



Armadillo

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

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Picture Book Reviews

Aife and Stray

Stevie Westgarth, illus. Emily Ford, pub. Troika Books

Gray and Grayer. Doer, Sayer? Party Slayers? Aife and Stray are they, and even more, in Stevie Westgarth's 60-page picture book vibrantly illustrated by Emily Ford.

The story of Aife and Stray starts when an envelope to Aife, the poor child of the class (and to his pet pig, Stray) arrives. It's an invitation from his "cool" classmate, Prunella Bonbon, to her "posh soiree." The nightmare for Aife now begins, because he has nothing trendy to wear to such an elegant event - cool children always have posh parties after all. So, he panics! But, his one-eyed pet pig, Stray, encourages - yes, Stray is a talking pig - him to go shopping in the "hottest" stores in town. Bounding the streets and visiting seven boutiques, Aife (and Stray of course) choose something chic for the party. But what? And how does it rate at the soiree? Is Aife a hero? Is Aife a zero? Are there jeers or cheers?

Aife and Stray (both really are painted grey) is a lengthy and large format picture book, delightfully rhymed, and punctuated by humorous situations; and, is accented by kooky and complementary illustrations. The sing-songiness of the books' words help move the story along. The author juxtaposes 3 main topics: boy and pig, poor and rich, same and different. Also, he incorporates the theme of being oneself, and loving those who differ. A different book for all who feel different and even for those who don't!

Patricia Ann Timbrook

Arabella and the Magic Pencil

Stephanie Ward, illus. Shaney Hyde, pub. EK Books (Exisle Publishing)

Gentle watercolours, a scene of happy sunflowers, royal birds, fairy tale houses and rose trees greet the reader of *Arabella and the Magic Pencil* as they explore the front cover - so much to see and so many questions already - who is the little girl with flowers in her hair, why do the swan and bird wear crowns and what is the magic pencil? Shaney Hyde tantalises the reader. Open the book and the end pages offer more clues and more questions, here we see what could indeed be that very magic pencil but where does its trail take us?

Time to begin the story and meet Arabella, only child of a doting duke and duchess. From the outset the playful language with its alliterative sentences will appeal to readers/listeners (this is after all a

picture books) as they hear the gently rolling sounds and the adults reading the book (particularly any teachers out there) may want to take note of this technique and demonstrate to children how and why it works well. Now back to the story and to Arabella.

Every year a royal decree grants Arabella a wish. Usually her wishes are for splendid things - who wouldn't want a pink puppy their very own amusement park or even a faery? When Arabella gets a baby brother her wish for a magic pencil is heartfelt - she wants all she draws to become real. This is, at first, of course wonderful fun and whilst Stephanie Ward has clearly had fun inventing things for Arabella to draw Shaney Hyde has worked magic with his own pencil!

As the story progresses we are soon introduced to the problems of wishing too hard. Sibling rivalry may sometimes reach a head but some creativity can always put things right - can't it?

A truly delightful book and princesses aside this is for both boys and girls an important message about learning to appreciate the gifts we are given for free, learning to understand one another and learning to tolerate as well as love. An important message, a funny story, a beautiful book.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Billy and the Dragon

Nadia Shareen, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

Billy and her sidekick Fatcat are at a fancy dress party in the woods when Fatcat is kidnapped or is he? Mummy Dragon is causing mayhem which ties into the story brilliantly. Will Billy figure out what has happened? There is a lot of familiar woodland characters in the story. And of course the happy ending.

A beautifully written story, with lovely illustrations. The pictures are great and colourful, bold, and what I liked was that each page had a different coloured background. The book is a great size for little hands. Lovely length book to be either read to or to read by yourself. Ideal for a confident 6 year old reader. The words are quite large and there isn't really a lot of hard words in the book. It is one of those books that has a textured pattern on the cover. It's a great sequel to *Billy and the Beast*.

Helen Byles

The Bookworm

Debi Gliori, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

What an adventure this lovely story takes you on!! We had to read it a few times to really absorb it and understand the path it was taking us on. It links perfectly with the imagination of young children and makes the world seem so magical!

The Bookworm tells a story that most children can relate to - it is all about asking 'parents for a pet' and the adventure it then takes him on with his imagination. We loved reading this story together and talking about how the worm changes into a dragon and how they become best friends. I enjoyed the little twist at the end about the goldfish having teeth (which doesn't give anything away)!

The illustrations are fantastic, making the story come alive, especially with the vibrant colours and comical sketches. This book is quite magical and holds a strong appeal ... After the 4th or 5th time of reading the book in one sitting my little boy and I found ourselves having to go through the book, looking at the pictures, discussing them in detail or I would let my little boy try and re-tell the story using them.

The Bookworm also has educational aspects, from learning about what worms like to eat and where certain animals like to live to what they need to survive or be happy!

I would recommend this story, use it to let your (and your child's) imagination go wild!

Amy Wall

The Boy In The Big Blue Glasses

Susanne Gervay, illus. Marjorie Crosby-Fairall, pub. EK (Exisle Publishing)

Sammy imagines that he's a superhero, building a pirate ship and flying through the air to save his friends from sharks. In his red cape and superhero costume, he certainly looks the part. But one day Sammy has to wear glasses, and if there's one thing he knows for sure, it's that he doesn't want to wear glasses.

Adults know that children don't want to wear glasses – it marks them out as being different from their friends, so they try their best to make them feel better about it. Sammy's parents tell him that the glasses make him look handsome. He says they make his ears hurt. Grandma and Grandpa take the same approach, asking who the handsome young man/superhero is in the glasses. Sam feels sure no one recognises him now that he wears glasses (just like when Superman wears his).

In school, Sammy's teacher brings him to the front of the class and asks everyone if they can see anything different about him. Sammy doesn't feel different, he feels invisible has a sore tummy. Luckily, Sammy's best friend still recognises him and announces that "Sam's got glasses." After declaring that Sammy's glasses make him look handsome, his teacher also explains that they mean

that he can “see everything really well now”. Sammy feels so sad that he doesn’t want to go to school anymore. He tries his best to lose his glasses but people always find them for him. Things seem even worse when his best friend isn’t at school the next day. Sammy hides himself away from the other children. When some of them pull faces and make fun of him, he takes off his glasses to clean them suddenly sees everyone differently. Sammy starts pulling faces at everyone and soon the whole class is laughing – not at him but with him. Putting his glasses back on, everyone comes back into focus and he can see them clearly again – and the best thing of all is that they can see him.

This book addresses an important issue that children can face and highlights the importance of having children’s vision checked and monitored as it can impact greatly on educational and social development. The book has been beautifully illustrated by Marjorie Crosby-Fairall. A great picture book to read and look at, and one that will prove useful at home and in schools.

Vicky Harvey

The Boy Who Knew Nothing

James Thorp, illus. Angus Mackinnon, pub. Templar Books

The Boy Who Knew Nothing is a challenging, rewarding read for any child, presenting as it does, the complex nature of knowledge and how it is only through the simple act of asking questions that we come to understand anything at all. A great encouragement for those who feel left behind in the knowledge stakes.

The book starts with a baby in a pram, who, in common with all babies, knows nothing. No alphabet, no numbers, no idea of space, place or time but, sadly, as he grows, he feels he is still like the small baby he started as, knowing nothing, and this feeling is reinforced by the children in his class unkindly calling him a fool.

One day, he goes to play dress-up and finds a very odd creature. He asks his parents what it is. His Dad says everyone knows this odd animal is a sleepy giraffe. And here’s that scornful statement, ‘Everyone knows,’ which haunts all those who are struggling to find out things. But, actually, as we go through the book, it seems everyone knows something different. So our sleepy giraffe becomes a whispery owl, then a clumsy gnu and, finally, a giraffe.

The Boy Who Knew Nothing has his own ideas of what the creature is but having had enough of all the confusion, goes off to see all these animals for himself and finds his odd creature is a flamingo. He takes the flamingo to school and, together, teach the children that if they want to know something, they must just ask.

The illustrations, startling and super-imaginative, with strong, gentle colours and sweeping, graceful lines, not only bring to vivid life the adventures of the boy and his world, but also underline the movement of the story, making it easy to follow. The smooth, silky, fascinating pages of this book hold much for a child to think about.

Gwen Grant

The Bug Collector

Alex G. Griffiths, pub. Andersen Press

This has been a real favourite in our household! Hui (my 2 year old son) asked for it every evening for about 3 weeks. The story took us on a journey of emotions from the excitement of an adventure with Grandad to the sadness that all the bugs were in bottles to the happiness and relief that they were free and the garden felt alive again!

We talked about how the bugs love being in their natural habitat! It was wonderful to see how excited Hui was to get to the page when the bugs were all set free. Additionally Hui loved looking at all the illustrations of the animals, we often spent time discussing them in detail, the illustrations really brought the story alive. They are vibrant, plentiful and in some places comical!

We loved the learning behind the story and taking to Hui about how special the bees, ladybirds, dung beetles and other insects are. So much so that on a walk he spotted a ‘dung beetle ‘ and then told us all about them ... he is 2!

We would highly recommend this book, what a great way to start learning about the wonderful nature around us! It inspired us to go on our own bug hunt.

Amy Wall

Clem and Crab

Fiona Lumbers, pub. Andersen Press

Clem, the little girl whose story this is, discovers a crab at the beach; and, sadly, she also discovers a lot of junk left behind by her species, humans. What she does with the collected trash isn't unique — making a collage — what happens in her classroom is.

Mention the words, sea, surf, and sand to someone, and often, what follows is a smile. Why? Because the experience of being by an ocean with its repetitive waves lapping onto the shores, where its daily

gifts from beneath the water come forth, is memorable. Many children experience this ocean thing at early ages, perhaps when they were first introduced to the water and sand, with a bucket and a spade.

In this 32-page picture book, *Clem and Crab*, author and illustrator, Fiona Lumbers, shares the good, the bad, and the ugly of one particular beach story. Through the use of pastel colours and simple text, she tells a story that displays true sensitivity to the environment – and points out to all readers that children, like parents, teachers, and others, can help improve the made-messy-by-people beaches, even if it is, one... beach...at a... time.

Patricia Ann Timbrook

Don't Mess with a Princess

Rachel Valentine, illus. Rebecca Bagley, pub. Puffin Books

An awful ogre is terrorising the land and the king wants his precious princess granddaughters to stay safe. But the princesses have other ideas. So, off they go on an adventure involving danger, dancing and a daring rescue. Can they stop the ogre in time?

In a fairy tale land, three diverse princesses and a conservative king disagree on how to stop an ogre who is wreaking havoc across the kingdom. While the king sends his bumbling knights – with giggle-inducing names like Sir Clatter-Bottom – to do the job, the princesses sneak out of their room to help. With original techniques, including dancing through the dangerous forest, the princesses find the ogre. But instead of jumping to conclusions and banishing the unfortunate ogre, they find out what the problem is and help him solve it. In an ending filled with kindness (and the hilariously common mistake solved), the king and his modern-day granddaughters agree to disagree on proper protocol for princesses.

Aimed at children aged 3-6, this picture book seamlessly blends the old with the new. While the setting may be traditional, the princesses are anything but. Ballet-dancing girls can still go on adventures after all. The colourful illustrations are full of detail and convey both darkness and danger as well as action and antics of a wonderful cast of characters.

This contemporary book will likely ring true with children that enjoy adventure stories and fractured fairy tales. It offers loads of opportunities for discussions about assumptions and challenging stereotypes. Above all, it's an engaging read that will keep young eyes glued to the pages as they watch the princess heroes save the day.

Stephanie Ward

Don't Worry, Little Crab

Chris Haughton, pub. Walker Books

A new picture book by Chris Haughton is a treat to be savoured, and this one does not disappoint.

Little Crab and Very Big Crab live in a tiny rockpool, and one day they set off to the sea. Little Crab says 'This is going to be so great', and they go tic-a-tic, tic-a-tic over the rocks, splosh splash across the pools, and squelch, squelch through the slippery seaweed.

The reality of the sea is, however, a bit daunting, and Little Crab suggests they don't go in, but Very Big Crab is reassuring. The waves whoosh onto their rock, and Little Crab thinks that is enough of the sea, but Very Big Crab is still encouraging, and they go a bit further, and further, until finally they are in the sea. Little Crab is entranced by the fish, and they all play together. They play and have fun, and Little Crab decides 'I love the sea!' – but then it's time to go home, and, after an initial protest, they decide to take the long way.

Children who have been reluctant to try a new experience that they eventually love will recognize this scenario, and the relationship between the crabs, both of indeterminate gender, is delightful. Chris Haughton's bright blocks of colour, big eyes and text in wobbly white writing are familiar now, and his use of language is fun as ever. This is another winner which will be fun to share and to read aloud.

Diana Barnes

Grandad's Island

Benji Davies, pub. Simon & Schuster

When Syd goes through the gate at the bottom of his garden and lets himself into his grandad's house, Grandad is strangely nowhere to be found. Eventually Syd finds him in the attic where, together, they go through a mysterious door onto a tall ship which is sat in "an ocean of rooftops". Following a long voyage across the seas Syd and his grandad arrive at an island, where with the help of the local animals, they build a home and explore its "wonders." After a while, Grandad announces to Syd that he is staying on the island by himself so after one last hug Syd travels home alone. When he next goes into Grandad's house everything is still the same apart from Grandad not being there, he ventures into the attic once more, but the magical door is not there either; "its as if it had never been there at all". Syd does find, however, an envelope addressed to him containing a photograph of a smiling Grandad stood alongside his new island friends.

Benji Davies, the creator of *The Storm Whale*, has produced a gentle, charming, multi-layered story, which could be used as a way of talking about death with a young child, in fact Davies describes it as his death book*. There is no religious context to the book, no medical or other direct reference to

death or dying is made but it is easy to make the conclusion that Granddad is now in a better place, albeit one where he and Syd cannot be together again. The appearance of the letter could be viewed as a spiritualist connection between the worlds or maybe it is just an extension of the imaginative game that Syd is playing. Granddad isn't really gone because Syd has his memories, letters, pictures etc. Granddad is happy in his vibrant, busy, colourful new home, has many friends, does exciting things like sliding down waterfalls, and significantly has no need for his walking stick anymore. He is better, is not in pain, does not struggle anymore, although his clothing does not change – his wearing pyjama trousers with a jumper, shirt, tie, and hat denote his vulnerability and possible confusion. He also has many of his favourite personal items with him.

Personally, I get the impression that this world could have been one that was the focus of Granddad and Syd's recent games together. That Granddad has been planting this idea of a different, better world into Syd's mind, to help ease his loss, using his household objects for inspiration. The easel shown at the beginning of the book when Syd is searching for him portrays the ship that they sail upon. The orangutan and tortoise that are significant characters in the new world are notable objects in the attic and are absent when Syd returns to the room at the end of the book. The string of yellow and red bows are very similar to the birds inhabiting the island as are the plants which originally appear in the house and the gramophone is an important feature of his jungle life.

This story, I think, is an introductory talking point about death, to initiate the ideas of loss, missing somebody, the confusion of where the loved one has gone. Further questions and discussions around death can then be engaged through books such as Michael Rosen's *Sad Book* and Rebecca Cobb's *Missing Mummy*, which both focus on death in more direct but still gentle ways.

However, it is possible to read the book and not consider death at all: the journey from house to a mysterious jungle island is reminiscent of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and the relationship between Syd and his Granddad reminded me of other books celebrating a grandfather/grandchild relationship, notably, Michael Morpurgo's *Grandpa Christmas*, Penelope Harper's *Lollipop and Grandpa* series, and Lane Smith's gorgeous *Grandpa Green*. All celebrate the imagination and play as well, just as Benji Davies does.

The cheerful and bright illustrations and the chunky boardbook style of format make this an appealing book and there is plenty to get from it whichever level you choose to read it on.

Natalie McChrystal Plimmer

*An interesting article by Davies about how he developed his ideas for this book on the Pictus Picturebook Makers blog.

Hello

Fiona Woodcock, pub. Harper Collins Children's Books

This exquisitely illustrated book tells, in ice-cream sundae colours, the tale of a brother and sister who go on their holidays by the sea. It does so entirely through words which contain the letter pair 'll'. Beginning with 'Hello', we see children 'collide', 'yell' and 'gallop' at a funfair, play 'ball' on the beach, swim with 'jellyfish' and finally 'collapse' on their 'pillows' after an evening of campfires, 'lullabies' and 'marshmallows'.

For me, and the small children who formed my mini research panel, the visuals of this book were an instant point of engagement. Woodcock, according to the notes, uses 'a mix of BLO pens, hand-cut stencils and printing techniques to create her images'. There is a nursery like charm to her predominantly pink, blue and yellow palette, which varies in shade to represent different times and environments; and there are things to spot; colours to talk about; faces to analyse. The illustrations stand alone to create a narrative that, like Raymond Brigg's *The Snowman* renders words unnecessary. As such, the use of 'll' theme felt laboured and gimmicky. The single word on each page could, perhaps, provide a springboard for wider discussion, and could, perhaps, allow a young reader to consolidate their understanding of the 'll' letter pair in words, but they are very much second fiddle to images themselves. For me, however, they create an enforced limitation which needlessly restricts the story.

I would recommend this book for very young pre-reading children who will enjoy the pictures and building the story through interaction, or for budding artists who might like to try creating similar images through Woodcock's techniques. If readers put the 'll' premise to one side, they will derive far more enjoyment from the other aspects that this book has to offer.

Laura Myatt

Is 2 a Lot?

Annie Watson, illus. Rebecca Evans, pub. Tilbury House Publishers

Every parent knows that answering a child's questions in a creative way whilst driving can be challenging, but in this spirited story, Joey's resourceful mother has it in the bag!

Is 2 a Lot? written by Annie Watson, is a clever and insightful approach to learning about value and numbers whilst entertaining young children with whimsy and humour. During an ordinary car trip, the imaginative Joey asks his mother a succession of number-related questions and with each inventive response his mother gives, their car trip takes an unusual turn. We begin to see an adventure unfold through Joey's imagination which is so beautifully captured and illustrated by Rebecca Evans.

Text and illustrations meld skilfully to create many layers to this picture book. Both children and parents will delight in discovering all manner of details in the lively illustrations that carry the adventure forward. This is not a typical counting book, however, the host of diverse characters and creatures that Joey and his mother meet along the way – from skunks to cowboys and dinosaurs – provide plenty of scope for counting and learning about numbers. Throughout the text, numbers are written numerically as well as in words which provides a further learning strategy.

This is a handsome picture book with its vibrant colours and glossy pages and is brimming with vivid imagery that invites interaction with its readers. The attentiveness shared by Joey and his mother creates a positive, feel-good experience making this book suitable for school libraries and gifts as well as being a perfect bedtime story for ages 4-6.

Is 2 a Lot? will ignite discussion and inspire children to mimic Joey and formulate their own mathematical questions. And in turn, will inspire parents to have clever answers at the ready.

Kathryn Adams

Just Read!

Lori Degman, illus. Victoria Tentler-Krylov, pub. Sterling Books

This is a frustrating read because it's very close to being great, but has these moments where it missteps. It is in its best moments so excellent that I end up wondering what happened in-between the creators' first draft and the finished book.

I'll start with the positives. This is a book about the joy of reading that in its intention looks to encourage the very young that struggling to learn to read is worth it, and the slightly older that continuing to read is a fantastic experience. I'm glad someone's said it, and said it so elegantly. I'll guess if you're reading this, that you'll feel the same way. And there are points where the book captures this perfectly. Page 16, pages 20/21, pages 24/25 – you will not see better anywhere.

The book makes its argument in rhyming verse, each couplet supported with a single full-page image (or two couplets and a double-page spread). I'd feel comfortable reading it with/to children all the way up to Year 3, though by Year 3 you'd need to think carefully about how you're using the book. The writing is great. So often with books like this it's either boring and clunky, or it's showing off and inaccessible. Degman's writing is neither, it's warm and urgent and feels like a real person talking. There's only one reason I have any misgivings about it, and unfortunately it's on the first page. She begins by saying "Hooray! I know how to read on my own!" – for me it's off-tone, and a bit patronizing to the older readers. I am really disappointed because the rest of the writing is so good.

The art is sensational with moments of awkwardness. I'm terrible at media, but to me it looks like brush and ink. It's colourful, lively, flowing, impactful, beautifully-composed. It has a real 1960s/1970s feel to it – those translations of Italian books of folk tales and history that you sometimes used to see. It hits that same lovely, Utopian subtext of positivity. Tentler-Krylov does sometimes fall down in the detail of depicting people. I infer that's her background as an architect: her figures are full of movement and interaction with their environment, but sometimes a limb is a little odd, or a face too elfin.

I have a few issues to mention.

Just Read! really has a go at proving the adage about books and their covers: this one does its interiors no justice at all, the book is far better than the cover would lead you to suppose, and does nothing to embrace the book's message. Likewise the title, which sounds too irritated to be properly welcoming. It's a shame that in a book encouraging the young to read, that the publisher has done so little to include the promotional copy, author biographies and so forth in its agenda.

