



**Armadillo**  
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# Picture books

## **The Cats Who Wanted More**

Katie Sahota, illus. Naomi Tipping, pub. Owlet Press

Can picture books be political? Absolutely. *The Cats Who Wanted More* is a fantastic example of how picture books can work for multiple audiences and deal with challenging or complex subject matters.

The very young reader or listener might enjoy a simple story of a group of greedy cats who take far more than they need at the expense of the rats and mice. Playful and humorous illustrations including cats' bottoms and a sneaky feline pooping on the treadmill are sure to delight many young children. However, the cautionary message of the book could be explored with a younger audience too.

This would make an excellent book for developing critical literacy and for use in PSHE or Modern Studies lessons in educational settings. With a context many families will relate to such as working from home; Covid tests; baking banana bread; and zoom calls, this satirical picture book explores deeper themes of capitalism, poverty and greed. Older children could be supported to draw parallels between what happens in the book and western societies today. As the 'fat cats' put their own spin on what is going on, this would also make a great introduction to the concept of fake news for children. With a recent study revealing over 50% of the adult population in the UK admitting to having been deceived by fake news, it's a current and sadly relevant issue that our children need to be aware of. The newspaper style of the book and the colour palette which supports this is a clever nod by the creators of the book to this concept too. A fantastic book with many layers to unpeel.

## **Pauline Bird**

### **Cloud Babies**

Eoin Colfer, illus. Chris Judge, pub. Walker Books

Eoin Colfer is probably best known as being the author of the hugely popular *Artemis Fowl* novels for older readers, but *Cloud Babies* proves that he's more than capable of turning his writing hand to anything.

"Erin's very first word was CAT." She saw it in the sky whilst she was out in her pushchair with dad. Dad looked up and saw it too, and said it was a 'cloud baby'. That was how the game started with Erin and her parents. From then on, they would always be picking out different 'cloud babies' in the sky. When Erin became unwell, she had to go into hospital for quite a long time. Playing 'cloud babies' made them feel happy and close together, even when they couldn't be together. Erin even played it

with her new friends at hospital. Eventually, Erin was well enough to go home, though she would still be making regular visits to the hospital.

Back at school, Erin realises how much everyone has grown – she’s hardly grown at all, and no one seems to understand about ‘cloud babies’. Erin starts to feel like there’s a great divide between her home/school life and friends and her life and friends in hospital. She has trouble connecting them and starts to feel out of place and sad. She even stops playing ‘cloud babies’. Fortunately, mum and dad see what the problem is and together, with support from her school friends and teacher, they are able to reconcile everything.

The story itself is based on events in the illustrator, Chris Judge’s family life. His artwork, which combines illustrations with photographs of the sky, perfectly brings the issues and the ‘cloud babies’ to life. A great book to use when talking about hospital visits in a child’s life – both for the child in question, and for classmates and friends.

**Vicky Harvey**

### **The Heart of a Giant**

Hollie Hughes, illus. Anna Wilson, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Up in the hills, a giant is said to sleep, "beneath a grassy blanket on a bed of moss and peat."

Tom knows the saying and he loves the hills. Tom is the central character in this story around whom the action unfolds. One day, when Tom is out for a walk, the giant wakes. Rather than run away, Tom, who is a brave young boy, befriends him, realising that Abe (the giant) is actually a child, just like him. After a nap of a hundred years, Abe wants to find his mother, so despite suffering his own loss, Tom accompanies him on his journey. As they travel, Tom discovers that even an ordinary boy can be brave and resourceful, can have the heart of a giant. An unforgettable adventure unfolds in front of the readers eyes.

Glowing, jewel-like illustrations perfectly complement the lyrical, rhyming text, clear from those first opening lines, helping this beautiful picture book to explore themes of friendship, discovery and bravery. It is an emotional read, as you understand that Tom's mam has died but will always be in his heart and he has other people who love and care for him. A beautiful book to share and talk about.

**Jayne Gould**

### **Life With My Dragon**

Didier Lévy, illus. Fred Bengalia, pub. Thames & Hudson

Have you ever tried to live with a dragon? No, I am sure that just like me you haven't though it may have crossed your mind or happened in your imagination? Dragons love to find their way into stories and this picture book is no exception except that actually it is. Why? There is not only one story here, there are five for you to read. Life with a pet dragon is anything but ordinary and this picture book is therefore anything but ordinary!

In the first story the dragon has a cold. Can you imagine what they would be like...a dragon sneezing? Thankfully for us Didier Lévy's idea for the stories has been illustrated throughout by the talented Fred Bengalia whose wonderful green spot covered red dragon springs to life from the page and, in this story, does a very big sneeze, so big in fact that firefighting equipment is needed. Once the fires are out our human character swaps into doctor mode to care for their dragon. Cleaning a dragon is very important as we discover in story two, 'The Check-Up.' In story three the dragon and its human help to put out a fire and by story four we have reached Christmas time and we see how much they both love Christmas. After all this excitement it is time for bed and some sweet dreams.

A book bursting with humour and heart, perfect for bedtimes, for any time that a good story or five are needed, I highly recommend this story for little and large dragons and their humans everywhere.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Magic Feather**

Sandra Dieckmann, pub. Hachette Children's Books

This is a delightful picture book that follows young bear as he gradually discovers who he really is and what his name should be. Being very young, he does not really feel very bear-like and wonders whether he will ever be like his mother and siblings. One night when he cannot sleep, he sees a shooting star and follows it, discovering a magical firebird who gives him a wonderful glowing feather as a present. The next day he feels much more confident and is willing to try new challenges. When young bear saves a small hare from a raging river, he learns a new lesson in growing up and gains an inner knowledge about himself.

What a glorious story of growing confidence in your abilities. The illustrations are absolutely beautiful, truly evocative of the magical space that bear and his family live in. There is a dynamic to the story that is helped by the differing size and placement of the illustrations and the bright colour palette; the images of the firebird are particularly special, brought vividly to life with the reds and golds the writer has used. As children and even as adults, we have times when we feel unsure and in need of something or someone to help us have some self-belief. This story shows that we do not always need to depend on having a physical support, like the feather, but that it is about finding the inner belief that what we can do is good enough and that we can succeed when we try. It also reminds us that even

when we have a loving and caring family around us, it is still possible to have that inner feeling of self-doubt.

This is a wonderful story to help younger readers as they begin their journey towards self-discovery and should be a standard in Foundation and KS1 settings.

**Margaret Pemberton**

## **Maybe You Might**

Imogen Foxell, illus. Anna Cunha, pub. Lantana

The little girl in this story lives in a country where nothing grows. It's too hot and dry. "The grass has turned to desert, the river drained away." It seems like nothing can be done until the little girl finds a seed and decides to take things into her own hands and give it a try. The seed is planted in a dry riverbed, and the little girl takes care of it. She waters it, and gives it shelter and shade from the sun. Eventually a tree grows with fruit to eat. Each fruit has seeds which are planted, just like that first seed was. As more trees grow, the river returns bringing more life to the land. And all because of that one seed.

This is Imogen Foxell's first picture book, and she has made a great job of telling this positive and uplifting story through the child in lyrical verse, making it great to read aloud. Anna Cunha has illustrated more than 30 books and her style perfectly complements and enhances the text.

A positive story for our times that encourages readers not to give up, no matter what others might tell you. It might seem that one small action by one person won't make difference, but unless you try, you'll never know – *Maybe You Might*.

**Vicky Harvey**

## **The Midnight Panther**

Poonam Mistry, pub. Templar Books

Before even looking inside this stunning book, note must be made of the beautiful and enticing front cover of *The Midnight Panther* - it is just gloriously illustrated with a wonderfully patterned black panther and lush autumn-coloured flowers against a midnight blue background with gold, gilded detailing. So, what awaits inside?

You will not be disappointed once inside as the illustrations continue to delight and tell the story, as does the rich choice of words, both telling the tale of overcoming self-doubt to discover who you really

are. The story begins with panther having little self-worth and feeling devalued by the other big cats. He is thoroughly demoralised and lost in the world and does not know where he belongs or where he fits in. This part of the book conveys such deep emotions that you just want to pick Panther out of the book and hug him. He then begins his journey of self-discovery, failing, on the way, to become like lion, tiger, and leopard. Interestingly, in his attempts to become like them, it is Mother Nature that has different plans for him, to reveal who he truly is meant to be. It is not until he is enticed by the light of the moon that he becomes brave enough to climb higher than he ever has before and it is with the moon's encouragement and light that his beautiful velvet fur is revealed to him which 'began to sparkle, shimmering like jewels'.

An epiphany takes place when Panther acknowledges that he didn't need to be like the others, that he has his own beauty and inner strength, becoming content with who he is, and a great sense of peace occurs at the end of the book. The message is beautiful and clear: we are all individuals, we do not need to strive to be anyone but ourselves and, once we know that, we will find contentment and peace.

I can't praise Poonam Mistry enough for such a gorgeous book with such an important theme.

**Claire Webb**

## **Our Incredible Library Book (and the Wonderful Journeys it Took)**

Caroline Crowe, illus. John Joseph, pub. Floris Books

What an inspired idea for a picture book! We follow the story of one library book, meeting all the children who borrow it, and sharing in all the adventures it has.

The book has been splashed with cocoa and splashed with bubble-bath. It's been sat on by a cat, chewed by a dog and snuggled to sleep with a cuddly mouse. It's been soaked in the rain and left on a train. Read in a tent, read in a town, read upside down and read wearing a crown! Enjoyed by children reading all by themselves and shared by families and friends. Each new reader finds just what they need within its pages, from excitement and escape to chuckles and comfort. The text bounces along with an easy rhythm and satisfying rhyme. Cheerful, colourful illustrations introduce us to a diverse range of characters, all united in their enjoyment of a good book.

The design of the book cleverly reflects all the adventures within, complete with scribbles and stains, folded corners, peeling stickers and sellotape repairs. A library is a treasure-house, it's wealth available free to one and all. The humble library deserves to be celebrated with trumpet-calls and golden fanfare, and this wonderful book does just that.

**Dawn Casey**

## **That's Nice, Love**

Owen Gent, pub. Book Island

Some readers may be reminded of David McKee's *Not Now, Bernard*, but in this picture book the distracted parent is just Mum, constantly on her mobile phone. There is no monster at the end, but there is certainly a lot of jeopardy, as the boy declares that he will climb a tree in the park and go higher than he has ever gone before. He does so, teetering on a small branch, with his Mum on the bench below, her face lit by the glow from her phone, saying "That's nice, love." The view from the tree is wonderful: "it's like a whole new world up here!" but the boy's imagination leads him to shout to his mother that he's about to be eaten by snakes, and again the reply is "That's nice, love."

