauty of the island through gorgeous descriptions and sensory language. Finally, Bromfield fully immerses the reader into the setting through the characters using both the local dialect of Patois and English when speaking, allowing the reader to gain a deeper insight into Jamaica.

As the first lines of the novel says, we get two birthdays; "The first one is the day we are born. The second is the day you leave home and give birth to yourself." It is this message of self-discovery which is so core to the story and is what makes the novel such an accurate depiction of being a young adult.

Hurricane Summer combines lyrical writing with complex themes such as colourism and classism to create a novel which is not only a joy to read but a story which handles sensitively issues so prominent in our modern world. It is a truly searing and poignant novel for all to enjoy.

Elinor Hurry

The Key to You and Me

Jayne Robin Brown, pub. HarperTeen

Piper dreams of horse riding in the Olympics, but when her coach goes into hospital her dreams are put on hold until her grandmother makes an offer: she can stay with her in North Carolina for the summer and intern with a famous dressage trainer. The fact that Piper will also be getting away from the girl who broke her heart is an added bonus.

Everyone around her seems to be falling in love, but Kat has never felt that way about boys and she's started to wonder if she likes girls. But how will she be able to tell if she's never actually kissed a girl? Kat needs to make some cash over the summer, and Piper is terrified of driving, so Piper's grandmother hires Kat to teach her how to drive. But perhaps Piper can also help Kat to understand herself.

The course of true love never did run smooth and Piper and Kat's happy ending is obstructed by Piper's ex- who can't quite seem to let go, and a very persistent girl Kat meets at a party. The chapters alternate Piper and Kat's perspectives, though I did get mixed up sometimes as the voices were very similar. *The Key to You and Me* is a very sweet and sincere story of friendship, first love and coming out.

I'm not a horse rider, but I always loved a pony book - I grew up on the Pullein-Thompson sisters' books amongst others - and they are perennially popular in the school library so I'm sure that a queer romance, set in the world of horse riding, will prove a welcome addition to the genre.

Rebecca Rouillard

The Last Whale

Chris Vick, pub. Zephyr

The Last Whale follows Abi Kristensen, a fierce teenage environmentalist on a quest to save Earth with the help of her AI computer, 'Moonlight'.

Abi's great grandfather Peer worked on a whaling ship, but instead of killing whales, he instead chose to study them and their songs, and present his findings to the world. However, in a community of whalers, his research was ignored, and he never spoke of it to his family. As Abi discovers how whales could help save the planet, she also faces a similar level of disinterest from the world. NewTek - the tech company from whom she has 'borrowed' Moonlight to help with her research - is so obsessed with how she has made its AI hardware more self-aware, that it completely dismisses her scientific findings into whale songs, phytoplankton, and climate change. In her later years, Abi's reluctance to leave home due to her ill-health, is symbolic of humanity's reluctance to change. But despite Abi's inaction, her daughter Tonje ventures out to track a passing whale and prove her family's theories.

Author Chris Vick uses lots of wonderful imagery to connect the four generations of the family. One example of this is when Tonje initially describes the taste of strawberries to Moonlight as like "eating sunlight." Abi later tells her granddaughter Astrid that she is "a human strawberry plant" and that, like strawberry seeds, Astrid is a seed for the future of humanity. Strawberry aromas are later used to comfort Astrid as she sleeps.

The Last Whale is a thought-provoking piece of Young Adult fiction, with author Chris Vick drawing on his Norwegian heritage and his work with the charity Whale & Dolphin Conservation. In the Author's Notes, Vick reinforces his message that the science in his novel "concerning the role whales play in the ecosystem, and our need to save them is very, very real."

Chris J Kenworthy

The Many Half-Lived Lives of Sam Sylvester

Maya MacGregor, pub. Astra Young Readers

Sam Sylvester has a secret. A book of stories collected over the years. But these are not ordinary stories, they are the stories of young people who have died before their time. For Sam the book is not only a means of honouring those young people whose lives have been tragically cut short but also a manifestation of their own terrifying belief that they will not live to see their nineteenth birthday. It is a belief all too real as Sam and their dad have fled to a new town following an horrific ordeal which both hope they have finally left in the past.

The Many Half-Lived Lives of Sam Sylvester begins with Sam and their dad moving into their new home in Astoria and Sam enrolling into the local high school. As a non-binary, autistic teenager who has survived a traumatic ordeal, Sam's fear of starting a new life in a new school is all too real. MacGregor describes Astoria High as "set back from the road by a line of trees that stands like sentinels to guard it." For Sam, their father has always been their protector but here, at the queer club run by Mr Quach, Sam is immediately befriended by Shep and Sky and feels that this may be a place where they can feel safe and protected. But Astoria also has its secrets. Local teenager, Billy Clement, died thirty years ago in the house now occupied by Sam and their dad. All those who knew Billy claim it was a 'tragic accident' but Sam and Shep believe it was a murder that they must solve. As their quest for the truth intensifies, MacGregor skilfully interweaves a series of gripping plot twists from death threats to ghosts and no end of potential suspects.

