



Armadillo

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Reviews, news and more
from the world of children
and young adult's books

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Picture Book Reviews

The Adventures of Egg Box Dragon

Richard Adams, illus. Alex T. Smith, pub. Hodder Children's Books

Dragons can emerge from many places - some of them more unusual than others... With only an assortment of household objects to hand, Emma builds herself a small companion whose creation, though not as gruesome as that of Frankenstein's creature, is imaginative and intriguing. Following advice from the town's gardener, a normally silent fellow learned in his folklore, Emma puts Egg Box Dragon to bed under the moon and waits. It soon transpires that forces are at work in the night sky: the next day, a lot of footprints and a loud roaring fill the garden. How will everyone adjust?

In this tale from the creator of the much loved classic *Watership Down*, there is a fun blend of mischief and moral. Egg Box Dragon may be cheeky and take some getting used to, but Emma's family - and indeed the whole town - soon grow to embrace him. Richard Adams' imaginative story is intertwined with beautiful illustration, following a bright but naturalistic colour scheme full of foliage and finer details. For younger ones, the dragon's antics will prove eye catching, while the interesting figures of the townsfolk (themselves diverse and their occupations not conforming to rigid gender roles) provide lots of small touches that both adults and children can enjoy.

The action of the tale accelerates after Emma's discovery that Egg Box Dragon has a special talent: many different clients soon come seeking his help! One request in particular has high stakes; a theft must be tackled in the final scenes, which calls to mind echoes of Roald Dahl's *The BFG*. As a reminder to trust our abilities and preserve our own personalities, the ending of this story is both playful and uplifting - it may not be long before some Egg Box Dragons start appearing in your vicinity!

Jemima Breeds

Baabwaa and Wooliam

David Elliot, illus. Melissa Sweet, pub. Walker Books

Where do adventures come from? Baabwaa and Wooliam have certainly never given much thought to the matter before this story begins: these sheep are content at home getting on with their hobbies. But even though they won't be letting anyone tell them their lifestyle is boring (they like it and that's all that matters), they do admit to being vaguely curious about what an adventure might feel like. This curiosity leads to a spontaneous decision and they set out from their funky home - but the

journey gets off to a slow start, with no immediate excitement revealing itself. Their trip, however, still makes for hungry work, proving that lunch should always be on the agenda!

The illustrations for this story leave their pencil lines visible, adding lots of shading and texture that makes Baabwaa and Wooliam's world a partly naturalistic one, full of depth and movement. Among landscapes in paler pastel shades, many deeply coloured trees stand out, complimented by bright bursts of orange, pink and red from the sheep's accessories (they have great scarves and hats that make for a fun blend of animal and human), books and the occasional mushroom. It's like sneaking a look inside a personal sketchbook.

When a scary encounter reminds Baabwaa and Wooliam that not all sheep are what they seem, tensions run high and they must face an imposter. But stories turn out to be a powerful remedy in strained situations, and we are reminded of their value when the imposter reveals a secret. Soon, bargains are struck and an unlikely friendship develops, proving just as exciting as any fairytale adventure. The ups and downs of their new bond show that even when it's hard, you shouldn't have to change yourself to make a friendship work. And if you're ever stuck for an adventure, some of the best ones may be just around the corner...

Jemima Breeds

Balthazar the Great

Kirsten Sims, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

Balthazar the Great is such a bright and cheerful book, the reader almost expects it to burst into song, but it leads gently into a thoughtful and tender story of loss, courage and finally, joy.

Balthazar is the only violin playing polar bear in the world, until he is set free from his cage by animal rights activists, free to go home if he only knew where home was. Balthazar really misses his Grandpa, who gave him his first violin, but how can he find him? He sets off to look for Grandpa and home, waving goodbye to old friends and hoping to make new ones.

His search for home takes Balthazar to many places. At the water hole, there are zebras wearing sunglasses but, sadly, the animals are not friendly. Some days there are new friends, some days Balthazar feels so alone, he even begins to think about going back to the circus. A gorgeous illustration of a snowy mountain under a starry sky with a solitary Balthazar in the distance, shows his isolation.

Then just when Balthazar begins to give up, he sees a face he knows. His Grandpa! A joyful illustration shows him swimming through the icy water towards Grandpa and home. Party time! Balthazar and Grandpa play the violin together for their family and friends.

Balthazar the Great is a story that will prompt many questions about the rights of animals. Told in short sentences, the story is easy to follow and easy to remember, the text underlining the sympathetic illustrations. The circus tent on the title page is especially beautiful and I could see many children drawing these lovely illustrations for themselves.

Gwen Grant

Bonkers About Beetroot

Cath Jones, illus. Chris Jevons, pub. Maverick Arts Publishing

Bonkers About Beetroot is a big, bold picture book written by Cath Jones and brightly illustrated by Chris Jevons. With nobody coming to visit, Sunset Safari Park is doomed and something has to be done. Zebra is determined to save the park but ever cynical Penguin thinks he's wasting his time.

"Nobody comes because we're boring," says Penguin. But Zebra is still determined so the animals go in search of the missing visitors.

Although they don't find any visitors, Zebra has an idea. "Beetroot!" he yells... For some inexplicable reason, Zebra thinks that people are "crazy about beetroot" and is sure that if they grow the biggest beetroot in the world, people will all come to see it. Needless to say, Penguin thinks that this idea is "bonkers" - but Zebra tries anyway.

The animals make a huge manure mountain, plant their beetroot seeds, water them and watch them grow. They soon see that one beetroot is growing bigger than the others. In fact it grows so much that hundreds of visitors come to the safari park to see it. It seems that Zebra's plan has worked but the beetroot keeps on growing and before long it takes over the whole park so that there's no room for visitors anymore. Once again, something has to be done - this time, to get rid of the giant beetroot - and Zebra knows just what to do. And once again, Penguin thinks the idea is "bonkers!"

In *Bonkers About Beetroot*, Cath Jones has written a great story about the determination to succeed and achieve what you want despite the negative attitudes of people around you, and Chris Jevons's artwork really brings it to life. As with other picture books from Maverick, its size and distinctive square shape make it ideal for sharing with a little one by your side, but it will also be a good one to read aloud in class as children will love it - finding lots to laugh at along the way.

Damian Harvey

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Christmas Surprise!

Pub. Make Believe Ideas

I couldn't let the Winter/December issue pass us by without a couple of Christmas titles sprinkled in the mix of picture books and this delightful board book will bring hours of entertainment to little ones as they learn about the build up to a very special day.

With flaps galore to lift they will learn how to become more dextrous, how to interact with the book they are reading and hope to carefully open their presents on Christmas day (at least we can hope that they will)! Add to the mix the carefully rhyming text, the rhymes are in the black print and the other words in white which gives the reader a true pattern to follow and helps them learn about how words can blend and bounce together to make wonderful, playful sounds.

The bright pictures entice one to reach out and touch which is exactly what readers are meant to do and they engage the eyes and mind. Blending together in perfect harmony words, pictures and flaps make this a book to enjoy everyday this Winter in the lead up to a very special Christmas with possibly even more surprises to come. A perfect book for nursery, playgroup, toddlers and home environments.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Creature

Helen Bate, pub. Otter-Barry Books

A family of three unnamed children recount to the reader an encounter they had with an unnamed purple hairy creature that resembles a porcupine, which their cat, Alfie, brings into their home and despite several attempts to remove it, becomes their houseguest for a year. With similarities to Judith Kerr's *A Tiger Came to Tea* or David Walliams' *The Slightly Annoying Elephant*, this tale of an uninvited creature causing chaos in a domestic setting is amusing and opens up a set of intriguing questions – what is the creature? Why did it choose their house? What is the family scenario? Where does the creature go to when it leaves the house?

Written in rhyme, this is an intriguing story, which concludes with a surprising twist but unanswered questions remain and a proposition is declared to the reader that one day the creature might visit them too. The illustrations amplify the sense of mystery and intrigue to the story with their mixture of colourful elements fitted in amongst grey shadowy features. There are lots of delightful details to notice such as the flies that are always hovering around the creature as she* is described as being smelly or the cats peering through the window at the children's cat.

The illustrations also neatly move the story on throughout the yearlong visit and are very evocative of the seasons.

This is a thought-provoking, curious, and unusual story. I did wish that the creature had been named but maybe the fact that it isn't just as the children aren't adds to the mystery that Helen Bate's creates so skilfully.

*The twist at the end indicates that the creature is a she.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

Dragons: Father and Son

Alexandre Lacroix, illus. Ronan Badel, pub. Words & Pictures

What's a young lad to do when his father tells him he has to burn down a house in the local village in order to prove that he's a 'real' dragon? It might be tradition but Drake has only ever breathed fire to grill a small slug as a snack. Is making his father proud more important than doing the right thing?

This delightful story, written by French philosopher Alexandre Lacroix, is about finding the courage to be different. In it, Drake learns that, with a little kindness, a smidgeon of understanding and a large helping of barbecued trout (flame-grilled to perfection by himself), a small dragon can make friends in the unlikeliest of places. Full of humour and charm, this is a story you can really get your teeth (or claws) into and will be enjoyed by young and old dragons alike.

Badel's hilarious, detailed, illustrations are an absolute treat. Full of character, energy and wit, they perfectly convey the relationship between father and son. I had no idea that dragons could be so expressive! All in all, *Dragons: Father and Son* is everything you could possibly want in a picture book – I highly recommend it.

Abby Mellor

The Elephant in the Room

James Thorp, illus. Angus MacKinnon, pub. Templar Publishing

'It started with an "Oops!" and "Look out!" and a CRASH!' opens this delightful 'whodunnit' story, a tale that unravels step by step in flowing rhymes until the mystery of the broken china elephant that fell off the mantelpiece is resolved.

Father Giant's investigations follow the chain of events which involve his little son, a newt, a lady, a yak, a sofa, the sun and a storm, all playing a part in the rumpus.

The incidents leading to the crash are far-fetched and will delight every reader, but eventually it is a little girl who offers the explanation for all the chaos. The resolution is a happy one and all the characters join in a colourful parade splashing in muddy puddles.

This book is the first one produced by Thorp and MacKinnon in collaboration with a mainstream publisher, following two self-published books.

This volume is a striking hardback, whose font and illustrations, full of curvy lines and vibrant clashing colours, suggest an Art Nouveau influence to which the bright blocks of fluorescent orange add a twist, with a nod to the 1960s'-style graphics.

The setting is also delightfully reminiscent of a bygone era, with a grandfather clock and multiple portraits adorning an imposing hall, with chandeliers and Chinese vases furnishing the drawing room and a vintage car waiting in the drive. An array of details and lovely shapes wait to be discovered in every page adding enjoyment to the story.

A second book by this creative duo will be published in 2018 by Templar; we look forward to it.

Laura Brill

A note from the editor ... at the wonderful launch event, hosted by the duo's agent, Caroline Sheldon, in her London home, we were thrilled to meet the duo behind this creation, a duo who had the courage to create a book that is not normal with an agent and publisher who were prepared to take on a book that is not normal – all their words, I promise! They promised another title next year, in a similar style and equally inspired by personal events – The Boy who Knew Nothing – will be coming soon. In the meantime enjoy this title and know that at the event we bid for limited edition prints with all the money going to Beanstalk a charity helping children in schools by sending in readers to work with them one to one when they find group work challenging. A wonderful launch and a great cause, I hope we will be seeing more from this brave and courageous author illustrator pair.

His Royal Tinyness: A Terrible True Story

Sally Lloyd-Jones, illus. David Roberts, pub. Walker Books

Once upon a time there was a Happy Family...and the most beautifulest, cleverest, ever-so kindest Princess with long flowing wondrous hair. (In fact, actually, she is ME!).

His Royal Tinyness: A Terrible True Story is a wonderful fairy-tale'esque picture book that is hilarious from the first page, told from the perspective of a little girl who is madly jealous of her new baby brother. She tells the reader of her many trials and tribulations and how the rule of King Baby has ruined her life.

After breakfast the cruelly–mistreated Princess hardly even got a turn in the bathroom. But meanwhile...

BEHOLD His Royal Clean-and-Sparklyness (What a Smelly!) King Baby...

This book weaves in the problems of sibling rivalry with such observational grace and wit that it is first and foremost quite simply a great story. The words and pictures work together in glorious symbiosis, which is what makes a great picture book – the illustrations add to the text and create more humour by showing the reader another side of the story: what's not said. Perhaps life isn't quite as bad as 'the gentle girl (lovely in all her ways)' describes...

Illustrator, David Roberts gives us gorgeous muted colours and striking characters set in (it appears) the 1970s, which quite frankly fits the story to a T! Yes, the wicker chair looks like a throne and the long flowing maxi dresses look rather royal, and so the illustrations work their magic alongside Sally Lloyd Jones' spot on text: these two should work together more!

Buy this for a fun story, or to help with the problems that a New Ruler in the house can bring – either way, it's a great picture book to read aloud with your child and have fun spotting the contrasting compliments of text and picture. We loved it.

Anja Stobbart

Home Sweet Home

Mia Cassany, illus. Paula Blumen, pub. Frances Lincoln

Using domestic pets – dogs, cats and a tortoise, depending on location and culture – to voice the descriptions, Mia Cassany and Paula Blumen take KS1 readers on a trip to look at a variety of homes in countries around the globe.

Originally published in Spain, it's a small sample of countries, with Spain – Mia Cassany and Paula Blumen's home country – the US, France and the Netherlands qualifying for images of several different homes. On the other hand, Canada, Myanmar, China, Mexico, Japan, Italy, Iceland, the UK, only rate a single image apiece. This is a pity, as we get a very one-sided view of these countries, where we see only very specific locations, for example (super expensive) central London for the UK. Not many children and their pets walk to school every day beside the Thames! Mia Cassany's brief descriptive passages are therefore likely to give readers the impression that everywhere in the single-

image countries looks alike, whereas the more extensively covered countries have variation in the places, the housing and the living experience. Overwhelmingly the chosen locations are urban, often major cities, and, except for Myanmar we get no idea of how the rest of the population lives.

Paula Blumen's colourful, illustrations are full of detail, which adds a lot of information which couldn't be covered in the few lines of written description. There's always a danger, however, that such a profusion of detail can occasionally become slightly daunting to the reader, and in one or two spreads it becomes quite hard to get an overall view of the household being described.

The idea behind this book is admirable, and this may remind those (much) older readers sharing it of Richard Scarry's many books, which took their audience all over the world in far greater detail and depth. I wish author and illustrator of *Home Sweet Home* had defined its parameters more specifically to offer a wider spectrum of life experience in a smaller number of locations. Nevertheless, it's an attractive, well-produced hardback, which will certainly engage children, particularly because of the use of pets to describe the locations and way of living in different countries.

Bridget Carrington

Little Bear's Big Adventure

Sarah Philips, illus. Claire Fennell, pub. Make Believe Ideas

Did you know that bears are meant to hibernate ALL winter? Well this little bear didn't know and he has woken up too early. This could be a bad thing, he could be very tired or it could be a very good thing and he could have a very exciting time in the snow ... yes snow. The pages of this book are filled with this wintry delight and it will delight the children who read and share this book as much as delights bear and his friends when they get to play lots of games in it.

Not only will children have the opportunity to share in an adventure, in the snow and the woods, they will discover how much fun it is to make friends and learn a new song. It is always lovely to sing songs at this time of year, most often carols, so why not introduce a new one and encourage your young readers to remember it and sing along each time they think of and read the book?

With warm and gentle illustration that truly captures the mood of the text, see bears face as he feels just a little scared, turn into something happier as he sings his song and feels more confident, hear the crunch of his paws in the deep snow. A true wintry delight to share snuggled up in the warm whilst we wait to see if there will be any adventures awaiting us in the snow this year.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Night Box

Louise Grieg, illus. Ashling Lindsay, pub. Egmont

When Max turns a magical key and opens *The Night Box*, darkness comes out and day goes to sleep. While Max sleeps, the night comes to life – showing its beauty and its magic. The fox, the badger, the mole and the owl all come out to play, while night wraps itself around those who sleep. However, night gets sleepy too and when night falls asleep, it is time for Day to take over and bring light to the world again.

Louise Grieg is a poet based in Aberdeen. She won the inaugural Children's Poetry Prize organised by The Caterpillar and has been joint winner of the Manchester Writing for Children Prize. She was also a runner-up in the Chicken House Publishing 'Big Idea' competition in 2014.

Ashling Lindsay is an illustrator and animation director from Belfast. She was shortlisted for the AOI Illustration Awards two years running and for the AOI Serco Prize for Illustration.

