



Armadillo

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

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Picture books

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

Ian Fleming, adapted by Peter Bentley, illus. Steve Antony, pub. Hachette Children's Books

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang is such a cheerful and interesting book, full of the adventures of the Pott family and the old car that Jemima and Jeremy Pott's dad repairs. Chitty Chitty Bang Bang is so dirty and broken down, she is about to be sent to the scrapyards until Mr. Pott puts her back to rights.

When the Pott family go to the beach in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, they get stuck in a long traffic jam. A knob on the car's dashboard flashes 'PULL ME' and when Mr Pott pulls it, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang begins to fly. But there's nowhere for the car to land. The detailed illustration showing the car with wings and a propeller is exactly the kind of car every child would love to ride in.

Then Chitty Chitty Bang Bang flies to an empty island where they all have fun until tired, they fall asleep on the sand. Only the car sees the mist drift in and the sea roll up the beach. She blows her klaxon to wake the Pott family but now there's not enough room to take off, so when a knob flashes on its dashboard saying 'PRESS ME,' Mrs Pott presses it and Chitty Chitty Bang Bang rolls into the sea, sailing through the misty darkness, huge ships around them.

They roll out of the sea onto a beach in France that has a cave. Only it isn't a cave, it's a tunnel and Chitty Chitty Bang Bang drives right into it, going round and round until they reach the end, when her headlights shine over a big pile of gold. Joe the Robber's secret hideout! There is a brilliant illustration of Joe and his robbers. When the robbers escape in a van, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang chases after them. When they try to get away in a hot-air balloon, the car flies into the sky and cuts the balloon ropes sending Joe and his robbers tumbling into the sea where the police pull them out and take them away.

The book ends as excitingly as it begins with the President of France giving the Pott family and Chitty Chitty Bang Bang a special medal for catching the burglars.

This is such a great story and told so simply, a child would read it again and again. The richly detailed illustrations are in clear bright colours with much to look at and examine. The final double page illustration is lovely, with a huge white moon, a sparkling Eiffel Tower and the Pott family leaving in their magical, dramatic car that is Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

Gwen Grant

Dance like a Flamingo

Moira Butterfield, illus. Claudia Boldt, pub. Welbeck

This book has the 'get up and go' that we all need in our 2020 lives! The author takes readers on a journey, a journey where they will meet creatures from all over the world - from flamingos to elephants, penguins to lemurs. Combining factual non-fiction elements with a series of lively, upbeat story rhymes this is a picture book that will get readers of all ages on their feet - wiggling, shaking and dancing! If you need a little encouragement, beautiful illustrations introduce both the animals and the actions.

If your fellow readers are as taken with this book as mine, you might even find yourself working up a sweat whilst banking facts about each of your new-found animal friends.

This is the perfect book to take you out of your story-time comfort zone (on the sofa) and to get everyone laughing.

Equally enjoyable to read aloud, as a group activity or simply to be used as an exploration of illustrations for a pre-text reader, *Dance like a Flamingo* is a fun story and introduction to wildlife, plus a chance to get active.

Amy Ellis

Every Night is Pizza Night

K Kenji Lopez-Alt, illus. Gianna Ruggiero, pub. Norton Young Readers

Pipo thinks that pizza is the best food, but unfortunately this means that she will not eat anything else for her dinner. That is, until her mother raises the question “how do you know Pizza is best if you don’t try anything else?”

So prompted Pipo decides to undertake a scientific experiment to try and validate her opinion. She asks each of her friends what they love to eat and agrees to try some of their favourite dishes.

Given the multicultural nature of Pipo’s neighbourhood it is not surprising that she gets to test a wide range of amazing dishes. Many of the foods are family favourites, having been passed down for generations, so we discover (with Pipo) that there is an added reason for their popularity, beyond having a great taste.

This is a brilliant look at the way children can become ‘faddy’ about their food and it makes a great starting point for discussions about what we do and do not like and the reasons behind this. There is

an excellent section which looks at how we like different foods depending on our mood; sometimes we want crisps or chocolate cake and other times it would be hotdogs, burgers or fish and chips.

This story is an encouragement to give things a try. It is also about the delight of discovering that there are so many great tastes for us to indulge in. An excellent read for reception and KS1, although it could be used for discussion further up the school.

Margaret Pemberton

Fish

Brendan Kearney, pub. DK Children

From the front cover onwards we are invited to share Brendan Kearney's love of all things watery. Storytelling and artistic ability combine to tell a meaningful little tale about a profoundly big problem, pollution. Succinct text and intense graphic detail will suit multiple aged audiences that so often share a story session. The audience will take away with them the recycling mantra, how to recycle, repair and re-use, use recyclable goods and spread the word ... job done.

Finn and his dog Skip take centre stage in the story. They fish together for a living until one day the fish have disappeared and the seals are looking sad. Skip dives in to investigate and returns covered in litter. They are overwhelmed with plastic rubbish. As there are no fish to fish they decide to spend their time collecting the rubbish, and their boat struggles back at the end of the day under the weight of it. The drawing of this will delight both young and old, packed with amusing detail.

The beach cleaning team greet them on their return with offers of help and lots of explanations about how the rubbish got there, the damage it does to the inhabitants of the sea and its unmanageable behaviour. Everyone is wiser about micro plastic development and its ability to destroy our wildlife, our water system and even our food. We are left in no doubt that big changes start with small steps and that there are lots of things we can do immediately. There is no place for apathy and procrastination.

The four points of the recycling mantra follow and Finn confirms this by recycling everything he can, mending everything that can be fixed, finding ways of using what can't be processed and inviting his friends and family to help clean up the beach.

Lots of positive things then happen, the fish return, the seals are happy, the crabs celebrate, and Finn and Skip have made new friends. A really happy message to take away from this lively little book.

Elizabeth Negus

Futuristic Fairy Tales: Goldilocks in Space

Peter Bently, illus. Chris Jevons, pub. Hachette Children's Books

Goldilocks in Space became an instant hit in our household. Given the extreme love for fairytales my almost-4-year-old has, it's probably no surprise that she was very taken by this modern riff on the golden-haired girl's escapades.

This time she's on a mission to find her perfect planet. Setting off on her journey, Captain Goldilocks takes young readers on a rhyming adventure visiting planets on the way and assessing their relative merits. Turns out that maybe her 'just right' could be closer to home than she thinks...

Illustrations of her intergalactic friends made for good talking points about space, stars and whether indeed aliens do exist?

We lingered longer than average on the opening pages showing the whole galaxy - a great opportunity to introduce some of the more abstract topics around planets and stars. We joined in with gusto, panto style, with the 'too hard, too soft, too big, too small' moment, and we shared chuckles about planet names, then coming up with our own.

As a parent, the subtle moral of the age old saying 'grass is always greener' also felt like a positive end to what is a really fun story.

Amy Ellis

Girl From the Sea

Margaret Wild, illus. Jane Tanner, pub. Allen and Unwin

Girl From The Sea is a new picture book collaboration from Margaret Wild and Jane Tanner. Regarded as two of Australia's finest children's book creators, this is their first joint project since 1984's *There's a Sea in my Bedroom*.

Girl from the Sea is an unusual picture book telling the haunting tale of a young ghost longing for home and acceptance. We are drawn into the story through monochrome images of the wild and restless sea and a shipwreck is hinted at. Images of swirling water begin to dominate and will resonate throughout the book.

The girl emerges from the sea glowing with an ethereal green light. The simple lyrical text swells with her yearning and hope to be let in as she gazes at a loving family living by the sea. She creeps closer, bringing the sea with her until images of water and sea creatures suffuse the page. The story ends on a hopeful note as the girl finds a way to connect with the family.

This is a rich and enigmatic book that creates space for readers to develop their own interpretations. New and telling details emerge on each re-reading. The interplay between the misty charcoal illustrations and the elliptical text creates an eerie and mysterious atmosphere. It is a text that could be used effectively for class discussions and could stimulate children to respond creatively.

If you have a family tradition of reading ghost stories during the festive period this could be a good choice for all the family to enjoy together.

Liz Speight

I Am One

Susan Verde, illus. Peter H Reynolds, pub. Abrams Books for Young Readers

The tagline to this title is 'A Book of Action'.

The story starts with the small narrator wanting to make a difference and realising that beautiful things start with 'just one...' One seed, one note, one step... one gentle word. The narrator, who might be a boy or a girl, begins to explore the power of one action. Gathering support and building momentum, they reach out across the world, uniting with others. The difference this small person ultimately makes is to inspire others to create a beautiful garden together, with each person contributing according to their skills. Such a lovely, visual metaphor!

The illustrator, Peter H Reynolds, dedicated the book to Greta Thunberg, 'who showed the world the power of ONE young person'. His colourful, joyful illustrations are fresh and full of energy against a pure white background. A friendly font and text pared back for maximum clarity and impact means it can be read aloud or read alone.

Children know we are living in a world full of cares and that there's a lot of 'sorting out' to be done. At the end of the book, Susan Verde includes an 'Author's Note'. Addressing a slightly older child here, she explains that *I Am One* was inspired by a quote from the Dalai Lama: 'Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects.' A guided meditation and self-reflection activity follow. For parents, carers and teachers, this is a really lovely resource for helping children with their mental well-being. In fact, it is an activity to bring focus and empowerment to anybody of any age, should they wish to try it!

I Am One is a call to arms – and not just for children. It is a timely reminder for everybody that we all have it in us to be activists.

Jackie Spink

If You Come To Earth

Sophie Blackall, pub. Chronicle Books

'Dear Visitor from Outer Space, if you come to Earth, here's what you need to know...' This is the way the narrator, Quinn, begins his letter. First, he pinpoints whereabouts Earth is located in space and, in an instant, the reader knows they are going to be embarking on a wonderful learning journey.

Quinn zooms in on our planet, pointing out the range of places people live, from big cities to lone houses in the middle of nowhere; the assortment of shelters people call 'home' across the world; the different types of families, different bodies, different minds... you get the drift. It's brilliant. Quinn guides the visitor to expect abundant variation in clothing, transport, employment; he explains sizes, senses, sickness ... the pages are crammed, illustrating the rich diversity and texture of the world we live in. The text is minimal, but there is a story on every page – so much to talk about - it begs to be shared.

There's humour and warmth in the colourful, detailed illustrations. Each page is quirky and unpredictable in its layout and content. One page has a guide to sign language and another the braille alphabet, while yet another is filled with paint tubes with the colours you need to 'paint everything in the world'. It would be rewarding to explore these pictures with children who are learning to speak English.

In an extended author's note at the end, Sophie Blackall explains how she was inspired to write this book following her travels around the world in support of UNICEF and Save the Children. She talked to children from many countries. Although there is no such thing as a 'typical' person, she says, 'there's something we all share – the planet on which we live.'

If You Come to Earth, is not only a beautiful, encyclopaedic guide to that planet, but a friendly prompt to cherish it. I cannot wait to be able to share this book with my five-year-old granddaughter. It's a stunner!

Jackie Spink

Kind

Alison Green, foreword Axel Scheffler, illus. 38 Kind Illustrators, pub. Alison Green Books

Kind is a beautiful book all about making the world a better place by simple acts of kindness. Axel Scheffler has written a lovely foreword and his illustration – 38 Kind Illustrators were involved in this book – is the one that graces the cover and is instantly recognisable.

This colourful picture book brings together an anthology of suggestions of how we can be kind and help one another, as well as giving the reader a plethora of pictures to explore and enjoy as we spot how the many different animals are helping each other - there are even a few people. From sharing toys to helping those who no longer have a home. This is a book for now (and perhaps for many times past and future too).

Written in a gentle and warm way the prose will bring about recognition, questions and discussions: Animals need kindness too; Sometimes people have lived through very hard times and are brave and amazing; Isn't it fun to see what we do the same and what we do differently?

Kind is helping raise money for Three Peas, a charity that gives vital practical help to people who have had to flee their homes – 50p from each book sold – and of which Axel Scheffler is patron. In the end pages of the book there is an easy-to-read description of the charity and where the money goes. Also, there is a list and short bio for each and every illustrator who worked on *Kind* – out of kindness. I have no doubt that children reading this will spot the style of their favourite picture book illustrators and possibly want to see more books by newly discovered ones.

You can't go wrong with *Kind*; a reminder for us all, and a guide not only for the small but for us biggies who have perhaps forgotten the benefits of a simple act of kindness.

“Everyone can be kind
Even if they're a bit small
Or a bit shy”

Beautifully written and adorned with incredible illustrations. This is perfect bedtime – anytime – reading and snuggling up too.

Anja Stobbart

Last: The Story of a White Rhino

Nicola Davies, pub. Tiny Owl

This story is based on the true events and life of a Northern White Rhino called Sudan. He is the last male of his kind and was captured as a youngster and kept in captivity. Eventually he is returned to where he was taken from, but because of his rarity had to be guarded 24 hours a day by rangers. It was hoped that Sudan would breed with two females, but unfortunately this was not successful and he sadly passed away without any living offspring.

The written words inside this book are from the perspective of the rhino and it is simple but very effective. This is due mainly to the fantastic illustrations that accompany it.

You cannot help but feel emotional when reading this book and feeling a deep sadness for his story. It covers difficult but relevant topics, such as poaching, in a sympathetic and understandable way.

At the beginning of the book it is explained that the words you can see in the pictures are “random snippets of advertising slogans, and short phrases from famous environmental speeches.” They are written in many different languages and aim to contrast the bleakness of advertising with inspirational words. Another effective contrast is the bleakness and muted colours used for the zoo pictures and the bright, vibrant colours of the pictures of the wild rhinos.

At the back of the book is the true story of Sudan in more detail and what they were trying to achieve by capturing him in the first place.

This book aims to encourage us all, one at a time, to change the world for the better. It is an important message that every child and adult should learn. This is a beautiful book that I hope will be enjoyed by many.

Victoria Wharam

Marney’s Mix-Up

Jane Rushmore, illus. Sally Darby, pub. Owlet Press

Autumn is coming and the squirrels are busy preparing for winter. This is Marney’s first year having to collect nuts, but he is having problems finding a supply; so, he decides to head off to the other side of the park in the hope of finding some. When he is startled by a red furred stranger, speaking in a strange language, he is scared and asks his friends who it might be?

The answer he discovers brings him a new friend and a better understanding of the world around him.

Marney’s Mix-Up is a lovely story that blends together the concepts of sharing, learning about different communities and also about the seasons and how animals adapt to different conditions. The illustrations are bright, energetic and have a definite spark of humour about them. I particularly like the image of Marney in a fountain pond with his swimming goggles on. There is a certain naivety about the illustrations, but the way that the characters are placed against a plain background gives them a 3-D quality that brings them alive. This is a delightful story that will be enjoyed by young children, especially Reception and KS1 and which provides lots of opportunities for use in the classroom.

Margaret Pemberton

Merrylegs

Pam Smy, pub. David Fickling

Merrylegs is a riding school pony, fed up with his ordinary life of plodding and clomping around the stables. He wishes his life was more exciting. Merrylegs can't help but compare himself to the tall and beautiful racehorses who dash by. His friend Feathers, a bird, cannot convince Merrylegs that the children love to ride him. Merrylegs has closed himself off from feeling anything other than sadness and doubt. When the fair comes to town, buddies Merrylegs and Feathers venture along to see it.

Merrylegs is mesmerized by the attractions and, most of all, by a carousel of beautiful, painted horses. Merrylegs notices how happy the children are, but refuses to believe Feathers when he tells him that the children are just as happy riding on his back. Merrylegs tries to be just like the carousel horses by running alongside, but becomes exhausted and fully fed up with his lot.

But, in the hush of the night, 'when stars start to glitter and the moon shines bright,' the true magic of the story begins. Merrylegs sets off on an adventure with one of the carousel horses, that changes his whole outlook and gives him the courage to see that he has been loved all along. Merrylegs is filled with dreams and a new belief in himself.

Pam Smy's beautiful text and stunning illustrations marry together magnificently and create a magical atmosphere. It is difficult to not root for Merrylegs and wish that he would believe in himself. As such, when he sets off on a special moon light adventure, and begins to see himself as others do, one can only delight in Merrylegs' happiness.

A recommended read-aloud book for children interested in ponies, horses and night-time magic!

Evelyn Bookless

The Midnight Fair

Gideon Sterer, illus. Mariachiara Di Giorgio, pub. Walker Books

I don't know how you feel about wordless picture books, but I love them – what a fantastic opportunity they present to the reader to use their imagination, time and time and time again. Never be afraid of a book with no words, pictures are there to be read as much as words are and after all we are told that a picture can tell a thousand stories so why don't you try? This book is a delightful place to start. Off we go to the fun fair, The Midnight Fair.

The setting is spectacular, it is also surreal and extremely cinematic as it introduces us to the secret life of a selection of animals in its filmic pages, moving seamlessly across the paper, absorbing mind

and eyes as you turn the pages (which at times it is easy to forget to do being so absorbed by each and every one).

Step away from the city and into the countryside. Hold on though. Is this the countryside or an in-between place? Time for your imagination to take over here. Discover a fairground but one with a difference for as night falls this one is empty, curious? Be prepared for a lovely big surprise as all of a sudden, with the blink of an eye, the turn of a page, the fair comes to life, the unbelievable happens and somehow it all becomes believable. As the animals emerge from the trees. A brave racoon makes the first step and pulls a lever but what magic will this unleash? Can you tell? What happens if you change the story? Rides explode into life with glorious bursts of colour, now it is time for fun – will you join in?

This story asks that ever-enchanting question – what happens when the humans are in bed? The answer is up to you to imagine, guided by some favourite fairground rides, stands and games. With so much to follow and spot, this book may make its reader sleepy after so much action – perfect for bedtimes – but they will never tire of wanting more and nor will you.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Nine Lives of Furry Purry Beancat. The Captain's Cat

Philip Ardagh, illus. Rob Biddulph, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

First volume of a series aimed at 5+, *The Nine Lives of Furry Purry Beancat* wins its readers through a charming cat protagonist who will stay in your hearts well after the book is finished.

Philip Ardagh picks up finely realistic traits of cats to create a lovable character who wakes up from her catnaps in different worlds each time. In every world, she has a life in which she is recognized as a familiar presence, despite her having no memory of it at all. The interplay between the familiar and the strange at the start of her adventure is an engaging narrative feature which stirs the imagination.

As well as its readers, Furry Purry Beancat wins all the other main characters in the story: her favourite Captain Topaz, the funny little mice living aboard the pirate ship Rapier, and even the big and muscly Ten Tun, a member of One-Eyed Bart's crew of pirates attacking the Rapier.

At the very start, the story does not hold a fast pace, which at times lets the reader's attention wander, but the rhythm catches up in the second half of the book when Furry Purry Beancat concocts a plan to save the ship.

Rob Biddulph opted for computer style illustrations in black and white which are a perfect to and complement the narration.

The book wraps up with Furry Purry Beancat following her tail around three times, and falling asleep. What will come of her next? I look forward to finding out in the next volume, *The Railway Cat*.

Francesca Magnabosco

Pirate Stew

Neil Gaiman, illus. Chris Riddell, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Neil Gaiman is a multi-award-winning writer of both picture books, middle grade fiction and numerous books for adults, team him with Chris Riddell, author, illustrator and political cartoonist and you have a match made in heaven – at least in my opinion and so it is a great pleasure for me to bring you this review and to be able to add yet another fantastic title to my bookshelf.

From its cover, having spent many minutes admiring its sheer vivacity and detail, to the story held within the pages this book is a delight. So, on having managed to actually open it up and then navigating all the intricate details not to be missed before the story-proper begins – yes I love to read the dedications and admire the end pages as well as the flaps! But before I get to the story allow me a moment to backtrack, as I was saying look at the cover, please do take some time to do this and put into your mind each of the characters you see there, try and create personalities for them and then wait to see if they will match those in the story or if, like me, you will need to keep going back to check!

Right, to the story, sorry I am just so very excited about every aspect of this one! Be prepared for jollity (this is after all a pirate story), delicious rhymes, rollicking adventure and wicked illustration. Be prepared for colour, for action. Meet Long John McRon, ship's cook and chief babysitter. What is a pirate to do when complete with a crew he has two children in tow? Make pirate stew of course. How does this happen? Heavy pestles and leeks (but not in vessels), seeds that feed the parrots, silver spoons, a good stir with a pirate sword, and on the riotous cookery lesson goes ... Want to know the outcome? Will the children become pirates or the pirated revert to children? Dive in, arm yourself and be ready for silliness, adventure, fun and wickedness (of course). Joyful, quirky, laugh-out-loud tongue-twistingly funny this book is the perfect gift to yourself or any young reader and will start (or continue) their reading journey with a true bang!

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Song of the Nightingale

Tanya Landman, illus. Laura Carlin, pub. Walker Books

This is the story of the creation of the colours of the world and how each animal, insect and landscape got its uniqueness.

The world started off as a colourful place, but the twist to the story is that the creatures who lived there were dull and drab. The story is based around the 'painter' who decorates all of the creatures on the earth. However, when the painter thinks they are finished, a small bird appears who has been hiding from all of the commotion throughout the day. There is no paint left except a little drop of gold that the painter places in the back of the bird's throat. This gives the bird the most beautiful voice. There were magical sections of storytelling and I particularly enjoyed the rhyming section used to describe the animals. It was very effective, and I wouldn't have been disappointed if this had appeared in other parts of the book.

I read this book with a child who is in year 6 and asked them what they thought. Overall, she enjoyed the book but felt that if she was younger and was using just the pictures to work out the story, it would have been a bit confusing, so this is definitely a story to enjoy reading out loud to your young children, where discussion can be had. The drawings are simple and child-like giving them a certain charm that will appeal to some. They are bright and colourful and project happiness. She also described the story as getting 'a bit chaotic in places, but in a good way!' as it showed the excitement amongst the animals.

The message that we both heard in this book was that whatever colour you are, you are beautiful. It also showed that if you wait long enough and are patient, you will be rewarded. We particularly liked how the little nightingale was plain, but we could see it was beautiful from the inside.

Victoria Wharam & Seren

The Stone Giant

Anna Höglund, pub. Gecko Press

The first thing that strikes you, as soon as you pick up this picture book, is the stunning set of pictures within its pages. Anna Höglund both wrote and illustrated this book, and it is so apt that she chose the old traditional technique of engraving to compliment the retelling of an old, traditional Swedish fairy-tale.

It is a story told with an undercurrent of darkness and dread threaded throughout, analogous to other fairy tales. In particular, the similarity to *Little Red Riding Hood* walking through the woods, is very evident in the middle of the story when the little girl, wearing bright red, is walking through a dark gloomy forest to find her missing father. What has happened to him? He was supposed to go and fight a giant that had been turning people into stone but he hadn't returned, leaving the little girl all alone.

The other little detail that you notice is the tiny blue bird that follows the little girl everywhere. Why is it there? Is it a symbol that all will be well?