Although a compelling murder-mystery, *The Many Half-Lived Lives of Sam Sylvester* is also a powerful insight into the everyday challenges faced by young people with autism, where dealing with change and forming new relationships can feel terrifying and overwhelming. It also, importantly, highlights the need to continue striving for tolerance and inclusion. Although the love story feels a little contrived at times, MacGregor has created a wonderfully diverse community of kind, warm, funny, and supportive LGBTQ+ characters who 'stand like sentinels' to protect each other.

Paulie Hurry

Running Out of Time

Simon Fox, pub. Nosy Crow

Alex and his father must escape. His father has posted incriminating evidence of governmental human rights abuses and war crimes to an address in London, which he intends to collect and show to the international community. His government will stop at nothing to obtain them, including murder. Alex however has a gift, although his father believes it to be a curse. He can steal time. Whilst he can only steal fifteen seconds at the moment, this might be enough for him to see into the future and make the right choices now, keeping them alive.

When Alex arrives in England however, it is without his father, who might be dead. It is up to Alex to find him and collect the parcel. The plot thickens as undercover police infiltrate the illegal smuggling gang that brought Alex to England, and Ronnie, paid to ensure Alex's safe passage, is himself trapped by his crime boss. Rachel, an undercover police officer and her daughter, Hayley also help Alex out, at great personal risk. Moreover, Alex's fifteen seconds never seems to be enough, maintaining tension throughout the novel as we never fully know what will happen next. The story is often teetering on a knife-edge with a threatening undercurrent of an ultimate endgame, where no matter what Alex does, the outcome is the same.

There is however more to Alex than his gift. He demonstrates great courage and is driven to do the right thing, though, what is right seems difficult to articulate. But he always wants to help other people and keep them safe, risking his own life to do so. His gift however alienates Alex from his father and his mother left when he was young. Alex also seems confused about what is happening in his country, sadly laid bare in the documents posted by his father. There is therefore much for Alex and others to lose.

The book is cleverly constructed, alternating chapters of 'Before' as Alex remembers the immediate past and 'After', the present and there is a genius twist to the closing chapters. It is a perfect blend of action and jeopardy with a complex plot and characters.

Simon Barrett

The Silence That Binds Us

Joanna Ho, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Set in California, Joanna Ho's novel, which is labelled as aimed at young adult readers, actually speaks to a timeless audience. Through it she draws all readers, teenage and adult, to consider how we think of others, and of ourselves, and how we treat everyone in a multicultural society. Ho's introductory letter in the book, addressed to her readers, considers what we mean when we describe

something as ‘timely’. It is, she tells us, something in which ‘the world shows an interest in a truth that existed long before it became a topic of public dialogue’.

We tend to think of racism as only being directed at the Black community in the US, but Ho tells us that she particularly wanted to tell a story about anti-Asian racism, a specific racism which was not widely recognised five years ago when she began her novel, but of which she, as the daughter of Taiwanese and Chinese immigrants to the US, was increasingly aware.

The basis for *The Silence That Binds Us* lies in the teenage suicide epidemics which occurred in the Asian community starting several years ago, and in actual events of racism and classism which Ho witnessed. As a High School vice principal Ho is speaking from a close observation of the behaviour she reveals in this book, and this brings to the book an astonishing and devastatingly truthful account of the experiences and relationships of Black and Asian students. Ho emphasises that racism doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Her novel, she writes, is about ‘family, friendship, mental health, fear, power, hope, healing and love’. As a result of specific encounters with anti-Asian racism she set out to explore what it would be like to have a loved one commit suicide, and then have the world accuse you of driving your loved one to his death. Chinese Taiwanese American High School student Maybelline tells the story, and it is her family, together with her Asian and Black friends, and the entitled, elite, White community who draw us into this outstanding novel. Not to be missed, and surely destined for awards.

Bridget Carrington

The Silver Chain

Jion Sheibani, pub. Hot Key Books

The Silver Chain is a powerful novel which explores classism, mental health, and the power of music. The story follows Azadeh, a 16-year-old trying to navigate her way through the normal pressures of being a teenager; friendships, fitting in and having fun. However, when her mother’s mental health begins to deteriorate, Azadeh struggles to keep up with friends and parties while also trying to hide the problems she is facing at home.

Sheibani beautifully depicts the complexities of class and race, the power of poetry and music, and the importance of asking for help. The story, written through verse, mirrors how it is through poetry and music that Azadeh begins to discover who she is and her place in the world. The illustrations which are woven throughout only adds to the beauty of the book and is a lovely change to typical young adult literature which is often devoid of artwork. By being written in verse the story is fast-paced and easy to read, however, it should be noted this has led to less developed secondary characters. This does not necessarily detract from the novel, merely changes its dynamic. The poems enable a stronger

connection to be established with Azadeh, as her thoughts and feelings are expressed through such a personal medium. This does, however, mean there is less focus upon the surrounding characters.