This is an absolutely delightful bedtime story, exploring the magical nature of night-time. Beautifully poetic, it has a lyrical quality that gently sweeps the story along, offering a child that might be scared of the dark a feeling of safety and reassurance. The illustrations are so well drawn, providing a wonderful contrast between the light of day and the subtlety of the night's darkness. The illustrations move between expansive double page spreads to single pages and smaller details capturing the mood and feel of the text superbly.

Age suitability: 3+

Annie Everall

Oh No! Where Did Walter Go?

Joanna Boyle, pub. Templar Books

Imagine *Where's Wally* - but with a story. And with illustrations which don't fry your brain. Joanna Boyle might have been nodding in the direction of the cult classic when she wrote this, although the similarities end with getting the reader to search for a Walter (or a Wally).

In this case, Walter is a green parakeet. He is Olive's best friend and sidekick in their many, imaginary adventures. They are inseparable – until the day that a game of hide and seek goes very wrong. When Walter disappears, the adventure begins for real.

Luckily, all that make-believe comes in handy and Olive can deploy her skills of detection as she sets out into the city to track Walter down. She can also make use of her pirate's voice and her acrobatic

skills. All that playing was certainly time well-spent. The city is a noisy, crazy place but Olive is well-prepared. When the clues lead her to a big, empty park, the mood changes. It's a formidable place for a small person but she draws upon the derring-do she has cultivated as an explorer and the search continues.

All the time that Olive is looking for him, Walter is tantalisingly close. If it were the reader on his trail, they'd spot glimpses of him in all sorts of strange places, looking for Olive. But being a leafy-green coloured parakeet, he is very well camouflaged. Happily, of course, they do manage to rendezvous and rescue each other.

This beautifully illustrated book is lovely for small, eagle-eyed readers to participate in. From a bustling Where's Wally-ish street scene to the double spread of the park gates opening to reveal a very gloomy, uninviting park, to a final gallery recapping scenes Walter has appeared in, there is huge visual variety – turning the page is excitingly unpredictable. And, very importantly, it's nice and lively to read out loud, too.

Jackie Spink

One House for All

Inese Zandere, illus. Juris Petraskevics, adpt. Lawrence Schimel, pub. Book Island

Raven, Crayfish and Horse are friends. Though each wants to marry and have a family, they all agree they still want to still live close to one another. So they design a dream home together. Raven plans treetops, but horse children can't climb branches. Crayfish wants a passage leading into the water, but Raven's wife can't swim. Horse dreams of acres of grass, but Crayfish can't run around a meadow. What can they do? Maybe they can't live together after all?

The animals' solution, to build a three-story house, with a floor for each family, offers readers a friendly example of how to value and meet your own needs, whilst also valuing and meeting the needs of others. The themes of co-existence and collaboration, and respecting difference, are valuable teachings in today's world.

Juris Petraskevics' illustrations have a wonderful dream-like quality – flowing shapes of trees and rivers, fish and flowers, glow in rich orange-reds, warm yellow-golds and deep blue-greens.

Perfectly partnered, Inese Zandere's text has a poetic quality – it is distilled and rhythmic, and highlighted with heart-warming moments.

An unusual book, full of wonders.

Dawn Casey

Pandora

Victoria Turnbull, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

The first illustration in *Pandora* is of a refuse heap where old and broken things lie abandoned. In the middle of all this desolation is Pandora, a little fox, who saves and repairs what she can. When we meet her, she is cradling a stuffed, toy dog, a derelict St. Bernard, also known for saving the lost.

Living amongst giant heaps of rubbish, Pandora brings a bright spirit of hope and practicality to her broken world, building a home out of what has been discarded, doing what she can to create beauty and wholeness in the wilderness around her.

She is lonely, however, until an unexpected visitor, an injured bird, arrives. Although unsure how to help, through care and kindness Pandora brings her visitor back to health. Loneliness becomes a memory until the bird leaves and Pandora is by herself again. Gifts brought by her visitor, however, ensure she is not alone for long.

Every line and illustration in this gentle story is full of kindness, care and compassion. The clear, simple language together with the unthreatening clarity of the lovely pictures will ensure that not only will a child understand *PANDORA*, it will also prompt questions. This little fox is the friend this broken world urgently needs.

The subdued and beautiful illustrations demand every page be given a close and loving examination. The illustration of the empty nest may be empty of a bird but I'm sure any child will point out how full it is of other things.

Pandora is a tender, accessible story with underlying environmental muscle.

Gwen Grant

Reena's Rainbow

Dee White, illus. Tracie Grimwood, pub. EK Books, Australia

This picture book is about Reena, for whom sounds are scattered and scrambled and make no sense, but she can see very well.

"She couldn't hear the wind whistling through the trees, but she saw the leaves shimmer and dance in the breeze."

She finds a brown dog in the park, and they both join in with the other children's games. Reena is very good at seeking for Hide and Seek, but she hides too well, and doesn't hear when the children call her, so they think she has gone home: she feels abandoned, and upset.

Mum explains that we are all different, like the colours of the rainbow, but work well together as one. Neither Reena nor the brown dog feel that they belong, until Reena's quick action in preventing an accident at the park saves Thomas from being hurt, however as dog had helped to knock Thomas out of the way he is then injured himself. These actions help Reena realize that dog belongs with her, and dog in turn makes sure that Reena is never left behind again. Reena and dog become "part of the rainbow" and the last page shows the children doing some signing.

Maybe it is easier to just take on a stray dog in Australia, but British children might wonder about that aspect of the story. It is good to have a positive story about living with a hearing problem, but it felt somewhat laboured, and the illustrations could be stronger.

Diana Barnes

Rooster Wore Skinny Jeans

Jessie Miller, illus. Barbara Bakos, pub. Maverick Arts Publishing

Rooster is a flamboyant follower of fashion. When the skinny jeans that he's ordered online arrive, he marvels at the indigo shade, the gold stitching and the flattering style. He dons them immediately and struts out to show them off. But his confident expectation that his purchase will amaze and impress his farmyard companions is misplaced. They jeer and howl with laughter. Mortified, Rooster retreats to the barn and hides away in shame. Then he catches sight of himself in a mirror.

What's not to love? Are they being sarcastic?
These jeans are amazing: my bum looks fantastic!

Deciding he can manage without the other animals' approval, he flies to the top of the barn.
He brushed off all feelings of worry and doubt,
Then he cockled and doodled and dooded with a shout!

Suddenly he finds himself admired for his nerve and his ability to go his own way. Rooster beams. As the day comes to an end, he sits at his computer and pre-orders a gold sequined vest.

This is a lovely picture book that cheerfully smashes gender stereotypes. What a delightful protagonist Rooster is, and what important messages his return to confidence and pride gives, in

particular that there is nothing wrong in being different; that everyone can be special in their own way.

The rhyming text is funny and clever, and begs to be read aloud. The illustrations are wonderfully colourful and exuberant and complement the words perfectly. Highly recommended for nurseries, classrooms and libraries and for family use.

Anne Harding

The Shepherd Boy and the Christmas Gifts

Aly Hilberts, illus. Sanne Duff, pub. Floris Books

Nathan longs to be a shepherd like his father. Out on the hillside with the sheep, he collects scraps of wool, bits of stick and handfuls of earth. He crafts them into little figures; a clay bird, a woollen angel...

His father tells him he mustn't waste his time with play-things, he must keep watch over the sheep. His father is angry when, one day, Nathan is distracted whilst whittling, and one of the sheep wanders away.

But when, one night, the sky blazes with light, and a voice announces a new king born in Bethlehem, Nathan knows just what to do. He leads the shepherds to where a bright star shines over a stable. Inside is the baby, and Nathan has the perfect gifts to give.

The character of the shepherd boy makes this simple re-telling of the nativity story easy for young children to relate to. The woollen angel that Nathan crafts is simple to make. This book would make a sweet Christmas gift alongside a hand-made woollen angel. (Or, for older children, alongside an angel-making kit; including white wool, gold thread and instructions.)

Instructions to make a woollen angel are freely available online – click here for one such example: <http://www.educator101.com.au/fun/christmas/how-to-make-fairy-wool-dolls-christmas-tree-angel/>

Dawn Casey

Something's Fishy

Jean Gourounas, pub. Phaidon

This picture book for children aged 3-6 is a very nice production on thick textured paper, and the illustrations are stylish too. A very simply drawn cartoon penguin is fishing (with a rod and line) in a

hole in the ice, and she remains grumpily the same in that exact place on the double-page spread for most of the book. Other creatures, equally simply drawn, appear one by one around her, and ask her what she's doing, is she fishing? - the kind of obvious questions that people do tend to ask.

There is an arctic hare, a walrus... "I think she's fishing", a seal, a moose, finally an Inuit, and they don't understand, or they're baffled or perplexed or flummoxed that the fish aren't biting. Finally a polar bear appears, and asks what she put on the hook. "Some cake". "Who wouldn't want a bite of cake?"

They decide that something's fishy- and then penguin's eye changes just a little, she hisses "Shhh - I hear something", and the next page shows what's happening underneath the hole. Lots of fish in birthday hats are greeting the fish whose birthday it evidently is: "Surprise!" The pink and yellow sponge cake is being saved just for this one fish.

It's a daft idea, but a very charming story, and the repetitive questions of the animals are fun. Jean Gourounas has written and illustrated 15 children's books in French, but this is his first story in English, and children will certainly learn a few alternative and expressive words about not understanding. Feathery snowflakes are falling on every page, and the stylized animals are cleverly drawn: there is a lot of character in the illustrations as some animals put paws on hips in exasperation.

Diana Barnes

Twinkle, Twinkle, ABC

Barney Saltzberg , illus. Fred Benaglia, pub. Phaidon

This book is a clever mash up of two classic songs for children: *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* and *the Alphabet Song* (aka the ABCs) which I can foresee being a great activity for kids and parents. It's a unique and interactive way to make learning the ABCs more fun, and a good bed time story to support any day time learning.

The rhymes used throughout are clever and fit it well with the original tune, and there are lots of actions in the text that children can act out. The classic rhythm of *Twinkle, Twinkle* is slightly muddled at times, particularly at the start, so when reading aloud it is important to take it slow to get the rhythms right.

The illustrations have a very appealing colour palette, and the way the letters are visually integrated into the text is very natural looking. One aspect of the book I really liked was the fact that the final pages wind down to sleepy time, using the Z very appropriately. I can see parents greatly appreciating this aspect as they come to the end of story time and want their children to wind down fully. There is

also a musical score to *Twinkle, Twinkle* with the altered lyrics for children to learn (one whatever instrument they want – likely be a recorder {you poor parents!}). This is yet another unique element to the book that bolsters its inherent musical feel and not something I’ve not seen in many children’s books before.

Great for parents wanting to find other ways of making learning the ABCs fun and interactive. Also a great night time, wind down read overall.

Rachel Kennedy

When I Grow Up

Tim Minchin, illus. Steve Antony, pub. Simon & Schuster

Is the best thing about being a grown up being smart enough to answer all the questions? Maybe it’s being tall enough to climb the trees you get to climb when you’re grown up? Or is the best thing being able to eat treats every day? Inspired by the hit song from ‘*Matilda The Musical*’, *When I Grow Up*, considers adulthood through the optimistic, rose-tinted goggles of childhood.

As you’d expect Minchin’s words are a delight; full of fun they convey the curiosity that comes with a carefree childhood perfectly. Fans of ‘*Matilda*’ will love the references to the song and Minchin’s humorous take on adult (and child) ‘hood.

Steve Antony’s illustrations have just the right amount of warmth and whimsy to bring the children’s daydreams to life. The children are drawn in black and white which makes the colourful world of their imaginations fizz and pop on the page. As delicious as eating sweets on the way to work and watching TV until your eyes go square, this book will be adored by children and adults alike.

Abby Mellor

Witchfairy

Brigitte Minne, illus. Carll Cneut, trans. Laura Watkinson, pub. Book Island

Rosemary is a fairy, with a pink dress and a pink hat. For her birthday, Rosemary would like a pair of roller skates, or a boat, but her mum gives her a magic wand. “What if you fall and have a nosebleed?...Your dress will get all dirty... your hat will be a mess. No, no, no.”

Rosemary is fed up of being sweet and neat and dull. She would rather be a witch, and get nice and dirty, and shout and scream with laughter. “A witch?” cries her mother. “Shame on you!”

But Rosemary is not ashamed. She packs her bags and flies off to the witches' woods. She builds a treehouse and a boat, and whizzes through the trees on roller-skates. The witches give her a broomstick, and cheer her on. "Go on! Jump! You can do it!"

Rosemary crashes to the ground. She tries again, for an hour. Then swoops high over the witches' hats, back home. But her mother barks "I don't want a stinking witch for a daughter," and Rosemary flies away again, back to the woods.

Rosemary's mum is sad and lonely – she ventures to the witches' wood. She sails a boat with her daughter, and Rosemary teaches her how to roller-skate. So now, sometimes Rosemary is a fairy, and sometimes she is a witch – she's a very happy witchfairy.

Cnutt, the Flemish illustrator, uses a striking palette of pinks and reds to match Rosemary's dress in her fairy home, and contrasting dark greys and greens in the witches' woods, all applied in thickly textured layers.

This tale has as much to say to parents as it does to children, with its message of acceptance, and the witches' wisdom in trusting and encouraging Rosemary, rather than holding her back with fear and anxiety. Its resolution, with Rosemary choosing to be a 'witchfairy' provides an empowering model of being yourself.

Dawn Casey

The Wolf, The Duck & The Mouse

Mac Barnett, illus. Jon Klassen, pub. Walker Books

The Wolf, The Duck and The Mouse is yet another fabulous offering from the masterful, award-winning author-illustrator combination of Mac Barnett and Jon Klassen.

Early one morning a mouse meets a wolf in the woods – and is instantly gobbled up! This unusual opening sets the scene for an equally surprising modern tale, set in the wolf's stomach. The mouse fears it is the end ("oh woe!"), but instead he encounters a duck, who having also been scoffed by the wolf, is living a great life in the wolf's belly; "I may have been swallowed, but I have no intention of being eaten".

A friendship bond develops between the mouse and the duck, who decide that living inside the wolf is the best place to be as it's nice and safe. There are tablecloths and candles, plus plenty of delicious food for them to prepare and share. Barnett's humorous, yet quaintly old-fashioned text (a 'flagon' of wine, 'oh woe') and Klassen's wonderful illustrations ensure that this will be a story that will be much loved by children. They will delight in exploring the possibilities of what you can find inside a wolf's

stomach and learn why wolves really howl at the moon (“Oh woe! Oh woe!”). The story can also be used to illustrate the idea of making the best of one’s situation, no matter the circumstances.

The Wolf, The Duck and The Mouse is a fairytale-esque picture book which is sure to become a classic. Perfect for reading aloud, adults will love this just as much as children (maybe even a little bit more...).

Sasha Roth

Words And Your Heart

Author & illustrator: Kate Jane Neal, pub. Simon & Schuster

This picture book, written and illustrated by Kate Jane Neal, is all about words and feelings, and in particular the power of words and the importance they play in our relationships with those around us.

The delightful illustrations are deceptively simple but they are all the more powerful for it – perfectly and subtly conveying the character’s emotions. The subtitle on the cover, encapsulated in a little heart, “let’s make the world a happier place!” says it all. And this is further backed up by the opening words of the book. “This book is about your heart. The little bit inside of you that make you, you!”

And later, about the hearts and feelings of others “the little bit inside them that makes them, them!” The book shows how words can make a person happy when they are sad, pick them up and give strength when it’s needed, and equally how they can hurt and wound. Words can be used to describe things around us and are so powerful that they can change can change the way our heart’s feel.

This book deserves a place in every primary school classroom – on a daily basis, a difficult and highly charged emotional place. It’s perfect to help and encourage children to think carefully about the words that they use and to help them understand and think about their power.

Vicky Harvey

Yoga Babies

Fearne Cotton, illus. Sheena Dempsey, pub. Andersen Press

In the introduction to this book, Fearne explains that Yoga is a fun activity with lots of benefits and can be enjoyed by the whole family. Importantly, she also points out that while she loves doing yoga with her children, she isn’t a yoga instructor, however, the text and illustrations in the book have been approved by a qualified instructor. “It’s not a ‘How-to’ guide. Baby yoga is something fun for you to do with your kids.”

The book itself, written using a simple but effective rhyme , has a nice rhythm as the brightly coloured pages introduce the reader to parents and children from different cultures and backgrounds – all having fun sharing simple yoga exercises. “Maya’s made a clever bridge, see how she’s arched her back. Who’s pushed his car right under her? That’s cheeky brother Jack.”