He's King of the Monkeys, helps a beautiful leopard, he's flying as high as the sun on the back of a red bird but Mum is not paying attention. As they walk away from the park, he tries to make contact: "I know you're right here, but sometimes you feel far away" but gets the same response. Once home, he leaves the treasures he has collected on the table, and trudges upstairs, head down, saying, "Sometimes you miss the magical things," Mum finally takes notice "I'm so sorry, love. Can you tell me again about your adventures?" She puts her phone down, takes his treasures to him, and, in his pyjamas, he tells her all about it in an almost continuous stream of words, as children do, she says she'd love to come along next time.

In his bedroom we see his toy snake, his cuddly monkey, see him wave goodbye to a cat that was the same colours as the leopard - he has used what he knows to invent his stories. This is a salutary tale for distracted mothers, who are indeed often seen out and about, and certainly the reader hopes that mothers, (or fathers or carers), who find this book will put their phones down and share the fun of their children's imaginations. The stylish illustrations, by the author, are mostly in warm autumnal colours, with unusual usage: e.g., the boy's hair and the cat/leopard are blue. It is a very beautiful book on fine quality paper, with a message...

**Diana Barnes**

## **What Feelings Do When No-One's Looking**

Tina Oziewicz, illus. Aleksandra Zajac, pub. Pushkin Press

If feelings were little furry creatures, what might they get up to? Some of these 'feelings' look like soft hedgehogs, with ears, and bulbous noses, and others stand on two legs, but they're all rather loveable. In shades of grey with occasional splashes of muted colour, Joy bounces on a trampoline, Calm strokes a dog, Envy tramples flowers, and Insecurities build cages. Some like Imagination, are not exactly feelings, but the concept gives scope for showing a 3-fingered signpost as she travels an

unbeaten path, and Hospitality is shown baking a cake. The facial expressions are fun: Fear, pretending it's not there, is disguising itself as a flower and looks very scared, but the next page shows Contentment, resting in an armchair with a cup of tea, and looking very smug.

Tina Oziewicz is an award-winning author in her home country, Poland, but this is her first book published in English. Her illustrator, Aleksandra Zajac, also Polish, has been shortlisted for international awards. Pushkin Press publishes translated books from other countries, but not many picture books- this is a welcome addition to their list.

The publishers say this is “a charming and brilliant way to talk about feelings with children”, and indeed, parents and carers could share this book and work out which feeling fits a situation, though some of the longer words, like Gratitude, may need explanation, but they could also have a lot of fun looking at the details in the illustrations.

**Diana Barnes**

## **Who will Kiss the Crocodile?**

Suzy Senior, illus. Claire Powell, pub. Little Tiger

Yet another brilliant version of the story of *Sleeping Beauty*, but this time the princess, called Liss, turns into a crocodile as she falls asleep. As you can guess, this tends to put off the suitors who try to waken her with a kiss! As the years pass by, so the castle falls into disrepair and eventually the neighbours (in a very up-market neighbourhood) decide that something needs to be done. So, they call in a team of cleaners called the “Handy – Grans”, who set about clearing the castle. When they find the princess, they are not scared and provide help for her and blow a kiss; the princess wakes up, turns back into a girl and a grand celebration begins.

I love the way that the illustrator has shown the passage of time in this story. At the beginning the costumes are very formal and Edwardian but by the time that the princess is being woken up, we have reached the age of the shell suit (the 1980s if you are not old enough to remember) and the power suit with large shoulder pads. It also pays to look at the end papers of the book; at the beginning we have a very classic trellis design with flowers, but when you go to the back of the book you find a very different look. The design is a very modern geometric mixed with squiggles.

The author has provided a wonderfully amusing version of the story, told in verse, which makes it very easy to read and which brings the humour alive. We all think that we know this story, but this version reminds us that we should not judge people on their looks alone and that being kind and helpful can have the most positive benefits for everyone. A definite five-star addition to the family of *Sleeping Beauty* retellings.



**Margaret Pemberton**

## **Wolves in Helicopters**

Sarah Tagholm, illus. Paddy Donnelly, pub. Andersen Press

The first thing I loved about *Wolves in Helicopters* was the title, such an enticing one for young children. The front cover presents a striking illustration which it reminded me of a movie poster! The back cover illustration is also wonderful, with the main character - Hop, falling upside down out of his burrow into the sky. On reading the blurb and finding out the story is all about overcoming bad dreams, I immediately wanted to find out more.

Being set in the realms of dreams has given the illustrator Paddy Donnelly real freedom with the illustrations. Right from the first double-page spread, I was struck by the colour, texture and movement in the artwork. Hop has a lot of character, and you empathise with her immediately. Every few pages, we cut back to the real world in Hop's burrow and her waking, terrified by her bad dreams of being chased by wolves. Her kind mummy advises her on how to get away from them next time she has a bad dream. The writing by Sarah Tagholm, and the way the text is placed on the pages, really builds tension as the story continues, and Hop tries different strategies to outrun the hungry wolves, even when they come after her in helicopters!

My children and I enjoyed reading this book together. Hop is a wonderful character, although she is afraid, she is also inspiringly brave. It would be a brilliant book to read if you have a child who suffers from night terrors or bad dreams, but I am certain any child would enjoy this exciting adventure story with a fun twist at the end. The colour palette is stunning, and the poetic writing paired with the vivid illustrations make for a nail biting yet inspiring story.

The book is beautifully produced by Andersen Press. I love the mixture of matte and glossy finish on the cover and the interior pages are slightly glossy which enhances the illustrations well. I highly recommend this picture book for a perfect bedtime read.

**Sarah Lovell**

# Junior Books

## **A Fairytale for Everyone**

Boldizsár M. Nagy , illus. Lilla Bölecz, trans. Anna Bentley, pub. Farshore

A beautifully illustrated book filled with 17 magical fairytales, but it wasn't quite what I had expected to read at bedtime that night...

I opened this book and began to read, having asked my 6 year old son, "Which title captures your imagination the most?", to which he replied, "Autumn Brown, because it's Autumn outside now Mummy!". As we read, the 'Once upon a time' told the typical story of a King and Queen who dreamt of a having a perfect princess to call their very own. As with all fairytales, you expect the highs and lows, triumphs and tragedies, good versus evil characters but as this tale unfolded the stereotypes too began to unravel. Our story of choice, Autumn Brown, tells the tale of a princess whose mother falls ill and dies shortly after her birth. As she grows up, the King watches on in disgust as she chooses to dress in boys' clothes, run about in the nearby woods and return home covered in mud – not behaving as a real princess should. The King turns to his magic shaving mirror for advice, which suggests many torturous punishments and eventually advises she should be taken into the woods by the huntsman and killed. "Mummy, that's just like in Snow White!" As the story goes on, we continue to find many comparisons to Snow White but yet the subtle twists and turns of Autumn Brown's story feel as though they tell a more sinister tale – one of a girl misunderstood, rejected by her family for being different and cast aside by society for breaking the mould. However, in the end, she lived happily ever after. "That was a bit different to Snow White!", my son declared. "I think I'd like to be Autumn's friend because we could play in the woods together and make dens! She's very brave too isn't she." To which I nodded and kissed him good night. Then I took the book with me, opened it to the next fairytale and began to read once again...

Curious as to the origins of the tales within this book, I read the editor's foreword and it all began to make sense. Folk stories and fairytales are passed on from generation to generation, and these tales have been retold with an inclusive twist. A twist that turns princesses into giant slayers and where princes fall in love with other princes, celebrates heroes from all ethnicities, genders and sexualities but above all keeps the magical and fantastical world of fairytales alive for the next generation.

Originally published in Hungary, where the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters sparked political controversy and this book hit many headlines across the world and has been used to support the fight for equality and the stand against discrimination. It is an enlightening read, one which I would recommend whole-heartedly – you are never too old to enjoy a fairytale, right?!

**Anna Stebbings**

## **The Little Match Girl Strikes Back**

Emma Carroll, illus. Lauren Child, pub. Simon & Schuster

A powerful retelling of Andersen's bleak story *The Little Match Girl* set in Victorian London and based on historical fact: the pivotal matchgirls' strike that led to major changes in working conditions in match factories and more widely.

Despite little or no education Bridie Sweeney has a brilliant way with words, a gift that gives her a tiny edge over other match sellers. Her pledges that her matches grant wishes bring her custom on the impoverished East End streets where she plies her trade. Each sale makes a pittance, but every farthing matters. Her mother labours fourteen hours a day in the match factory and her pay is minute, even before the fines the despotic foreman metes out for the slightest transgression. Bridie's little brother frequently skips school so he can earn a few extra pennies by making matchboxes. They suffer grinding poverty, hunger and cold. What's more, Bridie's mother's work with phosphorous has made her ill.

It's New Year's Eve. Bridie is determined to make enough money to buy the family a good meal. But things go horribly wrong. The factory owner's carriage knocks her over. Her matches are ruined. Her meagre takings from earlier in the day are stolen, and her mother's slippers, the only pair of shoes they have between them. She has three broken, unsellable matches left. Could they bring the sort of magic she has promised her customers? Striking the first she finds herself in a beautiful house eating delicious food, but she hates the ostentation and waste. Horrified, she realises the house is the factory owners. The second match lands her in the home of Annie Besant who is talking to her father about her attempts to improve the matchworkers' conditions. Together Annie and Bridie go the factory. The foreman has laid off her mother because she's too sick to make enough matches. Annie suggests writing letters. Bridie says what's needed is action. The vision fades, but not her idea, nor her resolve. The third and final match brings her briefly into a home that is recognisably hers but with food and comfort and a mother who is well. Bridie accompanies her mother to the factory the next day. She needs her job back, but the workers decide to strike in protest against her dismissal, galvanised in part by Bridie. Helped by Annie Besant their actions start to have an impact. Bridie won't suffer the fate of Andersen's matchgirl.

An empowering story with a compelling protagonist, brought to life by Lauren Child's striking and evocative illustrations. Mostly monochrome, there are vivid flashes of red – the red of Bridie's fiery hair, the red of the match flames, the red of rich people's Christmas decorations.

**Anne Harding**

## **The Lucky Bottle**

Chris Wormell, pub. David Fickling Books

This novel is a delightful adventure in which the author pays homage to many classic stories such as *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Why? Because this is a desert island story but with a modern twist courtesy of the wonderful imagination and illustrations of Chris Wormell.