Sheibani has written a moving and heart-warming novel that accurately portrays the difficulties of being a teenager, as well as exploring the impact caring for a parent can have on a child's life.

Elinor Hurry

Sisters of the Snake

Serena and Sasha Nanua, pub. HarperTeen

Written by twin sisters, this is a magical realism retelling of *The Prince and The Pauper* as two 18-year-old twin sisters, separated at birth in a land which is filled with the scenery, food and traditions of ancient India and imbued with a history of ruling families with specific magical gifts.

Rani is a wealthy princess, heir to snake magic in the last remaining magical family and destined to take over from her increasingly merciless father, the Raja, in squeezing the poor all around them to provide conscripts for a looming war with a neighbouring country. She is cloistered from all public view and soon to marry the handsome Saeed who she loves only as a friend. Ria is a tough and accomplished street thief who grew up in an orphanage. She and her best friend Amir are horrified when she is scheduled for conscription to the hated Blue Coats - the Raja's soldiers. A chance meeting provides the sisters with a chance to escape their fates - and to find out the truth about their origins.

Told through alternating diary entries, this fast-paced story is filled with suspense as each sister struggles with the swap and avoids the dangers of their new worlds. For Rani, it is learning to cope with life on the run and the ever-present fear of arrest; for Ria it is coping with her latent snake-magic abilities and outwitting the true power behind the throne – the Raja's new and ruthless King's Advisor, Amara, who also happens to be her new fiancé's mother.

Romantic complications thread through the novel which is captivating in its detailed depictions of the sisters' worlds. It is a powerful argument for empathy over envy, as the girls explore their losses and the nature of parental love.

Saira Archer

Something Certain, Maybe

Sara Barnard, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Something Certain, Maybe is a companion novel to *Beautiful Broken Things* and *Fierce Fragile Hearts*, and it follows Rosie, the last member of the trio featured throughout the series. Rosie is friends with Caddy and Suzie and this time it is her story in the focus. She is off to university, leaving family and friends behind in Brighton. She has a plan and is beginning to spread her wings and discover more about herself in the process.

Tough at times, this honest read will take readers to university where decisions, friendships and life become increasingly difficult. It has a very realistic feel and I have no doubt older readers will remember days of doubt, fear, and uncertainty over life's major decisions at that time. Rosie is developing a close relationship with Jade and exploring her bisexuality. This relationship is a positive thread throughout the book.

Something Certain, Maybe is an enthralling YA read and deals with mental health, being bi-sexual and mentions suicide. There is a lot to deal with but it feels authentic and real with plenty of heart and hope mixed in.

Erin Hamilton

These are the Words: fearless verse to find your voice

Nikita Gill, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

This is a collection of poems from Nikita Gill, aimed at teenage girls and young women. Nikita is not afraid to tackle some difficult and sensitive areas, such as anxiety, depression, sexual harassment and rape. This is a brilliant collection of poems, covering these topics with frankness and honesty. The range of emotions covered will bring tears to your eyes. The poems are aimed at all girls, including girls of colour, girls who are not straight and girls who may be overweight.

The poems are conveniently organised under different headings, making it easy to find each collection of poems. There are poems for girlhood, womanhood and sisterhood, for the highs and lows of love, for understanding family, for when you are hurting, for when you need to protest, for when you hate your body, for when you need to heal and for friendship and family. So, this is a complete journey through life, which many will find helpful and supportive. They are not always easy poems to read, and they are often fierce and heart-breaking. There are also many beautiful references to friendship.

Nikita uses the cycle of the four seasons as a framework for the poems. Each part starts with poems for the astrological signs, and they fit with the mood or feeling for each season. This allows the poems to focus on many of life's challenges, including first love and the breakup of friendships.

From a British-Indian poet, this is an empowering, feminist collection of poems. Many are a challenge to read, and it is re-assuring that a poet is prepared to cover all these areas and themes that many may shy away from. This is a collection well worth reading.

Gary Kenworthy

Non-Fiction Books

50 Fantastic Ideas to Encourage Diversity and Inclusion

June O'Sullivan and Nausheen Khan, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

As the world mingles and expands its ideological horizons, we get to see newer ways of being and a convergence of different cultures, thoughts, and processes. To understand them and to cultivate a sense of inclusion and diversity amongst multicultural communities, we have for you, this summer- an amazing book by the founder of UK's largest childcare charity- London Early Years Foundation, and author June O'Sullivan, whose work in early childhood education has collected several accolades, along with nursery manager Nausheen Khan.

The book is titled *50 Ideas to Encourage Diversity and Inclusion*, which are shared in a very practical and interesting manner for teachers, trainers and parents who'd like to guide the young ones in their budding years on these most vital matters of communication in society. Each page is colourful and filled with photographs to enable a better understanding of the content. On each page, there's an activity to encourage better inclusion and diversity and these activities are shared through pointers such as - 'What You Need'; 'Top Tip'; 'What to Do'; and a 'Health and Safety' section where appropriate.

