



Armadillo
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**Winter
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Books Reviewed

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Board Books

Bougie Babies Boss Brunch

Harriet Evans, illus. Kim Faria, pub. Little Tiger

I have discovered a new word to add to my vocabulary. Bougie. Derived from the French bourgeois, it's used to refer to someone with upper-class tastes, who might possibly display pretentiousness. Why did I need to look it up? There are clues a plenty in this little board book but I wanted to be sure I was understanding it fully. I am and I love it.

If you have, or know someone who has, Bougie inclinations, you'll adore this darling book. Meet the Bougie babies who do yoga with the sunrise, visit the farmer's market and even enjoy babyccinos. They love to colour coordinate and snack on smorgasbords. With its simple sentences, bold pictures and playful nature this book is a delight.

The Feelings Book

Mike Henson, illus. Miguel Ordóñez, pub. Happy Yak

With its extended back cover sharing some of the feeling words and their associated faces, this book is eye catching from the outset. The reason for the extended cover becomes immediate as soon as you open the book to find Orange who is feeling buzzy and jittery. After giving his paw a scratch can you identify what he's feeling?

You'll be able to see the words and faces from every page which means you can look at them each time and hopefully work out which one fits. Of course, there are not truly any right or wrong answers but this book offers the perfect opportunity for talking about and exploring feelings, how they affect us, might look like and even sound. A wonderful playbook.

First Friends: Colours

First Friends: Opposites

Mk Smith Despres, illus. Libby Burns, pub. Barefoot Books

With the *First Friends* series adults can teach young children, especially those at nursery school or its equivalent, some very important first steps in their learning journey. Not only can children share in the joy of being with friends, seeing what it is like to have a teacher, they can also enjoy the wonders of the world. They are outside when they learn about the colours all around them, so many to see and in so many different places!

Back inside and it is nearly time to rest, time for a nap and whilst they get ready the children have an opportunity to learn all about opposites. This little board book offers the perfect opportunity for little ones to join in. Arms are stretched high and then hung low, mouths open for a yawn, close for sleep. Eyes open when we wake, some smile whilst others frown. There is so much to discover and this series is the perfect accompaniment.

Hello Fish!

Hello Sun!

Sharon King-Chai, pub. Two Hoots

The series is growing *Hello Bunny!* and *Hello Bee!* Are now joined by *Hello Fish!* and *Hello Sun!* Young children, and their adults, are certain to have hours of fun with these charming, bright and informative books. A shimmering seahorse welcomes us into *Hello Fish!*: can you spot the hidden octopus on the next page? If you can then turn over for a special surprise and your next challenge.

When we say *Hello Sun!*, we are often looking at the sky. (Don't look at the sun directly it's too bright.) Did you know there are lots of other things to see up in the sky? Perhaps you'll spot the flying birds. The sun lights up land and sea too, has it helped you to find the black whale in the blue sea? And what about when sun and rain are out together what can you spot then?

A delightful, charming and clever pair of board books.

I Find My First Words

ed. Little Gestalten, illus. Yayo Kawamura, pub. Die Gestalten Verlag

First words can come as a wonderful surprise, it's impossible to know which your little one will choose to speak first. Once they have started, or even beforehand, sharing words and their associated pictures is a wonderful exercise. As speaking skills develop they'll be able to make connections that will be invaluable once they learn to say the words for themselves.

Learning words is so much fun, especially now there is this board book to accompany the experience. It helps little ones to explore the bathroom, the park, the playground, the street, the farm, the doctor's surgery, a holiday, the supermarket, the wardrobe and the playroom. With a big scene spread out over three quarters of the page there is also a panel with pictures to spot and their words. This book promises hours of learning and fun.

Ten Minutes to Bed: Where's Little Dragon?

Rhiannon Fielding, illus. Chris Chatterton, pub. Ladybird Books

The *Ten Minutes to Bed* series continues to grow. Eight of the many books, including this one, are now board books. A certain Little Dragon named Flicker is playing hide and seek with the reader. Are you ready to visit the Land of Nod for a bedtime adventure, to find Flicker and make sure that he is tucked up in bed.

Little hands need to be able to lift the flaps and keep a close eye on the pages for clues as to where Flicker might be. Under the mushroom, in the jungle or on a moonlit log? He might be playing with the fish or perhaps, up there, do you see the dark cave? Could Flicker be in there and will he already be asleep? An absolute charm.

Picturebooks

Bert and the Bubble

Kim Hillyard, pub. Ladybird Books

Bert is a frog, as are all his friends, and one day he finds a bubble, beautiful and very shiny. He lets Sandra hold it, but she's not careful, and it bursts. The same thing happens with his next bubble, and it's Norman who pops it. So, when Bert finds another, enormous bubble, he builds a fort to keep it safe, and hides himself in the fort, too. Days pass, and then his friends tap on the door, and keep tapping until he comes out. They promise to be more careful, and they all have a lot of fun with the bubble until, inevitably, it bursts. His friends are apologetic and sad, but Bert says that playing with the bubble with them was the most fun of all.

This is a very charming story about being careful when playing with other people's possessions, but in reality, bubbles hardly last any time at all, and certainly one bubble, however large, couldn't be played with all day, even if great care is taken. The cover declares that this is a story about sharing, and the illustrations are fun, add this one to a collection with some of the many other books around the subject.

Diana Barnes

Dragon Flower

Chen Jiang Hong, trans. Alyson Waters, pub. NYRB Kids

Mae is a very young girl travelling with her father and extremely sick mother on a horse and cart for months in search of some magical flowers, the only possible cure for her mother. The exhausted family camp in a village by a mountain, Mae falls asleep determined to find the mysterious plant. Woken by a beam of light she follows it into a foreboding forest and through a hidden door into a cave. A whirlwind picks her up and carries her into a cavern filled with the ruby red flowers she has been desperately searching for. As she begins to pick them a large angry dragon appears; she is stealing his flowers. After she bravely explains why she needs them the dragon makes her a deal. She can take the flowers to save her mother but only if she rescues his injured young son who has fallen into a pit.

There is a traditional Chinese folklore feel to the watercolour illustrations. The story has many classic fairytale features including Mae unquestioningly accepting the fantastical and mysterious events that occur alongside her ordinary and mundane existence and of course there is a happy ever after,

although due to the delicate subject matter – a dying mother miraculously revived by a special flower - this is a book that may require sensitive handling.

Mae is a wonderful heroine, her trailing blue cloak makes her look like a superhero, she is unfalteringly bold, brave, determined, kind, compassionate, and so expressive in her appearance and movement. The reader cannot help but be captivated by her. Where the text is quite understated and straightforward the illustrations are big, dramatic, vivid, and energetic, especially the bright red dragons with gold whiskers (mirroring the red petals and gold stamens of the special flowers) and the panoramic atmospheric brooding environments and landscapes.

This is a compelling, magical, tender, quest adventure packaged in an eye-catching large square format, an enchanting picturebook fairytale.

Natalie McCrystal Plimmer

Enchanted Beach

Esther Freud, illus. Emma Chinnery, pub. Walker Books

Are you one those people who visit beaches in the warm weather, on sunny days or simply when you are on holiday and there is one nearby? Have you ever considered visiting the beach no matter the season?

I am among the latter. I am not a huge fan of the ocean but I think beaches are fascinating places, all year around. I have had some wonderful wintry walks on beaches and there is something very bracing and wonderful about it. Beaches change daily. In this gentle story one boy and his dog discover that, for them no one day at the beach is ever the same. Beaches are a natural feature of the world, they are wide open to the forces of nature, not only the oceans. There can be storms or sunshine, castles built, games played, picnics (complete with sandy sandwiches) consumed and best of all (in my opinion) treasure hunting. Maybe you'll dig down in the sand, comb the surface or find some rock pools. However, you hunt you'll soon find that the wonder of the beach is that it offers so much no matter the season.

Embrace the power of nature, the seasons and the sheer joy of the outdoors where the wonder of discovery changes every day. Start with this delightful book and then see where your own adventures will take you.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Frank is a Butterfly

Alex Latimer, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Frank is a plain, dull-brown, medium-sized caterpillar. He doesn't have any pretty stripes, spots and zigzags or the bright colours and hairy bristles of his fellow caterpillars. But Frank is absolutely fine with that. He's happy in the sunshine with his gorgeous view of the river munching on delicious leaves and enjoying the company of a myriad of tiny insect friends. As the caterpillars build their tiny chrysalises they're full of excitement about how beautiful they'll look when they hatch...only to be bitterly disappointed with their new looks, convinced they're not beautiful enough to fly around. Only Frank is ecstatic, now able to fly to the river with his strong brown wings, make new friends who don't care about appearances and explore the wonderful world of nature together.

Frank is a fabulous and unforgettable hero. Completely satisfied with his leafy lot in life and ecstatically happy and confident in his own wings, he knows that looks aren't everything and refuses to compare himself to others or envy what he doesn't have. In a society which judges by appearances and where we're constantly encouraged to measure our lifestyle against that of others on social media, this is a powerful and timely reminder to all of us to 'be more Frank.'

With its bold, bright, characterful illustrations and a simple explanation of the caterpillar to butterfly metamorphosis this is a must have for any KS1 classroom or primary school library. It is so much more than another life cycle book though. Very funny speech bubbles between the insect friends make it a perfect and popular read-aloud, a story to revisit again and again. Packed full of positivity and deadpan humour, this is the ultimate feelgood picturebook, reminding every reader, young and old, that they're amazing, unique - and enough - as they are.

A companion story, *Godfrey is a Frog*, is equally inspired and inspiring. Buy both, they're utterly brilliant.

Eileen Armstrong

How to Catch an Idea

Forest Xiao, pub. Orchard Books

A young girl sets off in her yellow wellies, with her panda backpack and a butterfly net, to find an idea, a big "super-shiny sparkling idea that is all my own." Accompanied by a red squirrel, she asks various people for help: a farmer advises her to give an idea time to grow, a mathematician says there are too many ideas to count, but sometimes too few, and a baker, in response to her question about making the same idea over and over, tells her that no two buns are exactly the same. Asking a giant is no help, as her voice is too small and far down to be heard...

Disappointed, she decides it's time to go home and sets off. On her way back, she meets a fisherman, who says that sometimes you have to let the ideas come to you, and she realises how many ideas she has found along the way. She remembers that, early in her quest, a traveller had told her to go 5 miles in each direction, which of course would bring her back to where she started, so she knows exactly where to go, and sits still to let an idea come to her.