What we do know is that the small child musters some big bravery to set out on her adventure to find her father. She has to use some cunning to outwit the giant and save not just her father, but others who have been turned to stone.

This story is about finding the strength within, to do things that are perhaps a little scary, in order to survive.

It is wonderfully written with each paragraph set out like a stanza of a poem, in the centre of each page. The creative use of poetic features produces amazing imagery such as ‘The water was as black and shiny as oil’.

It is a book to add to any child’s collection and is certainly a must read aloud book.

Claire Webb

The Teeny Weeny Genie

Julia Donaldson, illus. Anna Currey, pub. Macmillan Children’s Books

This is a charming tale, following the highs and lows of the genie as he is released from his quiet teapot life by Old MacDonald.

In true Julia Donaldson style, clever nods to well-known fairy tale characters weave this story together with others, yet *The Teeny Weeny Genie* is a unique tale that captivates younger readers.

The title itself even raises a little smile before the first page is turned. In what feels a departure from more recent releases from Donaldson - the inimitable lilt and rhythm - this story is at times a wander through both rhyme and prose without a central chorus. Yet, it hangs together as one narrative and kept my avid pre-reader rapt throughout.

Laughs and shouts at the genie's magical rhyming spells ensued, and plenty of opportunities to join in with the noise of chugging tractors, tooting trumpets and loud whistles were duly welcomed. As the story closes, we both feel a definite sense of endearment to our new diminutive friend, and discussion opens as to what his next adventure might be.

Anna Currey's illustrations bring the story to life beautifully, with some whole pages devoted to showing the action in full colour. This story feels like it will be one that grows with us, and becomes a firm favourite in our ever-growing library of Julia Donaldson classics.

Amy Ellis

To the Island

Patricia Forde, illus. Nicola Bernardelli, pub. Little Island Books

Commissioned by the Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture programme, *To the Island* celebrates Galway children's author Patricia Forde's love of islands, both real and imaginary.

According to Irish legend, Hy Basil is a magical island off the coast of Galway, said to appear once every seven years. The island is shown on old maps from the fourteenth century up to the 1800s and now, in 2020, is captured beautifully in *To the Island*.

Guided by the pull of the magic in the air and the magic in her own heart, the young Fia leaves the comfort of her bed to journey to the water. As her travels take her across the stars, Fia is soon transported to Hy Basil where she discovers the secrets of the island, from its magical creatures to its waters laced with silver. As she dances across the island, readers are invited to celebrate every new discovery with Fia as we share her awe and amazement.

The mystical island of Hy Basil is brought to life by the stunning artwork and colour palette of Nicola Bernardelli which beautifully compliments this legendary tale.

To the Island is the perfect book to transport your young reader to a whole new world, fuelling both imagination and curiosity.

After reading this tale, I am keen to further research traditional Irish legends.

Ellie Egleton

What's in the Truck?

Philip Ardagh, illus. Jason Chapman, pub. Faber & Faber

A menagerie of animals are traveling in a fleet of different vehicles along steep winding roads encountering various characters and experiencing many misadventures in this amusing, energetic, and colourful picture book which has a surprising and entertaining twist as the different modes of transport appear from within each other like vehicular Russian dolls; a series of nesting wheels, and, for added pleasure, not all appearances are physically realistic. So, for example, a cow driving a white stretched limo suddenly appears out of the back of a much smaller yellow turbo-charged racer driven

by a horse and a frog riding a blue scooter appears out of a box on the back of a motorbike driven by a ginger cat.

Ardagh's rhyming text gives no indication of where they are all going but eagle-eyed readers will spot little clues among Chapman's vivid lively images like balloons hanging from a road sign. As they travel to their destination they will also spot clever little visual jokes like a hamster walking along the roadside with two centipedes on leads or a badger standing on a barrier filming one of the vehicle's appearances on their phone.

The rhyming text, as you would expect from a Roald Dahl Funny Prize-winning author, is joyously silly and entertaining and is enhanced brilliantly by the dynamic illustrations. I especially liked the lines rhyming heathers and leathers and the appearance of a green arm and four green fingers appearing out of a box in the foreground. The sense of energy, movement, and fun bursts from the page.

There is also a nice feminist angle to the story as all the characters arrive at their destination of Princess Maxie's Palace for her birthday party, we see a dog wearing a tiara and a pink tutu and as the guests present her with a key in a box we could expect her to be receiving a pink sports car or some such gendered vehicle. However, as she emerges from her garage/workshop with a spanner in her hand to accept her present she squeals with delight as climbs into the driving seat of the big red truck with giant wheels which started the whole story off.

This title feels like a good companion to Ardagh's *Bunnies on the Bus* and also reminds me of Jez Alborough's *Duck in the Truck*. It is a nonsensical exuberantly jolly lovely book.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

While We Can't Hug

Eoin McLaughlin, illus. Polly Dunbar, pub. Faber & Faber

As more and more books naturally begin to appear based on the events of 2020, I think this sequel to the 2019 picture book *The Hug* will stand out as being one of the best. It is cheerful, cute, kind, and thought-provoking and as it never directly mentions Covid and everything that goes with it, it has a wider scope and life than other titles that deal directly with the subject.

Hedgehog and Tortoise, who in the previous book desperately searched for somebody to give them a hug and delightfully found each other, are now catching up but this time around they are unable, for reasons unspecified, to hug each other so they must be creative in finding other ways to greet each other and show their love.

And so, through making funny faces, writing letters, blowing kisses, painting pictures (rainbows, which is a nice topical image), and more they reinforce their relationship, and the book concludes with the simple but effective sentiment: “they could not touch, they could not hug, but they both knew they were loved”.

I gave this book in the summer as gifts to my four-year-old niece and two-year-old nephew as a means to explain that despite being unable to physically touch or at times even see their wider families we could do other things to replace cuddles and so on. Not only did they enjoy the story and the characters, but we were inspired by some of the activities shown in the book and also made some of our own up. For example, they were already aware of butterfly and eskimo kisses so we tried distanced ones which resulted in funny faces being pulled and with that silliness and laughter.

I like that the reasons why Hedgehog and Tortoise can't touch are not explained as it gives the book a typical children's book feel – things just are in that book's world and there is no need for our reasoning or reality to rear their heads. It also allows the book to be used for other reasons, such as with families separated by physical distance for example across countries.

The illustrations are perfect for the sentiment of the book – romantic, gentle, cuddly water colours. It is so sweet but not in a sickly, over-the-top way. For me, this picture book would be a great addition to a time capsule made about life in 2020, it is a perfect representation of the sadness but also the hope and fulfilment of finding a way through the frightening restricting world that this year has brought. It is a hug in book format.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

Who's Your Real Mum?

Bernadette Green, illus. Anna Zobel, pub. Scribble

What do you think about when you think of family? Mum, Dad and kids? Mum, Nan and a baby? Brothers and sisters looking after each other? Families, today, come in all shapes and sizes and this book demonstrates just that.

Written in response to her own children's situation, this book is ideal for introducing children to different social norms in an easy-to-understand way and will prompt dialogue that will lead to the exploration of the diversity that makes up 'family'.

Bernadette Green's debut picture book, *Who's Your Real Mum?* is a conversation between two children, Elvi and Nicholas. Nicholas is interested by the fact that Elvi has got two mums and he is really inquisitive to know why? He repeatedly asks the same question, all the way through the book, while Elvi repeatedly makes up fantastical reasons as to who her 'real' mum is, such as her real mum

'teaches spiders the art of the web'! Nicholas knows these reasons are pure fantasy and it is only when he gets so frustrated with her, that Elvi reveals the secret ...

Family is all about people who love and care for each other and that's what both of Elvi's mums do for her. It is written in such a way that, with every repetition of Nicholas' question, you can feel his exasperation grow, while Elvi is 'quietly sniggering' to herself as she teases him and prolongs his agony. It is a book of one child's discovery that family simply means love and another child's ready acceptance of that, in whatever form it takes.

The use of colours by Anna Zobel is pure genius – contrasting the imagination of Elvi in different hues of blue with the warm yellow tones of the real world, giving a sense of warmth, joy and contentment.

Beautifully written and wonderfully illustrated, this book is an absolute delight to read! Loved it!

Claire Webb

Wild is the Wind

Grahame Baker-Smith, pub. Templar Books

Young Cassi floats across the sky in a hot air balloon as she witnesses the flight of a swift recently nursed back to health. Through storms and calm, above oceans and deserts, readers are taken on the incredible journey of migrating swifts and experience the wonders of the wind in all its forms.

Wild is the Wind is the latest lyrical, non-fiction picture book from Greenaway award-winning author and illustrator, Grahame Baker-Smith. In this fantastical exploration of migration, readers travel the globe through colourful landscapes and glide through scenes on the wind witnessing what the swifts pass on their long journey.

With an incredible attention to detail – the butterfly trees not yet ready to release their seeds, the still eye of a cyclone – the story illustrates the power that the wind holds in all things great and small. In both acknowledging the wind's past deeds and showing how wind is used today, *Wild is the Wind* is at once a reminder and a promise of all that the wind holds for Earth and humanity.

But at the core of the story is the incredible migration of swifts – three months, 8,000 miles. This monumental achievement is beautifully illuminated in the joy their arrival brings to children on opposite ends of the Earth as they symbolize the beginning of spring.

Wild is the Wind is a thoughtful, often abstract story that prompts questions about migration and instincts, wind and weather, history and geology as well as different societies. The vibrant colour palette and bold, often dramatic scenes draw attention and offer secrets to discover within the

illustrations. This is a book that can be used in a variety of classroom discussions and an opening for further exploration of many subjects.

Stephanie Ward

The Wolf's Secret

Myriam Dahman and Nicolas Digard, illus. Julia Sarda, pub. Orchard Books

The enticing board cover of *The Wolf's Secret* is so beautiful with its dark background, shining gold lettering, the lovely dots and dashes of gold gleaming amongst the darkness and the two golden eyes that look remarkably like a wolf's eyes, any child would want to read it.

The wolf lives in a cold dark forest, ringed by huge snowy mountains. All the animals are afraid of him and he has no friends. But the wolf has a secret. One day, he heard such sweet and tender singing, it beamed into his cold heart like sunshine. The singer lives in a wooden house in the middle of the forest, caring for her sick father. Every day, the young woman goes to the well for water. There is a captivating illustration of a dancing line of music streaming out behind her.

The wolf follows her until one day she doesn't come. Standing outside the wooden house, he hears her crying because her father's bed is empty. The wolf longs to comfort her but he can't speak. Sadly, he goes out hunting and catches a rabbit. Just as he is about to eat the rabbit, it changes into a wizard who tells him to 'Follow the music' and then he will be able to speak. Here is a glorious picture of a wizard made of leaves, tiny bells and long thin twigs.

The music takes the wolf to the top of the mountain where he finds a golden egg with a small bell on a strap around it. He puts the bell round his own neck and finds that now he can speak. Hurrying back to the wooden house, the wolf comforts the sad young woman with stories of the forest. But when he goes hunting, the jingling bell warns the animals and the wolf catches nothing. Soon, he is so thin, he collapses and can no longer speak at all.

Will the wolf take off the bell?

This story of loneliness, of willingness to change and of how friendship can overcome any difficulty has great appeal. The illustrations are wonderful with a beautiful wolf and dear little owls in a tangled forest. I love the magic which gives a little unfamiliar jolt to this modern fairy tale.

Gwen Grant

The Worry (Less) Book

Rachel Brian, pub. Wren & Rook

All children, and adults, feel worried and anxious from time to time.

This book provides a great introduction to the subject by explaining just what anxiety is and how we can cope with it. The first page sets out exactly what the book can do ... it explains 'how your body reacts to worries', helps you understand what anxiety is and how to recognise it, and, usefully, gives 'ideas for calming yourself.'

The book also makes it clear that it can't 'tell you not to worry', 'pick up your dirty socks' or 'make all anxiety disappear.'

The potentially difficult subject matter is handled very well and with a light touch making it an enjoyable and easy read. The humour, together with the cartoon style illustrations and text make the book additionally appealing and accessible to young readers.

This is a book that I would recommend for every classroom and bookshelf. It's one that can be shared with a class or just placed conveniently on a shelf for anyone to pick up and casually read.

Vicky Harvey

Junior Books

A Clock of Stars: The Shadow Moth

Francesca Gibbons, illus. Chris Riddell, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Magical fantasy and adventure entwine with a generous sprinkling (for those of us old enough to know the stories) of Narnia and even Mary Poppins in this chunky – 477 – page story. Please do not be put off by the number of pages, I use that only as a way of explaining to you that this book may take up some space on your shelf but it won't stay there long for it is such a delight to hold it in your hands and drink in the story, page after glorious page, again and again.

If we had met Fran (the author) when she was 12, we would have met a girl who was simply excited about the idea of writing a story about a door in a tree. Fast forward to meeting Fran the grown up who has done just this and then propel yourself into the story itself. Meet here Imogen and her annoying little sister (well she couldn't be anything else could she!). Imogen thinks of herself as a grown up, too old for adventure, for silliness and for her sister but her sensibilities only go so far, and her curiosity often gets the better of her. Seeing a silver moth she is intrigued, though she has no idea why, and having rescued it from being swotted she is compelled to follow. Of course, her sister is in turn compelled to follow and as by now neither girl has done what they are told there is nothing to lose! The girls find themselves plunged into a world of magic, of fantasy, of new friends, old enemies and adventures but can they survive AND find their way home, not forgetting of course, win a race against time?

A classic adventure story but one that makes the reader question the stories they are told, this one included. A clever, twisting, turning story that will absorb and fascinate the reader, once, twice, many, many times. I hope there will be more adventures to follow.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

A Most Improper Magick

Stephanie Burgis, pub. Piccadilly Press

Stephanie Burgis and Piccadilly Press have republished this book in a 10-year anniversary edition, complete with new artwork, and in anticipation of the release of the second instalment in February 2021. Whilst this would most likely be described as a fantasy novel but that element doesn't dominate the story which also runs themes of adventure, determination, family and bravery.

The protagonist is a headstrong, 12-year-old girl who learns much about herself, secrets about her family and the ways of society living throughout this book.

There were some stereotypical features of the storyline that felt, at times, a little dated. The notion of marrying young girls off to rich, older men and that of the character of the unkind stepmother harked back to fairy tales of bygone years. Stories depicting girls pinning their happiness on finding love and wealth doesn't tend to inspire but here the strength, fire, cunning and loyalty from the mainly female characters attempting to shun these expectations goes a long way to overshadowing this.

It felt unusual to have a fantasy story set in these times. It did mean that some of the language used was more complex and would most likely appeal to accomplished readers and those willing to question the words they might not understand. Younger readers may not be familiar with some concepts in this book (such as dowries), if you add to this the murder accusations and the expected age of a reader for this book goes up again, perhaps to pre/early teens.

The storyline was full of twists and would keep readers well engaged. It is exciting, a definite page turner and not at all your run of the mill fantasy book. This book isn't just for fantasy fans though, a thrilling adventure awaits inside.

Hannah Cooper

A Poem For Every Day of Autumn

ed. Allie Esiri, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

I've read Allie Esiri's *A Poem for Every Day of Year*; and *Shakespeare for Every Day of the Year*; and now I have happily read through this, her latest anthology titled *A Poem for Everyday of Autumn*; which is a part of the four part season collection. A truly well put book with poems historically located in Septembers, Octobers, and Novembers of the past as lyrically painted by popular poets. Major events from English history have been decorated by poetry from/for that specific occasion.

There are 60-61 poems in each month, with two for each day; including hymns, lyrics and popular prayers from world religions which both adults and children can enjoy anytime of an Autumn season!

All the much-lauded poets from literature are enriching this collection with their peculiar expressions; there's John Keats with his Ode to Autumn, singing praises thus:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,

And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core.

And Rabindranath Tagore, connecting with the world outside through *Paper Boats*; then there is Michaela Morgan with her powerful words on Malala Yousafzai who was shot by a Taliban shooter on 9th of October, 2012.

A girl with a book.

A girl with a book.

That's what has scared them-

A girl, with a book

...

Because a girl with a book,

A girl with a voice,

A girl with a brain,

A girl with a choice,

A girl with a plan To have rights, like a man.

That's what they're scared of

One girl, with a book.

A number of emotions like joy, hate, grief, love, curiosity, bravery, ecstasy, longing and peace are part of these myriad poems; associated with the season of Autumn which is a time of reflection, retrospection, celebration of the harvest season and a preparation for the rest of Winter.

This gorgeous book has a pumpkin spice-y hardcover with autumn foliage and golden leaves; making it a perfect companion for returning to each dawn and dusk with a warm cup of tea!

Ishika Tiwari

The B on Your Thumb

Colette Hiller, illus. Tor Freeman, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

This entertaining and educational book by former BBC Education producer Colette Hiller and London based illustrator Tor Freeman is a delightful collection of phonetic rhymes created for little ones aged 3-7 years old. It has tongue twisters as nursery rhymes for kiddies, helping them to develop good English pronunciation skills.

Here we have excellent play on words and sounds with homonyms and homophones which have been devised by the author to help parents and educators to teach kids; not only that, but these poems have been successfully recited in schools and on the BBC channels.

As I open a page and see, there's a cat sitting in its study with a book titled 'Mr Know-it-All'; and the poem that follows plays on the sound 'N', here how it goes:

Now You Know

N-O spells no!
Easy Least. Even so...
If you know something
that's know with a K.
And now you know
so that's okay!

This is an engaging book with 60 poems full of laughter and learning hidden inside its pages for kids just beginning to grasp pronunciations, to those ready for some tricky poems.

Here an E dresses as a magician and K butterfly sits on a girl's knee, and an army of frogs celebrate with an 'oi'. There are full-page illustrations depicting a variety of emotions and these, coupled with the sounds and words take the reader on an adventure.

Children will definitely enjoy reciting these and adults can have a good laugh along with the kiddies.

Ishika Tiwari

Brand New Boy

David Almond, illus. Marta Altes, pub. Walker Books

David Almond's books aimed at younger readers, like *The Tale of Angelino Brown*, *The Boy Who Climbed into the Moon* and *My Dad's a Birdman*, for example, are a happy blend of magic and realism. Family life, personal experiences and feelings are at the centre of the story, but a fantasy element is present to soften the edges, giving stories which deal with important topics a unique otherworldliness.

Almond's latest book for this age group is similarly thought-provoking and intelligent, though slightly more steeped into reality. Well, in the sense that the topic of artificial intelligence and its development is already widely discussed and accepted as a concept in our world. Here, though, the author imagines how young children may relate to the concrete application of this technology.

At Darwin Avenue Primary Academy Daniel and his friends welcome a new boy to their class. George impresses them with his skills in mathematics but his peculiar social skills and the fact that he is permanently followed by minders, Miss Crystal and Mr Marsch, soon give rise to speculation.

Nevertheless, the children grow fond of George and do their best to include him in their community, including introducing him to football with amazing results. However, Daniel and his friends cannot avoid noticing certain details and following a tea and play session at Daniel's house, they are convinced that George may not be just what he appears to be.

It is a special announcement at Darwin Avenue Primary and its consequences on George that convince Daniel and his friends to step into action in order to help their new friend.

While targeting the younger audience, this book raises deep questions about the use of artificial intelligence, and, in particular about what makes us human. This is a concept with which the protagonists of the book grapple and which is addressed with great sensitivity. Overall, it is the sense of warmth and gentle humour that pervades this story.

The positive interaction among children, the kind attitude towards the younger pupils – the delightful 'fairies' – and the readiness to accept the newcomer offer very positive models for any reader. I loved the little but consistent regional inflection in the dialogues, while the way in which the relationship between Daniel and his mother, a single parent, shines through completes this heart-warming picture. And, of course, it is the humanity that pervades this setting and its characters that offers the starkest contrast with the plan of those who consider perfection the ultimate goal.

Laura Brill

Chocolate Milk, X-Ray Specs and Me

Bethany Walker, illus. Jack Noel, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Freddy Spicer wants three things in life; his parents to come back from sprout farming in Outer Castonga; to go to the 'Blast Yourself Bonkers' laser game for his tenth birthday, to make friends at his new school.

Freddy misses his parents, not just because they're the only people who know how to make his favourite chocolate milk, shaken not stirred. He can't join them due to an unfortunate allergy to Outer Castonga pine spores. Instead he is stuck at home with his tight-fisted grandad, whose culinary skills are limited to all things sprouts, producing the kind of gases that get Freddy known for all the wrong reasons #FreddyFartyPants. But Freddy is resilient, and through illustrated hand-written letters (Outer Castonga has no internet or phone access) he regales his parents with life back home, his determination to fit in at school and the glamorous new neighbour Mrs Allbright, who has developed a serious flirtation with Grandad.

A series of classified dispatches and news bulletins reveal the truth to the reader who will discover more about criminal mastermind, Dr Alpha Bett, and how Mrs Allbright is using Freddy and his grandad as bait. Will Freddy end up as sprout stew before his crush on Head Girl Samira Hadid is ever requited? Is new exchange student Harry Covair, all that he claims? Will Freddy lean espionage isn't French for spinach? Is neighbour Desiree Delicata really helping Freddy post his letters to his parents? The plot thickens and not just with sprout mash. The whole world is in danger, can Freddy save it, albeit totally unknowingly and in madcap fashion?

A truly hilarious debut with an endearingly innocent hero. Freddy's resolute efforts to see the best in everyone is comedy gold, ensuring he misses every clue and warning. Clever use of letters also makes for a tight, fast-paced action-packed story.

Jack Noel's illustrations are a perfect partner to bringing alive Freddy and this world of international spinach, I mean espionage. A laugh-out-loud, high energy middle-grade adventure for young readers. For insight into the mind of the author that brought you a sprout-themed spy book, read my interview.

Matilde Sazio

Fighting Fantasy: Crystal of Storms

Rhianna Pratchett, illus. Eva Eskelinen, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

I'm this book's natural audience. I was there for *Tunnels & Trolls' Deathtrap Equalizer Dungeon* and remember *Fighting Fantasy's* original launch. I start off feeling warm towards *Crystal of Storms*. Gamebooks, briefly: alternative versions of a story, of varying success for the protagonist, are presented as a series of jumbled, numbered paragraphs. The reader, as protagonist, is presented with choices at regular intervals that switch them between the alternatives. Navigation is achieved through the paragraph numbering. Kids, it's what we did before computer games. Zork and its antecedents were pretty much hidden away on university mainframes.

Every game book is conspicuously artificial, and depends on its ability to be immersive and evocative. Description, language, names, locations all need to do huge amounts of work and feel never less than believable. Tick. These are all excellently done. The occasional illustrations are moody and dynamic, they deserve separate and significant praise.

A game book has to be fair and present genuine jeopardy. If every choice is too obvious, there is no agency. Neither is there any if every choice is random. A reader needs to be rewarded for good judgement, likewise making the right choice shouldn't lead automatically to success.