The book interactively engages its readers and evokes thoughts to be put in practice, for instance, through the activity titled 'I Baked a Cake for Christmas', we learn about how to support bilingual children- through the metaphor of baking a cake and with the help of an empty bowl and spoon, kids put in imaginary ingredients one by one to create a mixture. In another activity, the 'Message Tree' children are guided to write messages and hang them on a tree, they are encouraged to read the messages each day to help them express their feelings.

These are just a few examples of the unique and expressive activities included, all of which involve and encourage participation, understanding, kindness and ensure a celebration of individuality within communities. I highly recommend picking this one up to introduce your class, or family, to the colours of the world and its inhabitants.

Ishika Tiwari

Bodies, Brains & Bogies

Paul Ian Cross, illus. Steve Brown, pub. Welbeck Children's

The body is an amazing thing. Everyone's body is different, but they're all designed to perform similar functions. Whilst many of these functions are straightforward and understandable, others are more obscure, and even sometimes pretty disgusting! *Bodies, Brains & Bogies* covers all aspects of the fascinatingly complex human body.

This book is perfect for young scientific minds who want to understand more about the human body, how it works, and why it does certain things (like why we have brain freezes). With chapters on different parts of the body including the brain, skin, and the gut, this book really does cover it all. In this book, you'll learn how much of your energy is needed to power your brain, what the smallest and largest bones in your body are, and how one woman extended her life by seven years with a home-made kidney replacement!

Paul Ian Cross keeps the perfect balance of humour and information throughout this book meaning that it isn't too heavy-going to read even though you will pick up loads of facts and information on each page. The fun illustrations also break up the writing and often include amusing speech bubbles or labelled diagrams to help understand the scientific terminology used in that section. Mini quizzes also allow you to see if you can remember some of the information that you just learnt about – a really good way to engage the mind at different points within chapters. Another great touch is the 'grossometer' which measures how disgusting certain pieces of information are!

Bodies, Brains & Bogies is a fun book to read that will teach you loads about the human body.

Tom Joy

The Book of Dirt: A Smelly History of Human Hygiene

Wydawnictwo Dwie Siostry, trans. Zosia Krasodomska-Jones, illus. Piotr Socha, pub. Thames & Hudson

When this rather large book arrived on my desk, I wasn't sure how you could have a whole book written about dirt that would engage and interest children. I'm pleased to say that my first impression was completely wrong; this is a rather wonderful and eclectic mix of topics all centred on a "smelly history of dirt, disease and human hygiene."

Readers are introduced to cleanliness practices across time, around the world, and within different cultures and religions. We learn how being clean was important to the Ancient Egyptians, how the Romans used baths for social occasions and about the spread of epidemics. We discover the history of Turkish baths, saunas and spas and find out about soap and skincare as well as how toilets and bathrooms developed through the ages. Shaving and haircuts are not forgotten and nor are toilet paper or teeth. The book is brought up to date with the perils of washing in space.

The text is never dry or dull, instead, it is littered with fascinating details that are sure to impress and cause much glee and astonishment such as the fact that watching Louis XIV on the toilet was considered an honour so around a hundred people would view him each time he went or that the Ancient Greeks wiped themselves with stones stating that “three stones were enough”! The book is also lavishly illustrated with rather humorous pictures, some of them filling double-page spreads. This book is an unexpected delight with a wide ranging age appeal.

Barbara Band

Britannica’s Word of the Day: 366 Elevating Utterances to Stretch Your Cranium and Tickle Your Humerus

Patrick Kelly, Renee Kelly, and Sue Macy, illus. Josy Bloggs, Emily Cox, James Gibbs, and Liz Kay, pub. Britannica Books

Who doesn’t immediately open a book showcasing a word for each day of the year on their own birthday? I was contented (22 September): the word of my day cutely and appositely describes most of what I do. Result. Flicking through I found some top-notch (31 October) words to grapple (6 February) with. I felt less like a ruffian (13 December) with each new opulent (26 July) page. I thought I’d erupt (29 November) into an ovation (4 January). This is no motley (30 March) jubilee (19 May).

I sincerely adore this book.

Words are spelled phonetically, given a dictionary definition, then accompanied by a chatty nugget of knowledge to contextualise them. Flummox (9 April) tells you about Rubik’s Cube; accumulate (3 August) about Mansa Musa, 14th century ruler of Mali. Each page is delightfully illustrated in the retro-70s style that seems pleasingly common now, but with a modern sense of humour. Each month has a short story dedicated to it that draws on as many of the words of the month as possible, which is a lovely touch, and also has a couple of thematic pages. It’s a reference work, too! The source notes are a marvel (31 January). As an object, the book is perfect to clutch to my chest with pride and joy.

