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Books Reviewed

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Picturebooks

All the Things We Carry

Helen Docherty, illus. Brizida Magro, pub. Alison Green Books

What a lot of things we carry throughout our lives. We can carry pebbles, and pictures and warm blankets, but we can also carry worries and sadness and the weight of the whole world on our shoulders. Some things are a lot easier to carry than others and this book shows how important it is to help each other, when times get tough.

The first few pages ask the question: Could you carry...? Demonstrating inanimate objects that are easy to carry, but then the theme changes, ever so subtly at first – can you carry a blanket that makes a den to share? Sharing is such a wonderful thing to be able to do with friends. In doing so, we carry kindness in our hearts. What about hope or a memory? Can you carry these? Yes, you can! We can't see them, but they are so very important in keeping hope alive and the memory of a person with us.

I think there are so many lessons to learn from the words in this book: 'You can carry a worry, deep down inside. But that worry, once shared, has nowhere to hide.' This leads to the ultimate carry – each other! What a wonderful thing to do.

Helen Docherty has written this book in a wonderful lyrical rhyme, which is perfect for reading out loud, and it is spectacularly illustrated by Brizida Magro, using fun, bright colours, bursting straight out of the page, that children can identify with. It's a book that celebrates all the many precious things we carry, from toys and treasures all the way through to love and hope, and finally in caring for each other – this is certainly a book with an inspiring message for both children and adults alike.

Claire Webb

Bea's Bad Day

Tom Percival, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Bea is really looking forward to her birthday: she's marking the days on the calendar, and she just knows it's going to be the most wonderful day ever. She gets even more excited when it starts to snow, but the snow continues to fall, and her grandparents and other family members are unable to make the journey. The postman can't get through to deliver cards and presents, and Dad can't get the party food from the shops. Bea's happiness is SHATTERED, and Tom Percival shows this with cracks over the pictures as she gloomily accepts one present from Mum, and sadly takes a phone call from Bampi.

When she reluctantly goes sledging with brother Archie, a few of the cracks disappear, and when they get back home, the house is warm. Mum and Dad have made decorations and a cake, just as Bea had imagined. But Dad trips over the dog, and the lovely cake ends up upside-down on the table. Bea stares at the cake, then we turn over the page, and we see that she grins, and takes a spoonful of messy cake, because birthday cake is always delicious, even if it doesn't look quite as expected!

Tom Percival points out in the introduction that it's not always a good idea to get very excited. Sometimes real life does turn out to be wonderful, but if it doesn't, it can be very hard to cope with the disappointment. We must take pleasure in little things around us, and leave unhappiness behind, as Bea finally does, but always let people know how we're feeling. Bea's expressions are excellently pictured, especially the really cross face which also features on the cover, and it's good that her loving family shows positive ways to help her to feel better. This is part of the series *Big Bright Feelings*, and it's one of eight written and illustrated by Tom Percival, covering topics from worrying to making friends and telling fibs - which may well be useful for discussions on feelings.

Diana Barnes

Betty's Birthday

Celine Ka Wing Lau, pub. Cicada Books

There's something about an interactive picture book. They all have that very special timeless quality about them which means they also appeal to children of varying ages. With *Betty's Birthday* Celine Ka Wing Lau brings together many differing elements to engage the reader. It is these elements that give it its timeless quality and that will see you coming back to reread time and time again - it's been a favourite book in our house over the weeks since it arrived for review!

Betty is turning six! Through the pages of the book, we follow along with the celebrations that she has planned for this big day. Inside there are opportunities to find elements on the page, the reader is given the autonomy to make choices (the pizza toppings page is a firm favourite with my children), and practice counting too. With many of the prompts being open ended, *Betty's Birthday* lends itself to being a picture book that is reached for by little hands (and big ones) time and time again.

Betty's Birthday works beautifully as a social story around celebrating birthdays, taking us through many of the elements we may celebrate. Betty's own birthday story benefits from the added bonus that it allows the reader to interact with the experience, making it their own. My own daughter has recently turned six herself and really bonded with the book, anticipating her own transition. This would make a fantastic birthday gift or book to read together to discuss upcoming celebrations.

Hannah Bartleet

Billie's Buzz

Alison Brown, pub. Farshore

I love bees, I hope we all at least care about them and try to do what we can, with wildflowers and other natural habitats to help them survive. As with all animals they play a vital role in our ecosystems. They produce delicious honey too. Bees are incredibly industrious. If you look into a beehive you will see just how busy honeybees are. Remember however there are many varieties of bee and they are all important. They are all also perhaps one of the more misunderstood of the creatures of the natural world. After all, when they buzz... Yes...

We all know what happens when we hear a buzz and see it is coming from a bee ~ we panic. But Billie and her boy are here to tell us there is more to bees than their buzz and that it is incredibly important for us to not only realise but also recognise this. Alison Brown's *Billie's Buzz* introduces us to Billie, an incredibly talented bee. She is cute, intelligent and agile. Above all though she would like to be someone's pet so that she can enter the pet show. She knows it will require hard work and training but both she and the boy are willing and so they set about making their preparations. Once the big day comes they are both incredibly excited but the boy does make sure to remind Billie not to buzz. Billie gets through all the pet show tests, she is brilliant at everything ... but then comes the final task, the obstacle wall. This is when Billie has no choice but to buzz... She is, after all a bee. Which also means the show organisers disqualify her for not being a real pet.

The story does not end there however, for there are some people who were at the pet show who have other ideas. And just because Billie no longer needs to be a pet, after the show is over, that doesn't mean a thing, because there is still Billie, there is still the boy and... Well, I will leave you to discover the joyful ending that Alison Brown gives us. Her illustrations are magical, she brings additional vibrancy to the story with them, Billie becoming incredibly real and everything being charming to look at and discover the detail in. A delightful celebration of being a bee and of being yourself.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Boy On Fire

Sarthak Singa, pub. Flying Eye Books

Til is the boy on fire. As he gets angry, he gets hotter and hotter, burning everything that he touches. Being different and alone is tough, and the fire within him gets bigger and bigger, so that he can't sleep, and we even see his bed on fire.

So, he runs away, and shouts at the sky, so loudly that a star comes swooshing down. Til and the star recognise each other and have a lot of fun with their lights throughout the night. This helps Til learn

to shape his flames and to glow when he wants to, but also learn how to be quiet. The star advises Til to keep the fire up, keep it lit, as then he and the star can always be found, even in the dark. Then it heads back to the sky. That is when Til realises he isn't angry any more. At school the next day he realises that he no longer feels so different, and as he shares his light and his stories, he finds he has friends. Soon everyone wants to glow like Til.

Your reviewer was unsure what to make of this admittedly very beautiful book. Perhaps the boy needs to come to terms with his difference, and control his anger, but then he is not illustrated as a boy, unlike the other children: he is always a fiery blob with big round eyes, and stick-like legs, and we are shown the bookcase, as well as his bed, actually on fire. How does he play with a star? As the author is also the illustrator, this must be as he intends it to look. Looking for some guidance, this review, probably by the publisher, states: "*The Boy on Fire* will ignite young hearts and remind readers of all ages that our differences are what make us shine brightest. Embrace the warmth, embrace the light, and discover the joy of being uniquely you!" Make of it what you can!

Diana Barnes

The Boy, the Troll and the Chalk

Anne Booth, illus. David Litchfield, pub. Templar Books

This is a truly inspirational book about kindness and perseverance.

Why is there a 'troll' in a cave that never wants to come out and play with the other children? Why does he always want to be left alone? Why do the other children do just that – leave him alone? All that is, except one.

Before you even open the book, you are treated to a most beautiful front cover, depicting a very serene boy, drawing pictures on the ground, with chalk. Behind him, is a cave, which is surrounded by flickers of delicately gold flowers – like mystical enchantments. This is the first inkling that something magical could happen within the pages of this book. And it does!

The boy returns every day, to start a new picture outside the cave. Every day, it is completed by the 'troll.' The troll keeps himself hidden from sight and will only engage with the boy through art. Eventually, the boy draws a picture of himself, holding out a hand and the next day, that hand is being held by a scary troll. Is this how the hidden person sees themselves?

The boy has other ideas and starts to change the picture of the troll into a picture of a boy – just like him. With encouragement and patience, the troll emerges from the cage, as a boy. The things that made him feel like a troll have disappeared.

Sometimes, we have feelings that we can't comprehend or put into words, and we don't feel ourselves anymore. This book is about the power of art therapy and how it can be used to help people, especially children, who don't necessarily have the vocabulary to talk about their feelings, find a way to articulate their emotions. The topic is a complex one, but the narrative is simple and engaging. Its overarching message is one of love and kindness – amazing qualities to instil in every child. The illustrations compliment the storytelling so well, starting with some darkness that slowly dissipates and the pages become filled with happy, bright colours that children would often use themselves.

This book is an absolute delight and I can't wait to read it to my children!

Claire Webb

The Boy Who Painted the World

Tom McLaughlin, pub. Oxford Children's Books

The Boy Who Painted the World is a sweet story about turning mistakes into creative triumphs.

When a boy wanders into a blank book, he thinks it looks empty until he stumbles into a talking paintbrush and trips over some pots of paint that are making a huge mess. The boy apologises but the paintbrush shows him how to transform a messy green splodge into a dinosaur with just a few little brush strokes. The nervous boy claims he can't paint, but the friendly paintbrush encourages him to try some simple shapes and soon the boy is letting his own imagination run free, turning squares into robots, steam trains and even dumper trucks. "You've turned nothing into something. You've made art!" exclaims the paintbrush.

Growing in confidence with every stroke of the brush, the boy turns circles into birds, triangles become boats and eggs have legs. After that there's no stopping the boy on his creative journey where colours fly everywhere and nobody minds the mess.

This is a wonderfully positive tale about the artist inside us all, the joy and freedom of the artistic process rather than the end product. The book closes with some simple paintings to try and remember, "there's no such thing as a mistake, just a world of possibilities."

Janet Ling

Changing Tides

Júlia Moscardó, pub. Little Tiger

Changing Tides by Júlia Moscardó is a beautiful, gentle tale of Lula's first steps with her new blended family – her dad is now with Theo's mum, Simone, and they are going on their first holiday together. Will Lula and Theo get along, how will this new family blend?

Lula isn't sure what to expect and she is very grumpy about the idea of sharing her bucket and spade – Dad's singing does cheer her up though. At the beach, it is the same bucket and spade along with the suggestion of making a sandcastle that begin to bring Lula and Theo together. But as the sea laps at the foundations of their new creation – covered in shells that Theo has found, patiently built by the two of them – how will they cope with the threat of the changing tide? A fantastic and subtle metaphor.

Júlia Moscardó's words and pictures work in symbiosis to show us the journey from Lula and Theo's apprehension to the success of their sandcastle on the beach. The evocative illustrations and gentle text create a space of love and caring for Lula's story to unfold upon. Perhaps representative of the care both parents have gone to, to bring their families together. The beauty of the shared sandcastle, and thoughtful development of Lula and Theo's relationship as new siblings will tug at your heart. It is a powerful, yet gentle pull. This book will immerse your little reader in the world of the seaside, the race against the tide and the ups and downs of creating new friendships and families.

Ideal for 3+, reading at bedtime or anytime. A thoughtful story, and a book that promotes understanding of the challenges and joys of forming a new family and gaining a sibling. A beautiful picture book that will fill your heart to the brim.

Anja Stobbart

The Elephant and the Sea

Ed Vere, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

The Elephant and the Sea is a wonderfully warm and hopeful story about following your dreams, even though the goal posts keep changing. Written and illustrated by Ed Vere, it is the story of Gabriel, who as a young elephant wanted to be a member of the lifeboat crew. However, first he was too small for the boat and then, as he grew, he was too large for the boat; so, he built a vessel that was strong enough for him to sail in. When a giant storm threatens the fishing fleet and the rescue lifeboat, the heroic Gabriel has to be the one to come to the rescue.

As an island nation we are very aware of the dangers around our coasts, yet the sea has held a fascination for many and over the centuries many brave sailors have manned lifeboats to help those in distress.

This story is all about friendship and teamwork, reminding us that everyone can feel involved in what is going on, regardless of their background or abilities. It is basically a call to understand the importance of diversity and how differences can add so many dimensions to the way that people work together. Once again Ed Vere has given us some amazing illustrations and has created a wonderful central character in Gabriel. The energy and power in some of the image's contrasts perfectly with the quiet and reflective pictures that show the calmer elements. This is a picture book that is thoughtful and one that gives the children a chance to use their imaginations. Fantastic for nursery and KS1.

Margaret Pemberton

Gorgeously Me!

Jonathan Van Ness, illus. Kamala Nair, pub. Walker Books

Gorgeously Me! by Jonathan Van Ness is a delightful read. It has selflove oozing its way through every page and even oozing out of its covers! It is a completely charming poetry book for the youngest children. The magic of a New York Times bestselling author, social activist, queer voice amplifier and an illustrator, who is also an architect, coming together for this book, shines throughout the pages.

The reader begins traversing the pages and the poems with a group of gorgeous kids who are each aware of their own individuality! A little girl looks in the standing mirror and affirms –
“I am exactly who I’m meant to be.
Perfectly, happily, gorgeously me.”

Another child with her dazzling blue afro asserts to her readers-
“I won’t be afraid to stand out,
I’ll show the world what I am all about.”

The vibrantly illustrated pages take readers on a life affirming journey of friendship, honesty, compassion, self-love and a reminder that we need to be harnessing the joy within ourselves. The book feels like the happy feast enjoyed at a celebration with magical confetti flying everywhere signifying the celebration of ‘you.’ It’s inclusive and beautifully teaches the philosophy of loving and sharing joy from a space of wholesomeness. It’s truly a contemporary children’s book which can be gifted or purchased to inculcate the liberating of emotional intelligence in its readers.

Ishika Tiwari

Grey

Laura Dockrill, illus. Lauren Child, pub. Walker Books

Described in the blurb as a picturebook poem, this is truly a beautiful, engaging, poignant book with an important message and mindful nature. Using the psychological connection between colours and emotions it explores how a child expresses their feelings by describing themselves as being “grey” today. They aren’t “treetop green” or “big hug red” but like “the storm in the clouds,” “the puddle in the road,” they are pavement grey.

Being grey means feeling lonely, not like yourself, but the appearance of a mother-figure brings reasoning and reassurance. The child learns that the colours are inside waiting to be seen. “Sunshine yellow” sits in the pool made by the storm, pavements can be drawn on in any colour. All the colours are their feelings, it’s okay to feel the way they do, it’s not permanent, and most importantly, she will always love them however they are feeling even when its grey. The soulful tender text is enriched by Child’s distinctive illustrative style and an appealing tactile cutout feature. The child is depicted entirely in grey tones until the end of the book, when colours begin to permeate as they feel more settled and reassured by the adult. This is a heartwarming visual representation of the overall subject matter – colour is a powerful communication tool.

There are so many scenarios where this book could be used, it’s not so much a standard story to read with somebody but more a concept book to use as a talking point when dealing with big emotions and situations including grief, homesickness, depression, loneliness, illness. The use of imagery to associate a colour to a feeling, for example, “lullaby blue” could be an activity for an adult to do with a child when reading the book, allowing them to come up with their own imaginative comparisons.

Sitting comfortably alongside titles like *The Colour Monster* and the contrasting but complementary *This is Happy, Grey* is an important, compassionate book about emotional wellbeing. They state the importance of accepting feelings without being ashamed or disguising them. They recognise that these emotions will change over time, and that feeling grey or sad is just as legitimate as being happy. Significantly they do not try to cheer the unhappy child up but reassure them it is and will be okay. A sensitive, subtle, rich book full of warmth, kindness, and of course colour.

Natalie McChrystal Plimmer

The Legend of the Wild West Twins

Jodie Lancet-Grant, illus. Katie Cottle, pub. Oxford

The Legend of the Wild West Twins is the brilliantly imagined Wild West, now populated by children but no less complicated!

Buffalo Lil and Buffalo Jill are twin sisters who couldn’t be more different. But Jill is totally behind her twin sis, Lil entering the Rip-Roarin’ Rumble; the wildest cowboy contest in the west, even if other cowboys try and talk her out if it! But first Jill must beat the legend and reigning Rumble champion,

Yee-Haw Jack – he has been the champion for ages! Can Buffalo Lil make sure her sister is treated fairly in the rumble? Does Yee-Haw Jack live up to his heroic image? How DO you spot a hero? Actions often speak louder than words...

This is a delight of a picture book, Jodie Lancet-Grant whips us up and carries us along with plot twists and humour, celebrating differences and the power of honestly and being true to yourself. Katie Cottle's illustrations have a life of their own and I challenge you not to smile as you read through this high-speed tale. There is also girl power, which is always good to see. Girls working together and supporting each other still needs celebrating.

Ideal for 3+, great reading at bedtime or anytime. A brilliant story, and a book that promotes understanding of being true to yourself, supporting each other, and that heroes come in all shapes and sizes.

Anja Stobbart

Little Lion Girl

Olivia Hope, illus. Fiona Woodcock, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Leonie is excited: she is going on an adventure to the big city! This is *Little Lion Girl* and it is Leonie's story.

Leonie loves to roam and roar while discovering new places. She soon learns, however, that being alone in the big city is scary after losing sight of where her mother is. Not all lions are fearless all the time and Leonie soon finds that out as her roar quietens – the jungle has started to feel very big for one little lion girl. Once reunited with her pride again, her strength comes back and she realises that sometimes others can bring the strength that you seek in moments which are more difficult. *Little Lion Girl* is a wonderful picturebook, capturing the emotions associated with exploring new places perfectly. The excitement, the noise, the diversity but also the unknown are all explored within the pages of this book which would be suitable for young ones who love discovery!

The different fonts and text styles used for particular words on each page direct the reader as to how the book should be read; a useful tool for any parents modelling how to read with intonation. Fiona Woodcock's illustrations are super. Each page is filled with vibrant illustrations that bring the story to life and capture Leonie's feelings perfectly – she uses colour cleverly, especially when Leonie gets lost and becomes scared. She represents other characters as animals by their clothing choices and hair which is a thoughtful touch as well as engaging for the reader – trying to spot what animals each person may be is fun!

This is a lovely story about strength, courage and overcoming fear.

Tom Joy

Mushrooms Know: Wisdom From Our Friends the Fungi

Kallie George, illus. Sara Gillingham, pub. Greystone Kids

What do you know about mushrooms? Can you name some different varieties, maybe you know what they look like, perhaps you have even eaten some. And before we continue, I will just stop there and say: please be very careful when you see mushrooms in the wild. Only ever touch them or pick them if you are with someone who officially knows which ones are safe. Now, in the meantime we can use the safety of a charmingly educational story to learn more about mushrooms but, perhaps even more importantly, we can use it to find out just what it is that mushrooms know.

If we take a moment to think about it, it becomes very clear that mushrooms must be very wise indeed, they must know a lot. How do we know that? Well, have you noticed that mushrooms like to wear caps, their thinking caps, in fact they seem to be always wearing them. There are so many things they know, that they want to share with us, so where shall we start? I find the beginning the best place and this is where we learn what the different mushrooms, well some of them and in this case the four that Sara Gillingham has so wonderfully illustrated to somehow look comic-esque and real all at the same time! Mushrooms grow out of the ground which means they know a lot about what is beneath the surface. They know how to both stand firm and spread out, be free. They know that their uniqueness is a reason for celebration and once more we see them in all their glory! On we go, discovering all the things that mushroom knows, stopping to read more detail, to look at them in more detail. Kallie George has, after all, packed this book full of fascinating facts.