When young Jack finds himself washed up on an island, he must plot a way to make it back home to his family. He has survived a terrible storm even if it has left him stranded on a desert island with a kindly but mysterious inhabitant, fresh water and more than enough food. *The Lucky Bottle* has all the hallmarks of a classic adventure story- giant tortoises, dead pirates, treasure maps, sea monsters ... there is also witchcraft, some scary moments and of course pirates! But ultimately it is a tale of friendship and, despite being occupied with many escapades, it is about yearning for home and family.

Beautifully illustrated with a gorgeous cover, this book would make a lovely gift. The short chapters make it accessible for younger children to read alone or with parents. I took it in turns to read with our seven-year-old son who says, 'This is a magical story – the writer has an amazing imagination!'

**Stephanie Robertson**

## **The Ministry of Unladylike Activity**

Robin Stevens, illus. Jan Bielecki, pub. Penguin Books

*The Ministry of Unladylike Activity* is another great Agatha Christie style murder mystery from Robin Stevens, as we have come to expect from this exceptionally talented writer. The Cluedo-style maps and family tree at the front of the book set the scene before you even begin to read the text.

Our main protagonist is 10-year-old May Wong is determined to help the war effort so she can return home to Hong Kong and leave Deepdean Boarding School. She wants to join the Ministry of Unladylike Activity like her sister Hazel, but they refuse her application. So, May and her friend Eric decide to take matters into their own hands and masquerade as evacuees so they can go to Elysium Hall, home to the wealthy Verey family – including snobby, dramatic Nuala. They suspect that one of the Verey family is a spy.

The plot moves at a rapid and logical pace, from hunting a spy to then finding a murderer, to provide an exhilarating ride that racks the tension up as the reader follows the clues from two points of view: from May Wong's reports and Nuala's diary entries. This is a clever format for a children's book as it breaks chapters into smaller chunks along with other unique elements, such as extracts from

notebooks, which will help to keep young readers engaged. There are lovely touches that bring the characters to life such as May's use of disguise to help her track down her suspects that makes her feel like a different person and the hilarious way that they have to act unsuspecting, so they do not become suspects themselves when the police arrive.

I loved this well-researched, wartime mystery with well-rounded characters and extremely well-plotted events.

**Anita Loughrey**

## **Monster Doughnuts**

Gianna Pollero, illus. Sarah Horne, pub. Piccadilly Press

*Monster Doughnuts* is a fantastically funny series perfect for Year Two up. It currently sits as a trilogy but perhaps Mr Harris, Grace and the Hunters will be back for more monster adventures in the future?

We meet Grace and older sister Danni holding down the fort at their bakery, Cake Hunters, since the disappearance of their parents. This is no ordinary bakery, their delicious cakes, biscuits, and doughnuts are baked primarily for the destruction of monsters. The entire family are monster hunters, sending annoying monsters from the human world, back into the monster world. Occasionally they encounter a very dangerous monster and, in this series, that monster is Mr Harris, a cyclops who intends to eat the prime minister. Grace must track him and send him back before that happens. When Grace speaks to Mr Harris, he lets slip that he ate two humans who she believes to be her parents!

Funny and bonkers in places, try to have some snacks nearby as the descriptions of doughnuts and cakes are mouth wateringly good!

With plenty of twists and turns, Grace and Mr Harris end up working together when Mr Harris gets a new job and a delicious hobby! While he has a tricky start (he keeps eating all the monsters), he eventually gets better but is hiding some secrets from Grace and the Hunter family, who he now lives with. As I said, plenty of twists and turns!

I ploughed through this series which, in my opinion, goes from strength to strength. The relationships between Grace and Mr Harris, brings a real emotional aspect to what is naturally quite a funny story. Mr Harris is brilliantly egotistical and the things he says are joyous to read aloud. Readers will love the development of the characters over the series as well as the relationships formed in such unlikely circumstances. With great use of language and vocabulary, humour and inventive situations, readers will be unable to resist reading these books in quick succession.

**Erin Hamilton**

## **The Mooncatcher's Rescue**

Karen Lamb, pub. Walker Books

Karen Lamb has many strings to her bow including a talent for animation, puppet making and illustration. She has contributed to the International Film Festival and Swedish and Danish TV. She has also written a series of educational books and a biography. And now she has turned her attention to writing a children's story book. *The Mooncatcher's Rescue* provides an exciting adventure wrapped around a heart-warming account of evolving friendships in whatever shapes and sizes they might appear. It's a book with a rosy glow to it.

The story begins with River, a little boy who lives in Bigdeepby village. He is standing by Bigdeepby's pond talking to a ghost called Mona who he has just become acquainted with, and she has indirectly introduced him to Boot, a toy badger that River fishes out of the pond and unexpectedly comes to life. Boot, despite his lowly status as a toy badger, manages to sum up the essence of the story by declaring to River who is carrying him along in his rucksack and secretly chatting to him through the flap - "Some folk don't like it when you're different, Boot went on. And what a funny place the world would be if everyone was the same and no-one had a striped snout or wobbly underbelly".

After this enter Bettina, a classmate of River's, who delights in taking advantage of his diffidence and sabotaging his recycling project. Fortunately, Kaleisha a new girl in the village joins Boot as a determined ally of River's. So, the scene is set for several more unusual characters to join the mysterious litany of events, including a pirate who has only recently joined the ghost world as a novice, and a toad like monster who lives in the pond called a Crackenlurk. Soon we have a diverse group of characters some natural and others supernatural all muddling along together in a fluster of fun and melodrama.

Suitable for 7–9-year-olds, this is an ideal bedtime read. The ghosts are nothing to be afraid of, in fact you get to like them in a funny kind of way. Finally, a quote by a wise ant tied up in the story, "on the ice-cream of life, friends are the sprinkles". One to enjoy.

**Elizabeth Negus**

## **Murder At Snowfall**

Fleur Hitchcock, pub. Nosy Crow

We've definitely felt the change in the weather recently in our house. It's now firmly blankets and candles season here! I love reading books which match the season we're in. *Murder At Snowfall* is the perfect book to curl up with as it starts to get colder, especially in the winter months. An atmospheric book set in the grips of a chilly British winter, with sprinklings of Christmas markets and snow flurries, it serves as the perfect accompaniment for cosy evenings in.

The most recent novel from acclaimed author Fleur Hitchcock; this thrilling mystery had me hooked from the beginning. When Ruby and her 'step' (step-brother) Lucas make a grisly discovery in a snow covered box, they set in motion a chain of events that put them in the thick of danger. This crime thriller is not short of action and it's quick-paced narrative had me speculating and second-guessing at every turn.

I loved how the text also sensitively explored the dynamics of a new sibling relationship in a blended family and touched on other themes such as resilience and fledgling romance. It gave the characters and narrative a sense of authenticity, which grounded the dramatic storyline which the protagonists find themselves involved in.

An epic crime thriller for lovers of mystery and adventure with a murderous twist.

## **Pauline Bird**

### **Oskar and the Things**

Andrus Kivirahk, trans. Adam Cullen, illus. Anne Pikkou, pub. The Emma Press

*Oskar and the Things* has been translated from Estonian into English thanks to a generous grant from the Traducta programme of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia and it is an absolute treat, I for one am thrilled that we have been able to share in this story and that I can share it here with you.

The book is intriguing, not only does it have an unusual premise, a child who discovers that he can talk to inanimate objects, but it comes with an unusual illustrative palette of reds, blues and black which at once bring a complete charm to the story and add a layer of intrigue too. From its front cover with a cheerful looking Oskar and some clues as to the 'things' we are to meet in the story to the additional hints on the end pages this is a book of mystery, of wonder, of the importance of friendship and, for the modern child, an important lesson. No, this book does not preach, the lesson is that it is possible to live without a phone! A simple but effective and important message that comes across with no small dose of humour, I certainly found myself at first jumping (likely along with Oskar) as items such as the bin start to talk to him, and then laughing too. I may have been a little scared when the wardrobe explained about the bloodthirsty coat but then I was laughing again at the chair worried about being shipwrecked in the loo. Yes, these things really do happen and all because Oskar was

expecting a dreary stay with his grandmother and is encouraged to discover his own imagination works without tech!

Lively, silly, brilliant, and full of unexpected twists, turns and humour this book is amazing for reading out loud, if you can manage to get through a sentence without laughing! I highly recommend it and hope The Emma Press will continue to bring us more from Estonia, from Andrus Kivirahk and more books in translation.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Pickpocket and the Gargoyle**

Lindsay Eagar, pub. Walker Books

*The Pickpocket and the Gargoyle*, or *The Patron Thief of Bread* in the U.S.A. where Lindsay Eager lives, is set in the medieval period French town of Odierne. Standing by the river in Odierne is an uncompleted, and all but abandoned cathedral. At the top of this cathedral sits the Gargoyle, looking out over the town and watching the years pass by. Always watching, occasionally commenting, and, at one point playing a more important role.

The story centres around Duck, an 8-year-old street urchin who was fished from the river as a baby. Duck is the youngest in a small group that call themselves the Crowns, who, led by Gnat, survive from day-to-day by stealing food and anything else they can get their hands on. When a rival, notoriously violent gang, known as the Red Swords arrive in town the Crowns are told in no uncertain terms that they must stop stealing. It seems they are going to have to move on somewhere else for their survival, but Gnat has a plan – as he always does.

Duck is sent to work as an apprentice at a bakery for Griselde Baker, with instructions to pass coins and bread on to the Crowns without being discovered. Duck sets to work and all seems to be going to plan until Duck finds herself growing attached to Griselde and her new life. Duck worries what will happen if Griselde discovers what she has been doing and finds herself torn between her place in the Crowns and at Griselde's side. When Duck spots Gnat shaking hands with the leader of the Red Swords she realises that something is going on that her old friends know nothing about. Duck is uncertain about what she should do and must decide where her loyalties lie.

*The Gargoyle and the Pickpocket* is a delightful, heart-warming book about forgiveness, redemption and found family, that will appeal to girls and boys alike.

**Damian Harvey**



## **The Spectaculars**

Jodie Garnish, illus. Nathan Collins, pub. Usborne

*The Spectaculars* is the first book in a new fantasy adventure series, which is set in a magical boarding school with a theatrical twist. A familiar premise perhaps but here done with panache and exciting world building. Thrills and spills galore abound in the travelling theatres and concert halls of the Hidden Peaks, where performers use the magic of the stars to enhance their skills.