I can’t imagine any accomplished and enthusiastic reader not loving this book, from precocious seven-year-olds to the most venerable adult. It’s informative, jocular (25 December) and cute. It extends your word knowledge, certainly mine, it’s a logophile (16 February) treat. It’s so very dip-into-able, but once in, you’ll just keep reading. It put a massive smile on my face. Do get it.

‘Sprocket’ (31 July) – seriously, who doesn’t love the word ‘sprocket’?

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

British Museum: Secrets of the Dead

Matt Ralphs, illus. Gordy Wright, pub. Nosy Crow

The dead have a lot to tell us, and they are great at keeping secrets, so we are about to learn as we travel back in time (hold on to your hats) to discover the secrets of the mummies, not just those in Egypt, and other human remains from around the world. Far from gruesome this book is in fact packed with fascinating information about people, their daily lives and their cultures. Accessibly written, with expertly observed illustrations and having been compiled with expert help from curators at the British Museum this is a sensitive topic dealt with respectfully and yet giving its readers just the right amount of “that is gross” and “wow.”

The dead are introduced with an explanation of not only where they can be found but also how many of them were originally, and continue to be, laid to rest. We are given a short explanation as to how human remains can survive intact for great spans of time and briefly introduced to the way in which they were found by archaeologists. The mysteries of the dead then begin to be revealed with Tutankhamun because this year marks the 100th anniversary of the discovery of his tomb. Careful scans of his body have revealed more about his life and death and, because he was a ruler of one of the most powerful civilisations on the planet, he continues to hold a deep fascination for many. From him the book moves on to a study of the ancient Egyptian way of life, briefly told over a series of double page spreads and all relating back to what we can learn from the dead. The Maiden of Llullaillaco in South America is also a famous find revealing more about the Inca way of life and the book continues, working across the continents of Africa, America, Europe & the Middle East and Asia providing some fascinating insights.

Both a beautiful and an education book that will sit as comfortably at home as in a school library, respecting the long since deceased who have so many secrets yet to reveal about their lives and beliefs.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Bugs: Brain Bursts

Noodle Fuel, illus. Rich Watson, pub. Little Tiger

Bugs: Brain Bursts comes with the tag “boredom-free guarantee” and once again this book certainly lives up to that claim. In this title all six main insect groups are explored: beetles; bees and wasps; bugs; butterflies and moths; crickets, grasshoppers and locusts; and flies. There’s also a page about spiders even though, officially, they are arachnids not insects. There’s a contents page making it easy to find what you’re looking for, a glossary explaining some of the words used, and bug activities and games to try.

The book has been designed to be eye catching and the simple but bright colour scheme, green, orange and lilac creates a cohesive impression and works well for the illustrations of the bugs which are included. Children will love pouring over the pages, ‘ooing’, ‘ahing’ and making yuck noises as they tend to when faced with bugs! The packed pages with their information and illustrations, much of it presented in boxes and in a humorous way, and symbols, such as rosettes and circles, have been used to highlight things of interest, for example, record-breaking facts or facts that will burst your brain, like the longest stick insect being 62cm! The Top Ten Weird Bug facts is sure to fascinate; did you know that dung beetles use the stars to navigate and that honeybees have hairy eyeballs?

A great introduction to the topic of insects. Aimed at 7 – 9 years, this book could also be shared with younger children and would make a great addition to both the school library and classroom collection.

Barbara Band

Curious Creatures Working with Tools

Zoe Armstrong, illus. Anja Sušanj, pub. Flying Eye Books

The rather cute sea otter on the front cover of this book, using a stone to break open a clam shell, makes you want to explore further, to discover what other creatures can be found within its pages. And the reader is not disappointed! We learn about how crows shape sticks to make them nice and pointy for poking into holes in trees, how veined octopuses lug around half coconut shells looking for another section to create a safe hiding space, how orang-utans use huge leaves to shelter under during the rain and – my favourite – how dolphins wear sponges on their noses to protect them from prickly sea urchins, a trick that is passed down from mother to daughter but only occasionally to sons.

Animals from around the world in different habitats are featured including oceans, forests, the tropics, grasslands and towns. The reader learns what is a tool and its various uses, such as for finding food, hunting, trapping or shelter. How the same animals do different things in different places and how the habitat affects the use of the same tool. The book is packed with information, the muted illustrations add to the text and there are “Just Like You” sections that prompt you to consider the similarities and differences between the animals featured and humans. A perfect book for any 6 – 8-year-old who is interested in animals and the natural world.

Barbara Band

Curtain Up! Behind the Scenes at the Royal Opera House

Royal Opera House, illus. Lauren O’Hara, pub. Thames & Hudson

As an ardent ballet fan from an early age, I'm amazed at how many 'behind the scenes' secrets *Curtain Up!* has taught me in this hugely entertaining book. It's been a real eye-opener to me, and readers know whose illustrations we are admiring, but I just wish we knew who actually wrote the detailed explanations of what goes on to ensure a seamless performance every night at the Royal Opera House, and, of course, other theatres.