The book uses equipment, codewords and luck as gatekeepers. Frequently, there's conflict with monsters and enemies. The slow way in which this is resolved is exciting, without being so slow that it's a mood-breaking chore.

Consequently, it's possible to grow and dwindle as a character throughout the story which also adds to its replayability. You can be more or less ready for encounters.

Choice-making is not so influential (paragraph 143, I'm looking at you), so I'm going to say this book is skewing towards a younger audience. The puzzling out is not so important. While this might add to replayability (there's less invested in working the story out), it'll make the book less satisfying for someone who's done a lot of these before, so again we're pointing at younger audiences.

Perhaps that's why there's nothing I can find that actually deals with you as the protagonist dying in, say, the tentacles of the Great White Squark. I would have liked a rewarding respawn routine as perhaps the adventure is handed on to the next eldest sibling in the family along with the pick of whatever equipment the previous protagonist died with.

Overall, it's high adventure in a fantasy setting with lots of two-fisted interaction. It's not remarkable, but it gets so many things so right that I'd say it's quintessential.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Dragon Mountain

Katie and Kevin Tsang, illus. Petur Antonsson, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

When you go to a summer camp, you may expect a few things; to make friends, to learn from new activities, to have a few stories to tell upon your return. For Billy Chan however, going to Camp Dragon results in discovering his destiny - to try and prevent the Dragon Realm, and the Human Realm as a result, from certain devastation at the claws of the Dragon of Death.

Billy is reluctantly thrust into a friendship group upon his arrival at Camp Dragon but soon finds out that this unlikely quartet, which he is part of, has more than just camp challenges to take on together. The mixed group have quirks and skills which seem to complement each other although that does not necessarily bring them guaranteed success in their first quest together – to follow a clue and collect their unknown item. When they mysteriously disappear into Dragon Mountain, their lives are about to change.

Dragon Mountain, which is the first in the *Dragon Realm* series, is cleverly written so that the rest of the series has a strong foundation to build upon. This book leaves the reader unsure about what is going to come next for the characters, although it is clear that their journey is far from over, and not

far from the next dangerous turn. This book is perfectly suited to those looking for their next adventure!

With a variety of characters, both human and dragon, and a number of setbacks and twists along the way, this engaging story will excite the imaginations of younger readers.

The cover art by Petur Antonsson is stunning and captures the characters with the dragons in the heat of the Dragon Realm.

Tom Joy

Elsetime

Eve McDonnell, illus. Holly Oviden, pub. Everything with Words

Debut Irish author Eve McDonnell crafts an enthralling story suspended between two worlds, one set in 1864, and the other in 1928 - the year of the great Thames flood in London. Twelve-year-old Glory and Needle, accompanied by a mysterious black crow, masterfully hold the threads of a time travelling adventure which will keep you from putting the book down.

The narrative is not always linear, so I would recommend *Elsetime* to a confident reader. As somebody who is just about to enter a new world, it took me a few pages to find the emotional connection to the characters. It may have been due to the sudden jump through historical time between the prologue and first chapter. Or perhaps to the initial atmosphere which appeared quite gloomy (lost parents; lost hand; school expulsion; bullies; difficult childhood). By chapter two this feeling had vanished, and the tension generated by the parallel worlds in the book turned out to be one of its strongest points.

The plot is driven by the determination of the protagonists who manage to get over themselves and achieve their individual goals. Needle is beautifully depicted through his quirky language, his vision, his magical skills. Glory comes alive in her determination, her kindness, her uplifting dreams. Their friendship plays a pivotal role in the story's outcome.

I warmly invite you to 'enter' *Elsetime*. Like the great flood of London, its murky puddles and strong currents will sweep you away.

Francesca Magnabosco

The Greatest Inventor

Ben Brooks, pub. Quercus Children's Books

Victor has never left his home village of Rainwater and is beginning to yearn for adventure. When inventor Walter Swizwit passes through Rainwater, Victor doesn't think much of it: he's just the latest in a long line of inventors and magicians with nothing interesting to sell. But when the villagers reject Walter's cheap magic tricks, he turns spiteful and puts a curse on the entire village.

Only Victor is left unaffected and now he must leave his village for the first time to try and find a way to lift the curse. Along the way he meets new friends Elena, practical and fierce with a bow and arrow, science prodigy Mo-Lan, and the more nervous Mingus. Together with pet tortoise St. Oswald they will have to take on Walter – and it's soon clear that they have underestimated his malevolent power...

Written in a clear, humorous style, *The Greatest Inventor* is a warm-hearted and magical adventure. Slapstick humour is neatly combined with a more subtle social commentary, which speaks up for the value and pleasures of real life against the potentially dulling and unsatisfactory virtual life of smartphones and computer games. Readers will come away with a renewed sense of the importance of 'quiet' time, where you can be 'alone with your thoughts'.

Olivia Parry

The Island That Didn't Exist

Joe Wilson, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Imagine being whisked off to the fancy London Law offices of one Arnold Crump only to discover, in the reading of a will, that you've inherited the private island of your eccentric old Great Uncle Silvester (who incidentally has left his entire £2.5 million inheritance to a seagull sanctuary). And what if the island in question hadn't appeared on any map in hundreds of years and maybe didn't even exist? Intrigued and undaunted, the resilient 12-year-old Rixon persuades his mum to drive him to the coastline nearest to the island then affects a daring, not to mention dangerous, solo getaway to try to find it in a hijacked motorboat ferry.

Splinter Island turns out to be inhabited by four half-wild, spear-throwing children, hidden away from outsiders by a concealed, seagull-controlled curtain. Gradually the significance of the other part of Rixon's inheritance becomes clear - an envelope of old newspaper clippings about a group of scientists who disappeared with an invention that could change the world and a memory stick of unintelligible diagrams and formulae. Rixon and the island children find themselves forced to solve scientific problems, create energy-saving inventions and battle a corrupt and power-hungry multimillionaire tech giant to protect not just their home but the future of the planet.

The Island that Didn't Exist is a timely, page-turning eco-adventure with a real *Famous Five* feel but set firmly in the here and now. The adults are, largely, not to be trusted, while the children excel

themselves facing character tests aplenty, ultimately proving they're more than capable of putting the world to rights on their own. The risks feel very real, the danger is perfectly pitched for the upper KS2/lower KS3 audience. The underlying theme is the use and abuse of power both by individuals and by corporations on society and the responsibilities which that power entails. This is a book to make you think and a book which makes you want to get outdoors adventuring.

The twisty turny plot and cliffhanger chapter endings would make this story a fantastic classroom read aloud and the plot lends itself perfectly to a myriad of creative curriculum projects from imaginatively mapping your own island to creative diary writing and news reporting. Definitely a debut author we need to hear more from!

Readers seeking more exciting island adventures might try *The Island at the End of Everything* by Kiran Millwood Hargrave or the classic story *Kensuke's Kingdom* by Michael Morpurgo. Katherine Rundell's *The Explorer* is an equally exciting adventure story of children fighting for survival set in an untamed Amazon landscape. Other outstanding adventures tackling the climate crisis include *Swimming Against the Tide* by Jess Butterworth and *Across the Risen Sea* by Bren MacDibble. *Spylark* by Danny Rurlander is another tense and tightly plotted adventure where techno-gadgetry proves crucial to thwarting danger.

Eileen Armstrong

Jumbo: The Most Famous Elephant Who Ever Lived

Alexander Stewart, illus. Emily Sutton, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

East Africa 1890, a baby elephant is trying to stand up for the first time.

As a young elephant Jumbo travelled 10,800km from Africa to Europe. He ends up in London zoo, there (so they say) he gives rides to people. Rumour has it that a young Winston Churchill was among those who rode on Jumbo. Sadly, at night Jumbo would fly into rages, so bad that he would try and break down his enclosure. There was only one member of staff who could calm him. He was eventually sold to a circus where he was paraded in front of paying guests. Sadly when he died the circus that owned him still used him as a source of income. Happily today zoos are more educated about animal habitat and welfare, and circuses are discouraged from having animals perform.

This is a powerful book which will make you smile in places and make you feel sad in other places. The pictures are beautifully drawn. Some of the pictures are double pages, some are single pages, and some pictures are scattered across the book. There are different fonts of writing which makes it fun to read. The book is easy to follow and it's full of interesting information.

I was really pleased to have reviewed this book, I really enjoyed reading it, and it has reinforced my belief that wild animals are better off in the wild.

Helen Byles

King of the Swamp

Catherine Emmett, illus. Ben Mantle, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

This is a lovely story with such an important and relevant message. Children will enjoy reading it again and again.

The book could be used to encourage children to think about their environment and to appreciate the natural beauty that is all around them. It features a very clear and easy to read font and the rhyming verse makes it even easier for young children to read. The beautiful illustrations by Ben Mantle will also attract young children. The page when all the caterpillars turn into beautiful, colourful butterflies is a real delight. The whole layout is simple, very effective and very attractive.

McDarkly, the swamp monster, is a very loveable character and children will readily connect with him. He lives on his own in a dark swamp and cares for the plants all around. One day his peace is disturbed by a King who wants to build a new roller skate park. McDarkly quickly has to show that the swamp is a beautiful place full of colour and beauty. Young people today are very conscious of their environment and will love the idea that the swamp monster wants to stop the King from developing the swamp where he lives. McDarkly is desperate to save the flowers and the butterflies. This message of conservation is told in a way that children will understand and respond to.

This is a really delightful tale, with a very important message. It is very easy to read and a pleasure to look at, for both parents and children. The illustrations are magical, and children will love the ending.

Gary Kenworthy

The Lost War Dog

Megan Rix, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

An animal story with a difference...

Megan Rix has many middle-grade novels to her credit in which animals play a crucial role, and which are set in specific times and circumstances. Some are placed in situations which result in uncertain, challenging or mentally disturbing experiences for young people, but in particular Rix chooses significant, primary school curriculum-based points in history which produce those situations.

In The Lost War Dog she engages readers in the plight of Tilly, a Jewish girl in Nazi Germany just prior to the start of the Second World War. Rix begins Tilly's story during the events of Kristallnacht, November 9-10 1938, when the Nazis undertook a campaign of organised violence against the Jewish population across Germany. The ensuing destruction of their homes, shops, synagogues and way of life, and the transportation of many men to concentration camps resulted in families desperately trying to send their children out of Germany, on the Kindertransport. In the lead up to WWII this organised transport to take almost 10,000 children to England. Rather than just tell Tilly's story as a historical narrative, Rix sets the events around Tilly's dog, a dachshund called Wuffly.

Wuffly is an accomplished escapologist, who takes every opportunity to ensure that she is never far away from Tilly, or failing that, from one of Tilly's friends. That's not easy in wartime, and certainly not easy when Gretchen, Tilly's best friend, is not Jewish, and by law is now not supposed to have anything to do with Jews. One of the highlights of this engaging novel is that Rix shows how some Aryan – non-Jewish – families changed their opinions of Hitler and the Nazis as they saw what was happening to those who had previously been part of their community, and their friends. In Tilly and Gretchen, and their deaf friend, Hans, Rix creates likeable and brave characters whose reactions to the history happening around them are exciting, understandable and realistic.

A fast moving, sometimes heart-wrenching story, with a wealth of accurate historical information woven skilfully into the text, and a helpful glossary provide an excellent novel.

Bridget Carrington

Malice in Underland

Jenni Jennings, illus. Hannah Peck, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

The title of this book gives you a good idea of what to expect. It takes the idea of *Alice in Wonderland* and plays with it: so, as in Alice, we have a girl adventuring in a fantasy world beneath the earth. This girl is the antithesis of Alice in looks; she has short dark hair instead of the familiar long golden hair – but, like Alice, she's tough and determined.

Malice belongs to the Malign family, who live in our world but have one foot in Underland. Their job is to be bad: to do annoying things, to stir up trouble. But, following a familiar trope – the 'normal' one in a family of weirdos – such as Count Duckula, the vegetarian vampire, or my own Spooker Batt from Spook School, a ghost who doesn't like to frighten people – Malice doesn't like doing bad stuff; in fact – whisper it – she's rather good.

This being the first of a series, it takes a while to establish the set-up. But once it gets going – grandpas, including Malice's own, of whom she's very fond, are going missing, and Malice is

determined to find them – it takes us on a fast-moving adventure in Underland. Malice has helpers – her Uncle Vexatious, another outcast in the Malign family, and her ordinary human friend Seth, who is fascinated by his glimpses into Malice’s world and thinks nothing of sharing a cupboard with a skeleton. These three form an excellent team, which is clearly all set to undertake more investigations in Underland.

The illustrations are charming and add a great deal to the story, and the cover, with a sort of keyhole arrangement through which the main characters peer, is really rather gorgeous and should certainly make people want to pick it up.

Sue Purkiss

The Marvellous Land of Snergs

Veronica Cossanteli based on the original by E.A. Wyke-Smith, illus. Melissa Castrillón, pub. Chicken House

Pip and Flora are recent arrivals and the very best of friends at Sunny Bay Home for Superfluous and Accidentally Parentless Children. When Flora is abducted and Pip gives chase, the two children suddenly find themselves in the Marvellous Land of Snergs. Their fantastical adventure begins.

Pip and Flora face many dangers as they navigate through the Land of Snergs and into the Kingdom of the Kelps, the Snergs’ arch-enemies. There are wobbers, a forest of Twisted trees, Fungus tunnels populated by hairy walruses and the Distressful Swamp with its myriad of deadly occupants for the unwary. There are however allies, including their good, but blundering friend Gorbo and Flora’s puppy, Tiger. Unbeknown to Pip and Flora, they are slowly and inexorably being lured into a deadly trap set by the wicked witch Malicia. She is planning a nasty surprise for Pip and Flora and all the residents of Sunny Bay Home.

Pip and Flora are great characters, always getting into trouble, but their courage and friendship hold true. They both however need to confront their past and their parents’ failings if they are to stop Malicia’s evil plans. Whilst Gorbo’s buffoonery causes much calamity and hilarity, he is a very likeable companion and unlikely hero. There is an interesting backstory to all the characters, including Miss Watkyns, currently in charge of Sunny Bay Home. In essence it is a story of two sets of orphans: Pip and Flora and Miss Watkyns and Malicia.

The Marvellous Land of Snergs inspired *The Hobbit* and there are some obvious comparisons, for example, each chapter begins with an introductory outline. Moreover, Flora and Pip travel across different lands, populated by the fantastical races of the Snergs and Kelps, whilst avoiding goblins and trolls. Despite the perils, the children have to take the initiative and save themselves as much as

Gandalf leaves Bilbo Baggins to his own devices. Like any good adventure there are always lessons to be learned and Sunny Bay Home will never be the same again.

This delightful story, originally published by E.A. Wyke-Smith in 1927, is brilliantly retold by Veronica Cossanteli and illustrated by Melissa Castrillón, enabling this forgotten classic to be enjoyed by a whole new generation of children.

Simon Barrett

Meesha Makes Friends

Tom Percival, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Meesha Makes Friends is the latest book in Tom Percival's *Big Bright Feelings* series, and my favourite one so far. (*Ruby's Worry* was excellent but, when I read it to my four-year-old niece, the visual of a big cloud of worries following her around made her even more anxious!)

Meesha is excellent at making things, but she finds it hard to make friends—she doesn't know what to say or when to say it, and she doesn't understand why everyone else seems to find it easy. So instead, she creates her own friends out of paper, paints and glue. When Meesha has to go to a party with a lot of children she doesn't know, she hides in a corner making her own friends as usual. But this time a boy wants to join her, and Meesha has to decide whether to let him into her made-up world. In the end Meesha's made-up friends finally help her to make some real friends. I've read it aloud to several reception and year 1 classes this week and I've choked up on the last page every time.

As always, Tom Percival's illustrations are delightfully whimsical with a wonderful relationship between emotions and the intensity of colour.

Meesha Makes Friends is a moving and sensitive portrayal of a subject that most children can relate to, to a greater or lesser degree—an uplifting story that will also inspire children to be kind and inclusive.

Rebecca Rouillard

Mina Mistry (sort of) Investigates: The Case of the Disgusting School Dinners

Angie Lake, illus. Ellie O'Shea, pub. Sweet Cherry Publishing

Mina Snotbridge, a.k.a. Mina Mistry has a secret diary which is ‘pink and fluffy and girly.’ She keeps it ‘badly hidden at the back of her sock drawer,’ but that isn’t her real secret diary – that one is hidden under a floorboard at the back of her closet. Her real secret diary is full of notes from her ‘investigations’.

As well as the notes, Mina keeps files on anyone and everyone that she knows. When an expert arrives at school to talk to the children about the importance of healthy eating, Mina realises that all of their school dinners - pizza, chips, chocolate cake, ice-cream, cheese burgers – is unhealthy junk food. Mina thinks that this is very strange, as does Granny Meera. Granny knows the school cook and knows that she is concerned about healthy eating too – so why is she making unhealthy meals? Mina knows there must be a reason why this is happening and it’s a mystery that she is determined to solve – with the help of her best friend – not her self-obsessed best school friend, Holly Loafer, but Mr Panda (an old one eyed cuddly toy).

Young readers, and especially girls, will enjoy this fun mystery story. Written in the first person with an easy conversational tone, Mina really jumps off the page. There are bold illustrations on almost every page and the text is in a large enough format, and with different fonts, to make reading easier and more appealing for younger readers – the font size and plentiful illustrations also allow for a thicker book which will be another draw.

Readers that enjoy this won’t have long to wait for the next *Mina Mistry Investigates The Case of the Disappearing Pets*.

Damian Harvey

Roxy & Jones: The Great Fairytale Cover-Up

Angela Woolfe, pub. Walker Books

Roxy, 11, has just moved into her sister’s home in the city of Rexopolis in the kingdom of Illustria but things are very odd. Gretel, her sister, is a cleaner who is always on call at the mysterious government Ministry for Soup. When, late one night, she finds an underground stone staircase behind a panel of the bath, she can’t help but investigate and it is in the old underground chambers that she meets Jones, a strange girl, who leads her into all sorts of danger and adventures as she learns the truth about her new home.

With tongue-in-cheek humour using well-known fairy tale elements such as Jones always losing a shoe, a talking mirror (always in rhyme), or vegetables becoming modes of transport this is an amusing and entertaining fantasy adventure where fairytales are true stories and magic is real but forbidden and hidden because the mysterious Ministry has covered up history, forced inhabitants like magical godmothers underground, and placed an enchantment over the world.

There were elements I found a bit confusing or annoying such as why soup, of all things, is so prominent and it was slow and plodding at times but there was also some intriguing sections which I wished were made more of such as the Rumpelstiltskin character, the witches' retreat, and the invisible flying minibus. The development of Roxy's character is also interesting because as she becomes increasingly involved in Jones' adventures the more she questions things around her and discovers hidden skills and depths of bravery.

This feels like it is the first in what could become a long-running series and as Woolfe has also written under the name Emerald Everhart there are other titles already available for readers who enjoyed Woolfe's work.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

The Secret of Magic: The Forbidden Box

Natassa Louppou, pub. OnTime Books

This is the first adventure in a time travelling series of books by Natassa Louppou. *The Magic Bus*, book two, is currently being translated and will be available shortly.

To whet your appetite book one features a young girl who makes a fascinating discovery. Tania has just celebrated her 12th birthday on the 15th of April. A magician was hired to be the entertainment for her party and she discovers his magician's kit left behind at the end of the evening. Containing several varied items and a rabbit, she is intrigued and begins playing with an old fashioned pocket watch. Feeling a strange surge in energy, Tania closes her eyes and when she opens them again, she is no longer in her room. She finds herself on a boat and must figure out when and where she has arrived. Every time Tania picks up another item from the magician's kit, she is immediately transported to the same day but in different years. Accompanying her is the rabbit, who is named Mike and can speak while travelling through time.

This is a fun and intriguing book with the potential to teach readers about events in history, important time periods and influential people from history. Tania moves from the sinking Titanic, to Rhodes in WWII and then back to 1504 where she meets DaVinci, her hero. Set in Rhodes, the story begins to make historical links between Tania and the family she meets during WWII. I thought this was a sweet story and would make for some interesting conversations with readers about events from the past. I am curious to see where Tania may end up next so look forward to book two.

Erin Hamilton

Shoe Wars

Liz Pichon, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Shoe Wars is a brand-new story from the creator of the *Tom Gates* series. Ruby and Bear Foot live in Shoe Town with their Dad, but he has a secret - he has invented some amazing flying shoes. But he has to keep them a secret from his evil boss, Wendy Wedge, or she will steal them to win the prestigious Golden Shoe Award. When Wendy catches wind of the shoes and arrests their Dad, Ruby and Bear must rescue him, keep the shoes out of Wendy's ambitious grasp, and find a way to get rid of Wendy Wedge once and for all.

Wendy Wedge is an excellent villain, with her malicious insistence that everyone in Shoe Town must wear her uncomfortable wedges, and her hypocritical determination to ban fluffy slippers. Her offspring, Walter Wedge, is almost as bad as her.

Reading Liz Pichon's stories is a wonderfully visual experience—each page is not just illustrated, but beautifully constructed and designed, including literal 'foot'-notes and shoe sizes for chapters. The gold, red and black cover is particularly striking, and I loved the red shoelace bookmark.

Shoe Wars is an inventive, madcap, page-turning, adventure, filled with hilarious shoe puns. As it says on the cover: Liz Pichon 'likes shoes not war' and above all this book is a love letter to shoes - crammed full of ridiculous footwear that perform a dazzling variety of functions beyond merely covering the feet. I can't decide if my favourites are the 'Octi Shoes' that can walk up walls or the 'Book Shoes' with reading light and automatic page-turner. A wonderfully engaging, laugh-out-loud story that children will love to read.

Rebecca Rouillard

Voyage of the Sparrowhawk

Natasha Farrant, pub. Faber & Faber

Natasha Farrant's literary skills materialise again to thrill her audience. This book will not disappoint with its humdinger of a tale to tell. Paced well for 9-11+ year olds and especially for the reluctant reader. "What happens in the end" proves to be irresistible.

Set around 1919 at the end of the First World War, a prologue recaps on recent past events. Here we find Nathan's narrowboat The Sparrowhawk unknowingly moored near an orphanage. He meets Ben and Sam, two of the 'inmates' of this establishment, after Ben has sustained a foot injury due to owning no shoes. Nathan's concern about the boys encourages him to put the offer of a home to the orphanage. After some speedy alterations to his boat in preparation, and the orphanage not being bound by child protection legislation, they say yes.

Sam, the older boy, leaves some years later to fight in the 1st World War, and is badly injured. Nathan decides to go over to France to visit him. He is killed in a bombing raid and Sam is reported missing. This leaves young Ben on his own living with Mercy, a friend of Nathan's. One thing leads to another and the story opens when Ben returns to the Sparrowhawk to assess its condition after this interval only to find Lottie on board?