This picture books reads aloud well and the illustrations are bright and fun - ensuring that children will be happy to have it read to them many times. The yoga poses are clear and easy to follow and copy – they are also usefully detailed again on the endpaper, making each one easy to find.

A good fun book to share and ideal for introducing simple yoga poses to parents and their young children.

Vicky Harvey

Junior Book Reviews

The Accidental Father Christmas

Tom McLaughlin, Oxford Children's Books

With his secret notebook, a knowledge of tripwires and a skill for sneaking, Ben may sound like a shifty character; but often he's just out to get a midnight snack! Indeed, being nimble and perceptive is no bad thing, especially this Christmas Eve - his skills have uses in ways that he never predicted...

Ben's Christmas list to Santa is always the same: he wants his Dad to spend more time at home. But year after year Santa keeps failing to deliver. Full of doubt and keen for answers, Ben sets out to try and trap Santa - but complications come thick and fast when this plan costs Santa his memory. Suddenly, Ben's taking the reins (in more ways than one) and Christmas looks set to collapse. Will bitterness spread among millions of children, left ignored and feeling deflated?

A confused Santa may make for amusing antics, but it's not all laughs for Ben: contending with a late night journey to Buckingham Palace, some nosy policemen and curious tourists, it takes a lot to get Santa through this dilemma. All the while, clocks are ticking and soon helicopters are in the mix too, when an army unit (led by the mysterious 'Number One') mistake Santa's sleigh for UFO activity. Some speedy (and slightly terrifying!) sleigh rides ensue as Santa struggles to regain his memories. With so many presents remaining undelivered, Ben's not heading home anytime soon; rigorous training awaits him in the North Pole, where he discovers that the Elves working with Santa are much fiercer than expected!

Indeed, Santa's line of work turns out to carry perils (and laughs) of its own. Is Ben up to the task? He has the tricks of the trade on his side after Santa reveals some of his secrets (as well as his eventful past), but chaos is never far behind them. Mixing lots of witty dialogue with some moving memories and troubled histories makes for an exciting and emotional adventure. And Ben might just have a few more surprises coming his way on Christmas morning...

Jemima Breeds

Amelia Fang and the Barbaric Ball

Laura Ellen Anderson, Egmont

This first title in Anderson's debut series as author-illustrator surprised me. Initially, judging a book by its cover, I thought this was just going to be another slightly amusing take on vampire children encountering human society and be full of puns and the usual Halloween-esque details inspired by

The Adams Family and the like. Yes, there is this (however, here it is not humans they meet), but there is also a lot more originality than expected.

Amelia Fang is a vampire aged about eight and lives in Nocturnia: a 'city in the Kingdom of the Dark'. One of the first doublepages of the book shows a map of the land with its Frogleg Falls, Petrified Forest, and Catacomb Academy. The other is a gallery of Amelia's friends and family which include her countess mother whose eyes frequently fall out, her crossword-loving, slightly absent father, ghost butler, pet pumpkin, and best friends Florence – a rare breed of yeti and Grimaldi – a Grim Reaper. The Barbaric Ball of the title is a Fang family tradition that Amelia usually hates but this year is different as she is given the job of looking after Prince Tangine, the son of King Vlad, who have both been recluses since the unfortunate death of their mother/wife who was eaten by a fairy.

It is the introduction of this murderous fairy that creates such a sense of originality; this is because the inhabitants of Nocturnia are terrified of their neighbours from the Kingdom of the Light, which is where the fairies live with other glitter-loving creatures such as unicorns, and angel-kittens. It is this clash between the two realms which explains why King Vlad has been a recluse, why his son is so spoilt and looked after by a group of mummies who do his every bidding, teaches Amelia and her friends to not believe every prejudicial thing they hear, and neatly leads into her next adventure for the second title in the series.

The author has substantially illustrated the book with heavy black images that bleed off the pages, decorative borders and other embellishments which are all interwoven with the text greatly building on the slightly anarchic atmosphere of the story. It is also unusual in having an orange edging to the pages which makes the physical object of the book more intriguing than its traditionally-looking counterparts.

I enjoyed this story more than I thought I would and think it could be a good class read and even a talking point for what one finds scary another finds normal and societal prejudices, which I think are themes which Anderson will develop more in her further instalments of Amelia Fang.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

Begone the Raggedy Witches

Celine Kiernan, illus. Victoria Semykina, pub. Walker Books

In the first book of a trilogy, *Begone the Raggedy Witches*, Celine Kiernan brings us magic, intrigue and adventure. Mup, the main character is a young girl whose father works on an oil rig. She lives with her Mam, brother Tipper and dog Badger. On their way back from the hospital after visiting her aunt (who is dying), she notices some unusual happenings. Witches appear to be flying around the car and she feels very uncomfortable. She doesn't let her Mam know, but waits until she gets home

where her aunt appears to her as a ghost. She explains what she has seen to her aunt and this is very worrying. The witches have come to take her Mam but she only decides to follow them when she finds out that her husband, Mup's father, has been kidnapped.

Packing up, they head to the border and an enchanted world to rescue him, along with aunty who is floating around trying to protect them.

When they finally enter Witches Borough, they find a world of crows that rhyme, cats that talk and magic that is forbidden. It is ruled by a nasty queen who is Mup's grandmother and the raggedy witches.

They embark on the journey to find her father and bring him back home but there are obstacles in the way; dark magic that tries to stop them; people who give up their lives to save others and an orphan who eventually finds a place where he belongs.

Mup finds her true self and by fighting the queen and the dark magic, endeavors to bring peace and tranquility once again to Witches borough.

"Even if they can save her father, Mup knows that nothing will ever be the same again."

Helen Finch

The Boy with One Name

J. R. Wallis, pub. Simon & Schuster

Jones (the boy with one name) is on a mission in the dead of night with his master, Maitland. This is not unusual for them – they hunt down the monsters and evil spirits that, unknown to normal mortals, inhabit the world. What is unusual is that this night should mark the start of Jones' journey from apprentice to Badlander via the mysterious process known as the Commencement, a journey Jones is very reluctant to make – all he wants is the normal life he has never had, with parents, school and a home. The mission does not go well, Maitland is killed and Jones is left to deal with Ruby, on the run from yet another set of foster parents, who has witnessed the whole thing.

Ruby, once she gets over her initial shock and horror, is as fascinated with Jones' extraordinary life as he is with her ordinary one and she would give anything to be the Badlander that Jones is trying to avoid becoming. They make a deal that Ruby will help Jones navigate his way round the mortal world and find his parents, if he teaches her how to use magic (something that girls do not do in this parallel existence). Little do either of them realise how fraught and dangerous this deal will prove to be.

This story captures the reader's attention from the first paragraph and very quickly we meet Jones, Maitland, Ruby and the moon-bathing ogre who changes all their lives. Maitland and the ogre are dead by the end of the first chapter, leaving Jones and Ruby adrift in a world full of monsters, witches and imps of all descriptions. There are many incidents of confrontation with these creatures as Jones and Ruby search for his parents and then for the witch who has enslaved them. Magic mirrors and potions are all tools to be used in battles against the forces of evil and there is much cutting off of heads and regenerating skulls to deal with.

Central to the story is the relationship between the two main characters, both brave and resourceful but wanting completely different things. From their initial accidental meeting, through mutual suspicion to trust and true friendship, the reader follows their adventures as they take on demons of all descriptions. Ruby defies all the rules of the Ordnung to become a female Badlander and Jones finds both his parents and a first name but the last sentence of the book suggests he cannot completely leave the past behind.

With two likeable main characters, magic, mystery and mayhem, this book will appeal to confident readers in search of a fast-paced fantasy adventure story. J. R. Wallis has constructed parallel worlds, including a helpful glossary of Badlander terms; the normal world that Jones is so desperate to belong to and Ruby equally desperate to leave, and the Badlands where the likes of Maitland and his apprentice do constant battle to keep monsters and ogres at bay.

June Hughes

The Creakers

Tom Fletcher, illus. Shane Devries, pub. Penguin Random House

Strange things are happening in the town of Whiffington and when Lucy Dungston and all the other children wake up to find that the adults have disappeared it takes a turn for the worse. While most of the children relish their freedom, Lucy knows that they need the adults to return, but where are they and how can the children bring them home? Added to this there are strange noises coming from under beds, what is causing it and does it have any link to the disappearing parents? Lucy and her friends have to use all their ingenuity to solve the mysteries and get life back to normal.

This is the second 'middle grade' novel written by this author and despite the discussions over celebrity authors I found it a very enjoyable read. Lucy is a really sympathetic character and I loved the way that she was willing to really fight for her family. The illustrations by Shane Devries are superb and add so much to the book; the variation in size and scale really brings more life to the whole story and adds a sense of fun. Despite being full of humour this story also has a lot of lessons that we should learn about the importance of family, the environment and how we get rid of our rubbish. Overall a great read with potential for classroom use.

Margaret Pemberton

The Doldrums

Nicholas Gannon, pub. HarperCollins

This is a book for those who already revel in Dahl or Selznick's brand of slightly off-the-wall humour, and are therefore prospective fans of the 13-volume epic *A Series of Unfortunate Events*!

Eleven-year-old Archer B. Helmsley wants an adventure. His grandparents were famous explorers ... until they got stuck on an iceberg. Now Archer's dictatorial mother barely lets him out of the house, as if that would stop a true Helmsley. Archer enlists Adélaïde – the new girl at school who, according to rumour, lost her leg to a crocodile – and Oliver – the rather timid boy next door – to help him rescue his grandparents. As someone who regularly talks to the many stuffed animals that the Helmsley grandparents brought back, and which now adorn the rambling pile that is Helmsley House, Archer is a little out of the ordinary, and his experiences are mainly unfortunate, usually for him, but often for those around him too.

First published in the US in 2015, *The Doldrums* series has now made it to the UK, where a further volume (*The Doldrums and the Helmsley Curse*) also now appears. The first book describes the friendship which develops between three very different children, and the plans which they make to escape from their predictable and boring parent-and-school defined lives in search of a wider world of adventure.

Archer is accident-prone, and not infrequently the cause of accidents to his friends, but this rarely deters the three as their relationships develop. Gannon's adults are frequently weird, often unpleasant and sometimes malicious, but there is the odd understanding and helpful one, who sees beyond the rumours which spread among those who are judgemental without knowing the real facts.

Woven into the bizarre scenario of Archer's life are truths about friendship, families and the fickle nature of life. Unfortunately for us the UK publication has omitted the colour that the original US edition illustrations had, but at least we still have the black and white versions of Gannon's excellent graphic work which perfectly depicts Archer's existence.

Hopefully this is the start of an unmissable series, so don't miss it!

Bridget Carrington

Eloise Undercover

Sarah Baker, pub. Catnip Books

Eloise Sophie Boudin is aged twelve in Nazi-occupied France. She loves reading detective novels. Her favourite series Monsieur X. Eloise understands that her mother has died. She lives with her widower father and Amma, her father's housekeeper and Eloise's carer. Her two friends are Albert and Maddie, whose family is of traveller origin. Maddie goes missing. Next Eloise's beloved father fails to return from work. The book becomes a quest. Whatever she needs to do, Eloise is determined to find her father and her missing friend.

This is a thrilling book to read. The pace is swift and unfaltering. The chapters are short and nearly all of them end with a cliff-hanger. The atmosphere of war-torn France, barriers of uncertainty and suspicion between fellow-citizens – who is a secret collaborator and who is a genuine resister? - together with hatred of the occupying force, all this is depicted with frightening intensity. Much of what actually happened between 1939 and 1945 might too easily be judged unsuitable for the eyes of pre-teen readers. Baker's book excludes nothing. The war is there in all its horrendous reality. Yet at the same time the book is infused with the hope and expectation of deliverance to come.

A note from the editor who just wants to add that she too loved this book and the yummy macarons that accompanied the proof version she was sent, they were the perfect accompaniment o the book and I would highly recommend reading it with some by your side to really get you into the French mood!

Rebecca Butler

Fairy Tales

Hilary McKay, Sarah Gibb, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

In Hilary McKay's *Fairy Tales* you will find ten imaginative retellings of traditional fairy tales which were her favourites from childhood. These include 'Rapunzel', 'Cinderella', 'The Princess and Pea', 'Rumpelstiltskin', 'Red Riding Hood' and 'Snow White'. Although there are signs of the original stories that we know and love, McKay injects humour and even some sarcasm from the characters to make this a truly fascinating collection. As with most fairy tales there are morals hidden in the background and this collection doesn't disappoint.

"You can't leave a parcel on a doorstep for long. Not if it's alive. So they took it in, the innkeeper and his wife, and they brushed off the frost and unknotted the string, unfolded the shabby brown blanket, and there was a baby."

Without giving too much away, the characters come alive with brilliant descriptive narrative; you have Little Red Riding Hood and her Gran as true heroes; Diamond, a very clever pig; a princess and a maid jumping on the bed to find out what was keeping them awake and many more...

These are truly inspirational stories of traditional meeting the magical. For bedtime or pastime, this is a book that you will have trouble putting down. Escaping to far-off places, meeting a Prince who is less than Charming or a Fairy Godmother who grants wishes. Suitable for confident readers or those who love being read to, it is a must for all those who love escaping into a magical world; even those adults among us.

Helen Finch

I Swapped my Brother on the Internet

Jo Simmons, illus. Nathan Reed, pub. Bloomsbury

Nine-year-old Jonny is fed up with his older brother Ted teasing him, flicking his ear, calling him names, and worst of all, trying to get him to touch the Hanging Pants of Doom. But then he discovers SiblingSwap.com...

A new brother. A better brother. A brother who didn't put salt in your orange squash, who didn't call you a human sloth, who didn't burp in your ear. That kind of brother.

Jonny had to try it. He could always return the new brother if things didn't work out. It was a no-brainer.

He clicked on the application form.

What could go wrong?

Of course, it all goes wrong. The replacement siblings the website sends are not exactly what Jonny had in mind, and sometimes—not even human. It's a shame that the identity of the first three brothers are mentioned in the blurb, this is a bit of a plot-spoiler and I think it would be more entertaining to encounter them without knowing they're coming.

Eventually Johnny realizes that Ted wasn't so bad after all, but will he ever be able to get him back? And who are the mysterious people behind the Sibling Swap website?

I Swapped my Brother on the Internet is an enjoyable, inventive read with some hilarious moments that will make the kids laugh out loud, (e.g. the Hanging Pants of Doom!) It's also a brilliant, attention-grabbing title—any child with a brother or sister would be intrigued by the concept and

would probably relate to Jonny's sibling woes. (My daughter loved the book but my son was rather concerned when he saw her reading it.) Fans of Tom Gates will appreciate the zany, comic-book-style illustrations by Nathan Reed, and it's also a great book for reluctant readers as it is funny, fast-paced and engaging.

For any child who considers following Jonny's example, the website itself, www.SiblingSwap.com, takes you to a page on the Bloomsbury site where you can download an *I Swapped my Brother on the Internet* activity pack and read an extract from the book.

Rebecca Rouillard

Jack Fortune and The Search for The Hidden Valley

Sue Purkiss, pub. Alma Books

There are a number of novels about animal hunting for readers of various ages – for conservation purposes – but I haven't previously come across a novel for any age which dealt with those intrepid explorers whose goal was flora rather than fauna. Sue Purkiss offers an exciting adventure story for KS2 readers which combines a boy's search for his own identity and the resolution of deep psychological trauma, with the search for new and exotic plants.

Jack Fortune is anything but fortunate: he lost his parents as a child, for which he blames his father, and lives with an aunt whose lack of understanding and sympathy verges on the Dickensian. Jack's frustrations present as mischievous though usually well-meant actions, which irritate his aunt to the point where she insists his timid uncle take him on. Uncle Edmund is on the point of fulfilling his life's wish, to explore the slopes of the deep valleys that border the eastern Himalayas and south-eastern Tibet, where rhododendrons grow wild. He wants to search for new plants to take back to King George III's newly established Kew Gardens. Reluctantly he agrees to take Jack with him and eventually realises that his nephew is not only a resourceful and brave boy, but also an excellent botanical artist. Their adventures in the mythical country of Hakkim introduce them to a culture and religions with which they are unfamiliar, but which they respect, and they are in turn respected and helped by those peoples. All except one, of course, who adds danger to their journey, and through whose behaviour both uncle and nephew discover their own strengths.