What I hope many readers will come away with is a newfound respect for the humble mushroom but also that there is a whole science of mushrooms. They will also discover how we can learn from mushrooms. Learn how to help one another, to take care of the spaces around us, above us, below us. And perhaps most importantly we can all learn to celebrate our uniqueness. The perfect guide for budding mycologists and anyone who feels a little small in the big world, who needs a little comfort and, above all, reassurance.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

No.5 Bubblegum Street

Mikolaj Pa, illus. Gosia Herba, pub. Greystone Kids

This is a crazy party of a picture book with brightly coloured, childlike illustrations that reward attention and draw you into the lives of the residents of No.5 Bubblegum Street.

We are introduced to these residents one by one. First there is Mouse, the famous rapper who can't find his hat. Young children will love poring over the various places in Mouse's apartment where the hat might be concealed. Next there are the monkeys in Apartment 2 who are baking a Speckled Orange Orangutan Cake with the recipe thrown in so you can recreate this delicacy at home. Mysterious Owl should be in Apartment 3, but where is she? Look out for her later in the book. The tour continues with Cat recording bird sounds, Panther and his plants and the Spider family with their famous Spider Orchestra.

The delightful pencil drawings capture the energy and activity of the various residents, and the many amusing details will be sure to keep little ones entertained. Hippo is dreaming of a great adventure; a bunch of singing frogs compose a new song and invite the reader to join in; Dog is sculpting a masterpiece and Bat shares dance moves in 21 easy steps.

Finally, the residents converge for their weekly party to show off their talents and the grand finale is an explosion of colour and fun. A joyful book that will appeal to children with a quirky sense of humour.

Janet Ling

Not-A-Box City

Antoinette Portis, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

What a truly delightful early picture book is for the very young child: *Not-A-Box City*. The main character is a 'rabbit,' who has decided that he is going to build himself a city out of cardboard boxes and other scrap materials. This is something that almost every child has tried at some time and the story will resonate with so many of them and the adults sharing the book. However, others want to come and help in the building, which leads to 'rabbit' getting more and more frustrated, as it is HIS city. Eventually he sees that each of the other creatures is bringing a new skill to the project and he begins to understand the value and importance of working together.

It is amazing how much can be gained by reading such a very (and deceptively) simple looking book. Each page only has a single short sentence at the most, but every word counts. The creatures are just black ink outlines, but again, character is achieved by the positioning of ears, arms and eyes. In fact, the only colour and texture at the beginning of the book comes from the cardboard boxes. Towards the end of the story 'rabbit' allows the chameleon to help paint the city. The simplicity of the illustrations means that this book would make a great starting point for young children to try out ways to create their own models and pictures. This is a definite winner for the nursery age child, learning to work together with others of their age and for older children, to encourage their storytelling skills.

Margaret Pemberton

Our Wild Garden

Daniel Seton, illus. Pieter Fannes, pub. Pushkin Press

When Ali and Poppy hear about wild gardening at school, they immediately start dreaming about all the adventures they could have. With their parents' help, they transform their own ordinary and plain garden into a beautiful, less tidy space that can house a wide variety of animals and plants. They create a pond, a meadow, and cultivate a hedge so that it is perfect for hiding little creatures. It doesn't take long for their garden to soon fill with gorgeous wildflowers, bringing pretty butterflies, hedgehogs, migrating birds, and much more. Each new year and new season bring Ali and Poppy new adventures, and eventually they begin to look forward to them in a whole new way.

Inspired by their children, the parents in the story are willing to change their ways, leading to the transformation of a space that is rich in experiences and enjoyment for the whole family. This allows them to reconnect with, and enjoy, all the amazing natural world has to offer. The stunning illustrations show how the family reconnects with their outside space and enjoy it as it continues to transform throughout each season. Their new garden brings them great joy as they share these experiences together.

Our Wild Garden could also be used in schools and community groups to inspire rewilding projects on site or in the wider community. The notes at the end of the book remind us that the space does not have to be a large one to achieve a place wildlife will want to visit.

A wonderful storybook for young children.

Katy Ralph

Pearl and Her Bunch

Momoko Abe, pub. Orchard Books

What can you do when you suddenly face the realization that you are different from the rest of your family?

That is the dilemma facing Pearl, when she finds that she does not look like anyone else in her family of green grapes. Her parents admit that she is actually a young pea, that they found her alone and adopted her, but that regardless they consider her part of the family. However, Pearl is unhappy to learn she is different and she runs away. Luckily she meets her friend Carlos (a carrot), who helps her

to see that there are all kinds of families, all around us, and that families don't have to all look the same to be part of the same bunch.

In a world where there are now many variations of what we mean by 'family', it is great to see such a humorous and yet meaningful little book that highlights the importance of acceptance. We all know families where someone looks different because of hereditary issues, disability, and adoption; but we also know that the conventional family does not always exist, that a new normal is in place. This story, with its use of fruit and vegetables as the characters, is able to highlight where we share similarities, whilst at the same time show us how we can maintain our individuality; after all grapes and peas are both green and round, but they differ in size, taste, texture. *Pearl and Her Bunch* can be read as both a delightful tale of family and friends, but it can also act as a starting point for discussion about the meaning of family.

Margaret Pemberton

Sparks of Imagination

Stephen Hogtun, pub. DK

Every child is born with something wondrous... It's called your Spark of Imagination.

Sparks of Imagination is a lovely, luminous picture book and the latest creation of author and illustrator Stephen Hogtun. It is a stunning introduction to the power and wonder of the imagination and the confidence it can build if you look after it. Throughout the book each child's Spark takes on a different form, from a bear in a tiara to a fluorescent jellyfish which lights up the dark! The Spark travels with the child giving them the confidence to journey into imaginary worlds where they can paint rainbows, shape clouds and SOAR.

Packed with inspiring messages about the power of individuality this important book also tackles the dangers of neglecting your imagination by letting dream stealers, time takers and inside makers take you away from what is important. *Sparks of Imagination* teaches children to become storytellers, to make emotional connections with others and improve their self-esteem, all using imaginative skills, creativity, and play.

The book was inspired by the author's three young children. Their ideas, drawings, paintings and handprints feature throughout, infused with his own distinctive style of artwork. The colours glow from the page like the aurora borealis from the author's native Norway.

A celebration of imagination for all. What will your Spark look like?

Janet Ling

Tell Me a Mitzi

Lore Segal, illus. Harriet Pincus, pub. NYRB Kids

This is a re-print of the original book of the same title initially published in 1970. New York Review, Children's Books aims to bring classic texts back into circulation for a modern audience and with books such as this one they are also bringing back the lost and forgotten texts of fifty or more years ago.

The images and artwork of Harriet Pincus are suitably retro in feel and have an almost Sendak feel to them. *Tell Me a Mitzi* introduces us to Martha who lives in New York with her family. Within the book are three delightful stories, in which Martha asks for stories, hence the title, *Tell Me a Mitzi*. Here we have layers of story and storytelling, an absolute delight.

Each of the three stories gives the reader a wry insight, a look at the life of a child and toddler in the 1970s. Martha tries to take a trip to see her grandparents with her baby brother while their parents are asleep, only to discover she doesn't know their address. All the preparation that went into getting out of the house must be reversed, just in time for mother to awaken. Something that would probably not happen today! And when the entire family get a cold, they learn to take care of each other. Utterly charming.

Delightful and humorous, this set of stories will enchant new readers and cause older ones to reminisce about their own experiences of growing up and the stories they shared.

Erin Hamilton

This Is Happy!

Anna Ross, illus. Debi Gliori, pub. Otter Barry Books

One of the elements of mindfulness is noticing the simple things in life and acknowledging their impact on the senses, understanding and appreciating them – in essence – celebrating the little things and finding comfort in them. Ross and Gliori do this with aplomb in *This Is Happy!* encouraging us to look closely at the world around us, to “slow down, pause and find our happy.” Following five diverse families, all with pre-school age children, we are taken through a melodic and gentle series of activities such as painting rainbow skies; smelling the earth after rain; dressing up; creating new worlds, jumping in puddles without worrying about getting muddy and so on. They encourage readers to be in the moment, employing senses and imagination, finding peace in the world and with loved ones.

The finale urges readers to consider where they can find their own happy, encouraging them to try the suggested activities but also think about how to implement the techniques in their own life. This could be a fun, engaging experience for the young reader and their wider family group to attempt, possibly when in need of something different to do over the summer holidays. There is something in taking time out to notice the little things, the supposedly insignificant details in the world, which shows that you don't need expensive toys and so on, it makes you appreciative for what you have and is both soothing and thought-provoking.

The illustrations are gorgeous, full of detail, humour, and vibrancy. The jumping in puddles scene, in particular, is rich in earthy tones and charming touches like the mittens attached to the coat sleeves and the girl's hat dripping in mud. The text is lyrical, simple and tender, instructive but friendly – “lie down in the grass and stay as still as you can. Notice all the different things you see and hear.” The productive and interactive activities; the slowing down and focusing on how things feel, smell, appear; the emphasis on wellbeing and family; the lullaby meditative feel of the book; the diverse characters all make this a joyous book to celebrate. *This Is Happy!* Is important and useful for the young child and all the family.

Natalie McChrystal Plimmer

Time Runs Like a River

Emma Carlisle, pub. Big Picture Press

With her latest beautifully illustrated picture book, *Time Runs Like a River*, the award-winning artist Emma Carlisle takes the reader on a journey of appreciation for the movement of time. Time runs like a river, never resting, moving steadily on. But if we notice how different each minute can be, we can appreciate them before they are gone.

Not only is this a wonderfully informative book, but it is also a fantastic tool for introducing other educational topics such as the animals that live in and around rivers, the river ecosystem, and how there are new obstacles and changes that must be overcome, in nature and beyond, as time goes by. It is a great story to encourage, not only little ones, but all of us, to slow down and appreciate the changing world around us. Aside from themes related to mindfulness and nature, the book also contains a really useful non-fiction section at the back that could be used as a teaching tool with children. It would be a great resource for schools.

I see this book as primarily a book about change, and it is truly a delight to read. Readers will fall in love with the outstanding watercolour illustrations and rhyming text. You really cannot help but enjoy reading this book with children, or even alone.

Katy Ralph

Wherever You Go

Alexandra Penfold, illus. Suzanne Kaufman, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

As if written from a parent to a child, this picture book shows various families, with combinations of parents, carers, children, ethnicities and faiths, watching their children grow, enjoying the things they do together, and wondering what they will be. The children are preschooler's ready to graduate and take the next step, to move to 'big school.'

Some of the children have religious head coverings, one is in a wheelchair, some have gappy teeth, others wear glasses, and there are all kinds of hairstyles and idiosyncratic clothing choices: all are shown, in vibrant colour, having lots of fun in very many ways. With her illustrations Suzanne Kaufman is showing us that we can all be who we are, we can all accept others for who they are and that we are all unique.

We also see how the parent is proud of the child when they do their best, as much as when they know it's time to rest. Alexandra Penfold's rhyming text brings an easy flow to the words and when reading the book aloud the positive message of love is very comforting. This partnership has already published the similarly positive picture books: *All Are Welcome* (about starting school), *Big Feelings*, and *We Are All Neighbours*, and this vibrantly colourful book should be equally useful for young children, it continues the theme of acceptance, of growing up and shows children they can be ready to take on the world.

Diana Barnes

Whisper to the Rescue

Rose Robbins, pub. Scallywag Press

Did you know that it is possible for a dragon to be both small and quiet? It is also possible for them to be the smallest and the quietest. Small I can understand, after all they must hatch from an egg and then grow into a full-sized dragon so that means they must begin life as small dragons. But quiet? Only when they are asleep on their piles of treasure, dreaming sweet dreams are they quiet surely? Rose Robbins is here to tell us otherwise.

Whisper to the Rescue is the story of the aptly named Whisper. Whisper is the smallest and the quietest dragon on the mountainside. Because he is small and quiet Whisper notices everything but it means that his family don't notice him. How is one small, quiet dragon going to get the attention of his whole family when they don't notice him but he needs them to listen. After all they have put their mountain in danger and Whisper knows how to help them. You will easily spot Whisper once you

open the book. He is the little blue dragon where all his family are red. He is also small. And with Rose Robbins' individualistic art style the illustrations truly bring him, his family, to life. Whisper, his family, and all the dragons are happy on their mountain. They can eat berries and acorns and Whisper always makes sure they don't take more than they need. They also like to have fires. The bigger the better.

But these fires are hurting the mountain, they are making the birds cough and something needs to be done or the other animals will have to find new homes. Whisper tries, he really does, to get the attention of his family. But they smile, pat his head and don't listen. Whisper needs the help of his friends, Bear and Owl. The three create a plan which they put into action whilst Whisper's family are sleeping. When they wake up and see what the three friends have done, what Whisper has been trying to tell them they realise the importance of listening, of doing the right thing and of solving problems together. The mountain animals can once again live in harmony thanks to a small, quiet, caring dragon.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Worry Boots

Lisa Thompson, illus. Aysha Awwad, pub. Scholastic

When one of my nephews started preschool he found, for a while, that his feet mysteriously got stuck to the doormat just outside the entrance and whatever he did they remained stuck like glue to the floor. As such, Thompson and Awwad's humorous and gentle picturebook about a little girl who discovers that there is something both surprising and uncomfortable inside her new boots stopping her walking to school on her first day, struck a chord.

Worry Boots introduces us to Connie whose uncertainty about school manifests itself through the fact that there is something in her boot. Inspired by things she sees on her journey this unpleasant object could be, thinks Connie, a dinosaur's bumpy bottom; a unicorn's spiky horn; a shark's pointy tooth. She imagines the creature admonishing her for standing on it, and strangely her tummy begins to feel uneasy in just the same way the object does. She also tells her mum that the other children will stare or laugh at her or be scared of her. Each time her mother reassures her that this won't be the case the painful object vanishes until, a little later on the journey, it transforms into the new animal.

By showcasing a child's imagination in a gentle way and with appealing colourful illustrations full of interesting touches and details, such as the appearance of familiar creatures in the classroom, or the gathering at the bus stop, *Worry Boots* reminded me of Rebecca Cobb's picturebook *Lunchtime*. There is a serious message in the book, which Connie's mum tells her when she gets the offending pebble out of her boot: "sometimes when we worry about something it can feel scarier than it actually

is.” As such this book can be used to reassure those anxious about starting school but also any other concerns the young reader may have.

Worry Boots is a sweet, charming, amusing book celebrating imagination but also providing reassurance and encouragement regarding dealing with worries and anxiety.

Natalie McChrystal Plimmer

Junior Books

The Beanstalk Murder

P.G. Bell, pub. Usborne

Once upon a time there was a young boy named Jack. He climbed a beanstalk; he met a giant and all sorts of fairytale-esque things happened. I am of course paraphrasing here because I am sure you, our readers, are quite familiar with the tale of Jack and the Beanstalk. What you might not know however is that giants really did once roam the world quite freely and that, as a result there were plenty of beanstalks around. Where did they all go? Well, around a century ago there was The Great Beanstalk War. It all began because of gold. Giants have a lot of it but they have no magic, unlike the humans. The war ended in a stalemate. The humans still live on earth and the giants live in the Sky Kingdom. It isn't in the sky, it's just the Thin Places, the doorways into their world are up there so it looks that way.

There are in fact lots of doorways to lots of worlds, there are layers upon layers. As you will soon discover *The Beanstalk Murder* is not just a detective who-dunnit story but a magical mystery too. The reason we have no more beanstalks ... The stalemate, both sides wanted to live in peace in their own lands, away from one another. But for absolute emergencies there are still a couple of very old beans around. This is an emergency: Anwen and her grandmother have just found a dead giant. Literally. He fell from one of the thin places you see. Only it wasn't the fall that killed him. It looks as though somebody did that and then pushed him. This now means that Anwen and her arch-enemy, trainee sorceress Cerys are about to find themselves in the Sky Kingdom, with one ally and the news of the murder ... a murder that it soon transpires was far more significant than they could have ever imagined.

With a wonderfully huge scoop of tongue-in-cheek, humour, remixed fairytale, magic and of course crime this story is deliciously funny, anarchic and one of the very best whodunnits you could choose to read this year! P.G. Bell really does have a way with words, making them into outstanding stories so make sure to take some time out to improve your detective skills with this cleverly woven story.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Boy to Beat the Gods

Ashley Thorpe, pub. Usborne

The Seven Orisha gods terrorise the many villages of the land striking fear into their people. When they decide to descend on a village wielding their darkly destructive powers, only the offering of the

fruit of baobab tree and the sacrifice of some of their own community can save the entire village from annihilation.

Young Kayode was only five years old when his own father had offered himself as an Orisha sacrifice to save their village. Now the Elders fear the gods are close once again. But young Kayode is tired of living in fear and is consumed with the idea of eating one of the gods' forbidden baobab fruits to obtain the power of the gods themselves, wanting to turn the power against them and destroy them all. So, when his sister Temitope is taken Kayode will stop nothing to save her – even if it means joining a shape-shifting trickster god and a bitter princess. But each of the gods is more powerful than the last and even with the help of the power from the fruit of the baobab, this quest is not going to be easy!

The Boy to Beat the Gods is a brilliantly, evocatively written tale of one boy's determined, dangerous and death-defying quest to save both his own sister, his village and all those who suffer at the hand of the Orisha. Rooted in African storytelling, it is a thrilling, and entertaining tale which explores the themes of loyalty, trust, and friendship. Once begun it is impossible to put down as action and drama spews from its pages. To say I was on the edge of my seat would be an understatement. Each of the seven gods brings a new challenge for Kayode and this exciting story, full to bursting with epic battle scenes, beautifully balanced with humour and sprinkled with quieter reflection, will keep readers gripped to the very last page!

A wonderful story of self-belief for readers of 9+, this would also make a wonderful read-aloud book for school, home and libraries!

Tracey Corner

Chasing the Shy Town

Erica McGann, illus. Toni Galmés, pub. Little Island

Senan's new neighbour, Joshua Robyn, is very adventurous. Together they start digging to wherever the spinning world takes them; they begin building a boat to sail a stream to the ocean; search for secret passages under Senan's house but find none. All these adventures never take them any further than the end of the road, much to Senan's relief: he is not very adventurous.

So, imagine Senan's worry when Gran let's slip about the Shy Town. He had only seen Shy Town two and a half times from his bedroom window, through his binoculars. It was on a hill with winding streets, houses with red and yellow roofs, a park and blue lake. The town however rarely appeared, and when it did, soon disappeared as if it didn't want to be seen. Gran and Joshua conspire and, the following weekend when Joshua is supposedly sleeping over, they plan to embark on their greatest adventure yet. To find the Shy Town.

Joshua and Gran prove to be feisty adventurers, joined by the Paper Boy, another great adventurer, whilst Senan continues to long for home. Then they find Pearl, a kruckle, an anxious and lost inhabitant of Shy Town, and slowly the mystery unravels. However the need to find Shy Town becomes more pressing, before it can escape across the sea.

Chasing the Shy Town is an imaginative story, encouraging readers to develop a more adventurous spirit about life as Senan overcomes his reluctance, gains in confidence and begins to enjoy himself. There is a great dynamic between Gran, Joshua, Paperboy and Senan on their journey, and of course they befriend Pearl.