Harper Woolfe has grown up in the Smoke, a grey, dull place where the sky is obscured by smog and all the theatres have been closed. Her father died in accident and her mum is a mechanic running a repair shop. Vague memories of a friend with blue hair, who her mum insists was imaginary, have puzzled her since she was young. So, Harper is unprepared when a flying canoe, containing some unusual people, appears at the window, and she discovers the secrets of her past. Trick, the friend with the blue hair, and Fletcher, Chief Spectacular, inform her she is invited to join the first-year apprentices at The Wondria, to train in theatre arts. Students learn to harness Star-stuff, to imbue their stagecraft with enchantment.

Harper settles into her new life, but The Wondria is being stalked by Misfortune, one of the Four Curses, said by the superstitious to bring accident and destruction to the theatres. Harper feels she is to blame, especially when The Wondria is threatened with closure, and she is determined to solve the mystery of the Fallen Stars.

Jodie Garnish is a playwright and performer and her background in the theatre informs the inventive detail throughout the book. Friendship is at the heart of a production which takes readers on a thrilling journey. Sprinkle a little stardust over your reading!

## **Jayne Gould**

### **The Spell Tailors**

James Nicol, illus. Jenny Zemanek, pub. Chicken House Books

Step into the magical world of Ingle as you enjoy *The Spell Tailors* by James Nicol, the author of *The Apprentice Witch* series.

In this story we follow protagonist Hen, who dreams of becoming a spell tailor and stitching magic into clothes just like his Nana. We join him on an adventure to uncover a generations-old family secret and discover just how it connects to the mysterious garments he's found in his attic. Hen is in for many twists and turns as his aunt, uncle, and cousin Connie come to town at the same time as the strange new tailor Tiberius Pepper, along with his new factories and promises of affordable, mass-produced spell stiches. Hen also begins to show a knack for a new kind of stitches- a magic that both

Nana and his uncle have tried to hide from him, and have even banned him from sewing, but why? And how could all of this connect to Hen?

From the imagery of beautiful patchwork and stitches to the mesmerizing magic flying scarves, this tale combines cosy and familiar fantasy with the delights of discovering new magic. Readers aged 8 and older will enjoy getting to know Hen and his unique family and they will love reading this story, joining him on a journey where he realizes that family truly is everything.

**Anne Singer**

## **The View from the Very Best House in Town**

Meera Trehan, pub. Walker Books

This unique and heart-warming story follows two friends Asha and Sam, who are on the autistic spectrum. Their friendship is strong and unwavering until Sam gets accepted into the elite Castleton Academy, leaving Asha behind. Struggling to fit in after being labelled 'Miracle Boy,' Sam starts spending time with rich snooty girl Prestyn, the daughter of the family living in Donnybrooke House. After taking interest in Sam, she invites him to join her for a school project to which she also invites the friend of her arch nemesis Asha and so we wait to see how it will unfold.

Whilst the story doesn't have an obvious story arch, it does have a natural flow and lots of realistic yet problematic events that build up to a big conclusion, bringing everything together at the end. It explores themes such as making and losing friendship; acceptance of who you are; privilege and status; and autism with great sensitivity and depth. Friendship is hard at the best of times and these characters navigate big changes. As a reader you root for them as they follow their new paths and witness their need to be accepted and liked by their peers.

Split into three different points of view: Asha, Sam and the most magnificent mansion in Coreville: Donnybrooke House at first, it took me a while to realise that the house had its own point of view! The comedic and slightly dramatic house has its own views on events happening around and, in its home, making it feel like the house is a person in its own right.

A good strong read this is a book that children in middle schools should read at least once as it is a great conversation and question starter about acceptance and autism awareness. The relatable story pulls at your emotions and makes you root for these two friends as they negotiate middle school and change. One I highly recommend!

**Natalie Stanford**

## **Which Way to Anywhere**

Cressida Cowell, pub. Hachette Children's Books

Oh, how blessed I felt to receive an early copy of the latest offering from Cressida Cowell, author of the *How to Train your Dragon* series. Having begun reading that series when my, now 20-year-old, son was still young enough to have a bedtime story and having finished it with he and I reading alongside each other, those stories have been woven into the very fabric of our home. They have brought us adventure, laughter and even tears. So, what more could this new book/series possibly offer? Well...to put it simply – Magic!

K2 O'Hero knows he and his sister Izzabird need to keep the secret of their family's magical history, even from their stepsiblings, Mabel and Theo, and even if they think he's hopeless. But K2 has a gift, a gift that even he does not fully understand. He draws maps. Maps of the most incredible worlds, worlds beyond the realms of imagination. But what K2 doesn't know is that these worlds are real and that these maps will be the key to finding a crossing to another world when their baby sister Annipeck is kidnapped. Soon they are on a daring mission with the future of their family at stake.

This book offers a line 'Come with me if you dare and take the which way to anywhere' and never has a truer offer been made as you venture into lands with terrible beasts, burning rivers and jungles full of plants that hunt by smelling fear.

*Which Way To Anywhere* is a wild and outrageous story that sweeps you along on a fantastical, thrilling adventure to places so incredible, where you meet characters so alive, that you wonder how Cressida Cowell ever dreamt them up! She is truly a master storyteller!

This book is most definitely my read of the year and so compulsive that even the most reluctant of readers will surely be asking to turn the page! Thank goodness this is just the first in the series!

## **Tracey Corner**

### **Witchstorm**

Tim Tilley, pub. Usborne

Tim Tilley's second ecological fantasy adventure, *Witchstorm*, proves to be every bit as magical as his bestselling debut novel, *Harklights*.

Will's world falls apart when his mum disappears. The whispering tongues of the locals say that she ran off, abandoning the family, but Will was brought up to believe that "stories and songs change the world, one word at a time." He believes in mythical storm-lions, disappearing villages and secret spells. He knows witches are real, magical treasure was hidden in the Fens centuries ago and that

finding it can solve the mystery of his Ma's disappearance. When witch girl Magda arrives, in the eye of a storm, like a character fallen from the pages of a storybook, he recognises that she holds the key to finding the witch treasure; a magical stone that can summon storms. But someone else, someone with less honourable intentions, is also searching for the stone. If the wicked Hildreth finds it first then Will's home, and his chances of being reunited with his Ma, will be destroyed.

*Witchstorm* has all the hallmarks of a classic fantasy adventure - missing parents, dark magic, witchcraft, spells, prophecies, family traditions, lost treasure, a terrifying villain - but Tilley puts his own spin on the genre with some oddly quirky, brilliantly clever and breathtakingly inventive details - collapsing towers, hidden cloud cities where witches live unnoticed and breakneck broomstick chases aplenty. As the mystery unfolds there are unusual artefacts to find, clues to follow, coded messages for the reader to decipher alongside the characters and riddles to untangle...all of which accelerate the pace and serve to draw the reader into the narrative. Short chapters heighten the tension, keeping the pages turning until the spectacular set piece confrontation where the future of witches, people and nature will be won - or lost.

*Witchstorm* is the perfect Year Four or Five class novel: it reads aloud beautifully off the page, is packed full of discussion starters around values such as kindness, courage and looking out for each other and even offers links to science and mythology curriculum topics. It would also make the perfect book for fantasy lovers and thrill-seekers to cosy up with in the run up to Halloween, with just the right amount of menace for the 8+ reader. There are some memorably funny moments too. Tilley really is a writer to watch and we can't wait to visit whichever fantasy land he creates next.

**Eileen Armstrong**

# Young Adult Books

## **Big Bad Me**

Aislinn O'Loughlin, pub. Little Island

Blood, blood, and even more blood! Well, when you're a teenager in a town which is definitely supernatural at times, and you keep having to move between human and werewolf personas what do you expect? Add to this the fact that Evie's mother has just gone missing, on some sort of vampire research, and nobody around you actually seems to be what they appear to be, well, it makes for an interesting life, and very interesting reading.

Readers must be aware that blood drips from every page (virtually every sentence), so if you're squeamish this probably isn't a good choice of cosy, cuddle up reading, but it is actually very funny and very thoughtful. To try to avoid the supernatural beings who seem to be increasing both in number and in viciousness, Evie and her little sister Katie go into hiding, while also trying to find their mother. They end up in a guesthouse with a teenage manager who doesn't seem quite what he appears to be, shy, uncertain, dorky, but Evie ends up relying on him to get her through her increasingly frequent and violent changes of persona. All very disconcerting and unusual you might think for a teenager, but not unknown in the realms of teenage horror fiction! Of course avid readers of this genre find the changes of persona, unknown danger, untold gallons of life sustaining liquid, and general terror and uncertainty about the future reassuringly similar to the experience of being a teenager, when nothing seems certain, and everything seems exciting but terrifying at the same time.

The story unfolds with Evie and Katie, mainly alternately, narrating things from their viewpoint, drawing readers into their hilarious and terrifying changes, their everyday life (blood, blood, and even more blood), and their underlying serious search for their mother. Virtually nothing is what it seems to be on the surface, and identity is actually the pivot around which the novel is built. Ultimately I defy any reader not to return to the preface in order to understand more clearly the origins of Katy and Evie's very tangled, intriguing family.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **The First Thing About You**

Chaz Hayden, pub. Walker Books

*The First Thing About You* follows 15-year-old Harris, who has Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) and wants to reinvent himself when his family moves from California to New Jersey - meaning a new high school, a new nurse, and a fresh start. Fascinatingly, Harris judges people by their favourite colours,

knowing if they are too close to his 'blue' then their friendship likely will not work. Weeding out the incompatible greens and purples, he works through the novel to surround himself with 'outgoing' yellows, 'adventurous' oranges, and 'thrilling' reds. His new nurse, Miranda, sees him for who he really is - funny and smart - and with her beauty and confidence, she is a perfect blend of orange and red. Although she has her own complicated history, when she realises Harris is smitten with a girl at school, she makes a pact with Harris to help him with girls if he can help her to become a better nurse.

Carer and disabled person romance story this is not, but it is beautiful to see their friendship blossom particularly when Miranda helps Harris realise that others are not focused on his wheelchair, but his personality. The most eye-opening parts of the story are the brutally honest truths regarding family dynamics. Claire is not a bad mother to Harris but is not perfect either - she symbolises the often frustrating and messy relationships between a disabled person and their families in reality. Ultimately, however, what shines through is the love that they share. Particularly at school, when she is simply 'Claire' - she knows how it would affect Harris if his classmates discovered his mum had accompanied her son to school.

It is worth noting that author Chaz Hayden also has SMA, so readers can be sure that the story is accurate with its details. While *The First Thing About You* is fictional, Hayden's personal experience makes the novel as informative as a non-fiction book. It is an easy read that at times is humorous, but also very moving and heart-warming. Hayden knows his subject, and with this beautiful but powerful story, he reminds readers to treat wheelchair users with respect.

