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Picturebooks

The Ballad of Cactus Joe

Lily Murray, illus. Clive McFarland, pub. Oxford Children's Books

A beauty of children's literature, especially picturebooks, is that they can be about anything at all, and in the case of Lily Murray and Clive McFarland's new collaboration it's a gruff, prickly, lonely cactus. One which is actually inspired by the real Saguaro cactus, which is found in Arizona and Mexico, the iconic cactus of Western films. The endpapers explain how the different features of the Saguaro and all the characters that appear in the story are based on reality. This makes it not just an amusing and entertaining read but also fascinating and a means of cultivating an interest in this plant in particular, and botany and nature as a whole.

Cactus Joe is a lonesome, gruff, prickly character, he resembles a cowboy from old westerns like Humphrey Bogart or John Wayne, complete with his bright orange Stetson and checkered neckerchief. He sings his ballad about being a rough, tough prickly machine standing alone until the day he dies until a woodpecker comes to him with a pact – he will eat the critters that feast on Cactus Joe in return for a space in one of Joe's 'arms' for his nest. Cactus Joe agrees but is keen to keep his grumpy façade going! Eventually he becomes a home for various birds, repeating his not so lonely ballad with each new bird added to the verse.

Cactus Joe's temper gets the better of him one day when he is swarmed by birds all wanting to make a home in him. He tells them all to go. The illustrations here are especially dramatic looking down at Joe from above, the flock of the birds swirling around him, you can hear their noise and understand Joe's feeling of being smothered. On my initial look at the book, I was very unsure about the illustrative style, it has quite a cartoony, graphic garish style but the more I looked at the pictures and read the story the more I enjoyed his artwork. The use of colour especially; the purples, yellows, pinks, and florescent orange really capture the intense heat of the desert landscape.

With a sweet ending, this is both entertaining and informative; a lovely, unusual, and surprisingly appealing read.

Natalie McChrystal Plimmer

The Boy Who Loves to Lick the Wind

Fiona Carswell, illus. Yu Rong, pub. Otter-Barry

A boy watches the boy next door as he sticks his tongue out in the wind and asks his neighbour about it. She explains about licking the wind and invites him to go with them to the beach, where the winds

are best. The boy next door doesn't always use words, and wears ear-defenders against loud noises, but he enjoys the ride to the beach and is delighted to see the sand and the sea. Our boy wants to collect shells, but the boy next door likes to throw stones into the sea: "Big splash!" He is upset when his sandwich gets sandy, but his Mum knows how to calm him. Our storyteller builds a castle of stones, and digs a little moat, but the boy next door starts to pick up the stones, so they both throw stones into the sea until the castle is gone. They jump and spin and yell into the wind, and splash in the shallows, until the Mum says they're going home in 5 minutes, and she sets a timer on her phone. They are both sad to leave the beach, but on top of the dunes they lick the wind, and it's the best feeling in the world. At school on the next day, they report on licking the wind, which the boy next door demonstrates, and at playtime ALL the classmates have fun licking the wind.

Fiona Carswell has an autistic son, so she knows what she is writing about in this her first book, though she does a lot of other writing in her work in book promotion. She also promotes Autism Awareness Week in Scotland every year, and there is a page at the back explaining about autism, and how some people are different, but she emphasises that we are all different from each other in some ways. Yu Rong's illustrations have twice been shortlisted for the Yoto Kate Greenaway/Carnegie Medal, in 2022 and 2023, and she illustrates this story of inclusivity and friendship with warmth and sensitivity.

Diana Barnes

Detective Catz and the Missing Nut

Marjoke Henrichs, pub. Scallywag Press

Have you ever aspired to be a detective? What skills do you think you would need? Well Catz practises the skills of clue finding, disguise and making himself invisible, so that he can be a REAL detective!

Before the story even begins, you are indulged in a vibrancy of colour only matched by a rainbow, with the splashes of colour oozing out of the inside cover as Marjoke Henrichs' characters playfully whizz into life, on the page. These are Catz's friends and they all have a part to play in his success as a detective.

As we follow Catz on his mission to find his friend, Flossy's nut, he starts to believe that he isn't cut out to be a detective, as he just can't find it, despite discovering some of his other friends' lost items, on the way. He is so down hearted and feels such a failure that he decides to give up on his dream of becoming a real detective and decides to tell his friends.

But he doesn't remain sad for long, as his friends are delighted that he has found their treasures and encourages him to carry on. As it turns out, Flossy had left her nut in a very special box that required

a key to open it, but she's now lost that too! Did Catz find the key on his journey? You really will have to read this delightful book yourself to find out.

The simple narrative is wonderful, and the characters have a child-like quality, each one of them wanting to help each other, demonstrating kindness to one another. Their encouragement makes Catz determined to not give up, showing resilience to the very end. What better personal qualities would you ever want to instil in a child? The illustrations compliment the story telling so well, with the use of the happy, bright colours that children would often use themselves. The use of colour and the clever child-like illustrations have a sense of liveliness about them – you could almost imagine that the trees and toadstool are alive too.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and will definitely be reading it to my children!

Claire Webb

The Golden Hare

Paddy Donnelly, pub. The O'Brien Press

I always look forward to books published by The O'Brien Press, knowing that they'll be an engrossing read and if they have illustrations I look forward not only to the pictures but also to the text, both of which always stand head and shoulders above many books for young readers.

The Golden Hare is no exception, and Paddy Donnelly has proved once again to be an exceptionally brilliant illustrator, as well as those books in which he has shown to be an excellent author-illustrator. His awards for his work show us just how much he is revered throughout Europe and beyond and published in at least a dozen languages. *The Golden Hare* is an outstanding story. Donnelly lives in Belgium now but, as his name suggests, he is Northern Irish through and through, and the people and stories, especially those about nature and magic reflect his love and knowledge of his homeland. His original hometown is very near to Rathlin Island, right at the very northern most part of Ireland, and not far from the Giant's Causeway. At the end of the book we learn that Rathlin Island is rather special because of the creatures which live in and around it, in the water, in the sky, and on the land, and amongst those are the Golden Hares themselves. The story itself is followed by pages which tell readers about the creatures which are found there – again excellent information and splendid pictures. Come on, readers will say, tell us about the story! Well, it's a delightful story about a Grandad and his grand-daughter Meara. Meara would love to see some of the amazing animals she's heard of, like sharks and giraffes, but Grandad doesn't think they'll meet them on a walk where he lives, so instead they set out to find a Golden Hare, a fantastical shape-shifter animal, but very rarely seen. They encounter many wonderful real creatures and as a result Meara falls in love with nature.

Readers will also fall in love with the beautiful illustrations, and there's so much to find, learn and love in this magical story.

Bridget Carrington

Help! We Need a Story

James Harris, illus. Mariajo Ilustrajo, pub. Little Tiger

This is a picture book for any child (or children) who wails about being bored! Artie the macaque is peacefully drawing when June Baboon (the sort with a bare bottom) appears, complaining of boredom. In simple rhyme, other animals, including tamarins and capybaras (wonderful words!) also join in. In fact, Maud the bear thoroughly enjoys sitting and moaning. Quickly, Artie makes a book with them all in, and they crowd around to see.

Although the title is quite dull: 'The Story of Our Morning' they find that they are the heroes of an imaginative story featuring a dragon, a lion with gold wings, robot sharks, zombie hens, going into space, under water, and on a desert island where they eat pink ice cream. The next day, they are all happily inventing stories and drawing their own characters.

The end papers give simple outlines of the animals, so that children can copy and embellish their own characters. Mariajo Ilustrajo is one of those talented artists who can create an expression in a few dots and lines on a face, and James Harris, whose website proclaims that he is "an award-winning children's author, pole-vaulter wizard, exaggerator etc" (two of these claims are true), has written two junior fiction books that are proclaimed by reviewers as bonkers. This is evidently his first picture book, and is only a little bit bonkers, in Artie's imaginative story.

Diana Barnes

I Love Books

Mariajo Ilustrajo, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

I wonder what it would be like to not like books. In fact, what would it be like to hate books? To never pick one up and enter the world of your own limitless imagination!

Well, the inside front cover of *I Love Books*, shows you some of the more mundane activities you can involve yourself in, illustrated in grayscale, of course, to emphasis their boringness!

As you turn the pages of this story, you meet a little girl, who does just that – never picks up a book because she hates reading! Unfortunately for her, she is tasked to read a whole book, yes, a WHOLE

book, over the school holidays. Not knowing where to begin, she is reluctantly taken to the daunting library.

At this point in the book, there is very little colour, in the illustrations, save the little girl's bright orange socks, but on the double page spread, showing the library book shelves, an aqua and starry wisp of a story is seen escaping the pages of a book – is this the book she is going to choose? What might it be about? Will she enjoy it?

As she starts to read, she is taken on an adventure into her own imagination, and colours start to burst from the pages of *I hate books*, as she meets many interesting characters and discovers many different places such as a 'pirate lake', a 'quicksand valley' and even an 'enchanted frog forest'.

The grayscale, at the beginning of the book, is transformed into a rainbow of colours as the girl's enjoyment of reading develops throughout the story until, on the inside back cover, you see all the different characters that the little girl reads about – she becomes so engrossed that she just can't put her books down!

It is wonderfully written, with humour, and the illustrations are bright and colourful. You will love the very expressive faces of the characters – showing what they are thinking and feeling.

It is such a joy to read and has a very important message about the importance of books and the enjoyment you can get from them; how you can be taken on fantastical adventures just by reading words on a page that unleash the power of your imagination. If you are a reluctant reader or know someone who is, then this is the book to start with and you won't look back!

Claire Webb

The Library Mouse

Frances Tosdevin, illus. Sophia O'Connor, pub. Uclan Publishing

Quill the mouse lives in a hole, but most importantly this hole is in what appears to be a children's library. He spends his days surrounded by books, listening to stories being read to enthralled audience of small children. However, Quill has a dream, he loved telling stories, so wondered if he could become an author and read his stories to the children. Eventually Quill finished his book, but how was he to get it read?

A mouse's voice is too soft to be heard and he couldn't get the pages to be seen. When the cleaner throws the pages into the bin, he yells for her to check what she has done; but he then despairs and hides in his hole. However, miracles do happen and next day, he finds the cleaner reading through a little book that he recognizes; she has a hearing aid and that had picked up his final shout

comments. With a little help from his new friend, Quill is able to follow his dream of writing and of helping others achieve their dream as well.