All Lauren's previous books have an author's name as well as hers, as illustrator. Several of the award-winning books are written by Lauren's sister Natalia, with Lauren's illustrations, but who is the mystery writer who takes us on this excellent backstage tour? Is it the 'Designer' Belinda Webster? Who knows – perhaps it's Figaro, the resident cat at the Royal Opera House, who shows readers round the places the audience never get to see and explains what goes on there.

Tonight, the performance is *The Nutcracker*, a ballet with which many readers will know. We visit the costume department and learn about making stage clothes, wigs, and shoes, and then about scenery, props, stage fights and how much effort goes in to ensure everything works properly in the performances in front of the audience. We get a brief look at some of the famous costumes made for both operas and ballets at the Royal Opera House (some are on display to visitors), and then Figaro takes us to the Ballet Studio, the Rehearsal Room (opera), and the Dressing Room, where – yes, you're right – they get dressed for the performance! Before we complete our tour we are taken to the Orchestra Pit, down below the level of the stage, where they are tucked away ready to perform the music for ballets and operas. Finally, we see the Nutcracker ballet itself, the story, the 'side stage' activity where crew, technicians and managers ensure everything goes perfectly on the night (and the afternoon, the matinée!).

There are suggestions of how readers can get involved in ballet or opera, and a useful glossary. Where's Figaro all this time? It's up to you to find out!

Bridget Carrington

Dinosaurs: 500 Questions and Answers

Anne Rooney, illus. Jake McDonald, pub. Arcturus

Space: 500 Questions and Answers

Anne Rooney, illus. Jake McDonald and Senor Sanchez, pub. Arcturus

Did crocodiles live with dinosaurs? Could raptors climb trees? How fast was T-Rex? What can you know from a dinosaur nose? Are dragons dinosaurs? Did dinosaurs have feathers? Whose music was played on Mars? Has a satellite ever got lost? Have jellyfish gone into space? Is Earth a giant magnet? How does the moon affect tides? How do stars work?

These questions, and plenty more, are found across these two colourful, detailed, informative, and light-hearted titles. Despite the number in the titles, I have actually counted more than 500 questions in each book spread over their 95 pages. In distinctly defined boxes, usually separating each page in half, a main question is asked and then surrounding a vibrant cartoonish illustration further related questions are asked and answered in bite-sized paragraphs. The use of different colours, font sizes and appearance, plenty of surrounding white space, and clever positioning of images and text make these easy to read, uncluttered, nicely flowing books. However, contrastingly, the order of the questions, particularly in the dinosaur edition, was distracting and annoying for me. I would have chosen a more linear thematic structure so all questions relating to the demise of the dinosaurs, or different aspects of their anatomy, or the study of palaeontology followed on from each other instead of jumping backwards and forwards across topics, for example, over several pages the questions covered birds, feet, museums, bones, babies, asteroid, babies, diet, babies, eyes, eyes, nose, jaw, diet, museum, dung beetles, swimming, birds, diet, babies. On the other hand, the Space title felt more ordered and flowing, with subjects largely grouped together, for example 21 boxes looking at various aspects of the moon are together. This felt more concise and so easier to read and understand.

Each book is absorbing and engaging, with complex ideas written in a straightforward manner, with many amusing or light-hearted features, for example, the image of a black hole with a face and a speech bubble saying “I’m not lazy” really helps to explain the idea of lazy black holes and the question which dinosaur was teenager-sized is very relatable. The use of infographics and statistics are accessible and useful as is the pronunciation guide to dinosaur names. These books are intriguing, bright, bursting with interesting and understandable facts, and good for those who are either new to or already interested in the subjects of space or dinosaurs.

Natalie Plimmer McChyrstal

Marvellous Body: A Magic Lens book

Jane Wilsher, illus. Andres Lozano, pub. What on Earth Books

Have you ever wondered what is going on inside your body? This book explores how our bodies work through different organs and body systems. It is a brilliant book packed full of interesting and fascinating facts, with lots of detail. Everything is explained in a simple way, which is easy to understand. What children will find really exciting is that the book comes with a magic lens, which works as an x-ray and a microscope to help explore the human body. This really makes the book stunning and eye catching. Wave the lens over any page with a special red pattern, details of parts of the inner human body are magically revealed. With well labelled drawings and illustrations the workings of the body are clearly explained. In addition to the pictures, every page has a list of key words, easily located next to a small drawing of an eye. There is also a very useful index and source notes. Overall, this is an awesome and fantastic book, crammed with information and detail. It is a great book for young people eager to find out about their bodies.