The illustrations are lively- she is a sturdy little girl with a very round face, and the people and animals she meets are similarly sturdy. This is an attractive book, in bright colours, and it may lead to some interesting questions and discussions about the nature of ideas.

Diana Barnes

The Last Egg

Sofie Laguna, illus. Jess Rackyleft, pub. Allen & Unwin

Goodness this book created a range of emotions when we read it. There was joy, lots of joy, there was that feeling of sadness when you feel the tears form but not quite fall, followed by the overwhelming feeling of joy, for the happy ending and also for the beauty that shines through in the message that love, kindness and loyalty are the most beautiful gifts any of us can ever share.

Mother Bird and Father Bird have discovered a large blue egg in their nest. It isn't one of their eggs but they treat it as their own. Keeping it warm, nurturing it. There is a problem though, the egg is taking much longer than usual to hatch. Not that they will give up on it, even if the freezing winter is drawing in. With the winter comes a cold so deep that when the egg hatches, a dragon no less, Mother Bird can't wake Father Bird and the dragon flies off. This is where the tears threatened until, turning the page we discovered one beautiful surprise after another. The baby dragon hadn't abandoned them, he had gone to find help.

This book is more beautiful than I have the words for. It reminds us that love, resilience and kindness are all we truly need and here they are shared with us in abundance. A gentle story with incredibly appealing illustrations, perfectly gentle and accessible for young readers. An absolute must for libraries and homes everywhere.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Let's Be Earthlings

Mary Murphy, pub. Otter-Barry Books

This colourful and vibrant picture book celebrates life on Earth through the eyes of a little yellow alien who transforms into an Earthling when he lands on “the Universe’s favourite planet.”

On developing Earthling eyes, nose, mouth and ears, the alien proceeds to explore the world through his new-found senses. First tasting the delicious fruit and nectar available to Earth’s creatures, before finding out about different animal homes. The alien then shoots off in seemingly random directions exploring gravity via flight, swimming and jumping; surprises through camouflage and lifecycles; and play through babies and children. Eventually, the alien is joined by his friend, who also becomes an Earthling and they join in a colourful parade with all the other living creatures introduced throughout the book.

In attempting to illustrate all of life on Earth, this simple tale for very young readers inevitably skips over the surface of the subject matter and lacks any clear plot. However, the charming illustrations hold it all together and this charming book would serve as a stimulus for much further discussion. I would recommend it as a joyful introduction to the natural world for foundation and early years.

Janet Ling

Minna’s Masks

Louise Gooding, illus. Irina Avgustinovich, pub. Dorling Kindersley

A picturebook story that can very much be enjoyed by young readers whilst also helping caregivers with its introduction to masking. It is the first in a promised series, the overarching title of which is *Wonderfully Wired Stories* and is written by Minds Ambassador and neurodiversity advocate Louise Gooding. This is an important book; I believe the series will be too and will be perfect in settings where children have teachers or other care givers.

Minna is a bright and happy young girl, the illustrations show her happy, smiling, wearing bright colours and enjoying play. Sometimes though Minna needs to feel brave and the first time we experience this with her is when she is facing her very first day of school. Usually when Minna needs to feel brave she chooses a mask to wear but for her first day at school she forgot to take her masks and it makes her feel very nervous. Soon that becomes a feeling of being overwhelmed, something some readers will be familiar with. Fortunately, one of Minna’s new classmates shows her his own mask, one that he carries in his back pocket and she realises she is not alone.

Empathy and compassion exude from this book, there is lots of lovely colour, realistic illustration and happiness and illustrator Irina Avgustinovich has been able to interpret the words of the story to ensure we understand and know how to create safe environments for those who might need them. Beautiful.

May Ellis

Perfect Pedro

Simon Philip, illus. Ella Okstad, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Pedro likes everything to be perfect, or at least his interpretation of perfect. All of his possessions have to be in the right place; he does perfect roly-polies he spells his name perfectly. Whilst he has lots of friends, they do not meet his high standards as a partner for the school talent show, until he meets Poppy. All goes well until she fails in her table manners, so Pedro has to do his act on his own. However, not everything goes well and he realises that perhaps he needs a less than perfect friend to help him.

This is a delightful which looks at how we all interpret the concept of perfect. As adults we are aware that this varies from person to person, but young children have to learn and also accept the idea that flexibility is something they need to learn. Part of this learning process is for young people to see that everyone has got their own positive skills and ideas, so that when people work together, they balance all of these attributes, which makes for happier outcome. The illustrations are so bright and energetic and they really add to the overall joy that we find in the book. This is one of those books that would be fantastic to read in a small group, as there is plenty of opportunity for interaction for the audience. A great read for nursery and beyond.

Margaret Pemberton

This Way Up

Tom Percival, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Tom Percival has the very happy knack of creating wonderful stories from what could be perceived as very simple ideas. This story has two central characters and the first that we meet is called Queetle. Queetle has been pondering the differences between up and down. They believe that if you lie on your back then up is the direction that your nose is pointing, and all of their friends agree. However, when they are out walking one day they get lost and meet another character called Meeple, who totally disagrees with Queetle. They end up having an enormous row and Queetle storms off, but then they fall and end up near Meeple, so that they can see why they have their version of up. This leads to a change of heart and an understanding of a different viewpoint.

This is a wonderful story about our perception of the world around us. We find ourselves in these situations all the time, where we have a strong belief which is challenged by a differing point of view. The initial confrontation leads to strong disagreement, but it is possible to compromise. The characters in this story as just brightly coloured fuzzy balls, but with faces and arms and legs and it is

amazing how much we can believe in these images. Children as young as nursery will engage with this and there is an opportunity to create their own versions of the story using thumb prints, as always this is highly recommended.

Margaret Pemberton

Early Reader Books

Ava Spark Hello I'm Here!

Alex Field, illus. Joanna Bartel, pub. New Frontier Publishing

Ava Spark: Hello, I'm Here is a charming and uplifting read that radiates warmth from start to finish. The book is brought to life with delightful black-and-white illustrations, full of expression and detail, that perfectly capture the personalities of the characters and add interest.

Ava Spark is a lively, determined wheelchair user who communicates through a device but this is not a story about her disability - it's about friendship, teamwork and the joy of making others feel welcome. Ava attends school with her older twin sister, Flo, and shares her days with her close friends, Jack and Miya. When their teacher, Mrs Taylor, announces a new student will be joining the class, Ava is asked to help her settle in. The friends are immediately inspired, putting their heads together to come up with activities that will make Liv, the newcomer from Australia, feel part of the group. With sports day just around the corner, Ava and Jack hatch a creative plan for an 'Australia versus England' race, blending fun, a little friendly competition and plenty of laughter.

Author, Alex Field, offers readers a thoughtful glimpse into Ava's everyday world - from both her school and home life - without ever reducing her to her wheelchair or communication device. The narrative is refreshingly positive, focusing instead on the qualities that make Ava a great friend and an imaginative problem-solver. Joanna Bartel's illustrations add warmth and energy, making the characters feel wonderfully real.

This heart-warming story is a celebration of inclusion in its truest form: making sure everyone, no matter their background or abilities, feels valued, welcomed and part of the team. It's a joyful reminder of the power of kindness, empathy and human connection - and it will resonate with children, parents, and teachers alike.

Barbara Band

Bravepaw 1: Heartstone of Alluria

Bravepaw 2: Clawstone of Rotwood Mire

L.M. Wilkinson, illus. Lavanya Naidu, pub. Albert Street Books

Welcome to the *Bravepaw* books. Meet Titch, a mouse with a message that 'you can be brave.' The first two engaging books in the series introduce Titch, her wooden handmade sword and her wish that

she could have some adventures just like the hero of the stories she loves to read. When the day comes that finds Titch and her best friend, Huckleberry, in a situation of dire trouble, in their village, the place where nothing ever happens, the pair realise they are about to have a grand adventure.

The stories have a moral which will engage children about being brave. It may be that you are the smallest, like Titch, lack confidence, feel lonely and do not believe people will listen. As comes through in the adventures of *Bravepaw*, with the help from your friends, family and other people you meet, like Titch, you can do unimaginable things. Titch and Huckleberry stick together with the going gets tough; meet unlikely characters that have to be helped and saved. The group then can gather together to fight the evil that is taking over the Plateau. Titch can then work out how to use the Heartstone that was once used by Bravepaw.

By joining the group in their 'Dangerous Quest' the reader will be enthralled and engaged, willing them on and wanting the next book in the series. There are fantastic illustrations threaded throughout the pages along with the engaging cover. Large bold text accentuates words in the story to boost excitement and danger. Character names are amazing and this too engages the reader.

These are books that confident readers would engage with, as well as reading them to younger children who would be enthralled with the illustrations and the excitement of an adventure. I can't wait to read the next instalment.

Helen Finch

The Coming of the Iron Man

Ted Hughes, illus. Mini Grey, pub. Faber

The story of *The Iron Man* is a much-loved tale used in primary schools. The giant robotic man appears from nowhere and finds himself on a journey of discovery about the world in which he finds himself. Unfortunately, he finds himself at odds with the humans as he begins to eat all of their metal. At first the town manages to capture the Iron Man and bury him under the earth, but eventually he is able to find a way out. Thankfully a young boy, called Hogarth comes up with a possible solution; he takes the robot to the local scrap yard and says he can help himself to all the metal that he wants. This, of course, is the perfect solution for all concerned.

This is an abridged version of the famous tale and the balance of text and illustrations make it perfect for the KS1 child. It works both as a read-alone and also as a story in class. The illustrations by the brilliant Mini Grey pay 'homage' to the original image of the robot and her use of colour works perfectly with the range of illustrations, from whole pages to small motifs. The story maintains the underlying theme of the original; the concerns about the environment, waste removal and also the

need for the human world to be more aware of their impact on the world around them. What a truly delightful version of this story, it deserves 5 stars for both story and illustration.

Margaret Pemberton

Dream Keepers: Map to Starlight Hollow

Rebecca Lewis-Oakes, illus. Anastasiya Kanavaliuk, pub. Piccadilly Press

Fans of magic, mythological creatures and dream worlds, with additional golden sparkles and rainbow slushies, will love this second book in the *Dream Keepers* series. Plenty of narrative art intensifies the reading experience for 6+ year olds along the way.