Lottie's parents have recently died and she is living with an uncle and aunt in her parents' house until she is old enough to inherit her estate. They do not have her best interests at heart. She is anxious to contact her maternal grandmother in France. Ben is equally concerned to find out what happened to Sam, the friend he considers his brother and of course the man he regarded as his father, Nathan. They decide to travel to France together on The Sparrowhawk. A daring feat in itself, on a narrowboat tantamount to suicide. They are chased by several parties, some official, others are friends with concerns for their well-being. And family with little good will in their hearts. They meet other folks on the journey and so begins a wonderful, pacy tale of altruism, friendship, leadership, tenacity, stoicism and empathy.

Themes for discussion arising from this tale will be thought provoking for the solitary reader, whilst a class at school can chew over the relevant issues. The fate of orphans whilst never a happy topic, back in 1919 takes precedence. The lack of accountability for children finding themselves in this plight, is strikingly illustrated with both Ben and Lottie. Lottie comes from a well-off family but this does not secure her safe passage. A child's safety would depend on the consistent presence of a well-meaning person. A tricky commodity in post WW1 Britain. These children's lives were lotteries.

In essence a brilliant little tale which manages to unpack all sorts of early twentieth century unique realities that had to be endured. Then wrapping them all up again in a mantle of strength and indefatigability.

Elizabeth Negus

The Wizard in my Shed: The Misadventures of Mervyn the Wild

Simon Farnaby, illus. Claire Powell, pub. Hodder Children's Books

Have you ever felt like an outcast or a weirdo? Been bullied because you weren't the best singer or didn't have the most fashionable hairstyle? We've all been there; growing up is tough stuff. But fear not because Rose has been through it all, and she's now got a wand wielding warlock to deal with too!

When Mervyn turns up in her, quite frankly, dull world Rose's life takes a strange turn. She finds herself helping him find disguises, welcoming him to the greasy delights of fish and chips, and that's

before she finds herself on national television. But it isn't all fun and games, Rose learns life lessons along the way, and we see her grow as a person through the narrative.

This book is a pure joy to read, it cast me back and forth from the dark ages to the present day- painting a vivid picture as the story moved back and forth. My own imagination was bolstered by the wonderful illustrations; Powell's scribbly drawing style perfectly complements Farnaby's comic writing and gives further clarity to the story.

It's difficult to believe that this is Farnaby's first book- though the keen eyes amongst you will have seen him acting in the likes of *Paddington* and *Horrible Histories*. His writing style is fun and accessible, yet intelligent and informative. He even goes so far as to include a guide of different types of grass for the green fingers amongst you.

Warlocks, wizards, talking guinea pigs- this book has it all, and would make the perfect pick for anyone who revels in fantasy and magic.

Rosie Cammish Jones

Rosie likes to read and write in her free time. Her own debut young adult novel, *Man vs Machine*, is due out later this year.

Wulfie: Stage Fright

Lindsay J. Sedgwick, illus. Josephine Wolff, pub. Little Island

Libby is a lonely child terrorised by her horrible step-brother Rex and his gruesome tales of the Big Bad Wolf.

Everything changes for Libby when she discovers a wolf-like creature in a mysterious trunk in the corner of her bedroom. Despite his yellow eyes and long claws, Wulfie turns out to be a sweet and big-hearted character. At last Libby has a friend, albeit one that inadvertently causes her a lot of trouble! He wreaks all sorts of havoc with his well-meaning but not always successful attempts to help Libby out. There is a lot of fun to be had following Wulfie's antics as he grows and shrinks at will and sneaks off to explore. Children will enjoy the fact that his favourite food is smelly socks and that when he eats cakes he starts to smell so bad the whole school has to be shut down!

Libby wishes she could star in the school play and with Wulfie's help she might just get her chance. There are various hurdles to overcome such as Rex's jealousy and Libby's lack of confidence. The story will have you rooting for Libby to succeed and longing for Rex to get his comeuppance (which when it comes is suitably disgusting).

This book would be suitable for newly independent readers who still like to have the text broken up with pictures. The black and white illustrations throughout capture Wulfie's cute and mischievous character and sympathetically portray Libby and her struggles with the monstrous Rex. Wulfie's adventures are set to continue in a series of books.

Liz Speight

Zombierella: Fairy Tales Gone Bad

Joseph Coelho, illus. Freya Hartas pub. Walker Books

Joseph Coelho, writer and poet, is probably best known for his anthology of poems *Overheard in a Tower Block* and he has also written picture books, but this book is definitely a story for the older primary ages.

Coelho has taken the classic fairy tale and turned it into a Hallowe'en-esc story where he takes the opportunity to use death as the main theme, produce ghostly settings, and change key characters into zombies, skeletons, vampires and ghosts. You feel Coelho having fun with readers as characters pull out brains and guts, pull woodlice from cracked heels, and it certainly isn't the shoe that Zombierella loses as she runs from the ball.

The tale is told over eight chapters, and the story is accompanied by Hartas's superb black and white drawings on every page, giving the young reader (and old) plenty to think about upon every turn – sometimes you just don't know what you are going to get next!

All this is driven by Coelho's poetic writing. On each page the narrative is laid out like free poetry, with occasional rhyme, and there is a rhythmical feel to the writing that bounces the reader on and on through the story. His use of language throughout is rich - a nod to his poetic roots - and he does not shy away from using advanced vocabulary choices such as glissaded and mewling to describe.

Underneath the fun, the gore and the laughter, Coelho still manages to make this a romantic love story, that pulls at the heartstrings, and just to finish off, the sisters cut off their feet and slip down the stairs in poo in an attempt to woo the prince – why not!

Even though one can imagine children going 'eww' or 'that's disgusting' as they read the story, you just know that they will want to read on, and enjoy every minute of it.

Anna Sterling

Young Adult Books

The Arrival of Someday

Jen Malone, pub. Harper Teen

Lia lives her life as any strong-willed teenage girl would, throwing herself into situations that she is passionate about and counting down the days until her graduation so that she can begin the next step of her journey through life. Except Lia's condition, biliary artresia, throws a spanner in the works – one that, without a suitable donor, could have severe consequences.

As Lia awaits the arrival of the liver that could change her life, the arrival of her 'someday', where she can focus on her future, starts to become a more distant possibility. Her mental struggles alongside support from family and friends will resonate with most readers. In times where mental health is never far away from conversation with all young adults, this story will open minds to the inner processes of someone battling against a huge obstacle in their life.

Jen Malone's purpose with *The Arrival of Someday* is to raise awareness of the importance of organ donation and how difficult living with a condition such as biliary artresia can be. Her writing style, delivered through the character of Lia, is extremely effective and takes the reader on the journey with her and her thoughts, leaving them desperately hoping for the best outcome for Lia. The supporting characters, who are all so likeable in their own individual ways, play a huge part in the success of this story, holding different roles for Lia as she does her best to keep strong day-by-day.

This book would be enjoyed by many adult readers (and adults) who are looking for a touching read which will open their minds to the different struggles that young people and their families are going through. There are similarities to *The Fault in our Stars* in terms of the emotional journey that the book takes the reader on but Jen Malone's *The Arrival of Someday* is unique and deserves to be appreciated for its own beautiful story which it tells.

I was completely engaged with this book within a few chapters; it had my emotions going up and down, had me screaming at Lia to avoid making a poor decision and praying that others around her will step in to provide her with the help that she needs. A rollercoaster ride but one that I am pleased that I have experienced.

Tom Joy

The Boy I Am

K. L. Kettle, pub. Stripes Publishing

In this dystopian tale, the survivors of events which have made the environment inhospitable live in a structure called the Tower. The society that has emerged by whichever cataclysm has shaken the world is controlled by women, it is based on a system of credits or debits. The community is led by the Chancellor, men and boys are subservient. Boys, in particular are however treated as something valuable, whose company is coveted and charged by the hour, but objectified and auctioned to the highest bidder in special events. At one such auction, seventeen-year-old Jude Grant is poised to give the performance of his life. This is his last opportunity to receive favorable bids, put him under the protection of a woman, save him from a future working in the mines. There is a bidder in particular, however, whose attention Jude is desperate to attract. The Chancellor. By getting close to her, Jude hopes to learn the fate of Viktor, a boy he has grown up with, who disappeared after being auctioned by the Chancellor. Against all odds Jude is successful, but the huge risks of his mission become immediately apparent. To survive Jude needs to reassess his understanding of the world in which he lives and his own past.

The first few chapters of this book require the full attention of the reader. Jude and his story emerge from scenes which are written skillfully, but move fast, including flashbacks, presenting a rich cast of characters and hints to the post-apocalyptic world setting. The most striking aspect of this book, however, beyond Jude's quest for an answer on Viktor's fate and the struggle for power in the Tower, is the depiction of the objectification of men and boys.

Science has marginalized the role of men in procreation and in their contribution to the various sectors of society. Relegated to the humblest roles, their only hope for a better life is through the favour of women. The role carved for the boys is somehow more complex. Admired for toned bodies or different skills, limitations are imposed, they live in designated, less comfortable areas of the Tower, wear only slippers and move blindfolded around women. Of course, not all is black and white and there are characters who defy the gender stereotype and strengthen Jude's resolve by doing so.

In the address that follows the story, the author mentions her focus on the ability of power to corrupt, and on gender rights movements. I think this story represents both and will make young readers stop and think carefully. Jude and Viktor are both fighters and survivors in their different ways. Their moral approach to the issues defining the society in which they live emerge gradually from Jude's recall of their relationship and are exposed in a final showdown. Fans of the genre will love this book.

Laura Brill

The Bridge

Bill Konigsberg, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Inspired by his own suicide attempt at age 27, Konigsberg's 388-page novel is about finding a way through the worst moments, with treatment and support systems.

The plot of *The Bridge* diverges into four possible timelines with two lead characters. In Chapter 1A, Tillie jumps from the George Washington Bridge and Aaron doesn't. Shaken by what he has witnessed, Aaron goes home to his father, who openly shares feelings with his son. White and half Jewish, Aaron fantasizes about having a boyfriend and becoming a beloved singer-songwriter, but is crushed when no one responds to his latest video online.

Aaron and Tillie have never met, but they have a lot in common. Both attend private Manhattan high schools. Both are performers. Each has one supportive and one distant parent.

In Chapter 1B, Tillie watches Aaron jump and leaves the bridge traumatized but safe. Adopted as a baby from Korea, Tillie wonders if she really fits in with her white family. Two weeks earlier, she performed a highly personal monologue at the school talent show. Through Tillie's eyes, we see the achingly real devolution of her relationships with Molly and her father.

The next chapters detail the empty spaces left if both teens jump. This section feels quirky: the holograms in the future seem out of sync with the realism of the rest of the book. In the final chapters, Tillie and Aaron climb down from the bridge together. Despite the dramatic setting, Konigsberg's depiction of depression is nuanced and realistic. He doesn't shy away from the pain of mental illness, but makes clear there are no simple routes to resolution.

The supporting characters have their own identity crises, but these lack impact when compared with those of Tillie and Aaron.

Few young adult novels highlight adult perspectives, but the parents here are fully realized people. The scenes of their grief are particularly moving. Simple language and short sentences render this structurally challenging and emotive novel accessible to most YA readers.

In the concluding author's note, Konigsberg describes being admonished a few years back for speaking about suicide to young people. It remains his belief that we must talk about it more, not less, to prevent it.

Trevor Arrowsmith

The Cheerleaders

Kara Thomas, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Kara Thomas' book very quickly brings an enjoyable balance of mystery and revelation, with a main character - Monica - who feels at times like a detective in her own right. While beginning a new school year, she begins to investigate events from five years previously, when the deaths of five Sunnybrook cheerleaders occurred in quick succession and brought intense grief for the town. Among the girls was her own sister Jennifer, and this story follows Monica as she becomes increasingly uncertain that the perpetrators have been correctly identified.

Monica's narrative is upfront and at times sarcastic, her thoughts unfiltered and informal. This allows readers to become easily invested in her pursuit of answers: she is confused, hurting, and yet capable of challenging a community reluctant to open old wounds. Readers are held on edge, but not left waiting and waiting for new truths to unfurl: Monica makes quick progress, but every new piece of information brings its own further questions.

As she works to understand more about the people in her sister's life, Monica's own personal relationships become strained, and she struggles to cope with her own grief while processing her changing friendships. Her mother finds it almost impossible to talk about Jen, and the clashing of their ways to grieve is without any easy resolution. Growing increasingly stressed, Monica feels this tension in her body, and the novel reminds readers of how easily emotion and thought can impact physically.

It is important to mention that suspected suicide forms part of the events five years ago. The development of this storyline encourages readers to understand that you cannot be led by assumption about someone's state of mind, even when they are closest to you. Mental illness is consuming and is far more than what appears outwardly - we must encourage more nuanced understanding of different conditions and the ways they are experienced.

This is a thought-provoking as well as page-turning read, with warming moments and difficult questions. Monica opts for several hard decisions, and must live with her own reasons, for - as the story reminds its readers - no one will know your own truths better than yourself.

Jemima Breeds

Dear Justyce

Nic Stone, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Dear Justyce is the sequel to the awarded *Dear Martin*. The 264 pages are divided into two narrative phases, describing the fall and rise of black teenager Vernell Laquan Banks (Quan) and his relationship with trainee lawyer Justyce McAllister, among others. This contemporary story echoes themes in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Part One opens with a vivid description of the unnecessary killing of Quan's father by the police and the impact this has on Quan's unstable and impoverished Atlanta life. His mother begins an abusive relationship with Dwight, mainly to provide for her two young children. Quan moves from determined school student to petty criminal as his home environment collapses. Eventually, he is caught up in a police raid and imprisoned for shooting a police officer.

Part Two is the account of his developing relationship with Justyce, who is a successful law student, and legal representative, Liberty. Quan's abusive treatment under the legal system is vividly conveyed. In the concluding Author's Note, Nic Stone (real name Andrea Livingstone) comments that the successful outcome for Quan is rarely to be found in the many similar cases involving prosecution of people of colour.

A striking aspect of the narrative is Stone's use of a broad range of typographical devices to enhance the realism of her account. Quan's letters to Justyce from his prison cell are self-contained chapters in bold italic. The emotion of the characters is conveyed in bold type and concrete-poetry style arrangements of the text. A film clip is presented as a play script. Although there is a fair amount of street-slang, this is combined with more neutral and simple descriptive language which contributes to the brisk pace of the narrative.

This is a powerful novel which raises important issues in an uncompromising way.

Trevor Arrowsmith

The Deep Blue Between

Ayesha Harruna Attah, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

The split narrative really helped to bring this book to life. The vivid descriptions, from both twins point of view, really help to draw in the reader and make you feel as though you are part of their world. I particularly enjoyed the complicated relationship between the twins and how they should be considered as individuals rather than defined as just being a twin. I found this concept quite thought-provoking; I had never considered what it means to be part of a twin ship, especially if one has a more dominant personality than the other. The character development amid a background of slavery, sexism and violence is very well handled in *The Deep Blue Between*. The author has produced a very visual story; I could almost smell the damp and decay at the coast.

I would recommend this book for 14+ and for both sexes. There are some very interesting discussion points, especially around ownership of people and those that benefitted or took part in the slave trade, but also those who fought against it. It would be interesting for students to put themselves in that position, or even role play the part of slave/slave owner. Grief is also an important topic, as well as belonging and identity. Hassana and Husseina, the main twin characters of the story, are violently

taken from their home and forced to adapt to a new way of life and new surroundings. One of the twins even changes her name, but does this change who she is and where she belongs? The sea journey in the late 1800s/early 1900s sounds dreadful and would be an interesting talking point to compare travel now with how it was back then.

The main characters have very different beliefs, which are based on the journey they have been on and who they have interacted with as they have grown up. This is another interesting discussion point. Why do people form certain beliefs? Can it become part of their identity? Due to the discussion points that this book raises, it would work very well with a reading group. There are many topics raised that would create good conversations and debate topics.

Sophie Castle

Delivered

Sylvia Hehir, pub. Garamon

Sylvia Hehir's second award-winning novel, *Deleted*, was reviewed in the previous issue of Armadillo, and her latest book continues the story of some of the characters we met there. Unlike Dee, the heroine of the previous story, whose life became a nightmare when she felt she had psychic powers she was unable to control, to others her best friend Frankie appears to be confident and outward-going. We soon learn that this is not entirely how Frankie sees herself, especially when she is thrown into the middle of an ongoing family drama.

Frankie is persuaded by her boyfriend Alec to join his band for a summer tour. She has enjoyed playing fiddle for years but has always been too nervous to get up on stage, and too embarrassed to admit her fear.

Then, as they are all set to go, her estranged sister Keira reappears, demanding Frankie's help. Keira had walked out three years earlier, gone to Glasgow, and then vanished. All that time Frankie had kept messaging her, but after a while she never heard back. When Keira does reappear she refuses to move back into the family home, and Frankie leaves for the summer tour desperate to reassure herself that both Keira and Dee are safe and well. Getting messages back from them is essential to Frankie, and when that doesn't always happen, and the tour doesn't go too smoothly either, she finds it hard to cope. With Alec's help, and his belief in her ability she begins to assert herself (especially against a particularly unpleasant manager) and believe that she can stand up to those who belittle her.

Without giving away too much of the plot, it becomes obvious to readers that this book's title refers to several aspects of the novel, all of which initially challenge Frankie, but ultimately are crucial to her self-confidence.

Like *Deleted* this is an exciting, funny and engaging teenage romance, but with a deeper message for readers than might be expected. Though less Scottish Highlands based than *Deleted*, it still introduces to many unfamiliar with this lifestyle. A third novel imminent hopefully.

Bridget Carrington

The Forest of Ghosts and Bones

Lisa Lueddecke, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Running away from their past or running towards their destinies? Beáta, Liljana and Benedek are three strangers with a powerful bond. Readers will be drawn into this story of inner strength and revelation of truths just as the characters are drawn towards the mysterious castle of dark magic and death. What is the invisible thread that links them to the castle and to each other? Will they be able to make sense of the lives they have already lived and find a future of hope and peace or will the evil that's growing devour their power and rule the land forever?

Inspired by Hungarian myths, Lisa Lueddecke has created a mystical world containing a dark castle haunted by memories of the past, poisonous rains, and a forest of lost souls, shadows and spectres. Cleverly written from a dual point of view, readers journey with Beáta and Liljana through their individual hardships and quests for truth. Intriguing secondary characters are woven into the story revealing the folklore and prophecy that drives the complex plot. Readers feel a part of the adventure as life hangs in the balance and the characters must risk everything to defeat the evil surrounding them.

Acceptance of identity is a strong theme running through this story. Both Beáta and Liljana have to come to terms with their own powers and how others react to them. Societal fear of magic, punishment of those who are different and the confusion of being unique drives each girl to set off on a quest to find out who she is meant to be and realise her true potential. As the Eve of the Saints approaches and evil grows around them, they have a choice – a choice to be true to themselves and accept their gift or to turn away from it all and give in to the lure of power and darkness.

The Forest of Ghosts and Bones is a magical young adult fantasy set in a detailed world of politics, religion, fear and hope. With many aspects of a brilliant Middle Grade adventure combined with the edginess of death and darkness more typical of Young Adult fiction, this incredible story will appeal to a wide range of readers.

Kate Heap

Girl of the Ashes

Hayley Barclay, pub. Garoman

There aren't many YA novels that emerge as a direct result of the author researching a doctorate! In *Girl of the Ashes* however we have exactly that: in 2011 Hayleigh Barclay began her study for a Doctorate of Fine Arts at the University of Glasgow where her thesis investigated how 19th century Gothic vampire literature influences contemporary Goths. This, her debut novel, was written as the main part of her thesis, and throws a twenty-first-century spotlight on the themes and variations of earlier vampire novels.

Barclay's is largely set in the north of Scotland, where three hundred and fifty years ago the Inservium overthrew the government of a remote town and for over three centuries the Phoenix vampires have faced persecution. We meet her first a century after her 'death' in 1897, in London, seeking Jacque, who had been her boyfriend, but who had been captured by the Councillors of the Inservium, where he had languished for many years. The final chapter returns to the present day, but the main body of the novel reveals the events leading to seventeen-year-old Elise de Velonte's 'death', and how she is caught in a war which threatens to wipe out her entire bloodline. Between hunting and killing the corrupt Councillors of the Inservium, and fighting against an ancient curse which is tearing apart the families of her coven, she blurs the lines of love and hate to become a warrior and survivor. Violent, bloody and very fast-paced, Barclay's very twenty-first-century narrative includes all the traditional elements of the nineteenth-century Gothic novel, with marginal places, transitional time periods, eroticism, and the use of fear and manipulation, while challenging gender stereotypes and expectations.

Since the nineteenth century, the characterisation of female vampires has gradually changed, from being regarded as transgressing the societal expectations of women as housewife and mother, to Barclay's twenty-first-century take which permits and celebrates both alternative gender, and disability. She focuses particularly on strong female vampires (no wilting heroines here), who will stop at nothing to kill their largely male enemies.

Strong stuff but hugely enjoyable and thought provoking for older teenagers.

Bridget Carrington

The Girl Who Became A Tree

Joseph Coelho, illus. Kate Milner, pub. Otter Barry Books

I've had the pleasure of reading Joseph Coelho's *A Year of Nature Poems* and *Poems Aloud* and I've thoroughly enjoyed those. This one, even though is equally meaningful and thought provoking than the earlier ones, is departure from the colourful world of poems for kids and that of idyllic nature.

There is friendship, woods, love, longing, anger, melancholia, sadness, familial support and so much more.

It ticks though, like time alive with its daily events of visits to places, making calls, receiving messages, feeling emotions, feeling nothing, gaining yourself, losing someone. The mundane, the unseen, the grievous, the resuscitating, the shadows and lights of Daphne have been highlighted in this novel in verse.

The black and white illustrations are abstract and stark at the same time and immediately pin the reader to the text. Daphne is a teenager manoeuvring her daily life- angry, aloof, confused and lovelorn. She is grieving the loss of her father and finds her safe haven in the library, amidst books. Juxtaposed with this plot is the myth of Daphne and Apollo who was turned into a tree to avoid the unwarranted attention of Apollo.

Joseph Coelho is an award-winning performance poet, and incorporates that in the flow of his poetry and the reader feels like going on without stopping; there are different fonts, angles, illustrations, alliteration, implications conveyed through acrostic and free verse styles. This one is rich with metaphors and wisdom for an angry and hurt soul:

"Take one girl of 14 years,
steeped in missing and mourning.
Take from her what she holds dear –
a memory of a father calling. Tempt her from the world of books through a tunnel of false promise
and dream...
Let the forest do its work of changing those trapped into wood.
Let these tree-children feed me, their bitter fruit tastes incredibly good."