The publisher rightly states that the real world is more amazing than anything you can make up. Inside our bodies there is breathing, moving, twisting, stretching and thinking. The magic lens will help you to discover exactly what is going inside your body. How your brain works. How your muscles make you move and how doctors and nurses spot diseases. It is wonderful that this book highlights that there are all types of bodies, all shapes and sizes and that our bodies change over time. Children are also reminded to treat everybody with respect because we are all different and we are all special. Some children are able bodied, others are disabled, some have medical conditions. Readers are also reminded to look after their physical and mental health.

This amazing, interesting, informative, and fun book covers everything inside the body: brain, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, teeth, skin, bones, muscles, lungs, heart, eating, drinking, keeping fit, surgery, babies and growing up. Parents and teachers may also be interested to know that the book includes STEM/STEAM and other science content linked to the curriculum. This is the second in this series. The first featured marvellous machines. Hopefully, we can look forward to a third.

Gary Kenworthy

Space: Brain Bursts

Noodle Fuel, illus. Rich Watson, pub. Little Tiger

Space: Brain Bursts comes, as its partner title, with the tag “boredom-free guarantee” and the book certainly lives up to that. There are a huge number of topics covered: the solar system; planets; stars and constellations; the moon; space travel including the Mars Mission; asteroids; and black holes. A useful space timeline is included and the “day in the life of an astronaut on the ISS” is sure to fascinate. There’s a contents page so it is easy to find what you’re looking for, a glossary explaining some of the words used, and space activities to try.

This is a visually attractive book that will appeal to many children and, although at first glance the pages feel a bit busy, the colour scheme of shades of blue, orange and turquoise creates a cohesive impression. The topic is approached in a light-hearted and humorous way with pages full of information and cartoon-style illustrations. Symbols, such as rosettes and circles, have been used to highlight things of interest, for example, very big numbers or facts that will burst your brain; did you know that as of 2020, 34,000 large pieces of space junk are in orbit around the Earth?

A great introduction to the topic of space and, although aimed at 7 – 9 years, this book is sure to delight older children, and would make a great addition to both the school library and classroom collection.

Barbara Band

Special Delivery: A Book's Journey Around the World

Polly Faber, illus Klas Fahlen, pub. Nosy Crow

Special Delivery: A Book's Journey Around the World is a bright and bustling adventure, charting a book's voyage from factory to new owner. The stunning illustrations by Klas Fahlen are fresh and modern, with crisp shades and forms bursting from every page.

The book demonstrates to us and is full of modes of transport and machinery – conveyor belts, lorries, ferries, cranes ... so it will definitely have a strong appeal to young children who love learning about how things work and seeing just how the workings happen too!

The journey of the title is framed by a narrative of Jay's birthday, Jay is the young male character who guides the reader through the book and over the course of the month that he has to wait for his birthday. We start by watching as the book flies out of the factory and makes its way across the globe to a lovely bookshop, where Jay's grandma buys it for him as a gift. Polly Faber's writing, her 'story' focuses on showing us how so many different people, along each stage of the book's travels, work together, behind the scenes, to fill our shops with such amazing books.

An eye-catching and engaging illustrated guide which suggests that every book has its own history and narrative before it even reaches our hands. A beautifully produced hardback for curious children who love learning about how the world works and with added bonus content, three fully illustrated pages of illustrated delivery facts which will delight and inspire curiously minded reader.

Stephanie Robertson

Spies

David Long, illus. Terri Po, pub. Faber Children's Books

My son, brought up on a diet of Alex Rider, James Bond and Spooks, had a yen to join to MI6. "Mum" he explained "You have to be able to blend in." I replied, "you are six foot five and your name's Tristan." Perhaps I was wrong to pop his balloon, but spying is a dirty game at worst and morally dubious at best. Unless, of course, you happen to be a secret agent working against the Nazis. No moral conundrum there!

Fortunately, David Long has found plenty of examples of unambiguous heroes of both sexes (not to mention one animal) to fill the bulk of his excellent book *Spies*. He concentrates on stories that have come out of the Second World War, some well-known and others only recently discovered. It should really be called *Spies and Secret Agents* because many of the operatives did not spy in the technical

sense but went deep under cover to aid the local resistance in sabotaging supply lines or spirited stranded airmen to safety.

Here are 27 accounts of courage, resourcefulness, ingenuity, tenacity, and occasional treachery to keep children of 9-14 entertained and amazed. Wisely, the author gives each subject enough space (five pages or so) to give a true flavour of his subjects' characters, lives, and achievements. I particularly enjoyed the adventures of American, Virginia Hall, and her wooden leg 'Cuthbert' and Claus Helberg, from Norway, who skied his way out of danger. Jeanne Rousseau played dim to her Nazi employers but alerted the British government to the threat of V1 and V2 missiles. Some stories are distinctly humorous: William Colepaugh seemed keener on splashing German cash than working for Berlin and one of Britain's most successful agents was a dead man!

The illustrations, done in the style of a Second World War era comic complement the text perfectly. It is a beautiful book. As for blending in, you do not have to. Josephine Baker, Alix D'Unienville and Noor Inayat Khan made their own mark as people of colour and... I should also mention a spy of six foot six called Roald. Dahl, that is.