The book is conspicuously American. For example, 'armour' is spelled 'armor', the astronaut has a USA on their chest, that's not how a clown looks around here these days. It doesn't reflect diversity in the same way we do in Britain, either. This isn't to say that the book's white and male, far from it, but it's American diversity. So where does that leave us? I'm firmly on the side of 'recommended', it's a joyous book. Ignore the cover, understand it comes from a parallel sensibility, and *Just Read!*

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Little Red Riding Hood

Beatrix Potter, illus. Helen Oxenbury, pub. Frederick Warne

In Beatrix Potter's original version of this story by Charles Perrault, her language is very much of its time, and of the countryside. Red Riding Hood's mother 'was fair silly about her' and instructs her to 'put on thy little red hood, and trot away to thy granny's...' and we are told that 'her grandmother dwelt in another village'. The woodcutters sing joyfully, and the wolf 'was afraid of them. He durst not go home to his bed in the thicket'. Red Riding Hood's innocence, as she tells the wolf exactly where she is going, encourages him to challenge her to 'try which road is shortest', and he cheats, of course, by running to ensure that he gets there first, while Red Riding Hood dawdles and picks flowers, collects nuts, and finds 'by the brae, little scarlet wild strawberries, as red as her hood', which she gathers, with great concentration, into a dock leaf and puts in her basket.

In her foreword to this picture book, Helen Oxenbury describes how much she enjoyed portraying the wicked wolf, in much the same way as actors relish a villainous part, and so he starts off scheming and scrawny, not having eaten for three days, but very elegant in his plus-fours and two-tone shoes, with

his walking stick. She explains that, although the wolf has eaten Red Riding Hood and her grandmother in this version, she shows him on the last page with a belly so fat that he can't fasten his trousers, and looking unlikely to outrun the woodcutters closely pursuing him... Even though the words do not indicate a rescue, the illustration hints that all will be well.

Helen Oxenbury evidently delighted in illustrating the wolf hiding in the pea sticks in grandmother's garden, and showing him dressing, with some difficulty, in grandmother's clothes. There is much to enjoy in the language of this version, though some explanations may be necessary: Grandma, and the wolf imitating her, tell callers to "Pull the bobbin and the latch will go up", but it is possible to work out what happens.

Red Riding Hood's questions are not quite the same as in most versions: she asks about grandma's hairy arms, her hairy ears, the fact that her eyes have turned yellow, and only then doesn't get very far in enquiring about the big white teeth before she is eaten. She is a sweet Oxenbury child, with dark curls peeping out from her hood, and her innocent face is very much contrasted with the half-closed and cunning eyes of the wolf. This is a very beautiful book, one to treasure along with the tiny books in the Potter collection.

Diana Barnes

Lunch at 10 Pomegranate Street

Felicita Sala, pub. Scribblekidsbooks

Lunch at 10 Pomegranate Street is bound to be a favourite in every child's house, giving, as it does, ten recipes for delicious food to cook and share. It's a beautifully illustrated book and the pleasure starts immediately you open the cover with its soft gentle coloured squares already promising delightful things inside.

The illustrations, mouth-watering, detailed and appealing, range far and wide, from Italy, Turkey, China, Greece, right through to those countries whose food we not only want to eat but also to cook. This is the book that will help a child, or indeed an adult, to do just that. The recipes, varied and exciting, are so clear that if followed, success is bound to follow.

On one side of the double spread used for each recipe are the ingredients required for the given dish. Each ingredient has its own picture and description, making it super clear what is needed. Below this, is the method used to make the Strawberry Crumble or the Green Rice, or Baba Ganoush, or any one of the other excellent dishes we wish to eat and enjoy.

The illustrations are wonderful. We are making the Peanut butter and Choc Chip cookies with Jeremiah, who, we are told, cannot seem to remember the words to his favourite song. So friendly

and inviting, any child will gladly accept the invitation to bake with Jeremiah. Or cooking Okayo Don with Miss Ishida, reaching, with her, for a bottle of Mirin to add to her Chicken and Egg Rice.

At the end, when everything has been cooked, the friends of 10 Pomegranate Street have a party, with all the delicious food set out on a big white table and, there is Mister Singh, looking over the wall, inviting everyone to come and join them for there is plenty of food for all.

The deep, soft colours, the wonderful faces and rooms, are so detailed and interesting, it's almost as if each picture is just waiting to be walked into. *Lunch at 10 Pomegranate Street* is a book to be kept.

Gwen Grant

Mr Nogginbody gets a Hammer

David Shannon, pub. Norton Young Readers

The characters in this picture book are rather like walking eggs, with hands and legs, and Mr Nogginbody has a bowler hat perched on top. The story starts with him sliding in his socks, and stubbing his toe on a nail.

At Dan's Hardware Store (and Dan seems to have dungaree buttons as eyes), he is advised to buy a hammer, and he duly tries to bang the nail in, only to see it bounce out. He says 'I better really whack this baby!' and holds it in position with his fingers. The outcome is predictable: 'That really smarts!' With gentler taps this time, he manages to knock the nail in: 'I fixed it!' and sets off with his hammer in search of another nail. That one goes wonky, and he realizes what the other end of the hammer is for, but in clawing it out, he wrecks the floor. 'Well, lookie there', he says, as he spies a crooked picture nail, but he smashes the glass on the picture. More mayhem ensues, as he mistakes a lamp switch, a shower head, a flower and a fly, among other things, for nails, until he realizes that not everything is a nail, drops the hammer, and 'fixes' the flower by watering it.

The setting is American: there are fire hydrants and letter boxes on posts, and although some of this may be familiar from American films, the very American language is rather more off-putting, this doesn't always work for the English reader but give it a try.

David Shannon's books, especially the David series, in which David gets up to all sorts of mischief but is still loved, have won awards, including the Caldecott Honor Medal, over the last 20 years, and some have been animated for American television and Youtube.

Diana Barnes

Naughty Narwhal

Emma Adams, illus. Katy Halford, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

My first impressions of this book are glee and delight: the big, bright book is adorned with holographic lettering and glittery lines on the illustrations, making it instantly dazzle in the light and catch my attention. This gives the impression that a lot of money and time has gone into this book, and along with the cute illustrations of the character on the front, this book will stand out in a line up or on a shelf.

The book is about a naughty narwhal who realizes it's better to be nice and have friends than be naughty and alone. It's a nice story to teach kids something they already know and are told quite often. Nothing new or exciting in the premise but a nice story all the same. At first, I thought the narwhal on the front was not really recognizable as a narwhal. While I appreciate the book isn't going for 'realistic' animals in the pictures, it's such a far throw that without the title it would be hard to tell what the character was. It's sort of like a pink blob with a unicorn horn. I would like children to be able to learn a bit about the sea creatures in the book, but they're just there for fun and not really essential to the story.

The illustrations are of a very high quality. They're beautiful, colourful and bright. They have a great level of detail without being overcrowded and are a delight to look at on every page. Each little character has a unique expression even in the very corners of the book, and I can see little children enjoying hunting for creatures as a carer or parent reads the book to them. I tried to find something critical to say about the illustrations but I really couldn't find much at all – they are fantastic!

The text is in a simple font that is easy to read for all ages, although there are some additional text in the illustrations (for example, signs and character noises) that are in a similar font which I found a bit distracting. For early readers it may be confusing to understand what is to be read and what is part of the illustration. One way of combatting this would be to have the signs and illustration text in another colour other than black, or an obviously different font. This is made a little worse by the way the text splits and bends around the pages. A younger child would miss parts of the text. That said, keeping the text in one place is quite restrictive and boring, so I like that they have tried to keep the book fluent and fun. Perhaps the text should be a little bigger, or more obvious in placement. It's not a deal breaker for me, but the best books are often the ones that children can follow along with the adult and eventually read themselves, whereas I think the text might put off early readers.

The words are fun to read out loud. They rhyme well and make a fast, playful rhythm which an advanced reader could read almost like a song! However, I come back to the same point as above, that someone who wasn't as good at reading might struggle a bit and trip over their words. I tried reading it aloud several times and it was only by the third read through did I not make any mistakes as I had a better idea of where the words were placed. The sound when you do get it right though, creates a really enjoyable melody that would even help some readers enjoy books more.

The main character, a naughty narwhal, is obviously female. A lot of books still sway to male main characters even with animals, so that is nice to see without it being a main focal point. I get the impression she is a young, confident little girl (narwhal) who is a bit young and self-centred, almost like a spoiled 5-year-old who is used to getting their own way. In that sense, I didn't really like her character so much. She appeared a bit mean and brat-like. Not something I would advertise to children as being funny or acceptable. When she is mean to her friends, she hits one of them on the head at one point. It's played down in the book as a 'bop' on the head, but I dislike the blasé attitude to physical violence, albeit not serious.

While mean and rude, the narwhal soon finds herself alone and scared and facing a shark. It's something that children can relate to; be mean and your friends will leave, and the positive message is wholesome, although a little obvious. I wanted there to be something more to the story. Some action or turning point that created a build-up of energy, yet I felt like it never really led anywhere and once she came back to apologise to her friends, I was a bit unsatisfied. I think that the brilliant illustrations made up for this lack of content, they almost carried the whole story along better than the text which is what good illustrations should do. I have read so many books like this now, that I find them predictable and crave to see a bit more creativity or some straying from the default 'be nice or you'll be lonely.' Even depicting the shark as a scary bad guy is old news and has been overdone. A real Narwhal's main predators are whales and polar bears; yet the whale is one of her friends in the beginning. I appreciate it's not a real-life educational book, but it might have added some new element if the enemy was a polar bear or she had something more exciting happen to her which made her decide to need her friends.

Overall, I felt like the story didn't really live up to the high expectations I had when I first saw the book, but it was still a good experience and I wouldn't regret buying it for a child. The lovely illustrations are worth it alone, and while I don't think the words will be ones you remember fondly and carry with a child to adulthood, the book could easily become a favourite for reading time with small children.

Izzy Bean

One Fox

Kate Read, pub. Two Hoots

There are many, many counting books out there, but I have not seen one quite like this before! It is far from being just another counting book and I think it is a real treat.

Kate Read is both the author and illustrator of this, her debut offering and what a way to start. She has shown real originality and provides an exciting farmyard adventure to help children learn to count

from one to ten. The numbers are shown in both text and numerals to help children make the link. Accompanying this are big, bright and bold picture, full of detail, with something different to count in each one. The colours and illustrations are as vibrant as the story and give a modern feel to the book. It states on the cover that *One Fox* is ‘a counting book thriller,’ and this is no exaggeration, as a sly fox makes his way through the farmyard, searching for the chicken coop. Will he succeed or will the chickens triumph? The wording is fantastic, using many examples of alliteration that children will appreciate. This is definitely a book that adults will also appreciate and it had me laughing out loud. I can’t wait for Kate Read’s next book if this is anything to go by.

Victoria Wharam

Prudence and her Amazing Adventure

Charlotte Gastaut, pub. Thames and Hudson

This is a totally magical story of Prudence and her parents’ efforts to get her ready to go visiting with them. The problem is that Prudence is caught up in her own imaginary world and ignores all the calls that are going on around her. Whilst most of the book is wordless there are three double page spreads filled with the increasingly desperate calls from her mother telling her to ‘brush your teeth’ and ‘find your shoes’; all to no avail. Prudence’s day dreaming starts out in her bedroom but in the company of her small (and very bright pink) bird she visits the deepest oceans, rainforests, outer space and places that are full of extraordinary and mystical creatures.

This is a truly stunning evocation of how imagination can inspire young, and not so young, people. The whole book is a delight both in the images and in the physical structure of the book. The author has used a range of techniques to draw us into the pages. There are cutouts in many of the pages, but they are created to reflect the actual pictures on the page, so they are quirky and very individual. The central 8 pages are created from a silicone type paper, which gives a translucent feel to the images. This really is an amazing piece of art and a book that is both sophisticated and yet very accessible to the intended audience. It would act as a tremendous starting point for getting children to create their own works and I really loved it.

Margaret Pemberton

Quill Soup

Alan Durant, illus. Dale Blankenaar, pub. Tiny Owl

Quill Soup is a thought provoking retelling of a European folk story (Stone Soup) where the moral of the tale is to appreciate the value of sharing; an important lesson for everyone to learn.

Alan Durant recreates this version of the tale using some of the more unusual and endangered animals of Africa such as the armadillo and pangolin. The leading character is a porcupine called Noko who arrives at a village very tired and hungry. On his arrival the residents of the village retreat to their homes and initially offer no help to the visitor. He visits them one by one asking for food but they all make excuses as to why they have none to share. Noko concocts a plan to persuade them to contribute to a special soup that he starts with three quills from his own back and at the end of the story, they are all sharing a delicious meal together.

The story is complimented by beautiful double-page illustrations that are colourful and intriguing. Every time you look at one of the pictures you are sure to discover another creature hiding in the pages. These pictures, by Dale Blankenaar, are a perfect match for this vibrant book. On many of the pages you will find numbers embedded, but I am yet to work out what they represent and would love to find out.

This book delivers on all levels and would make a great addition to any bookcase.

Victoria Wharam

Ravi's Roar

Tom Percival, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Ravi is the youngest in his family. He has three older siblings who are bigger, stronger and faster than him—even Biscuits the dog is bigger than Ravi. Most of the time Ravi doesn't mind being the youngest, but sometimes he finds it frustrating when he comes last in a race for the train, when he can't find anyone in a game of hide and seek, and when he can't do some of the things his older siblings can do. And when Ravi's get frustrated, he turns into a roaring Tiger. At first it's fun being a roaring tiger—he gets his own way and he gets to do whatever he likes. But everyone is frightened of tigers too, and no one wants to play with him. Ravi has to say sorry for how he has acted, and he learns that he much prefers being a boy—though he does still have a bit of a growl every now and then.

Ravi's Roar is a wonderful book for anyone struggling with anger or temper tantrums, in particular, but I think all children can relate to feeling overwhelmed by their emotions sometimes, and the image of a tiger is lovely metaphor for that feeling. The illustrations are particularly stunning and dynamic. I love Tom Percival's hand-drawn text for the titles and the way he varies the colour saturation for effect—the background becomes monochromatic while Ravi becomes vividly furious as he turns into a tiger.

Ravi's Roar joins Tom Percival previous books, *Perfectly Norman* and *Ruby's Worry*, to create a lovely series that helps children to deal with their emotions, promotes good mental health and features diverse characters. A beautiful book with a simple but valuable message.

Rebecca Rouillard

Red Red Red

Polly Dunbar, pub. Walker Books

An angry and explosive child, red crayon covering the cover in circles and squiggles and words emphasized with lines, it seems that *Red Red Red* is going to be an angry book. But what is this? An inside spread with a smiley child in red stripy socks - maybe I was mistaken?

This is the story of a little one and their mishaps - we begin with the biscuit jar which is ... yes ... just ... no ... not in reach and now, ouch! That was a bump on my head as I fell off the stool. But it's okay, mum has come to dry my tears. No, it's not okay. My socks have fallen down and my pants are twisted and I really WANT A BISCUIT! Everything is wrong, so wrong that I am not going to be good for mum, instead I am going to have a tantrum, surely that will result in a biscuit - after all I am seeing red and I want my own way.

Does the above scenario sound familiar? Do you sometimes feel that this is what is going on inside the head of your own little one? I wonder if Polly Dunbar is writing this from experience - it certainly reads that way - and so I am sure we can all sympathize with her as she can with us, perhaps this is why she wrote *Red Red Red* - not just to help children see the funny side of their tantrums but to help adults too. Thankfully Polly Dunbar's mum character is a very patient lady and can help her little one learn to become clam - try it yourself - if you need to, hopefully it will work but more importantly, hopefully any children sharing this book will see the error of their ways and that there really is no need to see red.

The perfect book for those difficult moments when it seems a tantrum will never end. Funny, simple and to the point. I loved it.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Runaway Pea

Kjartan Poskitt, illus. Alex Willmore, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

"It's six o'clock and we're ready for tea,
but look - what's that?"

It's a RUNAWAY PEA!"

So starts this funny rhyming tale of one pea's bid for freedom and fun. But the plucky little pea quickly finds that escaping from the plate is just the start of his troubles as he plunges into the dog's bowl and gets flicked into the fish tank. The pea is flicked, bounced, blown, snapped, twanged and almost ironed flat before his journey across the kitchen. When he meets other 'naughty' escaping vegetables hiding beneath the fridge, the little pea has a change of heart and decides that he wants to go back to the plate. Sadly, the other escapees tell him that now that he's been on the floor he won't be loved anymore. The little pea is swept up and thrown out where he lands by the recycling heap. Fortunately, there's a happy ending for the pea but I'll let you discover that for yourself.

Kjartan Poskitt's rhyming text flows extremely well, making this book a joy to read aloud – and Alex Willmore's bright, colourful illustrations compliment it perfectly. Children will laugh out loud at many of the little pea's misadventures – especially having his bottom set on fire by a piece of toast. A great one to share with young children time and time again.

Vicky Harvey

Sneaky Beak

Tracey Corderoy, illus. Tony Neal, pub. Little Tiger Press

This story begins with Bear and Hamster happily enjoying their favourite programme. When Sneaky Beak appears on their screen, Bear initially chuckles at his advert for a Snores – Galore Mega Bed. However, there must be something about Sneaky Beak's natty bow tie and catchy catch phrases because, later that night, Bear begins to wonder if his bed really is bouncy enough...

For Bear, the bed is just the beginning. Sneaky Beak is an advertising whizz and seems to pop up everywhere! A master of persuasion and manipulation, he sneakily convinces Bear that he needs all manner of super gadgets. Bubbly baths and better breakfasts beckon. Poor Hamster can only watch in despair as his friend decides they simply must buy a Super-Whirl Turbo Tub and a Crunch-O-Matic Granola Maker.

A holiday rocket proves to be the final straw for Bear. As he sees the Earth, and his dear friend Hamster, get further and further away. He realizes that he's been silly. The old adage is true: money can't buy you happiness. Friendship is the only thing he needs and he wouldn't change Hamster for anything!

This beautiful picture book is lots of fun but it also has an important message about materialism. I highly recommend it.

Abby Mellor

Song of the River

Joy Cowley, illus. Kimberly Andrews, pub. Gecko Press

In this enchanting story, *Song of the River*, Cam, a small mountain boy, longs to see the sea. One day, his Grandad says, they will see it, but as Cam watches a trickle of water sparkling through the pine trees, his imagination takes him with the river on its long journey to the sea. And what a journey. Full of adventure and excitement as that first trickle of water joins other trickles of water running through the snowy mountains until they become a creek.

The illustrations are so beguiling and beautiful, so full of light and shade, mountains and water, birds and animals, crisp mountain air almost blows from the pages. Now the creek is a waterfall, now a stream full of leaping trout, now a river flowing down to the little town at the bottom of the mountain, where ducks and clock faces float in the quiet water, now flowing on to where green and gold frogs swim, until growing wider and deeper, bridges, railway tracks, paddleboats, factories and ships make it so noisy, so busy, Cam can no longer hear its voice.

The river moves on, its voice deeper and louder as it joins the cries of wind and sea birds and whales singing in the ocean, becoming a wide blue sea where Cam runs on the sand and paddles in the waves. Back at the mountain, Cam tells his grandfather he has seen the sea. His grandfather says one day they will go there. That night, out in the mountain darkness, again Cam lets the little trickle of water that is the beginning of the sea run through his fingers.

Song of the River is told in language as simple, clear and appealing as the wonderful illustrations. This beautiful book tells an exciting story with a strong environmental message any child will believe in and embrace. Green and gold frogs? How lovely is that.

Gwen Grant

Swarm of Bees

Lemony Snicket, illus. Rilla Alexander, pub. Andersen Press

When a swarm of bees are angry they set off to try and find someone to take it out on. But they find everyone has a reason why they should not be stung; from the sailor returning home to the family playing cards, everyone is working hard. However there is a young boy, who is throwing tomatoes at others, so perhaps he should be punished for his naughtiness? Luckily the bee-keeper comes along and manages to catch the bees and calm them down and gradually everyone calms down as well and life can go on as before.

This story is very much an analogy which equates the swarm of bees with the anger that we feel as humans. Throughout the sequence of the story we have the bees, shown mainly as dots but with one shown as yellow and black and we have a child character that is also depicted as being yellow and black and is pulling along a truck full of tomatoes. The bees being caught and calmed down directly relates to the child finding his parent and being hugged, which lessens the anger within him. The imagery in this book is very simple and uses primary colours and simple geometric shapes to create the characters. The language is also very straightforward, with the repetition of the phrase 'swarm of bees' creating a rhythm to the text. Lemony Snicket is best known for his books for slightly older readers but this story is for the very young. It is quirky, expressive and will help young readers to understand when they are angry and how to try and control that feeling.

Margaret Pemberton

This is Frog

Harriet Evans, illus. Jacqui Lee, pub. Caterpillar Books

This is Frog is a book that is extremely appealing to its readers, with its interactive pages which makes them excited to turn each page and encourages reader and book to relate.

The vibrant colour and bold illustrations add to the exuberant way the book is set out, with the child blowing the flies towards frog and pushing him the right way up. This is such a creative touch by the storyteller.

As I read the book I felt that I was immersed in what frog was doing, that we were having a great adventure together, and I am sure each child reading and enjoying this book will receive so much out of both reading and assisting frog too. I really enjoyed the story and was definitely hoping to find out how the story ends and whether there are potentially more books featuring frog to come.

This title will undoubtedly be a hit story with young readers who will want to take the book everywhere, and I am eager to share this book with my grandchildren and look forward to reading this many times as it has the ability to change for each child's interpretation.

Susan Thomas

This is Gus

Chris Chatterton, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Gus is the grumpiest dog in the world, or so it says on the front cover of this delightful picture book. He really does not like all of the things that dogs are meant to enjoy, such as walks, being petted and even birthdays. Perhaps the one thing that he does like is sausages and everything to do with them. When a new puppy arrives at his home Gus has to change his ways, but can he learn to share with this new arrival and importantly can he share his sausages?