Full of such powerful lines, this book is as beautiful and as truthful in its conveyance of heart in need of love and support as could be. This can be read by anyone above 12 years of age and flow in through, to battle their own winters and embrace the warmth of love again.

Ishika Tiwari

I, Ada

Julia Gray, pub. Andersen Press

Ada is the daughter of Lord Byron who remains for much of this account a distant and mysterious figure. Why is he not present in her life? Did he flee the country because of debts? Was he involved in some sort of scandal? Did her mother not love him? Why won't Mamma let her have any connection with her aunt, Lord Byron's sister?

Both Ada and her mother have an interest in mathematics and machinery. However, Lady Byron worries about Ada's butterfly mind. She takes Ada on a tour of factories to show her the dark and messy side of machines.

This is a first-person account from Ada from 1821 to 1836 – from when she is five until she is 20. This is a fictionalised biography of Ada Lovelace, who was one of the first people to realise that a computer could be built. However, this account does not deal with that and is only mentioned in an afterword. We do however see some of her early connections with Babbage who built a Difference Engine, a forerunner of the computer. It was Lovelace's notes on her translation of an article in French about Babbage's machine that led to her fame.

In this book we see a young girl grow into a woman. Julia Gray stays firmly in Ada's point of view. We may suspect that Ada is anorexic and bi-polar.

There is some romance.

The ending is upbeat but there is some pain and suffering this text: Ada's health is frequently not good and there is tension between her and her mother.

Gill James

Gill James' *Girl in a Smart Uniform* is published by Chapelton Books.

The Inheritance Games

Jennifer Lynne Barnes, pub. Penguin Random House

It starts off as a game in the local park. Innocent, well Avery is trying to be innocent, if she wins Harry is bought breakfast at her expense. It is a generous gesture and one that, if she is honest, Avery only gloats over a little. In truth she loves playing her daily games of chess before school. During school her head is down, and she works, hard but quietly and under the radar until – well until the day she aces in a physics test. Genuinely aces even though it should be impossible. It is after school when things get tough and home is not a place she wants to be. Once the inheritance makes itself known does it mean a life on the up for Avery and her sister. Will the new family, new home along with the opportunities the money brings really, truly bring happiness?

Secrets can be revealed, codes cracked, games played, lost and won but how will this deadly family game turn out?

A suspenseful thriller this book takes us, the reader, on a rollercoaster ride through emotions, psychological ups and downs and moments of truly nail-biting anxiety. The blend of thrill, secrets,

reminiscences, romance and high stakes is woven together so seamlessly I did not realise how quickly I was drawn into this compulsive read and I certainly didn't work it out before the end.

Utterly compelling reading.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Into the Real

Z Brewer, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Although widely available in the US, where Z Brewer's many creepy, challenging, novels for young adult readers are well-known and award winning, *Into the Real* will be the first that many readers in the UK encounter.

Beginning with Chapter 24, and ending with Chapter 1 (moving 'into the real'), we encounter Quinn, battling with three aspects of the world we live in, a world in which people's lives are largely defined by gender, male or female. But what happens for those who don't find that the simple definition fits with how they feel? Brewer attempts to address this dilemma, and her reason for writing, on their website:

'I write for outcasts, for kids on the fringe, for people who have ever felt like they don't fit in – no matter their age... a label doesn't make something so. A label is just a word. It's what a person does that makes them who they are'.

The confusion which conventional expectations engender in Quinn are expressed through three different scenarios, interwoven into the narrative in groups of chapters which first show Quinn in a horrific monster-filled town, attempting to exist. Escape is impossible, because the dense and perpetual fog surrounding the town merely turns anyone attempting to escape back into the town. The second scenario finds Quinn in an abusive, bullying religious boot-camp where adults attempt to 'turn' teenagers who feel their childhood gender definition to be wrong. Thirdly Quinn is seen as a soldier, battling the Allegiance, an organisation which threatens freedom of thought, and of gender. As the three narratives unravel we follow Quinn through their process of coming to terms with living true to themselves in a challenging and largely unsympathetic society. Brewer's attempt to portray conflicted character traits is an intriguing one. It is not entirely successful, and each of the three scenarios Brewer offers us could undoubtedly be expanded into a full book.

The style of narrative varies between the scenarios, and some are more engaging than others. Nevertheless, the novel offers us an exploration of profound problems which face many, and an attempt at their reconciliation.

Bridget Carrington

The Key to Fear

Kirstin Cast, pub. Head of Zeus

Kristin Cast's *The Key To Fear* is a shockingly relevant story to our 2020 pandemic lives, and foreshadows a dystopian nightmare about keeping your distance.

In a world which lives by the phrase 'no touching today for a healthier tomorrow,' it's an instalove story told through the points of view of its protagonists, who want to get closer to each other despite the rules of their society.

The story is an eerie glance into a possible, post-pandemic future in which people live in fear of a new outbreak many years after a virus killed most of the world's population. People don't touch each other, or kiss, or make any sort of intimate contact, and rely on science to create new life. It's a science fiction story that, in today's reality, could easily be science fact.

The government – "The Key" – makes life choices for you, including future spouses, in a society that's become too reliant on science and too afraid to make its own choices.

Elodie, the main protagonist, is a nurse who has trusted in the system, until now. She has a toxic relationship with her misogynistic husband, and her abusive mother, which persuade Elodie to break free from the locked-down realities of her society.

Aiden is a rebel with whom she falls in love. Whilst he tests the limits of their society, cleverly he never breaks the rules. When Elodie and Aiden initially meet, he senses her true rebellious nature, and together their rebellion is their secret.

But in this locked-down society, no act can be a secret forever, and soon their rebellion will have drastic consequences on their lives. The reader gets to experience this through the different perspectives of its main protagonists.

Whilst its subject content may not be to everyone's tastes, *The Key To Fear* is an incredibly topical story with a desolate environment that differs to that of a post-apocalyptic science fiction world, but with a forceful reality that reflects our own current fears.

Chris J Kenworthy

Poisoned

Jennifer Donnelly, pub. Hot Key Books

This is a dark retelling of an age-old tale from the New York Times bestselling author Jennifer Donnelly, whose critically acclaimed novel *A Northern Light* won a Printz Honor and a Carnegie Medal. Following in the footsteps of her bestselling *Stepsister*, Donnelly gives us an enchanting, but not sweet, reimagining of a beloved fairytale.

Poisoned traces the trail of Sophie, a girl with hair as black as night, lips as red as blood and a kind heart. She is about to inherit her father's throne from her ruthless stepmother and take a doomed trip with a huntsman ordered to cut out her heart. Told from the huntsman's point of view, the cruelty and hardness of Sophie's world is described in details as gritty and dark as the woods themselves. Rumours and whispers abound in the court that Sophie is too gentle, too trusting, too weak to rule and Sophie herself believes them to be true. She exists in a state of fear, acting hard to fit in and please the Queen. Yet she still trusts and loves in small acts of defiance which are ruthlessly punished. Fear and self-doubt stalk her as she hides in the dark woods, relying on the kindness of seven strangers. She is without her heart and her kingdom, seeing the evil inflicted on her downtrodden people. In finding the courage to fight back, every act of resilience and compassion brings reciprocity and takes her closer to finding her own power.

There is an uplifting beauty to this tale, woven with poetry and indelible imagery. Sophie's hero's journey is to reject the narratives of fear and cruelty which poison her world. She finds her broken-hearted strength in acts of empathy, persistence and kindness.

The book is multi-layered allowing empathy for many of the darker characters including an understanding of the Queen's own journey. It is a deliciously political tale for our times of female leadership, courage and the power of claiming your true role.

Saira Archer

Punching the Air

Ibi Zoboi and Yousef Salaam, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Punching the Air is fiction, but it is impossible to discuss without some reference to the experiences of its co-author, Yusef Salaam, on which it is loosely based.

In 1989, Salaam was one of the so-called Central Park Five, a group of black and Latino teenagers arrested for the rape and assault of a white investment banker in New York. The case became notorious, and the five became hate figures; a local demagogue named Donald Trump famously took out full-page advertisements in multiple local papers calling for the death penalty to be reinstated.

Salaam served more than six years in prison, but in 2002 a combination of DNA evidence and a confession from the real attacker meant that he and the other four were exonerated. He has since become an activist fighting injustice, particularly against the African American community.

In *Punching the Air*, Salaam has joined forces with YA writer Ibi Zoboi to create a free-verse novel, telling of the experience of Amal Shahid, who, like Salaam himself, is imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. Amal's journey from courtroom to juvie makes for grim reading, but ultimately this is a book in which the burning need for justice shines alongside, and indeed through, an equally strong passion for art and poetry, pursuits that sustain Amal during his time in incarceration but that also become the means by which he is able to tell his truth. Zoboi's verse is spare and controlled, skilfully tracking Amal's state of mind across multiple moods and changes of fortune.

Conventionally, the conclusion of such a book would be the protagonist's exoneration. This book resists that narrative, ending with Amal still in prison, though hopeful of release. In refusing such a pat conclusion, in which the justice system is ultimately vindicated, the book becomes more politically charged than it would otherwise have been; the reader too is denied an easy release – and that only adds to the book's power.

Catherine Butler

The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker

Lauren James, pub. Walker Books

When Harriet Stoker stumbles over a balcony in an abandoned university building, she dies instantly. Then she wakes up. What she finds is an afterlife beyond anything she could have imagined. Revived by Harriet's arrival, Kasper, Felix, Rima, and Leah are excited to welcome another ghost to their tight-knit fold. Unfortunately for them, when Harriet discovers that every ghost has their own special power, friendship is the last thing on her mind...

In *Harriet*, James wanted to create an 'unapologetically evil' female villain. She succeeded. Harriet's reckless pursuit of power wreaks havoc in Mulcture Hall. As well as our complicatedly cruel anti-hero, James has crafted an array of far more likeable characters. A cool 90s tribe, Felix, Kasper, Rima and Leah have spent decades fighting, flirting and forming a found family.

Readers will especially enjoy Felix's pining for Kasper, Rima's pet fox ghost, and Leah's ghost baby.

As you'd expect from a Lauren James novel, *The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker* is full of unexpected twists and turns. Described as a horror-com, this story puts magic and the supernatural within scientific parameters. James goes where other paranormal novels don't as she explores ghost culture, currency and death.

This is an enticingly dark novel which will make you question: what happens if death is only the beginning?

Abby Mellor

Savage Her Reply

Deidre Sullivan, illus. Karen Vaughan, pub. Little Island Books

The Children of Lir is an ancient foundational myth of Irish folklore.

It has been told and retold down the generations and has been referred to as influential both to the story of *Swan Lake* and in the works of Bram Stoker. Deirdre Sullivan's *Savage Her Reply* is a response for our times to this ancient Irish fairy tale. The interwoven illustrations by Karen Vaughan, complement Sullivan's text in a way that enhances an already beautiful piece of writing.

For it is a beautiful piece of writing. It has the allure of a fireside yarn alongside the lyricism of a bardic song. Several times, I wanted to read aloud or be read to so as to hear the rhythm of the recitation. Just lovely!

This retelling is essentially a study of power: A feminist exploration of who owns it and what are the acts and retaliations that ensue? The basic storyline starts with Aife marrying King Lir, who has four children by his former wife. Aife becomes jealous. We may soon be in the realms of wicked stepmothers and witchcraft.

I'll leave you to enjoy how these traditional tropes of women's wickedness are played out for our times. I also enjoyed the strong presence of nature in Sullivan's retelling; this seemed to reflect our current ecological awareness and enhanced understanding of the healing power of nature in difficult times.

I would recommend this book to adults and to young adults who are confident readers (YA 13+). I found it helpful to look up the legend of King Lir for its bare outline as this was, unfortunately, my first acquaintance with the story. If readers prefer to go straight to the book, the "original" story is briefly explained in each section.

Happy reading!

Morag Charlwood

SLAM! You're Gonna Wanna Hear This

Nikita Gill, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Nikita Gill's *SLAM! You're Gonna Wanna Hear This* explores the world of poetry through the passionate voices of up and coming SLAM poets. Discussing themes of love, identity and acceptance in the engaging and refreshing style of performance poetry, Gill provides a sensational introduction to modern poetry that all readers are sure to enjoy.

SLAM poetry, for those who don't know, is a form of performance and spoken word, with the focus being on connecting with the audience and delivering the beauty of the verse powerfully. For young adults in particular, this diverse range of poems offers a change from the traditional work studied at school and shows the influence poetry can have. Furthermore, the accessible style gives a chance to new readers of poetry to truly engage with the poets, which is so compelling.

Also included within the book is an introduction from each poet and a tip they have for performance poetry- a lovely detail which really allows the reader to connect with the poets. With poets such as Raymond Antrobus, Dean Atta and Fathima Zahra guest starring, the range of voices involved is vital to the book's success and inspiring message of empowerment.

Inspiring, humorous and sometimes emotional, this collection of poems is definitely one to watch out for!

Jemima Henderson

Sofa Surfer

Malcolm Duffy, pub. Zephyr

In this unflinching, heartfelt story about homelessness, award-winning author Malcolm Duffy brings the all too real plight of life on the streets to your doorstep and immediately demands complete attention and action from the very first sentence, 'You never forget the day you lose your home. I lost mine on a Tuesday.'

15-year-old Tyler's world is turned upside down when his family uproot and leave London for a new life in Ilkley, Yorkshire. Angry, upset and bored, Tyler finds comfort in swimming at the local lido and quickly comes to befriend Spider – a sofa surfer teen down on luck and about to be without a sofa. As Tyler is drawn deeper into a world he never knew existed, he finds himself spinning a tangled web of lies in his efforts to help Spider escape a world of fear and insecurity.

As thoughtful as it is eye-opening, Duffy, with great consideration and sensitivity, refuses to give space to the negative stereotypes and connotations associated with homelessness. Rather, through the

character of Spider, a vulnerable teenage girl, reinforces the reality that homelessness is a universal situation and impartial to any age, gender or race. For any reader, but particularly the intended YA readership, the terrifying and dangerous reality of homelessness feels otherworldly but *Sofa Surfer* shines an uncompromising light on just how real and relatable this issue is. Spider could easily be a friend, or a classmate, and it's this urgent thought that will ignite empathy and inspire action in all its readers.

Duffy doesn't shy away from the gritty and difficult descriptions of life on the streets but, and by no means overshadowing the importance, he uses his skill and platform to bring hope and heart to a naturally very heavy subject, and with his undeniable trademark humour has you holding down laughter.

Masterfully weaved into this is a courageous coming of age tale of belonging, friendship, and the importance of empathy and understanding. I loved both Tyler and Spider's characters. Despite navigating polar opposite situations both characters came off relatable and admirable, but it was their sheer tenacity and trust for one another that had me holding my breath and racing towards the end of this unforgettable story.

Truthful, compelling and fearlessly insightful, *Sofa Surfer*, without any shadow of a doubt, lives up to the promise of Duffy's acclaimed and powerful debut, *Me Mam. Me Dad. Me*. Duffy has once again showcased his talent for writing timely and topical narratives whilst never losing humour and heart.

A worthy, highly recommended, read. I look forward to what Malcolm Duffy gifts us with next.

Fern Tolley

The Truth Project

Dante Medema, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

What should have been a simple genealogy project becomes a life-changing discovery for Cordelia Koenig. The DNA results that reveal that her father is not who she thought he was confirm her worst fear: that the sneaking suspicion she does not quite fit in with her perfect family is not unfounded. So begins a compelling journey of self-discovery and identity that asks us what it means to truly belong somewhere.

The Truth Project is a quick and satisfying read with a unique format. The multimedia storytelling – a mix of mediums including lyrical free verse, email and text message – make this perfect for reluctant readers or anyone looking for a quirky and refreshing take on a 'finding your truth' narrative.

Cordelia is a sympathetic character, even when she makes mistakes. Absorbed in her own journey, she lies to and neglects the people who love her the most – but only in doing so is she able to cultivate a sense of perspective. Her plight perfectly captures the existential shock of realising that parents are in fact fallible human beings as well as articulating the teenage desire for something more. These are, of course, the staple ingredients for a perfect coming of age story.

With its evocative imagery and truthful delineations of familial relationships, this is a fiery debut full of angst, anger and redemption. (And the Alaskan setting is a perfect accompaniment to these longer nights - best enjoyed with a blanket and hot chocolate!)

Jess Zahra

Winter White and Wicked

Shannon Dittmore, pub. Amulet Books

Shannon Dittmore has created an extraordinary world that seems part futuristic and part mythological. Layce, an island cursed by eternal winter, is home to humans and the descendants of the mythical beings Sola and her son, Begynd. This winter landscape is not one of magical beauty and benevolence but rather one of fear, manipulation and isolation. The island's inhabitants seek not only to survive but also to return the island to its former state, before Winter took her smothering control of the island.

Sylvi, a twice-orphaned rig driver is the main character of this fast-paced, fiercely delivered tale of one young person's attempt to survive. Sylvi has her rig, the Sylver Dragon, the solitude of the open road and Winter, an icy spirit to comfort her. Winter has been Sylvi's companion – an internal voice and presence in her very bones - since she was a small child. Until the arrival of Mars Dresden, a Kerce smuggler, Sylvi had always thought of Winter as a guardian angel but now she is being forced to question this reality.

The smuggler's request to haul a load to the North just as the weather is starting to turn more treacherous coincides with the departure of Sylvi's best friend, Lenore, to a rebel encampment. Sylvi knows that Mars can lead her to this camp and so agrees to transport his load in order to rescue her friend. The journey is anything but comfortable as danger awaits her at every turn, particularly as she must seek safe passage through the sacred grounds of the Shiv and survive the ghoulish creatures sent by Winter to stop her progress.

During this horrific drive, Sylvi forms an unlikely friendship with Mars Dresden's two companions, Hyla, a warrior woman from the neighbouring island Paradyia, and Kyn, a young male with skin like stone. No matter what Sylvi does to retain her distance and preserve her solitude, she is repeatedly made to question her very beliefs and ultimately forced to choose between two very different realities.

The author has created a truly unique world but the tale of its creation and the beings that populate it are often confusing and distract from the overall storyline. I felt that the world was over-complicated, and some elements never were clarified or resolved by the end. The characters, however, were engrossing and their personalities nuanced. I definitely became invested in their success and interested in how their friendships would evolve.

Fair warning though as this book contains scenes of severe violence, harm to animals and references to sexual harassment.

Sheri Sticpewich

Wrecked

Louise Reid, pub. Guppy Books

Wrecked, by Louisa Reid, is a story of a tumultuous teenage romance, seen through a series of memories and flashbacks that are interwoven with a court case following death by dangerous driving. Whilst this is a story about morals, it is not moralistic, and cleverly uses spacing to convey the meaning of words on its pages. Whilst structured like a poem, it reads like a series of thoughts grouped into mini-chapters, with occasional rhyming.

At the start of the novel, the language in Joseph's first-person narrative appears rather disjointed, and comes across as a series of disorganised thoughts, written in the style of bullet-points, which accurately captures Joe's sense of guilt. This later gives way to more detailed flashbacks that question the behaviour of both Joseph, and his girlfriend Imogen, but never without losing the story's poetic structure.

Wrecked is so innocent in its appearance, and yet devastating in its delivery, and the plot's many twists and turns will have you questioning the narrator's reliability (much like Nick's unreliable narration in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, referenced in the novel).

Such is Joseph's confusion, mixed with his desperation to gain empathy from both the members of the jury and the reader, that, occasionally, hidden messages appear within the main body of the text. Individual letters emboldened within different words, eventually group together to form phrases such as 'Coward' and 'Not Guilty.' It's as if Joseph is continually questioning his own feelings and motives, much like the jury does during the court case which lasts the length of the book.

Is Joseph a normal teen, who's been involved in a terrible car accident with his girlfriend Imogen, or is he guilty of manslaughter through reckless driving?

While some of the story's vivid imagery may not be suitable for all readers, *Wrecked* is a modern masterpiece that involves the reader emotionally, through the court case, to explore the wider issues of relationships, of truth, and the implications of 'doing the right thing.'

Chris J Kenworthy

Non-Fiction Books

A Natural History of Fairies

Emily Hawkins, illus. Jessica Roux, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

Outside is a collage of deep greens, auburns and earthy browns and here in my room I sit with the fairies of nature, illustrated breathtakingly in Emily Hawkins' and Jessica Roux's *A Natural History of Fairies*. This big hardcover book is gilded in gold with the most beautiful vines around a wild fairy smiling with birds amidst the decoration of wilderness.

As I open the book I see such beautiful fairies flitting around blossoms and birds. This 60-page delight contains information not only on the secret lives of fairies; types of fairies in our vicinity; and fairy habitats; but also on fairy language and how to find them!

What's very interesting is that this book is inspired and borrows from the notes of a Botanist and Professor Elsie Arbour whose work was discovered in the archives of the British Museum of Natural History in an unidentifiable folder. The reader discovers a letter written to Annabelle by her Aunt Elsie and from thereon embarks on an adventure with her to discover the Fairies.

The other captivating aspect of the book are the illustrations akin to the style of the 1900s. The book is like a scientific and poetic exposition of the fairy realm with scientific names, tables, pictorial graphs, charts, and anatomical diagrams. Despite the scientific structure, it is not at all boring as the illustrations are life-like and explanation accompanying them are very engaging for someone interested in the world of fairies, for instance, the Firefly Sprite page is full of glowing fairies and has the following description-

"The FIREFLY SPRITE is bioluminescent, which means that parts of its body light up ... This fairy's large eyes help it see through the gloom."

There are Fairies of the Jungle, Woodland Fairies, Mountain and Hill Fairies, Freshwater Fairies, and Fairies found in different parts of the world!

This one is such a joyful read for children and adults alike, each page brings something new and magical. If you're on a quest to know almost everything about fairies and the flora and fauna they tend to, this could be a great companion. It's a good way to introduce children to the fragrant flowers, chirping birds, glowing insects, i.e. to the enigma and mysticism of nature, and to spark in them a belief in the unbelievable. Definitely pick this one as an autumn read.

Ishika Tiwari

A World of Art

Helena Hunt and James Brown, pub. Walker Books

“The world of art is an enormous place to explore” but this book certainly rises to that challenge. It is a visual feast for the eyes, not only in the styles of art represented, but within each double page spread. Dynamic and bold illustrations introduce many styles and forms of art to the reader. Taking us on a journey through art, we begin with cave paintings and plenty of examples from around the world are included to see the similarities and differences between the styles and countries. Mini history lessons are included to provide context to what was happening when these artistic forms were being created. I was hooked on reading about styles like mosaics and religious art featuring the famous Ghent Altarpiece.

Offering up history’s most iconic sculptures, paintings and movements, this book is sure to please budding artists and art historians, or anyone with a fascination with art. Interspersed with the text and illustrations are some tips and techniques that show how a piece may have been created in its smaller steps. Colourful and engaging this is a superb book which brings to life those visual art pieces created to inspire, cause emotion and reactions and to stand the test of time. A stunning book that will entice readers to pick it up and browse through stopping when their eyes are caught by something special.