Purkiss introduces us to this seventeenth-to-nineteenth-century botanical craze and adds brief factual notes on plant hunting and the most famous hunter, Sir Joseph Banks. Unfortunately, we have nothing on the rhododendrons themselves. I rather hope that this is the first in a series of Jack's adventures, as one Robert Fortune, sent to research the valuable tea plant, brought back seed in 1855 of a rhododendron which was then named *Rhododendron fortune*. Is this a descendent of our fictional hero?

Bridget Carrington

A Kitten Called Holly

Helen Peters, illus. Ellie Snowdon, pub. Nosy Crow

Jasmine and Tom are pre-teen best friends. Jasmine's mother is a vet, her father a farmer. This is the latest episode in a series of novels about these two friends, though each book stands on its own. In this book Jasmine accidentally disturbs a mother cat and her litter of kittens in their shed. The mother removes two of her kittens but abandons the third. Jasmine and Tom must undertake the task of raising the abandoned kitten. The book poses the question whether Jasmine will be allowed to keep the kitten or not?

This is a short book. But it is clear that Peters has undertaken serious research into the animal welfare issues the book raises. There is a section on what Jasmine must feed the kitten, how often the kitten needs to be fed overnight, what the kitten should weigh and how to ensure the kitten is warm enough but not too warm. She explains how the kitten should be socialised in the company of other cats. This little book is a more responsible version of the books published in the past to provide guidance on the care of animals.

Snowdon's illustrations are warm and realistic.

Rebecca Butler

Maudlin Towers: The Curse of the Werewolf Boy

Chris Priestly, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Curse of the Werewolf Boy is the first book in Chris Priestley's Maudlin Towers series – the second is due to be published later in 2018. The heroes of the book, Mildew and Sponge have the misfortune of attending Maudlin Towers – a gloomy, monstrosity of a building that is a boarding school for “the Not Particularly Bright Sons of the Not Especially Wealthy.”

Mildew, being an avid reader of detective novels featuring the hero Finlay Feathering, is keen on the idea of being a detective himself, so when strange occurrences start to occur – the School Spoon has been stolen and terrible consequences are threatened if the culprit doesn't come to light – it's down to Mildew and Sponge to get to the bottom of things... but being a detective isn't as easy as it seems in the novels.

The boys are led to the school's dilapidated bothy where they find a lot of the school's recently missing items. Among other things, the school hall clock and the Reverend Brimsone's high backed leather

chair – all put together to create a time machine. Does this explain the strange goings on at Mauldlin Towers? The Viking in the Ha-ha, ghosts in the attic... and that's not to mention the Werewolf. I'm not going to give anything away here so read on and enjoy.

Chris Priestley's writing is sharp and witty – frequently laugh out loud - with lots of wordplay to delight the reader. The story is packed with strange goings on and even stranger characters. At times it's creepy, but perfectly pitched and never frightening. Chris's artwork is a delight as ever – perfectly complimenting his own writing style.

Damian Harvey

Mike

Andrew Norriss, pub. David Fickling Books

Andrew Norriss has such a light, compassionate touch when dealing with sensitive issues and his latest book, *Mike*, is no exception. Floyd is a young tennis star on the verge of realising certain stardom when he meets Mike, the person no one can see but him. His encounters with Mike become more frequent and more distracting to his tennis game and ultimately require him to see a sports psychologist, Dr. Pinner. These meetings with Dr. Pinner slowly develop into a friendship and help Floyd to uncover what his own aspirations are rather than those of his parents. Dr. Pinner's advice, to accept Mike and learn from him, leads Floyd on a remarkable journey of self-discovery. This journey is riddled with doubt, anger, great uncertainty but also with new friendships, new skills and most importantly, his own sense of purpose.

Floyd is an honest and at times, an earnest teenager struggling with finding his own way. After a decade of having every moment of his day dedicated to tennis and being among the best in his field, this is a difficult task for him. I believe every reader will find something within the story to identify with and certainly will be pushing for Floyd to succeed. The idea of an invisible person (or one's subconscious self) works quite effectively the majority of the time and helps one to understand the tremendous pressure teens encounter while navigating friendships, school and family life. A lovely little story.

Sheri Sticpewich

Not Yet Dark

Simon P Clark, pub. Atom Books

Philippa and Danny have always been best friends, but growing up is bringing unexpected tensions. Escaping to an apparently abandoned house, they realise they are not alone. A mysterious society is

trying to summon and control Death, and Phil and Danny's world is transformed. They start being followed by two spirits who take them to the world between life and death. As The Society tries to track them down, Phil and Danny must help the spirits return to their world while deciding if they want to leave their own world behind as well.

Not Yet Dark offers the reader a very interesting mixture of the supernatural and the real, asking what happens when you extend the everyday world into the unknown. The real strength and skill of the book lies in this mixture, focusing on what a supernatural encounter would be in everyday life. The relationship between Phil and Danny is wonderfully constructed, and there is great attention to detail in developing believable characters, particularly in how they speak to each other. Rather than escaping into fantasy, the book is driven by asking how teenagers would experience the possibility to encounter new worlds, and particularly the problems and choices they'd have to face. As well as offering an engaging story, I think it succeeds in doing more, and offers the reader an opportunity to put themselves in the world of the characters.

If the book has a weakness, it's that it doesn't give enough space to exploring all of the ideas that it raises. The secondary plot – of The Society attempting to track down Phil and Danny when they realise they've been observed – brings up ideas surrounding how adults and teenagers understand loss, yet unfortunately there isn't enough space in the book to develop this, to give a clear sense of who 'The Society' are. Consequently, parts of the book seem a bit rushed, with a lot of the depiction of The Society seeming quite stylised and expository. Nevertheless, as a whole the book is great, and could appeal to a wide range of readers, though I would imagine particularly those already interested in the genre.

Edd Banks

The Princess and the Suffragette

Holly Webb, pub. Scholastic

Holly Webb has now written over 100 books, many of them animal stories for younger readers, and she started writing when she was a children's editor at Scholastic, so she has a lot of useful experience. In this book for slightly older children, 10+, she continues the story of *The Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. In that book, Sara Crewe was happy enough as a rich girl at Miss Minchin's school until her father's sudden death left her apparently destitute, and she was forced to become a servant, working extremely hard. She had always been kind and thoughtful, especially to the servant girl, Becky, and an unhappy four-year old, Lottie. Of course eventually it was discovered that she was still an heiress, and she moved into the house next door with her father's good friend, taking Becky the maid with her.

Holly Webb picks up the story when Lottie is 10, and notices a small girl, the same age as herself, working as a scullery maid, and eventually manages to befriend her. This is Sally, the suffragette, and slowly Lottie realises that life could be different for women. They go to the Women's Coronation Procession in 1911, (which actually happened) and also, on an outing with her friend Sara the "princess", see Emily Davidson fall under the King's horse. Sara, who has been almost like a mother to her, does not approve of the suffragette movement, and neither does her stern father, so Lottie has to decide on her path. There is also a development about the mother that she had thought was dead, and a happy resolution for both Lottie and Sally at the end. Holly Webb's writing flows well, and this is a fascinating story with quite a lot of dramatic action, especially towards the end.

In this coming year celebrating the centenary of (limited) female suffrage, this will be a useful way of explaining what it was all about. In an Author's Note at the end, Holly Webb admits that she uses the two points of view of Sara and Sally to illustrate her own uncertainty about the methods employed by the suffragette movement, and that could be a discussion topic.

Continuing a classic seems to appeal- her next book will be *Return to the Secret Garden*, which we hope will be as enjoyable as this one.

Diana Barnes

Prisoner of Ice and Snow

Ruth Lauren, pub. Bloomsbury

The Prisoner of Ice and Snow is Ruth Lauren's debut fantasy novel, set against a quasi-Russian backdrop. Thirteen-year-old Valor is determined to rescue her twin sister, Sasha, from Demidova's brutal icy children's prison, Tyur'ma, to which she was sent for stealing a politically sensitive national treasure.

Prior to Sasha's imprisonment Valor and her family held privileged positions within the royal court - Valor's mother was the Queen's first huntswoman and her father the Queen's adviser. Upon their thirteenth-birthdays, Valor and Sasha were apprenticed to their mother and father respectively, in order that one day they would take those positions within the court of the current princess on her ascension to the throne, but the family are now disgraced and banished from the city.

Valor's plan is to break Sasha out from the inside, despite the knowledge that no one has escaped in over three hundred years. To succeed, Valor must first get inside Tyur'ma, and she deliberately gets herself arrested for the attempted murder of the crown prince. Once confined to Tyur'ma, Valor must locate Sasha and orchestrate their escape, but she quickly realises that she needs to trust a few of the other inmates if she is to accomplish the impossible.

Valor is a superb female protagonist and role model. She's loyal, courageous and fiercely independent. She is unwavering in her plan to free Sasha, no matter the seemingly unsurmountable odds. With strong women (both good and bad) very much at the forefront of this novel it also challenges gender stereotypes, as Lauren showcases female resilience, aptitude and spirit.

The story carries the reader along at a cracking, suspenseful pace. Lauren's rich, evocative descriptions depict the harshness of the wintery landscape and the bleakness of life within the snow and ice of Tyur'ma, pitilessly governed by the ruthless Warden Kirov and her intimidating Peacekeepers. There are plenty of twists in the plot too, as we learn that Sasha did not in fact steal the national treasure of which she was accused – but if she didn't, who did? And why?

The ending will leave readers anticipating the sequel, due in spring 2018, to this entertaining and gripping read.

Sasha Roth

Ruby McCracken *Tragic without Magic*

Elizabeth Ezra, pub. Kelpies, Floris Books

In a reverse plot to Harry Potter, twelve-year-old Ruby McCracken believes her life is over. She has been forced to leave her home in Hexdonia and live in the ordinary world, without magic, after her parents both mysteriously lose their jobs at the same time. She is totally magicless – she can't even conjure up a quick snack spell to ward off the hunger pangs. She misses leaping off the flyway on her broomstick to go to school, she misses her old school and she misses her witchy best friends, Abigail and Margaret. Even her familiar, Vronsky, has turned weird. So when the girls at her new school are mean to her, she tries to phone home, with dire consequences.

This fast-paced, mystery-adventure story set in Edinburgh, will appeal to eight to twelve-year-olds. *Ruby McCracken Tragic without Magic* is packed with humour, magic, disgusting food concoctions and hilarious anecdotes that will be perfect for fans of the *Worst Witch* and *You Can't Make Me Go to Witch School*.

Ruby McCracken Tragic without Magic could be used in the classroom as a good starting point to discuss talking to strangers and how to make someone new to their school feel welcome.

Anita Loughrey

Visit Anita's website: www.anitaloughrey.com

Run, Elephant, Run

Patricia McCarthy, pub. Otter-Barry Books

Little Elephant lives in the rainforest with his mother and she is his protection. What will he do when it rains and he becomes separated from the herd? Everything seems strange and he is a target for predators such as the tiger. The jungle is dark and slippery, so can the little one find his mother before danger catches up with him?

This is a very simple and gentle tale of the connection between parent and child as well as a reminder that danger can easily creep up if you are not careful. The illustrations are visually stunning with the pages saturated in colour and filled with a huge range of birds and animals that are found in the forest. The author has managed to give the effect of torrential rain in the main part of the story, so that we can see the difference at the end, when the rain has stopped. With the colour palette we are presented with a kaleidoscope of greens and golds to reflect the range of foliage and animals and the elephants stand out with their pale grey colour. The text is a straightforward narrative but there are wonderful sounds for parts of the story, such as “slip-slop slip-slop” as the baby tries running through the rain. I think this has great potential as a story book but also as a very basic and simple introduction to the subject of rainforests for Reception and KS1.

Margaret Pemberton

Scarecrow

Danny Weston, pub. Andersen Press

How to move on children from exclusively reading from the same series of books, or what to offer to them as an alternative that may widen their reading habit are questions that any librarian, teacher and parent will have encountered at some point. It was therefore interesting to come across this thriller by Danny Weston.

This Edinburgh-based writer is the recipient of the Scottish Children’s Book Award 2015 having already written books for teen and young adults. This story possesses the quality to be received favourably as well, given its mix of action, mystery, wit and magic.

Jack is taken by his father on a long and sudden journey to Scotland. It is only once they arrive at their destination, and with much reluctance, that Jack’s father explains that the reason for hiding in the solitary cottage, lent to him by his friend Douglas, is his discovery of some irregularities in the bank for which he works involving powerful clients and the bank managers.

Having being forced to leave his phone and computer behind, Jack feels very isolated and unsettled. He thinks that this upheaval, as well as the fact that he has not taken his medication regularly, is the reason why he has started hallucinating again. Jack is convinced that the scarecrow in the middle of

the nearby field not only is able to move but to talk as well. Even Rhonda, a local girl that Jack has befriended, and whose late mother built the scarecrow, cannot believe Jack when he finally shares his secret with her.

Eventually, thanks largely to Douglas' disloyalty, those behind the illicit dealings catch up with Jack and his dad. Their attempt to escape fails and Jack, his father and Rhonda are at the mercy of some unscrupulous characters. Then someone, or something, comes to their aid leading to the thrilling finale.

A strong and resourceful protagonist and a good plot sustained by tension and suspense make of this story a very readable book. The initially grumpy and rather menacing scarecrow turns into a witty and playful sidekick, true to the role of protector for which he was created by Rhonda's mother, a white witch.

The fact that the scarecrows anthropomorphic qualities may only be a figment of Jack's imagination is very well played and certainly adds an interesting layer to this story.

Some may wince at the graphic description of a farming life scene – the birth of a calf, though it is in fact the occasional strong language that makes this work of fantastic realism more suitable to those ready to read at the top of the Junior age range of books, this one sitting on the cusp of junior and YA.

Laura Brill

Seven Simple and Slightly Silly Stories

John Foley, illus. Grant Cathro, pub. QuizzicalWorks

A collection of seven modern fables produced specifically to raise funds for Macmillan Cancer Support and the Silver Line supporting the elderly charities.

Each of the seven stories is very much in the slightly gruesome, underpinningly moralistic approach that one would expect of traditional fables. While witty, they are quite dark in their themes and have unexpected and sometimes quite unpleasant twists in their tales. A mouse being stalked by a cat, turns the tables and leads the cat on such a chase that ends with the cat's heart bursting with the effort; the social snobbery of clothes in a washing machine leads to fighting and destruction, a mayfly scared of living, spends his time in hiding without realising that he will die at the end of the day anyway, a cockroach leaves his home to find a friend without realising that the friend he finds in a cell from which there is no way out, is a condemned man waiting for execution and a tooth fairy trying to make a man bent on pulling his own teeth out, believe in her again.

The author John Foley is an actor, puzzle setter and an audiobook producer who has scripted and voiced more than six hundred programmes for the BBC English and World Service. This is the first of several collections of 'fables' which he began writing while staying regularly in Hans Andersens house in Copenhagen. The illustrator Grant Cathro is an actor, and illustration artist as well as an award winning screenwriter of children's and teenage television.

The cover image might suggest the collection is suitable for a younger audience than it actually is. In the custom of traditional fables, these stories do include some gruesome details or disturbing concepts and the wit and messages contained within them are more suitable for teenagers and adults, who will be supporting two charities if purchasing this book.

Annie Everall

Skeleton Tree

Kim Ventrella, illus. Victoria Assanelli, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Stanley Stanwright and little sister, Miren, live with their Mum; Dad left a while ago and is hard to get in touch with. When Mum is at work, Ms Francine, an older neighbour originally from Eastern Europe comes to look after them, making pots of borscht and cookies from a tube, whilst dispensing wise advice and tales of her childhood.

One day something strange starts growing in the garden and nothing is the same again. Poking out of the earth is a bone, a finger bone, which gradually becomes a hand, then an arm until finally a whole skeleton has emerged. At first, Stanley is intrigued and determined to investigate with his friend Jaxon. They want to photograph the growing bones to enter the Young Discoverer's Competition; if Stanley wins, he hopes his father will come back to go on the prize trip with him. With Miren increasingly unwell, he would also like to be able to help pay her medical bills.

Interest turns to consternation when the skeleton, which is only visible to certain people, starts showing an unusual interest in Miren and she declares Princy to be her new best friend. As she gets worse, Princy is never far away, even at the hospital, and Stanley is really concerned when, in one of his photographs, he spots a scythe at the skeleton's feet...

This is a moving and heartfelt exploration of a family coping with grief and loss as they face the inevitable. Not without humour and a touch of fantasy, the story also shows that hope and friendship can be found in unexpected places.