**Chris J Kenworthy**

## **Foul Lady Fortune**

Chloe Gong, pub. Hodder and Stoughton

Set in the politically tumultuous Shanghai in 1931, *Foul Lady Fortune* is a thrilling and suspenseful novel that hooks the reader from the very first page. The novel follows Rosalind Lang, (code name Fortune), the infamous assassin for the Nationalist Party, who, after being brought back from the dead four years ago, cannot die or age. However, when a series of murders in the city causes unrest, and with the Japanese government under suspicion, Rosalind must change from assassin to spy. Her mission: catch those behind the terror plot by infiltrating foreign society before anybody else is killed. But to avoid suspicion, Rosalind must pretend to be the wife of another Nationalist Spy, Orion Hong, whose partying ways and blasé manner only leads to her frustration. With her secret past, his unknown agenda and the fact that nothing is quite as it seems, the two spies quickly realize that this plot is much more horrifying than they could have ever imagined.

By rooting the novel in Chinese history, Gong writes a story which is not only dramatic and fantastical but also rich in culture and beauty. The novel entwines narratives from multiple different perspectives

to create a complex and intriguing plot which is constantly hinting at a greater threat. But Gong never quite reveals enough for everything to make sense, ensuring the reader is constantly in a state of suspense. It is not until the final, climatic chapters that everything begins to be revealed to the reader. The warring factions within the story mean no character can be trusted, yet they are written in such a dynamic manner that you can't help but root for them. The vibrant descriptions of Shanghai, along with the witty dialogue and gripping action ensures the novel is a delight to read.

A fast-paced mystery that is filled with romance, espionage, and intrigue, it is impossible not to be caught up in the drama which is *Foul Lady Fortune*.

**Elinor Hurry**

## **Honesty and Lies**

Eloise Williams, pub. Firefly Press

Cold, mystery, court intrigues on one side, and on the other sisterhood, hope, and a tale built on stories. Who is telling the truth, and who is telling lies? In *Honesty and Lies* author Eloise Williams has created an engaging masterpiece which takes the reader to a time when Queen Elizabeth I's reign was about to end to make way for the Jacobean era. Life was harsh, cold continued for months on end and meagre sustenance followed suit for those residing in London. Our heroine, with a pile of secrets in her head, enters the scheming and dangerous environs of the city from Wales. Her name is Honesty. She meets a girl named Alice, who works for the Queen as her maid. Honesty persuades Alice to help her survive and from there we enter the world of court full of self-centeredness, lies, jealousy, hate, glamour and escapism.

This tale came as a delightful surprise reminding me of my English Honours days. Eloise trained in theatre and beautifully situates the climax as Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is to be enacted in the castle garden. To build the suspense, the plot is built through narration from two points of views, those of Alice and Honesty. The division between the ladies of the court and those on the fringes is veritably described along with descriptions of London of 1601. The reader is pulled into the atmospheric picturing such as this one of the frozen grounds-

"The ground is white with frost and shines where the torchlight catches it. The river holds ghostly mists to its surface and the shape of boats are whispery grey and almost unreal."

And this when the festivities begin -

"I see Honesty enter, surrounded by merrymakers. The dress I have worked so hard to mend is vibrant and ethereal. The leaves seem to be drifting as she walks. I watch as she is hooked by the arm to the ladies-in-waiting, gabbling and batting their eyelashes at potential suitors. The Queen shall soon arrive and though the hall is festooned in golds and greens, the candlelight bewitching and the company jolly, a nightmare will soon be upon us."

I definitely loved reading a mystery novel after so long! Written in an engaging manner, it feels predictable but nevertheless keeps one hooked. A light read for a cold, windy night!

**Ishika Tiwari**

## **Lark & Kasim Start a Revolution**

Kacen Callender, pub. Faber & Faber

Lark is a student, struggling through a new school and new city (Philadelphia) after being relentlessly bullied in New York. As a black, non-binary, queer, neurodivergent teenager, Lark spends their free time with friends at The Commons, a local community centre offering a creative writing class. Lark is focused on getting their first novel published and plans to get noticed by an agent through Twitter. As a result, Lark spends hours focusing on posts, getting likes and eventually reaching 50,000 followers. But when a tweet that is accidentally posted on Lark's account goes viral, they agree to accept that it's theirs to protect their former best friend Kas. Things quickly spiral out of control leading to an unwanted relationship, vicious trolls, and tension with friends. Will Lark take responsibility or let social media acceptance dictate their actions?

*Lark & Kasim Start a Revolution* takes readers into a modern day setting with an optimistically flawed protagonist who believes everyone deserves love, though Lark themselves struggles with self-love. Through interactions with Kasim and the growing love they feel for each other, Lark starts to understand that they not only deserve love but are loved and ready to be part of a loving relationship. This emotional arc takes unexpected twists and turns and feels like readers have a front row seat in a contemporary, polyamorous teenage love life.

Written in first person, the story reads at a quick pace interspersed with Tweets, character profiles and letters from agents that give background information without slowing down the story with loads of backstory. Readers get an inside track to Lark's thoughts thanks to the character Lark is not only writing about but who makes hilarious, and more often than not, very wise commentary on Lark's decisions. As the students debate philosophical questions about life and love, race and accountability, oppression and narcissism, readers are roused into considering varying views on important topics than linger long after the book is finished.

**Stephanie Ward**



## **Let Down Your Hair**

Bryony Gordon, pub. Orion Children's Books

Bryony Gordon has worked for the Telegraph for 20 years. She is a successful author of several bestsellers and presents the Mad World podcast. In 2016 she founded the Mental Health Mates, a global peer support network, which encourages people with mental health issues to connect and get out of the house. In 2017 she won the MIND 'Making A Difference Award' for her work in changing the perception of mental health in the media. Her latest book is heart-warmingly written with insider knowledge of troubled mental health and thus able to provide us with astute observations on the trickiest of moments that life throws at us.

*Let Your Hair Down* is the story of a 16-year-old girl brought up by her aunt owing to her mother's death in childbirth, she is told. Barb happens to have sensationally beautiful hair, which fosters admiration from anyone that meets her. But sadly her self-esteem does not shine like her hair and she exists for the approval of her aunt, acquaintances and friends. Her mother's sister spies a lucrative opportunity through her niece, whose best interests she is prepared to sacrifice for personal kudos and cash. She encourages Barb to jump on the social media bandwagon. Barb stops school at 16, and isolates herself in her tower block flat with her aunt and two hundred thousand social media followers for company, avidly watching @hairwithBarbs. Her limelight career stumbles on erratically accompanied by an indefensible level of stress. Until one day she discovers a bald patch. Barb recalls the words she was told that she would be nothing without her hair. And she can't help wondering just what it would be like to be a 'nothing'.

The alopecia progresses and as her hair drops out her self-awareness, self-esteem and inner tranquillity begin to thrive. She is awoken from a nightmare. Barb's life is beginning. She is no longer there to please other people, beauty is a false mirror she realises. She switches off her phone, dons a beanie and starts enjoying the moment she is living in. It's a positive upbeat finale that Bryony Gordon offers us with this Rapunzel style melodrama.

## **Elizabeth Negus**

### **Monsters Born and Made**

Tanvi Berwah, pub. Sourcebooks

*Monsters Born and Made* is a South Asian-inspired fantasy story about a brave teenager called Koral, who risks her life hunting and capturing mystical creatures called maristags. Maristags are dangerous creatures which can live on land and underwater, and Koral's family makes a living hunting and breeding them. However, when Koral's brother is injured trying to capture a maristag, the family is

left in dire financial circumstances. Out of desperation, Koral cheats her way into the 'Glory Race,' knowing that the prize money for winning the deadly chariot tournament could change her family's lives. She soon discovers that her rivals have trained for the 'Glory Race' their entire lives, and that one of them is her ex-boyfriend Dorian. This creates an internal conflict, as while they still have feelings for each other they are rivals, and both need to win the tournament.

The author's fantastic world-building in the first part of the story later gives way to some intense action and helps the reader to feel empathy towards the broad cast of characters through internal monologues. This is especially true given that Koral has to be fierce in fending off challenges from both the rebel factions that try to sabotage the tournament, and the societal leaders that will stop at nothing to push her out of the competition. It is also within the initial stages of this dystopian narrative, that Koral is established as a naïve character. She too easily trusts others, which is an unfortunate weakness given that her rivals are ruthless in their pursuit of riches and glory - willing to kill, or exact revenge on to their rivals, to win. Koral's tendency to just roll with it and blindly trust others gives the supporting characters more than enough reasons to take advantage of her. Yet, it is her naivety that also allows the reader to feel sympathy towards Koral and her family's plight, even as the odds are stacked firmly against her.

*Monsters Born and Made* is a genre-bending fantasy novel. Author Tanvi Berwah has brilliantly written this action-packed Young Adult story, which provides the reader with intense chariot races reminiscent of the Romans, romance, and lots of action with mythological creatures.

## **Chris J Kenworthy**

### **Nothing More to Tell**

Karen M. McManus, pub. Penguin Children's Books

Brynn has always dreamed of being a reporter so when she gets an internship at a true crime show she's desperate to use the opportunity to redeem herself after being fired from her previous school newspaper job for an unfortunate article that went viral. And Brynn has the perfect unsolved crime to pitch them - the case of her favourite teacher who was brutally murdered four years earlier.

Brynn returns to her old school, after four years, to find the class divide between the 'dregs' (the scholarship pupils) and the 'elites' (the students from wealthy families) more firmly entrenched than ever. The three students who discovered Mr Larkin's body are still a tight unit and sticking to their story of what happened that day in the woods, including Brynn's ex-best friend Tripp. But there are plenty of unanswered questions for Brynn to poke her nose into, such as: Who was Mr Larkin really? Who had a motive for murder? And who had a reason to protect the killer? Brynn must balance her journalistic urge to uncover the truth with consideration for the real people involved in the case, including her own friends and family members.

Karen McManus's books are consistently entertaining and well-plotted and are hugely popular in my secondary school library. *Nothing More to Tell* is a standalone murder mystery, though there are a few nods to the author's other books including the previous one, *You'll Be the Death of Me*. Unlike some of the other books, this one doesn't have a hooky John Hughes movie concept (Ferris Bueller's *Day Off...with murder*, *Breakfast Club...with murder*) but it does have plenty of twists and turns to keep the reader guessing and I didn't figure out who the murderer was till the very end. Yet another irresistible, twisty tale from the queen of teen crime, suitable for KS3 pupils and above.