Erin Hamilton

An Emotional Menagerie: Feelings from A-Z

pub. The School of Life Press

The arrival of this fantastic book couldn’t have been timelier. In such unsettling and uncertain times this could well prove to be a wonderful resource to families, educational settings and professionals alike. As well as being a beautiful read this is also a toolkit in helping children grow their emotional intelligence.

This book lays out 26 different emotions alphabetically with each having a beautifully written poem and a cleverly chosen illustration to accompany it. The poems are short enough to be engaging for young children yet long enough to express meaningful explanations of the sources of these emotions and advice on how to manage them. The animals and their facial expressions depicting the emotions are perfect; the insecurity of a cat wearing the cone of shame, an uncertain chameleon constantly changing colour and a panic-stricken chicken are genius choices. Not only this but the colour pallets chosen for these illustrations bring them to life beautifully. The vibrant reds surrounding the poem about anger and the calming lemon yellows of tranquillity add so much to this book. The words and illustrations in this book are blended brilliantly.

A wide range of ages would enjoy this book. It explores some of the simpler emotions such as anger, boredom and shyness that could be accessed by 5-6-year olds and more complex emotions, such as melancholy and obsession, which would be better understood by older children. However, the illustrations are so good that younger children would take a lot from just looking at and talking through these. This is a book which could last for years.

This book normalises talking about emotions and well-being, few things seem more imperative for children and adults alike at the moment. This is a must for parents helping their children navigate and learn from their emotional experiences. A wonderful book to have to refer back to and to help in difficult times. A really exciting find.

Hannah Cooper

Be A Super Awesome Artist: 20 Art Challenges Inspired by the Masters

Henry Carroll, illus. Rose Blake, pub. Laurence King

This interesting guide to art is bright, bold, well set out, easy to follow, one I think older primary or younger high school students will enjoy and engage with as they develop their artistic interest and ability. Organised into 23 chapters plus a six-page history of art section, this is a very brief but detailed and accessible compendium.

Nineteen different artists, some well-known, others not so much, from a diverse range of genres, history, ethnicities and genders are explored in their own chapters, each a double-page spread. The inclusion of people that you would expect to appear such as Picasso, Goldsworthy, Duchamp, Lichtenstein and Magritte alongside new discoveries, (even for my artist brother who I showed the book to) such as Lorna Simpson, Chuck Close, Rachel Beach and Gayle Chong Kwan make this exciting and inclusive.

The other chapters, entitled 'nifty know-hows', are practical, slightly longer, explorations of topics such as paint, pencils, colour, and an especially nice feature entitled 'Make Your Mark' which focuses on the artist's signature. This is a topic I do not think I've seen before, fitting for a book whose aim is for the young reader to develop their own work.

Throughout the book there are numerous features designed to encourage reader interaction with art in a practical way. A hashtag link is provided as a way of sharing any work produced, and they are encouraged to make a work of art in the style of each featured artist with tips given along the way. These 'challenges' are portrayed in a way that is accessible and fun. Carroll jokes about making a painting, Jackson Pollock style with drips and flicks, on the living room carpet and exhibiting a 'ready-made' artwork in the style of Marcel Duchamp in the home but seriously thinking about how to justify that this ordinary object is a work of art. For a Frida Kahlo style self-portrait he talks about

using props and clothing representing how you want the piece to feel because portraits don't have to be serious and sad.

He is very encouraging, saying "I'd love to see what you do" when talking about producing a piece of performance art. Quite often Carroll explains the different layers an artwork has – the initial visual appearance and then the deeper underlying meanings and messages – in a way that is accessible and thought-provoking. However, I did find the annoying term 'super-awesome' very overused and some of the chat grating like 'bazillion gazillion dollars' which could put some readers off as they could see it as patronising as well as tongue-in-cheek.

Overall, this is a fun, practical, intriguing, very accessible, interactive guide to art which doesn't take itself too seriously and is very encouraging about nurturing young artists.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

Britannica All New Children's Encyclopedia: What We Know and What We Don't

Michael Bright, John Farndon, Dr Jacob F. Field, Abigail Mitchell, Cynthia O'Brien, Jonathan O'Callaghan, ed. Christopher Lloyd, illus. Mark Ruffle and Jack Tite, pub. Britannica Books

Britannica All New Children's Encyclopedia: What We Know and What We Don't is a clear and concise encyclopaedia with a twist. This unique encyclopaedia explains what we already know in the fields of chemistry, physics and biology and what we still need to discover. Rather than listing the entries in alphabetical order it is organised in sequential time order – starting from the beginning of time, to the present day and looking into the future where it highlights some of the most intriguing unexplained puzzles in archaeology, engineering, history and science, whilst still embracing the fundamental truth everything is constantly changing.

Aimed at Key Stage Two, *Britannica All New Children's Encyclopedia* is divided into eight chapters, each one written by a different author and all edited by the renowned writer of the What on Earth wallbooks, Christopher Lloyd. The eight chapters are: Universe, Earth, Matter, Life, Humans, Ancient & Medieval Times, Modern Times, and Today & Tomorrow. Each subject area is explored using diagrams, illustrations, infographics, maps and photography, as well as text. It is divided into separate, coloured blocks so even the most reluctant reader can browse, or dip in and out. All the facts and explanations provide a mammoth amount of information in original and engaging ways, which will interest older children and adults as well as KS2. Perfect for STEM education.

Over 100 experts have been consulted in the compiling of this book. At the bottom of each double-page is a credit to the expert who has checked the information and facts included on that spread. At the end of each chapter is an interview with three different experts, explaining what they love about

their job and what they are working to discover at the moment. Together these experts form a directory of innovators who have changed the course of history or science with their actions and discoveries. There is also a multiple-choice quiz at the end of each chapter so readers can test their own comprehension. All the answers can be found somewhere within the chapter but are also listed upside-down at the bottom of the quiz.

Readers of all ages will love discovering the facts, lists and information, which may inspire them to do their own research to uncover some of the remaining mysteries of our planet, the universe and beyond. There is cross-referencing so they can explore the topic further from different perspectives in the other chapters broadening their interest and knowledge.

This exquisitely presented, 416-page compendium of amazing, mind-boggling facts you can trust, will provide hours of exciting learning for curious readers all over the world. An excellent resource to support any topic in the classroom and could be used for homework and home-schooling. This book would make the ideal gift.

Anita Loughrey

Dyslexia and Me: Expert Tips and Mindful Activities for Young People with Dyslexia

Amy Rainbow, pub. Studio Press

Writing has been described as the greatest technology that humankind has developed; it allows thoughts and knowledge to be transmitted from person to person over great distances and through time itself. And yet there are a significant number of people who find it difficult to access this technology because their brains work in a different way. We do not know what causes dyslexia – but we do know that it can be extremely painful to live with. Dyslexic children can see themselves as failures. Dyslexia may also be associated with other cognitive differences which compound difficulties.

Dyslexia and Me is a useful and practical guide for children and young people (and adults who support them) in how to build coping strategies. The book divides into three parts:

All About Me provides short exercises that help the dyslexic child to see themselves and their life in a more positive light. The exercises are heavy on gluing, drawing and colouring; writing comes a poor fourth!

Learning with Dyslexia suggests ways that a child can improve and manage their own learning. It encourages the child to investigate such simple changes as altering screen and text colours, fonts and spacing to make reading easier. Text to speech software is mentioned as well as reading along to audio

books. Putting thoughts down on paper can prove frustrating so further tips are given to help with writing. Whatever works is the message!

Living with Dyslexia supports the dyslexic child in daily life. It helps them to organize their days and belongings as well as manage the everyday tasks that are so challenging. Lastly, there are suggestions for looking after mental health: take time out, exercise, eat well and ask for help - lessons to last a lifetime.

If I have one criticism, it is that some pages are word heavy and a dyslexic child might need substantial support to read them. Perhaps, breaking up the text and more use of differently coloured blocks would have been appropriate.

I would recommend this book to all those with an interest in supporting dyslexic children, not as a workbook to be ploughed through, but as an excellent source of ideas and a buttress for fragile self-esteem.

Katherine Wilson

Exam Attack: A Practical, Positive Guide to Exam Success and Beating Stress

Nicola Morgan, pub. Franklin Watts

Exam Attack gives the latest, informed advice on managing stress, learning effectively and keeping physical and mentally healthy when preparing and sitting exams.

The author Nicola Morgan is a renowned author on the science of the behaviour of adolescence, including previous well-regarded books on *Blame My Brain - The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed* and *The Teenage Guide to Stress*. The advice in *Exam Attack* is a theoretically informed text written as a practical guide. There is an excellent balance between explaining why it is important and how to implement and adapt the advice to the reader's circumstances. This is supported by a number of design elements isolating the main advice, including text boxes subtitled 'Action' and a distinctive graphic for 'Tips' with the tips in bold text. The 'In Short' also succinctly sums up the main points, easy to adapt as an actual or mental check-list. A single page of 'Top Tips' on exam stress, revision periods, study and in an exam is included in the Appendices.

The book is flexible, depending on the immediacy of the forthcoming examinations. Ideally students are preparing two-three months in advance and there is time to plan and timetable revision. There is advice on the best ways of learning, according to the latest science as well as how to stay healthy and maintain healthy relationships during this time. It is interesting that Nicola Morgan emphasises the importance of asking for help and supportive adults, such as teachers, and includes revision buddies

and groups, breaking away from a conventional idea of solitary revision. As expected there is useful advice for the day of the examination itself.

Exam Attack uniquely begins by discussing different challenges for students. This includes learning differences and specific learning needs - there are separate sections on dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, the autistic spectrum, memory problems and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder - poor health and home life. Student's different needs are however addressed throughout the book. Nicola Morgan writes both realistically about the difficulties and positively about how to manage individual circumstances offering practical strategies to maximise success.

As this is being written, the possibilities of examinations for all school students is in doubt, although some final exams are still planned for 2021. Whether it is a final exam or continuous teacher assessment produced in controlled conditions, the advice in this book is just as relevant for a whole school year as it is to prepare for an exam.

Simon Barrett

Exploring the Elements: A Complete Guide to the Periodic Table

Isabel Thomas, illus. Sara Gillingham, pub. Phaidon Children's Books

Somewhat improbably, there is a craze among Years 7 and 8 at my school for learning for the Periodic Table by heart. Pupils who claim that they cannot manage two irregular French verbs reel off 118 elements perfectly and without hesitation. Why? For the kudos, I suspect. I doubt whether any of them appreciate the beauty and order at the heart of their hard-won knowledge. More's the pity!

Exploring the Elements is the perfect book to educate and delight such children – but do not make the mistake of thinking it is only for the geeks and nerds. I believe any child with an enquiring mind will enjoy this book for it embraces history and culture as well chemistry, physics, biology and medicine.

It is impossible to decipher the structure of the Periodic Table and the behaviour of elements without a clear understanding of elements, atoms and molecules themselves. The introduction gives an excellent succinct explanation, accessible to most children of eleven plus, before delving into the detail of each element. Bold use of colour helps the reader to understand the groups of elements, their related properties and the implications for the organization of the Periodic Table.

Each element receives a double page spread filled with text boxes containing physical and chemical information as well as facts about its role in the environment, our bodies, technologies and culture. Picking some pages at random, I learnt that the words needed to understand 1000 languages have been etched on to a nickel disk and that tantalum makes excellent bone implants. Selenium is an ingredient of anti-dandruff shampoos and argon can protect damaged brain cells from dying from

lack of oxygen. I was genuinely awed by the diverse range of technologies that have been developed from these few elemental building blocks.

I have always been a bit vague about the Lanthanides (rare earth metals) and why so many elements seemingly occupy just one chemical niche in the Periodic Table but I understand now - thanks to the comprehensive explanation given by this book.

Lastly, I would like to comment on how attractive the book is. I believe that the author and illustrator have thought hard about how to make it appealing to every child. The colour coding used throughout is informative rather than merely decorative and never distracts from the scientific content. The same may be said of the handy thumbnails that illustrate the uses of each element. The graphics are neat, clear and modern.

Above all this book will grow with your child. Give it to a young teen interested in STEM subjects and they may still be reading it post GCSE. They may even appreciate that beauty and order I mentioned earlier!

Katherine Wilson

Fearless: The Story of Daphne Caruana Galizia

Gattaldo, pub. Otter-Barry Books

Fearless: The Story of Daphne Caruana Galizia is the inspirational biography of a courageous human rights journalist. Endorsed by Amnesty International UK, it carries an important message for the entire world.

Daphne was an ordinary little girl in Malta. She grew up believing that she could do anything she set her mind to and, through the power of books, learned to ask questions and think for herself. This little girl grew into a hero who stood up for the truths she believed in and fought against the injustices that marred her country. Even when others were too afraid to stand by her, she continued to speak up and challenge the corruption she saw. She was a leader. Her brave and brilliant example lives on even after her tragic death.

This engaging book shows readers that truth matters. It emphasises the importance of human rights and what they mean to so many people. Issues such as free education, freedom in the press, equal rights, jobs on merit and protecting the planet could easily be taken for granted. Through Daphne's story, Gattaldo encourages readers to think about how everyone deserves these same rights and how each of us should be true to ourselves and speak up for what we believe in.

The illustrations are just as powerful as the words. Daphne battles evils with the sword of truth as she clearly stands up to corruption and wrongdoing. Images of newspapers and placards reinforce her message and how clearly she spoke out. From the beautiful settings of her youth to the dark images of those she fought against, colours and shadows evoke feelings of positivity, tension and victory.

The story of this strong, female role model is one that needs to be told. Through this book, children will see resilience and determination come to life and be inspired to push forward, never letting fear get in the way of what they want to achieve.

Kate Heap

Fox: A Circle of Life Story

Isabel Thomas, illus. Daniel Egnéus, pub. Bloomsbury

In a sparkling frost-covered forest of early spring, a mother fox, with a bushy tail and fur like golden flames, is on the hunt to find food for her three little cubs. As the seasons change and the cubs grow, the mother fox teaches them the skills and lessons to survive in the wild world. Until one day, fox dies. As the autumn leaves fall, the fox begins to fade and gives back to the earth, to plants, to the air, and with it brings new life to the forest. For every particular that once was the fox, finds a new place in the world, from the trees, to the bees, to the soft, gentle breeze.

In this striking and sincere picture book, Isabel Thomas immerses you into the beautiful natural world and, with great clarity and sensitivity, explains the circle of life, and explores the new beings and beginnings that come from death. Uniting science with story, Thomas's direct, logical language blends with a gentle, poetic resonance to craft a unique approach on the usually hard-hitting, difficult subject, which I found to be as refreshing as it was enlightening. This, paired powerfully with Daniel Egnéus vivid and atmospheric illustrations, makes for a worthy 5 star read.

Thought-provoking and reassuringly hopeful, Fox: A Circle of Life Story paves the way for important questions and valuable discussions to be had, not just on death, but also on topics surrounding food chains, ecosystems, habitats, and the natural environment. The closing spread on the science behind death, the building blocks of life, and the meaning of decomposition is a great starting point for exactly that.

This is the second book the creative duo has collaborated on and they've quickly marked themselves as a firm favourite amongst children and parents, teachers and book bloggers. I hope this series of scientific stories continues well into the future!

Fern Tolley

Gods, Goddesses and Heroes: Mythology from Around the World

Marzia Accatino, illus. Laura Brenlla, pub. Lonely Planet Kids

Gods, Goddesses and Heroes is a sacred travel guide, introducing the pantheons and sharing the sacred stories of many ancient and indigenous religions from around the world. Readers cross continents with their guide Chiron the Centaur visiting Greece and Scandinavia in Europe, Egypt in Africa then South Asia and China, and finally central and North America. While some cultures may be more familiar to readers than others, a book such as *Gods, Goddesses and Heroes* will inevitably add to existing knowledge and present new information.

Each chapter focuses on the mythology of a specific culture, profiling the main deities, heroes and heroines, sacred animals, monsters and other divine beings. There is a brief description of each one. Their characteristics and distinguishing features are presented in a fun and engaging style by the author Marzia Accatino. Moreover, there is sufficient detail for readers to appreciate the connections between these mythological figures and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the religion. Since everything is explained in the main text, there is no need for a glossary. In addition, the text is visually appealing with illustrations in full colour, a number of which extend across double-spreads. The illustrator Laura Brenlla brilliantly caricatures the many different deities, heroes and creatures, helping readers to identify individuals and imagine particularly the less anthropomorphic figures, hybrids and other fantastical creatures. Overall, this book is a very accessible read for children aged 9-12.

Gods, Goddesses and Heroes is particularly notable for its retelling of a number of sacred stories. This includes creation myths, such as the Chinese myth of Nüwa creating animals and the first human being out of loneliness. There are also stories about the cycle of day and night, for example the Inuit story of how a bird called Crow brings daylight or the Norse myth of Dagr and Nótt.

Gods, Goddesses and Heroes is the perfect armchair book tour for young curious readers.

Simon Barrett

Happy, Healthy Minds: A Children's Guide to Emotional Wellbeing

illus. Lizzy Stewart, pub. The School of Life Press

The School of Life is some kind of curious philosophy organisation that I don't feel I know enough about. I've watched the YouTube videos, walked past the 'store and classroom' on central London's oddly quiet Marchmont Street, browsed the website selling many publications and various merch, noted the Facebook/Twitter/Instagram/etc. presence, and am now looking at the orange-canvas-bound children's book in front of me. At the helm of this global-wide project spreading 'Wisdom for Resilience' is Alain de Botton, a sort-of present day public intellectual figure who divides opinion,

referred to in a 2014 Financial Times article as having built no less than an ‘empire’ (<https://amp.ft.com/content/4c2d3894-dab3-00144feabdco>).

‘The School of Life is dedicated to helping people lead more resilient and fulfilled lives’, says its website, and if sales are anything to go by, it’s doing quite well. I find *Happy, Healthy Minds: A Children’s Guide to Emotional Wellbeing* nice to read: mix of ‘high brow’ and ‘low brow’ references, humorousness-with-just-enough-sincerity, delightful coloured illustrations by Lizzie Stewart that lift optimism levels. As it says on the tin, it navigates (somewhat) the complex organ of the young mind via clear sections – ‘Parents’, ‘Screens’, ‘Feeling Misunderstood’, ‘Friends’, etc. – with a tone pleasingly not dissimilar to the adult-oriented material I’ve seen elsewhere (even if whispers of patronising seem to be (m)uttered by some). To me, this book ‘does something’, and I imagine it potentially welcome curriculum supplement for variously aged children, indeed attested a ‘godsend’ by at least one source (<https://schoolreadinglist.co.uk/childrens-book-reviews/happy-healthy-minds>). There are even satisfying ‘work pages’ to make a change from Twinkl et. al. I’m no child psychology expert, popular or otherwise, but my ‘gut instinct’ says: quirky, balanced, sunny. Enjoy!

Amy Kathleen

History Atlas

Thiago de Moraes, pub. Scholastic Children’s Books

Following his impressive *Myth Atlas* of 2019, Thiago de Moraes has compiled another epic this year in his *History Atlas*. This large, lavishly illustrated book examines fifteen different civilizations, from Mesopotamia almost six thousand years ago (3500BC) to modern day America, via well-known ones such as Egypt, Greece, and the Roman Empire, to those we may not be familiar with, such as Maurya (India), Tang (China), and Ottoman (Turkey, and many of the areas round the Mediterranean the Romans had conquered earlier). We also look at wider topics, such as European Exploration. This topic includes a wealth of explorers from around the world – though, surprisingly, no mention of the Vikings, and highlights both the good things that resulted (spices, scientific discoveries, maps), and the bad things (slavery, wars, environmental destruction). Exploration is not all wonderful fun though, and he is careful to show that the people already living in these distant lands frequently fought against the newcomers and tried to save their lands and way of life from change and the dominating attitudes of the invaders. There are overviews of more general topics, communication, medicine and the World Wars, and also a section on what he calls The Global World, featuring people, political and social movements and inventions which have made a difference not only in their own country, but around the world. These include twenty-three people, most well-known, but also several who have had a significant impact on lives, but who are shamefully little known.

Thiago de Moraes is an artist, and has added highly entertaining, quirky and memorable illustrations to other people’s books. When he produces both text and illustration, as in both his atlases, we see

more clearly what he thinks is essential to the making of a book which will entertain and inform its young readers. Maps, careful illustrations of the environment and accurate, often humorous depictions of the people involved bring the pages to life, with a myriad of facts in separate small paragraphs, and catchy titles to make this an entertaining book for KS1 and 2 readers. I just wish there was an index...

Bridget Carrington

How Many Mice Make An Elephant? And Other Big Questions About Size and Distance

Tracey Turner, illus. Aaron Cushley, pub. Kingfisher

Arguably one of the most useful but difficult skills to teach children is how to estimate an answer to a mathematical problem. What sort of an answer would be sensible? Should they expect a big or a small number? Sometimes estimation will help a child to choose a correct method to solve a problem – they have framed the answer in their head and then know whether to multiply or divide. Teaching this skill is easier when estimation is purely an arithmetical exercise; real life problems involving size, quantity, area and volume are more difficult to explain.

This book is a welcome contribution to demystifying the process. The author uses a selection of silly problems (How many giraffes make a skyscraper?) to help a child to develop the required mental skills. The problem is described, and the solution explained in a clear and engaging way. Hot tips for dealing with large numbers (add the zeros!) are included. The accompanying illustrations and amusing factoids do an excellent job of disguising some serious mathematical content and number buffs get plenty of relevant statistics!

I do have some quibbles:

The useful page on measuring different things would be more relevant at the beginning of the book rather than the end.

It would be helpful to clarify that a larger number results from dividing by a number with a value between 0 and 1. “Divide 6 by 0.000025” (page 10). Children do not understand this intuitively.

The illustration showing the height relationship between Mount Everest and the Mariana Trench has not been drawn to scale.

Lastly, saying that “the moon is roughly a quarter of the size of the Earth at 3,476km in diameter” (page 21) is misleading. A child would not then understand that there would be room for 50 of our moons inside our Earth. The two statements are both factually accurate but there is a lot of GCSE level mathematics to unpack in these connected facts. It would be better to keep it simple!

But despite these gripes, I would heartily recommend this book to children of nine or over and their teachers.

Katherine Wilson

The Human Race

Sean Callery, illus. Donough O'Malley, pub. Quarto

This is a fascinating history of record breakers, explorers and inventors. Who was the first? Who was the fastest? Who went the furthest? Following a brief introduction, the book is divided into five chapters. These start with faster, higher and further and then cover journeys and expeditions, transport and vehicles, science and our world and finally technology.