As with all good stories, there is a strong moral message once they discover the truth about the Shy Town - enjoy the messiness of life and don't worry about perfection. This means everyone can indulge in their own joie de vivre without pressure from anyone else. For Senan that is definitely staying at home and eating his gran's delicious iced buns!

Simon Barrett

The Cheat Book: Vol 1

Ramzee, pub. Hodder Children's Books

Zero. The first and only zero, Wing, Kamal's friend has ever seen on Popstock, the new social media app, calculating a person's popularity based on an algorithm of everyone else's score. Kamal's score on Popstock is zero. His social status is rock bottom.

Moreover, Kamal's secret is also out. He is a refugee. Shackleton Academy is his third school, which he has attended for nearly a year, making great friends with Wing and Jojo, but afraid that even this is not permanent. Kamal expects to be bullied.

When a book unexpectedly appears in his hand - the Cheat book – Kamal is desperate to do everything and anything to be popular at school, achieving a Popstock score that is off the charts. The book promises to have the solutions to all of Kamal's problems.

Kamal's slippery slope begins by avoiding getting into further trouble with the Head Teacher and consequently his parents. A style fix leads to an unexpected run in with the school bully, Neville 'the Ogre' Sykes, and Kamal's desperate measures to avoid a fight. But Kamal wants more, successfully using the Cheat Book to become a school sports superstar, change friendship groups, receive party invites, enter the school talent show and finally, campaign to be the new school captain. Kamal seems unstoppable. Kamal's ratings skyrocket, but his morals plummet. As a Muslim, Kamal believes two angels are writing down all of his actions, the angel Raqib, writing down all his good deeds, and the

angel Atid, writing down all his bad ones. The dialogue between these two angels watching from the side-lines of Kamal's life is hilarious, offering a voice of conscience in the story. Even Atid despairs!

The Cheat Book is very funny. As a reader you generally feel Kamal is a good character, anxious about who he is and not wanting to disappoint his parents, doing his best to navigate the perils of secondary school in the UK. Much of what author and illustrator Ramzee writes about resonates with some reality of school, especially the pressure of social media and different ways young people try to increase their popularity.

Despite everything Kamal manages to keep the Cheat Book. Ready for Volume 2?

Simon Barrett

Ettie and the Midnight Pool

Julia Green, illus. Pam Smy, pub. David Fickling Books

Ettie and her grandma have lived together since her mother left to go travelling as a doctor. With the world affected by a war and sickness it's now just the two of them in isolation. Ettie's days are blissfully full however, with jam making, stories, sketching and playing in the wild woods that surround High Fell House where they live. Although Ettie is happy, she dearly misses her mother who has, due to the grounding of planes and the war, been unable to return or even write.

When Ettie spies the mysterious Cora who appears to be walking with a fox, Ettie finds herself drawn to her and follows her to the disused quarry where a pool, deep and inviting now lies. Grandma warns Ettie not to go there, it's dangerous, but Ettie is intrigued by both the pool and the girl, and her friendship with Cora slowly develops. Tension builds as Ettie, on the cusp of adolescence, pulls ever further away from her grandma. She is desperate to explore, to take risks like her mother and discover if there is more to her life than what she has been told. Ettie is certain a secret is being kept from her and believes Cora may have the answer. But not everything is as it may seem and as the summer comes and the story reaches a dramatic climax, both Ettie and Grandma face their truths.

I can honestly say I had no idea of what to expect from this story, but what a joy it was to read. A haunting and beautiful tale of freedoms, of growing up, and of how we as adults want to protect our children, and of how the secrets of the past are never really hidden. Wrapped in Julia Green's exquisitely detailed description of the British countryside Ettie's story is beautifully edged with Pam Smy's wonderful illustrations which so cleverly reflect both the beauty and the darkness that lies at this story's heart.

Ettie and the Midnight Pool is a poignant story that had me gripped, and torn between two totally identifiable characters, I can whole heartedly recommend this story which is in my eyes a classic! I will be reading this again...and again!

Tracey Corner

Freya's Gold

Fiona Longmuir, illus. Carmi Grau, pub. Nosy Crow

When I read Fiona Longmuir's first book *Looking For Emily* it left me feeling that this author was going to be an exciting author to look out for in the future, and when I found out about this book I was eager to read it.

Legend says the cliffs by the seaside town of Edge are riddled with smugglers' tunnels, and that gold is stashed in their caves. Freya and her best friend Lin love searching for treasure on the beach, but they steer clear of the dark and twisting tunnels. It would be easy to get lost in there, and Freya's sure she can hear voices echoing from them when the wind blows. Then a mysterious woman moves into Freya's granny's B&B and soon everything that Freya loves about Edge is under threat. It's time for Freya to face her fears. Can she strike gold before time runs out for her town?

This is a charming adventure story with plenty of twists and turns to keep readers occupied. The clever mystery that lies at the heart of it all is eventually revealed, but not before Freya and Lin have a far more eventful time than they ever anticipated! Freya is a geeky, scaredy-cat twelve year-old, she is loyal to her gran and her town, and she must summon her inner lion and become brave. She is a wonderful role model.

What a wonderful read! *Freya's Gold* is a fast-paced tale, packed with mystery and suspense, not to mention pirate caves and hidden treasure, perfect for 8-12 year-olds. Warm, funny and frightening by turns, the tightly twisted plot keeps the pages turning and the vividly drawn setting bites as deep as the salt wind off the sea. And I was right, Fiona Longmuir is an exciting author and I look forward to seeing what she writes next.

Helen Byles

The Girl Who Couldn't Lie

Radhika Sanghani, pub. Usborne

Twelve-year-old Priya Shah hates to let anyone down, so she tells lies. Just small ones, little white ones to make everything seem perfect, after all she would hate anyone to be disappointed! But Priya's

life is not perfect. In fact, it's not even close especially, as she is grieving the loss of her Ba – the only person she was always honest with. Priya is struggling with so many things, the pressure of expectation in gymnastics, and the worry of how her parents can afford her training. Her parents are arguing and now her gymnastics training and her worries are exhausting her, causing her to fall asleep in school.

After a particularly difficult day, Priya is looking at the gold bangle her Ba has left her. It has a broken clasp meaning it is unwearable, but when the clasp suddenly opens Priya slips it on she wonders if things are about to start to get better. The next day Priya finds she is unable to lie. She finds herself telling the truth no matter how hard she tries not to and Priya wonders if, in some way, it has anything to do with the bangle, but...she can't take it off!

Not being able to lie can cause a whole lot of problems and, even with the support of her two best friends Mei and Sami, Priya finds her life becoming ever more complicated. Can Priya find a way to be honest without hurting those she loves?

The Girl Who Couldn't Lie is a wonderfully enchanting story. It is a contemporary tale with a magical twist, which is full of humour, love, family, and friendships. A thought provoking read which highlights the complexities of feelings and relationships in a fun way. Priya is a completely relatable character, who has been bottling up her feelings for far too long and whilst Ba's gift may not feel like a blessing it helps Priya discover the courage she needs to own her emotions and speak up about how she feels – a valuable lesson for us all!

A beautiful read for all children aged 9+!

Tracey Corner

Hero Wanted!

Mark Powers, illus. Coralie Muce, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

One fateful day, a huge meteorite hit the Earth, separating the county of Brokenshire from the Mainland, sending it into its own pocket of space, unseen, largely forgotten and now rarely visited except by humans chancing upon time space rips. Whilst the Mainland changed, Brokenshire remained a land of magic and talking animals, many now extinct elsewhere on Earth.

The county of Brokenshire is at war: the People of the Day fighting desperately against the People of the Night. And Grace Parker of 18 Marigold Avenue, Flakebury, is the fifteenth and final Saving Grace who will lead the Army of the People of the Day and end the Worthy War. All twelve-year-old Grace needs to do is follow the lead of her brave (and talking) war horse Wellingtonia into the County of Brokenshire, successfully cross hostile country avoiding the Elite Assassin Force and take on the

Fearsome Foe, finally defeating the arch enemy of the Morning, Scarlett Moss. Unfortunately, Grace hadn't needed to learn sword fighting growing up in Flakebury, but she is keen to be absent when her brother finds out she has broken his guitar. So, her adventure begins.

The tear drop shaped land of Brokenshire is full of the unexpected, unlikely friends in strange places as well as harmless looking foes, who Grace would be best not to underestimate. Fighting alongside dinosaurs, dodos, spiders, tortoises and toads, against bears, chickens, badgers, dragons and venom goblins, it seems Grace needs to use her wits more than her weapon – Swickstipe forged in a sacred volcano from Hyperion steel - which generally offers Grace a greater chance of success. Something however does not seem quite right about this cataclysmic battle between good and evil.

Hero Wanted! is a lot of fun with great characters on both sides of the war: Day and Night. There is a superb twist at the end as Grace discovers the real reason of the war, fulfilling the prophecy, but perhaps not as intended.

Heed the warning on the front cover and be wary of encountering mind-control slugs.

Simon Barrett

The Hidden Story of Estie Noor

Nadine Aisha Jassat, illus. Sandya Prabhat, pub. Orion

Estie has been expelled from school. She is hurt and upset and angry. Her mother's acceptance of the school's side of the story and her refusal to hear Estie's account has left her distraught. Being sent to a small Scottish town to stay with her aunt Ru, whom she scarcely knows, feels a cruel banishment. But Rumana is welcoming and loving. Before long Estie is involved in preparations for the village art fair. Brunstane is a place that celebrates creativity and community and where diversity and inclusion are at the core. To her surprise, Estie finds herself making friends with Idris, the self-named Super Sleuth of the town. Together they discover a mystery and set about working out the meaning of the beautiful paper sculptures they track down and the messages hidden with them. Gradually they uncover a story of treachery that will shock the town and bring about a long-awaited fairness.

As that story comes to light, so too does Estie's own. As readers we also put together some of the pieces. Estie has been profoundly wronged by a teacher who consistently puts her down and refuses to accept her knowledge of mixed heritage heroines. He has destroyed her work, and Estie has responded. The school believed the teacher and not her. So has her mother, who is unaware too of all the comments from Estie's fellow pupils about her hair and her skin colour.

This is a powerful, moving and important book. The first-person verse narration is immensely effective. We feel Estie's pain. And we feel the difference in her as her voice is heard and she

experiences true friendship and acceptance and regains her loving relationship with her mother. There are lots of great characters here, not least Idris. How unusual and valuable to have a protagonist with type 1 diabetes who gets on happily with his life with the help of modern technology. Lynsey and Lindsey, the town's quite exceptional bakers are a delight. Definitely a book I recommend.

Anne Harding

The Houdini Inheritance

Emma Carroll, pub. Faber & Faber

This is another work of historical fiction from Emma Carroll. It is based on Harry Houdini, the world famous escape artist from the 1920's. In a very useful author's note, Emma Carroll explains that the details she includes about Houdini's wife, Bess, are based on fact, as is the information about some of his tricks and his top secret trunk, Number 8. Other features of the story are creation and are not intended to be fact. A very colourful and interesting cover invites the reader to explore a story packed with mystery, secrets and death defying stunts. The mix of historical fact and fiction works very well.

A thrilling and exciting plot features an impressive female character, which Emma Carroll is known for. This main character is Glory, who is supported by her friend Dennis. As well as mystery and magic, the story is also about friendship and blackmail. Glory and Dennis go to watch Houdini when he visits their seaside town of Sidford-on Sea. Houdini plans to jump off the town pier into the sea below. He will be tied in chains and must try to escape. Things seem to go wrong and the excitement really starts when Glory accidentally outsmarts Houdini. She finds herself drawn into his world of magic and secrecy. This develops into a dangerous world of rivalry and deception. The plot develops as Glory and Dennis find themselves looking after Houdini's secret trunk and travelling to America.

This story featuring a world famous escape artist, a suitcase full of secrets, dangerous stunts and two innocent children develops into a tale of excitement with a good mix of fact and fiction. It is a great read and an interesting mystery.

Gary Kenworthy

I Am Wolf

Alastair Chisholm, pub. Nosy Crow

In the world of Chisholm's novel, people live on mechanical, metal constructs. They are driven by the willpower of those who live on it. The one which Coll, the protagonist, lives on takes the form of a wolf. Coll, who has a prosthetic arm and leg, often feels ostracized by his 'clan', the other people who live on Wolf.

This life is all Coll has ever known and he has absolute loyalty to Wolf. All of his life has been spent roaming the world on Wolf, fighting other clans to absorb into their own. That is, until one day, when he and two others are accidentally cast adrift from Wolf and must survive alone. Wolf was attacked by a dangerous new Construct and although adrift he has help from Rieka, a ‘Tock’, one who makes the Constructs work but can Coll trust her and what are her motives, learning the truth could destroy everything Coll thought he knew about his world, his clan and even himself. Coll will have to find his way back.

The central theme of this book and its power lie in the character of Coll and his quest to find his own identity and belief in himself. Even readers who are unused to worlds like Chisholm’s and the tropes used in Sci Fi, will find themselves rooting for Coll.

Chisholm also, through Coll, makes some profound statements about difference and living with it. Readers who have experienced any kind of difference and particularly those living with prostheses will empathise with Coll.

Rebecca Butler

Mayowa and the Sea of Words

Chibundu Onuzo, pub. Bloomsbury Children’s Books

This is an incredible story, with a powerful twist. Mayowa is spending time with her grandfather this summer but he is an odd character with a bright green beard and penchant for jumping on books.

May’s mother is not keen on the jumping on books and has banned the activity for Mayowa. Over the course of the summer, Mayowa learns a lot about her grandfather and the reasons for book jumping, or logosaltering as it is formally called. He can channel emotions through stories to those around him. Sending courage to May when she climbs too high in a tree or compassion to those on a protest to protect refugees. So there is good reason for and purpose to his actions.

May discovers she too can logosalter and just in time as it turns out someone else has this ability and that they are using their power for evil, not the good that her grandfather does! Can May and her grandpa combat those who wish to stop refugees entering the UK? Are they strong enough to share compassion, empathy and understanding with enough people to change the course of a vote in parliament?

Wonderfully written, this story highlights the power of words when used for good. It celebrates refugees and their unique experiences and courage. The relationship between May and those around her is special and she is very loved. Not to mention powerful!

Erin Hamilton

Nora and the Map of Mayhem

Joseph Elliott, illus. Nici Gregory, pub. Templar Books

Interspersed with wildly imaginative, nail-biting pandemonium, *Nora and the Map of Mayhem* provides sparkling entertainment. A book that will win over the most reluctant 8+ year old. The reader can't help wondering how Nora aka GG and her great grandchildren Atticus and Autumn, are going to escape the appalling horrors that endlessly appear. But the good news is that they all manage to reach the epilogue, and happily sit down for tea. Joseph Elliott, the author, has a special interest in children with SEN, and is to be applauded for his resourceful ingenuity in writing this book. Children will love it along with any accompanying adults who happen to be around at the time.

Nora opens her front door to the arrival of Atticus and Autumn, having forgotten that she agreed to this short stay a while back. No sooner has she shut the door than a huge thud heralds the arrival of intrigue and drama, broadcast by the note pinned to the door with a knife. Nora alias Spit-tooth, a monster hunter in her dim and distant past, had stolen a map belonging to an arch enemy Ripclaw alias Winifred Blossomhurst. Nora then sells it on to Grizzler, an old flame, who unable to make any sense of it has buried it on the Craggenwich Islands. They need to get it back asap. And so, the story unravels involving monsters and all manner of dire events, including galleons and 'nautical marauders', commonly known as pirates. It is all action, and a lot of fun!

This is a cracking little book with endearing life management tips for younger people interspersed throughout the text. Phones and friend handling are top of the list, along with "weirdness", being odd or simply not stereotypical. Is it so bad the text asks to be unusual? How boring if we were all the same. And lots more little gems safeguarded by Nora, retired monster hunter and active great grandmother.

Elizabeth Negus

Nush and the Stolen Emerald

Jasbinder Bilan, pub. Chicken House Books

A brilliant tale, built from a mix of fact and fiction by the talented Jasbinder Bilan.

Anushka and twin brother Arian are the main characters in this story, headstrong Anushka, 'Nush' leads the way and is a determined girl, Arian is quieter and more cautious. They are Indian royalty,

princess and prince and they have had to watch the British East India Company take their land and the family's most divine jewel – an emerald that is the size of an apple.

When their father, the Maharaja, plans to travel to England to discuss the East India company and their battles with the Queen, at Buckingham Palace, it is Nush who takes Arian's place and travels with her father. It takes months for them to get there, a good reminder of how much we take travel for granted, but they are quickly welcomed into the family. Papa has constant meetings with advisors yet no progress seems to be made.

When the children are taken to Osbourne house for a week, Nush confides in her father about her secret plan to reunite Lakshmi's emerald with their family. Papa promises to do some investigating whilst Nush is away. When they return a week later it is to discover that papa has urgently returned to India with their entire party, leaving Nush behind.

Nush's determination to find the gem that belongs to her family and can heal her country leads her to uncover a jewel plot right in the palace where she is still staying. Can she save the emerald? Can she find her father?

Nush and the Stolen Emerald is a fascinating and exciting story.

Erin Hamilton

On Poetry Street

Brian Moses, illus. Mark Elvins, pub. Scallywag Press

Walking down the street, what can you read? You can pick this collection of poems which I have with me in this sizzling weather - and this one is titled 'On Poetry Street' by Brian Moses. This 120 paged anthology with 52 poems is made for the dreamers who wish to dream and create. It's an exercise in reading verses and writing one's own too!

With sketches by Mark Elvins and words by Brian Moses children aged 7-12 can definitely draw some inspiration on how to rhyme sentences, discover meanings and create poems from any word, phrase or feeling they are going through. In fact, the author introduces the reader with a little test first to see whether one has a love for poetry. From there we travel through varied verses on themes as diverse as a village or a dragon on one hand and on 'Painting the Town Red' and the 'North Face' on the other. Read a sample from the poem 'If I had Ears the Size of Satellite Dishes...'

"If I had ears the size of satellite dishes . . .

I could hear the buzz and whine of saws as they toppled rainforest trees.

I could hear the soft beating of a butterfly's wings.

I could hear a ladybird's footsteps on a leaf and the arguments of ants under the ground...."

And in another poem, 'So Bored' -

"So bored, I counted all the bricks in the garden wall. I talked to my dad about his varieties of roses. I watched our tortoise make slow and steady progress back to our vegetable patch.

So bored, I stared out the window watching the clouds drift by. I rearranged all the socks in my drawer. I talked to my grandma about her knitting."

Some of the illustrations are a bit grotesque and icky like one in the poem titled 'Worst Kisses' where a monstrous creature with a dripping nose takes up space on the page and others are cute and cuddly like the big gorilla in 'Safer Than...?' The poet includes realism in his verses without eliminating creative thoughts.

Children with bright imaginations will enjoy this collection of poems, it can be introduced as an exciting collection for children in order to evoke inventiveness.

Ishika Tiwari

Pernickety Boo: The (Only) Incredible Tale of a Magical Umbrella

Sally Gardner, illus. Chris Mould, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Leave a spell from The Time Traveller's Book of Spells bubbling away, stir with a plain black stick umbrella, add a few cake crumbs from a sponge cake filled with raspberry jam and cream and mix in dog hairs of a bouncy, hairy greyhound and presto, one magical talking, time travelling umbrella, calling itself Pernickety Boo. Sadly, Pernickety Boo is misplaced very quickly by the absent-minded sorcerer on London's Circle Line and so the adventure begins.