Every now and then you come across a book that really has a little touch of magic, and this is one of those. The short rhyming text works beautifully and the very soft muted colour used for the illustrations really bring the story alive. Quill and his spider friend, Leggsy, have real character and I love the pen which is tucked behind Quill's right ear.

It is a story about not giving in and reaching for your dream, something that we all need reminding about. Above all it is about friendship, helping others and realizing the magic that stories can bring to people's lives.

Margaret Pemberton

My Friend Andy

Emma Chinnery, pub. Little Tiger

Fluffy, a cute little dog, is the narrator in this lovely picturebook, who tells us the story of once getting separated from her best friend Lily and Lily's Mum on their daily trip to the park. Scared and lost in the city, Fluffy is found by her friend Andy, the larger dog, that her family pass during their journey, and together with his dad, they keep Fluffy safe and warm, until they can reunite her with her people.

With themes of friendship and caring for each other running throughout, Chinnery also explores the issue of homelessness in a subtle and thought-provoking way because Fluffy's saviours, Andy and his dad, just happen to be homeless. Ironically, Fluffy initially passes them busking outside an estate agents called Home; but is never allowed to play with Andy. They take Fluffy to their 'home' in an underpass, which looks magical with the glow of headlights and rainbow graffiti. Fluffy sees how Andy's dad tucked them up and sang songs to them until they fell asleep, and the illustrations depict dad as being gentle, kind, and in the following pages, playful as they spend the day trying to find Fluffy's family which includes rolling in mud and going for a ride in a shopping trolley.

After finding a missing poster with Fluffy's address on (another reminder of the power of home), Fluffy is very happy to be reunited with Lily but misses Andy and his dad. In the final charming pages, which are especially poignant to a dog person, Fluffy tells Lily all about her adventures and missing Andy and dad but doubts how much Lily understands dog language. However Fluffy concludes that maybe Lily "does understand dog language after all" when back on their daily walk Lily's mum doesn't walk straight past Andy and dad as usual but stops to share a drink and a chat.

The display of kindness and friendship is beautiful, Chinnery is a lovely writer and a gorgeous illustrator, filling her pictures with lots of interesting details such as the individual characters in the

city crowd scenes, the coordinating outfits worn by mother and daughter, or the use of lighting to contrast between Andy, dad, and Fluffy under the streetlamp and Fluffy and Lily cosy and safe lit by the bedside lamp.

With its dedication to homeless people and their canine companions Chinnery has created a delightful book which works on many levels: not only is it an engaging story about a little dog's adventures but it is also a gentle and insightful book about homelessness and as such is a welcome tool to use when talking about such issues with young children.

Natalie McChrystal Plimmer

Pink Trucks

Sam Clarke, illus. Cory Reid, pub. Five Quills

Have you ever seen a pink truck? Stink loves trucks and has trucks of all different colours: red, black, blue, white, but doesn't have a pink truck. The issue is that Stink likes pink!

He searches everywhere he can think and also asks his friends but still cannot find the pink truck that he desires.

Sam Clarke challenges gender norms in *Pink Trucks* by using the simple stereotype of genders preferring certain colours and objects, a concept that is relatable for the young readers who would enjoy this book. The story is great as it shows the support that Stink receives from family members in his search for a pink truck as well as showing how creativity can be the answer to many problems. Stink's sister is able to encourage Stink to use recyclable materials to produce the truck that he wants which encourages young readers to reuse materials rather than to waste them – another message which is really positive.

The rhyming patterns that are consistent throughout the book make this a fun, easy and memorable read. Different text types are used to show how to emphasise different words and phrases on the page with certain words in larger font or in bold. Cory Reid's illustrations are super; each page is filled with colourful illustrations that bring the story to life and capture Stink's emotions perfectly.

This is a well-thought-out book which is both enjoyable and educational.

Tom Joy

The Prickletrims Go Wild

Marie Dorleans, pub. Floris Books

There can be no doubt that the Prickletrims family is very proud of their scrupulously maintained garden. This family takes a lot of pride in their garden, which is characterized by straight edges, neatly mowed lawns and perfectly shaped topiaries, all of which they take great care of. As far as they are concerned as long as the nature is kept under strict control, they are able to enjoy it to the fullest.

It is only when their gardener, fed up with the strict rules that have been set, suddenly quits that the Prickletrims garden is left to grow wild. Initially the family is overwhelmed by the garden that invades their home, but as it grows wilder and more natural the family gradually learns to love and appreciate the garden that has become their own.

The Prickletrims' house, and chimney become filled with enormous plants and flowers that are growing both inside and outside the building, this is sure to delight children, especially when they notice all the animals moving in with the plants and flowers! In this delightfully fun and distinctive picture book, you will find a variety of bright, quirky illustrations as well as gentle humour throughout.

This is a playful celebration of untamed nature, from Marie Dorleans, award-winning creator of *The Night Walk*. The recommended reading age is 4+ and I agree, it is perfect for younger readers who will delight in its authors vivid imagination.

Katy Ralph

Thank You

Jarvis, pub. Walker Books

Are you grateful for all that you have? For you have more than you can imagine. This little book for kids will make them grateful for the flora, fauna, family, experiences and themselves. It's a sweet book on the practice of gratitude in our daily lives by Jarvis. The use of collage art on the pages makes it an easy to read and comprehend type of children's books.

Here, our little boy character emphasizes the importance and joy of saying 'Thank You' in his own way to that, which he is grateful for.

He thanks the sun, the moon, his boots, the tree which gives him shade; his boots, and the clouds, and his sister and for many more mundane and whimsical things, such as,

"I'll thank the Tyrannosaurus for being the longest word."

"I thank my bicycle for being so fast."

It's a cute and short read with the use of easy-to-understand English for kids aged 4-7. Parents and teachers can use it to cultivate a practice of gratitude in the child, which is, as we see nowadays in this fast paced life, an important habit to have. Gratitude is a great practice to elevate the emotional quotient of a person by making them see the brighter side of life and children can be encouraged to keep a gratitude journal along with their little book of gratitude.

Ishika Tiwari

This Is the Ship That Jack Built

Peter Millett, illus. Sam Caldwell, pub. Buster Books

This is a truly delightful version of an old favourite rhyme, 'The House that Jack built.' However, in this updated story Jack has built himself a pirate ship and has got a hoard of gold and other treasure, which he is keen to keep hold of. But then the excitement and fun begin, as a range of creatures try and relieve him of his haul. It starts with a rat, closely followed by a cat, squid, whale and various other marine animals. Eventually the bag of swag ends up being deposited on a beach and Jack is finally able to retrieve his belongings.

The author and illustrator have both brought a real sense of fun to this story. The text follows the beat of the original rhyme and there is a really strong sense of energy and movement as we have the repetition of the ever-growing list of animals. It is an absolute joy to read out loud and will soon have the audience joining in with the list. The illustrations complement the text with their really bright and exuberant images, which each cover a two-page spread and which lead us on towards the next part of the story. I particularly enjoy the facial expressions, as each animal in turn, is chased by another creature. This is one of those books that will be loved by a range of young children. There are those who love pirates, as well as animal lovers and those who enjoy the rhymes. It should be definitely on the list of all nurseries and reception classes for 'Talk like a Pirate Day.'

Margaret Pemberton

Junior Books

Black Hole Cinema Club

Christopher Edge, pub. Nosy Crow

This story starts with a simple visit to a cinema. Lucas and his friends meet at the Black Hole Cinema Club and they are excited about the show ahead. However, a trip to the cinema for Lucas, Ash, Maya, Caitlin and Finn may never be the same again. The lights go down. There is silence. The screen stays blank. For the reader the anticipation and excitement is building already. Suddenly a tidal wave comes crashing through the screen. The adventure begins as the reader is plunged into a fast-moving battle of fantasy, excitement and action.

The friends find themselves inside the film and as the reader of the book you can be the hero in your own story. There is lot of scope to use your own imagination. In fact, Lucas and his friends actually start to question if their adventures are fantasy or are they real. They find themselves in secret hideouts. In lost cities and in the jungle. They face prehistoric monsters and impossible missions. This story really is action packed and will keep readers on the edge of their seats. The action is fast, full of thrills and twists and is non-stop until the very end.

As the group reach their last adventure, will they be able to escape back to the cinema? There is still a blurring of fantasy and reality which will continue to pose many questions to readers. Are the group in the cinema? Are they in the jungle? Is this real? Is it fantasy?

This really is a fast paced and entertaining book to read. It is a whirlwind adventure and is sure to make the reader seek out Christopher Edge again.

Gary Kenworthy

Cactus Kid and the Battle for Star Rock Mountain

Emmanuel Guerrero, pub. Flying Eye Books

Comic books are becoming more popular, and I find that they are great for reluctant readers. There isn't too much writing, the illustrations are always big, bright and colourful and when reading aloud children often have different voices for all the characters. You know this one is going to be a great read...its first word is VROOM!!!! taking you are straight into the action and not slowing down.

Join Cactus Kid as he zooms through the Neverending Desert on his sweet ride, seeking the ultimate magical powers so he can become the greatest wizard of all time. Oh, and there are also huge amounts of explosive trouble, deadly motorbike races, and a lot of embarrassing encounters...

Life's not always easy for a cactus. This particular one wants to impress his all-powerful dad with his epic magic skills, and he's not about to let anything stop him on his solo hero's journey. All he needs is a chunk of star rock to level up his potions. There's just one problem – there's none left. The only way to get a single slice of the stuff is to enter the deadly MotoBrawl race; try to stop accidentally turning bugs into giant fire-breathing creatures; befriend the lizard gangs that roam the desert, maybe make a friend along the way. But does a lone hero need any of this? This young cactus just wants to be a hero, nothing else. He sets off on his own, on a hero's journey to become a great wizard. Along the way, he is going to meet others who could help him...but they all want something from him and let's not forget the bad guy...

Cactus Kid and the Battle for Star Rock Mountain promises plenty of laughs. The illustrations are amazing, the colours suit the story perfectly and the whole has great detail helping to tell the story. I just adore how different fonts have been used too. Aimed at Middle Grade readers, this is an ideal book for children who are new to graphic novels. This copy already has a really long waiting list at school.