There is a good mix of facts, human interest and colourful illustrations. As well as giving the factual detail the book looks into our imagination and our constant desire to achieve more and something new. It explores mysteries and new ideas. It covers many important and ground-breaking discoveries and inventions including transport, electricity, disease and computers. It is all very fascinating, and children will love the detail, the facts and all the information and stories. Every chapter has its own fascination and delight, children will want to return to each one again and again.

What really works well is the way the exploits of many famous people are covered, including Christopher Columbus, David Livingstone, Captain Scott, Charles Darwin, Marie Curie and Isaac Newton. Many discoveries which today we take for granted are included. There is a good mix of text, colourful pictures and the double-page timelines feature throughout the book. These are fascinating and simple to follow. Many of the discoveries are about humans wanting to challenge themselves to go faster or to explore the limits of the Earth, but others are about some very important and life changing discoveries that we all rely on today.

Children will be entertained by this book, and at the same time will learn a lot of fascinating and amazing detail about a wealth of topics. They will want to return again and again. Each page will probably challenge them to ask questions and want to learn more. This is a brilliant book.

Gary Kenworthy

Interview with a Tiger and Other Clawed Beasts Too

Andy Seed, illus. Nick East, pub. Welbeck Publishing

The question-and-answer format of this book offers an unusual style for a non-fiction book. The result is a light-hearted, jovial and charming read with a comical streak characteristic of other books by the author. Inside are ten 'interviews' with a range of animals, some more familiar than others. While children may feel they have good knowledge of lions and tigers they may not know so much about

honey badgers and armadillos. The interviews are packed with facts about habitats, diet and behaviours with each animal having their own voice; the tone of the interview with the giant anteater is very laid back compared to the confident address of the lion. The illustrations are bright, engaging and match the feel of the interviews well.

This is a book that children can dip in and out of and refer back to with ease. For this reason, it may appeal to reluctant readers or those not quite ready for a heavy non-fiction read. Up to date references of Greta Thunberg and climate change help to make this book feel relevant plus there is a quiz and a 'how you can help' section for those mindful of the impact on endangered species - a topic that comes up a few times in the book. Nature gripped pre-schoolers and upwards would enjoy this book.

Andy Seed is well known for his comical writings on wildlife and nature and this is a great addition to his other books. This is a lovely book that will entertain readers young and old. The next in the series interviews *Ocean Giants* and looks to be a fantastic follow up due out next year.

Hannah Cooper

Love Your Body

Jessica Sanders, illus. Carol Rossetti, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

It makes me so happy to see that such amazing body positive books are now available to growing minds. Right in front of me is this joyful yellow hardcover book with different body types on its jacket, which when you unfurl you discover a self-care list poster!

Love Your Body by advocate and social worker Jessica Sanders and illustrator Carol Rossetti is a must read for pre- and post-pubescent kids to relish the fact that their unique self is lovable and should be celebrated. The book is written in a gender-neutral manner so that anyone can identify with its motivational messages.

The book begins with a note from the author to all girls being subjected to unrealistic beauty standards in a digital world. Readers move on to see little girls having a good time together as friends, sisters and supporters. The message that "Your body is unique" pops up loud and clear.

This 40-page peppy book takes the readers through a journey of cultivating more self-love through simple psychological and physical practices which children of 8 years and above can easily incorporate in their daily lives, such as this one-

"Put on your favourite tunes REALLY LOUD and dance crazily just for you!"

Or this one,

"Search for positive quotes until you find one that has meaning for you. Print it out or write it down, and keep it with you. Look at it when you're feeling down."

The book is full of powerful illustrations depicting not only body types, but also sisterhood, celebration, intuitive communication with the body, community support and importance of a holistic lifestyle including physical, mental and social well-being.

This is a must read for those young and of a developing mind but also by adults who were devoid of such loving guidance in their childhoods, to empower their own inner children.

Ishika Tiwari

Me and the World: An Infographic Exploration

Mireia Trius, illus. Joana Casals, pub. Abrams & Chronicle Books

Me and the World: An Infographic Exploration is a bright and colourful compendium of infographics that provide visual comparisons of how people live all over the world, what food they eat, their homes, favourite pastimes and ways of communicating, highlighting the differences and similarities. The sources for the data for each spread are listed at the back of the book providing opportunities for the reader to check them for themselves.

Each double-page spread is introduced by the fictional character Lucia who comes from Spain, written by the publisher Mireia Trius. Starting with her name, family and pet Lucia moves on to talk about world population and significant cultural features such as languages, jobs, school and religion. Children can explore what life is like for Lucia in Spain compared to where they live and the rest of the world. The data is presented in interesting, visually stimulating ways which every reader can spend hours exploring. The infographics will engage the most reluctant reader as they are able to browse the pages in any order.

It was fascinating to discover that Hong Kong has the smallest average house sizes at 45m² compared to Australia which has the largest average house size at 214m²; or to compare the different school uniforms around the world and noticing very few of them wear ties and blazers; or view age, geography and language as if there were only 100 people in the world, which really does put things in perspective.

This would be an excellent resource for introducing the study of data and statistics to Key Stage Two pupils and would also be great for discussion points in PSHE and Citizenship. It would also be a good way of introducing the use of different keys and different graphical ways data can be presented. This book provides the foundations to help children recognise how data can be manipulated by presenting it in different ways, such as changing to vertical scale to make it bigger or smaller, or skipping numbers, not starting at zero, which is an important skill in our increasingly digital world.

Anita Loughrey

Music and How it Works: The Complete Guide for Kids

Charlie Morland, illus. David Humphries, pub. DK Children

Music and How it Works: The Complete Guide for Kids provides answers to questions such as, why do we like music, do animals like music, how sound is made and what animal can produce the highest pitch? It provides a very comprehensive look at music and everything involved in creating and listening to music. For example children can discover more about the seven ingredients of music: rhythm, dynamics, melody, harmony, timbre, texture and form. It discusses reading music and the different notes as well as explaining sharps and flats, intervals, tones and semitones and octaves.

This book provides opportunities for children to discover their own love of music by looking at scales, chords and keys, different instruments and different genres such as opera, blues, rock and hip-hop to K-pop and electronic music. The author, Charlie Morland, includes 'playlists' of key pieces encouraging the children to look up pieces of music to listen to themselves. There is also an insightful look behind the scenes at the process of the music industry.

The vibrant, modern feel using bright colours, photographs and infographics will appeal to children of all ages. I particularly liked the way this book clearly explains the psychology and math behind music, how it can affect our mood and improve our minds and the research into the Mozart Effect. At the back of the book is a musical timeline which gives a breakdown of music throughout history from the first percussion to using streaming apps such as Spotify.

This is the ideal book for anyone who is interested in music whether that is listening to their favourites, or learning an instrument, or writing and composing their own songs from the introduction to the final chorus. It is guaranteed to help children to develop a deep passion for music. The perfect addition for all school libraries.

Anita Loughrey

Our World in Pictures, Countries, Cultures, People and Places

Andrea Mills, pub. DK

I have always been intrigued by maps and countries around the world, their relationship to each other and the people who live in the smallest corners. This hard backed volume will entice readers to discover new places, cultures and locations around the world. Every single country is represented and unique information about each is included along with full colour images of the people, sports, food and flags. Set within the continents and not alphabetical order you can find out about the neighboring

countries. Beginning with North America, we travel across Canada, The USA and down into the Caribbean countries before journeying South to South America and then East to Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia, finally ending in the Polar Regions. Many of the countries have a large double page spread with fascinating facts dominating the page, from population statistics to language spoken and landscape information. Admittedly, I do not know every country in the world and certainly could not list facts about many of the ones I do know so this book is a gold mine of information for young readers and would-be travellers. DK are widely known for their incredible non-fiction books, and this is one to add to any classroom or school book order. I could also see this being popular at home while discussing where to visit or testing each other on the Alphabet Country Game. I could easily spend hours reading about each place and flipping back to the map to gain a better understanding of where they are in relation to me or friends and family.

Erin Hamilton

Question Everything

Susan Martineau, illus. Vicky Barker, pub. B Small Publishing

In a world where we are bombarded by information, it is important to recognise what is true, what is false and what is misinformation, *Question Everything: An Investigator's Toolkit* deals with this crucial issue.

Covering essential topics such as the news, checking facts and sources, analysing statistics, scary headlines, out-of-date information and more, this book is easy-to-read and very accessible. Each topic is presented on a dual page spread with lots of illustrations, and a good use of different fonts and colours to engage the reader.

There's a glossary explaining words relating to the specific topic as well as an overall glossary at the end of the book, activities to explore it further, and questions to stimulate discussion encouraging children to think for themselves.

This basic introduction to information literacy, independent research and critical thinking is ideal for KS2 (7 to 11-year olds), it would be a useful addition to a school library and an excellent resource for PHSE. Book 3 in the *Real-Life* series, the other two books cover *Real-Life Disasters* and *Real-Life Mysteries*.

Barbara Band

Real Life Disasters

Susan Martineau, illus. Vicky Barker, pub. B Small Publishing

Real Life Disasters investigates thrilling and horrifying stories of natural and human-made disasters. A wide variety of incidences that have occurred throughout history is featured including - volcanic eruptions; earthquakes; storms, floods and tornadoes; oil rig fires; dinosaur extinction; deadly plagues; and shipwrecks. Why do disasters happen? Can they be predicted? Can they be prevented? All these questions and more are explored.

Each disaster is presented on a dual page spread with a stunning and dramatic illustrative representation of the event and details explaining what happened and when. This is followed by a dossier containing a timeline, eyewitness statements and views of expert investigators. There is also an exploration into the tragedy, suggestions on what to do in a natural disaster and changes made to laws as a result of human-made errors. Ideal for 7 to 11-year olds, disasters is 'one of those' topics that appeals to many children and this book would certainly not disappoint them. Book 2 in the *Real-Life* series, the other two books cover *Real Life Mysteries* and *Question Everything*.

Barbara Band

The Secret Life of Spies

Michael Noble, illus. Alexander Mostov, pub. Wide Eyed Editions

The opening sentence states that “espionage is one of the oldest human activities ever to have existed. Spies from across the globe have shaped and changed the world, often in surprising ways”.

This fascinating book delves into the world of spies – covering the true stories of 20 real-life spies through history and across continents. From Ancient China through to modern USA, the featured spies are diverse and varied. Some are familiar names – such as Kim Philby and Mata Hari - but many are unknown and obscure, adding to their allure.

Each spy features on a double-page spread, with basic biographical details and information about their activities as well as the impact and effect they had. Their actions are put into context of the history of the time and there are also additional snippets such as spying technology, trade craft, agent handling and fictional spies.

The illustrations are simplistic and in muted colours with information presented in boxes on the page. The font is small but clear and readable.

This is a captivating and informative non-fiction book that will intrigue and engage. I would have liked a contents page and possibly an index but the omission of these does not detract from the appeal of the book.

Barbara Band

Space Maps: Your Tour of the Universe

Lara Albanese, illus. Tommaso Vidus Rosin, pub. What on Earth Books

We have street maps, road maps, town and city maps and of course atlases so that we can find our way around the world under our feet but how would our astronauts find their way around the vastness that is space without a map to hand? This is where Space Maps lends a very helpful hand. Not only does it help out those astronauts it helps us, the reader back on earth too.

Space is home to planets, moons, stars, galaxies, black holes, nebulae and more besides, the universe is a very big place to keep track of and to do that these maps are ideal. They are big, the book being a large A3 size one, they are vibrant and they are detailed. Not only is there detail on the maps themselves there are plenty of facts to accompany them too. Each of the 24 maps comes complete with a vast selection of detail to learn from.

Start from the beginning of history as well as the book, and learn how the ancient Greeks and Chinese mapped the sky, see the difference between a scientific map and an equatorial one. Learn about journey's that have been taken into and across space by people and animals. I could go on, so much has been packed into this book and though it has found a place on my bookshelf I have a feeling it will be spending more time off than on as we devour the facts and shoot off for another exploration of our universe.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

This Book is Anti-Racist

Tiffany Jewell, illus. Aurélie Durand, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

This enlightening work comes with a purpose of awakening all to anti-racism. Black bi-racial writer and Montessori teacher Tiffany Jewell along with French illustrator Aurélie Durand, have collaborated on creating this powerful book which dismantles the evil of racism by propagating knowledge and sharing tools for that purpose.

This 160-paged vibrant booklet has glossy and thick pages which remind the readers to be aware. To know the linguistic, political, academic jargons and actions which are etched in the trajectory of racism. The book deconstructs the patterns in which we all have been mired by exposing them, and by the simple action of awareness through some activities of acknowledgement and resistance.

Divided into four sections, it talks about topics like Social Identity, Prejudice, Black History, Solidarity, Loving Oneself and different types of Racisms. Interspersed in between are quotes and ideas from influential poets, academicians, and writers. This black book will acquaint you with the most needed political vocabulary which will be your intellectual and ideological weapon against the unjust evil of racism.

It's written in a manner which is easy to understand and remember, supported by colourful illustrations which clicks in the mind - such as this powerful affirmation accompanying faces of famous black personages-

"The history we carry with us is in each and every one of us. You will make your ancestors proud. You are a part of their stories of resistance. You will move us forward."

The activities in the book helps one become thoughtful about events implicitly supporting racism, such as one reminding readers to chart out their histories, and another one beckoning to create an 'anti-racism toolbox'. The use of gender neutral and deconstructivist terms like 'black, brown, indigenous majority, instead of minority, and use of the inclusive word folx makes this an important work to be read and shared with everyone aged 12 and above.

This has been one of the most important books I've read till date on the subject of racism written for children. It brings into conversation all the subtleties and blaring injustices wrought by racism; it takes steps to educate, empower and enlighten budding minds and those closed off by mundanity of oppressive systems into an enkindled and aware one. Definitely recommended.

Ishika Tiwari

Tricky Spellings in Cartoons for Children

Lidia Stanton, pub. Jessica Kingsley

Short, self-contained illustrations of commonly difficult to grasp spellings for primary school children. Years 2 to 4 will probably benefit most. I've not tested the book out and have reviewed it from a pdf, which are both worth mentioning.

I read the American edition, which appears fairly completely translocated (with eg spelling and idiom adjustments). I've compared contents lists and spot-checked pages and feel happy talking about the book in general.

My major misgiving: representation. The short-cut assessment is that it feels dated. It may be the British edition is different, I hope so, all learning materials need to be more active in this regard than this. Also, the title too directly shouts the book's function to the buyer and thereby puts off its readers. Simply 'Tricky Words' would've been so much better.

Moving on, the trick in any learning material is that its objectives get met before their user tires of them. Given that the subject is tricky spellings, I'd expect the user to have to hang around longer than is typical, so the book will need to work especially hard.

Design's important. The book's clean and open, so it's not wearying to use. Typography is attractive, colours are lively and crisp. Altogether good. Marks lost for an inconsistent art style and repetition, which make a book of this kind feel more thrown together and less confidence-inspiring. The art generally lacks personality. The art is the weak point from a teaching point of view. It needs to be more engaging than it is, just for its ability to encourage perseverance.

On balance, I feel the good aspects more than compensate. Tone is very difficult to get right in these situations, and Stanton nails it. The narrative elements to the exercises are varied and memorable, and when they (not that often) mis-step, it's an art problem rather than a writing problem. I think all the words you'd like to see covered appear. It's a smooth, enjoyable read.

So: is the book likely to get the job done before its readers get tired of it? I think in most cases yes, it's an effective book.

Am I comfortable using it? Yes and no. It's no more problematic than many of the things I've seen in a school or public library, but from a new book I'd expect more, and I think I'd have got more if there'd been more money in the budget for the artwork. It feels very much like a home-made collection of exercises that work. See it before you buy it, but I'd say it's worth seeing.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

What's the Issue: Fake News

Tom Jackson, illus. Cristina Guitian, pub. QED

Fake News is a book that every young person, and many grown-ups, ought to read. Every school library ought to have this resource in stock and anybody trying to explain this very topical subject should be aware of it. Clear and informative, attractively presented and incredibly relevant, this book outlines the history of communication from the development of speech to Web 2.0 and how, at various levels and in many ways, its use has served purposes beyond that of sharing facts and knowledge.

An amazing amount of information is provided in each chapter, which reveals a thorough process of research and selection of relevant knowledge useful to define what fake news is and how readers can build critical skills necessary to assess news.

The prose of the book is highly readable. The layout of each page is appealing to the young audience, as it is divided into zones and with recurring questions which summarise a relevant aspect of the topic of the chapter. Quirky illustrations complement each chapter and add a touch of colourful humour.

I was impressed by the wide-reaching treatment of this topic. The author deals with equal ease with the history of the written word as well as philosophical theories, technological developments and moral issues. Terminology which peppers current conversation is explained and ‘who’s who’ and what’s what’ small boxes recur to provide further insight when appropriate.

This book equips readers with insights that allow them to evaluate the extent to which some sources and news may be biased or not genuine altogether. At the end of the book a mind map offers a strong visual recap of the contents of the book, while the ‘find out more’ section is eclectic and includes books, podcasts, websites, games and even museums.

Laura Brill

Wild City: Meet the Animals Who Share Our City Spaces

Ben Hoare, illus. Lucy Rose, pub. Macmillan Children’s Books

Wild City explores the urban jungle that is found in our cities and towns, looking at some of the animals that can be found in the areas within which we live, often not far from our doorsteps. The book has an international approach and explores ports and parks, rivers and canals, subways and gardens across six continents including: Vancouver and Aspen in North America, Rio de Janeiro in South America, London and Berlin in Europe, Cape Town in Africa, Tokyo and Mumbai in Asia, and Sydney in Australia amongst others. Each location is identified on a map to place it within the world. There’s a lot to look at and explore at each site and the information provided includes a brief description of the setting and fascinating facts about the highlighted animals. I’m not sure that those who travel by London Underground would be pleased to learn that it’s frequented by cellar spiders and mosquitoes!

There are also features on specific animals such as city birds, hunters in the city, scavengers, around the home, animals on the move and cities by night. Bringing geography and nature together, this book has great appeal for children wanting to know more about their natural environment. Its attractive and detailed illustrations in warm natural shades have an art deco feel to them and author, Ben Hoare, is an award-winning and authoritative nature nerd who has written for the BBC and the Natural History Museum. Recommended for ages 7 – 11 years, it could also be shared with younger children interested in animals.

Barbara Band

The World's Most Magnificent Machines

David Long, illus. Simon Tyler, pub. Faber & Faber

Wow! What an amazing, mind blowing book. This is an absolutely thrilling look at thirty -two of the most fantastic and incredible machines. Some of these machines really are brilliant. Others are just plain bonkers. Some are really useful and many are very successful. Others are for fun and some are just useless. Every single machine featured is definitely magnificent.

The double page timeline at the beginning of the book starts from 1885, when Karl Benz built the first motor car. The timeline stretches to 2020 and includes the most expensive and most complicated machine ever made, probably the Saturn V rocket. It finishes with a small car that flies with room for just two people on board. There is also a glimpse into the future with a giant aircraft which has twenty-eight wheels and six engines, built to launch rockets into space. This should be an extraordinary sight when testing is complete.

The book is packed with facts and figures as well as brilliant and atmospheric artwork spread over two pages. It covers the longest, the smallest, the first and the most expensive machines. It is also very much about the humans involved in the development of these machines. We always want to drive faster, fly higher or dive deeper. All this is covered in the book and the result is a quite fantastic and really amazing non-fiction book, which should appeal to a wide age range.

The combination of facts, the human element and the striking artwork all combine to produce this most impressive of books, which children will want to return to again and again. The format is good, with a comprehensive contents page, an introduction, the timeline, the thirty-two machines and finally a short conclusion and a comprehensive and useful glossary.

Gary Kenworthy

Bethany Walker, debut author

Matilde Sazio interviews Bethany Walker, debut author of *Chocolate Milk, X-Ray Specs and Me*, a laugh-out-loud, high energy book for young readers.

Tell me a bit about your background, what made you become a writer and why children's writing? **I remember creating little magazines, with quizzes and articles, when I was young by stapling together sheets of paper. I've always loved writing, from thank you cards to history essays, but I never imagined working in creative writing. I studied History at university and then worked in museum education (first training as a teacher and working in primary schools for several years before achieving my goal) so I have worked with children for a long time. As Head of Education at Sir John Soane's Museum, I really wanted to write a children's guide to the museum, but time never allowed as my days were so full of working with groups (of all ages) and introducing them to stories hidden in the museum. I think that, opening special secret doors to children or describing a candle-lit party held 200 years ago to celebrate the installation of an Egyptian sarcophagus on a nearly-daily basis, helped me hone my story-telling skills, albeit verbally. When I left the museum (when I started having kids) suddenly all of these ideas for stories started coming to me and I decided to pursue them, starting with doing a children's writing course.**

What has the road to publication been like? **I feel so lucky in lots of ways with how my road to publication has been. Firstly, I landed on what was the most incredible Writing for Children course with the most inspiring and supportive tutor (Lou Kuenzler) purely because City Lit was somewhere I'd partnered with through my work in museums. Then (after a child-focused hiatus) when I started sending my manuscripts around, my now-agent signed me up quite quickly. The wonderful Jo Williamson (of Antony Harwood Ltd.) set to work straight away, sending out manuscripts to publishers, and I had a picture book contract after about 6 months. Most of the following year was spent trying to write something for older children, which developed into *Chocolate Milk, X-Ray Specs and Me* – and here we are! It has been exciting and incredible and I still can't quite believe it. But, while the whole thing feels to have happened really fast, I first did the course in 2015 so, in reality, it's taken a fair amount of time.**

As a debut author, what is your favourite part of the writing/publishing process? Least favourite? **I can't believe how much I enjoy working on edits and receiving notes from my editors. I think I am, at heart, still a school pupil, wanting a gold star for my work and to please the teacher. I love getting suggestions for how to improve my work or which character to bring out more – it really helps spark ideas. Editors have a special skill in pin-pointing what is needed to make the magic happen!**

My least favourite thing is probably the waiting. I am learning about myself that I am rather impatient and am possibly a control freak, so waiting for responses from people drives me a bit nuts.

Is there anything that has surprised you about being an author? I think I'm surprised at how lovely and generous the sector is in general. People are very supportive and I guess I thought it would feel more competitive. I have made some great friends through the writing course and now there's a little group of us who work as each others' writing buddies. It's so nice having people to bat ideas around with. We know what this all means to us so we can really celebrate the successes. One of my writing buddies just won the Times Chicken House competition – how amazing is that?

Do you test out your writing on your children and what's been your favourite reaction of theirs? My children are currently 7 and 4, which means that my eldest was 5 when I started writing Chocolate Milk, X-Ray Specs and Me – definitely too young for it! I'm delighted that, by quirk of fate and the timings of publication, she is now old enough for the book and has developed an appreciation for funny books. I have tried to read my picture book manuscripts to my children but there's a very good reason why these books are called picture books. Audio-describing what should be seen alongside my text was not met with great joy or excitement. The message I got from my kids was "Show me again when there's pictures for me to see, Mummy". They are nothing if not honest!