This is a brilliantly funny and thoughtful story not just about dogs but about the whole process of sharing a space with other creatures or people. The story will work so well when talking about sharing in a school environment, or when a new baby is expected in a house, or even when two families are coming together. The illustrations are bright and clear with a different background colour on every page; they are so expressive, even though they are very simple and the look on Gus's face is definitely reminiscent of Clement Freud or Bertie Bassett (older readers will remember these characters). This is a story that is highly recommended and is sure to become a firm favourite.

Margaret Pemberton

Together We Can!

Caryl Hart, illus. Ali Pye, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

A wide range of cartoon children of all colours, some with glasses and some in wheelchairs, illustrate this picture book about the value of friendship, showing kindness, and generally being nice to each other. A friend might help you with tricky work in class, or share your lunch, and it doesn't matter if they look the same as you and have similar interests, or if they're different- you can still get along. We might not always understand someone's language, but can still do things together. Some children need gadgets (e.g. wheelchairs) to help them have fun, and some friends might live a long way away, but it doesn't matter. If we see someone who doesn't have friends, we can ask them to join in. To make a new friend, you just have to ask them their name, and invite them to tea, or to join in with a game. When a friend is sad, they might need a hug or a cuddle, and sometimes they might need help to get out of a muddle. It's important to say 'Sorry', and to share – be loving and kind and you'll have friends for ever. Some friends might have four legs- pets are also included!

The colours are bright and attractive, and the whole book is in rhyme, which might have become apparent from some of the examples quoted so far, so it's fun to read and share. It is especially good that different children in wheelchairs are shown on a few pages, just part of whatever is going on. At the beginning and the end of the book there are pages of small pictures illustrating some of the points made on the larger pages, e.g. 'Saying sorry makes things better' or just 'happy cupcakes', and these emphasize some key points.

Caryl Hart is an award-winning and shortlisted author of many picture books and books for younger readers, and her experience shows. Ali Pye has fewer books to her name, but this reviewer much

enjoyed her story with her own illustrations: *Rosie is my best friend*, also reviewed on this website. Together we can will be useful in nurseries, playgroups and infant classes, as well as sharing with family- and, of course, friends. ‘Our friends are all different, but one thing is true, each one is quite precious and that includes YOU!’

Diana Barnes

Treacle Street: Marcel's Parcels

Kate Hindley, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Marcel's Parcels is the first book in a new series called *Treacle Street*. The chunky pages and lift-the-flap surprises make it a fun, ideal format for toddlers and pre-reading age children. The pages are really thick (perfect for little hands) and the flaps are made of sturdy card (not easily bent or torn) so it's really made to last.

In this book we follow Marcel Trunkmore, the Treacle Street postman, as he delivers a trolley-full of packages along the street (eagle-eyed readers can count up with him from 1 to 14). At each address, you can lift the flap and peek through the door and see what's happening. The final address - and parcel - find us at Marcel's own house. What on earth could it be? No spoilers, you'll have to read it to find out!

Kate Hindley's line drawings of the animals who live on Treacle Street (Marcel's an elephant) are charming and detailed, down to the stamps on each parcel and Marcel's knitted socks. Each flap (one per double page spread, of which there are six) hides a sneak peek into the address where a parcel is being delivered.

Marcel's Parcels would make a fun storytime book, and would be a lovely gift for young children, especially as there's more books in the series to come.

Antonia Russell

The Truth About Dinosaurs

Guido Van Genechten, pub. Five Quills

It is a fact, universally acknowledged, that all small children like dinosaurs. But what about chickens? Did you know that the *Gallus Gallus Domesticus* (otherwise known as an ordinary chicken) is actually a relative of the dinosaurs? It's a fact that the narrator of this story is very eager to prove...

If you have ever wondered what it might be like to take a peek inside a dinosaur's family album, now is your chance. In his quest to show us his ancestral history, our chicken narrator escorts us through some of his ancestor's memories. There is a fun mixture of facts and fiction so expect to see velociraptors learning to scoot and stegosaurus birthday parties amongst a few serious scientific bits.

Thanks to the scrapbook format, this book is a visual smorgasbord of delightful illustrations. They are characterful, colourful and even the Tyrannosaurus is cute! The star of the show, for me however, has to be our friend the chicken.

Buy this for your budding palaeontologists and I'm pretty sure they'll gobble it up before you can even say 'Gallus Gallus Domesticus'. We have read a lot of books about dinosaurs but we'll remember this one.

Abby Mellor

Junior Book Reviews

A Pocketful of Stars

Aisha Busby, pub. Egmont

Safiya's mum, Aminah, is from Kuwait, although she hasn't shared much about her life there before coming to England as a teenager to go to school. When her parents' marriage broke up, Safiya chose to live with her father, enjoying Saturdays with her mother, despite their slightly prickly relationship. Aminah doesn't understand her daughter's love of video gaming, whilst Safiya feels she is trying to push her into doing the things she enjoyed at the same age. One weekend sees them have a major argument, with Safiya storming out. Unfortunately, Aminah falls ill with a stroke and lapses into a coma. Safiya is desperate to aid her recovery, hoping that familiar objects and the smell of her perfume will bring Aminah back. The perfume has almost magical properties, drawing Safiya into her mother's memories as she finds herself in a game-like scenario, attempting to understand her mother's teenage life whilst trying to save her. There are links between the past and future that she was unaware of and the growing realization that she and her mother are more alike than she thought.

During this time Safiya is also having to negotiate the changing relationship with her best friend and discovering that being true to yourself leads to opportunities.

This assured debut novel draws the reader into a bittersweet fantasy dealing with the love of family, friendship, and loss. Hope, bravery and understanding can blossom in the most unexpected of places, especially with a little sprinkling of magic to guide the way.

Jayne Gould

The Accidental Rock Star

Tom Mclaughin, pub. Oxford Children's Books

We loved this hilarious book in our house! If you are looking for a laugh-a-minute, fast-paced read for somebody who has just started KS2 get this book!

The story fulfills every child's dream - becoming a rock star - and we meet Ollie and Hector who live with their hilariously bonkers family! Sadly neither of them have any musical talent at all and it really looks as if their dream will remain just that.

However, whilst they are making their own music video in Ollie's bedroom, a chance encounter with his deranged pet cat and fate shoots them to overnight fame!! They are, suddenly, the most famous band ever!

Will they let the cat out of the bag....? Will people find out that they are really, completely talentless, will their friendship survive, is life on the road really their dream? We read this until far too late in our house ... 'Just one more page' was heard and shouted far too often!

Jo Hardacre

The Adventures of Harry Stevenson

Ali Pye, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

This book contains two short stories, entitled *Who Are You, Harry Stevenson* and *Come Down, Harry Stevenson*. Harry is a guinea pig with no special powers. He belongs to Billy Smith, aged seven. The narrative technique of these stories is cleverly adapted. The story is told from the viewpoint of the intelligent guinea pig but in the third person, giving the author the facility to introduce elements that are not part of Harry's stream of consciousness. This facility is particularly significant in the first story, when the family move house and Harry goes missing. Will he return?

In the second story Billy has a birthday, which is also the day of the local football cup final. What havoc will ensue?

The key to understanding why young readers will respond to this book is that Billy is an ordinary boy and Harry has no special powers – he is an ordinary guinea pig. The book revolves around the relationship between Harry and Billy, between boy and pet. Some children have no pet. They will find in this book the pleasure of a relationship not yet enjoyed. Children who have a pet will put themselves in the spirit of Billy and share his enjoyment. Ali Pye is both the author and illustrator of the book. The illustrations punctuate the text at regular intervals, to facilitate the progress of less confident readers.

Rebecca Butler

Agent Weasel and the Fiendish Fox Gang

Nick East, pub. Hodder Children's Books

Agent Weasel is a super spy, though he's not too super at avoiding scrapes (always good to know when hoping for a few chuckles). We meet him as his rather magnificent card tower crashes to the ground,

taking him with it as the phone rings and Doorkins, his faithful dormouse pal and co-adventurer bursts in to find out what the noise is all about.

H, the big boss, needs Weasel on this job (there's no one else available). The shocking deeds that are hitting the news are too much: rabbit warrens covered with itching powder; vole holes caved in, and badgers waking up to find they have had their bottoms shaved. This mayhem needs to be stopped!

A fun read for independent readers or to be shared so as to increase the chuckling. *Agent Weasel and the Fiendish Fox Gang* is a fabulous laugh-out-loud tale with animal characters that jump off the page.

Nick East as author and illustrator has created some wonderful black and white illustrations to bring the action alive - he has even drawn the badgers shaved bottoms! - and these I suspect will help reluctant readers be carried along.

United Woodlands needs Agent Weasel to succeed and for security to be restored – a bold and clueless super spy who wants to be home in time for tea and biscuits - how can we not root for him, and chuckle along with his chaos as he comes up against the mean guys of the woods?

If you are hoping for a new series of books for your child to get into, this could be it. Book two is out in early 2020 (at time of writing this) and has the rather enticing title of *Agent Weasel and the Abominable Dr Snow*.

Ideal for 7+ (possibly younger), and definitely younger for being read to and sharing the fun.

Anja Stobbart

An Unlikely Spy

Terry Deary, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

As well as the hugely popular *Horrible Histories* series, their author Terry Deary has written several middle-grade novels about the twentieth century's two World Wars. Ten years ago, in *Put Out the Light!*, he drew parallels between the lives of children facing the Blitz in Sheffield, and those in German-occupied Poland. In 2018 came *The Silver Hand*, an excellent adventure set in a village in the Somme area of France in the last days of the First World War. Here we met Aimee, a young French girl who has just discovered that her mother is part of a spy network working with the British against the Germans. We also met Marius, a German boy helping to nurse wounded soldiers, but who is now desperate to return to Germany before the war's end, but first he and Aimee attempt to outwit a British traitor who is threatening their lives. In the new novel we discover that Aimee and Marcus met again and married after the Great War, and came to live in England. Now we meet their daughter

Brigit, as brave, resourceful and outspoken as her parents, and find that as the Second World War begins her father, now a respected doctor, is nevertheless interned in a camp because he has a German surname. Aimee is recruited again for spying work, and sent back to her home village in France to train the resistance fighters there, and Brigit engineers a situation which ensures she accompanies her. We learn a lot about the evacuation of children from the cities to the countryside, about the training of members of the SOE (Special Operations Executive), the secret army of spies and saboteurs Churchill built, and about the conditions, and resistance in occupied France. This is another exciting wartime adventure packed with well-informed historical detail.

Bridget Carrington

Caterpillar Summer

Gillian McDunn, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Cat is the glue that holds her family together, especially since her Dad died of cancer. Her children's book illustrator mum is working extra hard and Cat is the one who has the responsibility for looking after her little brother Chicken, who has special needs. She has always had a close bond with him, understands the things that cause him stress and is the one who is able to calm him down when he has a meltdown. But who is looking after Cat?, because these are some big responsibilities and she is desperate not to add to her mum's sadness and burdens. When the family's plans to stay with Cat's friend Rishi and his family for the summer go awry, Cat and Chicken find themselves going to stay with their maternal grandparents whom they have never met because their Mum doesn't speak to their Grandfather. Cat doesn't know why this is or what the family secret is but she's very apprehensive about how Chicken will cope. However, she discovers that living on Gingerbread Island, gives her the space to be a child again, to get to know her Grandparents and become part of a community, to make new friends and starts to understand that this may give her the chance to heal her fractured family.

I absolutely loved this powerful and emotional debut novel. Beautifully written, it wraps itself around the reader from the start. Characters develop well and the reader carers deeply about them and particularly Cat. Language and description evoke a strong sense of place and setting and the small rural community is really brought to life. Chicken and Cat are mixed race and the book explores the theme of this well. Chicken has special needs and although they are never given a label, his behaviour would suggest that he may be on the autism spectrum. This is accurately and sensitively portrayed, as is the impact on Cat and the family and it is rooted in the author's own personal experiences. The storytelling is excellent and although the book deals with some challenging family dynamics, there is always an underpinning note of hope.

A thoughtful, thought-provoking, thoroughly enjoyable and absorbing read, it's a book that will stay with me. A really strong middle grade debut and I think this is definitely an author to watch out for.

Annie Everall

Cookie! ...and the Most Annoying Boy in the World

Konnie Huq, pub. Piccadilly Press

Cookie Haque loves science and her best friend Keziah, hates birds and the annoying boy who's moved in next door, and she really wants to appear on Brainbusters, her favourite TV show. This is the story of when everything goes horribly wrong in her life.

Told in the first person, with great doodles, notes and cartoons (there's even an appendix with recipes and science projects), Cookie's story is engaging, funny and relatable. It's like having one long conversation with a friend who gets really excited about her favourite things (and not-so-favourite people). I'd recommend it to pre-teen readers and fans of the Wimpy Kid books. It would be fun to read together at bedtime, and could lead to some interesting conversations!

Cookie's story is fast-paced, with plot twists and misunderstandings galore. Science competitions, TV appearances, kleptomaniac teachers, disappearing fish, cats (both real and make-believe), best friends and new friends; there's lots of real-life experiences that readers will identify with and learn from.

This is former Blue Peter presenter Konnie Huq's first children's book. There's autobiographical elements to the character of Cookie and her story (Huq was on Blockbusters as a teenager!), and it's refreshing to read about a Muslim, science-loving heroine. As Shappi Korshandi says in the reviews at the front, "Wonderful to see a children's book that properly embraces diversity and makes outsiders cool."

There's definitely scope for more Cookie adventures; the nine-year old I lent the book to said she'd definitely read a sequel.

Antonia Russell

Dark Blade: Whispers of the Gods

Steve Feasey, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

This is a well written, epic fantasy from Steve Feasey and anyone that enjoys a good fantasy story will love it.

The story begins with a baby being left in a barn in the middle of the night. There's no knowing where he's come from but Lae Fetlanger says he's a gift from the gods and that they are keeping him. Her

husband, Gord knows better than to argue. It isn't until the boy, Lannigon (Lann) is thirteen years old and his adopted mother dies in childbirth that he discovers he's a foundling. The witch, Fleya was unable to save Lae, but she warns Lann that in a few years' time he will see a star with a serpent's tail, and that when he does he should run for all he's worth.

A couple of years later, Fleya's prophecy comes true. As Lann rides back to their farmhouse he sees the distinctive shooting star streaking across the sky. The figure of a man emerges from the house and changes into a wolf-like beast before his eyes. Remembering the witch's prophesy, Lann turns and gallops away but the beast is right behind him. Fleeing into the dark forest, Lann is certain that he's going to die, however, the beast is killed and Lann is left blinded.

Lann goes to live with the witch, Fleya, so that she can look after and teach him. Whilst there he is visited by an ancient god who offers him a magical sword (the Dreadblade) that has been forged to destroy evil. Ancient powers are stirring and the old gods aren't strong enough to stop it, but perhaps Lann can. Accepting the sword, Lann's sight is restored but the blade has a power and will of its own and he must learn to control it if he is to fulfil his destiny.

Together, Lann and Fleya set off to save a prince, wrongly accused of murdering his father, the king, and to stop a portal from being opened between this world and a chaotic world of monsters that will destroy everything.

Dark Blade: Whispers of the Gods is a complete story in itself but there's plenty more for the heroes to do so readers will be left wanting more.

Damian Harvey

The Dragon in the Library

Louie Stowell, pub. Nosy Crow

Kit can't stand reading – she'd much rather be outside playing games and getting muddy, than stuck inside with a book. But a trip to the library with her more bookish friends, Josh and Alita, ends up being more magical than she could ever have imagined: Kit is really a wizard, and 'probably the world's youngest' at that. Soon the three children are in the middle of an adventure involving magic spells, sleepy dragons, and a villain who turns out to be even more nefarious than he first seems as they fight to save the library...and the world.

The Dragon in the Library is author Louie Stowell's debut fiction title, but she has previously written many works of non-fiction for a middle grade audience on everything from pirates to astronauts. Her understanding of the age group really shows: *The Dragon in the Library* has a clear, accessible style with lots of humour and a fast-paced plot which is well-calculated to hold the attention of younger

readers, perhaps in the 7-9 age group. It would also be suitable for more reluctant or less confident readers, complemented as it is by Davide Ortu's lively illustrations which break up longer passages of text.

Kit's friendship with Alita and Josh is reminiscent of the iconic Harry-Ron-Hermione trio of the Harry Potter series, though Stowell has made her own characters memorable and individual, with their own quirky traits which pleasingly avoid gender or other stereotyping. Shy and tomboyish Kit is a particularly lovely and original heroine, and her worries about being average ('She was not incredibly clever, but not stupid. Not especially sporty, but not pathetically-unable-to-catch either') and her sometimes-uncertain approach to new things will be relatable for lots of young readers.

But this is only part of the book: there is also a lot of magic, a cheeky "dogon" (half-dragon, half-dog), and a message about the importance of libraries in the community, even in the internet age, which could lead to good classroom (or home) discussion points. *The Dragon in the Library* would be a particularly appropriate addition to a school library, or as an entertaining home read, and the upcoming sequel is eagerly awaited.

Olivia Parry

Dragons of the Prime: Poems about Dinosaurs

Richard O'Brien, pub. the Emma Press

Get ready to hear the ROAR and CRUNCH and the STOMP and the THUMP with this bright red and shiny collection of Dinosaur poems, edited by poet and translator Richard O'Brien. Merging out of curiosity, this collection features facts and fantasy of the Mesozoic era based on our friendly neighbours - the Dinosaurs! *Dragons of the Prime: Poems about Dinosaurs* is a delightful and informative read offering a holistic vision of the Dinosaur world. Not only do these verses feature the mighty mysterious creatures; but also their fans, researchers, attributes and the places where they may reside! There are little bird like creatures such as the 'Junornis huoi' and huge beastly ones like the 'Ornithocheirus', termed 'giant of the skies'! Here you'll know how to preserve dinosaur fossils you may find in your garden and and know how a dinosaur walked or smelled!

The poems, illustrations and informative notes work in conjunction to bring an awareness and a sense of hope to readers. Laden with factual knowledge and enriching philosophical contemplation, this work poses thought provoking questions about the limits of human imagination or the abundance of it; and the truth and fantasy about the Dinosaur universe conjured by scientists, dreamers, poets and movie makers explored through themes of loss, love, strength, evolution, history, and cyclical time. You'll meet all these fantastic beasts, experience with them their elemental homes and read about literary and historical events! Such as this interesting note about mammals -

"Mammals - the group of creatures which now includes you- emerged in the Triassic Period, like Dinosaurs."

You'll learn how relevant Dinosaurs are even today and what messages they have for you to unleash your personal Dinosaur juju -

"May you grow to fly like a Pterodactyl
and run like a Gallimimus.

...

May you and your friends move as one
like a velociraptor pack

...

And may no asteroid ever stop you."

This book can be enjoyed by children and adults alike because of its fun facts and games and for the profound messages behind the words. Bright and colourful, this nostalgic and informative book leads a journey back in time to paint the present and past together and contemporize a life which appears extinct but still reflects itself in many forms all around us on land, water and sky.

Ishika Tiwari

Read the interview with Richard O'Brien here ...

Fire Girl, Forest Boy

Chloe Daykin, pub. Faber & Faber

Fire Girl, Forest Boy, tells the story of Maya, a sparky inquisitive Scottish girl, who watches the world closely from behind the shadow of her grieving father, Dr Handi Anderson, a scientist with an obsession with light. When her father disappears to go on a mysterious mission in the jungles of Peru, Maya ignores his instructions to return to Scotland, and escapes from the suspicious couple he has tasked with taking her home. On the run in the 'cloud forest', with 'dragonflies as thick as your thumb and trees with teeth spikes,' Maya is found by Raul, a young Peruvian boy. Forced to leave his home because of illegal logging, Raul has travelled back to the jungle, having been called to arms by his blood-brother Matias, who is looking into the activities of JVF, a deforestation company. It is Matias who reveals to Maya that her father is involved with JVF, the same company responsible for the destruction of his and Raul's village, and the deaths of family and friends. But Maya is convinced her father has been coerced into helping these criminals, and the trio set off to track him down and uncover the truth. Added to the intrigue is Maya's ability to command little balls of fire, a power she discovers when evading her father's captors. What are these magical orbs, why have they suddenly

appeared and why are they helping her? Are they spirits of the forest or something closer to home? The answer is both powerful and moving.

The story is told as a dual narrative, with chapters alternating between the viewpoints of Maya and Raul. Lyrical in quality, the short chapters and tight paragraphs ensure the pace moves quickly. The descriptions of the jungle are rich and poetic, tapping into the mythology of the Amazon. Exploring grief, faith and the complexities of life, this book offers a thought-provoking adventure for middle grade readers, who enjoy their stories with a low fantasy twist.

Matilde Sazio

The Garden of Lost Secrets

A. M. Howell, pub. Usborne

Never has a book been more aptly titled than *The Garden of Lost Secrets* which is packed full of mysteries and secrets for 12 year old Clara, sent off to stay with her aunt and uncle as war takes hold and her father convalesces from a wartime gas attack.

There's the dark, locked room, a hidden key, a scheming thief stealing the earl's pineapples, mandarins popping up in unusual places, a mysterious boy who only appears at night, the coldness of a seemingly uncaring aunt - not to mention Clara's own guilty secret - a letter from the War Office stolen from her own parents about her brother fighting in the war.

Clara is an engaging, lovable and determined character who lets the reader into her thoughts and who, with the adults otherwise occupied by the war, just can't help herself breaking some of the many rules and limitations imposed by the situation she finds herself in. Impossible not to put yourself in Clara's shoes and try to solve the mysteries and unravel the secrets alongside her.