Helen Byles

Diary of a Big Bad Wolf

Ben Miller, illus. Elisa Paganelli, pub. Simon & Schuster

Ben Miller is a well-known actor, comedian, director and writer of magical stories for all the family. This is his unique spin on the story of Big Bad Wolf. Meet Wolf, living in the Fairytale Woods, he is the local bandit that everyone knows and no-one fears, despite his bluff and bluster. Written for age 8+ this is an amusing psychodrama being acted out and recorded by Lawrence, commonly known as The Big Bad Wolf. His diary reveals perceptive childhood anecdotes that help us to understand why he has become a big bad wolf.

Lawrence has been outlawed by his pack as they don't feel he does his fair share of their communal hunting. This comes as a shock to Lawrence who lives the dream of being the biggest and baddest wolf in the woods. He always wanted to impress his father who was constantly disappointed by his son and his lack of killer instinct. Lawrence explains that he is a sensitive wolf not a soft one, which unfortunately makes his position as the biggest and baddest untenable.

The diary begins on the 21 March with Lawrence misguidedly looking forward to his packs first barbecue of the year. He starts a fitness regime in anticipation of his planned hunting itinerary and

arrives at the barbecue only to find he has been excluded by the pack. The one wolf who tries to befriend him is Squirt the runt, who is industriously making veggie pies rather than meat. Twice he offers them to Lawrence but feeling obliged to react as the biggest baddest wolf should do he tells Squirt to get lost. Secretly Lawrence reflects on the desirability of a pie in which nothing has died, and conscience stricken feels sorry for humiliating Squirt in front of the pack but says nothing as his image is at stake here.

Lawrence's self-respect continues to nose-dive as he fails to take advantage of the troll on the bridge; capture the three little pigs; eat little Red Riding Hood. Wackily packaged and culminating in plenty of feel-good factor this book proves that you don't need to be the biggest, best, most ferocious to succeed. By May 1st Lawrence is doing 75-star jumps, 75 press-ups and 75 pull-ups too. Beat that if you can!

Elizabeth Negus

The Girl who Dreamed in Magic

Maria Kuzniar, pub. Puffin

The Girl who Dreamed in Magic is the latest book written by Maria Kuzniar, the author of *The Ship of Shadows*. It follows Saga Thorolfsdottir, an orphaned girl who lives with her Afi and pet bear Bjorn. After Saga's parents died wielding powerful runes, Saga has been so afraid of magic that she would do almost anything to avoid it. However, Saga's luck gets even worse when her village is attacked by ruthless mountain trolls who take over her village, capturing every villager in sight – including Afi and her best friend, Dag. Saga soon learns that the only way to save her village is by entering the Fifth Winter contest, a series of difficult challenges for the bravest of warriors. The prize? A horn full of magic, the only way to save the village.

The moment you open the book, you are greeted with a map of the book's setting, with a close up shot of Saga's village. The map also features all the exciting locations visited and mentioned during Saga's journey. Throughout the book, you can see Saga's transformation from a scared and hesitant young girl into a brave girl who is willing to face her fears to save her village. Saga is not alone on her quest, however, as she is joined by two new friends – Ruvsa, a fiercely loyal girl from a winter camp, and Canute, a mysterious boy from another village.

Whilst the story was slightly short on exciting twists and turns, the plot is intriguing and easy to follow. If you enjoy books about magic, facing fears, and heart-warming friendships, then this book is for you. I would recommend this book for ages 9-13.

Mya Grant (age 11)

The Letter with the Golden Stamp

Onjali Q. Rauf, pub. Hachette Children's Books

What an absolute thrill to have been given the opportunity to receive an advance copy of this latest book from the incredible Onjali Q. Rauf - writer of *The Boy at the Back of the Class*, and I can honestly say that *The Letter with the Golden Stamp* did not disappoint! Like her previous books, this is yet another tale with a powerful and important message – looking into the hidden world of child carers.

In the heart of Swansea, Wales, nine-year-old Audrey regularly misses school and is dealing with some huge secrets. No-one would ever imagine that she is the sole carer for her sick mother whose mobility is gradually failing due to osteoarthritis. Nor that Audrey must also care for her two four-year-old siblings Peck (as in Gregory) and Kat (as in Katherine Hepburn). Audrey worries that if anyone found out her secret her family might split up. So, when a mysterious new neighbour moves in across the street Audrey is convinced they are spying on her, and that mum could be taken away.

Desperate to protect her family, in dire need of money for medical equipment, and determined to find a way to help her Mum, Audrey decides she must take matters into her own hands. Inspired by her beloved collection of stamps and Mo, her friendly neighbourhood postman, Audrey sets out on a mission and finds herself on an adventure that will change everything.

Told from Audrey's point of view this book made me cry, both happy and sad tears, and really opened my eyes to the pressures that young carers have to deal with. This sensitive topic, so rarely dealt with, is heartwarmingly told with understanding and compassion. Far from being a bleak tale, it is a tale of love, hope and kindness and highlights the support and structures that can be there to help those in need.

I cannot recommend it highly enough!

Tracey Corner

The Magic Callaloo

Trish Cooke, illus. Sophie Bass, pub. Walker Books

Paying homage to her ancestors, Trish Cooke creates a magical story where all the enchantment comes from the cultural gifts, listening to the wise ones of the community and from the magic within us; with Trish's flow of words and Sophie Bass' vibrant artwork to go along with it; the reader steps into the engaging story of *The Magic Callaloo*.

The Magic Callaloo is a wish fulfilling tree in an African village. Whoever eats its leaf can ask for a wish, the villagers live peacefully content, taking care of and receiving from the magic tree; however, greed overtakes the wicked man who steals the tree and eats all but one leaf. What happens next, is what you should find out by reading the book. The folktale genre is highly engaging as a bedtime story for kids. It can be used to highlight the beautiful aspects of African culture, on which the tale is based. For instance, inclusion of the character of the wise woman:

“One evening, while Mister was sitting under the moon contemplating, a wise old woman appeared from Nowhere...she told Mister how she knew where the Magic Callaloo was.”

And description of the beautiful afro of Lou and its braiding by the Wise Woman as a powerful expression of the cultural symbol:

“Lou, grew to be a fine young girl. She had beautiful hair with luscious Afro curly locks...”

“The wise woman combed the tresses of Lou’s hair with a comb made of maple wood until the tangled hair was loose and flowing... Every line was marked with tenderness, love and care.”

This is a five-star read, for kids aged 5 and above. Pick it up to discover, love and get wiser with the magical tale of *The Magic Callaloo*.

Ishika Tiwari

Peregrine Quinn and the Cosmic Realm

Ash Bond, pub. Templar

A new feisty character has materialized in the person of Peregrine Quinn, and a fresh and distinctive voice has made a strong debut in the fiction for children field. Ash Bond’s debut book fizzes with energy, humour and it is laced with enough mythological material to delight any young reader keen on the tales of ancient deities.

Peregrine is aware of the magic and wonders within reach of her Terran Realm. After all, she has listened carefully to the stories about the Cosmic Realm told by her immortal godfather, Daedalus Bloom, hoping one day to meet some of the fantastic creatures that populate those tales. Daedalus’ kidnap at the hand of menacing thugs forces Peregrine to spring into action, making the best use of Daedalus’ teaching and that of her archaeologist mother. She is joined in her adventure by Rowan, a dryad librarian, and Cal, a faun also working for Olympus Inc, the technological branch of the Cosmic Realm. As if searching for Daedalus was not already a complicated mission, Peregrine must also look after a plant called Bernadette, following Daedalus’ strict instructions.

As the three unlikely companions join forces using their own skills, it becomes clear that Daedalus, the creator of the network that connects the Terran and the Cosmic realms, is instrumental in a plan that aims to restore Discord, banned from Olympus, and her Chaos Magicks. Travelling from Oxford

to Alexandria, Peregrine and Rowan must discover who is plotting to overturn the order of the Cosmic Realm, and stop that plan, before it is too late for Daedalus. They do so in a story that is peppered with cliff-hangers, witty dialogues and jokes, references to ancient history and mythological figures and a good sprinkling of technology. The heroes are not perfect and must fight against their own best judgement and instincts to continue in the quest and to stay true to what they believe in, revealing to themselves and others their real strengths.

This is a thoroughly engaging and splendidly written book, and hopefully only the start of the adventures of Peregrine. It would be lovely to hear more about her and her friends and to see where Ash Bond will take her readers next.

Laura Brill

Pirate Academy: New Kid on Deck

Justin Somper, pub. UCLan Publishing

This is a story full of adventure, mystery and above all friendship. It is a fun story set on the high seas and featuring pirates of the distant future. It will make the young reader want to be a pirate. The year is actually 2507 and it is a very different world. Ocean levels have risen, and the shape of the world has changed. There is more ocean and less land. It is set in a new golden age of piracy where the Pirate Federation controls the oceans. This is a worldwide organization of leading pirate captains. The Federation runs nine schools around the world, and each admits only fifteen students a year. These students are what the story is all about. They come from the fiercest pirate families. The students receive ten years of training and graduate as Captains and Deputies.

The book is very much about friendships. The students support and look out for each other. The school has students aged 7 to 17 years, but this tale centres on the 11 to 12-year-olds from Barracuda Class. The main characters are Jacoby, Jasmine and Blunt. Their official motto is 'wound one Barracuda and you wound us all' and their unofficial motto is 'never underestimate a Barracuda'. This group has been together from a very young age and their friendship has grown and blossomed. They work and play together. Their lessons include Knots Class, Sailing and Combat Workshop. Then the new kid comes along. He is Neo Splice. Suddenly everything changes and the daggers are out. The adventure becomes more intense as the new kid introduces mystery and danger. There are unexpected twists and turns. The students are battling a new enemy and are working hard to uncover the truth. Can they save the school from attack? Can they defend the Pirate Federation?

New Kid on Deck is the first book in the brand-new Pirate Academy series and it becomes more intense as it builds towards an exciting ending. The reader is left looking forward to the next adventure in the series which promises more multiple plots and plenty of action.