Four friends, Paisley, Fatima, Bella and Mai regularly meet up after school in their local library or the Sugar Scoops Cafe, where much to their delight a new slushie machine has been installed. At night they travel to a magical dream version of their hometown, after tucking a dream token under the pillow. There they meet up with their Dream Guardians, mythical creatures Quill, Skye, Crystal and Onyx. Paisley, the central character, is an artistic, sensitive little girl with a talent for painting but prone to worrying. Bella the deep thinker, is a good reader who cherishes books. Whilst Mai is confident and has a cochlear implant for her deafness, and Fatima is decisive and bold. The story starts as the little band of friends meet up in the Sugar Scoops Cafe to chat about their secret hobby, being Dream Keepers. The problem for Paisley is that her parents are regularly on the move giving her little chance to benefit from her precious friendships. Now that she has found such a group, will she suddenly be leaving again, Paisley wonders?

The four friends shared fantasyland adventure in Moon Wood helps Paisley to work through her anxiety and to see it for what it is. Moon Wood initiates Paisley into the Dark Queens world where negative thoughts feed energy and happy thoughts repel. Paisley learns from her experiences to share her feelings, pay attention to the advice that she receives and to remember that solid friendship bonds can be enjoyed from a distance. This little book has an important message for anxiety sufferers, about what it is and how to deal with it, along with a reminder about the indispensable qualities of friendship. It lends itself to being read at home or at school where it could be explored in more detail.

Elizabeth Negus

Kaleb's Farmyard Tales: Escaping Animals and Runaway Tractors

Kaleb Cooper, illus. Tom Knight, pub. Wren and Rock

I have a guilty pleasure, one that no one outside my family of four knows, and that is I love watching Jeremy Clarkson on *Clarkson's Farm*. I think it is very funny and Kaleb is part of my enjoyment. He

comes across as a really nice lad and he also tries his best to educate people about farming, the countryside and the environment. So, when I was asked by to read and review Kaleb's new book I knew I was in for a treat!

Grab your wellies so that you can join Kaleb, his trusty dog, and the love-of-his-life tractor in these muddy, true, and very silly stories from the farm. You'll meet Jeff the Mad Rooster, Bruce the Breakout Boar (and MAYBE even catch him), learn the wisdom of sheep, and discover how using a tractor can solve nearly every problem there is.

As I read this book all I could hear in my mind was Kaleb's voice, he has written this book as he speaks. I was laughing out loud by the time I had read a few pages. A particular favourite was the sheep story and Old Stumpy. As a reader you can clearly picture the scenes and smell all the smells. This is Kaleb Cooper's first children's book aimed at children aged 5 - 7, and would be ideal for children who are newly independent readers. The font is fun to read, added to the illustrations this is overall a joyful book and a delight to read. I hope that there will be more to come as children are going to love this book.

Helen Byles

Pia's Pet Club: Puppy Problem

Serena Patel, illus. Emma McCann, pub. Usborne

I am always on the lookout for suitable books for my wonderful Year 2 and Year 3 children and I think I have found a little gem.

Meet Pia, the girl who loves pets, but isn't allowed one of her own! A brand-new series of funny animal adventures from the award-winning creators of *Anisha*, *Accidental Detective*. Pia loves the idea of pets, but no matter how much she begs her parents for one of her own their answer is always the same, they always say no. Pia however won't give up easily. Her first plan is to help her friend Hari train his troublesome new puppy, Luna. If they can do this, if they can encourage Luna to behave then Pia can show her parents that she can look after a pet of her own. But when Luna continues to cause chaos despite their efforts Pia realises she will need to work really hard to show the puppy how to behave. It's time to join forces with her animal-loving friends and form a Pet Club! But will Pia ever get a pet of her own?

The first thing to mention is that this story is perfect for those newly independent readers, the font is larger than in books for older readers, the book contains a complete story and at only 215 pages its manageable. All of this also means it's ideal for those children who don't enjoy or find reading harder. Plus, there are some amazing illustrations. It's also a book based on animals that makes the story even more appealing to the children.

This book ticks so many boxes for children. And I look forward to discovering where the series goes next.

Helen Byles

Woodland Explorers Club: Fujiko and the Fox

Ewa Jozefkowicz, illus. Gillian Flint, pub. Zephyr

Are you a member of the Woodland Explorers Club? If you are you'll have the badge that all members are allowed to wear. If you're not sure how to join, or what it's all about this book and its three predecessors will help you learn more. Each is a standalone story and they all feature the fantastic Woodland Explorers Club. Even better, these books are all written with Early Readers in mind. At around 100 pages each they are fully illustrated in black and white and they even include a selection of activities at the back. I hope you're tempted!

The club are all eagle-eyed, carefully looking at their surroundings, they speak with a secret code, an owl hoot, so as not to scare the woodland wildlife and they respect as well as protect that same wildlife. In this story Fujiko broken her arm and has to miss out on playing her violin. She needs something else to do but now something strange is happening to her hearing too. It seems that Fujiko is going to need her friends, some fireworks and the unusual fox she meets in Willow Wish Woods so that she can find her music again and heal her broken arm.

A beautiful, charming story, perfect for newly confident readers and a wonderful introduction to the natural world, to our connection with it.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The World of Maxime

Lucile de Pesloüan, trans. Helen Mixter, illus. Jacques Goldstyn, pub. Greystone Kids

Ten-year-old Maxime loves cats and books, but she doesn't love other kids – they are too noisy for Maxime. So, she spends her time with her cat, Tumeric, working on her project, which is to read every book in the world. But one day, a new girl joins her school and Maxime wants to try to be friends. If only she was brave enough to talk to her. Then she discovers mysterious bowls full of cat food around her neighbourhood that lead to an unlikely culprit. As Maxime learns the value of friendship, can she find the courage to make a new friend?

Somewhere between picture books, chapter books and graphic novels lies *The World of Maxime*. Originally published in French, this 112-page book has a distinctive tone and unique structure that will appeal to both older picture book readers and newly independent readers. Focusing on the charmingly peculiar main character, Maxime, who leads a lonely life, and an elderly crusader for stray cats, Catmamou ('mamou' is sometimes used as a term for mother or grandmother in French), who breaks all the rules, the story explores themes of inter-generational friendship, confidence and caring for animals.

Political cartoonist and illustrator, Jacques Goldstyn, fills the pages with warm drawings full of feline fun and bustling city life scenes. There are hundreds of drawings created in ink, watercolour and pencil. Spectacular end pages include dozens of drawings exhibiting cats in all of their mischievous glory.

Heart-warming, imaginative and utterly charming, *The World of Maxime* is a delightful book for readers of all ages.

Stephanie Ward

Middle Grade Books

Adventures in Lylaland

Louise Pentland, pub. Templar Books

In Lyla's real world, things are tough. Lyla lives with her mum, who works a lot and is often tired, busy and certainly isn't around as much as Lyla wants. In addition, whenever her mum and dad talk they really don't, instead they always argue - loudly. At school things are also getting harder as her two friends, Honour and Clara, are starting to be around less now that they have started to run a maths club – maths is definitely not Lyla's favourite subject! Lyla is struggling to know what to do.

The answer is quite simple, it would seem. When everything gets tough too tough to handle Lyla has a special place to go. She can take herself off into her imaginary world, Lylaland. In Lylaland glittons fly around blowing out rainbow glitter: if you read the book you can find out more about these wonderful imaginary creatures. Then there is her enchanted giant eagle Celeste who helps her battle the evil Sir Radstone with his evil maths monster. She really doesn't like maths!

Sadly, however it seems as though a glitch is appearing in Lylaland, it happens when everything in the real world is becoming a bit too much and Lyla finds she has to look for other solutions to her troubles.

This is a cute story for any imaginative young people who would like to explore this magical land and also perhaps discover some tricks for overcoming their own worries.

Hayley Reeve

Blitzers

Alastair Chisholm, illus. Francesca Ficorilli, pub. Barrington Stoke

Follow Danny as he tries to get in with the in-crowd with his own 'Blitzer' - a fighting game craze which is flooding his school.

Danny's family aren't wealthy, and he can't afford to buy into the latest craze, but his brother, Jay, gets hold of a Blitzer for him - and that's when the action begins. Discover if Danny can:

- Save the day and confront the people who've developed this aggressive and highly combative game.
- Rekindle his friendship with best friend Tan.

- Understand and forgive school-bully Mel, and her intimidating father.

Danny may have, thanks to his brother, been able to join in with the craze for playing the new fighting game but when his stops working, when it won't fight he refuses to take his brother's advice and wipe the code so he can start again. He does something different and reveals a dark underside to the company who are making the toy. Danny has uncovered a deadly secret...

This book is great fun, an exciting read with a great message for young people. It's packed with fabulous black and white manga illustrations too. Pick it up now so you too can enjoy the glorious romp to the finish.

Laura Brill

Firebloom

Justin Davies, illus. Francesca Ficorilli, pub. Floris Books

Every year, visitors flock to Stormcliff for the Firebloom Festival. They enjoy what the island has to offer: the delicacies, the drinks, having their fortunes read but they are there for one thing in particular – seeing the jellyfish light up the water during the Firebloom. When the jellyfish do not show up for a number of nights in a row however, panic starts to spread. Can Tally Smuck, the next Sting Winkler, save the day, or will this be the first year when the Firebloom doesn't happen?

Tally's grandad is getting older and is feeling that his Sting Winkling days are behind him. Tally is next in line to take the role and be able to communicate with the jellyfish, ensuring that the Firebloom can happen and that the town's unique supplies of medicines can be harvested from jellyfish tentacles. Something isn't right though, the jellyfish are acting strangely, and Tally gets stung by one – something that hasn't happened to any Sting Winkler before. Lady Vorpall, self-appointed leader of Stormcliff, is starting to lose her patience and the town is starting to lose faith – after all, so much of their fortune relies on the influx of visitors for the Firebloom Festival each year. Tally and her friends have to find a way to discover why the jellyfish are not acting normally and essentially make the Firebloom happen.

Justin Davies carries the story well and captures the frustrations and fears of the town through the characters. One of the outstanding characters is Colette, or Zasu as she prefers to be known, who has inherited her family's ability to tell fortunes. Her wonderfully optimistic and determined attitude helps Tally believe that she is the right person to save the Firebloom. The illustrations by Francesca Ficorilli subtly placed around the pages of the book help to bring the story to life.