Inspired by the discovery of an old gardener's notebook on the National Trust-owned Ickworth estate in Suffolk this story feels very real with the estate and the gardens brilliantly described (and illustrated in the opening map). Clara's uncle is Head Gardener at the Big House and the story brings to life very clearly the different roles and relationships both above and below stairs and evokes the impact of the Great War on the home front in England on all kinds of families, never once shying away from its horrors.

This is an accomplished and imaginative debut novel bringing the people and places of the past to life, full of tantalizing false clues and cliffhangers and plenty of drama too, with short chapters constantly ramping up the tension. Its key themes of friendship and bravery are inspiring ones for middle grade readers - "sometimes just pretending to be brave is enough, you're braver than you know".

The Garden of Lost Secrets is perfect for fans of historical mysteries by Emma Carroll, Lucy Strange and Robin Stevens. I'm sure I won't be the only reader desperate to see what A. M. Howell will do next!

Eileen Armstrong

*A selection of Book Club Questions are included at the end of the book alongside an explanation of the author's inspiration but it's also worth checking out the comprehensive and well thought through supporting resources by Usborne on their QuickLinks website which include teacher notes, Booktalk points, pre-reading activities, creative writing opportunities, language and vocabulary studies, responses to literature, video clips, photos and first hand accounts of the Great War, the Home Front, Women's lives and rights as well as information about Ickworth House itself.

The Girl With Space in Her Heart

Lara Williamson, cover illus. Julie McLaughlin, pub. Usborne

This is a superbly cute book, which presents me with a problem. It means that it's constantly endearing, which obviously is great, but at the same time I'm always aware that I'm reading it, so I have to work to develop the intimacy with the story that its themes and subject matter deserve.

And it's properly weighty stuff: Mabel's dad's gone, and she blames herself for it. It's a familiar premise, but Williamson explores it in ways that writers rarely do, poking into the logical but uncomfortable consequences of that terrible thought. Mabel gets to mull it over thoroughly, and we see some of the horrible dark places her mind visits.

Because this is a story and a writer who don't shy away from the truths of anxiety, and there's the value in this book, really: that Mabel's going to end up holding the hand and being the comfort and light to – I believe – many pre-teens experiencing difficulties with loss, responsibility and victimization. On that basis alone, this is a must for school libraries (which must despair at the condescending self-help style of titles nudging their way into the market-place).

So that's the set-up, and that's the direction. It's explored within a fairly conventional arrangement – the recovering mum, the scarred older sister, mum's trying-too-hard boyfriend, the class-room antagonist, the inspirational teacher – but it needs to be, because we can't afford to be distracted from the proper service being done to Mabel's interior life.

There's an argument to be had as to whether the plot too conveniently mirrors Mabel's journey and facilitates it, but I'm inclined to ignore that. Again it's Mabel's emotional journey that is the important thing, and it's strong enough to sweep us along to a suitably victorious finish.

I like Williamson's writing stylistically, but it does have a strong flavour. It may feel precocious to some readers, maybe a bit over-analytical, confessional, very heart-on-sleeve, but I imagine that more action-oriented readers will be opening up other books. I think if they do read this one, however, they will read to the end: Williamson is nicely witty, which is a very valuable alternative route to engaging the initially reluctant.

And getting this in front of all Year 5s and 6s would be a good thing to do. I'd hope a fair few would pick it up without prompting, but it is one of those books that surreptitiously will lay building blocks for empathy and self-believe in many young minds.

Finally, before I hog the entire page with this review, this may just be me – I hope it isn't – but Mabel's passion for astronomy opens up an endless store of perfect metaphors and allegories that I loved and appreciated.

Happily recommended.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

I, Cosmo

Carlie Sorosiak, pub. Nosy Crow

A really beautiful story of one incredibly loyal, loving and protective family pet dog Cosmo, and his need to keep his family safe, happy and together. Cosmo can sense that something isn't right with his family members, mum and dad have been arguing more and more and Max – the son in the family that Cosmo has known since a baby – has shut himself in his room lots recently too. Max confides all of his feelings in Cosmo including that the pair may get separated if things don't work out with mum and dad. Fearing the worst the duo work tirelessly on a plan to show Max's parents just how much the boy and dog love and need each other in the hope that they will stay together for always.

This is a heart warming and often funny story that is hugely easy for young readers to relate to and incredibly immersive too, and that the book shows family life in a more realistic light to so many is utterly brilliant especially with the impact parents arguing and not getting on being shown through the eyes of a child and also the family pet. The humour inserted into the book makes the book enjoyable with many laugh out loud moments especially when Cosmo ingests random items like so many dogs do!

Samantha Thomas

Jack from Earth

Chris Wooding, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Jack is not your typical boy. His parents move every year. Each year he starts a new school, makes new friends mainly to avoid being bullied, fails all his subjects and then moves on. When Jack goes home -- although he is never too sure when and where his parents will stage a mock assassination -- he faces hours of gruelling mental and physical training. Oddly his parents wear identical black tracksuits and sneakers all the time, never seeming to go to sleep. What Jack does not know is that he looks exactly like Gradius Clench: the galaxy's most wanted spy, dead or alive.

Jack's world implodes when his first kiss is nearly a kiss of death. His parents then die fending off a Changeling, a robot programmed to be a Victorian Big Game Hunter and a cloud in a giant mechanical suit armed with a flame-thrower. Jack manages to escape only to be captured by a group of bickering bounty-hunters, who normally bootleg Earth Reality TV shows. Taken-off planet in a sleek spaceship Epsilon that goes absolutely crazy when in combat mode, Jack must convince everyone he is not Gradius Clench before they kill him. He is simply Jack from Earth.

Jack from Earth is a great misadventure of an anti-hero, who must at the very least avoid getting in the way of the real hero trying to save the universe. There is lots of fun, arising from the farce of Jack from Earth being a look-a-like for Gradius Clench and the general galactic attitude towards a back-water, bug-infested Earth. There is also Jack's unlikely friendship with Thomas, an asthmatic earthling and school nerd who had latched onto him. Moreover, Jack from Earth is a great parody of science-fiction culture -- a rag-tag team of no-hopers in a deranged spaceship thwarting an evil cyborg empire attempting to assimilate the whole of the galaxy -- with a number of homages, such as the cyborg General Kara and the masked Vardis, wielding a vorpal blade.

Jack from Earth is a funny caper, but a story of genuine friendship between a group of alien odd-balls.

Simon Barrett

Jemima Small Versus the Universe

Tamsin Winter, pub. Usborne

What an incredible book- full of humour, superb characters and a strong sense that being you is the most important thing you can do.

Jemima is nearly thirteen and is a larger girl, and she knows it. Everyone knows it and most try to make her feel worthless and small with their cruel words and actions. Themes of bullying are prominent throughout and it is heart breaking to Jemima that she is dealing with this all on her own. Her mum is no longer in the home, and Jemima lives with her Dad and older brother.

On the first day of school, mortifyingly, everyone needs to be weighed and their weights compared to amounts of bananas. Jemima creates a diversion which lands her in trouble but saves her number being shown to all. An invitation then arrives for Jemima to join a Healthy Lifestyle Program, or “fat club” as it gets dubbed by classmates. Gina, a bright, energetic woman is leading the group, and although all invited moan and groan at the prospect of the group, time changes their perspectives.

Jemima is beginning to feel a sense of empowerment and is encouraged to channel her inner goddess. Being overweight and incredibly intelligent are a hard pair to deal with for Jemima. Her school is offered the opportunity to send their brightest to compete for the TV show *Brainiacs*. Torn between her low self esteem, and her anger over being bullied, the question throughout the entire book is will Jemima show them just how brilliant she is?

I love that Jemima is encouraged to eat well, exercise and feel good about who she is. So many novels might take a darker path into anorexia, bulimia and self harm, just so the student can fit in. But Jemima was not made to fit in, she was made to stand out!

A wonderful book that had me hooked and rooting for Jemima every step of the way!

Erin Hamilton

King Dave: Royalty for Beginners

Elys Dolan, pub. Oxford Children's Books

When Dave the dragon finds himself throne-sitting for the King of Castleton, the best adventurer and semi-qualified hero Dave quickly realizes he doesn't know the first thing about ruling a kingdom ... but that won't stop him from trying his best and giving it his all.

With the help of his BFF and trusty sidekick, Albrecht, and an incredibly useful book, *Royalty for Beginners*, Dave is in for another mad-cap adventure that involves a lot of fancy clothes, pool parties, oh, and a power-mad potato-wielding queen who wants to steal the kingdom!

I for one haven't had the pleasure of reading Elys Dolan's first two *Beginners* books yet, which involve Dave learning to be a knight and disguising himself as a wizard, but if they're anything like *King Dave* then I'm in for an utter laugh because this wild and wonderful tale had me giggling from start to finish.

In amongst the brilliant black and white illustrations and all the marvellous medieval mayhem, author-illustrator Dolan has captured the importance of friendship and being yourself, even if you get a little distracted along the way.

Despite being from a fantastic series, King Dave works equally great as a standalone story, one that's perfect for newly confident readers who are looking for their first chapter book to read alone, or for sharing out loud. A must read for fans of Roald Dahl and Mr Gum!

I can only imagine what the next beginner guide Dave will get his hands on...

Fern Tolley

The Last Spell Breather

Julie Pike, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Rayne is a 12 year old who is being taught how to use magic by her mother. She is a very reluctant spell breather, who would rather be out playing with her friends. The main character is a girl and the story is a mix of magic, spells and the fantastic. It is an imaginative story with lots of atmosphere and some unusual ideas and concepts.

So, welcome to the amazing, magical and imaginative world of the apprentice spell breather. Prepare yourself to be scared with some monsters and mud biting devils, there to help protect mum's spell book. There are lots of twists and turns to keep your interest, but also a tale of friendship and love. How does the story develop? A stranger finds their hidden village. Mum announces that she has to go away and Rayne must use her new magic skills to help the neighbours and she promises to do what she can. But the spells break and a monster curse is unleashed on the village. Scared, Rayne and her best friend Tom set out to find mum and fix the spells.

This is an enchanting story with many magical twists and unusual turns. There is Frank, the talking fox and the 'grotesques', the snapping creatures from the mud that protects the spell book. The magic is the best part of the story, but the characters also add to the overall delight of the story. The story is told by Rayne, but it is also about her friend Tom and their journey together. It is a story of friendship. But, can Rayne find a way to save the village from the monsters?

The story is about tricksters, monsters, magic, talking creatures and friendships. It is a must for fans of magic and monsters, helped along by the unusual and imaginative twists.

Gary Kenworthy

The Longest Night of Charlie Noon

Christopher Edge, pub. Nosy Crow

This is a story where the adventure and tension builds right from the start. In Chapter 2, a scary monster appears and from then on the suspense, surprise and adventure come thick and fast. It is a difficult book to review, without giving too much away and spoiling the surprises.

It is the third book from Christopher Edge, after the successful *Maisie Day and Albie Bright*. This is a gripping book to read. There is a lot of mystery throughout and the reader is kept guessing from beginning to end. The story is a journey full of twists, puzzles, codes, secrets and discoveries. There really are some genuine surprises, lots of twists and real suspense.

The plot centres around three children; Charlie is the new kid and the story teller, Dizzy is Charlie's only friend and Johnny is the bully. Charlie is fed up of being told what to do or not to do, by Johnny and even by Dad. Charlie is determined that anything is possible. In the background, Mum and Dad constantly argue and this gets worse. They argue about the future, the past and about Charlie. Dad drinks and shouts.

At the beginning, the children are told about Old Crony, who is supposed to live in a nearby wood. Old Crony is scary and he builds his house out of the bones of the children he catches. This he does after he boils them up. Is there really something lurking in the wood? What is it? Is it a monster? Is it a spy? Here begins the anticipation of who Old Crony is and the hint that the woods are both scary and fascinating. So the scene is set for a story full of puzzles, codes, mystery and suspense. Enter the woods and you will start a brilliant adventure. The children do enter the woods and they get lost. It is night time and scary. The children find sticks on the ground, forming some kind of secret code. This has to be worked out. Clever readers will be able to decipher the code for themselves.

The rear cover of the book tells us this is "a timeless novel for anyone who's ever felt lost". This is a great summary of the book. The children have to investigate the woods. Will they ever get out of the woods? This story might be too scary for the very young, but 10+ readers will love the mystery, suspense and the scary bits. They will love the uncertainty and not knowing what is coming next. Both boys and girls will love the codes and the puzzles. Definitely a story to keep the reader engaged and interested from chapter one to the end and wanting to read more of Christopher Edge.

Gary Kenworthy

Milton the Mighty

Emma Read, pub. Chicken House

Written from the perspective of spider Milton, this is the story of how he has to find a way to communicate with humans in order to save his species after his type of spider – the false widow, is accused of being extremely dangerous and deadly, causing hysteria amongst humans all over.

The humans Milton shares a house with couldn't be more different, Mr Macey is terrified of spiders whilst his daughter Zoe isn't. It is Zoe who sees potential issues with the news article declaring Milton and his breed of spider the most dangerous and she who takes the time to research it too whilst Milton busies himself working out how to make humans see he and his friends are harmless but the clock is ticking as dad has called in an exterminator who is hell bent on witnessing the demise of arachnids everywhere.

A great story and I can see the spider perspective being a huge hit with younger readers and recommend this book to children starting out in chapter books. There are lots of spider related drawings within the book to accompany the text and help the reader imagine the world of spiders coming to life.

Samantha Thomas

The Monster Who Wasn't

T.C. Shelley, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Many different kinds of monsters fill the pages of this story; the space in which they dwell, called The Hole, is not as far from the human world as you might like to think.

The book quickly becomes an immersive one, moving into the lives of these creatures and the many conflicts arising between levels of an established monster hierarchy - one that oppresses any monsters with even vaguely human characteristics. It is the divides of this hierarchy that give the tale its central thread: when protagonist 'Imp Boy' comes to life during the monsters' Hatching Day, his identity poses interesting questions about the human and monster worlds, and the ways it may be possible for them to merge.

For Imp Boy - so named in the first part of the story because precisely the kind of creature he is remains uncertain - his ambiguous state of existence is a dangerous one, for it places a rather large price on his head. He is widely sought, left fearful and confused as he tries to adapt to the steep learning curve occurring in his first few days of life. This difficulty for the newly hatched 'Imp' makes a tense but enjoyable read, one that has high stakes from its beginning.

When he is fortunate enough to find unlikely friends, a chance at life seems like it may become possible - but some threats aren't easily dispelled. He must move between human and monster worlds, where he encounters for the first time families, chocolate, Brighton seafront and cheese. There are gargoyles, pixies, angels, banshees, and a mix of grief and wonder. As his vocabulary and experience - as well as the threat to his life - grow, there come several wrenching moments of loss and hurt, but also a rising appreciation for the moments of happiness and connection.

Jemima Breeds

My Parents Cancelled My Birthday

Jo Simmons, illus. Nathan Reed, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Tom can't wait to turn eleven on the eleventh of August – his lucky birthday. But after a series of unfortunate events including a flattened Chihuahua, a concussion of Tom's dad's head and his sister Meg's alleged tooth fairy curse, there's no choice but to cancel Tom's birthday party. Tom won't stand by and let that happen though. Not on his lucky birthday! With a plan to make it the best birthday ever, Tom and his friends create an epic party that no one will ever forget.

Tom is an endearing character who just wants his birthday to be special. But it soon becomes clear that his family has a lot of problems, so when his parents cancel his party, Tom realizes that the only way to get his birthday back on track is to fix each member of his family. He goes to work helping each and every one of them and learns a lot about his lonely grandmother, his estranged parents and his loyal sister, not to mention who his real friends are. With less than £9 to spend on the party, three days until the big day and no parental involvement, what could possibly go wrong?

Perfectly aimed at children aged 8-10, newly independent readers will appreciate the fast pace, short(-ish) chapters and non-stop action. I was immediately drawn to Tom and the cast of zany characters that work together to save his birthday. Each situation and character is hilariously creative – a huge pig that falls off of the roof, a dad who makes up his own swear words, a grandmother who tries to connect with her dead dog through seances, and much, much more. This book is crazy, fun fun to read and there is never a dull moment. Every chapter brings a laugh, but there are also lovely, heartfelt moments of realization and empathy.

My Parents Cancelled My Birthday is a humorous story that works on many levels. A great choice for readers who enjoy funny, fast-paced, contemporary chapter books.

Stephanie Ward

Peril en Pointe

Helen Lipscombe, pub. Chicken House Books

Milly is in trouble. Her prima ballerina mother has disappeared, she has completely messed up what was quite possibly the most important dance of her life and she has been invited to join a ballet school, Swan House, which is both mysterious and most certainly not all that it seems.

Helen Lipscombe knows how to write a spy thriller but she has created one that will have a huge appeal to a young audience and certainly to any budding ballet stars. Why? Because whilst we not only learn about the trials and tribulations of being a young ballerina - and the pressure of being the daughter of a prima ballerina - we also learn that there are great adventures to be had and brilliant friends to have them with. A very clever twist on two strands of story, brought together to create a highly readable and at time unputdownable book!

Boarding school, friends, enemies, textbooks to learn by heart - all this is new to Milly and she must find a way to adapt to her new life, keep up the ballet practice and undertake her mission whilst of course looking to solve the mystery disappearance of her mum. Helen Lipscombe has created in Milly a strong and feisty heroine who will no doubt become a great role model for her readers.

Turn the pages of this book - you won't be able to stop - immerse yourself in some fantastic storytelling and sit back for a great read which, like me you won't want to come to an end (so I am hoping this is just the start of more to come!)

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Princess BMX

Marie Basting, pub. Chicken House Books

Ava, is a princess and heir to the throne of the kingdom Biscotti. But Ava is bored of acting like a princess and likes nothing better than misbehaving. Forget dismal towers and stepmums that may be just a little bit wicked, the fairytales are completely wrong, for this feisty princess it is the boredom and her father's "troll-poop" face which are all too much to bear.

Tumbling through a portal (well this is a fantasy fairy tales after all) Ava finds herself in Camden, London. Here just about everything is strange ... then she discovers a BMX. Learning that she can divide her time between Biscotti and Camden -making new friends and finally enjoying her life all is well until she goes on a dangerous Quest...

The setting are brilliantly captured with fun being poked at all the fairy tale kingdoms we have all been imagining whilst some of the stark reality of London and the 'real world' comes across too there is plenty of safe adventure, great characters and characterisation and lots of laughs. Parents, if you are reading this then the references to fairy tale language will have you laughing and hopefully your children too.

When my 10 year old son saw this book he immediately took it away to read and now its on his book shelf! This may appear to be a book for boys but it being about a princess barely even registered, with

its fantastic characters and funny plot he loved and loves it. Plus there are some great illustrations too.

Helen Byles

The Princess Who Flew with Dragons

Stephanie Burgis, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Sofia is a princess with a conscience, who likes nothing better than reading, especially books about philosophy. She's disaster-prone, and her repeated gaffes against royal protocol go down very badly with her domineering older sister Katrin who's been in charge of the kingdom of Drachenheim since their mother died and their father went off the rails. Sofia has none of her sister's ability to conduct affairs of state.

Sent on a diplomatic mission to a neighbouring kingdom, the journey a long one in a carriage dangled from a dragon's claw that makes Sofia horribly sick, she fails her task within minutes of arrival. She is mortified, but delighted by the opportunity this gives her to go to Villene University in disguise, and to attend a lecture by her favourite philosopher. Freed from royal restrictions and expectations, she quickly makes friends, mostly with goblins, who introduce her to fascinating experiences. But the philosopher's message is seditious, and she and her new friends are in danger. They are saved thanks to the magic of a blue-skinned kobold called Fedolia, and the flying skills of Jasper, a young dragon and pen-friend of Sofia's. Fedolia is not the ally she seems however, and now they have the Ice Giants to contend with, and they have encased all the heads of state of the continent in ice, including Katrin. Can Sofia outwit these terrifying enemies armed only with philosophy? And even if she does, how will her sister respond when she finds out what Sofia has been up to?

This middle-grade fantasy adventure is fast-moving and exciting. The motif of a princess who hates her royal position is scarcely a new one, but in Sofia Burgis has created an appealing and spirited protagonist. While never being remotely didactic, the book raises valuable questions about loyalty and the meaning of power, the dangers of stereotyping and the benefits of diversity and immigration. Although the third in a series, it works fine as a stand-alone novel.

Ann Harding

The Return to Wonderland

Various, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

This book is made up of short stories inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice*. The stories are captivating, mystical and take you on a magical journey of the unknown. In addition they are easy to read,

hilarious and slightly crazy. You never quite know which twist or turn they are going to take or what creature is going to appear next. As you tumble down the rabbit hole once again, but this time without Alice, learn what is happening in Wonderland. Does the Queen of Hearts still rule? Is the Mad Hatter still having a tea party and will Tweedledum and Tweedledee resolve their long-standing arguments?

A much-loved classic has been given a new lease of life by a selection of very skilled children's authors who have all let their imaginations run wild! Peter Bunzl, Pamela Butchart, Maz Evans, Swapna Haddow, Patrice Lawrence, Chris Smith, Robin Stevens, Lauren St John, Lisa Thompson, Piers Torday and Amy Wilson are the authors whose stories appear in this collection.

The descriptive language used in each of the stories draws you into the Wonderland world perfectly and allows your imagination to immerse itself into the magic of it all.

I enjoyed the personalized introduction to each story by the respective authors which reflected the passion and enjoyment behind writing them. Although similar characters are used (there are only a limited selection in the original Alice after all) each story is very different and refreshing.