What do they think about mummy being a writer? I'm not sure my 4 year old really knows what I exist for, other than to provide him with food and listen to him talk endlessly about Pokémon! My daughter is very proud and is my biggest cheerleader, which is lovely. As a generally self-effacing person, I'm struggling to start calling myself a writer. A couple of months ago, I heard Elsie telling someone I was an author, which should have been a really special moment – however, I misheard and thought she was telling that person I was AWFUL.

You started out writing picture books, why did you choose them as a genre and what made you transition to chapter books? My first picture book will be published by Walker in July 2021, which is really exciting. That has been three years in the making and just shows what a long process it is. The end result should be totally worth it, though – picture books are like precious jewels!

I thought I would always write picture books but a combination of factors helped change my mind. The course I did covered the whole of children's publishing and this was a great start. Even though, for the entire time I was doing the course, I was still adamant my heart was in PBs, I learnt about other age groups and other genres and, importantly, we were encouraged to read widely from all areas of children's books. The

subsequent workshops involved critiquing each other's work and that was a brilliant way of learning more about writing longer books and seeing theory put into practice. My lovely agent signed me on the strength of three picture book manuscripts I'd sent her, but from day one she encouraged me to think about writing for older age ranges. Having someone believe in you and push you to do more than you think you're capable of is an amazing thing – as is having a great agent!

What are the challenges for writing picture books v chapter books and do you have a preference? **That's like asking me to pick a favourite child! I enjoy writing both types of books. Picture books are indescribably hard to get right – they are the ultimate head-scratchers to work out. But, at c.500 words, they're the kind of thing that you can fiddle with in your head until you land on the right solution, which is why they particularly suited me when my children were younger.**

I have massively enjoyed the whole process of writing *Chocolate Milk* – writing funny books is such a joy (and hopefully, if the book is making me happy, it will make others happy too) – so I'm definitely keen to continue with both types of books, please!

You're a mum of two. What does a typical workday look like for you? **Back at the time when I wrote most of *Chocolate Milk*, I was still looking after Lonnie full time so our days would consist of taking Elsie to school, doing some kind of toddler activity and then picking Elsie up. School days seem long for children but they're mega-short for adults! My book was written during nap times and, crucially, in the cafe of the local leisure centre while Lonnie was in the crèche there (and when I was supposed to be swimming).**

Since lockdown, I'm not sure I've had a typical workday but I hope to settle into some kind of pattern soon! In September, my youngest started school so my days (between 9am and 2.30pm) are largely my own and that's been great but I suspect I was more efficient when I could only snatch an hour here or there.

Describe your work process as a writer? **Crikey! I'm not sure I'm experienced enough to really have my 'process' down yet. The main thing, of course, is having a workable idea and I feel to spend endless hours with my brain essentially acting as a squirrel in Willy Wonka's Nut Room, tapping each fresh 'nut' (idea) all over as it comes to me, to see whether it is good or bad. Sadly, a lot of my ideas turn out to be Veruca Salts and get discarded. But when I do get a nut my brain deems worthy, that's a good day indeed! When I came up with the concept for *Chocolate Milk*, my brain was fizzing for days. That's always a great sign.**

I definitely think in a visual way and this has helped with pinpointing the concepts both for writing picture books and for *Chocolate Milk*. With *Chocolate Milk*, I started off thinking of key events I wanted to include in the book and used them as the building blocks for the plot, before layering up other aspects, like Freddy's school life and the other characters. As a person, I'm generally very organised and it frustrates me that I haven't yet organised how to keep my work/planning/thought processes in a sensible way. I have scrappy notebooks and even random documents on my phone, which say things like 'Briefcase swap?' and 'NIGHT VISION GOGGLES!' Thankfully, the act of just writing these things down normally helps me remember them, so even if I can never locate my notes, the ideas come back to me.

What has it been like debuting a book under lockdown and how has it impacted your writing? I feel incredibly lucky that the timescales for both of my books were not affected by lockdown. The publishing world has done a fantastic job of trying to respond to the difficult times we're in and adapting accordingly. The main impact will be in the PR for my book. Before March, virtual events were very much the exception and now they have been developed into a fine art, so I'm very glad that I've benefited hugely from what lessons have been learnt since March and am grateful to all the other brave authors who have blazed trails for the rest of us!

What's it like having to navigate social media? Do you feel pressure to use it as an author? I'd have to say that social media is not my natural habitat! My publishers are being fantastic at encouraging me to get out there and I'm starting to make contacts and connections but I do keep having to remind myself to use it. Thankfully, some friends have my back and are doing sterling work including me in comments etc. I will get better but it's a slow process, which can be helped by lovely people reading this following me! I promise I will start posting more (sprout-related stuff) soon.

Are there any nuggets of wisdom you can impart to aspiring writers? Can I just say do Lou Kuenzler's City Lit course? If not that, it is definitely worth finding a writing group, for all the reasons I've mentioned above.

There are so many nuggets, it's difficult to choose. Everyone says it – and everyone is correct – you need to read as much children's fiction as possible, as recently published as possible.

And, specific to writing, I think it's important to really enjoy the story you're trying to tell. On the whole, you should be having a great time putting your characters through the worst time imaginable!

Greet Pauwelijn and Book Island

Book Island is a small independent publisher of the most incredible books, all handpicked and personally chosen by Greet Pauwelijn. She has impeccable taste and is widely known for it. I was thrilled when I was given the opportunity to speak with Greet over Zoom to learn more about her and Book Island Books.

I immediately felt at home in conversation with Greet - she has a naturally welcoming smile and manner and so instead of quickly firing my planned questions to her, we had a chat that lasted over an hour. In the way that like-minded people can, we got on well as we share a love of picture books with a timeless quality. Proof of her love for picture books comes from the choices she makes as a publisher. Choosing books to translate from many languages and cultures to bring to the UK market is not without its challenges.

Continuously asking the questions about the readiness of the UK market and ‘gatekeepers’ for books dealing with loss or grief, books with a strong emotional connection and those with a multilayered narrative. Book Island books are not commercially produced or found on supermarket shelves - there is a far greater value to these books. Often found in hardback and with unsurpassed illustrations, these books will stand the test of time.

Curious as to where Greet finds new titles, I asked, she spoke about browsing catalogues, visiting publisher stands in Bologna and keeping abreast of award winners. These certainly give her an edge and it brings to light new authors and illustrators to the UK. Greet’s knowledge, experience and understanding of picture books is deep and she is willing to take risks for something she believes in. One such risk was with *Mum’s Jumper*. When showing it to a group of ‘gatekeepers’, they were less than enthusiastic about it. Trusting her instinct with this book was certainly the right choice as it has been picked up by The Reading Agency for their Reading Well campaign and Empathy Lab have also promoted its use in classrooms. The Reading Agency quotes “A simple, heartfelt and ultimately uplifting book for anyone coping with loss”. Though it is a book about loss, it is full of hope too. It does have a sad cover but the joyous yellow endpapers are a sign of that hope.

It is fair to say that Book Island Books are a publisher of hope. It is within the pages of their books, within the community of support shown to Greet and her books and it is evident in the funding from the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. This crucial funding helped to publish three award-winning picture books from Europe, *The Garden of Inside-Outside* by Chiara Mezzalama and Régis Lejonc *The Bird Within Me* by Sara Lundberg and *The Golden Cage* by Anna Castagnoli and Carll Cneut.

We spoke about the importance of social media to small publishers, and we shared the similar opinion of how welcoming and brilliant the book community is on Twitter. Knowing the importance of

Twitter in book promotion and potential sales, Greet has a few innovative ideas to test out in the new year. These will highlight her work, introduce us to the immense team of support she has and perhaps allow us to help bring a new book to the UK.

I was so impressed with how down to earth and kind Greet was - she is simply a working mum with a firm mission to bring high-quality, timeless books to our attention. She clearly works hard and is fully committed to the future of Book Island.

What does the future hold? Plenty! Covid has obviously changed the way many of us live and work but perhaps it has also given us a chance to peruse and appreciate amazing books and to support our independent publishers who are in need now more than ever.

To tempt you further to visit the Book Island online store, please see mini reviews for five of the incredible books available now.

The Garden of Inside-Outside, Chiara Mezzalama and Régis Lejonc, trans. Sarah Ardizzone
“The story of unexpected friendship of two children, on either side of war and peace”

An award-winning junior graphic novel with friendship at its core. Children have an innate ability to transcend the boundaries of war, borders, prejudices and this book proves it. When Chiara and her family move to Iran, she lives in a beautiful house surrounded by walls. Inside the walls is a peaceful garden perfect for princes and princesses, Outside there is a war being raged. When a young boy, Massoud hops over the wall, they begin a secret friendship. The illustrations are striking and suit the genre crossing format perfectly.

The Bird Within Me, Sara Lundberg, trans. B.J. Epstein
“A universal story of longing and imagination, the perfect refrain for a young rebel”

Based on the life of Swedish artist Berta Hansson, this book imagines what life was like for young Berta growing up feeling unable to follow her dreams of being an artist. When she loses her mother, Berta must become a woman of the home, cooking, cleaning. However, a cooking protest gives her the courage to leave home. The hope in this book comes from the encouragement of readers to find the courage to set off and follow their own paths. Full of exceptional illustrations that could be hung in a gallery.

Sammy and the Skyscraper Sandwich, Lorraine Francis and Pieter Gaudesaboos
“This look-and-find book is full of visual discoveries that will endlessly excite even the smallest of children, and indeed their parents”

This completely charming book deserves a lot of praise and attention. In its large boardbook format, this story will enchant readers as they study the superb illustrations full of fabulous details that will prompt some interesting conversations. Sammy is hungry and sets to build the tallest sandwich to satisfy his hunger. Pulling out all manner of ingredients, he continues to add more and more until “it’s as tall as a skyscraper standing on another skyscraper’s shoulders on top of the world’s tallest mountain.” A fun, light-hearted book perfect for bedtime reading.

Virginia Wolf, Kyo Maclear and Isabelle Arsenault

“A feel-good celebration of the power of imagination and sisterhood”

Vanessa has a sister Virginia who is feeling “wolf like” and is making strange sounds and doing strange things. It is affecting the entire house so that “up became down, bright became dim, glad became gloom.” All colour is lost in the following pages until Vanessa has a brilliant idea. Virginia needs to escape the doldrums, and Vanessa knows just what to do. Providing a hopeful way of dealing with overwhelming emotions, this book should be shared widely. Delightful illustrations and an engaging use of colour, this will allow children to think creatively.

The Umbrella, Ingrid and Dieter Schubert

“A wordless picture book that tells a thousand stories”

The story begins on the endpapers where a red umbrella leans against a tree and a dog approaches it, excitement in his eyes. A black cat watches the scene with interest. What happens next is an exciting adventure for the dog as the wind blows him around the world. Through the clouds, over the savannah and across an ocean, there is much to appreciate and study on each page. As you near the end of the book, the dog is clearly exhausted. Wordless picture books allow the pictures to be interpreted in infinite ways and new stories to be shared with each reader. The vivid illustrations are to be pored over and appreciated. This book will have children coming back again and again to tell new stories.

Sibéal Pounder, Christmas and Tinsel

Sibéal Pounder talks to Louise Ellis-Barrett about all things Christmas and Tinsel(y)

You have had such great success to date and I am sure you will with *Tinsel*. So, can we start with – what do you think has been the key to your success to date? **I'm not sure – a lot of success is definitely luck and hitting on ideas at the right time. Finding the right people to work with is also a big part. I'm surrounded by a lot of incredibly smart women, and one incredibly smart Jason! (illustrator of *Bad Mermaids*). There's Gemma, my agent, Ellen, my editor, Laura Ellen Anderson, who illustrates *Witch Wars*, Sarah Warburton, who illustrates *Tinsel*, Emily, who handles all the publicity, Mattea who does all the marketing. *Tinsel* is about mighty girls and, fittingly, it was a mighty team of women who created it.**

The writing - Do the ideas flow quickly or do you work really hard to find the next story? **I tend to find the ideas fairly easily, but it'll be a grain of an idea. Turning it into a book is the difficult bit! Not all ideas snowball to form a book.**

Tinsel – why Christmas and why give it a fashion, fantasy makeover? **I have always been fascinated by Mrs Claus. Everyone knows who she is and yet no one knows anything about her – we don't even know for certain what her real name is! I wanted to go back and find her story, all the way back to when she was a young girl. And it turns out, a long time ago, we all got the Santa story a bit wrong.**

In terms of fashion specifically, the characters Rinki and Teddy are very interested in design, and I think it always works its way into my books in some form – in part because it's something I'm interested in, but also because it's such a fun form of self expression. It's also an interesting time for fashion in the 1800s in London, when *Tinsel* is set, because it had many more rules around it back then. *Tinsel* is very much about two girls breaking free from the limitations placed upon them.

And character names – I love them, particularly Mr Krampusus – do you find it easy to create characters and find suitable names/descriptions for them? **A lot of the names come from twists on already established Christmas things – Captain Garland, the fact all the elves are called Carol (the carols), and Mr Krampus is a reference to the Krampus, the Christmas devil. I toyed with the idea of making him a supernatural being, but I thought it would be more terrifying to make him simply a rich and powerful bad man. The cane he carries, which forks at the top to form two horns, is a reference to his devil origins.**

Do you personally have a favourite aspect of Christmas –the day itself or the whole time of year? Any favourite memories? **I love Christmas, and normally start eating mince pies in September! One of my favourite memories is having mince pie picnics in the snow when I was little, which was a tradition in our house. I put mince pie picnics in the book because I love them so much.**

Do you have a favourite, classic Christmas story or one that inspired you? **My favourite Christmas story growing up was probably Raymond Briggs's *Father Christmas* (there was also the animation of the book – I remember crying when someone taped over my treasured VHS recorded copy with half an episode of *The Crystal Maze*!)**

How important is it to you to introduce young readers to feminist concepts? Why did you think this would work with a Christmas story – you do it subtly and weave it in so smoothly but it is there for the eagle-eyed. **I think it works well with Mrs Claus because she is very much a relic of the Victorian era – a woman known and yet completely unknown in a world that didn't imagine much of women. She's always in the background and I think it's important to look at the stories we tell and how we tell them, why some characters are in focus and others are barely there at all.**

Is this a book just for Christmas or one for any time of year? How would you feel if it were to become a must-read Christmas classic that readers return to year on year? **Christmas books can be read at any time of year because they are so cheering, but there is something magical about curling up with a Christmas book next to a twinkling tree. I'd of course be delighted if it became a Christmas classic!**

Who has been the biggest influence on your work? Do you have a muse? **Oh gosh, I'm not sure there is one person – I've been very inspired by authors I read as a child, particularly Eva Ibbotson and Jill Murphy. I don't really have a muse as such, I think I'm most inspired by meeting new people and seeing new things, thinking about things in new ways. It's such a difficult one to answer!**

What do you think is the key to your continued appeal could you bottle and share or is it unique to each and every author? **I have no idea! I always tend to write about the things I love, and create characters that I hope others will love too. The humour is very weird and very me and I think the most important thing is to write what you love and in a way that you feel is you. Friends who read my books say that when they read them they can hear every line in my voice – I think that's important, to find your own voice and translate that to the page.**

Finally, what advice would you like to share with up-and-coming authors or children who would love one day to be in your shoes? **I would just say: know that you can do it, find your voice, really think about what it is you love to write about, and keep going!**

Picture books

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

Ian Fleming, adapted by Peter Bentley, illus.
Steve Antony

Dance like a Flamingo

Moira Butterfield, illus. Claudia Boldt

Every Night is Pizza Night

K Kenji Lopez-Alt, illus. Gianna Ruggiero

Fish

Brendan Kearney

Futuristic Fairy Tales: Goldilocks in Space

Peter Bentley, illus. Chris Jevons

Girl From the Sea

Margaret Wild, illus. Jane Tanner

I Am One

Susan Verde, illus. Peter H Reynolds

If You Come To Earth

Sophie Blackall

Kind

Alison Green, foreword Axel Scheffler, illus. 38
Kind Illustrators

Last: The Story of a White Rhino

Nicola Davies

Marney's Mix-Up

Jane Rushmore, illus. Sally Darby

Merrylegs

Pam Smy

The Midnight Fair

Gideon Sterer, illus. Mariachiara Di Giorgio

The Nine Lives of Furry Purry Beancat.

The Captain's Cat

Philip Ardagh, illus. Rob Biddulph

Pirate Stew

Neil Gaiman, illus. Chris Riddell

The Song of the Nightingale

Tanya Landman, illus. Laura Carlin

The Stone Giant

Anna Höglund

The Teeny Weeny Genie

Julia Donaldson, illus. Anna Currey

To the Island

Patricia Forde, illus. Nicola Bernardelli

What's in the Truck?

Philip Ardagh, illus. Jason Chapman

While We Can't Hug

Eoin McLaughlin, illus. Polly Dunbar

Who's Your Real Mum?

Bernadette Green, illus. Anna Zobel

Wild is the Wind

Grahame Baker-Smith

The Wolf's Secret

Myriam Dahman and Nicolas Digard, illus.
Julia Sarda

The Worry (Less) Book

Rachel Brian

Junior books

A Clock of Stars: The Shadow Moth

Francesca Gibbons, illus. Chris Riddell

A Most Improper Magick

Stephanie Burgis

A Poem For Every Day of Autumn

ed. Allie Esiri

The B on Your Thumb

Colette Hiller, illus. Tor Freeman

Brand New Boy

David Almond, illus. Marta Altes

Chocolate Milk, X-Ray Specs and Me

Bethany Walker, illus. Jack Noel

Fighting Fantasy: Crystal of Storms

Rhianna Pratchett, illus. Eva Eskelinen

Dragon Mountain

Katie and Kevin Tsang, illus. Petur Antonsson

Elsetime

Eve McDonnell, illus. Holly Ovenden

The Greatest Inventor

Ben Brooks

The Island That Didn't Exist

Joe Wilson

Jumbo: The Most Famous Elephant Who Ever Lived

Alexander Stewart, illus. Emily Sutton

King of the Swamp

Catherine Emmett, illus. Ben Mantle

The Lost War Dog

Megan Rix

Malice in Underland

Jenni Jennings, illus. Hannah Peck

The Marvellous Land of Snergs

Veronica Cossanteli based on the original by E.A. Wyke-Smith, illus. Melissa Castrillón

Meesha Makes Friends

Tom Percival

Mina Mistry (sort of) Investigates: The Case of the Disgusting School Dinners

Angie Lake, illus. Ellie O'Shea

Roxy & Jones: The Great Fairytale Cover-Up

Angela Woolfe

The Secret of Magic: The Forbidden Box

Natassa Louppou

Shoe Wars

Liz Pichon

Voyage of the Sparrowhawk

Natasha Farrant

The Wizard in my Shed: The Misadventures of Mervyn the Wild

Simon Farnaby, illus. Claire Powell

Wulfie: Stage Fright

Lindsay J. Sedgwick, illus. Josephine Wolff

Zombierella: Fairy Tales Gone Bad

Joseph Coelho, illus. Freya Hartas

Young Adult books

The Arrival of Someday

Jen Malone

The Boy I Am

K. L. Kettle

The Bridge

Bill Konigsberg

The Cheerleaders

Kara Thomas

Dear Justyce

Nic Stone

The Deep Blue Between

Ayesha Harruna Attah

Delivered

Sylvia Hehir

The Forest of Ghosts and Bones

Lisa Lueddecke

Girl of the Ashes

Hayley Barclay

The Girl Who Became A Tree

Joseph Coelho, illus. Kate Milner

I, Ada

Julia Gray

The Inheritance Games

Jennifer Lynne Barnes

Into the Real

Z. Brewer

The Key to Fear

Kirstin Cast

Poisoned

Jennifer Donnelly

Punching the Air

Ibi Zoboi and Yousef Salaam

The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker

Lauren James

Savage Her Reply

Deidre Sullivan, illus. Karen Vaughan

SLAM! You're Gonna Wanna Hear This

Nikita Gill

Sofa Surfer

Malcolm Duffy

The Truth Project

Dante Medema

Winter White and Wicked

Shannon Dittmore

Wrecked

Louise Reid

Non-Fiction books

A Natural History of Fairies

Emily Hawkins, illus. Jessica Roux

A World of Art

Helena Hunt and James Brown

An Emotional Menagerie: Feelings from A-Z

Be A Super Awesome Artist: 20 Art Challenges Inspired by the Masters

Henry Carroll, illus. Rose Blake

Britannica All New Children's Encyclopedia: What We Know and What We Don't

Michael Bright, John Farndon, Dr Jacob F. Field, Abigail Mitchell, Cynthia O'Brien, Jonathan O'Callaghan, illus. Mark Ruffle and Jack Tite

Dyslexia and Me: Expert Tips and Mindful Activities for Young People with Dyslexia

Amy Rainbow

Exam Attack: A Practical, Positive Guide to Exam Success and Beating Stress

Nicola Morgan

Exploring the Elements: A Complete Guide to the Periodic Table

Isabel Thomas, illus. Sara Gillingham

Fearless: The Story of Daphne Caruana Galizia

Gattaldo

Fox: A Circle of Life Story

Isabel Thomas, illus. Daniel Egnéus

Gods, Goddesses and Heroes: Mythology from Around the World

Marzia Accatino, illus. Laura Brenlla

Happy, Healthy Minds: A Children's Guide to Emotional Wellbeing

illus. Lizzy Stewart

History Atlas

Thiago de Moraes

How Many Mice Make An Elephant? And Other Big Questions About Size and Distance

Tracey Turner, illus. Aaron Cushley

The Human Race

Sean Callery, illus. Donough O'Malley

Interview with a Tiger and Other Clawed Beasts Too

Andy Seed, illus. Nick East

Love Your Body

Jessica Sanders, illus. Carol Rossetti

Me and the World: An Infographic Exploration

Mireia Trius, illus. Joana Casals

Music and How it Works: The Complete Guide for Kids

Charlie Morland, illus. David Humphries

**Our World in Pictures, Countries,
Cultures, People and Places**

Andrea Mills

Question Everything

Susan Martineau, illus. Vicky Barker

Real Life Disasters

Susan Martineau, illus. Vicky Barker

The Secret Life of Spies

Michael Noble, illus. Alexander Mostov

Space Maps: Your Tour of the Universe

Lara Albanese, illus. Tommaso Vidus Rosin

This Book is Anti-Racist

Tiffany Jewell, illus. Aurélie Durand

**Tricky Spellings in Cartoons for
Children**

Lidia Stanton

What's the Issue: Fake News

Tom Jackson, illus. Cristina Guitian

**Wild City: Meet the Animals Who Share
Our City Spaces**

Ben Hoare, illus. Lucy Rose

The World's Most Magnificent Machines

David Long, illus. Simon Tyler