Firebloom is an entertaining read and one that lovers of *The Stormkeeper's Island* and *Malamander* may enjoy.

Tom Joy

The Invisible Parade

Leigh Bardugo, illus. John Picacio, pub. Orion Children's Books

With a number one New York Times bestselling author and a World Fantasy Award winner coming together to create this book expecting something outstanding did not seem far-fetched and was exactly what I found. Their personal notes at the back of the book reveal just how long this book has been in the making and some of the inspiration behind it. For John Picacio it is a story from his Mexican American culture, set withing Día du Meurtos which is a time when people celebrate the loved ones they have lost. For Leigh Bardugo it is a children's book to help families talk honestly about grief and loss. This book is special to them both and I hope it will become the same to you.

Tonight there is a party, everyone in the neighbourhood is getting ready to go and will be there later because they all know someone who is on the guest list. This is a once a year party, held on the day the dead return. Cala should be going, her family are all going, preparing to celebrate but she is still grieving the loss of her grandfather and working to pretend she isn't scared about going. She does attend but when they are at the cemetery Cala finds herself separated from her family. That sounds quite scary but when she meets four horsemen, mysterious riders who seem to have come out of nowhere, she lets them show her that she really is quite brave after all. Cala's story is one of love, loss and courage. There are plenty of unexpected moments of humour set amid the story and there is an abundance of love.

John Picacio's illustrations are uniquely evocative, they fit perfectly and I can imagine them sitting comfortably in graphic novels or on film. They are graphic, in muted and simply colours, they fill the page with their presence but they don't dominate, a true skill. The whole story is truly heartwarming, it is evidently born of love and the desire to share that love, to share a meaningful relationship with both life and death. Outstanding.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Isle of Ever

Jen Calonita, pub. Dorling Kindersley

The book opens with an extract from Evelyn Terry's journal, written in Long Island in 1825. She recounts a race with friends to a mysterious island known only to them. As she starts to cross over to it a strangely dressed man appears. He forcefully warns her off, especially as there is a blood orange moon in the offing. He asks if she knows of Captain Jonas Kimble – she doesn't – and what year it is

and is astonished by her answer. Evelyn returns to her friends. Bizarrely, none of them have seen the man. Only she and Aggy glimpse the ship with a skull and crossbones.

The scene shifts to Boston in 2025. Twelve year-old Benny is scrounging food at the diner where her mother Lynn works. She wishes she had friends but they move frequently as Lynn finds work then loses it, finds lovers and loses them. Benny never has long enough to fit in at school. There is never any money. A man in an expensive suit comes in, searching for Everly Pauline Benedict. Her! He announces that she has inherited a fortune – a Long Island estate worth millions. Only the inheritance will be lost if she cannot solve a puzzle set for her by an ancestor named Evelyn Terry 175 years ago. She has just a few days.

They move to Evelyn Terry's magnificent house and revel in luxurious surroundings and food. But Benny must work. Her ancestor has left her baffling clues. She meets helpful people and even starts to build friendships. But who can she really trust? Evelyn has sent her warnings down the centuries to be on her guard. Time is ticking away. And there's a blood orange moon about to appear. Can she even locate the island?

This is a great adventure story, full of excitement and tension. Calonita knows Long Island and evokes the setting well. Benny is an excellent protagonist – quick-witted and kind, but wary. The ending is truly unexpected. With luck we will read more about Benny and the challenges she faces.

Anne Harding

The Last Bard

Maz Evans, pub. Chicken House

The Last Bard features Will Davenant, who discovers that he is a descendant of William Shakespeare, via the poet and playwright William Davenant – who is rumoured to have been the illegitimate son of Shakespeare. This discovery comes about when Will and his mother go to sort out Will's grandfather's flat, in a block called Arden Heights, in an unspecified seaside town. His grandfather had been an academic, and there are piles of papers everywhere. Crucially, there is also an old Collected Works of Shakespeare, to which Will is strangely drawn: when he opens it, magical things happen – Shakespearian characters, including Juliet, Lady Macbeth, Puck and a delightfully lugubrious Yorick – come to life and start talking to him. This only happens when he opens the book: it doesn't work for anyone else – because he is the Bard, the descendant to whom the gift has been passed on.

There's so much else going on in the story that it's difficult to know where to start! Will's dad died two years ago, and as a result, Will and his mum have been living with her horrible brother and his equally horrible son. It's a sort of Harry Potter with the Dursleys/Cinderella situation: Will and his mum are bullied and treated like servants, given little to eat and nowhere decent to sleep. They're delighted to

get away for a bit. Will never met his grandfather but soon learns that his neighbours at Arden Heights were very fond of him and thought highly of him. Will meets a girl called Ani, who also lives at the Heights, she tells Will that there is a battle going on to save the Heights from being knocked down and redeveloped: the scheme can only be stopped if a certain number of tenants vote against it, and the main thrust of the story is the fight to save the flats, for the good people to triumph, the bad ones to be sent packing.

Maz Evans has lots of fun with references to Shakespeare – she says there is a reference to every single play included. The story races merrily along, and I'm sure it will be a great success with middle-grade readers. If some carping adult readers might question why a strong woman like Will's mum puts up with such dire treatment, and why she doesn't notice that her son is being beaten on a regular basis by his cousin – well, those aren't the kind of questions that would have bothered Shakespeare himself. And they probably won't bother young readers either. Or, as the great man wrote at the end of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*:

If we shadows have offended
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.

Sue Purkiss

Medusa Gorgon's Bad Hair Day

Bethany Walker, illus. Katie Abey, pub. Scholastic

Meet twelve-year-old Medusa Gorgon who works for Athena, goddess of war and wisdom, as a guardian in her temple at the base of Mount Olympus. Medusa is responsible for protecting Athena's shield, not that she's sure what she'd actually do if any if the other Gods living on Mount Olympus tried to steal it, after all who wants to mess with the Gods?

Medusa hates the unfairness of the punishments given out by the Gods on the mortals, and worried that Medusa's fiery temper will get her into trouble, her best friend Arachne suggests that she write her feelings in a diary to help her deal with her anger. Arachne even buys her the wax tablets and reed stylus she needs to do this, and it seems to be working, for a while at least. Then Athena turns Arachne into a spider and Medusa, in a fit of anger, throws Athena's precious shield into Hades' well. Given that it's probably not the best idea to make the Goddess of War angry, as a punishment Athena gives Medusa the worst hair day ever: she turns her luscious locks into a writhing head of hissing snakes.

When Medusa is offered a way to get back both her hair and her best friend, she has no choice but to sign a contract with Hades and Athena which sees her transported a modern-day secondary school 'Shadwell Academy' with the task of finding the shield and returning it to Athena. Easy enough, right? Well, no, it turns out that adapting to the 21st century is tougher than you'd think, especially when you mistake Alexa for an oracle, you have no idea what a bra is, and you asked to be served wine at lunch! How will Meddy keep to the terms of the contract, including not revealing who she is? And how will she ever find the shield? Be prepared to laugh a lot as you follow Meddy as she grapples with life in the 21st century and finds herself in some very unfortunate situations!

This action packed and quite honestly hilarious book will keep readers entertained from start to finish and you really don't need to be over familiar with Greek mythology before you read it as everything is so wonderfully, humorously explained! Brilliantly packed with diary entries, letters between Hades and Athena, input from the Chorus (genius), and all wrapped up in Katie Abey's most splendid illustrations this is a heart-warming tale of friendship and the craziness of modern society. Giggles are most definitely guaranteed!

Tracey Corner

The Odyssey of Phoebe Quilliam

Annelise Gray, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Phoebe and her nan, Cass, love to draw and paint together, especially in her grandmother's small, sunny studio. As Nan paints she also instructs, inspires Phoebe, helping her to paint feelings rather than objects. Nan is working on an Ithaca seascape – based on memories of her childhood holidays on the Greek island with her good friend, Hattie. It's Phoebe's favourite painting. Every week, Nan tells Phoebe a new myth and, though she loves them all, it's the story of Odysseus that truly captures her imagination. Over time, Phoebe notices Nan slipping away, her memory lapses are becoming more frequent and one day she momentarily doesn't recognise Phoebe at all. Soon Nan is moved into a home.

Whilst mum is at work Phoebe, along with Nan's lurcher Claude, visits the bungalow one last time to look at the painting. Magic is in the air and Phoebe suddenly finds herself on the Ithacan beach of the painting at the time of Odysseus. She meets Leander, a young boat maker about to set off on a quest to find to his father after the Trojan Wars, and Cass's childhood friend Hattie, who presents Phoebe with her own quest. Together, Phoebe and Leander set off, with only by a map drawn by Cass and Hattie as children. Their journey is perilous thanks to the interference of the Greek Gods who want neither child to succeed, but as the greatest danger of all confronts them, neither has any idea how or if they will succeed.

Greek Mythology and dementia may seem odd companions but they are woven together beautifully to create a story of hope, acceptance and finding those you've lost. Building on author Annelise Gray's reputation for creating compellingly detailed stories of the ancient world, this Greek adventure introduces readers to the infamous Odysseus and the implications of his long journey home. Written with vivid and powerful imagery Grey's work needs no illustrations – I even double checked there were none as there are simply dozens of images in my head!

The Odyssey of Phoebe Quilliam is a captivating quest story which explores precious family relationships. The descriptions of Phoebe's nan's dementia are heartbreakingly accurate and brought tears to my eyes from the very beginning of the story. With the protagonist caught between guilt (for not speaking up when she first noticed Nan's memory lapses) and anger that she is losing someone so precious, Annelise Grey has carefully navigated the subject of dementia through the eyes of a child, whilst all the while retaining a sense of hope and wonder. It is a story about finding your way and fighting daemons in every sense, but mostly it's about what Phoebe's nan tells her, that "The ending isn't the thing that matters. It's everything before the ending that counts."

I cannot recommend this book highly enough!

Tracey Corner

Out There in the Wild

Nicola Davies, James Carter and Dom Conlon, illus. Diana Catchpole, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

"You'll wonder what the hell we were all doing
To let the whole world get in such a state And look for those who brought us to this ruin
And failed to act before it was too late.
They'll be right there, those old climate change deniers,
Roasting rats beside you over bomb site fires."