I believe that this book would be perfect for children aged 8+. The length of the stories, adventure and characters are so much fun. These are fantastic stories that I would recommend to anyone who loves to let their imagination run wild.

Amy Wall

Spylark

Danny Rurlander, pub. Chicken House Books

Tom, walking stiffly and painfully following an accident on a school trip, finds a way of escaping his limited mobility through a drone (originally named Skylark) which he has constructed himself in his Great-Aunt Emily's shed. Tom's mother died when he was very young and, ever since his father went missing in action in the Middle East, he has lived with Emily in a remote part of the Lake District. Flying his drone high over the hills and valleys, he finds respite from the pain in his leg, the bullying of his classmates and the anger in his heart.

It is while flying his drone that he witnesses a strange and worrying event that he just has to investigate. The arrival of a family to spend their holiday in Emily's guest accommodation and the instruction to show the two visiting children, Joel and Maggie, around the area make that difficult. Through some difficult initial encounters, Tom, Joel and Maggie form a friendship and a trust which leads them into danger as they try to stop a plot to assassinate the Queen.

This is an exciting fast paced story involving plucky children, adults very much in the background, technology and terrorism. It also dwells on bullying, grief in all its manifestations, disability, friendship and the need to do the right thing with neither fear nor favour. Tom is an interesting character – he is clever, a whizz with technology, wary of people, brave and determined with a deep-seated sorrow that is in danger of overwhelming his future. Joel and Maggie, with their mixed-race parentage, are also no strangers to being regarded as somewhat ‘different’. The adult characters range from Joel and Maggie’s parents and Great-Aunt Emily (solid, supportive and for most of the story blissfully unaware of what is going on) to Rufus Clay and his co-conspirators (clever, ruthless and mercenary). Jim Rothwell, part time odd-job man at Tom’s school, sailor and gourmet chef, is the only interesting adult character. His past is drawn in by Tom for the other children and his conversations with them are full of notions that will make the young reader stop and think.

Confident young readers will enjoy this blend of heart-stopping adventure and the discovery of true friendship and loyalty. There is enough detail about drone technology to satisfy the young engineers amongst the book readers and it adds an interesting slant to the story.

June Hughes

Tulip Taylor

Anna Mainwaring, pub. Firefly Press

Tulip Taylor, schoolgirl make-up vlogger and dictionary enthusiast, is maneuvered by a variety of factors into applying for a place on a reality TV show along the lines of ‘teen survival in the wilderness’, organised by the TV star father of Harvey, the new boy in Tulip’s class. To her surprise, she is successful but then shocked to find that Harvey and his brother Hector are also going to be taking part. The question is, does she have the skills and resilience to survive the challenges thrown at them (jumping from a helicopter into water, hunting their own food, eating and drinking unspeakable items).

Chapter 1 introduces Tulip to the reader – obsessed with her online presence, gossiping with her friends, always in full make up and very interested in the new boy in her class. As the book progresses, however, the reader discovers that there is more to Tulip than the obvious (the cover of the book has the subtitle ‘take another look’). In a class discussion on the value or otherwise of social media Tulip talks particularly of the way girls are judged on their appearance and how make-up is a tool to build a shell around the real person. Her mother thinks nothing of posting videos of the lives of her children online, seemingly unaware that this might expose them to ridicule and her father shows little interest in his children following the breakdown of his relationship with their mother. Tulip, on overhearing a conversation, realizes that she was picked for the show to be the comedy element and is humiliated and outraged in equal measure. Her interactions with the other contestants are initially based on their disbelief that she could have any skills or attributes that might be useful in dealing with

the challenges but, surprising herself and everyone else, she finds herself in the final two with Harvey where they face the most difficult challenge of all. When it goes accidentally and horribly wrong, it is Tulip's inner strength and character that ensure their survival.

The book is full of humour (the one eyebrow incident, the live streaming of an embarrassing conversation and mistaking a dolphin for a shark come to mind) and Tulip is an engaging character, willing to give things a go (apart from the urine drinking challenge where she gives a reasoned argument for not doing it) and with a mine of strategies to help her through difficult moments. The story builds up to the competition finale and then deals with the aftermath when Tulip understands how she has been portrayed and re-evaluates her online life. There is much in this book for the reader to enjoy and think about; the pluses and minuses of social media, the glib stereotyping of people, the development of relationships and the empowerment of teenage girls to use social media as a tool rather than being defined by it.

June Hughes

Under a Dancing Star

Laura Wood, cover illus. Yehrin Tong, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

This book is stylish, chic and bohemian.

Meet Bea and Ben. Bea is highly intelligent, quick witted and rebellious of her sheltered upbringing. Ben is a womanising artist with an ego to match his handsome face.

This isn't your typical romance of boy meets girl, and they fall in love. Ben meets Bea, Bea punches Ben and they immediately start bickering.

This is a story full of upset, intrigue and perhaps a spot of infatuation. Artist friends, Klaus and Ursula, extend a challenge to set up a summer romance for sheltered Bea, and Ben readily accepts.

One condition: they must not fall in love!

I love the setting of this book, in terms of history and the significance of 1930's Europe. Allegiances are made and names like Mussolini and Hitler are being discussed while the political scene is beginning to change drastically.

Artists, such as Picasso and Matisse, are also topical and you can almost imagine the bohemian lifestyle for these artists against the stunning backdrop of Italy.

This summer romance is beautifully written, full of lyrical and imaginative prose. It is so easy to fall in love with Bea and Ben and it makes me wish I were in Florence with them visiting the important sights in the city.

Of course, as in any Shakespearean drama, all does not end well, or as is expected and I found myself so keen to carry on with the story, find out what happens to the cast of characters and of course, hoping that Bea and Ben would have their happy ever after!

This is a superb book and I was thrilled to read and review it. Now to read *A Sky Painted Gold*.

Erin Hamilton

The Unexpected Find

Toby Ibbotson, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

A middle-grade novel that skilfully blends magic realism with a portrayal of several significant social issues, all within a tremendously exciting and insightful twenty-first-century adventure story is quite a turn up for the books! Toby Ibbotson achieves all this wonderfully with *The Unexpected Find*.

He introduces us to William, Judy and Stefan, and to the Great Storm which changes their lives for ever. The storm knocks down trees, but it also uncovers things, and William, whose autism inhibits his social skills, is an avid collector of things – special things which intrigue him. When two unpleasant classmates try to take the special thing he found under a fallen ash tree Judy comes to his rescue and beats them off. Judy's Iranian father has disappeared, gone to find a friend, a refugee in danger, somewhere in northern Sweden, and in her fear of being put into care she has become determined to follow and find him. When the two unpleasant boys come after her, she ducks into a house to escape them, where Mr Balderson, a mysterious, eccentric old man, seems delighted to help her find her father. With his feckless mother on holiday and his Nan taken ill and in hospital, William has no hesitation in hiding in an old campervan in a scrapyard, but only emerges when the van – bought by Mr Balderson – has crossed into Europe, with Judy on board. Once in near-Arctic Sweden they meet Stefan, a teenage boy who lives with his elderly grandmother on a remote farm. As they all cope with the bitter winter weather, and William and Judy discover the old stories of the Norse gods, they all find answers which change their lives forever.

Excellent, multi-faceted characterization and a compelling storyline make this an outstanding novel. For Odin's sake – a sequel please.

Bridget Carrington

What's That in Dog Years?

Ben Davis, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Gizmo the family dog is ill and George takes him to the vet only to be told that Gizmo will continue to get poorly more frequently as he is old. Hearing that his best friend and loyal pet hasn't got long George decides to ensure Gizmo enjoys every last minute he has left and sets about working through a bucket list to created for the canine.

From a trip to the seaside and eating ice cream to giving Gizmo his fifteen minutes of fame there are laughs to be had whilst consciously aware as the reader of the sentimental aspect. There is something truly admirable about George's dedication to his dog and the extent he will go to for him and this book certainly helps the reader to understand that we do out live our pets and it is an awful experience to endure, that said the book is tactful where needed and sincere too .

With brilliant illustrations to complement the story throughout, this is one of those books you would love to read again, and would encourage competent KS2 readers to do so too.

Samantha Thomas

You Won't Believe This

Adam Baron, illus. Benji Davies, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

There is an awful lot going on in the nearly four hundred pages of this book. In no particular order, there is; the mystery of why Veronique's grandmother, Nanai, has suddenly stopped eating; the struggles of Cym's mother to hesitantly, softly, tell him that the person she goes to the cinema with every Friday is, in fact, far more significant than just a cinema-going companion; the issue of who is doing nasty things to the most popular teacher in the school and, more importantly, why. Add to that diversions into the development of friendships, the benefits of multiculturalism and the struggles of people forced to leave their home seeking refuge in strange lands, and we have a book full to bursting.

The book is narrated in the voice of Cym (Cymbeline Igloo to give him his full name), a boy of about eight or nine and the author does a brilliant job of recreating the restless, frenetic, disjointed thinking of a child that age, veering from frustration at the strange spelling rules of the English language to hero worship of a local football star. There is much humour throughout the book, Cym's retelling of the litany of disasters that led to his first visit to the local A+E department (along with several other people caught up in the incident) is very, very funny, as well as the unlikely outcome of a game of Scrabble. Cym's feelings about his trip to celebrate Chinese New Year with Veronique and her family demonstrate a youthful understanding of the richness of a society formed by people of many cultures. Towards the end of the book, when Nanai and Thu are explaining what happened to them during their flight from Hanoi, Cym instinctively understands that it is going to be a difficult and upsetting story

and muses that perhaps he and Veronique are too young to hear of such things. He concludes, however, that children should not be shielded from things that happen to other children, echoing a trend in recent children's books where difficult issues are broached in stories thus giving opportunities for further discussions between adults and children.

The four hundred pages of this book require some stamina on the part of the young reader but the engaging tone of the narrator, the humour and intriguing plot lines will enthrall and delight, sustaining the reader's interest throughout.

June Hughes

Zanzibar

Catharina Valckx, pub. Gecko Press

Zanzibar is a wonderful little crow who was happily eating his dinner until Achille LeBlab, a reporter (and lizard) knocked on his door looking for exceptional characters to feature in his newspaper, 'Do you do anything out of the ordinary?' he asks Zanzibar.

When Zanzibar's mushroom omelette does not fit the bill, he is inspired to do something extraordinary by performing one single feat: Zanzibar will lift a camel above his head with just one wing!

This delightfully eccentric tale will engage young readers and have them cheering Zanzibar on. What I loved most was the surreal nature of the story mixed with the everydayness of Zanzibar's life. I saw a review on Bruno, another very popular book by Catharina Valckx – it read, that Catharina 'mixes the mundane with the bizarre to interesting effect' and this in turn describes Zanzibar. Add uplifting and heart-warming and the potion Ms Valckx uses for her writing is laid before you. It's gorgeous.

The message of this tale, through its language and wonderful use of humour is not simply that it's never too late to chase a dream but at its core this book celebrates the importance of friendship, old and new and the support that brings. Zanzibar achieves the extraordinary but also discovers the happiness in the everyday and in his determination to do something unusual he brings his friends together and makes a difference to those who care about him too. As for Mr LeBlab, the cynic and the non-believer – he is won over. Eventually.

Zanzibar is an entertaining, heart-warming and quirky tale - the bright yellow cover with a little crow sitting on a stool wearing a lopsided hat is just the start. The child-like illustrations continue throughout the story, using gorgeous orange and grey pencil-esque sketches to create Zanzibar and his host of animal friends. Catharina Valckx is both author and illustrator.

This gorgeous book will be read many times over I have no doubt and will entertain those early independent readers as well as the grown ups supporting them. Ideal for 5+ as it is a great one to be read aloud too.

Anja Stobbart

Young Adult Book Reviews

A Hurricane in My Head

Matt Abbott, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

This bright lemon book with a broken phone on the jacket implies its message correctly as we are drawn in from the beginning to nostalgia into Matt Abbott's poetry collection *A Hurricane In My Head: Poems For When Your Phone Dies*; with its dedication to a time when childhood was spent in pursuit of natural joys, not created by virtual ones.

As we dive into the words, they make us walk down memory lane to school life - the early morning rush, the sick-leave excuses, the transitions, sports days, butterflies inducing calf-loves and the farewell day! From an entrancing whirl of childhood one is taken to the 'Big School' and thereon to adulthood with everything in between and beyond as one enters the current digital world with the feelings it elicits.

Not only sweet but the salty aspects of modern life and society are mentioned as well with humour and exactness- such as gender roles and online abuse. The poet writes -

"-a push notification. Abuse from a stranger.
An insult leaves my inbox full of dirt.
The feeling in my stomach, does not consist of pixels;
I can put my phone in flight mode, but the words still hurt."

The book is divided into sections focusing on school life, home life, adulthood and stream of consciousness. The poems narrate constantly changing lived experiences and thoughts we could relate to as the 'no-phones' generation turning into a digitally maneuvered one. We are made to think of the paradox of living a life fuelled by social media updates -

"I share my life on social media
I give it away for free.
And unless you make it private,
it's there for all to see."

With the use of different rhyme schemes- from Limerick to Haiku, the importance of poetry in instilling a sense of repose, acknowledgement and rejuvenation is affirmed. Also Matt has a secret message for the poet within us which wants to live out of the screen, as he says -

"The best view on bonfire night

is sat amongst the stars."

He means that and tells tips and tricks of expressing through writing what's in one's mind.

The poems are easy to understand and bring an array of emotions to surface. So gift this book to your teenage self or yourself and remember that a zero percent battery should not trigger FOMO, but not having lived experience with family and friends should.

Ishika Tiwari

All the Bad Apples

Moira Fowley-Doyle, pub. Penguin Random House Children's

This novel features three sisters, Mandy, Rachel and the youngest seventeen year old Deena. There is, in this family of sisters, a belief that if a girl is different from the norm then by the time she is seventeen she will fall victim to an unlucky curse. On the day after Deena's seventeenth birthday Mandy leaves home in the hope of overcoming the sinister tradition and avoiding one of them being just a little different. Deena sets out to find her sister and also to put the curse to the test – is it true or just a fantasy? On the journey, family secrets will be revealed.

In this novel Fowley-Doyle has managed to fuse two different traditions. Her book is in many ways a work in the conventional mould of magical fantasy. But at the same time it explores issues drawn from the real world history of Ireland, such as the constitutional amendment that legitimised abortions in the Republic of Ireland and the sinister history of the notorious mother and baby homes for unmarried mothers. The book describes the harm these institutions inflicted on mothers and children. It also deals with the issues of Lesbian gay rights and homophobia.

It is a rare achievement for a novelist to create a work of the imagination which also raises and discusses so many issues of the contemporary world. Fowley-Doyle has done this with compassion and a storytellers craft. It works well. A tough but rewarding read.

Rebecca Butler

All the Things We Never Said

Yasmin Rahman, pub. Hot Key Books

Three teenage girls, from different backgrounds but each with problems they find overwhelming, join a website which matches those contemplating suicide with others to form a group to work together to do so. With a termination date, time, place and method given, they are also allocated preparatory

tasks and must submit photographic evidence as they complete these. Failure to do so will result in further action, as detailed in the terms and conditions of the website, MomentoMori.

This is the opening premise of a book which explores the anguish of Mehreen, battling anxiety and depression as manifested by the “Chaos” in her head; Cara has been confined to a wheelchair since the traffic accident in which her father died and for which she feels responsible, whilst Olivia is being sexually abused by her mother’s boyfriend and feels that no-one will believe her. For each, suicide feels like the only solution. However once they are brought together by the website, they develop a mutually supportive friendship and discover that life is worth living after all. Unfortunately the messages and actions from those behind the website become increasingly sinister, as the girls struggle to ignore the pact. It takes a crisis for them to finally enlist adult help.

Once problems are shared, they can be overcome with the appropriate treatment and support.

Told from three viewpoints, this is an ultimately hopeful book, which does not shy away from the mental health pressures that young people may find themselves under. The author has experienced her own version of what Mehreen is going through, in a culture with little understanding of mental illness. This makes Mehreen’s narrative all the more powerful and believable, without detracting from those of Cara and Olivia, who are fully realized characters with their own distinctive voices. It is very readable with moments of humour.

This is a very timely book dealing with sensitive topics, which does not glorify suicide but aims to show that it is not the answer. Friendship can be truly life-saving.

Whilst aimed at readers of 14+ please be aware that the book contains sensitive issues that some may find upsetting or a trigger, as well as liberal use of swearing, especially by Cara. There is a list of organisations offering support at the end.

Jayne Gould

Because of You

Eve Ainsworth, pub. Barrington Stoke Teen

Barrington Stoke is a publisher which prioritizes quality writing presented in a user-friendly format. Their ever-increasing portfolio of top rank authors and titles for those who are reluctant to read now has Carnegie Medal-nominated and award winning YA author Eve Ainsworth. Her first title for them is a short – under a hundred pages – novel about Poppy, who is trying to adjust (not) to the breakup of her parents’ marriage and Richie, the new man who has moved in with her mother.

With Richie has come his daughter Kayla, two years older than Poppy, higher up the school, confident, pretty, popular – all the things Poppy isn't. Poppy is resentful of the changes at home, and has difficulty accepting that any of the moves Kayla and Richie make to try to blend into her household are genuine. Instead she sees them both as threatening to her and to her mother. Poppy resents her mother's behaviour in sending her Dad packing, and yearns for a reconciliation, becoming less and less willing to accept the peace-making moves that the newcomers make. Her unhappiness leads to an over-reaction to a situation at school, and that in turn unleashes a flood of physical and cyber bullying which reduces Poppy's confidence to zero. Poppy thinks the only person she can turn to is her Dad, who always used to be there for her, but when even that goes wrong, she feels she can trust no-one and has nowhere to go.

In a written style well suited to her audience Ainsworth shows readers how the newcomers' attempts to integrate are interpreted negatively by Poppy as she battles her own unhappiness. After her despair results in a denouement offering resolution she realises that her family past wasn't perfect, but there is now a positive way forward for all.

Bridget Carrington

Becoming Dinah

Kit de Waal, pub. Bellatrix Books (an imprint of Hachette Children's Books)

Kit de Waal's first YA novel is an absorbing reimagining of Melville's classic novel *Moby Dick*. However, if, like me, you're not into crazed one legged sea captains pursuing white whales across the ocean, fear not; the characters are all different, there is not a whale in sight, and the ship becomes a VW Campervan.

Our central character is Dinah, who we first meet in a state of distress, shaving off her glorious thick black curls, and planning to leave home and change her name to Ishmael. She is 16 and lives with her mother in a commune in the English countryside. Her father, Tego, from Ghana, is absent for reasons explained as the plot unfolds.

We learn that the commune was set up by a group of idealistic families but their society has broken down and now only Dinah, her mother Anne, and the landowner, one legged Ahab, remain. Dinah has opted to go to school, having previously been home-schooled, and something mortifying has occurred with a friend which has prompted her wish to escape. Just as she is about to leave Ahab persuades her to drive them both in his renovated VW Campervan – called The Pequod – in pursuit of another VW van (colour "Whale White") stolen from his garage and which contains his prosthetic leg!

As they travel across the country the story unfolds and we learn what Dinah is running away from and what has happened between her family and Ahab's to make him so bitter. Ishmael/Dinah faces up to

past events and grows into herself as Dinah, with all her contradictions and inconsistencies. Ahab has to let go of his hatred and blind obsession to finally find some acceptance and peace.

I love the way the author has entertainingly updated the details of the original classic for the 21st century and the young adult reader whilst retaining the original names, and even slotting in a Jonah! The murderously obsessed Captain Ahab is brilliantly reincarnated in this Ahab and his bullheaded refusal to see reason. Ishmael is fleshed out as a brave, likeable and complex individual. This is a pacy, page-turner of a read with real heart and wisdom which will really chime with teenagers uncertain about who they are and how their life should be.

Rose Palmer

Bone's Gift

Angie Smibert, pub. Boyds Mills Press

Laurel Grace Phillips is known as Bone. She is aged twelve in the USA of 1942. She lives with her father, her mother having died when she was five or six years old. She has uncles whom she likes. She has a maternal aunt named Mattie whom she detests. The feeling is mutual. Some of the members of Laurel's family, including Laurel herself, have a supernatural gift. Whenever Laurel touches an object she sees visual memories associated with that object. Laurel loves her gift since it enables her, for example, to evoke memories of her mother by touching a sweater that had belonged to her. But at the same time she fears the gift for the sinister memories it might evoke. Laurel has no control over the memories evoked.

Both her father and her hated aunt fear Laurel's gift. Her father is skeptical about anything he can't understand and control. Mattie has a fear of the gift for reasons which are beyond Laurel's understanding, at least at the start. Laurel faces two puzzles. Why does Aunt Mattie fear the gift? And did the gift play any part in her mother's premature death?

Smibert's book achieves its effect by combining the mystical details about the gift with real-world reports of the roles played by the characters in World War II. The novel also emphasizes the power that individuals have to express themselves in story-telling and the power stories exercise over the listener or reader.

This book is the first volume of a proposed trilogy. This reviewer looks forward to the publication of the remaining volumes.

Rebecca Butler

The Boy in the Black Suit

Jason Reynolds, pub. Faber Children's Books

The cover of this book is striking. It's black and white, with a bit of brown and a lot of orange: an uncompromising colour scheme, which suggests danger and high drama. The faintly drawn background is of a baseball court, but unless you look closely, the tall wire fence is more suggestive of a prison.

It's dramatic, but it's misleading. The book is set in a 'hood' in New York, sure enough, but the only incident of violence is one that could occur in any city anywhere, and while it's important, it's not at the foreground of the story, which is about Matt, a teenager who has just lost his mother to breast cancer.