Gary Kenworthy

Pirates of Darksea

Catherine Doyle, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

From his home in Galway Christopher writes a letter to a legendary pirate ship begging for an adventure but hears nothing back for two years. When the invitation to join the Stolen Sunset finally arrives, it is Christopher's little brother Max who goes on the adventure. He does this because Christopher is in hospital fighting for his life. The quest, the invitation which has come in the care of a bright red parrot, tells him this is going to be a dangerous quest but Max knows that the magic of the secret kingdom of Darksea is the miracle that Christopher needs to be healed. That is his intention for taking on the adventure!

What follows is a surprise as the captain has changed and the magic has dwindled to nothing. Max will need to do all he can to fight for his brother and bring home the miracle they need. Nothing is what it seems in this story, nothing from the secret kingdom deep in the heart of the Atlantic Ocean to the pirate ship and its captain or the threat from the invisible and deadly monster. The people are not what they seem either and Max soon discovers that he is going to have to navigate some high-seas adventure and magic, thievery and explosive danger but this is a pirate adventure that he is on and you will not be disappointed in the action...

A mutiny, fleeing mermaids and a shark man will be the very least of Max's worries as he joins the crew of the legendary pirate ship! Spectacular scenes of bravery, determination and pure love for siblings is dotted throughout this book and it may be my favourite book from Catherine Doyle yet!

Erin Hamilton

Shadow Fox

Carlie Sorosiak, pub. Nosy Crow

From the writer of *I, Cosmo* comes another story in which the main character is an animal – this time a fox called Shadow.

Shadow is alone in the world; her family having gone missing after developers destroyed their home. She has been befriended an elderly woman who occasionally feeds her fish out on the porch of a nearby motel, but when her food source vanishes, Shadow finds herself faced with a man and a young girl called Bea who it seems is the old woman's granddaughter. The man captures Shadow and the fox soon learns that Bee's Nan has gone missing, possibly drowned, although neither Bee nor Shadow believe that to be true. But there's something more - Shadow doesn't trust humans and yet she finds

herself inexplicably drawn to Bea; the pair can even hear what each other are thinking. Soon they're on a magical adventure to find Nan and to uncover what's happening to the secret islands of the Great Lakes. Unbeknown to Shadow she is in possession of magical powers which she must learn to use if they are to save both the islands and Bea's Nan.

Shadow's view of the world is deeply cynical, and her observations are sharp witted and at times cutting. Told through her eyes this story touches on so many themes, the special bond between grandparent and child, the loneliness of losing a loved one, our responsibility to the natural world, and how we must believe in ourselves and stand up for what is right. A heart-warming and magical tale, it is beautifully told and laced with just enough perfectly timed humour to make you laugh out loud at times.

With exquisite, detailed and vivid description it is so easy to picture the story scenes as you read and once begun, I found this story impossible to put down. Perfect for readers of 9+ this book is yet another triumph for Carlie Sorosiak.

Tracey Corner

Starminster

Megan Hopkins, pub. Harper Collins Children's Books

In all her eleven years Astrid has never set foot outside the rhubarb shed on her mother's farm, and never met anyone other than her loving and protective mother. There are terrible dangers outside, she's told. The shed is the only place she can be safe. She tries not to resent her situation. After all she has several visits and lovely food from her mother every day, good schooling from her and lots of books to read, even sometimes videos they watch together. But Astrid longs to see the stars. She just wants to get out for one night to watch the Perseid meteor shower.

Secretly she digs a hole through the floor. She is baffled and frustrated to find a layer of impenetrable concrete beneath the shed. Stirring from a dream the next night, to her amazement she finds a stranger by her bed, a woman with bright makeup and feathered turquoise wings. Mrs Wairi introduces herself. She's a Librae. Astrid will be one too she tells her once she's fledged. She must leave the shed though to learn to fly. The choice is agonizing, but Astrid cannot resist the lure of freedom and of flying. New worlds open up to her, the world of ordinary people, which is bewildering enough but which she has at least come across through books and films, and the secret world of the Librae and the fledglings, the city of London Overhead, invisible to non-Libraes. Starminster – St Paul's Cathedral to normal humans – is the only building in both worlds. This is where the Fledglings are educated, at night so they are not seen.

For the first time Astrid meets other people and makes friends. Life is exciting. Then she finds out that children are being kidnapped from London Underfoot, their likely fate a hideous one. Her mother was right. There are terrible dangers. Can Astrid thwart the demonic plot she has discovered?

This is a highly imaginative, exciting middle-grade fantasy adventure with lots of thrills and surprises. The concept of a covert society of winged humans is intriguing and well developed. London Overhead is a fascinating invention, beautifully brought to life. Astrid is a great protagonist, brave, resilient and resourceful despite self-doubts, and open to learning, not least about herself and the value of friends.

Anne Harding

Twice Upon a Time

Michelle Harrison, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

I have been reading Michelle Harrison's books since she started writing them and have met her many times so it wasn't possible that her latest book would pass me by! You may know her from her *Pinch of Magic* series, now she is back with an adventure that perhaps steers gently away from her usual magically themed stories, bringing us an exciting and mesmerizing adventure. There is a form of magic woven into the threads of this tale, I am not sure Michelle Harrison could write a story from which it is missing, but it is magic of a different type.

Time is important to us all but to this story it is of the utmost importance and so it is that we begin with a Once upon a time. But this one does not take us to a magical land or a fairytale land but to the city of London one frozen winter, a winter so cold that icicles hung from rooftops. And, taking us back to the question of time, it was New Year's Eve, just. It was the wrong time for the twins to be born and not only because they were four weeks early. But, at two minutes to midnight on the always auspicious last day of the year Meredith Morrow was born. At nine minutes after midnight and now in the new year her sister Rose was born (she becomes Spike as we will discover). The twins, as far as the eye could see, looked the same, nothing odd there but what was odd was the way both clocks in the house had stopped, each at the exact time of one of the twins' births. Now we begin to see that there must be magic at work for the twins are a pair, but they were born between night and day, on different days, in different months and years...

When it comes to Meredith and Spike there are stranger things yet to come and all of them are linked to time... So it is that we meet them, arriving at the dusty and old Fox House for their holidays. Both are certain it is going to be dull, but first impressions really don't do this house, or anything for that matter, justice. In fact, what this story will definitely teach you is first impressions are wrong for Fox House is a house full of secrets from missing people to abandoned babies and the locked study. So many mysteries that the twins soon find themselves investigating whilst at the same time hiding a secret of their own.

A spellbinding, adventure-packed mystery, take your time reading this one but beware for time may not be all that it seems.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Whisperwicks: The Labyrinth of Lost and Found

Jordan Lees, pub. Puffin

It all begins with a strange crack in the wall. From the crack a voice speaks to Edwid convincing him that it needs his help. There's something unsettling and slightly creepy about the voice and I was immediately drawn in, wondering if perhaps Edwid's decision to help would turn out to be a good or bad thing. However, we are left with some uncertainty as to Edwid's fate as the story sweeps us from his world into the world of Benjamiah Creek who lives above a bookshop in Wyvern on the Water and firmly does not believe in magic!

On the brink of divorce, Benjamiah's parents have gone away to see if they can resolve their differences, leaving him in the care of his grandmother. When a strange parcel arrives with no note, Benjamiah assumes it's a gift from them, but he can't believe what he sees, why would Mum and Dad have sent him a doll – he's eleven! The doll, known as a poppet, is more than it seems and, able to transform into a mischievous capuchin monkey or a bird, it leads Benjamin through a doorway into a world unlike anything he could have imagined – the world of Wreathenwold. There he meets a girl, Elizabetha Cotton, whose twin brother Edwid has been missing for some time. Before he knows it Benjamiah is caught up in a quest to find the missing Edwid, a quest that will lead them on a journey of discovery, through a labyrinth of strange places and chilling dangers.

The cover of this book, with its wonderful illustration by Vivienne To, is enticing and promises magic within its pages, but I had no idea of just how magical it would be. In his debut book, Jordan Lees has built an incredible world of unique and fantastical characters, full of magic and wonder. It is, I might say, the most complete magical world I have read about in a long time with such rich detail it reminded me of Pullman's *Dark Materials* or Rowling's *Harry Potter*. The characters are likeable, their motives understandable, and the plot is tempered with just enough darkness to make this a truly compelling read.

The size of this book, currently available in hardback, might be off-putting for some readers but I urge you to try it. It's magic and mystery at its very best and has the most enchanting, detailed illustrations. I also hear tell that it's the first in a trilogy, which for me is amazing news, as I can't wait to go back!

Tracey Corner

Young Adult Books

ASAP

Axie Oh, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

ASAP follows on from *XOXO* (by Axie Oh) and is set a few years after the circumstances of the first book. It is possible to read *ASAP* as a standalone quite easily, but I suspect that fans of the original will especially want to hear how their favourite characters have progressed since they were last part of our lives.

In *ASAP* we follow Min Sori, a young, beautiful, and modern Korean woman as she is finishing her time as a trainee idol. The book is set as she prepares to debut for her mother's company 'Joah', which promotes the now internationally famous boy band XOXO. Whilst at middle school there had been a romantic history between Min Sori and Nathaniel Lee one of XOXO's most charismatic (and popular) band members. But as the book begins life (and careers) have moved on. The friendships between the band members and the other high school students are all revisited here, and we see how each character has developed their own future path.

A new twist is added with Min Sori helping a new girl group to debut whilst questioning her own role as a strong woman in a modern Korea. Her family life remains as complicated as ever, but she is older now and brings a more mature perspective to what life throws at her. Fun dramas and twists abound with new characters and some old favourites too. There is lots of immersion into the world of K-pop and K-Drama and Axie Oh is strong in describing the subtleties of Korean culture without it feeling like a lesson. But what everyone is most interested in is of course, the romantic connection between Min Sori and Nathaniel Lee, I can promise that fans both inside and outside of the book will not be disappointed.

Marianne Degiovanni

Darker By Four

June Cl Tan, pub. Hodderscape

If you are not yet familiar with the trope of Urban Fantasy then I hope you are intrigued. It is an exciting new trope, moving fantasy to an entirely new level and, in giving it a new setting, even though the urban locations are still entirely fictional, taking us to new worlds. Quite literally it means the book is a fantasy which is set in a city. I mention this because June Cl Tan's latest book, *Darker By Four* is a thrilling urban fantasy which has an incredibly slow burn romance at its core along with all the thrills of a fantasy novel, and an especially big dose of magic.