Whenever I read poetry, I do so by opening a random page from a collection and indulging in words on the page. This time it was from a collection of nature poems. There it was- a potent one by Nicola Davies - the lines still resounding in my head. An award winning children's poet; a Carnegie Medal nominee; a writer and producer: the powerful trio of James Carter, Dom Conlon and Nicola Davies collaborated to create this meaningful collection of nature poetry. The book is divided into 8 sections with compilations on nature and memory; climate change; pets; wisdom from nature; birds and beasts; the azure world of the water bodies; the uninhibited wild; mythical creatures; and the minims we encounter every day. The book's title is taken from the first section. Each poem I read was full of power and meaning, sharing messages too bright to overlook. Black and white doodles complete the

poems and enhance the rhythm of the words. I loved the flowing Selkie illustration and the poem which captures the intimate connection she has with her skin-

“Come to me, my skin, my other!
Find me lost upon the shore.
A storm of dark is in me;
I fight no more. Come to me, my skin, my wildness!”

Then we read about a poet observing a plover and coming up with such beauty in this verse-

“...the shiver zone of light and shadow the boundary of sound and silence
the place where leverets and fawns hold still, and you are not reflected in the plover’s eye.”

And still more flows in when James Carter stands mystified by life and the experiences it entails, which for him translates into sublimity, the kind which Longinus and Keats once felt and wrote about in their expressive flows –

“Whether you call it magic,
a miracle or simply the workings of science, all life is a sublime concoction”

The reader can wallow endlessly in these pages and discover serene yet empowering words to carry on with them through the day, as they observe nature through their inner resources. It's a must read for poetry lovers and for those beginning to step into the depths of poesy.

Ishika Tiwari

Role Model

Ellen McNicoll, pub. *Knights Of*

Aeriel Sharpe is in a unique position. Her mother has just won the election to become Prime Minister, the most eminent political position in the country. Their move from Scotland to London has been fraught with change, busier lives and a hugely intense city. Aeriel is autistic and proclaimed an inspirational role model by the media. Finding herself splashed over newspapers and TV is hugely daunting and she soon falls into a pattern, consistently changing herself to better fit in with friends and this new life.

Her ‘friends’ at school are not really very nice or kind to her but fitting in is something Aeriel is keen to do. However, the effort takes a huge toll on her and she struggles in many of the social situations that come with her mother’s new role. Her mother and her ‘drones’ as Aeriel things of them, don’t

really understand Aerial and she is tired of trying to explain herself to those who just want her to ‘act normal.’

This is another incredible story from Ellen McNicoll and it offers an honest glimpse into neurodivergence with truth and passion behind every word. Aerial is such a likeable character, one who readers will relate to and empathise with. I found this to be a powerful story and one that should be read widely and recommended.

Erin Hamilton

Sin Bin Island

Doug Naylor, pub. David Fickling Books

Thirteen-year-old Jack Digby lost his mother, stepfather and sister suddenly, in a plane crash. Upon his mother’s death, he inherited from her grandmother, twelve generations removed, a Russian nesting doll containing uncannily accurate information about his current situation, anticipating exactly what was going to happen next and a place at the Cyril Sniggs’s Correctional Orphanage for Wayward Boys and Girls.

Cyril Sniggs’s Correctional Orphanage for Wayward Boys and Girls is not your traditional school. Founded by Cyril Sniggs, a privateer with the permission of the Crown to attack and plunder enemy ships, who had decided to share his knowledge and skills with future generations. Lessons included the history of sailing ships and piracy, celestial navigation and the firing of guns and cannons, preparing pupils to pass their Pirate Attack Test. Any misdemeanors – and there were a myriad of rules to break - were recorded as lashes, and the four pupils with the most lashes each year were banished to Sin Bin Island.

The adventure begins as Digs quickly settles in, making friends and desperately avoiding the school bullies. Together, he and his friends explore the old building, finding hidden rooms and the promise of treasure beyond that of silver and gold. The answer unfortunately lies on Sin Bin Island, the very place they don’t want to go. Alongside the mischief and hilarity of daily life in a pirate school, is the exciting mystery of the messages from the Russian doll, and the pursuit of buried treasure. A fantastic mishmash of different genres, seamlessly blended into one story that young readers are bound to relish. Sin Bin Island itself casts a long shadow, whetting the reader’s appetite for the eventual arrival of our heroes and a strong dose of jeopardy as this could be their last resting place.

Doug Naylor, co-creator of *Red Dwarf*, the popular BBC science fiction comedy television series, has written his first original story for children, developing a great set of characters – heroes and villains alike – as readers root for Digs and his friends, the underdogs.

Sin Bin Island beckons.

Simon Barrett

Teen & Young Adult Books

A Murder of Rogues

Joe Heap, pub. Scholastic

This Young Adult novel is about student life at Oxford University during the Regency period. It is a fascinating and very unique story with elements of mystery and scandal.

Main character, Cascabel Gray, disguises herself as a boy to gain a place at Oxford University. She actually becomes Pom, her own twin brother. Both are amazing and engaging characters; Pom is sharp, witty and determined. Throughout a very clever plot, Cascabel has to navigate murder, a secret society and many new friends. She receives a blackmail letter from Charles Lafleur, a member of an infamous secret society, threatening to expose her secret. When Lafleur is found dead Cascabel becomes a prime suspect in the murder investigation. Will she be able to clear her name? The plot thickens when Cascabel attracts the attention of male student William Grenville and also that of chambermaid Mouse. To add further interest, Cascabel attends a ball with an Austrian prince. Despite the constant switch between the male and female characters, the story is easy to follow and very readable. Cascabel has to balance her double life and clear her name.

This very enjoyable murder mystery has lots of suspense, as well as romance, drama, history and of course murder. It highlights the prejudices, secrets and scandals of Regency society in Oxford in the early 1800's. The stunning cover invites the reader to pick up the book and then the characters keep the interest alive. These include Knox, the Scottish surgeon and Garlick, the manservant to Pom.

This is compulsive reading. Can Cascabel find the murderer without being exposed herself? A wonderful mix of romance, drama and historical fiction!

Gary Kenworthy

Girls of Dark Divine

E.V. Woods, pub. Usborne

A marionette, trapped in a world of dancing and torture by Malcolm Manrow, an evil Puppet Master, Emberlyn lives with her sisters, forced to perform until her body rots due to the curse placed upon her.

Cursed as a young, ambitious dancer, Emberlyn lives her life in the theatre, her memories fading away, her routine monotonous and painful, she longs to be free of her curse and explore the world, far

away from Malcolm Manrow. When one of her sisters, another cursed marionette dies due to the curse, Emberlyn decides to act, fight back or run away as the rage and hate builds inside of her. The opportunity arises when the infamous marionette dance troupe is invited to Parlizia to perform; Emberlyn learns how to be free of the Puppet Master and the cost of her freedom on the lives of her sisters and all others that Malcolm has cursed throughout his life.

This book ensnared me within the story. The author's storytelling and ability to bring the characters to life is incredible. I was unable to put this book down until I had finished it. Throughout the book, there were many twists and turns, romances, friendships and a complete sense of female rage and empowerment. It emphasizes the importance of standing up for what you want and looking after those you consider family.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and would whole heartedly recommend it to anyone who has a passion for dance, female strength and the dark, unpredictable twists of curses and magic.

Gemma Walford

The Guardians of Dreamdark: Windwitch

Laini Taylor, pub. Hatchette Children's Books

The Guardians of Dreamdark: Windwitch is a story about Magpie Windwitch, the greatest devil-hunter of the Age. Together, with her trusted band of crows, she tracks down and recaptures ravenous beasts who devour everything in their path.

It should be noted that Laini Taylor's latest novel is not a new story; rather, it is a republication of *Blackbringer*, the first of two stories from the former *Faeries of Dreamdark* duology, which also included *Silksinger*. As the original duology is now out-of-print, the two novels are being re-published with new titles and new illustrations for a new generation of fans. For the sake of clarity, the novel being discussed in this review is *Windwitch*, formerly known as *Blackbringer*.

Faeries have lived safely in their ancient forests for centuries. However, with devils escaping from prisons that have held them captive since the Dawn Days, the faeries' peace is under threat. Only Magpie stands in the devils' way. When her hunt leads Magpie and her crew to the legendary forest of Dreamdark, she finds herself out-matched by the greatest foe her kind has ever known. If she is to save the world, Magpie will need to rely on all the help she can get - all while fending off an imposter queen, a disgusting imp, and a young faerie warrior, who is as infuriating as he is brave.

Taylor's writing invites the reader to engage with the narrative. The pace is good, as the narrative moves along briskly towards a satisfying end. Characters feel real: while Magpie can be impulsive, she is a lovely, down-to-earth person with a warm heart. Magpie and Talon's growing relationship also

has its bumpy moments. The world-building extends to creating unique rural dialects for the characters, which adds a personal touch to the story. It is difficult to pull off dialects in fiction, but it is notable that the protagonists do not speak in a highly moralistic tone, nor is their language particularly intellectual, which provides a very readable novel for all ages.

Windwitch is a brilliant story for teenage readers, with unexpected twists in the narrative and details to the world which make the story feel real. The new illustrations help to really make the story 'pop' off the pages and as the first of the newly titled *Guardians of Dreamdark* duology, there will certainly be many readers old and new looking forward to the next instalment.

Chris J Kenworthy

Immortal Consequences

I. V. Marie, pub. Electric Monkey

Wren is sharp: competitive and continually vigilant, desperate to surpass other students around her. Their school is Blackwood, in the cool air and ethereal light of the afterlife - the purgatory that follows death. Only one new student should fall into Blackwood every few decades, destined to learn the art of guiding souls to the Other Side. So, when word arrives of a new student appearing early, the suggestion is unsettling: what has changed? Worse, it is August who brings the news: he is Wren's biggest rival, and as a pair they infuriate one another endlessly. But rather than outdoing each other, they find themselves fusing together... For once, this might have its uses.

The last thing either of them needs is further competition: the Decennial is coming, a festival with only one chosen nominee, who if successful can make their way into the Blackwood elite. Otherwise, three hundred years is as long as any student has before they begin to forget themselves - all human memories fade, and they are sent to the Ether to reap lost souls without end. It is a fate that looms heavy over fellow student Olivier: certain memories of his home - the cottage, the hillside, his mother - are starting to blur. He fears it more than he is able to admit, losing this part of himself. His main source of relief is Emilio, who finds his own escape with secret hours spent in the library at night, tucked among books and scrolls.