Jayne Gould

A Skinful of Shadows

Frances Hardinge, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

This dark, historical/fantastical tale from Costa Children's Book Award winner Frances Hardinge tells the story of twelve year old Makepeace who is shipped off to her mysterious, long-lost family after the death of her mother. Possessed by a vengeful spirit, Makepeace finds herself in a fight for her life and struggling to escape her grim new reality, with a war torn country on one side and a secretive, potentially lethal family on the other.

The atmosphere of this book is decidedly dark, creepy and gothic. It reads like classic literature reminiscent of Mary Shelley or even Dickens, which gives it an ironically fresh feel in comparison with the scores of contemporary YA novels on the shelves. There is a great building of tension throughout, with ominous secrets aplenty and a real sense of imminent danger that keeps you turning those pages. There's still a touch of modernity to it though as Makepeace is a defiant, willful and un-stereotypical representation of young girls of this era, even while being weak and girlish. Not a Victorian wallflower in sight.

If I had any criticisms, it would be that the book feels slightly muddled at times, with its plot feeling sluggish and struggling under the layers of gothic style. And be warned, it is a long read, so I would recommend for teens on the more sophisticated, well-read end of the spectrum. But all said, it is a really interesting, different read that anyone with a love of classical literature will thoroughly enjoy.

Rachel Kennedy

Sky Dancer

Gill Lewis, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Joe is grieving for his father, a moorland gamekeeper who has died following a prison spell that broke his spirit and his health. His crime was to kill a hen harrier. Joe can't bear what happened to his dad, but nor can he bear the fact that beautiful wild birds lose their lives so that rich people can shoot grouse for sport.

At school, he is regarded with hostility because of his father's crime. Meanwhile his brother is following in their father's footsteps, and looks likely to want to get rid of any remaining hen harriers, despite the law. Joe's loyalty to tradition and to his family and their way of life is in direct conflict with his love of nature. The owner of the grouse moor will do anything to keep his lucrative business going, including threatening Joe's family with eviction from the house they have always lived in. Minty, the owner's daughter and a childhood friend of Joe's, is blind to the impact of her family's stewardship of the land. Ella, a town-bred girl who has moved in next door to Joe with her mother, becomes as passionate as he does to save hen harriers from extinction. She devotes lots of time to

finding out as much as she can about them, and has a blazing row with Minty about the need to protect the environment in general and the hen harrier in particular. Gradually Joe and Ella change Minty's views, and this very diverse trio join forces in a desperate bid to protect a hen harrier chick.

This is an extremely impressive novel. As in so many of her books, Gill Lewis writes beautifully and very knowledgably about the environment and nature. There is so much more here too. The emotional and ethical challenges Joe faces - his grief, his difficult relationship with his taciturn brother, his often fraught friendships with Ella and Minty, his divided loyalties - are depicted very skilfully and movingly. Class differences, prejudices and tensions are explored sensitively. A strong underlying theme about social justice comes combined with a passionate case for conservation. Lewis is far too respectful of her readers to provide trite or easy answers. Instead, her novel poses a range of thought-provoking questions. And it ends on a note of hope.

Anne Harding

Youth Adult Book Reviews

The Bad Decisions Playlist

Michael Rubens, pub. Clarion Books

Austin Methune is a person who attracts trouble, thanks to his poor decision-making and smoking weed. Consequently, he is at risk of not graduating from High School. So now he must attend summer school (and pay his mother's fiancé for a damaged mandolin) or face being sent to Military school. But then, unexpectedly, Austin's dead father knocks on the door.

The Bad Decisions Playlist is an engaging story about a talented, young man, lacking in confidence to follow his dream of being a singer-songwriter. His father, who incidentally is Shane Tucker, the music legend, presents Austin with the opportunity to showcase his talent, but also another reason for him to self-destruct further. Not only has Austin got to come to terms with meeting his father and his mixed-up emotions and his mother's forthcoming nuptials, he is also falling wildly, truly in love for the first time.

Austin is a tragic hero, inevitably messing it all up, whilst learning some hard lessons along the way. His character is so well-written, however, that readers will have some sympathy with him, despite him getting his just desserts. Life seems to deal Austin some unfortunate cards and, perhaps not surprisingly, he reacts badly.

Moreover, the concept of a playlist is an interesting choice of title. Each chapter begins with the lines of a song created by Austin. Austin, therefore, seems to be creating a playlist as the story progresses. But Austin is also a person with a reputation. A playlist is about listening again, an analogy perhaps to Austin making the same mistakes - again. Or maybe it suggests how difficult it is for Austin to change his song choice and hence in real life to avoid trouble.

Above all, the book is a great coming of age story when a young man learns to be responsible. Austin seems to have grown up by the end of the book. He pays his debts, focuses on his future and understands that some things are unforgivable. Certainly, his friendship with his former nemesis, Todd, seems genuine and based upon a mutual interest in music. It is worth noting that although tasteful and appropriate, there is more sexual content towards the end of the story.

With a storyline that is instantly relatable, *The Bad Decisions Playlist* will appeal to young adult readers. Irreverent in style and peppered with dark humour, it is an accessible book that keeps you wanting to read just one more chapter.

Simon Barrett

Ballad for a Mad Girl

Vikki Wakefield, pub. Text Publishing Company

Everyone knows seventeen-year-old Grace Foley is a bit wild. She's not afraid of anything, except losing. As part of the rivalry between two local schools, Grace accepts a notoriously dangerous challenge. During the ordeal, she experiences something she cannot explain. She has changed. Her thoughts and actions are no longer her own. She is drawn into the twenty-year-old mystery of a missing girl, Hannah Holt, and loses her ability to distinguish between the real and the imagined. The early loss of her mother becomes entangled in the mystery and Grace's sense of disorientation grows.

You will not want to put this book down. Its blend of Gothic nightmare, detective story and coming of age tale will grip you to the very end. This unusual literary mix is tightly crafted and mediated with a compassion that keeps the story this side of sensational.

It is a story of loss and change. It is a story of High School rivalries. It is a first-person narrative of inner pain. It is, in fact, unusual and very effective story-telling. Following a breath-taking climax to the plot, this gripping tale of coming to terms with grief maintains its tension to its very last page.

And beyond.

Morag Charlwood

Genuine Fraud

E. Lockhart, pub. Hot Key Books

This is a suspenseful YA thriller from E.Lockhart, written in reverse chronology style, with an intriguing protagonist.

The story begins when the main character, Jule Williams, is tracked down by a detective. Jule reveals herself only as a chameleon character with a complicated past and a choice of origin stories – superhero, spy or something much more mundane? You may well be tempted to reread it to try and find the clues you missed to the horror that lies in Jule's recent past. I appreciated the reverse chronology style more as the novel progressed - it created a suspenseful sense of impending doom.

Set in the glamorous world of rich and careless young Americans, Jule's carefully created knowledge, superior physical strength and spy-level disguises are impressive; she is Jason Bourne, James Bond,

Lara Croft, but it is not immediately clear whether she is the hero or the villain. You may still be unsure whether you even like her, by the end.

Lockhart describes *The Talented Mr Ripley* as an inspiration and the book feels like an updating of that tale, with the fascinating amorality of the main character. The change of gender allows for some interesting questioning of female friendships, as Jule absorbs the character of Imogen, her heiress best friend. Lockhart creates a fine balance of admiration and cool detachment as the novel unfolds, allowing Jule's remorse to touch you even as you recoil from her actions and ambition.

This is a thriller which references the American Dream, our love of spies and true life horror stories. It plays on the desire to reinvent yourself, to gain a fortune and live a carefree life. Its protagonist will stay in your memory long after you have finished the story.

Saira Archer

The Hanging Girl

Eileen Cook, pub. Hot Key Books

Skye is a small-town girl living in a lonely (if rather tick-boxingly diverse) world. She'd love to escape from her charlatan 'psychic' mother and the grubby side of the tracks. But not enough to do anything very positive about it. She isn't planning for college, unlike her more focused and successful friend Drew who believes that she and Skye are going to share an apartment in New York next year. But Skye knows she's kidding herself.

Skye's also kidding the people who come to her for Tarot readings, using skills of observation, empathy and imagination to tell people what they want to hear. She doesn't feel much guilt – if they are stupid enough to believe her, she's smart enough to exploit that. At least, unlike her mother, who also professes to be psychic, Skye doesn't believe her own nonsense.

And then a classmate goes missing. And Skye uses her 'powers' to help the police. Even though she doesn't have any powers. Because she does know a lot more about Paige's 'abduction' than she's letting on. Though not as much as she thinks she does.

It's hard to review this without giving spoilers, because like any good thriller there are several really surprising twists. I found the rather book slow at first, but I did become much more gripped as I realised – or thought I did! – what was going on. In many ways, Skye is an unlikely heroine, but I enjoyed seeing her slow working out of the truth, and her gradual understanding of the fact that, all along, she's been kidding herself as much as – or more than – the people around her.

All in all, I found this an enjoyable read, partly for the plot, which definitely took me to places I didn't expect and, perhaps more so, for the way in which Skye gets to know herself and the depths of her own duplicity.

Sheena Wilkinson

The Inexplicable Logic of my Life

Benjamin Alire, pub. Simon and Schuster

Reviews are always subjective and I don't like to give a book a poor review. The first review of my first novel was so savage I can't imagine it could have been worse if I'd hitherto burned down the reviewer's house with a flamethrower. But when *The Inexplicable Logic of my Life* arrived, with a back-cover blurb promising 'a gorgeous multifaceted story about love and identity' and a cover showing three teens staring up at the Milky Way, I knew this was going to be an uphill struggle.

But I've reviewed ten or eleven books now for Armadillo and I've found something to enjoy in all of them. Some have been marvellous and others flawed. One, set in New York and Europe, had a central character who was Jewish and every single good person in the story was Jewish and every evil person was a Slav. Another book I read was a counter-factual with American girl combat soldiers in the Second World War, which seemed like it was designed for a parochial readership who were only interested in characters who were exactly like them. But both those books were still immensely readable. And that is the problem with *The Inexplicable Logic of my Life*.

The main character, Sal, is a nice American teen of Mexican heritage. His noble, single-parent dad is gay, and his best friend, Samantha, is Queen Sassy of Sassyville. Occasionally, the kind of kids who have parents who think Donald Trump is a good idea (I'm guessing here, although we are introduced to them), tell Sal his father is a "faggot". Sal gets into trouble with the school authorities because he punches them. Samantha has a succession of unsuitable boyfriends – probably the elder brothers of the kids who call Sal's dad a "faggot". Sal's grandma is getting old and death is waiting in the shadows...

Benjamin Alire Saenz is a poet and this is reflected in his writing. Sassy Sam is 'a soft candle lighting up a dark room', for example. If you like this kind of writing then maybe the book is for you. But the main problem for me was that a third of the way in, the story wasn't really going anywhere. Maybe, later on someone destroys Sal's house with a flamethrower? I'll never know because the will to read on and find out what happens evaporated.

For those who need to know, there is plenty of common-or-garden swearing, but parents or librarians likely to be bothered by this will already have been put off the book by the fact that its most likable character is Sal's gay dad. Saenz is immensely popular, judging by his thousands of Goodreads and

Amazon reviews, and good for him. But I do like a story that makes me want to carry on turning the pages. And this didn't.

Paul Dowsell

Love, Hate & Other Filters

Samira Ahmed, pub. Hot Key Books

This is a striking first novel by Samira Ahmed – not the Samira Ahmed who presents Radio 4's Front Row, but a former English teacher and political campaigner from Illinois, where her story is set.

Maya Aziz is in her senior year in a small-town high school, where she stands out as the only Indian and the only Muslim. Ambitious as a cinematographer, she struggles against the expectations of her parents, both dentists, that she'll stay near home, study medicine or law, and marry a suitably approved Indian boy. With the support of her Aunt Hina - who, at forty-something, is seen by Maya as breaking the mould by being single, independent and successful – she's secured a place to study film in New York, but has yet to break this to her parents.

Several times Maya likens her situation to a teenage rom-com, and indeed that's where we seem to be at first. She meets two attractive boys: handsome Kareem (with 'sparkly dark eyes'), viewed by her parents as husband material, and sports jock, Phil, ('twinkly green eyes' and a dimple) who she meets in secret. Both boys are rather too good, sensitive and unfailingly considerate to be plausible, and a romantic scene near the end is over-the-top filmic, while Maya's mother would be quite at home in Bollywood and much of the dialogue is in the familiar style of teenage smart-mouth. But these ingredients will give wide appeal to what turns out to be a novel dealing with serious and topical issues of identity and expectations, racism, white supremacy, alienation and the dangers of unchallenged 'locker-room talk'. Yes, we're in Donald Trump's America, though he's never named.

Hints of what's to come are given in short, italicised sections in which an unnamed young man is preparing a suicide attack. (An unasked question for the reader here: how do we picture him?) This story and Maya's come together with dramatic suddenness. Soon, when a key suspect is identified who shares her surname, both she and her parents are the targets of hostility. Maya's dream of leaving for New York seems increasingly unlikely as her parents become fearful and protective.

The ending, once we get past the soft-focus romantic bit, is particularly well-handled, with Maya becoming newly-aware of the challenges faced by her parents when they left India before her birth, for a new life in America. A pleasingly realistic touch is that first love and first sex, however intoxicating, don't necessarily lead to lasting commitment.

Linda Newbery

Linda Newbery's *QUARTER PAST TWO ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON* is published by Doubleday.

My Side of the Diamond

Sally Gardner, illus. Nat Barlex, pub . Hot Key Books

Sci-fi meets twenty-first-century teenage love story in Sally Gardner's latest novel, and it will be interesting to see whether the combination will engage or enrage enthusiasts of both genres. Based on a widely reported and still unexplained incident in Suffolk in 1980, classed then and now as UFO related, Gardner offers an interpretation of the events and brings the story through the succeeding four decades.

Imagining that the mysterious object, which appeared over several nights at Rendlesham Forest, between two US air bases, was a craft from another planet whose humanoid inhabitants were researching love – an emotion which they lacked – she creates a scenario around several modern day social issues.

Jaz comes from a single-parent home and, at seventeen, her mother throws her out. She is taken in by her best friend Becky's affluent, super-socialist family, but finds that they are irreversibly fractured and Becky, an avid but secretive writer of sci-fi, whose novel becomes an immediate hit, succumbs to anorexia. Becky is sent to Suffolk to recuperate, with Jaz as company, where they stumble upon secrets that have haunted a village since December 1980. A convicted murderer and his prison guard hold the answers to those mysterious events but, before Gardner gives us the resolution, the parental protagonists suffer loss of their children, regenerations with both biblical and Pygmalion-like qualities, apparent suicides and aliens whose creation or recreation have left them desperate and violent. Amongst this Becky becomes infatuated with Icarus, the alien sent to research human love, and Jaz finds true love for the first time in her life.

This is mainly Jaz's story, which she tells on pages which reflect those of Becky's favourite Moleskine notebooks, but other narrators also relate their viewpoint to Mr Jones, presumed by the reader to be a reporter, but whose real identity we discover in the final pages. Nat Barlex's illustrations (<https://natbarlex.com/my-side-1/>) are ideally suited to this mysterious sci-fi-realist world and, like the text, carefully replicate details of the 1980s UFO incident. This is an innovative, interesting YA novel, but would have benefitted from greater character development, particularly that of Icarus.

Bridget Carrington

The Sidekicks

Will Kostakis, pub. Penguin / Harlequin Australia and as a Kindle UK Edition

More than just another prankish, high-school narrative, this sophisticated account of three Australian, male, private school barely-friends ('Oh, we are not actually friends') and the death of a mutually regarded fourth, Year Eleven student, will engross the thoughtful YA reader.

The three sections of the substantial novel are narrated by each of the three students in turn, with an individual grammar and tone which mirrors their character, as do the section titles: The Swimmer – 'Ryan Patrick Thomson, Olympic hopeful'; The Rebel – Scott Harley and The Nerd – Miles, who narrates in a film-script style which nicely captures his detachment and control of events. We learn of the unexplained death of Isaac Roberts early in the opening page but it is only by degrees, across the narrative, that we piece together the nature of his parting and where responsibility lies.

Events are complicated by an essay scam in which the three main protagonists play a part, by the presence of Ryan's Mum in school as the feared and respected Head of English, by the gay proclivities of several male characters who initially have not come out to their peers or parents and by the Catholic school context 'which is in the Marist tradition ... like regular Catholicism, only with a pinch of French.' Most of the character-based action and plot stems from Miles' selfish duplicity and drive, but even his final plan is thwarted by the school authorities. Typically, he turns failure into fantasy-success by projecting the concluding incident as a shared part of their lives which they will fondly recall as they move through adulthood.