Pernickety Boo learns a lot from all objects that pass through Baker Street's Lost and Found, but knows very little about the actual world. A jumbo sale isn't quite what Pernickety Boo imagines, but finds a new owner that loves the umbrella very much: Sylvie Moonshine.

Left alone in the house however, the umbrella makes a complete mess of the bathroom, attempts to help out in the kitchen and has a taste for gloves that some might unkindly interpret as stealing. It is Pernickety Boo's partner in crime, Jimjam the cat that saves him from causing more mayhem, and by using the catflap, allows the umbrella to taste the great outdoors. Jimjam is a great personality in the story, a little streetwise to offset Pernickety Boo's naivety.

Pernickety Boo is also a very desirable umbrella, and soon at risk of being stolen by the bully Billy Turpin and his accompish Simon the Snake or be exposed by local news reporter, Ada Moore, and perhaps claimed by the umbrella's original owner, the forgetful sorcerer. Moreover, whilst time

travelling might be good fun – as long as you can get back in time – Sylvie’s Mum worries about her daughter and Pernickety Boo’s untested magical powers. The author Sally Gardner brilliantly paces the story, gradually bringing in a little trepidation, enough to make Pernickety Boo doubt that home is not as safe as it may appear for objects, even much-loved objects.

Pernickety Boo is a great story. Sally Gardner’s words and Chris Mould’s pictures develop a loveable character from a simple everyday object of an umbrella. There is calamity that is funny and remedied before causing too much harm and a great balance between moments of danger and safe, protective care of Sylvie and her Mums. Every child will want their very own Pernickety Boo.

Simon Barrett

The Secret Garden Rewilded

Anthea Simmons, pub. Andersen Press

This sensitive retelling of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *Secret Garden* brings the story up to date and delivers an important twist.

Mia, like Mary in the original, is spoilt and self-absorbed. She too has been orphaned. An uncle she doesn’t know drives her from London to his home in Dartmoor. Mia doesn’t miss her parents, killed in an accident, because they spent very little time with her. Celebrities and influencers, they were always travelling, their strongest legacy a belief that things were only worth doing if they led to success and fame. She doesn’t miss the girls at her posh school either, but being taken away from Louisa and Ellis, who looked after her, is hard.

It’s hard too to be in a cold house in the middle of nowhere with no one she knows. Her uncle leaves for a long work trip abroad. The only people here are Mrs Jefferies and her daughter Maddie, who care for the house and Uncle James’s son Christopher who has a serious heart condition that keeps him virtually bedbound. His knowledge of the world comes almost entirely from his computer and books. The initial meeting between fractious Mia and frightened Christopher is terse and tense, but gradually they warm to each other. She gets to know Maddie’s son Daniel as well. Like Dickon in Burnett’s tale, Daniel adores nature and is immensely well informed about it.

Mia stumbles across a padlocked garden, an astonishing, sequestered, overgrown space. She longs to restore its original beauty but can’t do it by herself. Swearing Daniel to secrecy, she takes him there. To her frustration he insists that instead of clearing they should rewild, creating an environment for plants, animals and insects that will help combat the impact of climate change. Before long Christopher too is involved. The garden was his mother’s. Together they find joy, magic and meaning in the long, hard work of bringing it back to life. Christopher gains strength and courage. Mia loses her frostiness and learns to love nature. She has to overcome demons when Daniel is injured, their

mobiles have no signal and she is the only person able to get help. When Uncle James returns the changes he encounters are not confined to the transformed garden.

While never preachy, the author's love for the natural world and her passion for protecting it shine through in this uplifting story of redemption, friendship and discovery. With believable twenty-first century characters who are readily identifiable, who readers will soon root for, and a garden they too will grow to love.

Anne Harding

Storm Child

Ele Fountain, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

Maya Penrose has what some might perceive as an idyllic life, she loves to surf and spend time with her blossoming friendship group. For Maya surfing is her passion, her connection to friendships and a central narrative to the story. However, sometimes life throws us storms and for Maya this comes in the form of a literal storm. A terrible storm that sees her dad losing his fishing boat (and almost his life) that has far reaching affects within her family. The family opt for a fresh start, a relocation to another coastal location on the other side of the world. We see Maya navigate new friendships, a new lifestyle and her families processing of their experiences.

I found this a pacey read, with short chapters that left me longing for 'just one more chapter'. This format allows us to really explore Maya's story. I particularly connected with the discussion around her feelings and responses to the situations she found herself in. Being set in dual locations, gave us an opportunity to see contrasting experiences for Maya. I liked that the book offered narrative on the effects of tourism on local communities and the sometimes negative impacts this can have on traditional lifestyles. This was approached with sensitivity and gives the reader a point of reflection. It was also given as a point of contrast, being discussed in both locations.

Rich in the varied connections people share with our oceans and navigating friendships, this is the perfect book to accompany your summer adventures - and beyond!

Hannah Palmer

Terra Electrica: The Guardians of the North

Antonia Maxwell, pub. Neem Tree Press

Antonia Maxwell's first novel invites middle grade readers to engage with a fantasy that bears a startling similarity to so many of the problems we face in the current world. Fascinating, frightening,

exciting, puzzling and beneath this all, reassuring, this is a book that should be available in every school and which I very much hope will become a classic.

The Guardians of the North is the first of a projected duo of novels which will overall form *Terra Electrica*. Maxwell envisages a time in the near future where a deadly world-wide illness has killed many men, women and children. Those who survived so far are terrified that they will contract it and die through those who remain infected. Sound familiar? Yes, our own experiences of Covid offer readers a very real understanding of this novel. Of course, the title of the series, *Terra Electrica*, is a clever one, as it refers both to a land which has electricity, and it can also, when spoken aloud, be interpreted as ‘terror electrica’, which forewarns readers of the core of the novels.

This novel’s blurb on its back cover sets the scene succinctly and scarily: ‘The last ice cap has melted, and the world is on the brink of collapse. A deadly force – terra electrica – has been unleashed. It feeds on electricity. It is infecting civilization.’ In this first book, we follow Mani, twelve years old, whose mother has died in the pandemic. She is living with her father in a polar cave, with both of them keeping carefully out of the way of anything that they might encounter which would transmit terra electrica. However, when their dwindling food becomes dangerous to eat (pickled rat doesn’t sound too good), Mani’s father sets off to find seal meat and berries. When he doesn’t return Mani leaves the cave to find the scientific research station. She has a wooden mask which, when she wears it, magically produces an owl, a polar bear, a wolf, a crow and an eagle, all of which help her.

We leave her with those animals, who tell her she has more adventures to come to cure the world...
Unputdownable!

Bridget Carrington

Transcendent

Patrick Gallagher, pub. Orion Children’s Books

This is a great adventure story, featuring twins Jacob and Kira, on an exciting intergalactic mission. The story is based on these two amazing and intelligent characters as they embark on a high tech mission into space. It is also about the environment and conservation. The fast paced, action packed thriller is set in Uganda and London. There are some great descriptions and interesting comparisons between the two locations.

The two main characters live in Uganda with their conservationist mother. Jacob is introverted and Kira is hot headed. It is Kira who really wants to explore outside Uganda. They discover that someone has been watching them and aiming to enlist them in the top secret agency called Transcendent. They end up on the streets of London where their lives are turned upside down.

The story is based around three difficult trials, which the twins must complete. Each is more difficult than the previous one. If successful they will be launched into space to complete a mission to fight the greatest threat the world has ever seen. There are many questions to be answered. Why have the twins been chosen? Will their dreams of adventure come true? Is the threat too much for them to handle?

So, the reader is invited to join the team and help to save the world. Here we have an edge of your seat, high octane adventure, featuring two children, space travel, a top secret agency and a mission to save the world.

Gary Kenworthy

Unicornia: Learning to Fly

Ana Pusnet, illus Diana Vicedo, pub. Walker Books

Unicorns, the most magical of mythical creatures, animals that captivate everyone's imagination and being legendary, can be portrayed in every way possible. I am sure that you will have come across, and probably also read, a unicorn story. But have you ever been to a place named after the unicorns we love so much? Have you ever been to Unicornia I doubt it, primarily because this place is the creation of Ana Punset and has been imagined into pictures by Diana Vicedo. Rosie Eyre has translated the story from Spanish to English and it is simply a delight. It is also very pink, unashamedly so and why not. It is a full colour illustrated story for children aged 5+, those who are ready to move on from picturebooks but parents I am sure you will get equal enjoyment from reading this with them! Plus, this is the first title in what is going to be a new series.

Unicornia: Learning to Fly is the book which introduces us to a new world, to new characters and lets our imaginations run wild as we dive into to all the sparkly, wonderful, funny, creative newness. It has only been two weeks since Claudia's dreams came true. She and her parents moved to Unicornia, a place that is tucked away so snugly on the edge of the map that barely anyone can see it. It is one of those places that likes to make itself known to the people it wants to come to it... In the whole universe Unicornia is the most magical of cities. It is a place where cars run not on petrol but on syrup, buses have wings rather than wheels and of course there are unicorns everywhere! This is a city where the air smells sweet and it is the city where the School of Advanced Magic can be found. This is Claudia's new school, there are going to be lots of new lessons including unicorn flying (and a test) and lots of new friends to be made. Are you ready to sparkle and fly with Claudia and the unicorns?

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Wanderdays: Journey to Fantome Island

Clare Povey, pub. Usborne

The first in a new series *The Wanderdays: Journey to Fantome Island* is dripping with action and adventure from the very start. When Flo Wanderday begins making breakfast for herself and her younger brother Joseph, she notices the time and a bad feeling creeps over her. Her consistently punctual mother ALWAYS calls at precisely quarter past 7, every morning, whenever she is away on an expedition. Now, it is half past seven and the second day in a row that mum has not called. With panic threatening to overwhelm her, Flo answers the door to her best friend Funmi, who shares the news that Flo's mum Nellie, a documentary maker and famous ocean explorer, has been reported missing whilst on her latest expedition.

Flo and Joseph soon discover that Nellie was on a mission to prove that the local TV presenter, Sir Frederick Titan, is not the environmental hero he claims he is. Instead, he has been destroying habitats for his own profit. Could Titan be behind Nellie's disappearance? After all he seems to have a lot to hide; what is his mysterious project on Fantome Island?

Joined by their friends, Funmi and Isaac, and Nellie's friend Marianne de la Mer, Flo and Joseph board a submarine in search of their mother and hoping to also reveal Titan's lies and the secrets he is hiding on Fantome Island.

This tense, action-packed adventure has strong environmental themes carefully woven throughout the plot, addressing the exploitation of natural resources, the climate crisis, and the damage to our ocean's creatures due to ghost nets. However, it is brilliantly written, with lots of tension and danger and some absolutely fantastic twists and turns along the way, many of which come completely by surprise and will keep you turning the pages. Perfectly placed clues help the reader to follow Nellie's trail and allow them to attempt to solve the mystery for themselves along the way.

I found that all of the characters were beautifully written with Flo's protective and supportive bond with her brother who has OCD is a real strong point – it's so lovely to read about siblings who get along so well. This is the first of Clare Povey's books that I have read, and it really did not disappoint. A fast paced and exciting journey, this book will have you hooked from the beginning. Suitable for all lovers of perilous adventure tales aged 9+.

Tracey Corner

We are Family: Six Kids and a Super-Dad

Oliver Sykes, illus. Ian Morris, pub. Otter-Barry Books

We are Family is a nostalgic collection of poetry, forming an interconnected narrative, a story about the author's real-life childhood in the 1990s. A childhood that was rough, tough but happy, this debut

is based on Oliver Syke's own experiences of being one of six siblings, to a solo parenting dad. It is a testament to his dad, an homage to his dedication and love for his children.

Featured are a variety of poetry styles, with black and white illustrations from Ian Morris throughout. As a fellow child of the 1990s and growing up in a similar demographic of the working class, a lot of these poems resonated with me. Resulting in me relaying them to my sibling and us taking a trip down memory lane together.

Not only nostalgic, this collection, this story also offers up an opportunity for a giggle. After all dad makes disgusting nettle soup and some peculiar pancakes, there are home haircuts, press-ups and scum in the bathtub. Additionally, the sibling relationships are depicted in a very relatable way, there's love, tension and some disagreements too! Dad gives them boxing lessons, takes them on outings, jokes around, plays pranks and tells stories around the campfire. And the birthday cake...! With his writing style reminiscent of the previous Children's Laureate, Michael Rosen, I anticipate this being a book popular with children for the humour and adults for the reflection on their own childhoods.

Hannah Palmer

Where the Water Takes Us

Alan Barillaro, pub. Walker Books

Ava Amato does not really want to spend the summer with her loving grandparents on their island. Her mum is in hospital awaiting the birth of Ava's twin brothers. Ava would rather be with her parents and she feels she was sent away because she is a burden. This heightens her anxiety.

When, that summer, age eleven, Ava sees a dead woodpecker, she is convinced her family has been cursed and will experience a bereavement. Her nonna accidentally told her about the rumoured curse and is quick to disabuse her of it but Ava is not convinced.

When Ava meets Cody, a boy staying with his father for the summer, an uneasy companionship develops, after all he does seem to be annoyingly cheerful, a true contrast to the way Ava is feeling. Then there is a storm on the island. Will Ava overcome her fears and be able to save Cody whose boat is lost in the storm?

Where the Water Takes Us is a beautiful meditative and comforting book which explores the nature of anxiety and the hold it can have on people. There are realistic evocations of anxiety but the author never allows the reader to judge Ava's reactions negatively. This will be an important book for anyone who feels confused or lost.

Rebecca Butler

The Wrong Shoes

Tom Percival, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Things are tight at home for Will. His dad suffered an injury at work but is unable to claim benefits. Will's love for art and his friendship with another boy, Cameron, make things bearable in school, despite bully Chris Tucker's constant jeering. That is, it is bearable until a misunderstanding with Cameron drives the two boys apart. Isolated, worried by the worsening of his dad's financial situation and wellbeing, Will is drawn closer to Chris Tucker with worrying consequences.

However, his blossoming friendship with another pupil and her family, and a positive development in his relationship with his mother's boyfriend, give Will the confidence to stay true to himself and take steps which are not necessarily easy, but which allow him to take control as much as possible of his circumstances.

Percival, through Will's narrating voice, shows the complexity of Will's life: his concern for his dad, his unease at his mother's new living arrangements, his longing for the family life they used to enjoy, his struggle to fit in school and the general disenchantment that this causes. Will is a credible character and the small steps that lead him to join the wrong sort of friends and to step outside the law are credible too. Equally believable, however, is the value of friendship and of small gestures of kindness that bring hope. Poverty is not the only issue present in this book, which offers multiple opportunities for reflection about exploitation, bullying and juvenile crime, for example. However, thank you to Percival for showing also the importance of accessing school and the opportunities that it offers to discover talents and to provide inspirations that can really change lives. Here, it is a dedicated art teacher who gives Will a safe and empowering place and a sense of self-esteem.

According to the National Literary Trust's statistics, quoted in this book, one in three children were living in poverty in 2022, with reading levels among children from disadvantaged backgrounds being relevantly lower than the average. This powerful book contributes to raising awareness and should become a staple of libraries and classrooms too.

Laura Brill

Young Adult Books

A Sea of Wolves

Sarah Street, pub. Hodder Children's Books

Last year I fell in love, after a long hiatus, once more with pirates and their stories set on the High Seas. I fell in love with the storytelling, the story, the characters, the hidden monster, the curse, the very oceans on which the book, its story rode. That was Sarah Street's doing with her debut novel *A Curse of Salt* and I am incredibly grateful to her for that book. Now she is taking us back to the world she created there, with a story that gives an exceptional new twist to Red Riding Hood.

Little Red Riding Hood is retold in *A Sea of Wolves* with a sapphic enemies-to-lovers twist that will, at times, quite literally take your breath away. It is full of surprises for the characters and the reader who, despite their best efforts, their best attempts to see what is coming, will likely fail. And that is not a criticism, rather it is in Sarah Street's favour for, as author, she manages to take us on another unforgettable journey. One that begins in the woods surrounding the city of Bray. It is here that we first encounter Mersey, chopping wood but focusing her mind on other concerns. She is out here, in the woods, chopping wood, to keep busy, to save herself from wishing, beyond hope, that she could be back out in a ship, on her beloved ocean. But a promise was made and she won't go back on it. At least not yet. So, with her wolf-skin lined red cloak she chops wood, keeps busy and tries to work out what caused the fifty-year-old treaty with the pirates and the city of Bray to unravel so suddenly and without so much as a simple explanation. All the people of the city know is that their ships are returning covered in blood. All they can do is assume it is the Heartless King.

Golde and Ash are two of the Heartless King's crew and are quite possibly, at least Golde is, two of the most vicious of pirates, even more so than their king himself. Golde is first-mate, she is as cold-blooded as they come and she is out for vengeance but there is something about Mersey, something she can't quite work out and soon the pair are caught up in a war, one that could well be disastrous for them both and for those they are close to. But despite the wolf being out there, ready to pounce, they fall in headfirst. Let yourself do the same with this mesmerizing romance.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Better Than the Movies

Lynn Painter, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Would you fake date your annoying neighbour to try and make your childhood crush jealous? Some would say this is a difficult decision to make but it is exactly what Liz does when her childhood crush moves back to town, prettier and cuter than ever.

Liz lives next to Wes. They have a healthy, neighbourly relationship, filled with pranks and sarcasm and most importantly a daily feud over the parking space outside of their houses. When Michael moves back to town, Liz vows to have a relationship with him, determined that he will like her back. She makes a deal with Wes to fake date him and let him try and help her become more appealing to Michael and in return, he can have the parking spot. As Wes and Liz spend more time together, they become closer and soon Liz wonders whether their fake relationship is fake anymore and whether she's developed feelings for Wes that would ruin their newly formed friendship.

This book was incredible, it is heartwarming, and a book filled with wit that makes you laugh out loud. The characters are relatable, and it is easy to picture yourself in the book with them, experiencing the awkwardness of high school relationships and the vulnerability of crushes and relationships. I would recommend this book, and I hope to read more books from Lynn Painter as they are beautifully written and hard to put down.

Gemma Walford

Braids Take a Day

Zainab Boladale, pub. The O'Brien Press

A debut YA novel from Zainab Boladale about the consequential effects of our thoughts on our assumptions and decisions. Zainab is a journalist, television presenter and public speaker, born in Nigeria and raised in Ireland. "Uncovering secrets is like undoing braids, one at a time" she says. This is a thought provoking, gentle story, shades of Clare Keegan, set at the beginning of Abidemi Benson's summer holidays in Ennistymon, in County Clare, near the West coast of Ireland. We meet as she puts down her pen in the final school exam, the summer holidays ahead, a prelude to the rest of her life.

Abi lives with her widowed Nigerian father, an international accountant, and attends a small local school of about 180 students, "the farm kids, the townies and the blow-ins." Small enough for everyone to know each other. Her best friend is Sinead whose social circumstances have made life challenging for her family – they run the local launderette. In contrast Abi's father is strict and has high aspirations for her future in nursing. As school ends her father announces he will be going away for 3 weeks on business and Abi, whilst being watched over by a neighbour and housekeeper, will otherwise be on her own. Her first taste of self-reliance.