Emilio has to keep reminding himself he is dead; but this frustration at his less than human state, mingles with a fear of the human he once was. A disappointment, far from good enough - if he were to win the Decennial, he would shirk the elite for the Other Side, the unknown final place. Though he dare not say so to Olivier: Olivier is light and wit and wisdom, as much of a comfort to Emilio as Emilio is to him. They share a tether of quiet understanding, and their dynamic is very enjoyable. So too are the final pair of main characters: Irene and Masika are inseparable, their areas of expertise perfectly balanced - one's flaw is the other's skill. But Irene's mother, who gave her a very unsettled

childhood, long ago instilled a mistrust of friends. Her past remains a heavy weight for Irene, and she has no regard for rules or convention - she will do what must be done to win.

Among the twisting greenery and deepening mist of Blackwood, this set of six characters are intriguing. It seems the new arrival may not be the only threat: in the tangled woodlands beyond the school, the Demien order give up their souls for shadow magic. This frightening form of sorcery has lured some students away - but to give in to the shadows is to lose total sense of self. Even the afterlife can be a dangerous place - and each of them has much more to lose than they realise...

Jemima Breeds

iNSiDE

S. A. Gales, pub. Faber & Faber

Naya has spent her young life training to defend Emas, her beloved city, from the threat of the Spiravits, a mysterious enemy who lurk beyond its walls. The city itself is alive, sometimes suffering glitches blamed on the Spiravits. For Naya in particular because its walls mysteriously respond to her touch. However, what Naya longs for most is the approval of her mother, the formidable Commander of the NSDE, Emas's military force.

When Naya is assigned her graduation mission, she cannot refuse, even though it demands the impossible: infiltrating the Spiravits by posing as a traitor. Once across enemy lines, she uncovers secrets about their society and gets closer to their inhabitants and to Zayn, in particular. These truths challenge everything she has been taught about loyalty, danger, and the world she calls home. The more Naya learns, the more she questions her city's narrative, but hopes to change that and to reshape positively the relationship between the two factions. But when a single mistake sparks devastating consequences, Naya must confront painful truths about her people, her family, and herself. Where does her allegiance truly lie: in the city she was raised to protect, or in the society she has begun to embrace?

This coming-of-age dystopian debut offers a compelling mix of adventure, emotional depth, and moral complexity. Inspired by the author's fascination with abandoned buildings, the vividly imagined settings of Emas and the Outdoor bring fresh texture to a classic YA theme: the clash between two worlds shaped by fear, manipulation, and the misuse of power.

Though set in an otherworldly landscape, the novel resonates with timely themes, propaganda, division, and the courage required to question authority, that will strike a chord with today's young adult readers. With its confident voice and thought-provoking story, this is a striking debut from an exciting new talent in YA fiction.

Laura Brill

Murder High

Lauren Muñoz, pub. Hot Key Books

Every year at J. Everett High, there is a murder mystery game set to challenge the students and allow them to prove who really is the best criminology student. This year, it is the turn of Xavier Torres to act as the corpse while the other students must determine the story behind the death. The game takes a dark turn when student Xavier is actually murdered and his ex-girlfriend, Sierra, is framed for the crime. Will Sierra be charged for a crime she didn't commit, or will Dulce Castillo, a student at the school, be able to clear her name and catch the real killer?

Aspiring criminologist Dulce Castillo is determined to win this year's murder mystery and show everyone that her, and her best friend Emi, are the best team on the criminology course. When it turns out that there has been a real murder, the pair decide to take on the case after much persuasion from Sierra who has been wrongly accused of the murder of her ex-boyfriend. With her best friend Emi and mysterious new student Zane by her side, Dulce works to uncover the truth and clear Sierra's name.

Murder High has a lot of complex characters. The story focuses on the strained relationships between them, especially between Dulce and Sierra. Their friendship fell apart after a tragic accident that resulted in the death of Dulce's mom, and Dulce's hesitation to help Sierra is a central conflict. While Dulce wrestles with her own past and her quest for justice for her mother, she also starts to trust Zane, a new student who has his own troubled secrets. Throughout the story, Emi acts as Dulce's loyal and reliable best friend, providing stability and support.

A gripping whodunnit *Murder High* is hard to put down. Lauren Muñoz expertly controls the pace, slowly revealing key details and multiple plot twists that will keep you guessing until the very end. The brilliant writing and layered characters make this a must-read for any teen who loves a good mystery.

Tom Joy

Not Going To Plan

Tia Fisher, pub. Hot Key Books

This is a remarkable book about stealthing or non-consensual condom removal, regarded as sexual assault or rape under English and Welsh law. Tia Fisher enjoys writing accessible books for younger people on thorny issues. Her verse styled pacey tempo cleverly jogs the reader through intimate emotional moments where ignorance, feeling shy or wrong choices can have life-style changing

effects. Close scrutiny reflects a sexual health leaflet with absolutely none of the dullness, by cannily disguising the content in a quirky, easy to read story full of hilarity, poignancy and grittiness, capable of tempting the reader away from their phone.

This novel contains sensitive themes around teenage pregnancy, sexual assault and abortion, including strong language and explicit scenes; validated by Brook, the sexual health and wellbeing charity. Zed and Marnie are the main characters. Expelled from her private school Marnie joins the local comp only to meet Zed, a nerd with zero tolerance for mistakes and too much conversation. “I’m not so keen on conversation” he says. “It has all the unpredictability of ping-pong.” Zed excels in maths and physics, detests languages, and being touched; whilst Marnie loves art and languages, hates maths and is eager to lose her virginity. Chalk and cheese they may be but their differences become their strengths. Their deep friendship enables them to cope with Marnie’s misguided, short lived liaison with Harry Boorman, assisted by advice from the local sexual-health clinic.

Initially Zed helps Marnie to calmly and logically think through the process of being pregnant, does she or does she not want a baby. Decision made and all necessary hoops jumped through, armed with 4x Misoprostal tablets and other necessary items, they lock themselves away in Zed’s room to facilitate the abortion.

This story can be comfortably read at home, chewed over in a conversation group at school, act as a friend, provide brilliant entertainment or be a health education tool. The key point is it exists.

Elizabeth Negus

Small Wonder

Ross Montgomery, pub. Walker Books

Small Wonder is a treat: one of those rare stories you pick up and consume in a single sitting, happily lost in its beautifully narrated quest. With its blend of loyalty, love, resilience, courage, and just the right touch of mystery, it is destined to become a new classic for readers.

The tale follows Tick and his younger brother, Leaf, whose world is overturned soon after their grandfather’s death. Forced to flee their hut by the shore of the Ellian kingdom as enemy Drenes attack, the brothers embark on a perilous journey to the safety of Kings’ Keep. Pursued by a deadly assassin and beset by bandits, brutal weather, and forbidding terrain, Tick must draw on his grandfather’s teachings — and the steadfast loyalty of his horse, Pebble — to keep moving forward.

As the journey unfolds, Tick realises that his true mission has always been Leaf’s survival and protection. Pebble, far more than just an old companion, proves to be a warrior in her own right. Yet when the brothers finally reach Kings’ Keep, at the end of most white-knuckle ride, Tick learns that

this sanctuary is not what he expected, and that everything he thought he knew about his family must be questioned.

Ross Montgomery has woven a riveting, fast-paced adventure that fizzes with energy, brims with suspense, and never lets go of the reader's imagination. Every step of Tick and Leaf's journey is an edge-of-the-seat moment, and the finale is both satisfying and cheer-worthy. Bravo to Montgomery—*Small Wonder* is a thrilling, heartfelt story that begs to be read aloud, shared, and perhaps even, one day, brought to life on the big screen.

Laura Brill

Space: Royal Observatory Greenwich Poetry Book

Gaby Morgan, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Space is a 250+ page compendium which has some of the dreamiest poems by iconic poets from the times gone to the present. The foreword is written by Elizabeth Avery, the Deputy Head of Astronomy of the Royal Museums Greenwich. It's engaging and enticing, an anecdotal piece on the beginnings of the Royal Observatory of Greenwich by the order of King Charles II.

Such a historical space! Hence, here you will find Sappho admiring the moon; Wordsworth stargazing deeply towards philosophical musings; Walt Whitman finding comfort in the night sky; Helen Maria Williams expressing her plight to the pale orb in the sky; Mary Webb penning the mystical tranquillity of the moon on pages. Not only the canonical poets but those writing today have been equally enchanted by nature and its workings - Nicola Davies gets inspiration from the serene sighting of the sunlight filtering through the leaves and she writes-

"What shines on every lifted face the hope of a new day? It is the light from our home star, and when she rests A million suns sparkle in the space she left."

Double Carnegie-nominated poet Dom Conlon versifies the native moons with their names and imaginative meanings to it, like this stanza on the Strawberry Moon-

"Pluck the Strawberry, giving its flesh for all to eat now the world is awake and the Moon is strong and the year is half complete."

Children's writer Elena de Roo recites a few lines inspired by the discovery of the universe expanding by astronomer Beatrice Tinsley-

"I began with a big bang now there is no stopping no slowing no end or edge or limits to my open endless growing

Only the redshift of an infinite galactic elastic band expanding forever as I stretch away from
wherever you stand
For where you are is always my centre”

Poetry is always tranquil and soothing. This collection has the added bonus of images and artwork related to the moon; stars; galaxy. Poems on Galileo; time; space travel; astronauts and space missions. This book is a tribute to explorations within the mind and beyond the boundaries of earth. It's a victory laurel for human endeavours. A keepsake for me. It consolidates voices, a far cry from the past, yet resonant in the words of contemporary poets. The vast expanse of ether and atmosphere creates a magnificent warp and weft of this one.

Ishika Tiwari

The Uninvited

Ross Mackenzie, pub. Andersen Press

This is an imaginative and magical adventure story. The plot is both interesting and intriguing and the characters are appealing. There is a lovely friendship between Samm and Brogan and then Ally who is the more ordinary boy of the three characters.

The book explores the themes of immigration, colonization and freedom. Ross Mackenzie takes his character, Samm, to dark and dangerous places. There is a circus of nightmares and a museum with a murderous exhibit. This all adds up to a special and thought-provoking fantasy adventure.