Matt is a lovely character: thoughtful, sensitive, caring, kind. His father, knocked sideways by his wife's death, becomes 'absent' for a while, and Matt is left to cope – but not entirely on his own. Mr Ray, the owner of the local funeral business, steps in to support him. He offers Matt a part-time job, and Matt finds that it helps him to attend the funerals. He searches out the person most affected by the death, and watches them closely to see how they cope; and it helps him to feel that he is not alone in his grief.

Mr Ray is kind and supportive. The relationship goes both ways: he finds he is able to confide in Matt too. And he gives Matt practical advice too, about how to cope with his first date with a wonderful girl called Love. (The answer is to bake chocolate cookies - there's a recipe, which I intend to try.)

The other significant character is Chris, Matt's best friend. He's nice too. And that's what I very much like about this book. It's about good people who are coping with a life that hasn't necessarily been kind to them. And that's important, because we all need to know how to do that.

It's a lovely book, very positive and affirmative, with terrific characters. But I do hope they rethink the cover. It doesn't reflect what's inside.

Sue Purkiss

Sue Purkiss's most recent book, *Jack Fortune and the Search for the Hidden Valley*, is published by Alma Books.

Chinglish

Sue Cheung, pub. Andersen Press

Jo Kwan, 14, longs to be a typical teenager, just like the kids around her at school. But as Jo tells us in her wonderfully illustrated diary, there's little chance of that.

Jo lives with her highly dysfunctional family above their Chinese takeaway in Coventry. Life is tough and everyone is expected to work very hard to keep the business afloat. There's little time to pursue hopes and dreams or hang out with friends – even if Jo had them. At home, Mum speaks little English, her grandparents speak none at all and her father doesn't talk much at all and has anger management problems. At school, Jo is embarrassed and ashamed of her 'different-ness' – and is bullied for it too.

This could be a haunting story of a terrible childhood; certainly your heart will break for Jo at times. But this is a beautifully handled, balanced story, heavily autobiographical, told with searing honesty but also with warmth and sharp humour.

Jo has been compared to Adrian Mole, Sue Townsend's phenomenally successful teenage diarist. Sue Cheung herself says she is a big fan of Sue Townsend's writing and cites its influence on her own work. For me, this debut YA novel has more depth, more realism, more empathy with the plight of those who never quite find their niche. I think Jo Kwan will take her place alongside Adrian Mile as a classic teenage narrator of her times.

Yvonne Coppard

Yvonne Coppard and Linda Newbery's *Writing Children's Fiction* is published by Bloomsbury.

Dead Popular

Sue Wallman, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Dead Popular is a thriller set in a modern boarding school. It's told in the first person by Kate Lynette Jordan-Ferreira, a vain, entitled fifth former who is one of a trio of 'striking' girls. Kate considers them to be a 'powerful threesome'. We are quickly introduced to Kate's rivals, led by Clemmie, and the unpopular new housemistress, Ms Calding. Then there are the boys, boarding at a nearby house, who share the common room and some lessons with Kate. Further rivalries are gradually revealed. Kate organizes an illicit party and, as she intends, her reputation grows until the party itself where she is assaulted by one of the boys while a girl ends up dead. At this point the story really takes off, gathering pace and complexity until it reaches a satisfying ending.

The plot is cleverly constructed and it's intriguing to learn just why many of the characters, and Kate in particular, are so arrogant. Although it is hard to feel empathy with Kate in the first half of the book, by the end of the novel the reader's sympathies are with her and the other girls, even the mean ones. In the second half the gradual revelation of the characters' true natures and motivations are carefully unwrapped so that, bit by bit, we begin to engage with their feelings. The ending is neat with loose ends tied up.

I particularly liked the way in which one of the character's art works is used as a pivotal plot point. It's cleverly done and very believable.

Young adults who like thrillers and school stories will thoroughly enjoy *Dead Popular*.

Gill Vickery

Dear Evan Hansen

Val Emmich, Steven Levenson, Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, pub. Penguin Random House Children's

It is unusual to read a book where the story actually began on stage as a musical, but refreshing that it keeps the emotion and heart of the play. The story focuses on the main named character from the book title, Evan Hansen. Evan is painfully shy and struggles to communicate with his classmates. He is trying to find his place in the world and after a series of coincidences, he ends up becoming popular for the wrong reasons. As a lie spirals out of his control, his anxiety deepens and the reader despairs with him as he tries to find a way out that will make everyone happy.

Dear Evan Hansen deals with the subject of mental health in an honest, yet sympathetic way. There are links to charities such as Mind at the end of the book and it feels like the subject has been well researched. Other subjects dealt with include: grief, love, parental responsibility, relationships, sexuality, sibling bonds, loneliness and friendships. I would recommend this book to older teenagers, 14+. It does cover some sensitive issues, such as suicide and mild sexual references.

This would be an ideal book to use to discuss mental health and that all mistakes are fixable. There is also the option to include letter writing as part of a lesson, as Evan writes letters as part of his therapy. He is always told to start the letters addressed to himself and to include: 'today's going to be an amazing day and here's why....'

This book has appeal for both sexes and could be followed up by watching the play. It is written by the creators of the show, so it would be interesting to compare the differences. Overall it is an enjoyable read and fast paced, but would be more suited to confident readers.

Sophie Castle

D.O.G.S

M.A. Bennett, pub. Hot Key Books

D.O.G.S is a chilling sequel to *S.T.A.G.S*. It is not essential, but it is probably useful to have read the earlier book in the series because there are frequent references to the plot and characters in the earlier book and *D.O.G.S* begins where *S.T.A.G.S* left off.

This is a good thriller for young adults, which many older readers will also enjoy. It is a mystery thriller with dark undertones but lots of fun and humour. The enticing open line says “when someone’s dead they’re supposed to stay dead, right?”

The main character is Greer MacDonald, a 17 year old girl studying drama. Her best friends are Shafeen and Chanel (Nel). A hint to the first story, Greer is not convinced that the mystery of the Order of the Stag is not over yet. She is a film buff and there are many interesting references to different films. Readers with an interest in literature and history will enjoy these references. The other main characters are an interesting and diverse bunch; including the Headteacher and the drama teacher. Greer and her friends attend an elite boarding school. This is a very traditional school with no modern technology. The school is ruled by a group of pupils known as the Medievals. With this setting the story covers the privilege of the upper classes.

Greer is aiming to attend Oxford University and this depends on her successfully directing a play written in Elizabethan times. Conveniently, the first act of a script called ‘The Isle of Dogs’ arrives under her dormitory door, followed by further acts. This play was so dangerous that it was banned. Greer is unable to resist this and sets about finding a cast and starting rehearsals. This is when Greer and her friends are thrown into a world of mystery and historical scandals. The play leads them down a dark path and brings the past back to life.

The book is laid out in five acts and the chapters are the scenes. These are very short which makes this fast paced novel an easy read. Scene 1 goes straight into the action and by the end the reader is left wanting more.

Gary Kenworthy

Girl, Boy, Sea

Chris Vick, pub. Zephyr Books

Bill is enjoying his experience aboard Pandora, training for the Sailing Youth Challenge, when a sudden and fierce storm quickly whips the idyllic sea off the Canary Islands into raging waves. As Pandora sinks, Bill fails to board the life raft with the rest of the crew but finds refuge in the yacht’s row boat. The boy survives the storm, but is left stranded, with very few supplies and unable to determine his position. After a few days at sea, his limited provisions dwindling as well as his hope of being rescued, Bill amazingly encounters a shipwrecked girl clinging to a floating barrel of water.

Her name is Aya, and through the conversations that follow, half hand gestures, half a mix of English, French and Arabic, Bill learns that Aya is Berber and that her boat was hit by the same storm that sunk the Pandora. As the days pass, Bill and Aya's joint efforts allow them to survive by fishing and distilling water and creating a makeshift shelter from the pounding sun. Bill also finds great solace in Aya's storytelling. Though the girl is reluctant to reveal her own past and the reasons that brought her to her current predicament, her abilities to recount tales allow Bill to forget for a while the harshness of their reality.

Then, one day, Bill and Aya reach shore. Their exploration reveals that it is an island they have found and that someone else is already there too. Stephan, a boy a little bit older than them, is apparently also a victim of the storm. Bill is wary of Stephan and something that Aya reveals to him, as well as the boy's behaviour, convince him that Stephan could become a threat. His concerns are not unfounded and soon Stephan reveals a dark side. However, a violent altercation between Aya and Stephan leads to the boy's death.

Though the island offers relative safety and resources, it soon becomes apparent that it is not within shipping or flight paths and that the possibility of being found there is unlikely. Aya eventually convinces Bill they need to take their chances and start sailing again.

Luck, though, is against them. Their solitude is broken by the arrival of a shark which initially follows them, then attacks them. Bill and Anya initially seem to fight off the animal, but not for long, with dramatic consequences. I shall not ruin prospective readers' enjoyment by revealing the conclusion of this story.

In the 'letter to the reader' which accompanied the copy of the book I was sent, Chris Vick cites *Life of Pi* as one of the books that inspired him when writing this one. This brief outline of the plot may have revealed certain affinities and as a reader of Yann Martel's book, I read the book very carefully, looking for clues and wondering whether Aya, Stephan and the island were real or indeed a creation of Bill's mind, and wondered whether this story would have a similar denouement.

Yet, Vick's plot follows a different plan and its closure will satisfy the younger readership to which this book appeals. In it, Aya's strength of character is confirmed as well as Bill's belief in the strong bond that their shared ordeal had forged. This is the third novel by this author, whose expertise in marine conservation is obvious in the description of the setting and of the creatures that Bill and Aya encounter. It is a greatly readable book and the opening scene with the sinking of Pandora as well as the one describing the shark's attack are real page turners, narrated with precision and evocatively. Equally, the sense of stillness and ineluctability that feature in other moments of the story are well evoked too. There is a good balance between the main story and Aya's tales and her narrating voice is a strong one. When she finally recounts her own story to Bill, the reader is drafted into her world as much as Bill was into her fantasy tales.

Girl, Boy, Sea is a tale of survival which will appeal to middle grade readers.

Laura Brill

The Glassblower's Children

Maria Gripe, trans. Sheila La Farge, illus. Harald Gripe, pub. New York Review Books, Children's Collection

Another very welcome classic of children's literature republished by New York Review Books.

Swedish author Maria Gripe's *Glasblåsarns barn* (*The Glassblower's Children*) first appeared in 1964, and in this excellent English translation in 1973. In 1974 Gripe received the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, awarded biennially by IBBY (The International Board on Books for Children), which is the supreme award for children's writers. *The Glassblower's Children* is typical of her work, infused with Germanic fairy-tale elements, very much in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm.

Gripe's tale is in three parts, the first introducing us to the Glassblower himself, Albert, his wife Sofia, and their small children Klas and Klara. Although an excellent craftsman, Albert's glassware doesn't sell, the family is poor, and Sofia struggles to make ends meet. At the annual fair Albert is terrified by the predictions of the mysterious old fortune-teller Flutter Merryweather and Wise Wit, her one-eyed raven, but when at a subsequent fair his glass begins to sell, his fortune seems to change.

However in the second part the children are abducted by a rich Lord, and taken to a great palace filled with mirrored corridors and empty rooms, in an empty city, where his wife has grown ever more angry and depressed. Here the children are treated like pets, until Klas misbehaves and the frightening and cruel Nana is employed to look after them.

Maria Gripe's tale is a terrifying one, told in an ageless literary style, and her husband Harald's dark illustrations perfectly capture the atmosphere. Like the darkest folk/fairy tales of the past, it causes the reader to look deep into the story and reflect on their own world. As is traditional, there is resolution in the final part, but we have a deep and sometimes frightening path to tread to get there.

Bridget Carrington

Glitch

Sarah Graley, pub. Scholastic Children's Books, Graphix

Izzy and her friend Eric can't wait for the release of the computer game, *Dungeon City*. Despite promising not to play the game until they can play it together, Izzy can't resist checking the disc when

it arrives in the post. Then, something completely amazing happens. Izzy is not just playing the game, Izzy is in the game!

Izzy meets Rae, a robot, who explains that Dungeon City needs her help. A piece of rogue code, buried deep by the developers in the game, threatens to take over Dungeon City. By successfully completing different sections of the game, Izzy will be able to level-up, gain loot and win equipment that will help her finally defeat the rogue code. Meanwhile out of the computer game, her life is unravelling. Izzy is so tired from playing the game that she falls asleep during the day. Walks out of school. Ignores her best friend Eric, not answering her messages and forgetting the plans they have made. Her parents think she is being bullied, which is not helped by the strange bruises that Izzy cannot readily explain.

Alongside the fun and heroics of the computer game, there is a strong moral message about the dangers of being 'sucked' into a computer game too much.

The story is presented in a traditional comic book style, although Sarah Graley has a lot of fun with a variety of layouts, using smaller, confined panels to accelerate parts of the story and larger panels to create suspense or pathos as well as to showcase some kick-butt action. In addition the real world and the variety of different themes dungeons allows Sarah to use a full palette of colours and her impressive illustration skills. It is the expression of characters however that is genius. Izzy in particular can go through a multiple of expressions literally in one page, from shock to wonder. This brings a genuine human quality to the story.

Not all is what it seems though. *Glitch* is therefore an interesting title. What is malfunctioning in this story? Is it Izzy's real life? Or is there a glitch in the computer game Dungeon City? Read the book to find out.

Simon Barrett

Gloves Off

Louisa Reid, pub. Guppy Books

Admission time. When I first saw that this book was not only in verse but also about boxing, my heart sank. My previous experience with verse novels has not been altogether happy, and I was not looking forward to wincing my way through another 12 rounds. As for boxing, while I can see that it offers a reliable, ready-made story structure (sympathetic protagonist trains hard, has a few setbacks, but finally comes through to win the big match!), any sport in which the aim is to beat your opponent unconscious, however skilfully, is not really for me.

I'm still no fan of the sport, but am happy to say that my suspicions about Louisa Reid's *Gloves Off* were wholly unjustified. This is an excellent YA novel about body image, family dynamics, friendship,

self-belief, and, yes, girls boxing – with a strongly drawn protagonist in Lily, and a memorable supporting cast of family, friends and friends-who-aren't-really-friends. It dodges clear of clichés: the 'expected' climax to the story actually happens two-thirds of the way through, and the turn the book takes then is much more interesting.

No doubt the metaphor is too obvious, but the verse really does float like a butterfly, keeping readers' attention without ever feeling self-indulgent. Reid has far fewer words to play with than most YA writers, but she makes them count, implying back stories and important scenes rather than spelling them out, and trusting the reader to take the hint. The motivation of the Lil's main tormentor, for example, is alluded to in just one line – but it is enough to stop him becoming just a stock bully.

Gloves Off packs a real punch: highly recommended.

Catherine Butler

Heart Struck

Rebecca Sky, pub. Hodder Children's Books

This book is great for children moving up into secondary school, growing up, exploring. It's a read that is outside of the normal format of a children's or young adult book with an inner level of reading encased in the story. It's not your everyday girl meets boy book and it has imagination.

From the front page I was captivated and I was not disappointed. Whilst the story is easy to read, the style of writing is approachable and fun, neither does it leave the reader with a cliffhanger - book 2 *The Love Curse* is, we are told, coming soon. At the same time it is also thrilling and fun, a proper page turner not for its suspense but purely because it is a great, and highly original story (from which a little ancient history and a touch of mythology might be learnt too)!

Rachel Patel is different. Not only can she not forget the gods of old, for she is a descendant of Eros, a Hedoness but neither is she able to truly fall in love because, well of course, you have probably guessed, the gods control her love life! Rachel doesn't want to have her love life controlled so she rebels, is taken captive and must find a way to save herself, her family, her friends and maybe even true love! Whether or not she can I will leave for you to discover.

Melissa Blackburn

I Hold Your Heart

Karen Gregory, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

This is a compelling YA novel from Karen Gregory. It begins as a straight-forward romance and then evolves into something more disturbing, just as you notice, on closer inspection, that the heart on the book's pink cover is outlined in barbed wire.

Sixth-former Gemma's family are pinning their hopes on her brother's football career, to the exclusion of all else, including Gemma's own dreams of singer-songwriter success in country music. Then the beautiful and sensitive Aaron begins to take an interest in her. He has independence and his own income from creating apps, so he is, initially, the impressive knight to Gem's overlooked damsel.

As the relationship progresses, told in alternate diary entries, Aaron's entries provide explanations for his jealousy about Gemma's friends and interests. Aaron is plausible and pitiable, at first, but the increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere of their relationship is painfully well-described with several chilling scenes.

Playing on the romantic tropes of intensity, exclusivity, and finding the one who will cherish your heart, Gregory exposes a darker interpretation of each of these desires. Complex and subtle, the novel explores the patterns in Gemma's family relationships which perhaps pave the way for her own vulnerability. The reader sympathizes as she tries to manage this relationship which brings her acceptance and cherishing – and then anxiety and fear. It is hard to pinpoint where our reaction changes from indulgent pleasure to a horrified desire to get Gemma away from him.

Gregory underlines the key message of the novel in an afterword, saying that Aaron's explanations are not excuses. Women are frequently blamed for not leaving situations of domestic abuse. This gripping novel does important work in throwing light on where the real blame lies and the subtlety of coercive control.

Saira Archer

Jelly

Clare Rees, pub. Chicken House

Jelly is a novel that oozes with tension and mystery: an apocalyptic survival story about a group of people who have survived environmental disasters and the invasion of human-eating creatures that have invaded the land after emerging from the rising sea levels by camping out on the back of a giant jellyfish in the middle of the ocean. How they actually got there and what exactly happened are never explained properly, just little teasing hints emerging now and again like the mysterious shadows the 'Jelly People' see floating around just below the surface of the jellyfish. However, just like any good scary story, it works so much better if you are left to wonder and imagine such things for yourself and not have them spelt out to you.

We are told the story by Martha, who is one of the four youngest teenage inhabitants to live on the creature. She is an engaging and empathetic narrator, but as mentioned already, is not very good at giving specific details, so for example, it is not clear exactly how many people she lives with or how long they have been on the jelly, although it has been several years. However, Martha is good at portraying how uncomfortable, wet, salty, smelly, gloopy and wild the living conditions are on the back of this huge gelatinous sea creature that is both intensely lonely and claustrophobic at the same time.

She describes how different areas of the creature are used for different purposes, so the hard ridges of the muscle ring, towards what they suppose is the animal's back, is an area for solitude and contemplation, although it can often be full of people quietly staring out to sea. The opposite end faces the coastal villages where they can dream about which houses they would live in if they could ever get there and remember what life was like on land, (although for Martha and her friends especially, this is difficult as they have grown up on the jellyfish). They also keep watch for the few humans that remain in that area as they scavenge and attack the mysterious and deadly Kriks. In the centre, there is 'The Big House', their only bit of shelter from the elements and is created from any debris that happens to float into their reach. The way Rees describes how bits of driftwood, rubbish, and especially plastic bottles and bags are employed to create walls, furnishings, clothes and so on is a very clever and understated way of exploring the topical themes of plastic waste in the sea and its environmental damage. This fits in neatly with the overarching plot of rising sea levels and how people need to change their behaviours, which is nicely addressed by Martha and her friends towards the end of the novel.

This debut novel was created as a lesson resource and classroom activity for Rees to use in her role as Head of English in a British school and has already been nominated for awards. The ripples created by the various tentacles (mystery, danger, survival, friendship, environment, action, humour) that make up this gripping unusual novel make it a book well deserved to be read, enjoyed, and discussed.

Natalie McChrystal Plimmer

The Kingdom

Jess Rothenberg, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Welcome to The Kingdom, where happily ever after is not just a promise, but a rule. Set in a future, fantasy theme park, which bears a strong resemblance to the most famous one of all, this is a nightmarish vision of where technology might lead. Extinct species revived and hybrids created, roaming stunning habitats, along with shows and rides which can be experienced through a variety of means including the most advanced virtual reality. And most popular of all, the Fantasists, half-human, half android princesses, who entertain visitors and make wishes come true...

Fantasists are not meant to experience true emotion or to question their life in the Kingdom, but Ana finds herself doing just that, as she begins to realize that something sinister lurks at the heart of the fairy tale. Accused of murder, her story is told through court testimony, interrogation interview transcripts and fragmented flashbacks as the truth is gradually revealed.

This is a gripping read, blending twisted fairy tale with crime thriller to weave a dystopian version of future entertainment. Underscoring this is an indictment of how girls are manipulated to conform to expected ideals of beauty and behaviour. The teenage readers of this novel may think they have out-grown the princesses of their childhoods, but there is much here to set them thinking.

Jayne Gould

The Million Pieces of Neena Gill

Emma Smith-Barton, pub. Penguin Random House Children's

Neena has always had her brother there to support her, especially with her anxiety. When one night her brother goes out and never comes back, missing and very much missed Neena has no idea how she will cope. Her world shattered. Neena becomes a different person, she starts to sneak out to parties and drink, unconcerned that it goes against her parents strict cultural views, eager to numb some of the pain. As time goes on Neena's struggles become too much and the effect on her mental health is catastrophic, making it even harder to return back to those who matter and to any sense of normality.

This is a story of family ties, of sibling connections and of mental health issues. On their own each of these is an issue that could fill a book, together they fill this book so that the reader feels not only that they are living with Neena but that parts of her life could easily be parts of theirs. Luckily for us this is fiction and such a combination of factors is unlikely however in raising these issues Emma Smith-Barton is shining a sensitive and much-needed light on a hugely relevant topic which is all too often brushed off or at worst ignored. Mental health is as much a part of Neena's story as the mystery surrounding her missing brother and the difficulties she has with both family and friends. Neena is calling for help without knowing how to. Those around her want to help but at times do not know how to either. Is there resolution for Neena? In some form yes but not perhaps the happy, glossy, shiny ending readers may expect - which is great for this is a book reflecting the realities of life even if it is couching them in a fictional story that is extremely well told.