The school setting is credibly but lightly drawn, with references to CCTV, mobile phones, computer technology and fast food. This complements the convincing social interactions and descriptions of the inner lives of the main characters. The latter articulate the themes of loyalty, trust and the place of emotion in adolescents who have developed substantially and become semi-friends to each other, and possibly to the reader, by the novels effectively crafted conclusion.

Trevor Arrowsmith

Star by Star

Sheena Wilkinson, pub. Little Island Books

It is 1918 in Cuanbeg, a small rural town in Northern Ireland, and a time of great turmoil and change throughout the country. Although the Great War is close to ending, Ireland is a country in conflict: there is growing support for the fight for Irish independence, controversial changes to voting rights and a devastating flu epidemic which is sweeping Europe.

Into this world steps 15-year-old Stella, forced to leave her home in Manchester and travel to Cuanbeg to stay with an aunt she has never met, following the death of her Suffragette mother from the flu.

Used to helping with her mother's political campaigning, Stella feels stifled by the solitude of Cuanbeg and the narrow-minded views of those around her.

Desperate to be seen as a 'modern' woman, Stella is a mixture of impetuous youth eager to change the world and a naïve young girl who doesn't fully understand the complexities of the changing political landscape. Although, at times, her self-righteous behaviour and branding of all who disagree with her as 'reactionary' can be irritating to the reader, in essence, Wilkinson captures the energy of a young woman yearning to make a difference and to fulfil the dream of her Suffragette mother.

Stella's unlikely friendship with the reclusive Captain Reid is a particular strength of the narrative as, in her typical, headstrong manner, she defies social etiquette and the wishes of her aunt in her desire to heal his broken life. It is this quality of wanting to make the world better for those around her which endears us to this feisty heroine.

But what is probably the most resonant message in this book is that we all have the capacity, little by little, to make positive changes for the better. And, at a time when the world can seem frighteningly disorientated and where the mistakes of the past loom like shadows in the dark, it is a message we all need to heed.

It is in moments like these - when the rights of women and so many groups, are surreptitiously being threatened in democratic countries of the first world – that Sheena Wilkinson's novel is an important testament to the need for us all to recognise the hard-fought victories of the past which have helped shape a fairer present. But as Stella is only too aware, there is always more to be done.

Paulie Hurry

Still Life with Tornado

A. S. King, pub. Text Publishing Company

Sarah is sixteen and a talented artist, looking forward to a fulfilling career doing something she loves. One day she finds she cannot draw. Not at all. Nor can she go to school.

As we enter Sarah's disintegrating mind, the repressed childhood trauma that will no longer be ignored mimics the swirling, chaotic mass of a tornado hitting the shore.

A. S. King masterfully combines magical realism and the harsh realities of a child witnessing physical and emotional violence in an irreparably damaged family. This is no linear narrative: the reader is cast adrift, like Sarah, in a world that whips from one reality to another. The result is a compelling, pacey story that follows Sarah's quest – with the help of her younger and older selves – to overcome the past and reclaim her future.

Yvonne Coppard

Yvonne Coppard is currently a Writing Fellow with the Royal Literary Fund and with 'Writing Project', working in residence with various organisations to help to improve writing skills in the workplace. www.writingproject.co.uk

The Treatment

C. L. Taylor, pub. HQ Young Adult

C. L. Taylor, acclaimed author of *The Accident*, *The Lie*, *The Missing* and *The Escape*, takes us – wincing – into the psychological thriller that is her truly gripping new book, *The Treatment*.

Drew Finch is a loveable outsider, whose non-conforming ways attract bullies, at school and at home. When her brother, Mason, is expelled from school and sent to the Residential Reform Academy, Drew's priorities come sharply into focus, compelling her to take brave leaps of faith into dangerous waters. Drew's aptitude for understanding psychologies must be harnessed to beat the more sinister uses of psychological discourse at work (think *A Clockwork Orange*, no less).

Set slightly into the future, *The Treatment* hints at dystopia, but many aspects ring true to our present reality, bang up to date. What categories define the acceptability of my behaviour, and who decides that? Should I trust the medication that has been prescribed to me? Who is my 'recovery' benefiting – myself and others, or a specific power group with certain agendas? How does the government fit into all of this? Where are the people who truly care about me as a person, not just as a piece of plastic to be polished up and passed through the system? This could be an all too familiar read for some who 'society' has not understood or respected: something to be sensitive about.

Taylor writes with beautiful honesty and depth. A dark tale glitters with precious memories, left like scraps of secret paper resistance throughout the oppressive Academy. This is a story that champions acute and critical independent thinking, the brevity of human emotion and feeling in their rawest forms, the importance of friendship and love, and the necessity to be bold – vivid content that could be helpful to any young adult who feels like life is making them begin to fade... a heartfelt and strong encouragement to act. C. L. Taylor, thank you!

Amy Grandvoinet

Warcross

Marie Lu, pub. PenguinRandomHouse

Like its textless, hardback cover, this is a colourful swirl of a book. I'm not a 'gamer,' but the sheer energy and telegraphic style of this single-strand narrative sweeps the reader between and through many virtual worlds which form the context for a fast-paced, mystery-pursuit story.

The mainly youthful characters appear gradually, so the emphasis on describing the virtual dystopian overworld and underworld (Dark World) takes priority initially. Think movie *Bladerunner 2042*, where our memories are stored electronically, everyone is connected electronically to each other, the poor are very poor, the streets full of 3D floating advertisements and the population is obsessed and distracted by a game, in this case Warcross. This is controlled by its billionaire creator, benefactor or beast, Hideo (hm ...) Tananka. There are teams, leagues and every season several lucky amateurs are chosen to play alongside the professionals and so escape their wretched lives through celebrity and wealth.

Our teenage heroine, Emika Chen, is from the brutal underbelly of New York, where she has nothing except her wits and a drive to survive as a bounty hunter of those illegally betting on the Warcross games. In this hyper-connected world, she is soon noticed by Hideo, who selects her to play and befriends her for his own ends, ostensibly to hunt down a hacker, Zero, who threatens both Hideo and, through him, the entire structure of society. Other characters, Asher, Hammie, Rosham and Renoir Thomas (Ren) are only lightly drawn, but contribute to the plentiful physical action with clipped verbal exchanges.

Although we progress through the 353 pages at a slightly exhausting speed which will appeal to many YA readers, clear, contemporarily relevant themes emerge: the use of dystopian technology to control society through our connections with each other, an obsession with smartphones, the value of personal memories, the idiocy of celebrity, the trite numerical scoring of every aspect of life, the value of privacy. Some readers may feel the final outcome unsatisfying as they find they are, surely, manipulated by Marie Lu to imagine her sequel and/or movie franchise, where the true resolution of Erika Chen's chase may reside.

Trevor Arrowsmith

Zero Repeat Forever

G.S. Prendergast, pub. Simon and Schuster

Is sci-fi always dystopian? I would say not necessarily, but in the case of G.S. Prendergast's *Zero Repeat Forever* I would certainly have difficulty in distinguishing one from the other. Prendergast gives us two narrators, although one of them, a Nahx, a humanoid created to invade and apparently wipe out humans on earth, is actually mute. Set in Canada, we follow a group of teenagers training to host a summer camp, but whose plans are changed forever by the insurgence of Nahx. The Nahx narrator is Eighth – so called because he is a low caste warrior – who is classed as defective when

something goes wrong with his creation. Raven, a mixed-race human girl, narrates the human view of the story, and we meet her at the point when her boyfriend has just been killed by a Nahx dart. We learn that whole cities have been destroyed by the invasion, families split up and those who are able to have escaped into the wilds to try to avoid the Nahx. The teenage group survive on the rations which were intended for the summer camp students but, feeling they are vulnerable if they remain at the camp, they set out to try to outpace their enemies.

Raven's account reflects the fears of her group, but also reveals her own rebellious teenage years, where her feeling of not fitting comfortably in society has influenced her behaviour. Eighth, despite his lack of speech, and feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability, develops a conscience and feelings, which in many ways make him superior to the humans we see. Eighth rescues Raven after he has deserted his Nahx unit and she has been injured, and a close relationship develops. The pace of Prendergast's novel is slow and highlights many human characters who challenge the norm, before the final pages hint at who the Nahx actually are. Readers need to be patient, and our interest is held more by the developing characterisation of Eighth than by the rather formulaic humans. A promised sequel gives us hope that a happier resolution can be achieved than the final pages seem to offer.

Bridget Carrington

Non-fiction Book Reviews

Animal Surprises

Nicola Davies, illus. Abbie Cameron, pub. Graffeg

Nicola Davies trained as a zoologist and this book is based on her early explorations.

The book will excite children from nursery to year 2. Davies concentrates not on the names of the animals but on their attributes – whether they have claws, tails etc. Her animals are at times unexpected choices but ones that children will know and recognise, perhaps being curious about too as they are not ‘everyday’ ones. The accompanying text is simple, concise and snappy, ideal for a young enquiring mind, capturing their attention and giving them just enough detail to make it interesting and intriguing.

Abbie Cameron’s illustrations add as much to the text as the text itself. They are large, full-colour and vibrant throughout. The illustrations will definitely command the attention of the readers.

It is interesting to note that Nicola Davies has set herself a lofty and demanding goal: she wants every member of the human race to have a developed relationship with nature. Her book will certainly advance towards that goal.

Rebecca Butler

Build It! 25 Creative STEM projects for Budding Engineers

Caroline Alliston, pub. QED

Build It!, written by professional engineer and technical author, Caroline Alliston, contains 25 STEM projects to engage children in maths, science and engineering. Each project lists what you will need – all easy-to-find materials – together with items from the toolbox. There is a large coloured photo of each finished project followed by clear and concise step-by-step instructions with simple diagrams and additional tips.

Contents are divided into six sections: rocking and rolling; making a splash; speeding through the air; handy at home; making light work; and program me. A glossary and index complete the book.

The projects also have a “how it works” box explaining the science theory behind them, and a difficulty rating from 1 – 4 enabling them to be undertaken by students of varying ages and abilities.

A “now you can” list of suggestions enables experimentation with the designs to ascertain how changes affect the results.

A book to encourage young engineers in creative thinking, these projects would be great ideas for any STEM club.

Recommended for: KS2/KS3

Barbara Band

Coder Academy: Are You Ready For The Challenge?

Sean McManus, illus. Rosan Magar, pub. Ivy Kids

Coder Academy: Are You Ready For The Challenge? is clearly a fab book for young coders – I know this because as soon as it arrived my ten-year-old grabbed it and buried her head in it for the next week. Occasionally, I would see her jotting down notes, or peeling stickers out of the book. Not forgetting the appearance of Simon, a tiny cardboard robot that had previously lived snugly within the front cover.

The age range is from 7-10 years, and the beauty of this book is that there are plenty of activities to be done without the use of a computer, but - of course - to make it come alive (and to complete the challenges in the book) your child will need to get hold of that mouse at some point!

The book kicks off with the basics for all those completely new to coding: before we do anything we have to understand computer language from...Scratch. Ahem, pardon the obvious pun: Scratch - to those like me who had no idea prior to my child telling me – is a computer language and website where children make stories, animations and even games. Like any language, once you know it doors will open.

There are stickers and certificates scattered throughout Coder Academy for your child to mark the completion of tasks and sections, which is such a lovely touch as children always respond well to the recognition of milestones reached. As they continue through the book they can chalk off Qualified Coder; Qualified Computer Artist; Qualified Computer Musician, and Qualified Website Designer. If there was ever a time to join Coder Academy, it's deep mid-winter. There's hours of entertainment between these colourful pages.

The illustrations are simple, vibrant and fun, working with the text on each page so as to never appear too overwhelming to read: every page has space for writing, colouring or drawing designs as well as showing examples of what will appear on the computer screen at the various stages of the coding journey.

A gorgeously presented book to help children – and possibly Mum and Dad – understand the world of coding. It's the most frustrating feeling in the world to not understand the language being spoken around you – Coder Academy can help make computer language familiar. It's everywhere! So why not be prepared?

In addition to Simon the tiny cardboard robot, there is also Lucy (another tiny cardboard robot); a coding career poster; coding cards, and a programming challenge game.

Anja Stobbart

Dinosaurium

Chris Wormell, illus. Lily Murray, pub. Big Picture Press

Have you been to the museum lately and did you know that you can visit from the comfort of your own home, library, school library? You can, its true. Turn to Big Picture Press who have a golden ticket awaiting every reader at the top of the front cover of the book and then another one inside. Follow the instruction to 'enter here' and you will find yourslef immersed in a world of wonder and amazement.

Dinosaurium is the latest title in a collection the Big Picture Press are building, a chance for readers, of every age, to create and curate their very own museum collection through the pages of a book. In this particular title we are invited to look at the dinosaur collection and as we take a look through the six stages that Lily Murray has researched and presented us with facts about we will learn more about these fascinating creatures, how they are the ancestors of many of today's animals, how they lived , when they lived, where they lived and much more besides.

At the launch event (Waterstones Kensington) Chris Wormell explained that he had been thrilled to ask to draw the illustrations for this stunning book because he is a great lover of dinosaurs himself, making it quite an indulgent project! Each dinosaur was created using woodcut style, a style Chris taught himself back in the 1980s and has been using ever since. He told us how he enjoyed the extraordinary visuals the book demanded and that he is now working on *Planaterium*, yet another demanding illustrative challenge. His use of colour and texture brings each of these stunning creatures to life and the way in which the words and text complement one another has helped me learn a lot more about these amazing creatures and made the book part of my growing home museum library! I encourage you to make it part of yours too ...

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Dinosaurs and Other Prehistoric Creatures

Matt Sewell, pub. Pavilion

Dinosaurs are an endless source of fascination for children and older readers alike. Research is uncovering new information all the time, revising what we think we know about their habitat, their growth and appearance. From thinking that dinosaurs looked more like lizards, with similar coloured skin, it is now thought that they were perhaps rather more colourful, with several species having feathers. Fossils are still being discovered which will add further to our knowledge. The most recent included in this book is the Dracoraptor, the fossilized remains of which were found in coastal Wales in 2014, and named in tribute to the Welsh Dragon!

Artist Matt Sewell has taken all this information to create his own vision of the dinosaur world. As a keen ornithologist he has always used nature and wildlife in his artwork, producing a number of acclaimed books about birds, including his first children's title *The Big Bird Spot*, published earlier this year.

This interest is reflected in a number of the dinosaurs he has chosen for the book, those having bird-like features including beaks and feathers. In large format, double page spreads, a multitude of fascinating creatures run, hunt, walk, swim or fly across cream pages, with maybe just a hint of their habitat. Each opening reveals one, sometimes two, dinosaurs in vibrant colours, with their vital statistics listed and interesting information about them. A beautiful and fascinating book which invites browsing, with a lot of appeal; it would make a good introduction to the subject for a young enthusiast.

Jayne Gould

How to Think like a Coder: Without Even trying

Jim Christian, illus. Paul Boston, pub. Batsford

How to Think like a Coder: Without Even Trying is a beautiful-looking book: cork-board brown with vivid red and blue print (and a couple of robots gracing opposing corners). The aim of the book is to show the reader how to get to grips with coding: and the twist? There is no need to even touch a computer.

Every page prepares the reader for the end game: computer coding, which post-reading *How to Think like a Coder* your child will be brain-ready for. The book starts out by going through the basics of 'What is Coding,' and swiftly moves on to us - humans - and the personal computers that we possess between our ears. Jim Christian shows us how our brain works and the different approaches we can take towards problem solving, after all, to code, we must understand the bits and pieces that go together within the code. It's a puzzle. It needs to be broken down and understood.

Christian takes us through the popular River-Crossing Puzzle (apparently this dates back to the 9th century); what the success criteria would be for achieving a clean room - ahem, I see a few more parents grabbing their wallets – and even the Magic 8 Ball game is broken down, only using pen and paper, and designed from the ground up as if it were a computer game. By this point Jim Christian has already taken the reader through algorithms, loops, conditionals, variables and functions; one chapter is all Fun with Functions because, ‘not every part of a computer programme has to be coded, some is already done for you...’

The illustrations are striking, simple and effective and the two robots star throughout the book; trying to make a bed on one page and building a better cheese sandwich on another (page 77).

It really is a great take on how to teach coding as it lifts up the mirror to our everyday life, and everyday situations and turns them into opportunities to code – the reader has to understand how they work things out often and seemingly without thinking in order to eventually make things happen on a screen.

Not a bad purchase at all. If ever an author were thinking outside of the box, this would be it - quite literally.