Having told you that this is entirely a work of fiction, and it is, the setting has been inspired, the author tells us, by a real-life cultural park. Haw Par Villa is the place and in addition she tells us that her own experiences in the Chinese diaspora community in Southeast Asia and its folklore have also been influential. This does not make it authoritative, merely indicates that authors are inspired by the world we all live in.

Rui is a cadet at the Xingshan Academy destined for the Exorcist Guild to fight against the Blight which has, in recent years been running rampant, as an Exorcist-in-training she has one goal in mind, her intention is to avenge the death of her mother and with her magic honed she intends to achieve her goal. Yiran, another character in the story, is the black sheep in an otherwise illustrious family. If he had been born with magic he could have had the world at his feet. It would seem that Rui and Yiran are opposites, from different worlds, and yet when an accident causes all of Rui's power to be transferred to Yiran both their worlds turn upside down. Now has no means by which to avenge her mother and Yiran can finally feel that he has been given the life he was born for, he belongs to. But with dangerous monsters overrunning the city Rui is desperate to restore her powers and if that means she has to make a pact with a shadowy stranger, a pact that will find them hunting a god who does not wish to be found, she will do it. With its intriguing prologue, its mysterious reaper Nikai and plot twists galore *Darker By Four* leaves us urgently wanting to know what will transpire but we will have to wait for book 2. In the meantime, I highly recommend this immersive, exciting, speculative, thrilling urban fantasy.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Encanto's Daughter

Melissa de la Cruz, pub. G.P. Putnam's Sons Books

Melissa de La Cruz's newest story is titled *The Encanto's Daughter* and I want to make sure that we are all very clear on the fact that this has absolutely nothing to do with the Disney film of a similar name! Melissa de la Cruz is in fact using the Spanish word Encanto and its meaning 'spell' or 'charm' and I can honestly say that, whilst that is the title because of the nature of the story, it cast its spell on me with its charm and I am certain that it will do the same to any readers who love magical fantasy (and can't wait for the sequel). But I don't want to spoil your anticipation of a great book...

Encanto's Daughter is the first book in a new duet inspired by Filipino mythology (something very new to me and fascinating). Settle yourself into your favourite reading nook and prepare for an exciting ride, traveling from the human world into Biringan, a magical, dangerous, and endangered world under threat from warring kingdoms, dark powers, and the loss of its king. If you have ever wondered what it might be like to be part human and part Encanto (a fairy from a world unknown to humans, that is apart from you and I for now) then this is the book to turn to. I know I will never look

at school and education the same way again, and plenty of other things too! There is also the matter of doors... You know the type. The ones that appear out of nowhere, in the middle of woodlands...

MJ Rodriguez has been hiding in the human world for most of her life. She was taken away by her mother, with her father's knowledge, so that she would be safe from his enemies – and what a shock it is to find out who the enemy is – but I am getting ahead of myself. MJ's father, the King of Biringan, King Vivencio is dead, supposedly from natural causes but as theirs is a race which is almost immortal this immediately arouses suspicions. MJ is his only child and now, a month away from her eighteenth birthday she must learn how to become Queen and ruler, find out the truth about her father's death and crucially, discover her magic for without it she will not be able to draw the sword and claim what is rightfully hers by birth. There are complications. Amador, Duchess of a neighbouring kingdom becomes an immediate enemy and Lucas, dashing of the feared Sigbin Court, well, he becomes a boyfriend – doesn't he? With every page there is a new twist, and the ending will leave you breathlessly awaiting the sequel – I know I am.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Floating Hotel

Grace Curtis, pub. Hodderscape

First of all I have to say that this book is one of the best novels I have read for some time. Surprisingly I'm not talking about the setting, the content, the characters or the physical layout of the book. No, I'm talking about the quality of the writing: streets ahead of most current novels in the YA category, and clearly the work of someone who really does know what they're doing. When it comes to how to produce an excellent, intense, insightful and extremely well written clever novel, in my opinion readers need to look no further than this second work by Grace Curtis.

Curtis sets her scene in what it says on the tin – a floating hotel. No, it's not a cruise ship taking tourists around the Caribbean or the Mediterranean, it's an intergalactic spaceship, the Grand Abeona Hotel, 'home of the finest food, the sweetest service, and the very best views the galaxy has to offer.' Everything has been going well, largely because Carl, who started as a stowaway on the vessel, has risen over time to be the long-time manager and caretaker. Things start to go awry however, and Carl (not actually his real name, and you'll find out why...) now has to deal with discovering Imperial spies on the vessel. As well as all that, the Problem Solvers Conference onboard may not actually be what it says it is, and (even more worryingly) who is driving the ship? These are all questions that Carl needs to solve, as well as the mystery of the love poems which keep appearing in Carl's in-tray. Clearly a novel of excitement and mystery for readers but what really engages readers is the writing itself.

Divided into a prologue which introduces Carl's backstory, and other characters, the novel is then split into three main sections, but within those are tightly, brilliantly written short pieces which engross

readers into the mysteries of the ship. Curtis is also a writer for video games, and I wonder whether it is those skills which have honed her writing excellence. Outstanding work Grace Curtis!

Bridget Carrington

Keedie

Elle McNicoll, pub. Knights Of

Rarely is a prequel stronger than the first book in the series but in my view that is the case for *Keedie*.

Keedie is the elder sister of Addie Darrow, the protagonist of McNicoll's well-known work, *A Kind of Spark*. Their relationship is why Addie is able to be so strong in *A Kind of Spark*. The reader sees that relationship developing in this prequel. Addie is six and as yet undiagnosed with autism and Keedie is fourteen and diagnosed but struggling.

One of the strengths of this novel is the description of the autistic experience. At one point, Addie is experiencing a serious meltdown at school and Keedie, having left her own school earlier that day, is able to help her sister navigate her feelings without using much speech. She enables Addie to access sensory stimulation and slowly to self-regulate.

Unlike much writing for this middle grade age group, the autistic experience is never devalued and a non-autistic reader can gain much understanding and empathy from this narrative. For autistic readers, they may feel seen and have their experience validated with all its many facets.

Rebecca Butler

The Last Bloodcarver

Vanessa Le, pub. Rock the Boat (Oneworld Publications)

It takes a writer with a degree in health and human biology, and with superb imagination and writing skills to produce a YA novel as gripping as *The Last Bloodcarver*!

The setting of this book is inspired by Vanessa Le's family background, and as an author of a first novel, together with fascinating anatomical information, she has the added culture and history of her own Vietnamese heritage. This provides readers with a very unusual and interestingly different background. The hero of the novel is Nhika, an orphan from another country, Yarong, who has survived into her teens by using her gifts, sometimes gruesomely killing others. But her skills are prized in the underworld of her new home, the city of Theumus. Initially Nhika saves a human life, using her Yarongese magic, but inhabitants of Theumus abhor and fear Yarongese refugees and Nhika

is betrayed and sold into Butchers Row. Ultimately captured and facing slavery and death – possibly as meat from the Butchers Row, the novel plunges into some gruesome scenes of the filthy animal market, cruel and horrific behaviour, and great danger.

However, she is instead sought by a member of the elite millionaire Congmi family, and bought from the Butchers Row with the purpose of healing one of that household's security servants who is the only witness to her father's murder. Nhika has been rescued as she has been recognised as Bloodcarver, supposedly the last of that Yarongese with the ability to restore life to those who are dead or dying. This is a very different life from her previous existence in the rough areas of Theumus, and she becomes a member of the household in order to attempt to heal the comatose servant. All is not as simple as it would appear however, and readers will have to scrutinise very carefully those members of the Congmi clan and their entourage in order to unravel this gripping (and also romantic!) story.

The final pages deliver some dramatic scenes but, fear not dear readers, there is a sequel in the pipeline which will take us further into this fascinating story!

Bridget Carrington

Lie or Die

A.J. Clack, pub. Firefly Press

Lie or Die is a wild ride of a novel – fast-paced with twists and turns galore, it's perfect for fans of reality TV game shows such as *The Traitors*.

Reminiscent of Ben Elton's *Dead Famous*, a darkly comic rejoinder to the first wave of reality shows like *Big Brother*, Clack has breathed new life into the concept for the next generation of social media users. The fame hungry influencers who make up most of the cast will be familiar to today's teenagers, but it is the 'girl next door' Kass who is the more relatable character.

Kass is desperate to make amends with her best friend Thea, the beautiful golden girl who seems to have it all - at least she does until Kass kisses her ex-boyfriend. To regain Thea's trust, Kass agrees to join her in applying for the latest hit show, *Lie or Die*, which pits a group of 17 and 18-year olds against each other to win a cash prize. Based on the real-life game *Mafia*, contestants are given the roles of players, agents and detective - it's the agents' job to 'kill' one contestant each night without being discovered, whilst the players have to identify the agents and of course try to stay alive! Kass is brilliant at playing *Mafia* and hopes that if she helps Thea to win the game all will be forgiven. But things soon take a sinister turn - what if it's not just a game and somebody is out to kill them, for real?

A real highlight for me was the character of Lewis, Kass and Thea's friend who can apply a Taylor Swift lyric to any situation! I also found the description of *Mafia* roles and gameplay at the start of the book useful to refer back to.

Of course, to find out what really happens you'll have to read it for yourself. Remember - trust no one.

Louise Anne Colver

Looking for Lucie

Amanda Addison, pub. Neem Tree Press

Enthusiasts of Shakespeare's plays, especially those who enjoy his *Macbeth*, may remember that in Act 2, scene 2 where we are told that 'it is a wise father who knows his own child.' Three centuries later Samuel Butler's translation of *The Odyssey* reverses the wording and instead we read 'it is a wise child who knows his own father.'

Reading Amanda Addison's fascinating, funny and fiercely serious novel *Looking for Lucie* we share Lucie's need to discover who her father was, and therefore what her family background really is. Lucie stands out amongst her immediate family by being a brown girl, where her mother, her stepfather, and her brother are white. For Lucie one of the most irritating aspects of being brown emerges when her family has moved from Birmingham and is now living in a county (Norfolk) which is predominantly white. We discover the question – sometimes out loud but frequently an unvoiced but very obvious question from white people – 'where are you really from?'