## **Rebecca Rouillard**

### **The Ripper of Whitechapel**

Yvette Fielding, pub. Andersen Press

Author, Yvette Fielding, has worked extensively on television and has real experience of investigating the paranormal. She is fascinated by the ghosts of children because they can be more playful, and they love to be naughty whilst trying to scare you. This makes *The Ripper of Whitechapel* a ghost hunting story full of excitement from beginning to end. The book will send shivers down your spine with the horror and the danger, but there is also some humour and lighter moments amongst the more serious parts. Adults, as well as teens, will enjoy this eerie, atmospheric, and spooky tale.

The story starts by going back in time to meet Jack the Ripper as he lurks in the shadows. Then it soon returns to the present and follows the ghosts of two young children as they haunt a local school. Young, trainee ghost hunters Eve, Clovis and Tom are invited to help investigate. Could there be more to this story than first meets the eye? Could it be that the ghost children are victims of Jack the Ripper? Is the Ripper of Whitechapel about to start a new campaign of terror? The Ripper is a difficult topic to return to, but nevertheless this story is entertaining, frightening and eerie without being too much for readers.

There are some great characters in the story. Eve, Uncle Rufus, Clovis and Tom are all very likeable, if sometimes a little naïve. There are some lovely friendships, and all the characters have their own unique personalities. Uncle Rufus and his experiments are particularly fascinating. This great ghost mystery will appeal to those who love the paranormal as well as those who are still fascinated by the unresolved Jack the Ripper mystery. It is an enjoyable, exciting, and spooky tale.

## **Gary Kenworthy**

### **Stone**

Finbar Hawkins, pub. Zephyr (Head of Zeus)

This is a story about a father and son and the themes throughout are death, grief and the unexpected. As Halloween approaches, Sam is grieving the death of his father. The story opens on the eve of the funeral when emotions are running very high. Young Sam, his mother and little sister, Beth, are all mourning the death of their father and husband, who was a soldier on duty in Afghanistan. From beginning to end the story is atmospheric and melancholic. It tackles the difficult themes of death and grief, but in an understanding and often beautiful way. The writing is both heart-breaking and heart-warming.

There are some interesting characters in the story, and we learn a lot about the relationship between Sam and his little sister. This is a very moving relationship all about adjusting to the loss of a loved one. Sam is struggling to come to terms with the death of his soldier father. As well as losing his father, he has lost a best friend. Sam is devastated. There is also an older man, Bill, and his dog. Bill and Sam share a bond in grief. Then there is new girl Oona. Can she help to heal Sam's broken heart? Sam meets mysterious Oona when he tries to escape by going to a party. It is with the support of Oona and Bill that Sam tries to come to terms with the death of his father. Young readers of this book should be able to relate to Sam and it may help them to come to terms with their own experiences of death and grief.

There is also some myth and magic in this story. Mythology, magic, legend and witchcraft are all covered, adding to the tense atmosphere of the story. There is a good combination of magic and the ordinary. The typical is about the young boy dealing with the death of his father. Then the unusual kicks in when Sam finds a strange silver-flecked stone which is ice cold to the touch. Then strange and eerie things start to happen, as well as having to deal with death and his own teenage problems-like relationships and bullying-Sam has to deal with this mysterious stone. Some may find this is a difficult book to read. The subject of death can be hard to come to terms with. On the other hand, this is a story built around special characters and friendships, young love, and the unusual supernatural element.

**Gary Kenworthy**

### **Three Kisses, One Midnight**

Roshani Chokshi, Evelyn Skye, Sandhya Menon, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

I honestly wasn't sure what to expect from this title and I was bowled over! I read it in one go, so hooked was I once I got started. The title hints at three stories, there being three kisses to be had, there being three authors. So how does it work. It is a book that could be described as containing three short stories. It could also be described as one story told from three different perspectives. Both suggestions sort-of fit but don't quite do the book justice for it is both and more.

It is Halloween. Four hundred years ago the town of Moon Ridge was founded on a fateful Halloween night. The story opens sharing this knowledge with us and telling us that we are going to be celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of the founding this All Hallows Eve with The Coven. Legend has it that on the stroke of midnight a young woman about to embark on a life with her dearest love died. The Lady of Moon Ridge, as she is now known, has descended from the heavens every year since then to help those willing to follow their heart's desires. The Coven, three best friends since they were very young, all have desires tucked carefully away in their hearts, they need to admit them to themselves on this special night if they are to see the true magic work. Their nickname is an affectionate one and yet they do conjure magic between them. Onny, Asj and True believe in magic, in the alignment of affection, acceptance and healing but can they bring themselves to make it truly work for each of them.

They each, over the course of the day running up to the big celebration, face their own issues, confidence, heartache and seeing the truth. Their stories are told separately, one by each author and yet they are inextricably intertwined. The writing is first class, the story compelling, it is far from simple and yet is perhaps as simple as they come! I highly recommend this book to all those with a soft spot for romance, magic and the very special nights of the year which bring it all together.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Treekeepers**

Kieran Larwood, illus. Chris Wormell, pub. Faber

Already a Blue Peter Award Winner for *The Legend of Podkin One-Ear* (2016), Kieran Larwood's latest fantasy has all the hallmarks of an excellent read, and an exciting story with which to challenge rivals for yet another award.

Faced as we are in the twenty-first century with the unthinking destruction of forests all over the world, and the widespread climate and environmental catastrophe that will ensue if we don't come to our senses and urgently address the danger, *The Treekeepers* is a subtle fantasy with an incredibly important message. Shapeshifter Liska is training as a warrior, for Arborven is a city in the lands of Skyra that is in constant threat. Ringed by mountains, the city is held within an enormous tree, and is home to thousands of people. When Liska overhears a plan to take over the city, and no one believes her, she knows, as a warrior, that it is her duty to act. Those who are willing to help her are a mixed bunch: a nervy young boy whose companions are earthworms, and a ghost-girl. Together with a kittimew (whose illustration shows a character not unlike Puss in Boots), they travel through dangerous lands in an attempt to find the living heart of a tree, to defeat the worst threat their world has ever known.

Aided by Chris Wormell's atmospheric illustrations, a map, and chapter headings purporting to be from Arborven books, Larwood's fantastic adventure is a gripping tale of evil destroyers of the natural world, and of the oddball young people who, while apparently powerless, combine their strengths to overcome the destruction of their natural world. *The Treekeepers* is a hugely engaging book for middle grade readers, rich in drama and fear, in friendship and in the understanding that comes with learning about others. It is also rich in quiet comedy, in the silly mistakes they (and we) can make, and the magical powers which the characters learn to use correctly. An absorbing fantasy which has so much more to tell us and warn us than we learn by reading it only as an exciting adventure.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Unraveller**

Frances Hardinge, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Set in a fantastical world of marsh woods and wild landscapes, *Unraveller* is the latest offering by Costa award winning author of *The Lie Tree* Frances Hardinge. From the opening page, readers are immersed into web of curses and spells, secrets and lies – a mystical place where nothing is ever as it seems.

The story follows 16-year-old Kellen who has the unique ability to unravel the life-changing curses placed on people by their enemies. He is helped by his closest ally, Nettle, who has followed him ever since he saved her from an evil curse which condemned her to spend her days as a Heron. Kellen and Nettle are reluctantly recruited by the strange one-eyed Gall and his Marsh horse to infiltrate an underground band of cursers intent on over-throwing the ruling Chancery. But the stakes become perilously high when Kellen realises he, too, has been cursed. If he cannot find a way to unravel the curse he knows he risks endangering all those around him.

Hardinge is a master at making her spell-binding world feel all too real, whether it be through her beautifully observed prose or the parallels with our own world which are always bubbling just below the surface. Kellen's talent, although he does not fully comprehend it, is his commitment to understanding both curser and cursed. It is only through such a full understanding of why something happens that one can truly begin to unravel the terrible consequences. As such, *Unraveller* is an astute commentary on the complexity of human relations and the consequences of unleashing our vengeance on those around us. It is a story of loyalty in the face of deception and understanding in the face of ignorance. But it is also a story rich in imagination and imagery, full of pace and drama. A frightening, beautiful and absolute must-read of a book.

## **Paulie Hurry**

## **With Fire in Their Blood**

Kat Delacorte, pub. Penguin Children's Books

Sultry, gothic and spellbinding, this YA novel is a darkly evocative narrative about coming of age, identity and power. It is also the first in what promises to be an excellent series.

Lilly Deluca is a sixteen-year-old American girl who is forced to follow her father to his new job in Italy, after the suicide of her mother. Her relationship with her Italian mother was difficult and Lilly struggles to be in Castello, a dilapidated and divided medieval town built on ancient catacombs. It is governed by a beloved but terrifying authority called The General. His enforcers oversee monthly blood testing of all inhabitants to check for blood purity, to check that no one has signs of becoming a 'Saint' with magical abilities. The Saints were responsible for a mass killing in the past and were dealt with through execution by burning. The inhabitants of Costello belong to one of two powerful families and are forbidden from mixing – except for one night a year at a masked ball. There are overtones of *Romeo and Juliet* throughout, but the novel has mythology and a flavour all its own, certainly helped by the dramatic sense of place that Delacorte evokes in a medieval walled town in Italy, seemingly far removed from modern life.

Cruelty and twisted love are recurring themes within the novel as Lilly navigates its startling twists and turns, discovers complex loyalties, and explores her own attraction to more than one member of her class. Delacorte, who herself moved to Italy from America as an eleven-year-old, blends ancient myth, violence and modern sexual mores into a gripping mystery and a compelling love story. I am looking forward to reading the next one!

## **Saira Archer**

### **Wren**

Lucy Hope, pub. Nosy Crow

Wren lives with her father, brother and aunt in an ancient and crumbling castle nestled between the mountains and the sea. Following the loss of her mother in a tragic accident Wren's father is distracted and disapproving of everything Wren does. Whilst Wren wants nothing more than to be free to follow her passions, sailing out to sea and inventing like her late mother, her father reveals other plans, plans that involve Wren being sent away to the Anglesey Institution for the Re-education of Young Women run by the Aireys.

Desperate to prove him wrong, to show that she does not need to be sent to school and, at the same time to escape her suffocating life, Wren, along with the help of her friend Medwyn, begins building a

flying machine. But it is not that simple, there are other goings-on too. The house, her crumbling castle of a home, is making strange noises almost as if it is singing or crying and the cracks in the walls are growing larger. The Aireys are around a lot too and they along with Wren's father are keeping secrets. There's something in the basement. What is it they are hiding? Wren needs to find out, and when she does what will she do?