Anja Stobbart

The Poo that Animals Do

Paul Mason, illus. Tony DeSaulles, pub. Wayland

Are jellyfish smelly fish? What does it mean if a rhino kicks up a stink? How can elephant poo fuel a house? Find out many fascinating facts about animal poo, from modern day use to funny animal habits.

This is an innovative and informative book that will catch the eye of even the most reluctant reader. The Poo that Animals Do is full of small snippets and facts all about animal’s poo. The illustrations compliment the facts perfectly and add their own touch of humour.

There are three things I challenge the reader NOT to do when they flick through the pages of this book:

I challenge you NOT to laugh;

I challenge you NOT to hunt for the poo;

I challenge you NOT to learn something.

A child may pick this book up because they think it is fun, silly or even a little bit naughty and they may spend their whole time giggling whilst they read, but when they finally put the book down they really will definitely have learnt something. It may be whether or not jellyfish poo, or how poo is used as camouflage, or even what humans use poo for. What they do with these impressive facts, I've no idea!

I believe this is an essential book for class book corners all over the world.

Anita Loughrey

Visit Anita's website: www.anitaloughrey.com

Pop-Up Shakespeare

Reed Martin and Austin Tichenor, illus. Jenny Maziels, pub. Walker Books

The Reduced Shakespeare Company are renowned proponents of distilling Shakespeare's plays to the bare essentials with humour but also retaining the essence of his writing and dramatic art. This book covers all thirty-nine plays plus the poems, as well as facts about Shakespeare's life, packed into five double-page openings.

Ingenious and inventive pop-ups, flaps and openings conceal a wealth of information, written in an engaging and irreverent though affectionate way; the authors clearly have a great deal of respect for and love of Shakespeare and his work, as well as a deep knowledge and understanding. Jenny Maziels' paper engineering and illustrations really bring the plays to life, with so much to discover within the layers. The book, cleverly, has to be turned round to read the back of each spread, with the promise of further discoveries.

The first opening sets the scene, with a welcome to the world of Shakespeare, introducing the man with a potted biography, a map of Stratford featuring the important buildings and his life in London. The different types of plays, Comedies, Histories, Romances and Tragedies, each have their own spread, with all the plays described and a summary for each in a Long Story Short...panel. If the authors think the play is boring, they say so! They are also dismissive of the authorship question, which they declare to be a load of rubbish.

As someone who is very interested in Shakespeare and the plays, I think the book is a wonderful introduction for young readers. Exploring the layers should lead them on to wanting to find out more, armed with some entertaining facts and an outline of each play.

Jayne Gould

Suffragettes and the Fight for the Vote

Sarah Ridley, pub. Franklin Watts

As we approach the centenary of (partial) women's suffrage in the UK, there has been a minor explosion of writing, fiction and factual, for readers of all ages. Quality non-fiction for KS1 and 2 is still something of a rarity, so Sarah Ridley's *Suffragettes and the Fight for the Vote* is particularly welcome. With a helpful glossary (but no index unfortunately), a colour-scheme echoing the suffragette colours of green (Give), white (Women) and violet (Votes), and a wealth of original contemporary material available from the London School of Economics Digital Library, as well as other sources, Ridley (the great-great niece of a famous suffragette) takes her readers from the early nineteenth century beginnings. She then shows how over the succeeding century, women became increasingly incensed at the gross inequality with regard to their social and political status.

From the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, and the Great Reform Act (1832), we see how the number of eligible men doubled in response to their anger at social inequality, culminating in a petition in 1866 asking that this be extended to more men, and to women on a similar basis. While men were partially successful, in the rest of her book, Ridley shows us that it took a further 16,000 petitions for women to obtain even a limited right to vote. She explains, with plentiful illustration, the different suffrage organisations, their leaders, and the approach with which each sought to further the cause of women's suffrage.

The twenty-first century frequently forgets that there were many alternative views about the best way to influence succeeding governments, and instead we think only of those women who took to public – sometimes violent – expressions of their wishes. Eventually women's essential contribution to the First World War, by keeping transport, law and factories operational, convinced MPs to offer partial suffrage, but it took another ten years for full and equal suffrage to be offered to both men and women.

Some may argue that we aren't fully there yet, but Ridley's book powerfully shows how women fought – sometimes literally – to access the rights which men accepted as theirs alone.

Bridget Carrington

Thank you Bees

Toni Yuly, pub. Candlewick Press

This book is a vividly illustrated first introduction to natural sciences for nursery to year 2.

It introduces children to the interconnected nature of animals, insects and plants. Bees make honey – thank you bees. There is no talk of pollination but at this stage of a child's developing awareness this

is not a serious omission. Rather the book goes on to tell us that clouds give us water and sheep give us wool. This is more great introductory detail.

This reviewer's most favoured acknowledgement however is that Earth gives us a home. The intention is to make even the youngest children aware that we as humanity have a responsibility to protect and nurture what we have been given. Come to think of it, some adults might also benefit from understanding the same lesson.

Thank You Bees is a very important book with a message presented in a very gentle and thoughtful manner allowing and encouraging children to learn on more than one level.

Rebecca Butler

What Makes Me a Me?

Ben Faulks, illus. David Tazzyman, Bloomsbury

What Makes Me a Me? immediately pulls the reader in with its cute beanie-hatted be-spectacled character and the tactile title in glittery letters. This is basically a story about identity, in which the character compares himself to a range of animals, inanimate objects and even the naughty boy next door, concluding that, whilst there are some similarities, he is nothing like any of these and that "everybody's different in their own special way." In a diverse world it is good to recognise and celebrate uniqueness, and this book would make a good starting point for discussions with children about similarities and differences in race and culture.

What Makes Me a Me? is an easy-to-read funny and imaginative story written in rhyme with illustrations by award-winning David Tazzyman that both compliment and add to the text. These vary from scene to scene and fill the pages with bright detail: the comparison with a computer contains a mass of line drawings, whilst that with a volcano has a glowing tower of lava bursting up the page. I particularly liked the two pages at the front and back of the book; the first showing a variety of characters in muted colours, the last showing the same characters but with colour and added details giving them personality.

Recommended for: Pre-school, KS1

Barbara Band

What's Cooking?

Joshua David Stein, illus. Julia Rothman, pub. Phaidon

The mysteries of food and its preparation are revealed in a whimsical way, offering delicious answers to questions about what can and can't be done in the kitchen. Can ice-cream be fried? Can I can clams? What can be done with eggs and potatoes? Can anything else be stuffed as well as turkeys? Do frozen peas grow on frozen trees?

The book raises the kind of off-the-wall questions that might be asked by a child and answers them offering a blend of facts, open ended questions, fun and wordplay, especially when it asks that age old question at the end of the book – who is going to do the dishes? It is this mixture of styles that gives the book its changing rhythms and quirkiness.

A companion book to *Can I Eat That?*, this is a fun exploration of the practical and the enjoyable world of kitchen cookery, which could encourage children to try their hand at cooking and to exploring new foods.

Age suitability: 5+

Annie Everall

Be Cool Be Nice

Be Cool, Be Nice is not just the title of a book but of a campaign, of a way of thinking. It is a message to young people, that they can be cool and be nice too. Kindness is after all, always in style. Editor-in-Chief of Armadillo, **Louise Ellis-Barrett** went along to the launch.



This is a book about being stylish and it was certainly a launch about being stylish. Not only were we hosted by the House of Lords, on a charming terrace overlooking the River Thames on a wonderfully sunny Autumn lunchtime in October but the glittering array of people who arrive in support of the book, who have contributed to the book, made it an event to remember for a very long time and more importantly give the book a kudos that will ensure it's message is heard, recognized, remembered and put into action.

We had the chance to mingle and rub shoulders with royalty – Princess Eugene was at the UK launch and her sister, Princess Beatrice at the US launch as both are strong supporters of the message. There was a chance to have makeup done, being cool and being nice is after all also about being yourself and the makeup was very natural, plus Pat McGrath, whose make-up it was, has contributed to the book because she believes that what we put into the world we get back – another very important message not to be missed.

Add to this the photobooth where much fun could be had, the decorations that filled the room and the goodie bags to take away plus of course the book with its ingenious front cover – get the app and you will discover just what I mean and how this book is more than just a book ...

This is a book for children and adults alike. The launch, for adults, was an important one, encouraging us to share with the children in our lives, in any capacity, the importance of behaviour, the right behaviour, sharing, reading and dipping into the book will further reinforce this message and it is a timeless one, just as the book promises to be.



Learn how to live and love together, to share some kindness, be proud of who you are, recognize others for who they are, love the book, read the book and maybe one day you too will get to share in such wonderful launches and help to spread an important message too.



The Biographic Series

Armadillo's **Simon Barrett** (SB) took advantage of an opportunity to interview **Jason Hook** (JH), publisher and **Matt Carr** (MC), designer of the Biographic Series to find out more about the background and development of this exciting new series.



James Hook, Publisher



Matt Carr, Designer

SB: *The Biographic series* is for me a revolution in the biographical genre. How did the project begin? When did you realise this was an exciting new development?

JH: That's very kind, we certainly think it creates a new way of looking at the lives of the great thinkers and artists, and offers a very instant and visual approach to understanding extraordinary lives. Matt presented the original concept designs, which I immediately thought were exciting as I've always worked on books that make information visually engaging and fun. We worked together with our designer Robin Shields on exploring the

infographic approach to its fullest, to try to develop a unique style of biography.

SB: *The Biographic Series* seems to have a broad appeal, and from Armadillo's perspective, particularly accessible to young people. Did you intend the series to have broad appeal or did you think it would appeal to a certain market? Has your readership surprised you?

JH: Broad appeal! We love the idea that a *Biographic* might introduce a reader to an artist or writer they hadn't appreciated before. Equally, we hope that by looking at someone's life in the context

and culture of their world, we might create surprising new insights for readers who already know the subject. It's been a thrill to see the books selling everywhere from bookshops to museum and gallery gift shops, and appealing to everyone from students trying to get a grip on a subject they're about to study to lecturers looking for new ways to present information.

SB: Given we seem to be an increasingly visual society, why do you think the idea of biographies and infographics had not been combined before?

MC: It's one of those things you think of, then check on Google, expecting there to be a whole

load of them already out there and you find out there isn't. It was quite a surprise!

SB: Who came up with the title for the series of *Biographic*? Do you think it will be a new word in the English language?

JH: It was Matt!

MC: That would be nice. Give it a few years maybe!

SB: I cannot begin to imagine how much work is behind each book. How long does it take to write each *Biographic*? Whose *Biographic* has been the most challenging so far?

JH: The writing stage varies from a few months to quite a few months! Because the books have such a unique approach, the challenge for the authors is to think in pictures instead of words. They have to do the research required to find all the facts and figures (we need lots of data, dates and numbers) and then work with our editor, Jamie Pumfrey, on coming up with ideas for the designers to develop into great infographics. We then have to beg the authors not to write too much, as the books work best when most of the information is contained in the graphics!

MC: The design takes about six weeks with two people doing it...I'd say the most challenging were Shakespeare, Leonardo and Churchill... they really packed a lot into their lives! Also Bowie, who we're currently working on, because he's so iconic and the style had to change slightly to reflect that.

SB: *The Biographic series* has covered so many interesting subjects, defying easy categorisation. The series really covers European and possibly the World's culturally great people. How did you choose who was going to be the first *Biographic*? Is the choice getting easier?

JH: We decided to start with artists, as our infographics seemed to complement their work so nicely. Actually the ones we started first are still not published: we would love to publish biographies of Pablo Picasso and Frida Kahlo, but we're still working on them! The choice doesn't get any easier, there are so many different lives we'd like to look at: architects, film directors, actors, scientists, musicians, politicians. So many biographies and so little time!

SB: Currently Jane Austen is the only woman in the *Biographic series*. Can we

expect some more women included soon?

JH: Most definitely, we're very keen to make that happen.

Biographic: Coco is about to publish, looking at Coco Chanel's life, and, as I say, we think *Biographic: Kahlo* could be wonderful. She had the most extraordinary life!

SB: The blend of more important and trivial information makes the *Biographic series* informative and amusing, but also insightful. What appears trivial can turn out not to be so. I can still remember seeing the infographic on Jane Austen's dinner parties. On one level trivial, but on another level dinner parties were so central to Jane Austen's world. How do you decide what to include? How many infographics don't make it to the final edition?

JH: You've hit the nail on the head! I love the trivia, and it does bring a biography to life and give a flavour of the world that life was lived in. Readers love discovering that Coco Chanel went fishing with Winston Churchill, Shakespeare owned five houses and a public house, Churchill came under enemy fire 50 times and Jane Austen never ate lunch! We do

create many more infographics than we use. We tend to leave out those that don't convey their information instantly or in an entertaining way, or those that require too many words.

SB: All the infographics are great, but some are so good, you just have to share them with another person. The intellectual knowledge necessary to distil the content and the visualisation of that content can be astounding. For example, the summary of the complete works of Shakespeare in one infographic was genius. Does

the team ever surprise itself with what they produce?

MC: It's good that each spread is a different challenge, some harder than others. And fitting everything into two A5 pages in an interesting way is very rewarding.

JH: We work with fantastic writers, and Matt, Robin and Jamie do a brilliant and wonderfully creative job. It is a series that always produces surprises, which is why we all enjoy working on the books so much. I hope it surprises readers in the same way.

SB: Finally, what are you most proud of about the *Biographies series*?

MC: Seeing them in shops and galleries is nice, plus it's been good learning stuff as you design things.

JH: I'm proud to see them travelling the globe: appearing in translations all around the world, and in galleries such as the Louvre. And it's always fantastic just hearing that people have enjoyed reading them and giving them as gifts.

What is the *Biographic series*?

The Biographic Series published by Ammonite Press is a new non-fiction collection visually documenting the lives of world famous thinkers and creatives. Each book takes 50 amazing facts about an individual and their world, displaying the facts in a number of different infographics. With its mix of important and trivial information, each book is hugely entertaining and a fascinating read.

The Biographic series currently covers the lives of:

- Austen
- Cézanne
- Churchill
- Klimt
- Leonardo
- Monet

- Coco
- Degas
- Dior
- Rembrandt
- Shakespeare
- Van Gogh

Latest releases

Biographic: Cézanne

Paul Cézanne, a French post-Impressionist Painter and influence upon later Cubism, also painted 176 pieces of fruit in his still-life work.

Biographic: Coco

Coco Chanel is a true rags-to-riches life, from workhouse to fashion house. Chanel was also a keen sportswoman, catching in one day a total of 61 lbs of fish, catching more than Churchill.

Biographic: Dior

Dior was a French fashion designer leading innovation and change since the 1940s.

Despite public success, the private man Dior never found the love he longed for. Klimt was the face of fin de siècle Vienna, producing iconic art, such as The Kiss, yet

living a very ordinary and hard-working life, never going far from home for very long.

Harry Potter: the History of Magic

British Library Exhibition

Being invited to a private view of the *Harry Potter* exhibition at the British Library did, I admit, presented me with mixed feelings. How could they, I wondered, make this an appealing exhibition for the doubtless many children and families who want to visit? I love the British Library and its exhibitions but they are not often associated with the type of exhibit that would really engage children as they are often about the wonderful, stunning, rare books, prints, maps and other manuscripts that the library holds.

On one level this exhibition was no different, there are plenty of very old, medieval manuscripts to pour over and marvel at, however alongside them are modern manuscripts, copies of J K Rowling's own notes and drafts of the various *Harry Potter* books, prints, sketches and drawings by J K Rowling and her super-talented illustrator Jim Kay.

But what else is there? Well the exhibition invites you in, down a corridor lit by cauldrons, with portraits of the Hogwarts teachers on the end wall and into Room 1, Potions where you

can interact with the exhibits, make your own potions, read a giant potions book and marvel at the history of potions as you gaze at some beautiful books including the earliest printed book on witchcraft, Balds leechbook dating from the tenth century and some fascinating alchemy information.

Which brings me nicely to Room 2, Alchemy where you can marvel at the 6m long alchemical manuscript that is still, in parts, to be deciphered.

In Room 3 it is Herbology, there are talking plant pots in here and a film featuring Jim Kay explaining the inspirations behind his drawings. Complete with gardening wellingtons, lots of pots and some lovely old books including a Culpepper Herbal this is a fact filled room for the green fingered among you.

Charms is the theme of Room 4 with its purple lighting, ceiling filled with broomsticks plenty of sketches from J K Rowling and lots of witchcraft books you will also be amazed by the talking hats and the very special invisibility cloak in its very own cabinet. Maybe you'd like to

have a go at making the 20th century love potion that there is a recipe for too?