At eighteen Lucie is determined to trace her father and has taken a DNA test to find her unknown parent. Addison's novel first establishes Lucie's concerns, her friends, and the family she has at home, but when she meets Nav, also a brown person (and a wizard with repairing electronic things!) they become good friends and she gets to know his family. Lucie is a talented artist and photographer and is keen to move to London to study textile design. As the novel progresses, and Lucie become increasingly anxious for the results of her DNA test, in the text we learn far more of the inner thoughts and worries of the extended friends and their families, and eventually we realise why.

In the introductory double page before the novel starts we see a family tree which Lucie created when she was eight and a half. As a postscript we see it enlarged with the detail she has discovered about her family. For a real mystery, it's a pity it's not in a sealed envelope only to be opened when readers have finished the story!

Bridget Carrington

Not Like Other Girls

Meredith Adamo, pub. Bloomsbury Books

Jo becomes an outcast overnight through the actions of someone she thought was her friend. This causes her to lose her friends, fall out with her family, drop grades at school to the point where she is put on academic review but most importantly it changes how she acts. How would you react if someone you trusted turned their back on you and leaked private photos to your entire year group? Unfortunately, this is what happened to Jo.

Jo adapts to her new life, sticking to people she never thought she'd consider friends and hiding behind her new crueller personality but when her ex-best friend Maddie goes missing after asking for her help, Jo realises she must help. That means not only trying to discover what happened in her past and relive painful memories such as past relationships and the time where all her friendships collapsed but also trying to see what happened in other people's points of view, particularly Maddie's. With the help of Hudson and Tess, Jo is able to find out some disturbing truths and actions of her classmates but these quickly put her in danger and Jo needs to work out whose story to believe.

Overall, I really enjoyed this book. I thought the story was compelling and thoughtful and it provided an emotional ride throughout the story. It was relatable and I believe it left me with some insight into things that I couldn't relate to or wouldn't have even imagined happening. Despite a relatively slow start, around part way through the boom quickly picks up again and leaves you turning the pages, unable to put it down.

Gemma Walford

The Reappearance of Rachel Price

Holly Jackson, pub. Electric Monkey

The latest Holly Jackson novel was always going to be something to get excited about and yet there is also that wish of 'will it be as good as the *'Good Girl's Guide* series?'

Well, the wait is over and yes, it is just as good. Holly Jackson is great at writing suspense; she builds tension and wrong foots her readers when we think we have it all figured out.

The Reappearance of Rachel Price follows Bel, now 18 but whose mother (Rachel Price) disappeared when she was two years old. Her mother's disappearance was a high profile national mystery at the time as baby Annabel (Bel) had been with her mother at the time of her disappearance. Many questions lingered about the disappearance of Rachel Price – was she alive, was she dead and popular theories abound.

This leads to a documentary team picking up the story all these years later to re-examine what may have occurred that fateful day. It is in this environment of tense family scrutiny that the story is set. Bel and her father are close, and the intrusion feels like they are living through the nightmare all over again. But then...Rachel Price returns.

Everyone has questions, especially Bel but she also feels as if the timing is too perfect, the answers Rachel gives are rehearsed and don't always make sense and as she starts to dig into what really happened that day, her beloved father goes missing. After 16 years of mystery Bel will finally get the truth, but will she want to hear it?

With great pacing and more twists and turns than ever, Holly Jackson has produced a great story, sure to be a popular hit with her *'Good Girls'* fans but this book will probably bring her some new fans too. If you haven't read one of her books this is a great place to start.

Marianne Digiovanni

Soulmates and Other Ways to Die

Melissa Welliver, pub. Chicken House

While the world literally crashes around her, Zoe and her mum play it safe -- determined to stay alive at all costs. But when Zoe finds out that she's been KinTwinned (i.e. linked to her soulmate) to the hottest boy at school, her world turns dangerous in more ways than one. Milo Spencer just happens to be an adrenaline junkie and that's a problem because when your KinTwin gets hurt, you feel it too. And if they die, so do you. Zoe wants to find a cure and break their bond before it even starts...and she might as well set the rest of the world free too, while she's at it.

In this highly-imaginative, dystopian YA novel, the idea of soulmates is put to question. What if your soulmate isn't like you at all? What if you can't break the bond once you're matched? What if the whole idea of soulmates has been fabricated to make someone else rich?

The concept of KinTwinning – being matched with a soulmate through DNA and notified through an app – becomes both a draw and a danger. For Zoe, it's the absolute last thing she wants after her father left the family for his soulmate. But Milo can't wait to end his string of bad luck with girlfriends and find his true love, like his parents did. The 'opposites attract' scenario plays out as the two join forces to find the culprit behind the KinTwin concept. Along the way, readers learn about the characters' growing feelings for each other through a clever dual-narrative structure.

Soulmates and Other Ways to Die creates a world that puts the reader into the centre of a dire situation. In the post-modern British community, where the death of one soulmate results in the death of the other (thanks to Dearly Departed Syndrome), the characters face some gruesome scenes

(like planes falling from the sky, car crashes and trains derailing) as tragedies are common (and rather graphic). The bad guys, including the billionaire CEO of KinTwin Discoveries, are relentless and unapologetically violent as they try to stop the teens from revealing the truth.

The quick-paced plot unfolds through a diverse cast of characters that converses in contemporary banter and deals with relatable teenage issues, as well as an apocalypse. As Zoe, her newfound friends and her soulmate, Milo, face danger and uncertainty, she must decide if she's ready to risk her safe existence to start living her life and maybe even give love a chance.

Stephanie Ward

Trigger

C.G. Moore, pub. Little Island Books

Trigger is a powerful piece of Young Adult literature dealing with issues of rape and consent, from C.G. Moore - the award-winning author of *Gut Feelings*.

The story is told through the first-person narrative of Jay, the male protagonist and victim. The reader sees everything through Jay's own eyes, including the psychological trauma he experiences after the rape - which, it turns out, is largely caused by his boyfriend Jackson.

Trigger comes with a content warning, particularly as Jay has been gang-raped. The reader is drawn into the story and sympathises with Jay, as the level of trauma he experienced while being raped means that, for much of the story, he suffers from PTSD and struggles to remember the truth. At one point, Jay compares his broken memory to a corrupted file on a computer: "I click on the memory of that night, Waiting for it to load. A dialogue box pops up: Error message, File still not found."

The structure as a verse novel is commendable, as it enables the author to write a more engaging story and delve straight into the powerful emotions that Jay experiences. Separated into four Parts - "Survival"; "The New Normal"; "Fuelling the Fire"; and "Justice" - the novel is largely one poem to a page, each with its own title, acting as a series of impactful mini-chapters that collectively form the basis of the narrative. When Jay focuses on the many facets of 'Pain,' he explains: "Pain can be impacted by Emotional, Social, Psychological factors - Not just physical pain."

Occasionally, however, there are dual 'contrast' poems, printed side-by-side, which are packed with emotional intensity and portray the polarity of Jay's mind. The 'I Won't Be The Last' poems, for example, deliver a powerful message on consent and consequence:

"I'm not the first / I won't be the last
To be touched / To be hurt

Without consent / Without consequence.”

C.G. Moore states in his Foreword that he too was sexually assaulted, noting that much of the story cuts “deep and really close to home.” This adds realism and conviction to the story: particularly, Jay's trauma; the police interviews he endures as a victim; the support he receives; the anger and shame he feels; and the painful steps he takes to try to regain his memory. However, the wonderful friendships that Jay forms with Lau and Rain are also touching and help to deliver the author's own message that: “you are not alone. Help is always just around the corner (even if you can't see it!)”

Trigger would be an excellent novel to study in an academic setting, but also one for community book groups. As C.G. Moore rightly notes in his Foreword: “Consent is so important and I don't see many stories that open and facilitate discussion [and] destigmatise it and allow us to learn how we can support other survivors.”

At the back of the book is a very helpful guide, with helpline numbers and useful websites, for anyone who has experienced anything like the issues discussed in the story.

Chris J Kenworthy

Where Sleeping Girls Lie

Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé, pub. Usborne

When Sade Hussein approaches Alfred Nobel Academy for the first time, she is captivated by its grand buildings and gardens. The school is vast and impressive, but it carries with it a strong undercurrent: Sade immediately recognises a sense of secrecy, something strange in the tightly controlled perfection surrounding her.

The schoolhouse that Sade will belong to is chosen by a form of intriguing questions, and she is soon introduced to her roommate Elizabeth, with whom she will share dorm 313. Elizabeth and her close friend Baz (short for Basil) bring warmth to the unfamiliar boarding school environment, diligently informing Sade about the Unholy Trinity: a trio of popular girls, envied for their beauty and surrounded by rumours of ruthlessness. The trinity are considered by many to be spellbinding, but one of them, Persephone, appears drawn to Sade too - fixing her with an intense gaze that feels both powerful and perceptive.

Sade attempts to find familiarity with this new environment, while struggling to fend off the encroaching dread that signals a panic attack - it often comes with times of huge change, and Sade holds onto her mum's words as she tries to settle into the place she has chosen for her future. Sade is chased by doubts about her decision, and a recurring nightmare persists - though its familiarity comes

as a different sort of comfort, steady amongst the new life that so differs from her past home-schooling.

In a week of many firsts, Sade is pleased to be ushered into Elizabeth's greenhouse, which proves to be a shelter of sorts for when Elizabeth most longs to be alone. She is solitary and cares deeply for the plants, and Sade soon sees that there may be deeper roots behind Elizabeth's isolation. Elizabeth's mood shifts quickly at times, and with a strange warning left outside their dorm room, Sade feels a heaviness coming. When Elizabeth disappears, things darken quickly: Sade's familiarity with grief and blame are made even more difficult when rumours begin to swirl around her involvement in Elizabeth's fate.

Sade is an engaging character, and as we follow her through this unsettling new school, tensions both inside and outside of Sade's mind feel vivid. Elizabeth and Baz quickly feel like familiar friends, and a new mentor called August brings his own share of intrigue. With multi-layered characters and an eerie environment, the uncertain world of Alfred Nobel Academy is easy to get lost in...

Jemima Breeds

Where The Heart Should Be

Sarah Crossan, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

How far would you go to eat and survive in a town with no food, where the dogs at the manor house are fed better than you?

For many of the people in Ballinkeel, death becomes a part of their everyday and hunger is a constant sinking feeling in the pit of their stomachs.