Sorry, Tristan!

Katherine Wilson

Where to Go Wild in the British Isles: A Month-by-Month Guide to the Best Nature Experiences

pub. Dorling Kindersley

Having received this book as a PDF to review I cannot express strongly enough how eager I am to get my hands on a physical copy. Absolutely packed with information and the most stunning collection of photographs the book takes you month by month through the wilderness of the British Isles explaining just what to see when.

A comprehensive reference section featuring a regional directory and a huge index makes it easy for you to search specifically for exactly what you want to see or alternatively flick through the pages for inspiration. Do you, for example, know where to find an adder or the best spot for seeing seals, perhaps you want to wait for the best time of year to see boxing hares. Whatever your wildlife wish or question it will very likely be answered in the pages of this book.

With over 125 sights and wild places there really is something for everyone here, from whale watching to dragonfly hunting to the spring migration at Portland Bill, studying rocks and fossils at Lyme Bay or visiting an ancient Yew Forest, this book opens your eyes to the wonders of Britain. You could simply keep this on your coffee table immerse yourself in the book's pages, I for one have spent hours

poring over pictures and discovering so much I never previously knew, so beautiful are the images and so evocative is the text. However, it would be a real shame not to go and visit some of the wonderful places for real and experience the true beauty of our home in all its glory.

This book is an absolute must for all families!

Tracey Corner

Picture books

A Day by The Sea

Barbara Nascimbeni

A Pair of Pears and an Orange

Anna McGregor

Five Bears: A tale of friendship

Catherine Rayner

The Great Hamster Getaway

Lou Carter, illus. Magda Brol

I Am Angry

Michael Rosen, illus. Robert Starling

The Invention

Julia Hubery, illus. James Munro

Katerina Cruickshanks

Daniel Gray-Barnett

Milo's Monster

Tom Percival

The Missing Piece

Jordan Stephens, illus. Beth Suzanna

The Perfect Rock

Sarah Noble

Sid's Big Fib

Roo Parkin, illus. by Irina Avgustinovich

Too Heavy, Elephant

Tony Neal

What Do You See When You Look at A Tree?

Emma Carlisle

When Little Owl met Little Rabbit

Przemysław Wechterowicz, illus. Emilia Dziubak

The Worry Jar

Lou John, illus. Jenny Bloomfield

Junior books

21% Monster

P. J. Canning

Alex Neptune, Dragon Thief

David Owen

Alte Zachen: Old Things

Ziggy Hanaor, illus. Benjamin Phillips

Dead Good Detectives

Jenny McLachlan, illus. Chloe Dominique

The Dragon in the Bookshop

Ewa Jozefkowicz

Free Kid to Good Home

Hiroshi Ito

The Kingdom of NOTHING

Ronald Wohlman, illus. Dylan Hewitt

The Light Thieves

Helena Duggan

The Little Captain

Paul Biegel, illus. Carl Hollander

Mia and the Lightcasters

Janelle McCurdy, illus. Ana Latese

Neon's Secret Universe

Sibéal Pounder, illus. Sarah Warburton

Orla and the Wild Hunt

Anna Houghton, illus. David Dean

Rosie Raja: Churchill's Spy

Sufiya Ahmed

The Secrets of Cricket Karlsson

Kristina Sigunsdotter, trans. Julia Marshall,
illus. Ester Eriksson

The Stolen Prince of Cloudburst

Jaclyn Moriarty, illus. Karl James Mountford

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Adalyn Grace

Dogs of the Deadlands

Anthony McGowan, illus. Keith Robinson

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Grace Francis and Nadia Mendoza

Her Dark Wings

Melinda Salisbury

Hollow Fires

Samira Ahmed

Hurricane Summer

Asha Bromfield

The Key to You and Me

Jayne Robin Brown

The Last Whale

Chris Vick

The Many Half-Lived Lives of Sam Sylvester

Maya MacGregor

Running Out of Time

Simon Fox

The Silence That Binds Us

Joanna Ho

The Silver Chain

Jion Sheibani

Sisters of the Snake

Serena and Sasha Nanua

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Sara Barnard

These are the Words: fearless verse to find your voice

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Paul Ian Cross, illus. Steve Brown

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Wydawnictwo Dwie Siostry, trans. Zosia Krasodomska-Jones, illus. Piotr Socha

Britannica's Word of the Day: 366 Elevating Utterances to Stretch Your Cranium and Tickle Your Humerus

Patrick Kelly, Renee Kelly, and Sue Macy, illus. Josy Bloggs, Emily Cox, James Gibbs, and Liz Kay

British Museum: Secrets of the Dead

Matt Ralphs, illus. Gordy Wright

Bugs: Brain Bursts

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Where to Go Wild in the British Isles: A Month-by-Month Guide to the Best Nature Experiences