Sinead is invited to stay so the pair can plan their appearance at the forthcoming disco and chew over Abi's first encounter with Jack. Meanwhile a mysterious IT encounter with a Nigerian woman, called Folake occurs. A quick glance at her profile reveals someone with 31k followers, in her thirties, confident and stylish. And in particular Abi notices, she is wearing a perfect afro hair design and lives close by; she abstractedly presses the 'follow' button. In actuality Abi harbours a secret talent for braiding hair and all things related to hair. She hankers after attending business school and owning her own business. This aspiration is fuelled by the mysterious Folake who believes in following our passions in life.

So, the summer holidays ensue whilst Abi gently navigates the delights of potential boyfriends, the complexities of girlfriends, the hidden depths of families, and initiating a career path. Proceed with caution could be the moral of the story, things are not necessarily what they seem.

Elizabeth Negus

Dancers of the Dawn

Zulekhá A. Afzal, pub. Rock the Boat (Oneworld Publications)

'Never judge a book by its cover' warns the old idiom, and at least seven times in ten that is pretty accurate. Publishers Rock the Boat however aim to select writing which is bold, diverse and thought-provoking, and their jacket for Zulekhá A. Afzal's first published novel *Dancers of the Dawn* offers readers a tantalising vision of what lies between the covers. I certainly hope that this jacket will be replicated with a similarly breath-taking image in any future edition.

There is a second novel to come, as *Dancers of the Dawn* leaves us in a tantalising quandary as to the heroine Aasira's future. In this first episode of Aasira's life we see her graduating from the elite Amaar troupe of dancers who are trained to become assassins of enemies in the breakaway country of Mezeer. We learn that her mother was assassinated for being a traitor when Aasira was young, and the fear that she constantly lives with is that she is not trusted and may indeed follow her mother's end.

In this first novel readers will see the awful punishments which those suffer who are judged by Queen Sana to be traitors. This is a kingdom which is based on magic, but by and large it is a cruel magic which is used to maim and kill, and although Aasira has been trained as an elite dancer she, like the other dancers, has learnt how to kill using a variety of horrific magical deaths. The earlier chapters of this absorbing YA novel treat us to the intricacies and wonders of the amazing lives the elite live. Afzal clearly had great pleasure in describing the sumptuous surroundings of the palace, the gardens, the rooms, the food and, especially, the clothes Aasira is given to wear for the graduation ceremonies. Silk, gold, jewels galore, and wonderful food too! The pages are full of references to delicious clothes

and food, and it would be so helpful to readers if a glossary had been available so that they could really relish the luxury.

Intriguing, exciting, horrifying – and another book to come.

Bridget Carrington

Desi Girl Speaking

A. S. Hussain, pub. Hot Key Books

Desi Girl Speaking is an enlightening story, an original and thought provoking teen and YA fiction book; suitable for teenagers from 13 onwards. This book deals with challenging aspects of mental health including depression, suicide and self-harm within a community that does not recognise mental health as problematical. The South Asian Diaspora, also known as the Desi Diaspora, is the group of people whose ancestral origins lie in South Asia, but who live outside the region. There are 44 million people in this diaspora. The author Anika Hussain of South Asian descent, lives in Bath and writes books about South Asian characters. As a Desi teenager, raised in Stockholm, she could not identify with the personalities she read about, and as a consequence set about changing this gap in the market.

Her book is set in Bristol and tells the story of a 16 year old South Asian girl who is unwittingly coping with the onset of depression. Tweety, the main character is surrounded by benevolent friends and family who do not recognise mental health problems as a part of the South Asian persona. Regardless of Tweety's grandfather also suffering from severe depression and being admitted to a psychiatric hospital, they simply observed her nightmare in silence. Meanwhile, Tweety is an aspiring dancer preparing for the Bangla new year celebrations and is hoping to be chosen as the principal dancer. The story begins as Tweety attempts to maintain her dancing practice for the above celebrations despite feeling unusually anxious, tired and low. But why can she no longer motivate herself to work hard? And when she does she makes silly mistakes. Feeling despondent she stumbles across a podcast entitled *Desi Girl Speaking*, where her exact symptoms are being described by a young woman of a similar age. The two slowly connect whilst Tweety attempts to get on with her life. Unfortunately, any success is far outweighed by the relentless creep of her condition until Tweety's self-harm is noticed by her parents and she is taken to the hospital.

Desi Girl Speaking is an edifying read that will hopefully start a conversation on how to approach psychiatry within different cultural communities. Well worth reading, speaking up about and discussing.

Elizabeth Negus

The Evolving Truth of Ever Stronger Will

Maya MacGregor, illus. Jem Milton, pub. Astra Publishing

17-year-old Will has spent their life caring for their drug-addict mother Frances but when she dies, instead of embracing the chance to escape their abusive past, Will is tormented by their mother's last words: 'You are a monster.' Even in death their mother manages to trap Will into believing they are responsible for their traumatic childhood. For Will, dreams of leaving their narrow-minded, small-town community and moving to the more vibrant city of Baltimore seem ever more distant. Still considered a minor as their mother died four months before their 18th birthday, Will has to pretend Frances is still alive to avoid being placed back into the care of Child Protective Services whilst also dealing with the aftermath of Frances's death.

The Evolving Truth of Ever Stronger Will is a beautifully written story about friendship, resilience and trust from Maya MacGregor, author of the compelling murder mystery *The Many Half-Lived Lives of Sam Sylvester*. MacGregor skilfully intertwines moments of hope provided through Will's growing romance with the wonderfully eccentric Julian with intense drama. Together they desperately search for foster parent Raz, but can they find the one adult who ever offered Will any love and stability before they are hunted down by Frances's former drug associates determined to seek revenge for unpaid debts.

If readers loved MacGregor's debut novel, *The Evolving Truth of Ever Stronger Will*, does not disappoint. MacGregor writes with such sensitivity about trauma and its impact on young lives while being a champion for inclusion and diversity. A key strength of the novel is how MacGregor skilfully ensures the reader is invested in the protagonist, encouraging us to see the beauty, strength and kindness in Will even when they cannot see it in themselves. As with their debut novel, MacGregor is giving advocacy to all young people who feel a sense of otherness; of not being accepted. Will's journey is their journey and Will's survival and triumph in the face of such adversity is their victory, too.

Pauline Hurry

Fallout

Lesley Parr, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Marcus Pritchard is thirteen. It is the summer of 1980. Marcus's family has a reputation as criminals and Marcus is forced, increasingly against his will, to take part in their activities.

There is also a perceived threat of nuclear war due to tensions between Russia – then, the Soviet Union – and the United States. Marcus’s elderly neighbour, Mick, whom most of the community regard as odd, has built a secret, fully stocked nuclear bunker in the woods behind his house.

Emma, a local girl who takes part in protests with the local CND group is also regarded as strange because her family don’t have a television. How will Marcus manage to shake off his family’s reputation and develop a friendship with these two other outsiders? This is a deeply layered book about a rarely covered period in recent history which encourages its readers to be less judgemental about people who are different. Rarely in books for young people do we see such a detailed exploration of the Youth Justice System with some scenes taking place in prison. Harrowing but also an important insight delivered within the safety of this story.

This would be a comforting book for families who have someone incarcerated. It is character-driven and all of Lesley Parr’s characters, criminal or otherwise, are easy to relate to and will garner the reader’s empathy. A book which garner’s the readers sympathy with apparent ease whilst addressing the issue of questioning loyalties.

Rebecca Butler

Four Eids and a Funeral

Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé, Adiba Jaigirdar, pub. Usborne

The dedication in the front of the novel is from Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, and fans of this will recognise the nod that is given by this tale of friendship and fallouts to that original story. Given a modern, real life setting in North America and set in a small town with a thriving but marginalised Muslim community, we follow Said, young, intelligent and away at a prestigious boarding school about to embark on a future heavy with parental expectation, and Tiwa, his one-time childhood friend who stayed behind in their hometown and suffered huge upheaval in her family whilst Said has been away.

With a backdrop of community struggles, corporate greed and racial intolerance the two are bound together over the course of a summer and the story follows them as they try to navigate back to a true friendship they once enjoyed. In true Shakespearean style there are side stories, misunderstandings and a healthy dose of witty banter between Said and Tiwa and they are both likeable but very different characters in their way. It is a love story, don’t doubt that but it can be a little dramatic too! It takes a funeral and a fire at the Islamic Centre to bring Tiwa and Said back together. From being inseparable as kids, they somehow became enemies many Eids ago but the unfortunate events, part of the reason Said is back in town, force them back together because they both want the Community Centre rebuilt. They may have their own motivations but hopefully that won’t prove another hurdle for them...

Will this be a case of *All's Well that Ends Well*? or will it be another *Midsummer Night's Dream*? With a *Tempest* or two along the way this is an enjoyable tale and an interesting new take on a classic.

Marianne Degiovanni

The God and the Gumiho

Sophie Kim, pub. Rock the Boat (Oneworld Publications)

I have to admit that when I began reading *The God and the Gumiho* I thought I was not going to enjoy Sophie Kim's new YA novel. How wrong I was! My first impressions were utter rubbish, and very soon I couldn't put this novel down. The further I read the better it became, and once I had conquered the South Korean names (I'm hopeless at remembering names most of the time anyway!) I was well away on one of the funniest, bloodiest and interesting novels I've read for a long time.

If I'd read Sophie Kim's 'Author's Note' before I started to read the story itself I'd have understood the book properly from the start. Kim uses it to explain that her very modern, very funny, very gory and very interesting work is a twenty-first century retelling of the centuries old Korean mythical stories. Seokga, the 'hero' in the story (or initially the vicious god) is a character who has appeared in Korean myths for centuries, while Hani, the heroine, a teenager who works in a café, has a secret which likewise can be traced back for many centuries in the mythology of the Korean people. They are, though, very much a twenty-first version of the traditions, and readers will gain a greater enjoyment if they understand something of the original stories and Kim's very modern take on it all.

The novel takes place in South Korea in 1992, a time when it was hoped denuclearisation would also happen across the entire Korean peninsula, but that was a hope that at present still remains unachieved. This novel is doubly welcome therefore as readers can learn a little about the myths and legends beloved to Koreans, and, as Kim promises readers, 'the story of a grouchy god and a cheerful gumiho awaits'! It is thought that as many adults read YA novels as the YAs themselves, and this is certainly a novel which will also entertain adults who enjoy fantasy, humour and blood! Kim's characters subtly change as Seokga and Hani learn more about each other, and readers will certainly look forward to a sequel soon.

Bridget Carrington

Here Lies a Vengeful Bitch

Codie Crowley, pub. Hyperion (Penguin Random House, USA)

I really enjoyed *Here Lies a Vengeful Bitch*, it has all the right ingredients for a formulaic supernatural mystery but is far superior in how it weaves the story and character together.

Our heroine or rather anti-heroine for she is not your typical main character and perhaps not one you would want as a role model, is Annie Lane, town bad girl, rebel, loudmouth and a girl who is pretty unlikable at first. She is bored and troublesome, some might say a fairly typical teenager but it is as a result of this that she makes too many poor choices. In spite of them being poor choices they are relatable and therefore so is she.

The story starts as it means to go on, telling us exactly what is happening, keeping an air of mystery but at the same time planting the idea in the mind of the reader that despite us having seen Annie as a troublesome and troublemaking teen what happens to her is unfair to say the least. You see, Annie wakes up in a river with no idea of how she got there and what has happened to her. She has no idea, for quite a few chapters, that she is in fact dead and once she does realise this she of course is determined to get to the bottom of everything, to find all the truths.

Readers should expect inference of assault, murder, as Annie starts to piece together what has happened to her. It is not what happened just before the murder either, there are themes of revenge porn, domestic violence and emotional abuse which appear to have been happening over time. With such serious themes it would be easy to sink (pardon the pun) into a serious narrative but Annie's angry, driven and quirky nature, her new friends (a ragtag group who are possibly even quirker than she) and some excellent off the wall humour and storytelling make this a compulsive read, one you will devour in a single sitting.

It's original, angry and fabulous. A bit like Annie herself.

Marianne Degiovanni

I Wish You Would

Eva Des Lauriers, pub. Bonnier Books

How would you feel if all of your secrets were potentially written on a piece of paper, scattered on a beach for anyone to find? This is a fear for all of the seniors at the Senior Sunrise because of one small mistake.

Natalia is struggling with a tough decision, stay with her dad and give up her passion for art, or move house and live with her mum and lose her status in school that she has worked so hard for and the friends she has made there. Her awkwardness with her previous best friend Ethan does not help as she has had a crush on him for years but doesn't think he feels the same way after they attempted to break their "pact" and he turned her down. Senior Sunrise is Natalia's last chance to make her decision. It's her last chance to talk to Ethan and have fun with her friends before she makes her final decision. When the tradition of writing your secrets on a piece of paper and placing them in a jar to

burn on the campfire in the morning goes wrong, 7 senior letters are released, for anyone on the beach to find and read. Throughout their team building games, Natalia and Ethan hunt for the notes, to protect everyone from the chance of their vulnerabilities being shared accidentally. This search brings them closer, but will it persuade Natalia to stay with her dad?

I enjoyed this book and found the characters relatable and funny. The story was easy to follow and hard to put down. As a reader, I felt like I was at Senior Sunrise with the characters and experiencing their emotions with them. I would thoroughly recommend this book to any reader looking for a well-written story, filled with emotion and typical teenage insecurity leading to closer relationships and friendships.

Gemma Walford

The Last Life of Lori Mills

Max Boucherat, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Lori loves many weird and wonderful things: Detective Mermaid comics, episodes of Monster Kitten Fighting Force, blanket forts and her stuffed lion called Jonsey. Not to be forgotten is Voxminer: a vast world-building game, the best ever to be played, full of forest biomes and mountain biomes where you can gather resources and build any world you want. There are Voxfriends to collect, of many different species, like illumamoth, dogdecahedron and blizzuar - all unique, marvellous creatures who can help or hinder.

Lori often explores Voxminer with her best friend Shoelace, and together they've spent the last four months crafting and expanding a world called Kittentopia. When Lori's babysitter cancels, the chance for Lori to spend an evening at home alone is perfect: it means an extended Voxminer marathon in her blanket fort, with plenty of uninterrupted building time (made even better by forbidden snacks). But the stormy wind and rain outside are strong, and soon the house begins to feel a little strange...

A sudden glitch on the TV screen shakes Lori to her core, and she is confronted with an unsettling new version of Voxminer - one which makes the empty house seem far less safe. A doorway appears onscreen, and its arrival in the game should be impossible: Lori did not create it when crafting the rest of the world. The door stands, in bright graphics, beside a vast underground pool that Lori and Shoelace built inside one of Kittentopia's mountains. With the intrusion of this unknown door, even Lori's boldest Voxfriend is suddenly afraid. Ben the blizzuar, a two-tailed icy jaguar, whimpers in fear and grows reluctant to move. Shoelace is definitely offline, and Lori wonders who could possibly have control of the game.

As Lori's evening unfolds, a strong tension builds, and the story grows more and more eerie with each chapter. It is both creepy and exhilarating, as Lori tries to process these strange occurrences. They

pull her back towards the game, even as it becomes more unrecognisable. Lori faces a growing sense of panic as these glitches multiply, and her mix of nerves and courage feel very real. She is a warm character, determined to outlast the strange new dangers of Voxminer. Just like the members of Shimmer Squad, a group of smart, bold teens in her favourite book series, Lori is determined to find a way forward through the unexpected dangers of the night...

Jemima Breeds

The Maid and The Crocodile

Jordan Ifueko, pub. Bonnier Books

Would you survive as a young orphan if you had been thrown out onto the streets of Oluwan City on your seventeenth birthday? Small Sade, a talented young curse eater, lives this life, trying to make a living for herself when she ages out of the orphan house she has been living in for too many years.

When Small Sade meets the Crocodile, she accidentally binds herself to him, entwining their fates despite her fear of the rumours of him eating young girls. He is as entranced with her for she has a gift. Many may look at her and see only her unique appearance and unlucky foot but the Crocodile sees her secret and is entranced. Small Sade is a Curse Eater. Once bound she flees him, with the determination to become the most powerful curse eater and earn her place in Oluwan City. She has a very good job as curse eater in a high-class inn where her cleaning can change fates and she hopes to impress the wealthy clientele. Throughout the book, Small Sade and the Crocodile become closer, working together and forming an unlikely friendship, but will this friendship last or is it destined to fall into ruin as the Crocodile becomes more and more of a beast with his revolutionary ambitions taking over and threatening what they have built.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book; it was cleverly written in a different style to what I'm used to. The book was filled with plot twists and full of heartwarming moments and emotional turns. The characters were interesting, and the world was easy to understand and beautifully described. By the end of the book, the point of view was a little bit confusing but overall, it was still well written and a book which I would easily recommend to other people.

Gemma Walford

The Mercury in Me

Rachael Fernandes, pub. UCLan

If you pick up a book with a UCLan publishing fox on the spine you are in for an excellent read! *The Mercury in Me* is no exception, although at first glance I was confused and intrigued by the title.

Surely, I thought, it can't be the dangerous liquid mineral which used to be used to register temperature, nor yet could it be the planet! How then, I wondered, can it possibly be about mercury inside a teenager?

Readers soon discover that the story is told by Maya, seventeen and determined to become a doctor, but also a talented violinist, who usually plays for the school shows. When she discovers that the upcoming show is *We Will Rock You*, based on Queen's music, and that Freddie Mercury was, like Maya herself, a British Indian, she eventually decides to try for a role. She gets to know Harry, star of the show, and himself a British Asian, and – well that would be telling, and you want to read the story don't you? Cleverly Rachel Fernandes (herself a British Indian) manages to combine teenage love, extreme school bullying, varied family expectations and the agony of a teenager afraid to reveal that they are gay in this absorbing story. Maya and her elder brother Tamir have to face the kind, loving, but restrictive home regimes which prevent Tamir from explaining that he does not want to search for a quiet, submissive wife.

Likewise, boyfriends are not countenanced in Maya's family, and while her parents are very proud of her imminent career as a doctor, she is expected to be the quiet, submissive girl who will marry an Indian boy from a good family. The growing relationship between Maya and Harry has to exist painfully hidden from older family and friends. Fernandes is clearly very familiar with the expectations which even British Indians retain in Britain. It is clear that neither parent is being unkind to their children, but they are deeply aware of their own experiences and the expectations of an Indian family when they themselves were young.

Funny, happy and sad, true to life in so many ways, this is an outstanding first novel.

Bridget Carrington

Now, Conjurers

Freddie Kölsch, pub. Electric Monkey

Now, Conjurers is a dark-fantasy horror story that follows Nesbit Nuñez and his fellow witches as they uncover the mystery surrounding the gruesome death of his boyfriend Bastion Attia. With the only clue being Bastion's partially-devoured body, Nesbit, Drea, Brandy and Dove (Bastion's sister) reconvene their secret North Coven in the hopes of solving his murder. However, as they search for answers, they uncover their small town's dark history and the sinister, supernatural, red-gloved figure at the centre of it. The North Coven realise that confronting the monster is the only way to both avenge Bastion's death and save the lives of everyone they hold most dear.