Nell is sixteen and her father is a farmer. When the potato famine hits their village in 1846, their family lose all their income and all their food. They rely on Nell's small earnings from her scullery maid job at the Lord Wicken's manor house. When Nell meets Johnny (Lord Wicken's nephew) she is swept into a whirlwind romance filled with emotional connection and dependency. She starts to spend less time with her family and pays less attention to their health and chances of survival. When the people in the town become more desperate as more people die to the hunger caused by the famine, food riots begin and people become violent, killing and thieving for any scrap of food they can find for themselves and their families. People flee and people die, but how can Johnny and Nell's love for each other hold true when they come from completely different backgrounds and the most important people in Nell's life are dying?

This book was poignant and powerful. It was written beautifully as a series of poems detailing and documenting Nell's life through the potato famine. It was raw and projected emotion through every

page without fail. I could read this book over and over again and still admire the incredible storytelling from Sarah Crossan that helped me perfectly picture the story and relate my emotions to the characters. This book was stunning, perfect and powerful. It showed how even when the world is falling apart around you, love can be your saviour and provide and escape from the pain.

Gemma Walford

Non-Fiction Books

A Field Guide to Spring

Gabby Dawnay, illus. Dorien Bouwers, pub. Thames & Hudson

A Field Guide to Spring is a beautiful guide designed to be taken into the wild to encourage curiosity, creativity, and connection with nature. It is inspired by the Forest School movement and is the first in a new series teaching children how to engage with nature season by season. It features a blend of hands-on activities, fascinating facts and charming poetry that encourages children's natural curiosity about the world. Louise Black, Deputy Headteacher at Griffin Primary School in London consulted on the book. She was responsible for creating a large, on-site Forest School space for their students to have access to nature.

The activities are clearly described and easy to achieve by young children. They include making seed balls to grow your own meadow, pond dipping, building your own bird's nest and making a rain gauge. Identification pages are scattered throughout the book and will help children to spot different animals and plants. Budding scientists will enjoy learning facts about the weather, how plants grow or the metamorphosis of tadpoles into frogs.

There is really something for everyone packed into this handy-sized volume. The whimsical poems are a delight, as are the beautiful colour illustrations by award-winning illustrator, Dorien Brouwers. Come rain or shine, or whatever form the child's access to nature takes, this book will provide entertainment, interest and joy. The textured cover and high-quality paper are not just practical, but also give the book a quality feel making it an excellent gift and a book to treasure as a child grows up.

Author, Gabby Dawnay clearly has a passion for and in-depth knowledge of nature which shines through in this gorgeous publication. I can't wait to see what the next volumes in the series bring.

Janet Ling

Big Ideas from Literature: How Books Can Change Your World

The School of Life, illus. Anna Doherty, pub. The School of Life

This is the third book in the *Big Ideas* series, the other two being *Big Ideas for Curious Minds* and *Big Ideas from History* all published by The School of Life. The concept of this title is that stories can communicate a key idea as well as teach us, help us to grow, offer inspiration and wisdom, introduce us to different perspectives, and help us develop empathy and resilience.

It is a fascinating read and although aimed at 10 – 12 year olds, it would also appeal to older children and anyone with an interest in books and reading, including adults, and would make a wonderful gift for a child who is a bookworm. There are several sections. The first, *The Story of Stories*, details the development of stories from clay tablets and papyrus through to 19th century publishing houses and why books were written for children. Each point made is demonstrated by a story or extract from literature and these include classics as well as modern tales from a wide cultural mix and across timelines. *The Literature and Feelings* section encourages the reader to consider how books can evoke different emotions such as reflection, happy crying and a new perspective. When it comes to *The Future of Books* the authors consider how technology could change stories with books written from a personal aspect or to meet individual needs.

There are plenty of questions to get you thinking about the type of reader you are and why you like certain genres and the conclusion gives you prompts and note pages to write down your own ideas. The text is broken up into well-spaced paragraphs and interspersed amusing illustrations. I would have liked an index of the stories used in the book but that's the librarian in me talking!

Barbara Band

Inside In: X-Rays of Nature's Hidden World

Jan Paul Schutten, illus. Arie van 't Riet, trans. Laura Watkinson, pub. Greystone Kids

An exceptional book that uses stunning x-rays of a wide range of creatures in their natural habitat and explains what we are seeing.

Creatures are arranged by type - arthropods and molluscs, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. The images are fascinating and are accompanied by text that is there to "make you look more closely at the photographs." There is plenty of information to be gleaned from the whole package. We learn, for example, that a bee has "wasp waist;" that a dragonfly is a miracle of technology and the species has been around for 300 million years; that a butterfly's wings act as solar panels and that the John Dory is an underwater vacuum cleaner!

Did you know that the seahorse has no stomach; or that the tree frog eats with its eyes; or that pheasants are like mini-ostriches? Maybe you knew that some birds sleep on one leg, and that ducks are both land-air-and water birds? Blackbirds, starlings, and song thrushes are completely different from the outside but are "pretty much the same" on the inside. Hedgehogs have a long-rounded muscle like the elastic of a shower cap. If threatened they tighten that muscle. When it pulls together their prickly skin moves to cover their body. I did not know that foxes use their tails for balance, communication and for warmth. The style and tone of the text are appealing, with jokes, wordplay and questions that engage the reader.

The introduction that explains how the book came about and that all the x-rays were taken from dead animals. We also learn just what x-ray photographs are. There is a useful table of contents, an index, and information about Wilhelm Röntgen who invented the x-ray.

An awe-inspiring introduction to the natural world for children aged 8+.

Brenda Marshall

Nature's Fascinating Friendships

Mike Hills, illus. Kerry Hyndman, pub. Faber & Faber

Delightful, and exactly what you'd expect from the title. A survey of the mutually-beneficial relationships that species develop.

Substantial at 94 large pages and information-dense, zooming around the world from the deep seas to the high sky, discussing animals, plants and fungi you definitely have not heard of (Clark's Nutcracker) as well as familiar favourites (hippos) at a BBC flagship nature programme level of accessibility, detail and curiosity, the star of the book is its illustrations. I adore the marsh frogs clambering over the water buffalo. The weight of the buffalo, the delicacy of the frogs. Lovely.

The art is going to keep readers coming back to the book. The extreme close-ups (yucca moths), the interesting angles and composition (Galapagos tortoise from beneath), the taking of opportunities to be atmospheric (as in lanternfish in the gloom, coyotes and badgers at sunset). Colourful, dynamic and engrossing.

The youngest readers will need to grow into appreciating everything the book has to tell them; older readers will remind themselves fondly of ideas they've learned when they need to, for the writer does accommodate Key Stage 3 ideas in a book Year 2 could use. Consequently, the tone struggles in places to keep all the breadth of its potential readership engaged, and certainly younger readers will need support, but this is quality work with a tricky brief. I'd expect Years 4 and 5 to still be asking questions about what they're reading and need direction on technical terms they've not seen before.

It's a wide-ranging book that encourages thought and wonder and is equally a great dipping-in or all-in-one read with a high level of repeat-readability. I'd be surprised if it didn't win prize nominations and would myself have been over-joyed to have it as a child.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Outdoor Science: 30 Awesome Experiments to try at Home

Laura Minter and Tia Williams, pub. Button Books

This is a bright, vibrant book that contains thirty experiments, each based on STEM principles, that you can try at home using everyday materials, most of which you are likely to already have in the cupboard.

Each experiment has a list of items and/or ingredients you will need, together with clear, concise and easy to follow step-by-step instructions, illustrated with photographs of children undertaking the activities. At the end of each experiment is a “Science Made Simple” paragraph that explains the science in action. At the beginning of the book is a “getting started” section that contains lists of materials used throughout including craft essentials, food items and objects usually found in the recycling bin. There is also a glossary explaining various scientific terms used throughout the book. I loved the visual element of this book which is sure to attract the intended audience of 7 – 11 year olds. The majority of the experiments can be undertaken with minimal supervision and, whilst they are designed to be undertaken outdoors, some could be adapted for indoor use albeit with some mess!

This is a great fun way to introduce children to science theories but also to encourage outdoor play without the need to purchase expensive equipment. I am definitely going to have a go at making a pizza box oven to cook smores using thermal energy.

Barbara Band

Rebel Girls Money Matters: A Guide to Saving, Spending, and Everything in Between!

Alexa Von Tobel, illus. Morgan Goble, pub. Rebel Girls

Instilling confidence in a generation of girls around the world is the mission of Rebel Girls, a global, multi-platform entertainment brand. Based on a 2016 international bestselling children's book, *Rebel Girls* highlights real-life, extraordinary women throughout history, geography, and fields of excellence, focusing on creators, innovators, leaders, and champions. Giving young and teenage girls role models as well as excellent life skills.

This book explains the process of earning money, budgeting and its many facets, and how to manage your money. Its author is a financial planner so we know we are in good, safe and reliable hands with the advice shared. It is intended for audiences that are aged 8 or older, and it conveys financial literacy in a straightforward and engaging manner that appeals to even the most jaded of financial audiences, even though it is primarily aimed at American audiences. It combines quizzes, tips from experts, and stories from girls around the world to offer readers a better understanding of financial literacy. Readers will both learn about their finances and engage with how to control and manage them. This is what gives it such a strong appeal, it is immersive but not heavy going.

Readers will learn: How to create a budget; How a credit card works; What investing is and how to start; When to spend and when to save; The truth about pay gaps between men and women; How to create a business plan (excellent for those with ambition to start their own businesses and there is so much more too, this is just a flavour of the content!

This super fun and informative guidebook from the *Growing Up Powerful* series can be used to teach your child the building blocks of personal finance.

Katy Ralph

Shells and What They Hide Inside

Helen Scales, illus. Sonia Pulido, pub. Phaidon

As we approach the warmer season and time spent in the garden and on the beach becomes a more appealing prospect, this book will be an excellent tool to explore shells further. Focusing mainly on marine specimens, but with a glance at what hides among pots and borders in every garden, Helen Scales invites her young readers to examine each shell posing carefully aimed questions. The answers are hidden under the many flaps included in the pages, which make the book a very interactive and enriching one. As the flaps are not always obvious, discovering them becomes a tactile experience too – especially in the garden page.

The author does not shy away from using specific terminology, like mollusc, gastropod, bivalve and so on, which she explains with accessible and engaging language, directly addressing her young readers, encouraging them to explore and discover various aspects of a shell's purpose. Sonia Pulido provides the illustrations using colours suggestively as atmospheric background, but also to define shapes and to provide striking details for each specimen.