I found this an extremely gripping story that gave much sympathy to a character who is not so unlike many teenagers today.

Samantha Thomas

No Big Deal

Bethany Potter, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

No Big Deal is a coming-of-age hymn to self-confidence and acceptance.

Emily is a popular and smart teenager who loves music, books and spending time with her friends: sassy Abi, cool Ella, Sophia, and Camila, who is spending the summer holidays with her Swedish grandparents. It is with Camila that Emily feels the greater affinity. Not only do they have many interests in common and share a lack of experience in sentimental relationships, there is a similarity in their physical appearance too.

While accepting, indeed loving, herself, Emily readily admits that her shape sets her apart from the majority of her acquaintances. She loves her curves and other people's comments irritate her, but do not hurt her. That is unless it is her mum talking about her appearance. Constantly battling with her own weight, Emily's mother's relationship with her daughter seems to be punctuated by bonding moments watching old movies while eating fondant cakes as well as by efforts to enroll her daughter in the slimming pursuits she thinks may benefit her.

When Camila returns from the holiday with a new look though Emily is shaken. Camila's new hairstyle and slimmer body are noticed by all their friends and soon Camila is in a relationship as well! This change of circumstances leads Emily to give more consideration than normal to how people look at her and to whether her appearance really affects her social life.

The arrival on the scene of blond, spectacled and music-loving Joe offers more food for thought. Emily is attracted by Joe and encouraged by her friends, she finds opportunities to meet with him and to start a friendship which soon turns into something more. While Emily is overjoyed, she also becomes aware that, despite protesting his feelings for her, Joe appears to avoid her in public.

A spat with Camila, the pressure of approaching deadlines regarding university choices, growing doubts about her relationship with Joe, as well as a confrontation with her mum, upset Emily. The wise words of her older sister Katie and the caring affection of her friends, however, help her find the answers she needs. Armed with a new and strengthened resolve Emily is ready to put first what is more important to her.

Bright and fun, this is such a positive book and one that many readers will love. As a more mature reader, I cheered Emily's strength of character and confidence. I also understood her mother's struggle and thought the family relationship was quite nicely sketched and rang true. Emily and her mother present two opposite ways to look at oneself. Emily embraces what she is and her being funny, clever, cute and loved count more to her than her physical appearance.

An uncompromising and positive tale which hopefully will encourage many readers to celebrate their strengths and to embrace who they are.

Laura Brill

Only the Ocean

Natasha Carthew, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Kel Crew has lived in the swamps all of her life up until now. More fortunate folk live in the Towers. Kel has a plan: kidnap a Towers girl, ransom her for drugs and sell those to pay for a life-saving operation that she needs. She sets off taking her baby with her. She refers to him as "it" at first. We trace her development as the baby gradually becomes 'he', gains a personality and eventually a name. She seems at first not to care for him but we note that she is constantly checking that he is still breathing.

Her relationship with Rose the girl she captures, with the ocean and with life in general is complex. There is no happily ever after in this story and that is of course quite right in a novel written for young adults. There is however a form of survival.

Natasha Carthew brings us some delightfully refreshing prose: "It was a stupid baby, if it wasn't it would have put its fist to its mouth and left it there for gumming" (30), "She stepped into the shadows of the low-slung nothing-much sun" (46), "She stood at the door and tried every crack and corner for looking and when she heard footsteps scuffing the stairs down to her she sat backed up on the ground and waited" (134).

It's difficult to like Kel but Rose's privilege, her growing fondness for the baby and the demanding trials mainly on the ocean that the two girls face make us more sympathetic towards her.

Gill James

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

See All the Stars

Kit Frick, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's

Bex, Jenni, Ellory and Ret are as close and friends could ever possibly be. They are a solar system of friendship with all of them orbiting Ret - the sun to their smaller spheres. Once, all they cared about was each other, but then the terrible thing happened. The incident that shattered their friendship and left Ellory alone, and it would never have happened if they hadn't gone to that party, and if she had never met Matthias.

This YA novel feels like a familiar teen tale. There are many elements here that readers will recognise from other novels and movies of this type. The back and forth in the text between “Then” and “Now” adds an intriguing factor as Ellory narrates her story. The characters are likeable, and recognisable, which is handy because it does take quite a long time for the story to unfold. This is purposeful as the full details are held just out of reach, leaving the reader to speculate. The complex story is a well sculpted examination of teen friendship dynamics, first love, and grief.

It is, however, very much a book for older teens – emphasising the “adult” part of YA. There is a lot of smoking, drinking and drug use. All of this fits within the context of the book (and many teens will love it), but I’d pitch the book to older teens. I did also find that the book could do with a bit of a UK edit (it was first published in the US, and Frick is a US writer). Some of the references were a bit baffling both to me and my daughter, and her friends. References such as those to “smoking cloves” and a long passage about “APs” at school could easily have been taken out in a UK edit to allow for a smoother read.

I very much enjoyed Frick’s voice and writing style though and I’m intrigued to see how it will develop. An author to watch.

Dawn Finch

The Sharp Edge of a Snowflake

Sif Sigmarsdottir, pub. Hodder Children’s Books

Sif Sigmarsdottir’s recent YA novel has been heavily influenced by her love of Nordic noir and amateur detective novels. In this murder mystery / crime novel the setting is the often inhospitable landscape of Iceland where the weather, limited daylight hours and sparse population create its own challenges for relationships and emotional well-being. The two main characters, Hannah and Imogen, are reeling from terrible personal events that have subsumed so much of their last few years. Hannah has recently been shipped off to Iceland to live with her dad following the death of her mother while Imogen is sent there to work on an important project with her employer’s joint venture partner. Their lives collide when aspiring journalist Hannah is asked by her father, the boss of a local paper, to interview Imogen who has built an external life for herself as a social media influencer. The author uses imagined Instagram feeds by both Hannah and Imogen to help the reader discover more about each woman’s personality and psyche as the plot line develops. These posts also help to lighten the mood and push the plot forward in certain instances.

Imogen is a highly intelligent but deeply conflicted young woman who has been severely scarred from an unfortunate experience at the beginning of her university career. When she travels to Iceland she is forced to face the person responsible for this traumatic psychological breakdown and she develops a

plan to seek her revenge. Numerous conflicts emerge as relationships are defined and created with colleagues and other individuals seeking Imogen's companionship and advice. Hannah doggedly chases all leads and with the help of a childhood friend, now work colleague, works to find the murderer and uncover Imogen's deep secrets – fearing that they might well be linked.

The strong female leads are interesting characters and role models, both operating in a new world greatly influenced by social media and everyone's resulting (but often inaccurate) perceptions. The writing is strong but the plot is slightly convoluted and the ending is rather anti-climatic.

Sheri Sticpewich

Somebody Give This Heart a Pen

Sophia Thakur, pub. Walker Books

It's the age of poetry again, even though Instagram poetry, but words on page are still as compelling as online; and in it we find repose, courage and catharsis. This month I strongly recommend reading Sophia Thakur's *Somebody Give This Heart A Pen*. This spoken word artist's poems shook me to the core. The unabashed, bold and powerful words in this anthology will be all you need to feel motivated, explore more, feel deeply and live unapologetically.

Divided into sections mirroring life's process of growth; these poems are stark and honest. Themes of faith, loss, love, desire, heartbreak, community, solidarity, hopes, and society resound powerfully. It presents a holistic picture of a warrior with her or his vulnerabilities and resilience and channels the same in the readers. Each word strikes a chord and fires the inner flame. It addresses through its verses the innumerable transitions, intersections and challenges one faces being part of the modern world. The interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts are addressed in words as impactful as these -

"When your fists are ready to paint faces
When there is nowhere to confide
...
Write.
...
Write upwards
Write inwards
Write through and around
Absolutely everything that tries to steal your sound."
(Subject to change in the final copy)

All the turbid changes, the sweltering emotions flow from line to line and turn into faith and resilience as the poet expresses -

"You might scream
and you might cry
but as the night falls in
You will dance carelessly in front of watching eyes
Wearing a dress that couldn't complement your skin more if you tried.
Yes, you have been broken
but girl, don't forget that you still know how to work it."
(Subject to change in the final copy)

This is a book that will appeal to adults of all ages but mostly to your younger self which is discovering the big bad world and does not know how to face it. If you like the exhortations of Rupi Kaur, Yrsa Daley Ward, Nayyirah Waheed, RH Sin and other such poets, then you'd surely relate and feel glad that you discovered this book. It'll help you grow, fight, have faith and release without inhibitions what you haven't been able to express to yourself and to the world.

Ishika Tiwari

The Starlight Watchmaker

Lauren James, pub. Barrington Stoke Teen

Hugo is a maker and purveyor of the finest watches at the academy, a whole planet where the galaxy's wealthy send their children to be educated. Hugo is also an android, once owned by the Earl of Astea, then abandoned.

Dorian, Duke Dorian Luther from the star system Hydrox is more at home under the sea than on land at the academy and currently not doing as well as he might at his studies. He also owns a broken time-travelling watch and his Time Travel for Beginners exam is tomorrow.

When Hugo opens up Dorian's watch it is not broken. Someone has stolen the quantum energy that powers the watch. It could be someone taking revenge on Dorian. Alternatively, this amount of quantum energy could be used to make a bomb.

The Starlight Watchmaker is a great story. As Hugo and Dorian investigate the missing quantum energy, the plot deepens as more quantum energy is stolen from the time-travel watches of other students and although security quickly identifies the culprit, the motivation is unclear. As Hugo and Dorian investigate, their friendship also develops. Hugo learns to enjoy being outside again and in company, but fears he will be abandoned once again. Despite his arrogance at the start Dorian, begins to understand there are those less fortunate than himself, suffering injustice and heroically is

determined to rectify wrongs. The two characters - the introspective Hugo and flamboyant Dorian - superbly complemented one another, both needing their new friend.

Aboveall, *The Starlight Watchmaker* is fantastic science-fiction. Androids are more than robots in Lauren James' universe, having thoughts and feelings like biological life-forms, but are mechanical in construction. Android life is equally as fragile; parts need replacing and starlight energy recharges their batteries. Androids are perhaps the least diverse characters in the story with Lauren James stretching the reader's imagination to consider the variety of biological forms from Ada who will eventually grow to be a planet, gilled and green-skinned Dorian and large butterflies riding penny farthings. In addition there are the remains of previous unknown civilisations, hidden underground, forming the foundations that the next civilisation builds upon. Although for me, the most fascinating description is the botanical library and I don't mean a library about botany.

The Starlight Watchmaker is a classic science-fiction story, casting two unlikely heroes, an android and a student, to solve a mystery that could end galactic peace in a wildly imaginative universe.

Simon Barrett

The Switching Hour

Damaris Young, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

The legend says that when there is a drought, Badeko, the Dream Eater wakes, steals children and feeds off their dreams. There hasn't been a drought for a hundred years, but now the rains are late and rivers are drying up. And children are going missing.

Amaya and her little brother Kaleb live with their Grandma now, after their mother died in a tragic house fire, an event that still haunts Amaya at night, giving her nightmares. It is these nightmares that cause Badeko to salivate, but it needs to feed off one more child, before hatching its plans. So when Kaleb goes missing, Amaya knows exactly where to find him: the Badeko's nest under the Dead Tree in the middle of the forest.

Amaya's adventure into the middle of the forest begins. *The Switching Hour* however is a tense, psychological drama, with the reader never knowing whether the Badeko really exists. The creature seems to represent the fear that plagues every parent of losing a child and every brother or sister of losing a sibling and the sorrow that follows. This tension is heightened when Amaya meets another girl, Mally. Mally is evasive and there are elements about her story that do not add up. Amaya however must trust Mally to survive the dangers in the forest, but cannot wholly rely upon her. Moreover, Mally is harbouring a dark unspeakable secret.

It is Amaya's pet goat, Tau that adds another interesting dimension to the story. Tau is Amaya's constant companion, fearsome guardian and helps her stay on the right road when she has lost her way. There is however a gnawing doubt rumbling through the story, whether Amaya would sacrifice Tau to save Kaleb. Moreover the letter Tau is richly symbolically, something the author could be referencing, deepening the significance of Amaya's pet goat in the story.

In essence, *The Switching Hour* is a magical-real tale showing the importance of family promises and sisterly love.

Simon Barrett

That Asian Kid

Savita Kalhan, pub. Troika Books

Jeevan Kapoor has, till recently, been an ideal pupil at the boys' grammar school he attends: he's popular, highly-motivated, well supported by family and friends. But in the months leading up to his GCSEs, things go terribly wrong. With doctor parents, both hospital consultants, and an older sister studying medicine at Oxford, he has a lot to live up to – and is doing well in all subjects bar one. The problem subject is English Literature, where Jeevan is convinced that his teacher, Mrs Greaves, is deliberately marking him down.

When a chance encounter in woodland near home leads to him witnessing – and filming on his phone – a sexual act between Mrs Greaves and a history teacher he likes and respects, he feels he's in possession of an unexploded bomb. What should he do? Loyal school friends Dread and Sandip, and Amelia and Ree, new on the scene as potential girlfriends, have differing ideas. But once the film goes to a technician friend of Sandi's, things move out of Jeevan's control. The film clip is like Chekhov's famous gun in the first act which must go off by the end, and indeed it does, with unexpected results. The situation at school escalates when Mrs Greaves accuses Jeevan of aggression towards her; his parents are called in but Mrs Greaves makes a plausible defence, and Jeevan feels his reputation is permanently – and unfairly - damaged.

This pacy novel, closely focused on Jeevan's friends and family, confronts issues of prejudice and discrimination and how best to react. Jeevan is trapped between the desire to assert himself in retaliation, and reluctance to incriminate Mr Green, his understanding and supportive history teacher. As the girls reasonably point out, Mrs Greaves' personal life is no business of the school's and it is wrong to shame her. But then Jeevan reveals his second film clip, a damning piece of evidence that she treats him differently from other students because of presumptions about race - in fact, in what she thinks is a private conversation, she expresses open hostility towards 'those coloured kids'. This makes him realize that he owes it to others as well as to himself to expose her – but how?

Teenage readers will love this, including those far less driven to exam success than Jeevan and his friends. But there will also be many who identify with this self-description as exams approach: “Red-eyed, sleep-deprived, head buzzing with facts, figures, quotes, useful information, possible useful information, more quotes, equations, pages upon pages of bullet points, and with fingers that are still clawed round an imaginary pen ...” As he wavers between indignation, anger, doubt and determination, Jeevan is a thoroughly likeable first-person narrator, and there’s plenty of humour in his interactions with friends to lighten the tone.

Linda Newbery

Linda Newbery’s *The Key to Flambards* is published by David Fickling Books.

The Weight of a Thousand Feathers

Brian Conaghan, pub. Bloomsbury Children’s Books

Newly out in paperback, Brian Conaghan’s *The Weight of a Thousand Feathers* has already been shortlisted for several prestigious awards, winning the An Post Irish Book Awards Teen & YA Book of the Year 2018. It’s not hard to see why. As always, Conaghan writes with heart, wit and courage, tackling a tough subject with a light touch.

Bobby has more to handle than the average seventeen-year-old boy. A carer for his mother Anne, who has Multiple Sclerosis, he also has to deal with a younger brother with special needs (“There’s no official diagnosis... Danny is just different... Not a crime.”), complicated friendships, and his own awakening sexuality. He’s a likeable, thoughtful protagonist, articulate and emotionally aware, but at times drowning in uncertainty. The reader is immediately on his side. And Bobby needs allies, as his mother’s illness enters a terminal phase and the demands she places on him become unbearable.

As well as inviting the reader into the often secret world of the young carer, Conaghan forces us to confront difficult ethical questions: who should have control over their own life? Their own death? I found myself constantly challenged, as well as genuinely caught up in the claustrophobic human drama, with no certainties about how the family’s story would end. The best novels of this sort make us wonder how we would cope in similar circumstances, and *The Weight of a Thousand Feathers* certainly achieves this.

The characterisation and dialogue are spot on, ringing with messy humanity. The relationship between Bobby and Anne is played out in punchy dialogue, banter expressing what straight words often can’t manage, and we have a strong sense of Anne as the person before and beyond the cruelty of her disease.

It's a tough read – Anne's recorded farewell message to Danny is one of the most moving things I have read – but written with Conaghan's trademark wit and edge it never becomes heavy. I loved this book and hope the paperback finds new readers for a story that deserves a wide audience.

Sheena Wilkinson

Sheena Wilkinson's *Star by Star* is published by Little Island.

What Magic is This?

Holly Bourne, pub. Barrington Stoke Teen

Sophia, Mia and Alexis are Year 9 girls who all want to believe that magic truly does exist. If they were witches, could all their problems be charmed away? Would the right spell change all of their lives for the better? They decide the time has come to take that leap and conjure up some magic of their very own, but will it work?

Holly Bourne has written a book that is so closely and carefully observed that from the very first page you bond with and believe the characters. Each girl is so well written that you can identify with all of them. These are girls I recognized, and I think that their problems and lives will be familiar to anyone who has a less than smooth passage through school.

The language is highly visual and with lively dialogue that would translate particularly well to a classroom play. I would love to see Bourne write a script of this that could be used to explore some of the issues in the classroom.

This is part of the Barrington Stoke Teen collection and is written and presented in a format for dyslexic and less engaged readers, but the story will also work just as well for all teen readers. A very enjoyable book with a deeply satisfying resolution.

Dawn Finch

What She Found in the Woods

Josephine Angelini, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

What She Found in the Woods is a fast-paced YA thriller that takes us on a wild ride. When 18-year-old Magdalena is sent to live with her grandparents to recuperate after a scandalous high school incident destabilizes her world, she leaves behind her privileged lifestyle in New York, and stumbles headlong into an unexpected romance and a disturbing web of deceit and small-town crime.

Magdalena is drawn to hiking in the woods behind her grandparent's cottage each day as a respite not only from her grandparents' careful watch and that of her friends, but to try and escape the foggy medicated haze she has been in since her mental breakdown. She is trying to feel something. Anything. But it is not until she meets the inspiring Bo, the perfect young stranger who lives an alternate lifestyle in the woods with his family, that Magda begins to experience feelings of hope, happiness, love and lust.

Josephine Angelini, the accomplished author of the popular *Starcrossed* trilogy, artfully weaves a very intricate plotline with dexterity in *What She Found in the Woods* and you feel as though you are in good hands from the outset. Using Magdalena as the narrator and a series of flashbacks to fill us in on her back story, Angelini manages to pull a whole host of characters and plot threads together in such an easy manner that any doubts you might have with regard to plausibility will vanish and you will be propelled along to the end with ease, albeit via some surprising twists and turns.

This is quite a dark tale and sensitive younger readers could find elements of the story — murder, drug addiction and mental illness — quite confronting, however, there is also hope and plenty of lighter moments too, and although the main protagonist is a flawed character, she is likeable. With pop culture references peppered throughout, the trials of young love and friendships, the pitfalls of social media, the thrill of survival alongside an unravelling mystery, this book is highly entertaining and will keep you guessing until the finish line.

Kathryn Adams

The Wishing Bones

Michelle Lovric, pub. Orion Children's Books

This is a churning cauldron of a historical-fantasy novel, which mixes fact with fiction and hope with despair to engaging effect. The setting is Venice in 1739, and bleak and cruel it is for Sorrowful Lily and her many orphan companions left to survive the exploitation of the Badessa, the nun who heads the convent of St Teresa of the Barefoot Carmelites. The story opens with Lily's inadvertent murder of her Uncle Red, a Mr Dearworthy, who has unwisely chosen to stay at the Hotel of What You Want. She is literally being trained to asphyxiate poisoned visitors.

The four Magoghe sisters/ Carmelite Sisters run a criminal enterprise turning corpses into precious religious relics, with orphan children acting as unpaid labour and the Hotel supplying the bare bones As in all Good-versus-Evil narratives, the sisterly quartet has a Good counterpart in the emerging companionship between Lily, Darling, Ivo and the boy Casanova.

Matters become more complex from page 100, with the first of many supernatural events, which include a Flying Flayed Man and talking marble Madonna. Sea monsters, mermaids, the incarnation

of St Lucy and sea snakes, lots of them, sweep the narrative forward through short sentences, short chapters and above all, a rigorous internal logic and structure.

The issue of the historical setting is almost incidental to the success of the narrative. Michelle Lovric's website confirms she lives in Venice (and on the Thames). She is perhaps concerned with losing her readers if the pace were to slow. The occasional description of main characters owes something to Dickens in its heightened nature and the dialogue is sometimes cod-eighteenth century by way of Captain Pugwash (“‘Belay there, stripling,’ the mermaid said.”) Dialogue between the main good characters is largely contemporary in tone, but the four evil Sisters have a nice line in the macabre.

The flow of the story, which becomes a torrent of pursuit, is gripping. Despite the supernatural extremis, we want Lily to survive. As we savour the outcome, the closing Historical Notes give an interesting insight into the author's sources. Overall, this may be a challenging read for many YA's, but it will generously repay the attention required.

Trevor Arrowsmith

Non-Fiction Book Reviews

1001 Ants

Joanna Rzezak, pub. Thames & Hudson

Anyone who has watched ants in the garden will know they form what seems an endless line marching to and fro from their nest to their destination and this wonderful, large-format book has an endless stream of them trekking across each page from the front to back cover.