As the story progresses, the ensemble cast of compelling yet flawed characters become more life-like, and their nuances are compelling. Angsty, poignant descriptions will help readers emphasise with the

protagonists, and the revelations of Bastion's idiosyncrasies, coupled with his rather tragic backstory, give this coming-of-age narrative a more realistic tone. Despite the claustrophobia of the small-town setting, the world-building means it feels more detailed and vast – a world wherein the witches are real, but the monsters lurk in the shadows. Furthermore, with author Freddie Kölsch's pacy writing style and choice of placing this story in the late 1990s, the novel is laden with references that make this a nostalgia trip for older readers.

However, younger readers should not fear this YA novel, as Kölsch has constructed a fascinating insight into 1990s culture, with consistent references to *The NeverEnding Story*. The world of North Dana, Massachusetts in November 1999 is a fantastic setting for this story – a world not yet doomed by smartphones or social media, but instead beset by the panic of the incoming Millennium.

Now, Conjurers is a wild, spine-chilling debut novel. Ultimately, it delivers a fantasy horror story, offering a heartfelt insight into a coven of teens who are both struggling with the difficulties of growing up, while also fighting off evil monsters that lurk in the darkness.

Chris J Kenworthy

Off With Their Heads

Zoe Hana Mikuta, pub. Hyperion (Penguin Random House, USA)

Off With Their Heads is not only a really gripping title, but it is also a Korean-inspired, queer retelling of *Alice in Wonderland*. It is perfect for those looking for a darker, more intense dystopian story with plenty of action, horror, and drama too!

In this retelling, we are introduced to the two main characters, Caro Rabbit and Iccadora Alice Sickle, who were cast into Wonderland after being accused of a crime that they did not commit and unfortunately breaking each other's hearts in the process. Four years on, Caro lives a glamorous life in the capital as a royal saint-killer, concealing the dark secrets of the Red Queen that she serves, whilst Iccadora has become a ruthless hunter, waiting for the day she can get her revenge on both Caro and the Queen for their betrayal.

Mikuta really excels on the character development of both Caro and Iccadora. They say that there is a thin line between love and hate, and this story is the perfect example of that. They hate one another, whilst being completely obsessed with each other. We are left hanging on in a will-they won't-they situation to see if they will get the revenge that they both lust after. This leads to an interesting dynamic and an enthralling story that you just cannot put down.

Off With Their Heads is a great addition to the well-established dystopian genre and is filled with plenty of thought-provoking questions to ask yourself whilst reading. It is a commentary on love and

loss, and what it can turn you into if you refuse to let it go. So, I ask you, is it worth loving someone if that means losing yourself?

Cherelle Thomas

Sleep Like Death

Kalynn Bayron, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Eve is comfortable wielding a bow, thudding an arrow into a chosen target among the trees and rocks. But a bowstring is not everything: she relishes the assurance of her dagger, of holding a freshly sharpened blade in her grasp. She is first – and fiercest – advisor to her mother, Queen Regina, for whom Eve would do anything. Eve and her mother wield their daggers together, in loyal protection of the townsfolk of Queen's Bridge. Whatever their rank, the townsfolk are all deserving of safety and consideration. Guarding their lives and homes is of the upmost concern – and proves to be a hefty task. They face a persistent and sinister threat from the Knight, whose shadowed castle can uproot and move itself through the land – appearing wherever it may do most damage.

The Knight possesses his own wish magic, which he uses to cruel effect: even the most carefully spoken words of a wish can be twisted. Longings become fuel for despair and setting out to follow the tracks of his castle, trailing smoke across the mountainside, may lead to indescribable darkness. Queen Regina has suffered as terribly as any from the malicious magic of the Knight, and his actions weigh heavily on her family. Eve is fuelled by a bone deep determination to face the Knight, to end the harm and havoc he causes. She has been gathering firsthand accounts of his powers, wading through rumours and gossip that paint the Knight in many fearsome colours. Her own skills and talents have been honed since she was young, but her mother is reluctant to allow Eve to face the enormous danger that the Knight poses. But Eve has her own gifts, a powerful magic that allows her to weave herself with nature and meld its strength to her own. She can wind the sky around her and grasp hold of lightning's heat; she feels ready to rival the Knight, and as her mother's agitation worsens, the time for confrontation feels close.

The world of Queen's Bridge and its magic is gripping, and Eve's determination and dedication to her mother are quickly compelling. She is an intriguing character who pulls you to her side, soon wanting to wield a blade of your own in defence of all that the Knight seeks to destroy.

Jemima Breeds

Slowcoach

Bethany Rutter, pub. Hot Key Books

Despite the new trend for ‘young looking’ cover art this is a young adult story that covers body image, fat shaming, family dynamics and various forms of prejudice. It’s title and that image on the cover suit it perfectly, it could easily be a simple play on words or something much deeper and more meaningful.

Slowcoach is a story that provides author Bethany Rutter with the opportunity to cover some serious issues. However, she keeps the story light and fun to read. It has some very funny moments that will make you smile and even laugh aloud. We follow Ruby and her friends over the course of one summer as she challenges herself to take part in a local fun run. Anyone who has attempted this will know it can truly be a challenge. For Ruby it is about more than the physical exertion of the challenge. Goaded by her brother and shamed by staff at her school what starts as an act of rebellion becomes a deeper questioning of herself, her feelings about her own body and how society treats and influences those who do not conform to an accepted idea of ‘normal size’. Bethany Rutter tackles this with a gentleness, an understanding of its harshness and a reminder that we are each unique, we should recognise that and remember to love ourselves and keep those who truly see us, close.

Ruby is an excellent main character, she is likeable, not too arrogant, she questions herself and grows emotionally alongside some excellent friends she already has and new ones that she makes along her journey. The cover states the story to be joyful and heartwarming and I agree that it does live up to the hype. It is an enjoyable and easy read, one to pack in your hand luggage and perfect for a flight away this summer.

Marianne Degiovanni

Songlight

Moira Buffini, pub. Faber & Faber

Elsa Crane lives in Northhaven where she spends her days fishing alone and preparing to be given to a returning soldier as a second wife – a cruel fate, but better than serving soldiers in a Pink House. But Elsa has a secret. She has songlight – the ability to communicate with others telepathically – and, in Northhaven, that’s a crime with the severest of punishments. The only person she shares her secret with is her boyfriend, Rye, but on the eve of their escape, he is discovered and captured. Even though her father died for Brightland and her brother is quickly rising through the ranks of their military, Elsa knows that ending songlight isn’t right. But Elsa can’t find the strength to stand up for what she believes until she meets Kaira, through the strongest songlight she’s ever felt.

From award-winning screenwriter and playwright, Moira Buffini, comes the first instalment in a gripping YA fantasy series. *Songlight* introduces readers to a wide cast of characters living in a brutal world and explores the fascinating concept of mental telepathy. Set in a near-future world nearly destroyed by abuse, society is run by strict, power-obsessed men who feed misinformation to the masses and publicly punish nay-sayers to keep society living in fear. But some, like Elsa, Rye and

Kaira, start seeing through the lies and, eventually, they find others that are resisting. With danger around every corner, the young rebels race the clock to expose the evil that has infiltrated Brightland at the highest level.

In this high-concept, action-packed saga, a young teenage girl is driven to take on the brethren in order to save herself and others like her. The exciting opening chapters set up a page-turning drama written in multiple perspectives from intriguing characters. With occasional graphic violence, sexual abuse and slavery, the book contains mature themes and disturbing scenes that may not be appropriate for young YA readers. While some character arcs end prematurely and the cliffhanging leaves many questions unanswered, readers will be eagerly awaiting the next book in the enthralling *Songlight* series.

Stephanie Ward

Taylor Blake is a Legend

Laura Jane Williams, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

What would you do if you were an awkward teenager, feeling like your life was full of embarrassing moments? This is the reality for Taylor Blake. It could be your reality too and it is the basis for Laura Jane Williams' *Taylor Blake is a Legend*.

Taylor is a young teenage girl, trying to fight her way through high school with her two best friends Star and Lucy by her side. When a French exchange trip is on the cards, Taylor is desperate to go. She wants to experience France and more than that she wants to live the life of a Parisian. She hasn't had her first kiss yet and believes this trip will be the perfect opportunity for her. A first kiss in the romance capital of the world! When the exchange just leads to more embarrassing moments and awkward encounters Taylor finds not a kiss but herself gaining closer friends. She also finds that the relationship she was looking for wasn't as far away as she thought it was.

I enjoyed the story, I enjoyed this book and I found it to be heartfelt and warming as someone who feels just as awkward as Taylor. However, I would say that I think this book would suit younger teenagers and readers as I found it to be written in a way that seemed younger than I'm used to. The characters were well written and relatable, and the plot was easy to follow and interesting. However, I think it would be more suited to someone who is in the younger teen bracket, who is finding their feet as a YA reader and as a teen. It might have more of an impact for them as they embark on their journey into teen-dom.

Gemma Walford

Twelfth Knight

Alexene Farol Follmuth, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Viola is a self-proclaimed furious feminist and can't believe that everyone else isn't as mad as she is. Jack is the star of the high school football team and has his life figured out, coasting through senior year until he can head off to university with a football scholarship. Both find themselves on the student body – Jack as president and Vi as Vice President – where they constantly butt heads. But after Vi's gaming group breaks apart on bad terms on the same night that Jack suffers a football injury that could end his promising career, Vi and Jack find themselves taking solace in the video game, *Twelfth Knight*. Jack's identity is obvious, thanks to his thinly-veiled username, but Vi is anonymous, and likes it that way, since she finds the other players treat her differently thinking she's a 'he'. But when Jack confesses his feelings, Vi lies to make sure he doesn't know who he's confided in and goes to extraordinary lengths to cover up her deception. When a Comicon-like event brings the two together and they find that, against all odds, they actually like each other, Vi must decide if she's going to give in to such a traditional relationship. If Jack can forgive her once her dishonesty is discovered.

From the New York Times-bestselling author of *The Atlas Six* (written under a pen name), this coming-of-age, YA romance takes the opposites attract trope to the extreme. *Twelfth Knight* is a maze of twists and turns – from fantasy board games to football to video game conferences and homecoming – that lead the two main characters to each other. As they start to understand the person behind the reputation, they realise that there is more depth to each of them than most people realise and sparks fly.

The high school world of Vi and Jack was drenched in complexity – from an absent father to an overbearing father, teens considering their sexual orientation, adults reconsidering their protective devices – where everyone was trying to find where they fit in the world. It was, at times, difficult to feel sympathy for Vi as she was incessantly cruel to others while longing for someone to take the time to understand her. While Jack was a character that seemingly had the world at his feet and was hard not to hate him for having it so easy. But these two unlikable characters find solace in the unlikeliest of places – each other – and the pathway to getting there is an amusing roller coaster ride.

Stephanie Ward

The Virtue Season

L.M. Nathan, pub. Scholastic

The Virtue Season is a captivating and fast paced novel which follows 18 year old Manon as she embarks on her season as debutante. In a world which promises balls and perfection, it is quickly revealed that not everything is as it seems in Calde Valley. Anybody considered flawed is damned to a lifetime of gruelling service, while those who are not are organised into loveless marital unions

designed to strengthen bloodlines. The government's aim: root out all defects. However, as Manon begins her season the world begins to crumble and she won't stop until she can protect those she loves around her.

Nathan writes a tale which keeps us on our toes until the very final moments while her characters are defiant, flawed and most importantly surrounded by their loved ones. For while this is a novel which questions controlling authority, it is also fundamentally a tale which celebrates found family and community just as much.

Nathan has beautifully constructed a dystopian world that echoes the troubles existing in our present day to explore and challenge the corrupting nature of power and control. It is a rally cry which champions the unspoken power of ordinary people who unite to fight for change. For as Nathan writes in her authors note, 'we live in a world which pretends to be liberal. I want to live in a world that actually is.'

The Virtue Season encourages us all to fight for the world we want to live in.

Elinor Hurry

Wild East

Ashley Hickson-Lovence, illus. Camilla Ru, pub. Penguin Random House

Wild East is a poignant verse novel about Ronny, a 14 year old music lover who moves with his mother from London to Norwich, after his friend Maz dies tragically.

As a black teenager, Ronny initially does not feel welcome at his new, mostly white school but he loves music and dreams of becoming a rapper. When Lucas, the "published poet and performer" visits his new school and teaches a poetry class, Ronny learns that music lyrics are made up of spoken words, much like poetry. He realises the combination of poetry and music could make his dreams come true. This novel is powerful in its delivery, and very well constructed. The verse style complements the pacing of the story and together with the wonderful illustrations, makes the novel accessible to reluctant readers, particularly. The illustrations vary in their level of detail – from the skyline of Ronny's home city of London, with the contrasting tower blocks and St Paul's Cathedral to different fonts being used to portray Ronny writing lines of poetry. There is even a heart-warming drawing of a muntjac deer, which "somehow, from somewhere" gets into the exam hall, causing a commotion of "ear-splitting screams," before "feeling all calm, all safe, all loved."

The illustrations don't only complement the story. They invite the reader to immerse themselves. Such is the case with the wordsearch and the instruction to: "jot down the first ten words [...] and use them to write something new in five minutes." Moreover, this is one way in which the novel highlights

how the therapeutic nature of the arts. As the story develops, as Ronny is compelled to write lines of poetry, the reader may find it compelling to follow Lucas's instructions to open a notebook, and not take one's pen "off the paper for the entire five-minute duration" of the writing activity. Most importantly, Ronny's narrative is a journey of self-discovery and it is lovely to read a story which has positive undertones for its protagonist, while not shying away from difficult topics such as poverty, youth crime, bullying and racism.

Wild East is an essential read for all ages, from a relatively new but very real voice of. It is a great novel to study. Ultimately it is a story of coping with loss, learning how to fit into new surroundings, and how the support and encouragement from parents, teachers and adults are essential to all young people.

Chris J Kenworthy

You Don't See Me

Chris Ricketts, pub. Little Island Books

Not a game of hide and seek, *You Don't See Me*, is actually the story of the way that each of us looks at others. It is a story that wants us to see how we do that and how we can change.

Author Chris Ricketts explains that the inspiration behind it comes from a book they read when growing up. That book was a story about a man who misled others into believing that he was something he was not. For Chris Ricketts this story resonated, they had created various versions of themselves and they found an outlet. They started to write. Stories of hundreds of lives they could have enjoyed had they been born in a male body. Not only did these stories give them solace they helped in the discovery of a love of writing which has led to this most powerful story, *You Don't See Me*.

Ros has found Eddy, the girlfriend that they have always wanted and yet in spite of that Ros is unable to tell Eddy the truth. The truth is that Ros is trans and wants to live in a male body. What follows is an incredibly compassionate, heartfelt story about trans identity, about the challenges but it is also a love story, a story than anyone, of any identity or orientation can enjoy. When Ros finds Eddy they can't tell their truth. Then, at a party classmates think they have 'discovered' Ros is a lesbian. This is not their whole story by any means and it makes Ros's life harder to navigate until a new friendship with a boy changes everything as Ros finds someone to confide in. Then the truth comes out and it gains its own momentum, one Ros struggles to control but their school is nothing other than supportive. That is heart warming to read and the awareness, the knowledge that it happens is incredibly important. But there are still questions that Ros needs to find answers for. Do they have hormone treatment, is surgery an option, and what will happen when Eddy finds out?

A timely reminder that we need to truly look and learn if we are to understand.

Susan Smith

Young Gothic

M.A. Bennett, pub. Welbeck Children's Books

From the cover and title this does look like it is going to be what it says, a story sitting within the gothic genre and those are big shoes to fill. Classics such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* sit in that category, it is not just a genre for books either. There was a whole gothic period, we even have gothic architecture that can be admired. And, even today, there are young people who consider themselves goths, though whether dressing in black, having black hair and makeup is all you need remains to be seen.

It wouldn't be enough for the cast of M. A. Bennett's *Young Gothic* who are going to need to actually perhaps do the opposite of what you may expect. They may, in fact, not want to be Gothic at all, especially after the summer that awaits. You, reader, may however fall in love with the Gothic, with this story, with its message, its mystery, its horrors and the outstanding writing. I did. In fact I was captivated. I was also on the very edge of my seat rather a lot during the process of discovering what it would be like to spend the summer at the birthplace of all things gothic.

Eve, Griffin, Hal and Ren are complete strangers bought together by one thing. They have each been chosen, based on a letter of application and something that might be considered an interview, to spend one unforgettable summer at the Villa Diodati. If it is a place you have never heard of then aside from reading this story I think you may want to leave it that way. For each of them this is meant to be the trip of a lifetime, the type of trip that dreams are made of, the type of trip that they each need for their own reasons but it turns into a nightmare reality. As they each come face-to-face with their own deadly secrets, the monsters that should only be in their minds, they battle with themselves and then ... then they become suspects in a gruesome murder. Will this summer be their last?

A thrilling and absolutely brilliantly conceived gothic thriller, setting the bar for any more to come and leaving you with a pounding heart!

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Non-Fiction Books

24 Hours Under the Ocean

Lan Cook, illus. Laurent Kling, pub. Usborne

24 Hours Under the Ocean is an appealing, informative read. We spend a day in a high-tech sub with research scientists descending into the darkest depths of the Pacific Ocean. Our trip starts with a safety briefing and then we investigate an unexplored seamount using a computer-generated map. Our mission is to survey it, taking lots of videos and samples. We learn about the submarine, how it operates and see some of the equipment. After important checks are completed, we launch and dive.

I like the comic book style of this title which makes the content accessible. The pictorial aspect of the book is impressive - annotated diagrams are used throughout and are an excellent way of learning. My favourites are the diagram of the Ocean Depth Zones and the diagram of the Deep Submergence Vehicle. We see how experiments are performed and explore alien landscapes thousands of miles below the surface. I was fascinated by the pictures of creatures. The colours and shapes of the bioluminescent creatures in the midnight zone are awe-inspiring. I especially loved the Giant siphonophore which can grow up to 40m (130 feet) long and lives at a depth of around 700-10000m (2,300-3,300ft).

The Language of the Deep spread explains how creatures communicate with each other in “the vast darkness of the deep.” There are many more strange creatures throughout the book including the Bigfin squid, Eelpout fish, Elvis worms, the Japanese spider crab and the Headless chicken monster. I enjoyed seeing how a whale fall on the ocean floor supports a community of creatures. I recommend visiting the Usborne Quicklinks for links to websites where you can dive under the ocean in a submarine, meet strange deep-sea creatures and try some creature quizzes - <https://usborne.com/gb/quicklinks/quicklink/24-hours-under-the-ocean>

A fantastic insight into another world.

Brenda Marshall

A Book of People Like Me

HarperCollins Children’s Books, illus. Joelle Avelino, pub. Harper Collins Children’s Books

This new non-fiction style picturebook is a really lovely story told through the eyes of a young, and inquisitive boy named Kenny. Little Kenny is on a journey of self-discovery. There is nothing he loves more than being outside riding his bike, also Kenny is also very attached to his sweet dog, Ketchup.

There is something about young Kenny that makes him wonder, is there really anyone else like him in the world?

I have no doubt this book will provide young readers with plenty of interesting and thought-provoking facts about the world in which we live in today. The use of bright, colourful illustrations throughout this book ensures that it is presented in an approach that is open and accessible to everyone. The little things that make people come together day to day are celebrated in this inspiring story about a boy and his dog.