Woven with elements from Lucy Hope's own family history and set in her childhood home of Anglesey, this thrilling and historic tale is full of mystery, hope, love, and friendship. It is a story that will captivate you as you discover secrets right alongside Wren, and it is a story that will continue to surprise you right to its very end.

### **Tracey Corner**



# Non-Fiction Books

## **A History of Words for Children**

Mary Richards, illus. Rose Blake, pub. Thames & Hudson

This is an intriguing and unusual book. It is both simple and incredibly complex as it attempts to encourage young readers, and speakers, to find out how they can use words to make the world a better place. This was the aim of Mary Richards and Rose Blake when they followed up their earlier, award winning *History of Pictures...* and the *History of Music...* with an investigation of words and their uses.

There's an excellent summary published by Thames and Hudson, and I can't describe the book more accurately and eloquently than through it: 'A history of the world told through the prism of language, from Shakespeare to Anne Frank, Martin Luther King to Greta Thunberg. *A History of Words for Children* explores the uniquely human ability to transfer thoughts from one brain to another using words.'

Written in a lively narrative style, the book presents a history of the world and human development through the prism of language, introducing readers to the civilisations, inventions and wordsmiths who have shaped the way we communicate. Divided into themed chapters, the book explores what words are and how humans communicate using spoken language and sign; the development of written scripts and writing implements, including paper; the history of manuscripts and printed books, including worldwide bestsellers and famous libraries; the process of learning another language; dialects and accents and the way language can reflect our identity; the power of words to calm, inspire, rally crowds and rule nations; graffiti's role in spreading messages; codes and invented languages; the patterns of poetry; the future of words, including emojis; and languages facing extinction.

Through word and image Richards and Blake offer middle grade readers an understanding of what words are for, how varied they and their use is, and why we need to continue creating and using words to inform and entertain us. A timeline, a glossary, suggestions of further reading, and answers to questions posed throughout the pages, in addition to a list of illustrations and an index complete an intriguing book. It is serious, funny, bright, and cheerful and immensely useful for talkers, and for readers!

**Bridget Carrington**

## **All Things Change**

Anna Claybourne, illus. Sarah Edmonds, pub. Welbeck

This book explores the many kinds of change and what each means. The overall message is that everything changes. Even we change. The biggest change was The Big Bang when our universe began. The Big Bang was the start of time, space, and everything. The book goes on to look at the processes of change in the natural world, including the life of a changing star. It covers geology, ecology, and biology.

The book is ideal for children to explore on their own or with adults. It is beautifully illustrated, an easy, relaxing, and enjoyable book to browse and read. Very comprehensive contents, glossary and index pages all help when using the book. There is also a very clear and interesting chart explaining how long different changes can take. For example, a star changes over billions of years, landscapes change over millions of years, an oak tree changes over one thousand years, we as humans change over less than one hundred years, a butterfly may live and change over weeks, the sea tides change daily and our eyes blink and change every few seconds. This book explores some fascinating things, many of which we may never have really considered before.

*All Things Change* is predominantly a book about the changing world for young readers; day changes to night, plants grow and change, birds hatch from eggs and change as they grow, we change as we grow older every day. The stars, the rocks, the continents are all moving and changing. These concepts of change are presented in a factual and positive way. However, the book also takes a philosophical look. How do we cope with change that makes us feel sad or change that we cannot control. There is a fascinating look into the future and changes that young people will be concerned about. For example, climate change and how bush fires today threaten to change the land. Whilst some change is normal, the book shows that change can also be difficult.

This is a fascinating book, full of amazing detail about everything that changes. Some changes happen in front of our eyes, other changes take tens, hundreds, thousands, or millions of years. We change too, as we grow and learn.

**Gary Kenworthy**

## **Darwin and Hooker: A story of friendship, curiosity and discovery that changed the world**

Alexandra Stewart, illus. Joe Todd-Stanton, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Charles Darwin and Joseph Hooker were avid collectors in the 19th century; Darwin studied animals whilst Hooker was interested in plants, and both toured the world gathering all sorts of specimens for their studies. This book tells the story of each of their lives and how a chance encounter in London led to an enduring friendship that lasted for the rest of their lives. The reader learns about their families

and early years, how Darwin studied medicine at Edinburgh University then joined the HMS Beagle on a two-year voyage to South America whilst Hooker, who also studied medicine and was an expert botanist, joined the Royal Navy as a surgeon, reading Darwin's book, "The Voyage of the Beagle" as preparation.

Reading about both their journeys, we find out about life on board ship, the habitats and wildlife of South America, and the vastness and cruel weather of the Antarctic. We also learn that when Darwin's observations lead to his theory of evolution, he knew this would not be popular so he enlisted Hooker's help and support.

Although this is an information book, it can be read as a story – taking us through the lives of these two scientists. It is filled with information, lavishly illustrated and utterly fascinating. There can't be many who are unaware of Darwin, especially as evolution is studied within the curriculum; I had never heard of Hooker, despite him being an important botanist and the Director of the Royal Botanical Garden in Kew, where he is buried.

Aimed at 8-11-year-olds, this book would make a wonderful gift for a young person interested in the natural world. It is accessible to read and invites further exploration of the topics covered. It would also sit well in the school library and classroom.

**Barbara Band**

## **Galápagos**

Tom Jackson, illus. Chervelle Fryer, pub. DK

The Galápagos are a chain of islands in the Pacific Ocean, just off the coast of Ecuador, and a bucket list destination for many. They were first recorded on a world map in 1570 and are a unique place, containing over 2000 species found nowhere else. They are invariably linked with Darwin and have been called a "living natural history museum" but are still important in the world today; a recent expedition discovered over 30 new species!

Chapter 1 of *Galápagos* introduces the reader to the islands; how they were formed, their geology and volcanic activity, their weather and climate and covers Darwin's expedition and the theory of evolution. Subsequent chapters explore the islands' flora and fauna, separating them into reptiles, birds, marine life, and plants with a final chapter titled "people and preservation". This last chapter covers human damage, protecting the islands and ecotourism, and I would have liked more detail on this aspect given the importance of conservation and environmental protection.

As we have come to expect from DK, the book is a visual delight being lavishly illustrated with photographs, drawings, maps, and diagrams. Text is presented in bite-sized chunks and unusual

features are highlighted with arrows and comments making the overall book fascinating to read and perfect for dipping in to. Aimed at 7- to 11-year-olds, it would appeal to those interested in nature and wildlife as well as linking well with the curriculum. It also has a glossary and index, but it is a pity that there are no website suggestions for further information.

## **Barbara Band**

### **Human Kindness**

John Francis, illus. Josy Bloggs, pub. What on Earth Books

John Francis' idea in writing *Human Kindness* is to share his ideas of how kindness has shaped human history, and that kindness will rescue our world from the crises it faces. He explains why he thinks that, and suggests how, drawing on his own life and the thousands of miles he's walked, and the thousands of people he's met. Francis is American and not well known in the UK. In 1972, following a pollution disaster near his home town, he gave up using oil and began walking everywhere. Soon after, he gave up speaking too. He travelled the world, became a professor. Listened to everyone he met. In 1990 he says that "I realized that I had something to say" and he began a public life speaking up for the environment and for people and communities. He's given TED talks: they're lovely.

This is a book with a point of view written by a person who has led a remarkable life, and it is illustrated with subtle craft and great storytelling. It's a solid, colourful object, evocative and inviting, Josy Bloggs does well. Books like this very much depend on a non-writer being able to communicate in writing, and on their having something worth reading to say. As a writer Francis' voice is steady and warm. He writes simply, but not simplistically. I'd feel comfortable giving this to Year 3 (younger if you have an insightful reader). Because he doesn't dumb down, I'd still feel fine with this as a Years 5 and 6 book. There's value for older mid-years readers, but I feel the accessible presentation may make them self-conscious. The content is wide-ranging: biography, anecdotes, observations, opinions, quotes, advice – things he's learned from history, science, travel, people. Some of it finds the right way to phrase thoughts you yourself may have had; other parts take you into a distant corner of the world you knew nothing about. It's engaging and page-turning. It feels unfocused midway through, but at the end you see it's a broad survey with a very clear path and destination in mind.

I must mention how Francis, having travelled the entire world, brings stories from the entire world into his book. Often this feels forced because of the limits of the writer's experiences. Not so here. Everywhere in the world is part of his life. Briefly then, a lovely, sweet, thoughtful meditation on the often neglected but essential human qualities of kindness, compassion, and generosity. I feel privileged to have reviewed it.

## **Dmytro Bojaniwskyj**

## **I Hear You, Ocean**

Kallie George, illus. Carmen Mok, pub. Greystone Kids

*I Hear You, Ocean* is a non-fiction picture book for under 5-year-olds that explores the sights and sounds of the sea.

Two children visit the beach with their parents and, when they arrive, we see the older child tell his brother “the ocean has lots to say ... if you listen.” During the course of the day the book covers they climb over rocks, splash in the waves, eat sandwiches and, finally as the sun is setting, they are carried home, fast asleep in their parents’ arms. All the while the ocean is talking to them; waves are roaring and pouncing; shiny pebbles tumble together; crabs scuttle swiftly; shells mummer whooshing messages; and birds swooping and soaring.

Each page brings new delights to explore amongst the evocative pictures of wide sea-green oceans and rocks covered in barnacles. There are lots of animals to discover too including seals and a sea otter plus the usual sights you see at the beach such as seaweed and sandcastles.

This is a great book for sharing as children can mimic the sounds and actions on each page. It also enables them to engage with nature and, with its soft, slow gentle pace, is perfect for mindfulness reading. *I Hear You, Ocean* is the second book in the Sounds of Nature series; the first one being *I Hear You, Forest*.

## **Barbara Band**

## **The Museum of Odd Body Leftovers: A Tour of Your Useless Parts, Flaws, and Other Weird Bits**

Rachel Poliquin, illus. Clayton Hanmer, pub. Greystone Kids

I’m going to judge this book by its contents page. Ah, the contents page so obligatory, so dull so often – but not here. Here it’s the floorplan of the imaginary museum of the book’s title, with each section given its own room. Immediately you feel the attention to detail, the playful creativity. You see the personality in the illustration, the deco typography that recalls the golden age of Big-City American museums. You get a strength of identity and place that’s really unusual for fact books, that you more usually see in obsessively world-building fiction. I’m a fan, just from the contents page, but do the contents live up to that start?