From Charms we move to Astronomy in Room 5 with the amazing celestial globe of 1693 and your chance to interact with it, looking at the constellations, discovering what inspired J K Rowling in her writing and connecting the stars, just like the characters do with their astrolabes.

A red room for Divination (Room 6) contains a very comfy looking chair and lots of teacups, have you ever had your tealeaves read? Playing cards, oracle bones and more besides make this a fascinating room to explore.

It may not be the most popular subject at Hogwarts, or perhaps it is the most dangerous but you can't miss the Defence Against the Dark Arts (Room 7) with its serpentine wand, real life cauldron (which really did explode on a cliff top in Cornwall).

And then to finish it all off learn about Care of Magical Creatures and watch them wander past you behind the walls before you

come full circle with a brief look at Past, Present, Future and see some of the many editions of the *Harry Potter* series.

A simply stunning and very absorbing exhibition that will fascinate book lovers, *Harry*

Potter loves, grown-ups and children alike.

Lapland: The Untold Story of Father Christmas



Christmas is magical, it is a time of cold, crisp days and warm snugly nights, it is a time that is perfect for stories and storytelling and what story could be more appropriate than that of Father Christmas.

Now I can hear you saying ‘but we know the story of Father

Christmas’. My reply to that is ‘do you really?’ For I too thought I knew the story until one morning a few weeks ago when a magical invitation found its way to me. I was to join Lisa Snowden, Alison and Mike Battle, Lauren A. Mills, Bloomsbury Children’s Books and staff from the Tinker Tailor agency to discover the true story. Breakfast was due to be served in the delightful surroundings of Spring at Somerset House and on arrival we were greeted in a festively decorated reception room and served welcoming cups of warm drinks.

Having gathered together we were welcomed to the morning event by ... well it was two of Santa’s elves, straight from Lapland UK. They ushered ‘us humans’ into the main room, but only once we had been given our Elf Passports. these little booklets come with a map to help you navigate Lapland UK but also rhymes and songs to sing as you undertake your adventure. With space for detail about yourself there are stamps to be gathered for taking part in all the activities on offer. So what was on offer to us?

There was a sumptuous breakfast of course, how can any good human, or elf for that matter, have an adventure without a good breakfast first? Then there was an opportunity to meet some of Santa’s elves who had followed the magical pathway out of Lapland to share the morning with us and bring us an early touch of Christmas magic. Meeting Conker – the elf who does not yet have a bell – Wish, Wittle and Pixie Mixie – can you guess what they all do – was a true delight. Then being introduced to the humans who help run Lapland UK and hear an excerpt from their story, the true story of Father Christmas, was such a magical delight that I have been in the Christmas spirit since and had a very special spring in my step for weeks now.

Lapland UK has, we think been here for 10 years, at least that is what we are told, how long it has really been hidden in the English countryside is a mystery for the magical pathway is only opened once a year for humans to walk down and then you need to be very lucky indeed to find your way in. The elves work super hard

in their factory all year and this being, for the humans, the 10th anniversary, they allowed Alison and Mike Battle to tell everyone the magical, *Lapland: Untold story of Father Christmas*.

In a red cloth bound hardback book there is a story, a story for those who can see Christmas in the world forever, a story for those who have the heart and imagination of a child. This is the real story of Christmas. With the warmth of great love the story unfolds and it begins in olden times when there was still magic in the air and there was a toymaker and his wife ... as the tale unfolds we learn how the toymaker and his wife

become the givers of gifts, friends of the elves and then ... But I must not reveal too much here. Meet the characters from Lapland, meet the elves, find out the real story of Father Christmas and enjoy this story being read over and over again as it fills you with all the warmth and joy of this festive season. Don't forget either to look closely at the images filling the pages. Their glorious old-fashioned style, gentle colour palette and attention to detail bring even more of the story to life.

Some of the story was shared with us by Lisa Snowdon, Alison and Mike Battle explained some of their

involvement in it and have managed to find a few minutes to answer a few quick questions for us too.

Competition

To win a deluxe copy of *Lapland: The Untold Story of Father Christmas*, children should create a new elf for Lapland complete with name and description by Saturday 16th December. Entries should be sent to armadilloeditor@gmail.com. Three lucky winners will hopefully receive their prize in time for Christmas day.

Maurice the Unbeastly

Reviewer **Bridget Carrington** follows up her Armadillo blog about *Maurice the Unbeastly* with this special interview with the book's illustrator **James Mountford Karl**.

BC: I loved *Maurice the Unbeastly* which I thought was an outstanding combination of word and image to celebrate non-conformity and difference. I know that you've produced cover art for some very well-known titles, so can you tell us a little bit about yourself and just how you got into the business of book illustration.

JMK: I'm 29, I live in Wales now but we moved around a lot as I was growing up, we started off in Germany where I was born and I've been drawing since the word go really. I didn't know much as a kid but I knew I wanted something to do with art. I went to college and studied a broad church of all things art, ceramics, painting, photography, design but I was pretty much sold on illustrations and stories, think it helped that I liked to read also. I then went onto uni to study illustration, after that I spent two years freelancing which wasn't going great to be honest. So I decided to try and get an agent and luckily after a few tries The Bright Agency saw

something about my work and since then I've been illustrating all sorts of stories and books.

BC: I imagine that the creative process when producing a book cover is different to that for illustrating a picture book. When creating a picture book, how much is the style and colour palette of illustration a decision of the illustrator?

JMK: It's a collaboration by all means, the publishing house has ideas and I have some too and we chat and discuss what could work based on my first drawings. The publisher was great to work with, they gave me a lot of freedom to let my imagination run wild. The colour palette was a happy accident to be honest. I get bored of drawing roughs of a book in just black and white, so in the case of *Maurice*, I was using greens, pinks and black and the art director really liked it so we stuck with it.

BC: When I first opened *Maurice* I was immediately struck by echoes of Maurice Sendak's classic *Where the Wild*

Things Are. Was that a conscious connection or did his Wild Things infiltrate your work of their own volition?

JMK: I was worried about this when we finalised *Maurice*, I drew a bunch of hybrid animals/beast for the publisher to choose from at first. All I knew from the text (for me) was that *Maurice* had to be big and masculine-ish, just so we could see this giant supposedly scary creature in a softer light, rather than making him small or timid. *Maurice* is a combination of a bear, lizard and marmoset monkey. Maurice Sendak is one of my illustrative heroes, his stories and art have been with me growing up, (I wrote my dissertation on him) so there's bound to be echoes of that in my work. Hopefully it's a polite nod of admiration to the great man and not seen as me being a lazy illustrator! Haha

BC: Your work is very distinctive, but *Maurice* is particularly notable for the restricted range of colours you

have chosen. What influenced your decision to do this?

JMK: The text influenced this, when I read it the one thing that struck me was that Maurice is alone, he doesn't fit in at home or in school. Even his parents sit opposite him on the one spread they show up in. It felt right to have him in an isolated colour palette compared to the rest of the beasts who are all alike in behaviour and colourings. Hopefully it works on a visual level, even if you can't read you might get the sense that Maurice doesn't quite fit in. And if I'm really lucky, at the end of the story, it won't matter that he's coloured differently to the others, they should all seem as one (fingers crossed).

BC: In my view, the illustrations in really good picture books don't just show things mentioned in the text, they specifically extend the story. A notable example in Maurice is the identity of the 'creature', revealed in the pictures but never in the text! Can you tell us how you chose what the creature would look like?

JMK: I remember not knowing either, when I first read the text but I asked the team over at the

publishing house and they imagined the 'creature' was a small fluffy dog. Not a very exciting answer aye? But at a guess I reckon a domesticated creature/pet is sort of the opposite of the wild beasts... perhaps they wanted something the audience would know to be cute to oppose the beast... I'm really just guessing now.

BC: Some might see the creature's colour (or lack thereof) as an indication of its being 'good' compared to the monsters which we think of as 'bad'. Was this your intention?

JMK: Not really, the dog was spotty when I first drew him in black and white too (but not a dalmatian) I wanted him to be visually similar to Maurice at first but after some discussion it was best to have the dog as a white ball of fluff so it felt different from all the creatures, hopefully it subtly shows that Maurice treats everyone with kindness no matter how strange and fluffy they seem.

BC: Are people or monsters (beastly or human!) easier to create for your illustrations?

JMK: I draw people more than monsters, but I like it all. I love drawing and stories.

BC: It must help to be asked to illustrate a book whose message you believe in! There's an excellent message for us all, but particularly young children, in this book, reassuring us that difference is not wrong. Do you see any parallels with your own childhood experience?

JMK: It's great to illustrate a story with a message you can believe in, makes the job at hand a lot more interesting. Honestly I think everyone feels like an outsider, children and adults, I can relate to Maurice, for sure. We moved around a lot when I was growing up, by the time I was 17 I'd been to 12 different schools! I know what it feels like to be the new kid. So when a piece of text like Maurice came along it felt right for me.

BC: Do you pick and choose what you will or won't illustrate, and if so what influences your decision?

JMK: When I first started out I said nearly yes to every project offered, without even looking at the text, being a freelance illustrator isn't a comfortable way to live and you definitely do it for the love of it more than the money. I was flattered that people actually wanted me to help make books. But the

problem with that is, work sticks to you. So now I ask for synopsis, text and the theme of the story up front before agreeing to anything. If I can care about the story it means I can do a better job at illustrating it. The text does a lot of the work for you, there are bits that will inform you what needs to be illustrated, and other bits where you have room to create your interpretation of it. If you asked 10 illustrators all to draw a red tree, none of those trees would look the same, they'd all be trees and maybe some shade of red, but they would be an expression/echo of the artists' ideas.

BC: Are there any existing books you would particularly like to be asked to illustrate?

JMK: I'd love to illustrate *His Dark Materials* by Philip

Pullman a special edition sort of deal. I love Pullman's entire works but those stories schooled me a lot about life. But in all honesty I don't think I could reflect the story that lives on those pages with how I draw it needs something stoic and caught between a classic and contemporary sort of look. It would be great to illustrate a classic book too, one I loved as a kid, *Peter Pan* or *The Little Mermaid*... I'd be proud of that.

BC: Obviously you work in many spheres of creative art. Have you any ambition both to write and illustrate a book, and if so what age group would you aim it at?

JMK: I had to laugh at this, not because it's a daft question but picture books are much harder to write than most think. I've written a story (which I'm

quietly proud of) it was intended as a picture book in my eyes but I sent it to my agent Arabella a few weeks back and bless her, she rang me and said 'Karl, this is not a children's picture book'. Publishers won't touch it (the story was about a dead bird) but rather than shoot me down, she schooled me on the wonder that is adult picture books... So I'm hoping there is room in the world of books for a story about a dead bird! So to answer your question, I'd love to write and illustrate books myself I just have to think about whose hands it would end up in first.

BC: Finally, can you tell us where we can find more examples of your work online?

JMK: I'm on Instagram, Twitter and I have a portfolio website too.

You Can't Make Me Go to Witch School



Armadillo's **Anita Loughrey** joined the magical launch of *You Can't Make Me Go to Witch School*. The launch took place at Pickled Pepper Books in Crouch End on Thursday 18th October.



As soon as we arrived the fun began. There was a selection of fun spooky name tags to be our alias for the evening and the Nosy Crow team were dressed up in Daisy Wart's signature stripy orange tights. Refreshments and snacks were readily available, topped off by an amazing spooky cake.

Maureen Lynas explained how the inspiration for *You Can't Make Me Go to Witch School* was sparked by a comment from Caroline Sheldon. Speeches were also made by Nosy Crow's Head of Fiction, Kirsty Stansfield and Skylark agent, Amber Caravéo. We were introduced to the illustrator Jamie Littler and the cover for Maureen's next book, *Get Me Out of Witch School*, was revealed.

It was a great evening with a fantastic atmosphere.

Pickled Pepper Books exhibited a fantastic Halloween window display featuring Maureen's book.



Picture books

The Adventures of Egg Box Dragon

Richard Adams, illus. Alex T. Smith

Baabwaa and Wooliam

David Elliot, illus. Melissa Sweet

Balthazar the Great

Kirsten Sims

Bonkers About Beetroot

Cath Jones, illus. Chris Jevons

Christmas Surprise!

The Creature

Helen Bate

Dragons: Father and Son

Alexandre Lacroix, illus. Ronan Badel

The Elephant in the Room

James Thorp, illus. Angus MacKinnon

His Royal Tinyness: A Terrible True Story

Sally Lloyd-Jones, illus. David Roberts

Home Sweet Home

Mia Cassany, illus. Paula Blumen

Little Bear's Big Adventure

Sarah Philips, illus. Claire Fennell

The Night Box

Louise Grieg, illus. Ashling Lindsay

Oh No! Where Did Walter Go?

Joanna Boyle

One House for All

Inese Zandere, illus. Juris Petraskevics, adpt.
Lawrence Schimel

Pandora

Victoria Turnbull

Reena's Rainbow

Dee White, illus. Tracie Grimwood

Rooster Wore Skinny Jeans

Jessie Miller, illus. Barbara Bakos

The Shepherd Boy and the Christmas Gifts

Aly Hilberts, illus. Sanne Duff

Something's Fishy

Jean Gourounas

Twinkle, Twinkle, ABC

Barney Saltzberg, illus. Fred Benaglia

When I Grow Up

Tim Minchin, illus. Steve Antony

Witchfair

Brigitte Minne, illus. Carll Cneut, trans. Laura
Watkinson

The Wolf, The Duck & The Mouse

Mac Barnett, illus. Jon Klassen

Words And Your Heart

Kate Jane Neal

Yoga Babies

Fearne Cotton, illus. Sheena Dempsey

Junior books

A Kitten Called Holly

Helen Peters, illus. Ellie Snowdon

The Accidental Father Christmas

Tom McLaughlin

Amelia Fang and the Barbaric Ball

Laura Ellen Anderson

Begone the Raggedy Witches

Celine Kiernan, illus. Victoria Semykina

The Boy with One Name

J. R. Wallis

The Challenge

Tom Hoyle, *Spring*

The Creakers

Tom Fletcher, illus. Shane Devries

The Doldrums

Nicholas Gannon

Eloise Undercover

Sarah Baker

Fairy Tales

Hilary McKay, Sarah Gibb

I Swapped my Brother on the Internet

Jo Simmons, illus. Nathan Reed

Jack Fortune and The Search for The Hidden Valley

Sue Purkiss

Maudlin Towers: The Curse of the Werewolf Boy

Chris Priestly

Mike

Andrew Norriss

Not Yet Dark

Simon P Clark

The Princess and the Suffragette

Holly Webb

Prisoner of Ice and Snow

Ruth Lauren

Ruby McCracken Tragic without Magic

Elizabeth Ezra

Run, Elephant, Run

Patricia McCarthy

Scarecrow

Danny Weston

Seven Simple and Slightly Silly Stories

John Foley, illus. Grant Cathro

Skeleton Tree

Kim Ventrella, illus. Victoria Assanelli

A Skinful of Shadows

Frances Hardinge

Sky Dancer

Gill Lewis

Young Adult books

The Bad Decisions Playlist

Michael Rubens

Ballad for a Mad Girl

Vikki Wakefield

Genuine Fraud

E. Lockhart

The Hanging Girl

Eileen Cook

The Inexplicable Logic of my Life

Benjamin Alire

Love, Hate & Other Filters

Samira Ahmed

My Side of the Diamond

Sally Gardner, illus. Nat Barlex

The Sidekicks

Will Kostakis

Star by Star

Sheena Wilkinson

Still Life with Tornado

A. S. King

The Treatment

C. L. Taylor

Warcross

Marie Lu

Zero Repeat Forever

G.S. Prendergast

Non-Fiction books

Animal Surprises

Nicola Davies, illus. Abbie Cameron

Joshua David Stein, illus. Julia Rothman

Build It! 25 Creative STEM projects for Budding Engineers

Caroline Alliston

Coder Academy: Are You Ready For The Challenge?

Sean McManus, illus. Rosan Magar

Dinosaurium

Chris Wormell, illus. Lily Murray

Dinosaurs and Other Prehistoric Creatures

Matt Sewell

How to Think like a Coder: Without Even trying

Jim Christian, illus. Paul Boston

The Poo that Animals Do

Paul Mason, illus. Tony DeSaulles

Pop-Up Shakespeare

Reed Martin and Austin Tichenor, illus. Jenny Maziels

Suffragettes and the Fight for the Vote

Sarah Ridley

Thank you Bees

Toni Yuly

What Makes Me a Me?

Ben Faulks, illus. David Tazzyman

What's Cooking?