This is a wonderfully illustrated book and could be a brilliant resource that will help children to explore concepts such as identity, belonging and friendship in an easy-to-understand way. In terms of reading age, this is a perfect book for children aged 4 and up, which makes it an ideal choice for early years and above.

Katy Ralph

A Family of Trees: My First Book of Forests

Peggy Thomas, illus. Cookie Moon, pub. Phaidon

A Family of Trees aims to be “an artful introduction to trees, forests and the science of tree communication” for 2-4 year olds. To make the topic relatable to children of such a young age the author compares forests to families: there are parent trees, baby trees, all come in different shapes and sizes, communicate, share food, make friends, care for each other and the planet. For slightly older readers, these basic facts are expanded, offering more tree science detail under the simple captions: for example, how trees support each against breakage, how forests clean the world’s drinking water and create oxygen.

The cleverly thought-out accordion-style format of the book means that the back panels offer further information about nine different forest ‘families’ across the globe, from cloud forests in Uganda to rainforests in Brazil and frozen forests in Finland. Simple explanations show how each forest variety adapts to its region and highlight some of the flora and fauna which rely on that habitat, with examples, such as pink dolphins and pygmy fruit bats, carefully chosen to intrigue and inform young readers. Despite the postcard-sized format, the illustrations are clear and packed full of tiny details. Children will enjoy spotting the variety of creatures which make their home in the forests around the world.

With its clearly presented curricular information, global context and important environmental message, *A Family of Trees* is an innovative and invaluable for KS1. Small but imaginatively-formed and packing in a huge amount of information, it would make an eye-catching addition to classroom nature tables displayed carousel-style, or unfolded as a forest-scape which is over 2 metres long for a

shelf-display. Fortunately, the fold-out card pages are sturdy enough to withstand repeated handling and interaction as this brilliant book will definitely command attention from little ones!

Eileen Armstrong

An Invitation to the Botanic Gardens

Charlotte Guillain, illus. Helen Shoesmith, pub. Welbeck

A fabulous book from Welbeck created in association with Kew Gardens. This is *An Invitation to the Botanic Gardens*, one that is open to all who open the book.

We are invited to explore the Botanic Gardens. Our VIP Access Pass enables us to access all areas and go behind the scenes. On our tour we visit a variety of fascinating areas. One of my favourites is the Temperate Zone with its beautiful gatefold of the glasshouse that opens to reveal unusual plants such as a fern tree, a Himalayan yew and a kangaroo paw. The captions tell us more about each plant and we learn about photosynthesis. We also see horticulture students caring for the plants. In the Waterlily House we see giant waterlilies from the Amazon rainforest that and grow to be three metres across. There are workers in the pond raking out dead leaves so plants can thrive.

The Carnivorous Plant House fascinated me with its range of insect eating plants. I also enjoyed The Herbarium - "the heart of the botanic garden." Here we meet scientists who identify plant species and help to protect endangered species. In the Science Laboratory we learn about research on which plants will help beat disease and climate change. I enjoyed visiting The Seed Bank with its fire-, flood- and bomb-proof vault where over two billion seeds from across the world are stored, including seeds from plants that are extinct but could be reintroduced to wild habitats. We wander through outside areas such as The Kitchen Garden, the Conservation Meadow, the Arboretum and play and learn in the Children's Garden. Finally, we visit the café and exit via gift shop.

The book is beautifully designed with charming illustrations. A fascinating journey of exploration and discovery that will inform and inspire.

Brenda Marshall

Astrophysics for Supervillains

Dr Matthew Bothwell, illus. Nathan Reed, pub. DK

Every supervillain needs a good understanding of the universe they are planning to conquer. If you are hoping to take one over any time soon, or simply want to cause chaos, then this book will become your most valuable guide.

For any readers who are keen to know whether it is possible to crash the Moon into the Earth or whether you can stretch someone into spaghetti, this is the book for you. For those who simply want to find out more about the planets in our Solar System and whether cold winters are worse in the UK or on Mars, then this is also the book for you!

This terrific book is well-presented, fun and informative. It is separated into well thought-out chapters, with sections on planets, the death of stars and black holes (and how to use them) before finishing with the most important chapter for any budding supervillain: how to destroy Earth. Children interested in space will adore this book; with insights into all aspects of the universe delivered in a comical way. The more challenging scientific language and concepts are explained well so that readers of all levels can gain a good understanding of the content within the book, no matter how complex it is! The pages are engaging with different fonts used to direct the reader's eyes to key parts as well as super illustrations by Nathan Reed. Each page looks different, whether it has fun facts or quick questions to get the reader thinking – you will not lose interest easily whilst reading!

Pick up this book and your journey to taking over the universe will begin!

Tom Joy

Bang: the Wild Wonders of Earth's Phenomena

Jennifer N. R. Smith, pub. Thames & Hudson

Prepare to be awed by the wild wonders of the world's natural phenomena in this phenomenal book!

Bang is an astonishing achievement: an oversized, hyper detailed, fascinating exploration of the amazing things our planet can do. The award-winning science illustrator Jennifer N. R. Smith skilfully uses each double page spread to maximum effect, each focussing on a different phenomenon - from explosive fire-spitting volcanoes and twisty tornadoes to sparkling crystal caves and swirling polar light shows. She explains why natural spectacles happen and how they shape the earth itself, drawing the reader in with intriguing questions and relatable comparisons; explaining the earth's structure as if it were a slice of pie, for example. Diagrams are all clearly labelled, scientific terminology clearly explained. Information is given in bite-sized chunks and the examples are carefully chosen to engage, intrigue and be easily remembered (like those snow monkeys that love to soak in a natural hot tub!) Everything about this book is exceptional. The bright orange marbled endpapers cleverly resemble molten lava, HUV printing lends a luminous quality to the pages, a neon colour palette of greens, pinks and oranges make the illustrations pop and tiny dots (almost Aboriginal art style) give depth and texture to each minutely-detailed drawing. The result is stunning: engaging, informative and eminently browsable.

Bang is a brilliant learning resource for upper KS2 and lower KS3 and should be in every classroom project box and school library. Genuinely awe-inspiring, it would make an excellent gift for budding earth scientists and encourages readers of all ages to look for the wonder in the world around them. *Bang* is also the follow-up to the highly acclaimed *Glow*. Definitely watch out for future titles in this superb series of highly-readable non-fiction exploring amazing natural phenomena - and collect them all!

Eileen Armstrong

The Big Book of Useless Knowledge: 250 of the Coolest, Weirdest, and Most Unbelievable Facts You Won't be Taught in School

Sophie Allan, Dr. Victoria Atkinson, Dr. Brittney Borowiec, Laura Buller, Anna Goldfield, Dr. Yara Haridy, Dr. Lucia Perez Diaz, illus. Liz Kay, Hannah Li, Alexander Mostov, pub. Neon Squid

Useless knowledge delights young people, freeing them to find out about themselves, the world, the universe, as they please. There are no expectations, there is no need to retain useless knowledge, the dreaded learning-ready-to-be-tested bit isn't there. They won't even need it for school. As the book clearly states in its sub-title – this knowledge won't be taught in school. It's the ultimate knowing-for-knowledge-sake, shared because it's interesting and fascinating in itself.

The Big Book of Useless Knowledge has been written and illustrated by a selection of individuals, hence giving both authors and illustrators full credit in this review without an *et al*. All the authors are noted communicators, many are specialists in numerous scientific fields broadly within the Earth Sciences and of course Space Science. The illustrators' artwork is playful, imaginative and informative, including double and single page spreads and spot illustrations giving the book a cohesive and aesthetic appeal.

The chapters begin by examining the natural world and the human body, before including facts about places, prehistory, history, culture and finally introducing science, the earth and space. A broad range of facts with a broad appeal. There is a sub-title to each chapter, giving a taster of what to expect. By reading this book you won't have to shave a zebra to find out whether it is black or white; know where to go to see a moonbow; realise there a surprising amount of information in poo; find out how old you are; the colour of the inside of the earth without digging a hole and whether tortoises have been in space. Look it up in the book if you want the answers!

There are plenty of brilliant, encyclopaedic, fact books on the market. *The Big Book of Useless Knowledge* is a great addition, expanding upon each fact, explaining it further in an accessible and entertaining style.

(Shh! Don't tell the publisher, but I actually learnt some of these facts in school: I already knew you couldn't fold paper more than seven times. But as a teacher I'm desperate to get a few of these facts into my lessons, starting in September, to see the students' reactions.)

Simon Barrett

The Body Confidence Book: Respect, Accept and Empower Yourself

Phillippa Diedrichs, illus. Naomi Wilkinson, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

This small but mighty book is an ideal size for the intended audience. It is colourful, bright and filled to the brim with insights, ideas and positive messaging around navigating being a teenager in a digital world. Each chapter tackles a big issue and asks questions that some may be too shy to ask a friend or family member. Is my body normal? Should we compare with others? How can you help your community?

This is a vital book for secondary schools to have on shelves for those teens keen to work out the world around them, to help them find their place in friendship groups and navigate social media. The illustrations are brilliant and relevant to the subject and audience. With the message "Respect, accept and empower yourself" on the cover, this book is ideal for teens, and pre-teens. Research psychologist Professor Phillippa Diedrichs empowers us to respect our bodies and disrupt the harmful societal pressures we experience every day. By age 15 60% of us lack body confidence. It's now seen as normal to grow up feeling unhappy with our bodies. But it doesn't have to be this way. From filtered faces and dangerous body expectations on social media, to the pressures put on us by friends and family, our bodies have been through enough. The time is now to rally against these outdated ideals and create communities that celebrate the diversity of our bodies.

Through science and storytelling, Professor Diedrichs breaks down key topics such as toxic social media content, the value of diverse role models, health and body image and expressing yourself through your looks. Providing information, positivity and encouragement to encourage readers to accept and respect themselves, this book will give readers the power to challenge appearance stereotypes and feel at home in their own bodies. *The Body Confidence Book* is not only empowering and inspiring, it is practical. At the end of every chapter, there are simple tasks to help you put into practice the topics covered, including body appreciation mirror exercises and curating your social media feed.

Illustrated in a bold and inclusive style by Naomi Wilkinson, this is the book you need to help you be body confident and help make the world around you more accepting of everyone, regardless of who they are or how they look. Because every body is beautiful and every body deserves to be respected.

Erin Hamilton

The Brainiac's Book of Robots and AI

Paul Virr, illus. Harriet Russell, pub. Thames & Hudson

The Brainiac's Book of Robots and AI is another in the Thames & Hudson *Brainiac* series introducing STEM topics, looking at various aspects of science and technology in an accessible, fun and creative way.

Robots and AI is currently a hot subject generating a lot of discussion in schools and educational settings, and it is likely that young people today will be growing up in a world where AI is a factor in much of what they do. This book starts by looking at the history of robots, defining what they are before exploring how robots work - can they think and act for themselves? - as well as how to build one. It then explores robots in the world of work, considering the jobs they currently do (especially those that are dirty, dull and dangerous) before moving on to look at future possibilities such as nanobots battling bugs inside the human body and robotic limbs.

Robots and humans are compared in terms of skills and the contentious area of robot creativity is discussed including artificial art, humanoid robots and robotic cars. This is a visually attractive book with infographics and quirky illustrations, the information and concepts being explained are easy to understand and the narrator, ROB3RTA, is a cartoon robot that features throughout the book, presenting additional facts and explanations. There is a useful glossary, a timeline of robotic inventions and an index. There are also hands-on activities to explore such as creating a robotic hands and writing the first bill of rights for robots as well as a quiz.

Barbara Band

The Brainiac's Book of the Body and Brain

Rosie Cooper, illus. Harriet Russell, pub. Thames & Hudson

The Brainiac's Book of Body and Brain is an absolutely brilliant book; what a fun and exciting way to learn about the functions of the human body! Part of the *Brainiac* series – the other books are *Climate and Weather*, and *Robots and AI* (see review above) – it is aimed at 8-12 year olds and will have them going back time and time again plus sharing some delightful information about the body to whoever will listen.

Starting with the brain, how it sends messages and builds learning routes, readers discover how emotions can take over and how to improve memory. We learn about super senses, synaesthesia, where two or more senses are linked together, as well as secret senses such as chronoception, the sense of time passing. The section on excretion is totally gross with a Bristol Stool Scale enabling you

to “rate your poo”; farts, snot and dead skin cells are not forgotten. This section is definitely not for the squeamish – did you know, by the time you are 10 years old you will have produced 500kg of poo! There is information about historical moments in medicine, current technology in use and bugs found in the body. Finally, leftover body parts (such as the coccyx and appendix), weird evolution and mutated genes are explored.

With amusing illustrations, a narration from resident skeleton, Skully Boneapart, and quizzes, experiments and tasks this book is a delight.

Barbara Band

The Children’s Book of Wildlife Watching: Tips for Spotting Nature Outdoors.

Dan Rouse, illus. Abby Cook, pub. DK

This book invites its readers to observe the surrounding wildlife and to interact with animals living in green spaces, be that a meadow, a garden or even a balcony. The content is divided into short chapters where brief but very clear and informative notes accompany drawings and photographs of animals and plants. Information on a variety of birds and insects helps to identify them.

There is constant interaction with the readers through questions and tips sections, experiments and activities. These include creating a mammal tracker using a tray, some sand and seeds in a corner of the garden or building a bird nest or suitable homes for amphibians, and even recording and studying minibeasts. These are all excellent activities to be enjoyed at any age, but encouraging young readers to take an active role in conservation and building their understanding of the natural world is key to the success of future projects aimed to protect nature.

Dan Rouse’s aim is to share her love of wildlife and to encourage such a friendly and proactive approach to gardening and nature watching. This is achieved successfully in this book, through the advice given in accessible language and the various projects.

Laura Brill

Dive, Dive into the Night Sea

Thea Lu, pub. Walker Studio

The yellow light of a diver’s torch illuminates the wonders of the world hiding in the deep sea. There it reveals the shapes of many creatures that live in and around the coral reef. Parrot fish, manta rays, starfish, octopus and even a vertically sleeping pod of sperm whales meet the eyes of the diver, and the reader. When the brave diver dares to turn off the light, bioluminescent plankton and fluorescent

corals reveal themselves in a swirl of blue. Eventually the lone diver emerges to the surface, greeted by the full moon.

The sparse and poetic words accompany the striking illustrations and are complemented by notes on some of the sea life featuring in the book, which are hidden under the flaps of the pages.

Lu, recent winner of the Bologna Illustrators Exhibition 2024 with her debut book *Here and There*, uses few colours and rich texture in this book to create a beautiful world in this illustrated book. Having admired other work by Lu where a wide colour palette is present, this is a choice that successfully contributes to the atmosphere of a story which young readers will love to explore.

Laura Brill

Every Body: Celebrate, Respect and Accept ALL Bodies

Molly Forbes, illus. Mollie Cronin, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

Everyone's bodies are different and unique and it is extremely important that children learn this at a young age. We all have a body. They don't always function the same way as other peoples. And they certainly don't all look the same. But one thing is certain -- everybody and every body, deserves respect. Sometimes social media can make us feel like we're not good enough if we don't have a 'perfect' body. But the truth is, everyone feels bad about their bodies sometimes – even celebrities with millions of followers. Author and campaigner Molly Forbes is here to show you that you - and ONLY you - get to decide how you feel about your body. If we want to change the conversation around body image, we need to advocate for every single body - including those that look or function differently from our own. It's time to stop criticising the way we look and celebrate all our glorious differences!

This is such an interesting book to read. It's the kind of book that you are able to dip in and out of and every time you do you learn something new and interesting, not just about the human body but about perceptions, anatomy, social life, society, social media. This book covers many aspects related to the body such as the science of the body, diet and exercise, disabilities, mental health and so much more. *Every Body: Celebrate, Respect and Accept ALL Bodies* has also been designed so that it is fun to read, the page layout is engaging with an orange and white format throughout the book.

With quotes from famous people, some of whom young readers will be able to relate to, who could already be role models, for example, Sam Smith and detailed illustrations there is a lot here to support the growing understanding of readers and this book really is a must for every school or place where young people gather.

Helen Byles

The Every Body Book of Consent: An LGBTQIA Inclusive Guide to Respecting Boundaries, Bodies and Beyond

Rachel E Simon, illus. Noah Grigni, pub. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

The Every Body Book of Consent, a follow-up to *The Every Body Book*, is a valuable resource aimed at children aged 8-12 years. Although it covers sexual consent, it is designed to teach young readers about the wider concepts of consent including verbal and non-verbal communication, self-reflection, respect, and setting boundaries and saying no.

The key themes covered include understanding consent and appreciating that this is essential in all interactions; effective communication as a key component, and the importance of respecting personal boundaries whether these relate to physical space, belongings or emotions. It also looks at gender expectations and power in relationships. By educating children about consent and boundaries, this book empowers them to make informed decisions and feel confident in asserting their rights.

With the help of colourful illustrations and an engaging style, as well as appropriate and straightforward language, it provides an inclusive and accessible introduction to these important topics. The book is a highly recommended resource that introduces children to the essential concepts of consent and serves as a valuable tool for parents, carers and professional working with children to initiate and encourage conversations around the areas of consent and respect. For those wanting additional resources, there is also a list of useful websites for children and adults to consult for more information.

Barbara Band

Finding Home: Amazing Places Animals Live

Mike Unwin, illus. Jenni Desmond, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

For all its many qualities, and there are many, I feel this book is destined to be a bit niche: not liked by all but loved by many. Quite intensely itself, too much so for some. It's an animal book. There are 20, each given a generously-sized double-page spread to explore some of the distinguishing and often rare aspects of the way in which they go about making and inhabiting a home.

There are few stars of the animal world here, it's more an ensemble piece of the character actors: cathedral termite, three-toed sloth, rhinoceros hornbill. This will serve to delight those who love their animals, but also retain the interest of those bored by the half-heartedly researched hack parade of lions, tigers and bears too often seen. And the research has been done properly this time. The text is

dense with engaging detail delivered enthusiastically. We're deep into the David Attenborough Age of evocative, insightful narration and this mostly emulates it well. There is the odd point where the writing is needlessly over-aware of its youngest readers, but very almost always it's spot-on.

Of course, a lot of the heavy lifting has to be done by the illustrations. These succeed. There is some abstraction to the illustrations, some technique worn conspicuously, to emerge the character of their subjects. This isn't photo-realist computer-aided realism. The orang-utans are human, the puffins are sweet, the hermit crab baroque. The fish-bearing bald eagle returning to the nest reminds me of a briefcase-toting executive coming up the garden path of their new-build. 'Evocative' is my favourite word with art, I want to feel I'm in the picture. I can use it here.

Overall, this book makes me happy. It's a lovely splash of the natural world that will work well throughout primary years, so I'd say a library necessity and very much welcomed by the young reader beginning to go beyond the superficial with animals.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Let's Go!

Julie Flett, pub. Greystone Kids

At this time of year we can spend weeks watching chicks take their first hesitant steps out of the nest, grow in competence and confidence, then be independent young birds. Reading this book is like doing that. We live our young protagonist's looking-on and yearning-to-be, to the point of confidently being and inviting others in. It's the journey of becoming that's so important to young lives: seeing, aspiring, trying, failing, succeeding.

Here, skateboarding is the means by which the story is told. Seeing skateboarders from behind an excluding window, to being the confident skateboarder inviting others to join in. It's a great metaphor: all energy, speed, motion, dynamic – the forward thrust of growing up. It's anecdotal too, personal to the author so genuine in the telling, the story never feels constructed but shared. I like the first-person ownership the child has over the narrative, the process of growing up. The presence of the mother in the story is nicely developed too, from being more present to begin with, to more distant, to a facilitator, to absent, to looking on.