The story centres around the Faerae Folk and 13-year-old Samm Wolfback. The Faerae Folk flee their world and come to ours. They are running away from war. They have been locked away and don't know what to do. The main character Samm lives in Glass Forest a massive Faerae refugee camp in England. Life here is hard, poisoned by disease and there is crime and poverty. Samm has to escape from Glass Forest and return home. He must use his special gifts to unearth two treasures. These are a relic that will end the war back in Faerae. Then there is the Locksmith, the only person with the power to reopen the doors between the worlds. Samm can find lost things and he must use all his skills to stay alive.

The Uninvited is an amazing fantasy story with a kidnapped boy from another realm now in the human world. There are dark secrets and a showdown with the evil beyond the door. Definitely a good read for fans of magic and fantasy.

Gary Kenworthy

The Wicked Lies of Habren Faire

Anna Fiteni, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

The Wicked Lies of Habren Faire is a Young Adult 'romantasy' novel about Sabrina Parry, a Welsh teen who must strike a dangerous bargain with Fae in order to find her missing sister.

Sabrina is portrayed as a stropky and ill-tempered teenager, who steals and lies her way through life. She is the main breadwinner of the family, with her older sister Ceridwen suffering from an illness. Despite her hardships and cruel upbringing, Sabrina is practical and never fails to care for her family. While she is not morally idealistic, she comes across as a normal teenager. Her flaws make Sabrina a more rounded character and even influence her decisions and her journey through the faerie world. The world of the novel is set within a small Welsh mining town and the fairy forest of Eu Gwald. When Ceridwen vanishes into the woods, Sabrina opts to find her by venturing into Eu Gwald.

The Fae are shown to be vicious and inhuman, with tricky qualities. Neirin is the male love interest of Sabrina; he is a charming Fae prince, who cheekily considers himself as a scholar of humanity. Neirin and Sabrina often communicate with banter and their dynamic is intriguing, as his trickster personality more easily responds to her darker side. When he offers a dangerous bargain to help Sabrina find her sister, with little other choice she is forced to accept. But it is a typical fairy bargain; he is more interested in her than she could ever believe, so while her life is not at risk, unfortunately for Sabrina he is only interested in her love.

Author Anna Fiteni must be commended for her world-building, as the world itself feels so real as to be the third protagonist in its own right. The world of Eu Gwald is presented in great detail, with strangeness and danger around every corner and an eerie sense of timelessness. *The Wicked Lies of Habren Faire* delivers a faerie world filled with multi-layered characters and sharp but intriguing fae. It has a fast-paced narrative and is a wickedly fun read. The atmospheric world is deeply rooted in Welsh folklore, history and mythology, making this a unique story that should definitely be your next read.

Chris J Kenworthy

Non-Fiction Books

About Time: A Children's Guide to the History and Science of Time

Rebecca Struthers and Alom Shaha, illus. Lucy Rose, pub. Dorling Kindersley

I always love a good Dorling Kindersley book with big bright graphics and equally insightful prose. Experts share the depths of a subject, which in this case is time and we, as readers, can expect pivotal details.

The 41 pages contain a heavy dose of types of clocks; ancient and contemporary calendars from around the world; watch making; space and time; solar time; geological time; time measuring instruments from yore; DIY time checking tools; and so much more. Anything you may imagine about time, space and workings of it has been answered pages full with explanatory illustrations and notes. I bet you never read facts like these before-

“Electronic watches are also called quartz watches because they use the vibrations of a quartz crystal to keep time. When electricity is passed through a quartz crystal, it vibrates 32,768 times per second. This high frequency is then turned into one pulse per second by an electric circuit, which moves the hands of a watch or clock, or changes a digital display. Because of the very high frequency of vibration, quartz watches are incredibly accurate, often losing or gaining only a few seconds per month.”

“Big Ben is actually the name of the bell in the clock tower, which itself was renamed the Elizabeth Tower to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II’s Diamond Jubilee.”

The book begins with our physical and psychological preoccupation with time - of how much we have, how much we may gain, or how to make use of it. It then moves onto the definition of time and space; how nature works with it, through natural phenomenon for insects, mammals, aquatic animals and birds; it talks about planning a day on our planners; to counting units of time in days and months; to measuring it through calendars and clocks; leading to clockmaking and time on different planets; moving on to listing incredibly accurate time keepers from history to those keeping time today as contemporary artisans; and a little more on managing a lifetime.

I love how the book is as intricately crafted as a clockwork, the details on a single page makes the reader wonder about the vast expanse of knowledge available in the world. This book is for readers of all ages, as a gift and as a schooltime read; children will certainly enjoy the descriptions paired with the colourful artwork.

Ishika Tiwari

All Our Families Are Awesome

Charlotte Belliere, illus. Ian De Haes, pub. Floris Books

This charming book shows children that all our families are different and teaches them that there is no such thing as a ‘typical’ family. Told from the point of view of a group of young children trying to play families together, it allows each character to explain very simply how their own family works. There are blended families, extended families living together, single parents and adopted children, amongst others. Hopefully, children reading the book will be able to see their own situations, or similar ones, reflected back at them in the story, something which is so important for us all.

The children in the book accept one another’s differences in the way that innocent children do; if one of other families is different to theirs and they’re not sure how that works they just ask.

There’s no judgement, just curiosity and openness.

“Where’s your mom?”

“She lives a long way away. I don’t get to see her very often.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Kind of, sometimes.”

The storyline is simple but effective, and also picks up themes of learning how to play together, being kind and listening to one another. The illustrations feel warm and cosy; perfect for snuggling up with on a cool autumnal evening.

Louise Colver

Animal Gym School

Kate Peridot, illus. Samara Hardy, pub. Bloomsbury Children’s Books

Have you ever looked at the way animals move, their grace, their speed, even their lumbering movements, and wondered what it might be like to be able to move like they do? Now you no longer have to wonder for there is a fabulous book to help you move just like your favourite animals do. It’s this one!

Combining gymnastic with movement, and yes, they are different things, you’ll soon discover there are some wonderful ways to help wiggly, wriggly children who are bursting with energy. Just make sure to have topped up your own energy levels too, this book can get enthusiastic, and you will, I guarantee, be tempted to try the movements yourself! Of course, you could choose to swing like a gibbon or scuttle like a crab but one thing you will quickly learn is that even animals which appear to

move more sedately are quite active! The book is divided into lessons, each introduces a new animal and their movements. There are step-by-step instructions, and the illustrations are incredibly helpful too. The thirteen lessons really are just that, teaching about the animals as well as the importance of movement and how to do it safely. Warm-ups and cool downs are included as well as a fun medal chart at the back of the book.

If you are wondering I rather like the Laze Like A Lion lesson but am not averse to rolling like an Armadillo. A fabulous collection of ideas for those fidgety children we all know and love!

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Atlas Obscura Explorer's Guide to Inventing the World

Dylan Thuras and Jennifer Swanson, illus. Ruby Fresson, pub. Workman

Unusually for a knowledge book, this one has a strong authorial personality, stemming I imagine from one of its authors being one of Atlas Obscura's co-founders, in 2009. Atlas Obscura was created expressly to encourage exploration and hands-on (feet-on?) experience of the world, and this spirit underpins the book. The book's narrative takes the form of a globe-trotting journey taking in 94 locations involved in the technological developments that have led to our modern world.

There is a general chronological through-line from fire to AI, though it's lumpy in that closely-related inventions are grouped, such that e.g. glass is followed by lenses, which strictly should be placed many centuries later. This gives a sense of progress but also ebb and flow, supporting the book's assertion that inventions are often made, forgotten, then rediscovered. The text's format is somewhat like a travel-book: it begins with a section on kit to bring with you on your travels, and each location has a 'before you go'. The tone is somewhat like the *Lonely Planet books*, and likewise for all its friendliness makes no attempt to dumb-down, so this is a book for the more able readers with a reasonable understanding of STEM behind them, let's say 9 to 10 upwards.

The book echoes the encounters with the exotic and unfamiliar that 30s travellers faced, and adopts an art style that references that period. Ruby Fresson's utterly brilliant work is very European in character, and could easily pass for Hergé, creator of Tintin. I would happily buy this book just to look at it, regardless of the words.

Overall, this is a magnificent survey of the history of technology, written with a strong and enthusiastic point of view, and beautifully illustrated with bags of style. I have one minor gripe, the world maps inside the front and back covers are not representative of Fresson's art, and are in a Mercator-like projection and error-prone, and note that the text is American (eg Fahrenheit is used for temperature, though Centigrade equivalents are quoted). Regardless, this is a superb book, in concept and execution.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Bust or Trust? A Kids' Mystery Book

Small Wardour, illus. Sam Peet, pub. Words & Pictures

There is a podcast named *Bust or Trust?* that you may be familiar with. It was the inspiration for this book, its creators have put this book together and it is brilliant, a wonderful collection of puzzles, mysteries and conundrums for curious minds of any age!

The mysteries in this book come from around the world and span history, some of them might not yet have been truly unravelled so you know that means the challenges you are about to face are very real. It won't hurt to make sure you have your magnifying glass to hand and of course your lucky detective cap on. This is the world of case-cracking, its wacky, weird, wonderful and it's time for some *Bust or Trust?* action. For those of you who are having a moment of doubt be assured this is a very serious undertaking and anyone attempting to prove or disprove the puzzles will find themselves learning how to weigh evidence, look at a problem from all angles, think with their critical brain, debate the pros and cons of different arguments and ultimately be able to make a decision.

King Arthur, Amelia Earhart, the cursed tombs of ancient Egypt, the lost city of Atlantis and the mystical powers of Rasputin are among the contents of this book, each puzzle presented uniquely to suit the story behind it and the work done on it so far. Are you prepared for a testing, thrilling experience? Grab this book and see how good a detective you make.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Dig! Uncover the Secrets of the Past With Archaeology

Ruth Hatfield, illus. Sophia Watts, pub. Quarto Kids

Dig! is an engaging and informative exploration of archaeology that will captivate curious minds. The book sets the scene by clearly explaining what archaeology is and how it helps us understand the past. It also explains how archaeologists decide where to start digging and the types of materials that are found according to the time period in question. From there, it takes readers on a fascinating journey through time, starting with the Palaeolithic period and moving through the Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age, before delving into the worlds of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. It also includes insights into Aboriginal and North American Indigenous archaeology, early Islam and the Desert Castles, the Three Kingdoms period of Korea, the Kofun tombs of Japan and the Incas, ensuring a broad and inclusive perspective.