In one sense this is a book of human anatomy, specifically those parts that seem to be serving no useful purpose (did you know you start life with four kidneys?), but it's also an investigation into why they exist, so it's also a history of human evolution. It's a tour (and the book's persona is that of a museum tour guide) of how we have been shaped by our relationship with our changing environment and lifestyle. I feel that your level of love for this book depends upon whether you'll get on with its tone and approach. I adored it. For me it was charming and funny. Other people may feel it's trying too hard to be zany. It'll divide people like *Horrible Histories* and *Magic Bus* do, and probably in much the same way. What's undeniable is the density of accessible and rare factual content. We have hiccups because once we had gills! The knowledge content itself cuts through whether you enjoy the presentation or not.

Ultimately, the book works three ways: it tells you things you probably don't know in a way you'll understand; it reinforces that science is much like detective work, testing theories drawn from evidence; it's an enjoyable light-hearted pastiche, that makes me pine for *The Ministry of Curious Stuff*, which it closely resembles. The writing is grown-up without being off-putting; the art is the right sort of cartoony. The book achieves what countless others try and fail to do. Wagging my obsolete tail, I commend it to 8 to 12s.

**Dmytro Bojaniwskyj**

## **Our Planet: The One Place We All Call Home**

Matt Whyman, illus. Richard Jones, pub. Harper Collins Children's Books

This stunning book is like a David Attenborough documentary in paper form – it even has a foreword by the great man himself!

*Our Planet* looks at the habitats of planet Earth and gives information about each one in turn. From the high seas to the deserts and grasslands, this book takes you to every corner of the Earth. Broken down into sections which explore the different natural spaces that form our planet, this book is so easy to navigate through. Readers can spend time reading about different habitats, discovering stories about the fascinating species from those places. With a great balance between incredible photographs of creatures in their natural habitats and realistic illustrations, the book is not text heavy but can be enjoyed and taken in by flicking through the pages, much like the documentaries can be enjoyed from the breath-taking filming, as much as the brilliant narration.

One aspect of the book, which deserves a separate mention, is the double-page spread after each section which informs the reader of how to protect the natural space that they have just read about. These pages include worrying facts about the dangers that human activity have placed natural spaces in as well as laying out clear steps which could undo the damage and prevent further harm to those creatures that should be thriving in these natural environments. This book ends with a final double-

page spread, titled 'One Chance' and 'One Future', which encourages humans to realise the importance of the seven biomes that are explored in the book and seems to be a fitting reminder that we are responsible for the future success of our wonderful home.

A thoroughly enjoyable, and important read for any younger readers who are interested in finding out more about planet Earth and how best to protect it.

**Tom Joy**

## **Our Story Starts in Africa**

Patrice Lawrence, illus. Jeanetta Gonzales, pub. Magic Cat Publishing

Written by Bookseller YA Prize and Waterstones Prize winner Patrice Lawrence and vibrantly illustrated by nature lover and artist Jeanetta Gonzales; *Our Story Starts in Africa* takes the reader through a beautifully soothing and empowering story told to little Paloma who was visiting her family in Trinidad. Her cousins take a jibe at her when she speaks in a language other than their own and from there begins the story of Africa's rich culture and profound history.

Poloma's relative, Tante Janet, is the speaker guiding the reader through the book, and little Poloma interjects with questions, thoughts and affirmations while discovering facts about, for example, how the wooden comb came into existence, how warrior queen Amanirenas fought Romans back in time, how stories of thousands of years were etched on stones and stocked in the library of Alexandria! While Africa flourished with its spices, cocoa, frankincense resin and more such natural treasures; its citizens got scattered across the globe after European nations exploited their wealth and people. The story spans through history to the present with a happy Paloma living in a developing world with cousins awed by her dreams of becoming an astronaut.

The book is dedicated to the storytellers and history keepers of the true Africa that was and the book joins them to become one itself. It can be read by children aged 7-11, who will enjoy the bright illustrations and Paloma's inquisitiveness, which might match their own. It's well researched with plenty of added information on terms like Empire, Slavery, Africa's importance to world history, and a bibliography as well. The book introduces children to gaps in African history, opens up the untold spaces lit by a child's innocence.

**Ishika Tiwari**

## **Planets**

John Devolle, pub. Pushkin Children's

Travel through space on your own discovery adventure and learn about each of the planets that make up our solar system. From Mercury all the way through to Neptune (and even a small mention of dwarf planet, Pluto) each planet is explored with a fun fact and a lovely illustration to help readers understand what it is like there.

This book is aimed at very young readers rather than those who already have a bit of knowledge about space and the planets. It is definitely a first look at space through images and a few words for younger children setting out on their journeys of learning exploration, rather than a non-fiction run down of the planets in detail for the older child with more learning. With fully illustrated double-pages that are full of colour and details such as Jupiter's 'Great Red Spot' and the volcanoes of Venus, readers are given extra information about the planets alongside the few sentences that are on each page. The writing is kept quite fun, with descriptions of the smells or temperatures on each planet being the focus rather than typical, number-heavy details such as distance from the Sun that are often seen in books about the planets.

This book is a lovely introduction to the planets of the solar system for young readers.

**Tom Joy**

### **Toxic: The World's Deadliest Creatures**

Ico Romero Reyes, illus. Tania Garcia, pub. Thames & Hudson

Animals are incredibly adaptive creatures. Some animals have astonishing yet secretive weapons to help them survive – poison being one! This book is full of different types of spine-tingling animals from around the world and facts about how and why they are the deadliest! Some might even surprise you...

This book is perfect for young animal enthusiasts who want to know more about the most lethal animals to walk the planet. Each page is filled with different types of animals including a tiny blue octopus and a platypus (who knew?) which are either poisonous or venomous -There is a difference... This book is filled with fun facts on how quickly they maim or kill their prey.

Ico Romero Reyes worked at New York's Museum of Natural History for over six years and has collected numerous small fun and interesting facts about these animals, his writing has been paired beautifully with the work of acclaimed illustrator and designer Tania Garcia. Her illustrations can be seen spread out over double pages with images that are so vivid and colourful that they are memorable to look at. It is a perfect balance between little texts and big clear images giving the reader a lot to absorb.



*Toxic: The World's Deadliest Creatures* is an interesting book to read that will teach you all about the world's deadliest creatures alive, open if you dare!

**Natalie Stanford**

### **Up Close: A Life-Size Look at the Animal Kingdom**

Isabel Thomas, illus. Dawn Cooper, pub. Wren & Rook

This book compares the biggest and smallest of animals from across the world. It looks at their various features, many of them focused around the senses, including eyes and ears, noses and beaks, mouths, teeth and tongues. Skin, feathers, and fur are also covered as are paws and claws, wings, and tails!

*Up Close* is a book published in a large square format which enables the use of life-size illustrations that allow readers to look more closely at numerous animals that have adapted to live in various environments, comparing their similarities and differences – this is definitely a book that encourages observation skills. The pages are in bright bold colours and the large illustrations are interspersed with smaller, more detailed pictures.

*Up Close* is stuffed full of facts and readers can discover that an anteater's tongue is 60cm long and that a blue whale's tongue weighs more than an average sized car. It would have been useful to have a contents page and/or index to aid accessibility therefore, as such, it is more a book to dip into and browse rather than use to find out specific information.

Recommended for lower primary school, age 7 – 9 years, KS1.

**Barbara Band**

## **Picture books**

### **The Cats Who Wanted More**

Katie Sahota, illus. Naomi Tipping

### **Cloud Babies**

Eoin Colfer, illus. Chris Judge

### **The Heart of a Giant**

Hollie Hughes, illus. Anna Wilson

### **Life With My Dragon**

Didier Lévy, illus. Fred Bengalia

### **The Magic Feather**

Sandra Dieckmann

### **Maybe You Might**

Imogen Foxell, illus. Anna Cunha

### **The Midnight Panther**

Poonam Mistry

### **Our Incredible Library Book (and the Wonderful Journeys it Took)**

Caroline Crowe, illus. John Joseph

### **That's Nice, Love**

Owen Gent

### **What Feelings Do When No-One's Looking**

Tina Oziewicz, illus. Aleksandra Zajac

### **Who will Kiss the Crocodile?**

Suzy Senior, illus. Claire Powell

### **Wolves in Helicopters**

Sarah Tagholm, illus. Paddy Donnelly

## **Junior books**

### **A Fairytale for Everyone**

Boldizsár M. Nagy , illus. Lilla Bölez, trans.  
Anna Bentley

### **The Little Match Girl Strikes Back**

Emma Carroll, illus. Lauren Child

### **The Lucky Bottle**

Chris Wormell

### **The Ministry of Unladylike Activity**

Robin Stevens, illus. Jan Bielecki

### **Monster Doughnuts**

Gianna Pollero, illus. Sarah Horne

### **The Mooncatcher's Rescue**

Karen Lamb

### **Murder At Snowfall**

Fleur Hitchcock

### **Oskar and the Things**

Andrus Kivirahk, trans. Adam Cullen, illus.  
Anne Pikkou

### **The Pickpocket and the Gargoyle**

Lindsay Eagar

### **The Spectaculars**

Jodie Garnish, illus. Nathan Collins

### **The Spell Tailors**

James Nicol, illus. Jenny Zemanek

### **The View from the Very Best House in Town**

Meera Trehan

### **Which Way to Anywhere**

Cressida Cowell

### **Witchstorm**

Tim Tilley, pub. Usborne

## **Young Adult books**

### **Big Bad Me**

Aislinn O'Loughlin

### **The First Thing About You**

Chaz Hayden

### **Foul Lady Fortune**

Chloe Gong

### **Honesty and Lies**

Eloise Williams

### **Lark & Kasim Start a Revolution**

Kacen Callender

### **Let Down Your Hair**

Bryony Gordon

### **Monsters Born and Made**

Tanvi Berwah

### **Nothing More to Tell**

Karen M. McManus

### **The Ripper of Whitechapel**

Yvette Fielding

### **Stone**

Finbar Hawkins

### **Three Kisses, One Midnight**

Roshani Chokshi, Evelyn Skye, Sandhya Menon

### **The Treekeepers**

Kieran Larwood, illus. Chris Wormell

### **Unraveller**

Frances Hardinge

### **With Fire in Their Blood**

Kat Delacorte

### **Wren**

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John Devolle

### **Toxic: The World's Deadliest Creatures**

Ico Romero Reyes, illus. Tania Garcia

### **Up Close: A Life-Size Look at the Animal Kingdom**

Isabel Thomas, illus. Dawn Cooper