The story is very accessible. Easy to grasp at Key Stage 1 and younger, but not at any time condescending, just beautifully simply told, in words and pictures both. Each step of the story is a double-page spread in carefully considered art, building in intensity from more passive and muted early pages to more colourful and tumbling later ones. It's wise art, flecked with imaginative touches and great choices, but always perfect to the needs of the story, never distractingly showy. It's great at presenting a lived-in life.

At its most basic level, this is a 5-minute story about a child wanting to be a skateboarder who becomes a skateboarder. It does that very well, but its value is much wider than that because it does so much to meditate on the process of growing up, on the existential need to grow up. To become the thing you've wanted to be. Definitely a book for everyone to read once. Certainly a book some will return to because they are enchanted by its story-telling, Absolutely an understanding tale of what it is to be at the start of something important. There's a little auto-biographical essay in the back a couple of steps up in reading ability from the rest of the book that nonetheless is a lovely insight into the creative process for those interested in the expressive arts.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Lifesize Ocean Animals

Sophy Henn, pub. Farshore

WOW! As soon as this large book emerged from the packaging I was hooked by the stunning cover picture of an inflated pufferfish. Next we gaze at the LIFESIZE eye of the blue whale, the largest creature to have ever existed on earth. The underwater adventure continues and we meet a variety of ocean life. We encounter a LIFESIZE anglerfish that can swallow whole creatures that are twice their size. Information is provided in large font and is age-appropriate. The tone is conversational. Sometimes there are questions - "What would you eat if you could do that?" that encourage an interactive approach and help children to relate to the awe-inspiring creatures. We come face-to-face with a leatherback sea turtle. I did not know they could hold their breath for over one hour!

A dramatic moment comes when we encounter the LIFESIZE teeth of the megalodon – the largest shark that has ever existed. It is now extinct but its bite was so strong that it could have crushed a car! I like the double-page spread of a UK rockpool when we are invited to "poke around" to see what other creatures we can see. The book's pièce de résistance is the foldout that takes us 450m down into the depths of the Pacific Ocean and reveals the gigantic spider crab, the largest in the world. Its body may stop growing at about 30cms wide, but its legs keep on growing and can end up being three-and-a-half times the length of its body. The aquatic line-up is useful as it compares the size of creatures against each other using the size of the Lifestyle book as a unit. Readers encouraged to measure themselves in this way to gain a sense of proportion.

An exceptional book for age 3+ that teaches about the marvels of the ocean world and inspires further research. I for one am off to find out why the megalodon became extinct.

Brenda Marshall

Queens Of the Jungle: Meet the Female Animals Who Rule the Animal Kingdom

Carly Anne York, illus. Kimberlie Clinthorne-Wong, pub. Neon Squid

Queens of the Jungle is a highly illustrated book that demonstrates the unique roles many females hold within their species. Featuring sixty animals, each with a double page spread, readers will learn about grandmother elephants who pass on knowledge about where to find food and water. Then there are female orangutans who create some of the sturdiest nests in the animal kingdom. Bonobos matriarchs who control the troop and have first access to food which they do in fact share, unlike their close relatives, chimpanzees, where it is the adult males who dominate and eat first.

Often male animals don't stick around after young have been born so it is up to the mothers to teach them how to hunt and survive and, with many species, it is the males that put on an attractive display to attract the females. Many of the animals are familiar but there are some surprising additions such as the blanket octopus where the female is 200cm long and has a cape of iridescent skin compared to the brown male who is only 2.5cm.

With an index and glossary, this is a perfect book for dipping in and out of and will engage children aged 8–10 who love learning about animals. It is packed full of fascinating facts presented in accessible bite-sized amounts of text.

Barbara Band

Raising the Roof: A Dazzling History of Classical Music and its Colourful Characters

Jack Pepper, illus. Michele Bruttomesso, pub. Templar Books

Musician and broadcaster Jack Pepper takes his reader on a tour of classical music from its origin to its present developments before imagining its future too, and this is all in his book *Raising the Roof*.

The overall message presented, through the example of the composers selected in this collection and the writer's own experience, is that music is for everyone. Pepper's choices are inclusive and diverse, championing the work of women such as Hildegard of Bingen, an 11th century polymath, 17th century Barbara Strozzi, and British contemporary composer Shirley J Thompson. Thompson, apparently, was not particularly encouraged towards music as a child. In fact, the book is keen to give examples of composers who succeeded against the odds – for example Verdi was turned down as a music scholar in his youth; Schoenberg's and Stravinsky's performances elicited such strong reaction from the audience that some of their early concerts turned into fights.

Other names not normally featured in this kind of collection are here too. One, for example, is Joseph Bologne, who, born in a plantation in Guadeloupe in the 18th century, became a celebrated musician and a representative figure in the fight against racism. Another is Ethel Smyth, a composer and a prominent member of the suffragette movement. Nobuo Uematsu's games console soundtracks are celebrated too. The book starts with a clear explanation of the elements of classical music and ends with a look at its future and a list of charities and organisations supporting music and musicians. Each page includes a mention of particular pieces that represent a composer's work or a particular trend.

Well written and attractively presented this is a valuable addition to any library and a great read for young readers, not just those already musically-minded, but those who may find in this book a source of inspiration.

Laura Brill

Respect the Insect: Meet the Bugs that Clean, Tend and Feed the World

Jules Howard, illus. Gosia Herba, pub. Quarto

Jules Howard has filled *Respect the Insect* with facts and information about the many different kinds of important insects and bugs that help to clean, tend to and feed the world but who are also fast disappearing. Aimed at readers aged 7-10 years, every page is interesting, the design making good use of font, bold text and bright vibrant illustrations.

Beginning with What Is An Insect?, setting the scene before looking at life cycles and insect champions, such as the Australian tiger beetles that can run 2 metres per second, the contents are grouped into five chapters. Chapter 1 looks at the "cleaner-uppers", insects who eat dead animals and plants, keeping the world clean. Chapter 2 delves into the role of insects in growing food, those vital "menu makers" such as honeybees and the chocolate midge. Chapter 3 explores the eco-relationships between animals, plants and fungi whilst chapter 4 investigates "tiny teachers," insects that have helped scientists make new discoveries and also provide medicines via their poisons and venoms. Finally, chapter 5 is all about "inspiring icons" such as the gall wasp that has provided ink enabling humans to write or silkworms that have been at the forefront of fashion for years.

With plenty of "yuck" moments and a strong environmental message this book is sure to delight. As for my favourite insect? I think it has to be the wax moth caterpillar, one of the first animals on the planet that actually eats plastic without suffering any detrimental effects.

Barbara Band

Scientists Are Saving the World!: So Who is Working on Time Travel?

Saskia Gwinn, illus. Ana Albero, pub. Magic Cat Publishing

According to the title of Saskia Gwinn's latest book *Scientists Are Saving the World*. This is an introduction to a range of science disciplines and real life scientists, written in a comic book style, for young children.

The book begins with a mother and child looking at a TV screen with a programme called "Scientists are saving the world." The child asks their mother an interesting and insightful question: "if all the scientists are saving the world who is working on time travel?" The mother proceeds to explain that lots of scientists are doing amazing things such as looking for rainbows, eavesdropping on elephants and digging up dinosaurs. Each scientific concept is simply explained and looks at the work being done as well as featuring a diverse range of scientists; for example, how marine biologists Hans Hass and Eugenie Clark swam with sharks to discover they were very clever and needed our help to survive. Readers will also discover lots of interesting facts - I had no idea that clouds could be weighed and that one cloud is equal to the weight of about 100 elephants!

At the end of the book is a glossary of the scientists mentioned, many of them unknown names despite undertaking important work. A great introduction to a range of sciences from astronauts to meteorologists and acoustic biologists to robotic engineers, the book concludes with the concept that all these scientists started out by asking questions, wondering and watching when they were younger, that they were once little scientists.

Barbara Band

There's A Mountain in This Book

Rachel Elliot, illus. Genevieve Lacroix, pub. Thames & Hudson

This beautiful hardback book invites young readers to step into the hiking boots of a mountaineer and explore four mountain regions around the world. Areas visited are the Alps of Europe, the rainforests and moorlands of Kilimanjaro in Africa, the Rocky Mountains of North America and the Himalayas and Mount Everest of Asia. Young explorers will learn how mountains are created and discover some of the animal and plant life in each area.

There's A Mountain in This Book feels like an expedition taking you around the world to learn about lowlands, uplands, glaciers, woodlands, ecosystems and environments. A clever concept and clever title. Eighteen chapters cover mountain zones, foothills, forests, caves, canyons, lakes, snowy peaks, summits and the weather. There is even an illustrated climbing calendar, featuring a different mountain for each month of the year.

Other useful features include a glossary of mountain words, from altitude and avalanche to upland and volcano. There is a wealth of colourful illustrations, including plants, insects, animals and mountain diagrams. Maps show the locations of the mountains. Opening flaps reveals more pictures and information. To do lists are included and questions are answered. Many pages include height lines and there is an interesting spotters guide to clouds.

There is sure to be enough inside the covers of this fabulous book to interest young readers. They can explore alone or with an adult and return again and again.

Gary Kenworthy

What We Wear When We Take Care

Sarah Finan, pub. Walker Books

We change our clothing according to occasions and seasons and also to keep us safe from ever-altering environmental changes. This fully illustrated book for children aged 2-5 aims to teach them some of the safety aspects around our reasons for choosing appropriate clothing. Written and illustrated by Sarah Finan, *What We Wear When We Take Care*, is a mini collection of scenes from real life in which different people wear what is necessary for the particular job, adventure, invention, exploration or just for a ride to school on the bus.

The simple sentences are used bold, easy-to-understand and presented in a concise form for children. They can learn new sound words like 'crash', 'boom', 'bang', 'whizz' and many more as they read each of the mini verses. They'll be able to discover why scientists wear goggles during chemistry experiments or why veterinarians wear gloves while handling animals, as well as why safety equipment should be worn while doing certain tasks. Important information delivered in a friendly and approachable manner.

The aim of the book is to teach kids what is worn while practicing safety. The bright blue and yellow illustrations with flashing words and its depictions of people at work invites the attention of the curious child.

Ishika Tiwari

Who Makes an Ocean?

Sally Nicholls, illus. Carolina Rabei, pub. Anderson Press

A charming book on a complex topic. Dad and his children are visiting the Ocean World Museum. As they go round the exhibits Dad explains to his children about oceans and tells the story of the world around them.

Sally Nicholls conveys information in an easy-to-understand way. The text is extremely clear and is age appropriate. The final pages are more complex and would be of interest to older children, especially the sections on Ocean Ecosystems and Human Impact on our Oceans and how we can help protect them. Beautiful colour illustrations by Carolina Rabei support the text and convey the sensitivity of the relationship between the father and his children. I loved the picture of the fiery planet of lava and volcanoes, the pictures of the microbes and the double page of long, sinuous fish like eels some of which, we learn, developed legs and crawled onto the shore. My favourite spread shows what it was like when death came to the dinosaurs. But life remained. It also reminds us that life returned.

The book reads well aloud with its use of rhetorical questions, effective use of pauses and some alliteration - "Silvery shoals swim through the wrecks of pirate ships." An excellent starting point for discussion about the oceans and environmental issues in both homes and school. Highly recommended for children aged 4+.

Brenda Marshall

You're A Poet: Ways to Start Writing a Poem

Sean Taylor, illus. Sam Usher, pub. Walker Books

July here in India brings a soft, warm breeze with the onset of the rainy season. This July I have the chance to read this lovely, illustrated poetry collection by the Nestlé award winner Sean Taylor. *You're A Poet: Ways to Start Writing a Poem* has a warm, breezy softness to it which suits the season here and hopefully where you are too. The coloured illustrations remind me of the *Winnie the Pooh* series because the essence of Piglet is definitely in here.

The intermingling of forms through poetry and prose in a developmental tale of Piglet as he learns what poetry is, makes this an engaging book. Piglets' parents are teaching him how he can create his own verse by taking inspiration from nature-

"The track went winding through the woods and onto the meadow with the sandpit.

Sometimes when they went there the sandpit looked damp and grey.
But today it was dry and it was golden.

So Piglet jumped in and something special happened.

Words splashed out of the sand...”

Piglet voices words and so inks on the paper his first Puddle Poem. The series goes on with Piglet creating more such poems. The book leads the narrative effortlessly and young children are definitely going to enjoy the poems, stories, and drawings featuring the central character. By the end of the collection Piglet reveals poem-making secrets as well. So go grab a copy for your budding poet and in the author’s words-

“Write one word.
Then write another.
Write to remember.
And write to discover.”

Ishika Tiwari

Picture books

All the Things We Carry

Helen Docherty, illus. Brizida Magro

Bea's Bad Day

Tom Percival

Betty's Birthday

Celine Ka Wing Lau

Billie's Buzz

Alison Brown

The Boy On Fire

Sarthak Singa

The Boy, the Troll and the Chalk

Anne Booth, illus. David Litchfield

The Boy Who Painted the World

Tom McLaughlin

Changing Tides

Júlia Moscardó

The Elephant and the Sea

Ed Vere

Gorgeously Me!

Jonathan Van Ness, illus. Kamala Nair

Grey

Laura Dockrill, illus. Lauren Child

The Legend of the Wild West Twins

Jodie Lancet-Grant, illus. Katie Cottle

Little Lion Girl

Olivia Hope, illus. Fiona Woodcock

Mushrooms Know: Wisdom From Our Friends the Fungi

Kallie George, illus. Sara Gillingham

No.5 Bubblegum Street

Mikolaj Pa, illus. Gosia Herba

Not-A-Box City

Antoinette Portis

Our Wild Garden

Daniel Seton, illus. Pieter Fannes

Pearl and Her Bunch

Momoko Abe

Sparks of Imagination

Stephen Hogtun

Tell Me a Mitzi

Lore Segal, illus. Harriet Pincus

This Is Happy!

Anna Ross, illus. Debi Gliori

Time Runs Like a River

Emma Carlisle

Wherever You Go

Alexandra Penfold, illus. Suzanne Kaufman

Whisper to the Rescue

Rose Robbins

Worry Boots

Lisa Thompson, illus. Aysha Awwad

Junior books

The Beanstalk Murder

P.G. Bell

The Boy to Beat the Gods

Ashley Thorpe

Chasing the Shy Town

Erica McGann, illus. Toni Galmés

The Cheat Book: Vol 1

Ramzee

Ettie and the Midnight Pool

Julia Green, illus. Pam Smy

Freya's Gold

Fiona Longmuir, illus. Carmi Grau

The Girl Who Couldn't Lie

Radhika Sanghani

Hero Wanted!

Mark Powers, illus. Coralie Muce

The Hidden Story of Estie Noor

Nadine Aisha Jassat, illus. Sandya Prabhat

The Houdini Inheritance

Emma Carroll

I Am Wolf

Alastair Chisholm

Mayowa and the Sea of Words

Chibundu Onuzo

Nora and the Map of Mayhem

Joseph Elliott, illus. Nici Gregory

Nush and the Stolen Emerald

Jasbinder Bilan

On Poetry Street

Brian Moses, illus. Mark Elvins

Pernickety Boo: The (Only) Incredible Tale of a Magical Umbrella

Sally Gardner, illus. Chris Mould

The Secret Garden Rewilded

Anthea Simmons

Storm Child

Ele Fountain

Terra Electrica: The Guardians of the North

Antonia Maxwell

Transcendent

Patrick Gallagher

Unicornia: Learning to Fly

Ana Pusnet, illus. Diana Vicedo

The Wanderdays: Journey to Fantome Island

Clare Povey

We are Family: Six Kids and a Super-Dad

Oliver Sykes, illus. Ian Morris

Where the Water Takes Us

Alan Barillaro

The Wrong Shoes

Tom Percival

Young Adult books

A Sea of Wolves

Sarah Street

Better Than the Movies

Lynn Painter

Braids Take a Day

Zainab Boladale

Dancers of the Dawn

Zulekhá A. Afzal

Desi Girl Speaking

A. S. Hussain

The Evolving Truth of Ever Stronger Will

Maya MacGregor, illus. Jem Milton

Fallout

Lesley Parr

Four Eids and a Funeral

Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé and Adiba Jaigirdar

The God and the Gumiho

Sophie Kim

Here Lies a Vengeful Bitch

Codie Crowley

I Wish You Would

Eva Des Lauriers

The Last Life of Lori Mills

Max Boucherat

The Maid and The Crocodile

Jordan Ifueko

The Mercury in Me

Rachael Fernandes

Now, Conjurers

Freddie Kölsch

Off With Their Heads

Zoe Hana Mikuta

Sleep Like Death

Kalynn Bayron

Slowcoach

Bethany Rutter

Songlight

Moira Buffini

Taylor Blake is a Legend

Laura Jane Williams

Twelfth Knight

Alexene Farol Follmuth

The Virtue Season

L.M. Nathan

Wild East

Ashley Hickson-Lovence, illus. Camilla Ru

You Don't See Me

Chris Ricketts

Young Gothic

M.A. Bennett

Non-Fiction books

24 Hours Under the Ocean

Lan Cook, illus. Laurent Kling

A Book of People Like Me

HarperCollins Children's Books, illus. Joelle Avelino

A Family of Trees: My First Book of Forests

Peggy Thomas, illus. Cookie Moon

An Invitation to the Botanic Gardens

Charlotte Guillain, illus. Helen Shoesmith

Astrophysics for Supervillains

Dr Matthew Bothwell, illus. Nathan Reed

Bang: the Wild Wonders of Earth's Phenomena

Jennifer N. R. Smith

The Big Book of Useless Knowledge: 250 of the Coolest, Weirdest, and Most Unbelievable Facts You Won't be Taught in School

Sophie Allan, Dr. Victoria Atkinson, Dr. Brittney Borowiec, Laura Buller, Anna Goldfield, Dr. Yara Haridy, Dr. Lucia Perez Diaz, illus. Liz Kay, Hannah Li, Alexander Mostov

The Body Confidence Book: Respect, Accept and Empower Yourself

Phillippa Diedrichs, illus. Naomi Wilkinson

The Brainiac's Book of Robots and AI

Paul Virr, illus. Harriet Russell

The Brainiac's Book of the Body and Brain

Rosie Cooper, illus. Harriet Russell

The Children's Book of Wildlife Watching: Tips for Spotting Nature Outdoors.

Dan Rouse, illus. Abby Cook

Dive, Dive into the Night Sea

Thea Lu

Every Body: Celebrate, Respect and Accept ALL Bodies

Molly Forbes, illus. Mollie Cronin

The Every Body Book of Consent: An LGBTQIA Inclusive Guide to Respecting Boundaries, Bodies and Beyond

Rachel E Simon, illus. Noah Grigni

Finding Home: Amazing Places Animals Live

Mike Unwin, illus. Jenni Desmond

Let's Go!

Julie Flett

Lifesize Ocean Animals

Sophy Henn

Queens Of the Jungle: Meet the Female Animals Who Rule the Animal Kingdom

Carly Anne York, illus. Kimberlie Clinthorne-Wong

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Classical Music and its Colourful
Characters**

Jack Pepper, illus. Michele Bruttomesso

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