One can imagine this being a lovely book to have close at hand while visiting the seaside, and also one which will inspire young minds to know more about the natural world that surrounds them, sparking a deep interest in this particular branch of earth science. Its format and the wealth of information ensures that its young readers will return to this book again and again.

Laura Brill

We, the Curious Ones

Marion Dane Bauer, illus. Hari & Deepti, pub. Walker Books

Throughout time humans have told stories to make sense of the world around us. As we learn more about science and the universe the stories change to reflect our understanding. This large format book celebrates this journey in verse. The text shows how our beliefs are expanded when there are new discoveries such as the Earth not being flat but being round and the Earth not being the centre of the universe. The language is evocative and the text reads well aloud. Hari & Deepti's artwork is exceptional. The intricate cut-paper illustrations are awe-inspiring and create a feel of the cosmos. The endpapers are beautiful and each double page has impact and takes us beyond ourselves to wider horizons. I adore the picture that accompanies the Milky Way and the infinity pictures with beautiful colours and swirls. The artists seem to capture the concepts of infinity and mystery.

The Afterword tells how the author was inspired by a book about quantum gravity. "As a lifelong storyteller I was fascinated by his discussion of the complex and sometimes fraught relationship between science and story." She outlines key stages where scientists and philosophers have proposed ideas and theories that help us understand our world. "Every day brings more discovery."

"[O]ur universe is active, vital, changing and growing.
That we are active, vital, changing and growing, too.
That every grain of dust in this universe is amazing.
As we are amazing.
We, the storytellers.
We, the curious ones."
Where will the journey take us next?

A remarkable book that deals with a complex subject - man's evolving relationship to the cosmos - in a way that is accessible and thought-provoking.

Brenda Marshall

What a Rock Can Reveal

Maya Wei-Haas, illus. Sonia Pulido, pub. Phaidon

What a Rock Can Reveal belongs to the group of information books which combines effectively written information with impressive creative work in a child-friendly and visually attractive style. It offers a clear, but not simplistic, introduction to geology through the description of rocks, the processes that lead to their formation and an overview of what rocks can tell us about our planet. The language includes specific terminology but is not overwhelming.

By the author's own admission, the content of the book can only offer an introduction to the discipline but hopes to spark the same curiosity and interest that led her to nurture her own love for rocks and

fossil into earning a PhD in Earth Science and to forge a career as a writer and explorer. Her enthusiasm and passion for the topic are obvious.

This is the first book for Wei-Haas which is aimed at children in Primary education and invites them to take a look at simple stones and rocks to imagine the journey each of them has completed or is completing, mapping journeys that include the core of the planet and the highest mountains. A variety of minerals are mentioned as well as the processes that led them to become stones; fossils and tectonic plates feature too, with strikingly illustrated double spread pages showing volcanic activity. My favourite is the one depicting the impact of a meteorite on Earth, but all of them complement and enhance the information effectively. Other planets are considered, as they are a source of further information about the history of our own, while career paths in geology which may appeal to keen young readers are mentioned too.

Laura Brill

Wilding: How to Bring Wildlife Back, An Illustrated Guide

Isabella Tree, illus. Angela Harding, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Damage to nature hits the news headlines almost daily and is a local as well as global problem. In her heartfelt introduction, Tree explains that the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. "Never has there been a more important time to engage in nature and its recovery" she notes - nor a more important book to help achieve this than *Wilding: how to bring wildlife back, an illustrated guide*.

Wilding was previously published as an award-winning non-fiction book for adults and, although this new, fully illustrated, stunningly produced version is aimed at children, adults will very definitely love it too! It charts the story of the experimental rewilding project at Knepp in West Sussex, showing what happens when you take an exhausted, over farmed piece of land and allow - and encourage - nature to take over.

This illustrated reimagining of the adult original explains clearly, and beautifully, how rewilding can work to reverse decline and shows the close connections between habitat and species. Each double page spread follows a different plant, bird or animal which has returned to, or been reintroduced, and thrived at Knepp: everything from bats, bees and beavers to Exmoor ponies and Tamworth pigs, previously extinct large tortoiseshell butterflies and even white storks. The rewilding project is recorded here, not just in Tree's highly readable, factual account with her own personal anecdotes, but through Angela Harding's stunning mix of striking linocuts, watercolours and sketches. Maps, a timeline and photographs show the scale - and the rapid success - of the project, which isn't over yet. Tree's hope is that there will be "many more Knepps" and this timely, rallying cry of a book concludes

with lots of easily-do-able ways for the reader to rewild their own outdoor spaces as well as a glossary and comprehensive resource list for further research and action.

Wilding is narrative non-fiction at its finest, perfect to read as a story or to dip in and out of. It's a real treat of a book which deserves to be written into every primary reading curriculum, and should be in every KS2 primary classroom, science topic box and school library. Secondary school libraries need to stock this too, science and art departments will make brilliant use of it. *Wilding* will also make the perfect gift book for nature lovers and would-be rewilders. It is an exciting and powerful read, infinitely inspiring and bursting with hope that we can all make a difference and the conviction that real change is possible.

Eileen Armstrong

Wildlife Crossings: Protecting Animal Pathways Around the World

Catherine Barr, illus. Christiane Engel, pub. Otter-Barry Books

Catherine Barr has written 35 books, studied ecology and worked for Greenpeace. She lives near the Welsh Hills where she writes books to spark questions, inspire curiosity and provoke action to protect the natural world. She is fascinated by nature and particularly the power of words. Christiane Engel supplies captivating graphics that portray the sad stories of species under threat and conversely the happy solutions to these problems, all in the turn of a page.

The world is criss-crossed by ancient paths where endless journeys have been made by 8.7 million species searching for food, water, mates and safe places to breed. Humans are breaking up this natural world into inaccessible pieces with busy highways, cities, farms and fences. Ancient natural habitats are becoming isolated patches of land. Rivers that have been dammed remain inaccessible. How to resolve this catastrophic creep of destruction with wildlife pathways, is a heartening story. Young readers just might be goaded into taking up the cudgels on behalf of wildlife conservation.

Small vividly recounted snippets of text speckle the pictures, making the illustrations doubly memorable; for example, "Elephants can smell water over ten miles away", "Within weeks of hatching in the Arctic, spoonies fly south for 50 hours without stopping", "In just 50 years, freshwater migratory fish populations have fallen by 93%". The demise of elephants, hedgehogs, spoonies, gibbons, freshwater salmon, bears and cougars is related. Enquiring minds will have a field day and the uninterested just might become interested. This book can be a textbook or just a superb story. A bedtime read or a reference book for 6–12-year-olds.

Elizabeth Negus

Your Sense-ational Human Body

Emma Young, illus. John Devolle, pub. Bloomsbury

You've probably always been taught that you have five senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch. Well, that isn't quite right! You actually have more than five senses - there are in fact thirty-two senses that the human body relies on to function! This book explores them all and explains why they are all essential to us being able to function correctly.

In your eyes, rod cells and cone cells have different jobs in terms of what they sense and how they control light and colour whereas taste is not just down to one simple element which decides whether we like brussels sprouts with our Christmas dinners or not, but more detailed elements such as tasting saltiness or sourness – did you know that we don't just taste with our tongues? We can even taste on the insides of our bodies with our brains, guts and pancreas!

Your Sense-ational Human Body is a fascinating read for any budding young scientist who is interested in how the wonderful human body works. Whilst the book shares fantastic information, it does it in a light-hearted way which is easy to relate to. It is accessible for younger readers due to the level of content and Emma Young being aware of the depth of knowledge her target readers will be able to understand. There are brilliant touches such as explanations for how to pronounce trickier words and a glossary at the end of the book so that readers can understand key terms.

This book is cleverly thought out with double-page spreads that explore different groups of senses that relate to each other. The illustrations complement the text boxes that contain information and show the different parts of the body which are affected by certain senses that are being described. There are also plenty of fun illustrations depicting how the senses work. Each and every page is colourful and engaging; there is just the right amount of information to digest!

This is an engaging read which will extend any child's understanding of the senses.

Tom Joy

Picture books

The Ballad of Cactus Joe

Lily Murray, illus. Clive McFarland

The Boy Who Loves to Lick the Wind

Fiona Carswell, illus. Yu Rong

Detective Catz and the Missing Nut

Marjoke Henrichs

The Golden Hare

Paddy Donnelly

Help! We Need a Story

James Harris, illus. Mariajo Ilustrajo

I Love Books

Mariajo Ilustrajo

The Library Mouse

Frances Tosdevin, illus. Sophia O'Connor

My Friend Andy

Emma Chinnery

Pink Trucks

Sam Clarke, illus. Cory Reid

The Prickletrims Go Wild

Marie Dorleans

Thank You

Jarvis

This Is the Ship That Jack Built

Peter Millett, illus. Sam Caldwell

Junior books

Black Hole Cinema Club

Christopher Edge

Jordan Lees

Cactus Kid and the Battle for Star Rock Mountain

Emmanuel Guerrero

Diary of a Big Bad Wolf

Ben Miller, illus. Elisa Paganelli

The Girl who Dreamed in Magic

Maria Kuzniar

The Letter with the Golden Stamp

Onjali Q. Rauf

The Magic Callaloo

Trish Cooke, illus. Sophie Bass

Peregrine Quinn and the Cosmic Realm

Ash Bond

Pirate Academy: New Kid on Deck

Justin Somper

Pirates of Darksea

Catherine Doyle

Shadow Fox

Carlie Sorosiak

Starminster

Megan Hopkins

Twice Upon a Time

Michelle Harrison

The Whisperwicks: The Labyrinth of Lost and Found

Young Adult books

ASAP

Axie Oh

Where The Heart Should Be

Sarah Crossan

Darker By Four

June Cl Tan

The Encanto's Daughter

Melissa de la Cruz

Floating Hotel

Grace Curtis

Keedie

Elle McNicoll

The Last Bloodcarver

Vanessa Le

Lie or Die

A.J. Clack

Looking for Lucie

Amanda Addison

Not Like Other Girls

Meredith Adamo

The Reappearance of Rachel Price

Holly Jackson

Soulmates and Other Ways to Die

Melissa Welliver

Trigger

C.G. Moore

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