The information is presented in accessible, well-structured blocks, making it easy to dip into or read cover to cover. Diverse cultures are represented with sensitivity and depth, while the detailed illustrations not only complement but also enhance the text. Each period is brought to life with "fantastic finds," highlighting key artefacts and explaining what happens to these treasures after they are discovered. Modern archaeological methods are clearly explained, helping readers understand how technology and scientific techniques are reshaping our understanding of history. A handy timeline at the end provides context and helps to tie everything together, making it a useful reference for students and enthusiasts alike.

Dig! is a well-researched and visually appealing introduction to archaeology. Perfect for classrooms, school libraries or any budding historian's bookshelf, it sparks curiosity and encourages deeper exploration of our shared human past.

Barbara Band

Great Escapes

David Long, illus. Jamie Coe, pub. Faber & Faber

This large hard back book features accounts of over thirty escapes between 1849 and 2014. It is packed with excitement, ingenuity, courage, inspiration and luck and some escapes that are just terrifying. It includes the digging of tunnels, climbing of high walls and bailing from aircraft. The book tells many true stories of good and bad, of lucky successes, as well as some failures. It is particularly amazing because of the many thousands who were taken prisoner during two World Wars, less than 1% actually escaped and made it home. This makes the stories here very rare and special.

Some of the escapes are about famous people, whilst others are about ordinary men and women. A young Winston Churchill is featured when he worked as a newspaper reporter in South Africa. There is the airman, Nicholas Alkemade, who bailed from his Avro Lancaster bomber without a parachute and survived. George Blake's escape from Wormwood Scrubs in London is included. As you might expect, there are many escapes here from the First and Second World Wars. The well-known Colditz Castle is featured. The Great Escape of 1944 is amazing, with the tunnels named Tom, Dick and Harry. The famous prison Alcatraz is featured. There have been a variety of escapes: slaves running from captivity, wartime heroes and heroines, dangerous criminals escaping from jail and the ordinary men and women who were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A very comprehensive contents page makes it easy to find the various accounts. A short introduction and epilogue at the end are both very useful. The book is full of very colourful and eye-catching comic book style illustrations. The escapes are all real. Some are well known and have been turned into

books and films and others are not so well known. The whole book is thoroughly entertaining, very interesting and informative and well worth reading.

Gary Kenworthy

How to Save Granny from a Runaway Train

Swapna Haddow, illus. Jess Bradley, pub. Red Shed

Vibrant, informative and interactive - *How to Save Granny from a Runaway Train* is a wonderful book by the award winning author Swapna Haddow and the illustrations by Jess Bradley are cute and engaging. The book is structured like a children's magazine with little stories, comic strips and thought-provoking puzzles based on real life incidents, to teach scientific facts to the readers.

From cheeky grandpas creating chaos and falling in dormant volcanoes to tricking a shark and even chasing aliens away during an invasion! The book is full of elements which will surely attract kids and stir their imaginations. It is full of science experiments and imaginative situations establishing the primacy of a scientific solution to an issue. Kids will learn how to bend light; make an electromagnet and a periscope; a shadow puppet; an eggshell bridge and other such fun things which pique the curiosity of a child.

The pages are designed with an imaginative problem; a multiple choice option to choose from; with answers to each choice and then the best option is highlighted with the science behind it explained. Along with this, are facts from the past and present like these-

“Sounds can't travel in space as there is no air to pass on the vibrations.”

“Three and half thousand years ago, the ancient Egyptians used shadow to tell the time, using a device called the sundial. Make your own by popping a pencil through the middle of a paper plate. Then outside on a sunny day, mark where the shadow falls on each hour.”

Children aged 6-10 are going to enjoy a lot with inclusive characters communicating with them on the page. They will learn new things and will most certainly love the experiments shared.

Ishika Tiwari

My First Jungle Atlas: Trek Through Forests to Meet the Most Amazing Animals!

Camilla de la Bedoyere, illus. Greco Westermann, pub. Earthaware Kids

I would've loved this when I was about 6, and continued loving it for some years after. This is a colourful cavalcade of rain forest species (112 by my count, almost all animals, many super-obscure) characterfully participating in varied rain forest settings (9, from Canada to Australia, the Amazon to Borneo), depicted in a gorgeous, simplified Henri Rousseau (famous for *Tiger in a Tropical Storm*) style.

The emphasis is on the vibrant, charming art, endlessly rebrowsable, excellent imagination and awe fuel, but many of the beasts are captioned with facts and details that reflect the distinctive nature of the rain forest habitat, describing adaptations and behaviours that have evolved within the ecological niches such forests present. All the headliners are here, tigers and so forth, but less popular types of animals aren't neglected (there are 9 mini-beasts, for example), and the 13 double-page spreads are prefaced with short paragraphs that collectively profile the general features of a rain forest.

The accessibility and concision of the sparse text means younger readers can enjoy this book as much as the 8 and 9 year-olds drawn by the attractive art, interesting details and breadth of coverage, though the American spellings may need explanation to those who don't yet know there is more than one version of 'correct' English. Younger readers are supported and engaged further by the simple spotting-type questions that appear at the foot of each page, drawing attention to a facet of a species or group of species thereon.

And I wouldn't be me if I didn't appreciate the handy map locating the mentioned forests in the world – having a little map of the entire world as a sort of key and then expanded maps of the forests in a sort of mosaic is a nice idea, typical of the book's constant exploration of ways to engage. Overall, lovely, fact-filled and evocative. Recommended.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

The Stuff That Stuff is Made Of

Jonathan Drori, illus. Raxenne Manique and Jiatong Liu, pub. Magic Cat Publishing

Written by best-selling author Jonathan Drori, known for *Around the World in 80 Trees*, this captivating and beautifully produced book delves into the fascinating stories of 30 plants and their roles in our everyday lives. Meticulously researched and with every botanical detail checked by experts at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, it is as accurate as it is engaging. Some plants will be familiar — vanilla used to flavour ice cream, pine trees for wood and papyrus for early forms of paper — but others are full of surprises.

Did you know that alginates extracted from kelp and seaweed are used as thickeners in foods, that modern car tyres can contain rubber from dandelions or that giant timber bamboo stems are still tied

together for scaffolding in some parts of the world? Mandrake, meanwhile, makes its way into perfumes and cosmetics.

Presented in a large, visually stunning format, each plant is given a double-page spread: one side showcases a detailed and often intricate illustration of the plant in question with botanical information, while the opposite side offers a fascinating mix of where the plant grows, how it was first used and the many ways it is used today. Interesting snippets of trivia are scattered throughout — for example, olive trees often become hollow with age, making it impossible to count their rings accurately and thus ascertain their age, and when Rameses the Great was mummified in 1213 BC, peppercorns were placed in his nostrils although nobody is sure how they got to Egypt from India!

This book is a perfect blend of science and history. It will appeal to plant enthusiasts, history lovers and the simply curious. A beautiful addition to any home, school or library collection, *The Stuff That Stuff Is Made From* invites readers to look at the natural world - and the “stuff” around us - in a whole new way.

Barbara Band

Board books

Bougie Babies Boss Brunch

Harriet Evans, illus. Kim Faria

The Feelings Book

Mike Henson, illus. Miguel Ordóñez

First Friends: Colours

Mk Smith Despres, illus. Libby Burns

First Friends: Opposites

Mk Smith Despres, illus. Libby Burns

Hello Fish!

Sharon King-Chai

Hello Sun!

Sharon King-Chai

I Find My First Words

ed. Little Gestalten, illus. Yayo Kawamura

Ten Minutes to Bed: Where's Little Dragon?

Rhiannon Fielding, illus. Chris Chatterton

Picturebooks

Bert and the Bubble

Kim Hillyard

Dragon Flower

Chen Jiang Hong, trans. Alyson Waters

Enchanted Beach

Esther Freud, illus. Emma Chinnery

Frank is a Butterfly

Alex Latimer

How to Catch an Idea

Forest Xiao

The Last Egg

Sofie Laguna, illus. Jess Rackyleft

Let's Be Earthlings

Mary Murphy

Minna's Masks

Louise Gooding, illus. Irina Avgustinovich

Perfect Pedro

Simon Philip, illus. Ella Okstad

This Way Up

Tom Percival

Early Reader books

Ava Spark Hello I'm Here!

Alex Field, illus. Joanna Bartel

Bravepaw 1: Heartstone of Alluria

L.M. Wilkinson, illus. Lavanya Naidu

Bravepaw 2: Clawstone of Rotwood Mire

L.M. Wilkinson, illus. Lavanya Naidu

The Coming of the Iron Man

Ted Hughes, illus. Mini Grey

Dream Keepers: Map to Starlight Hollow

Rebecca Lewis-Oakes, illus. Anastasiya
Kanavaliuk

Kaleb's Farmyard Tales: Escaping Animals and Runaway Tractors

Kaleb Cooper, illus. Tom Knight

Pia's Pet Club: Puppy Problem

Serena Patel, illus. Emma McCann

Woodland Explorers Club: Fujiko and the Fox

Ewa Jozefkowicz, illus. Gillian Flint

The World of Maxime

Lucile de Pesloüan, trans. Helen Mixter, illus.
Jacques Goldstyn

Middle Grade books

Adventures in Lylaland

Louise Pentland

Blitzers

Alastair Chisholm, illus. Francesca Ficorilli

Firebloom

Justin Davies, illus. Francesca Ficorilli

The Invisible Parade

Leigh Bardugo, illus. John Picacio

Isle of Ever

Jen Calonita

The Last Bard

Maz Evans

Medusa Gorgon's Bad Hair Day

Bethany Walker, illus. Katie Abey

The Odyssey of Phoebe Quilliam

Annelise Gray

Out There in the Wild

Nicola Davies, James Carter and Dom Conlon,
illus. Diana Catchpole

Role Model

Ellen McNicoll

Sin Bin Island

Doug Naylor

Teen & Young Adult books

A Murder of Rogues

Joe Heap

Girls of Dark Divine

E.V. Woods

The Guardians of Dreamdark: Windwitch

Laini Taylor

Immortal Consequences

I. V. Marie

iNSiDE

S. A. Gales

Murder High

Lauren Muñoz

Not Going To Plan

Tia Fisher

Small Wonder

Ross Montgomery

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The Uninvited

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