The ants start in their home, a maze of underground tunnels before travelling through the undergrowth, across a field of mushrooms, around the pond - taking care to avoid the frogs, past a spider's web, and over a sleeping bear until they reach a tree. What happens there? You'll have to read the book to find out!

Children will love tracking the ants on their journey and reading about the dangers they face as well as the myriad of fascinating nature facts on each page. There are lots of details to spot including plants and animals, and the illustrations and text work well together to fill the space. The drawings are simplistic in style but imbue the creatures with character and personality. This is the sort of book that can be pored over with something new to spot on each subsequent reading. Surprisingly educational - it is not every day that you think of ants as a subject of interest this is a book to learn from and marvel over, an endless source of fascination as well as ants!

Barbara Band

ABC of Opera. The Academy of Barmy Composers: Baroque

Mark Llewelyn Evans, illus. Karl Davies, pub. Graffeg

When best friends Jack and Megan explore the Pontigorffennol's old boarded-up music hall, a tumble into a time-travelling trunk takes them far away in time and space to the very beginnings of opera. Jack and Megan go with a huff and a puff and land with a bump and bash at the Academy of Barmy Composers in Italy in 1597!

The story leaves you breathless as Jack and Megan experience a whistle-stop tour of opera in the Baroque period. They meet the inventor of opera Jacopo Peri and Claduo Giovanni Antonio Monteverdi, who made opera popular as well as the first female opera composer, Francesca Caccini, nicknamed the Songbird. Not surprisingly, Jack and Megan meet Georg Friedrich Handel and the English greats of Doctor John Blow and Henry Purcell. In addition Jack and Megan have to stand up to the bully Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth, hoping that opera might survive

his puritanic rule. With numerous asides and humourous interruptions there is plenty to entertain younger readers.

The language of the book is however delightful. With emphasis made through the use of different fonts, font sizes and colours, individual words are literally lifted off the page. This includes onomatopoeia words, technical language and foreign languages, for example French, German and Italian. Mark Llewlyn Evans really brings the European languages of opera to life, using the words to add drama and interest to the text. It is therefore a great read aloud book with verve, vim and vigour.

Moreover Karl Davis' illustrations are bright and lively, often conveying a sense of movement. His illustrations include whole double-spreads with the text printed on top to smaller illustrations, often depicting the characters in the text. I particularly liked the illustration of Francesca Caccini brilliantly capturing her ability to sing, dance and play the lute and guitar in one image.

The amount of information in the book is astounding. It is only when I read through the addendum of short chapters at the end did I appreciate the amount of information I had absorbed. Without spoiling it for the reader, I had no idea how 'Luckless' Jean-Baptiste Lully had died! In the addendum there is information about the Baroque period, the instruments, voice types, composers (the 7 featured in the story and a further 15 short biographies of other composers), Q&A about operas, and the plot line of Orpheus, the subject of many operas, including operas composed by Peri and Monteverdi. Told in an irreverent and humourous way this information is accessible and entertaining to read.

Mark Llewlyn Evans and Karl Davies do not simply introduce you to baroque opera in the *ABC of Opera*, they create an immersive experience shared with energy and enthusiasm. There is even a QR code in the front cover allowing readers to hear the songs included in the book.

As suggested by the title, this book is the first in a series with further titles expected on Classical, Romantic and Modern opera, principally supporting the KS2 curriculum. Jack and Megan's mission to save opera from the Forgotten Land will continue.

Simon Barrett

A Planet Full of Plastic

Neal Layton, pub. Wren and Rook

A Planet Full of Plastic provides a fascinating look at how our world is affected by plastic and is the perfect tool for teaching children how they can make changes. Animals, and their plight, tend to ensure our children are listening, and the young boy, our guide through this book sums it up when he says "But I don't want animals to get hurt! And I don't want our planet to fill up with plastic". As

animals eat, swim into or get stuck in plastic, it is having disastrous effects on the ecosystems and life cycles of ocean animals.

A Planet Full of Plastic is also a beautifully illustrated book teaching about the dangers our world faces through the throwing away of plastic. The quality of the illustration is high, ensuring small details are included. Layton's use of collage is colourful and engaging. Children will be enthralled by the book and I know I learned some new things by reading it. I can't wait to share it with classes to encourage their environmentalism. Many children are aware of what plastic is but not the environmental impacts it has.

This book deals with plastic pollution as part of an open, thought provoking discussion. I particularly liked the pages describing the garbage patches currently floating in our oceans. Full of facts, this might really illustrate how serious a problem we have and it will hopefully encourage children to make changes now. There are plenty of opportunities suggested and presented for schools to get involved with recycling and awareness.

How can we make changes? Simple, three words! Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. It is these small changes that can have a big impact on our planet so go forth young readers and change the world!

Erin Hamilton

All of Us: A Young People's History of the UK

Yvan Pommaux and Christopher Ylla-Somers, illus. Yvan Pommaux, pub. New York Review Children's Collection

This is a book about human history but not in the traditional sense, for it is not about kings, queens, emperors or other great people but about you and me, men and women, children too. Our story is a long one, it began more than one hundred and fifty thousand years ago and it is continuing. That is just human history. The history of the Earth is more than 2 billion years old and as we travel through time, chronologically we see how the world and its history came about. With some incredible illustrations to guide us it is very easy to read and learn. The fun facts help too!

Read it in school in your library or at home - on a lazy afternoon, at bedtime perhaps, try it when your brain is tired - admire and soak up the illustration - or when your brain is awake - marvel at the facts. Learn about war and conflict alongside peace and prosperity, invention and technological development. Discover the history of music, dance and song and see how much we, the men, women and children of the world have done to create the place we now live in.

A perfectly balanced book showing how humans have made the world in which they live and ensuring that there is a balance of facts representing all countries and not favouring one over the other. Unique, clever and highly readable.

Melissa Blackburn

The Big Book of the UK

Imogen Russell Williams, illus. Louise Lockhart, pub. Ladybird

This book is brilliant for young children to learn and have fun doing it. It's got interesting facts and the pages are laid out in such a style that it makes them incredibly helpful for children to learn from easily and quickly whilst enjoyably too. Add to this the fact that the book doesn't overload the facts with information but makes it easier to remember the facts and you are on to a winner. It is clear that this is a book which has been written by an author who understands not only children and the way they learn but the way they want to read and learn.

Louise Lockhart has illustrated every page and her pictures are brilliant, designed from the paper cut outs that she uses for her work.

This is a book that hides its true nature, there is more to it than meets the eye. It is packed with information about the UK and its population, its customs and culture but there is more. It is also about the wildlife, places to go, food and music. Learn about the local sports such as 'dwile flonking' or discover the origin of black diamonds. The UK is a cultural hubbub and this book has dug around to find as much as it possibly can to entertain, amuse and inform its readers.

I would read this book to reception classes and up as it is really easy to learn from and the pictures are great. I would definitely recommend this book for all school libraries as an information resource.

Melissa Blackburn

Body Brilliant: A Teenage Guide to a Positive Body Image

Nicola Morgan, pub. Franklin Watts

Nicola Morgan has been labelled a 'teenage expert' and rightly so. She not only writes fiction and nonfiction for teenagers (11+), but also runs courses on adolescence and wellbeing. This is the theory behind *Body Brilliant*, it explores the world today and the pressures many teenagers face.

From body image to sexuality, Nicola explores the difficulties and how to overcome them. Even as an adult, I found some interesting tips and new ways of thinking about how we perceive ourselves. The layout of the book is very appealing. Some parts are in bite-sized information boxes and there are quirky illustrations, which would be ideal for reluctant readers. Practical ideas are also highlighted, such as: 'write down the heading: 'My body is brilliant because...' – now fill that space with all the amazing things your body can DO'.

Body Brilliant is aimed at both sexes and would be a good addition to a school library. Some of the tasks would work in classrooms (KS3), but I think the book as a whole is best read solo (to ensure no embarrassment). The resource pages are especially helpful for signposting any readers to further help, e.g. if they think they might suffer from anxiety, the charity Mind is listed as well as several other resources.

I like the fact that *Body Brilliant* is written sensitively and isn't patronising. There is even an Index if any readers want to get straight to the answer to a question or read up on a particular subject. It feels like this is a much needed book at the moment when outside pressures are so high on teenagers and young adults. It covers topics such as sexuality and gender fluidity, which can be difficult to discuss or explore, for both teenagers and adults.

So overall I would recommend this book as it tackles difficult subjects and gives practical advice and resources for following up.

Sophie Castle

Brain Fizzing Facts-Awesome Science Questions Answered

Emily Grossman, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

This awesome book has been written by science expert Dr. Emily Grossman, also a television star and STEM ambassador. It follows a simple and basic black and white format, using an easy to read font and equally effective black and white illustrations by Alice Bowsher.

The book is crammed with questions and detailed answers. All are interesting, some are crazy, some are revolting and many are downright ridiculous. Why is the sea blue? What's the best way to escape the grip of a crocodile's jaw? Which revolting animal regularly eats its own poo? How much methane gas does one cow burp and fart in a day? How long would you need to fart for to produce gas with the equivalent energy of an atomic bomb? How much does the internet weigh?

What is interesting and amazing is that the book really does try to work out the answer to each question in a scientific way, which includes several very credible calculations and many facts. Many

questions come with multiple choice answers, giving readers the opportunity to work out or guess their own answers.

Children will love this book. It is very entertaining and funny and at the same time is crammed with educational facts and information. This is probably not a book to be read cover to cover, but one to browse and return to again and again. It could be read by a child alone or would be great fun to read in a small group or for an adult to browse with a child. However you choose to read it, it is a great book. In some ways this is a book not to be taken too seriously. It does contain many facts and answers to questions we always wanted to ask and were probably afraid to.

This book is highly recommended. It is an easy read. It is very entertaining. It is great fun. It is full of curiosities and surprises.

Gary Kenworthy

Celebrations Around the World

illus. Katy Halford, pub. DK

Celebrations Around the World explores a range of twenty four festivals, celebrations and holidays from around the world. It includes: New Year, Chinese New Year, Kite Festivals, Rio Carnival, the Valencian festival of Los Fallas, Holi, Easter, May Day, Eid al – Fitr, Bastille Day, Venice Ragatta, Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur, Mid Autumn Festival, Halloween, Day of the Dead, Diwali, Thanksgiving, International Festival of the Sahara, Groundhog Day, Chanukah, Dongji, Anzac Day and the Christmas Season.

Twenty of the festivals are each featured on a double page spread containing four paragraphs each outlining what the festival is, who celebrates it and how it is celebrated. The remaining four (Groundhog Day, Chanukah, Dongji and Anzac Day) each have a half page spread dedicated to their celebration.

Illustrations are bright, colourful and vibrant aiming to give a feel and flavour of the celebration described in the text. The language is clear and although each festival only has a small amount of text to support it, this does a good job of summarising it, giving the child reader a starting point that can be followed up with further exploration. No glossary but I'm not sure it needed one and it does have a detailed Contents Page. A useful and enjoyable introduction to some of the cultural and religious festivals of the world.

Annie Everall

Cherry Blossom and Paper Planes

Jef Aerts, illus. Sanne te Loo, pub. Floris Books

Dina lives on a farm at the top of a hill; Adin lives at the bottom with his mother who works at the farm. Dina and Adin have spent every day together since they were young and are best friends; they explore the countryside, walk along the river and eat fruit from the orchard, planting cherry pits in the village in the hope that one day they will grow into trees. However, Adin's mother decides she wants to work elsewhere and they leave the farm to go and live in the town. Although the two friends visit, they still miss each other and the long summer days feel very empty. But then, one day, a trail of cherry blossom trees appear spreading from the farm to the town ...

This book has an almost timeless feel about it. The soft gentle illustrations fill each page and beautifully illuminate the changing of the seasons as Dina and Adin explore their world together. You can feel the children's loneliness and isolation, and how empty their worlds are without each other yet "some friends are more than friends. They grow like twin cherries from the same stem". A wonderful story of friendship enduring despite distances. Fitting the non fiction category for its observations on the natural world and the gentle message about nature that comes across the pages.

Barbara Band

Discovering Architecture

Berta Bardi i Milá, illus. Eduard Altarriba, pub. Button Books

Discovering Architecture is a lovely book detailing how buildings are made - for children of course. It doesn't shy away from technical terminology though for of course, if you are a budding architect and want to know more about houses you need to know who built the first house, what is the difference between an arch and architrave; how does a dome really stay up and even can you build a house from paper?

Looking at different building materials such as mud, straw and concrete to name a few, and explaining to the reader who invented them or found they had a use in the building of houses and other buildings the book also looks at the people who are behind the constitution of buildings and of course it looks at how buildings stay up!

From mud huts of thousands of years ago to the towering edifices that took the world by surprise just a few hundred years ago and, the now, even bigger and bolder structures that fill us with awe this is an entertaining and informative guide for children about architecture around the world.

The pictures and diagrams are colourful and informative and I, as an adult learnt a lot, my 8 year old son? After hearing him talk about several of the pages at quite some length I believe he thoroughly enjoyed it too.

Helen Byles

Every Child A Song

Nicola Davies, illus. Marc Martin, pub. Wren & Rook

Written for the thirtieth anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (in 2020), this picture book is a celebration of those rights.

There is a brief introduction explaining what the Rights of the Child means and pointing out that millions of children all over the world still do not have these rights. The book then compares the birth of a child to a song, a unique and tiny voice that has never been heard before. And it continues by saying that each song needs a safe warm home of its own and must be heard, even about chaos and darkness. The author concludes by detailing the rights that she thought about most when writing the book; there are 54 articles so too many to include.

The illustrations in this book vary from those expressing light, joy and hope to ones which demonstrate darkness, despair and aloneness. Although this would appear to be a simple picture book, it covers some quite mature themes and would make a good starting point for further discussion around human rights so it has a wide age appeal. It is also a celebration of diversity and a reminder that all children need their rights protected.

Barbara Band

Hedy Lamarr's Double Life: Hollywood Legend and Brilliant Inventor

Laurie Wallmark, illus. Katy Wu, pub. Sterling Books

Hedy Lamarr was a beautiful and glamorous movie star yet this biography shows another side to her. She was also a brilliant inventor, a fact known only to a few of her closest friends. She actually had no interest in the Hollywood lifestyle as her passion was science and engineering, something that was encouraged by her father. Her greatest invention was the technology known as frequency-hopping spread spectrum which helps to keep mobile calls and texts private, although at the time she invented it to reduce the chances of torpedoes being intercepted by the enemy. This was patented in 1942 yet Hedy's involvement was not acknowledged until 1997.

The text includes not only the main thread of the story but lots of additional facts, and the bold vibrant illustrations add extra details such as her design for a glow-in-the-dark dog collar and an accordion-fold box of tissues. They are also excellent for explaining her various theories and inventions. There is a selected bibliography and a list of other women in STEM for further reading as well as a list of her films. In addition, the book is littered with some great quotes from her such as: “the brains of people are more interesting than the looks, I think”. A fantastic addition to the biography shelves of any school library highlighting yet another woman who has had a major involvement in STEM, this book would also be excellent for any girl who is interested in the sciences.

Barbara Band

How to be Extraordinary

Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illus. Annabel Tempest, pub. Puffin Books

How to be Extraordinary is a non-fiction picture book containing the real-life stories of 15 extraordinary people from all over the globe, who have achieved incredible things. There is a good mix of well-known and lesser-known males and females from a wide range of nationalities and backgrounds. Each person is presented in a double-page spread, which outlines where they are from, their childhood, beliefs, jobs and their greatest accomplishments despite all obstacles, with inspirational quotes to encourage others to follow their dreams. My favourite quote is: “What would you like to be remembered for?” (Abdul Kalam)

It is aimed at ages 5-7 years (KS1) and meets the requirements of the history programmes of study for KS1 as it documents the lives of significant individuals who have contributed to national and international achievements. The illustrations are bold and colourful. They catch the eye and will keep young readers turning the pages. But the vocabulary and size of the text is very advanced for this age range so they would mostly need adult support to get the most out of this book unless they are particularly talented and able.

I personally feel that *How to be Extraordinary* being prove to be more popular with children ages 7-11 years (KS2). I feel that more picture books of this high-standard containing narrative non-fiction are needed for the older primary age range, especially as the snippets of information do not have to be read in any particular order, which is great for children with low attention spans who prefer to dip in and out of the book.

This book would provide an excellent springboard for encouraging pupils to research their own extraordinary person, which could be stuck into a class book or encyclopaedia with their own illustrations or photos printed from the Internet. Throughout the book the emphasis is on how with determination and hard work anything is possible.

Anita Loughrey

Anita's recent publications include: *Children's Encyclopedia of Technology* by Anita Loughrey and Alex Woolf, published by Arcturus

Kids Fight Plastic

Martin Dorey, illus. Tim Wesson, pub. Walker Books

Setting out to show that 2 minutes is all the time it takes to become a superhero, Martin Dorey aims to encourage children to fight the tide of plastic which is threatening to engulf our oceans and coastlines. He set up The Beach Clean Network in 2009, after finding his local beach knee-deep in plastic. This was followed by #2minutebeachclean on social media in 2013, inviting others to spend that amount of time clearing up an area and posting a photo of the results, inspiring others to do the same. This initiative has spread, with many thousands of followers.

In a bright and breezy style, with colourful pages, the book details a series of missions, showing ways in which children can fight plastic, in a myriad of settings including the bathroom, the supermarket and the park. Packed full of facts, the book gives the information and statistics behind the problem as well as solutions and alternatives. Admittedly, some of these will necessitate parents and other adults changing shopping habits and perhaps attitudes, but with this topic so much in the news, I'm sure young superheroes will be able to persuade them!

As a very readable guide to an issue which needs tackling now and one that children are passionate about.

Jayne Gould

The Language of the Universe

Colin Stuart, illus. Ximo Abadia, pub. Big Picture Press

I knew as soon as I looked at this book that it might well be one for us. Neither I nor my nearly 8 year old are brilliant at maths. We are, however, creative and visual. This book is a colourfully unique exploration of maths and demonstrates clearly how it is in every element of our world.

In giant-sized picture book format and divided into four clear sections, *The Language of the Universe* is a follow-up to the brilliant *Speed of Starlight*. We explore maths in all our different worlds: the natural world, physics, chemistry and engineering, space and technology. Most things that children are fascinated by are covered here - insects, animals, space, atoms, beehives, plants and distance all play a part and this book shows how maths plays a large part in it all. We were fascinated by cicadas who use prime numbers to protect themselves from predators, chickens who can count and how to lift

with levers. It seems we can escape maths no longer and with stunning images as colourful and wonderful as these by Abadía, combined with such easy to read and informative text, we actually didn't mind embracing it at all!

Finally, a book that has made maths accessible, fun and visually stimulating.

Jo Hardacre

My First Book of Relativity

Sheddad Kaid-Salah Ferrón, illus. Eduard Altarriba, pub. Button Books

Before we can understand Einstein's special theory of relativity we need to fully understand what time and space is. *My First Book of Relativity* achieves this as it starts by explaining exactly what time is and how it is measured, from sundials to the exceptionally accurate atomic clock. Sheddad Kaid-Salah Ferrón then goes on to define in a beautiful concise way what space is and how it is measured, explaining how using standard units of measurement, such as the metre stick, came into being.

The next important concept to understand is speed. Again, Sheddad Kaid-Salah Ferrón, walks the reader through the concept of speed in a clear and easy to understand fashion, so that when he goes on to explain how movement is relative it just all makes sense and the reader can make the connection instantly to how frames of reference are used to measure positions, distances and speed, just as Galileo Galilei had said 400 years ago. Her then goes on to explain exactly why light always travel at the same speed of 299,792 kilometres per second. The illustrations support and extend the readers understanding with each double-page spread having its own distinctive limited palette.

Each of Einstein's thought experiments are broken down into small segments by organizing the text into short, distinctive sections using the engaging illustrations, bullet points, bold and capitalized words to emphasize important information. *My First Book of Relativity* talks us through the incredibly difficult to understand concepts of time dilation, length contraction and mass increasing outlined by Einstein in his special theory of relativity in a fun, appealing and easy-to-read way so it is accessible to young readers of about 8+.

This is an ideal book for introducing the concepts of speed, light and movement to the class, or your own child. I believe it will inspire young scientists to think about time and space and even come up with their own thought experiments.

Anita Loughrey

Anita's recent publications include: *Children's Encyclopedia of Technology* by Anita Loughrey and Alex Woolf, published by Arcturus

Photo Adventures

photos Jan Von Holleben, text Monte Packham, pub. Thames & Hudson

Ingenious! Such a brilliant idea. This book is full of fun ideas for children to enjoy experimenting with. It is not just a book about photography, it is a book about stretching your imagination to transform everyday objects and settings into incredible, zany and magical art. The children are encouraged to create scenes such as, flying through the air as a superhero, floating in space amongst the stars, deep-sea diving after treasure, swinging through a tropical jungle to growing extra arms and legs and dissecting your brain.

Jan Von Holleben is a professional photographer and his photographs throughout the book will inspire any child to step away from their games console or tablet. The only thing the child needs is a digital camera or smartphone. A great way to keep the children amused and happy on rainy days whilst encouraging them to be creative. All the suggested ideas can be achieved in three to five easy steps.

The text of the book has been written by Monte Packman to support the photographs. It is often written in rhyming couplets, which helps to set the tone and adds to the entertaining nature of the book.

Photo Adventures is recommended for children aged 7 upwards (KS2) and some of the activities will need adult supervision. I believe it would be possible to adapt some of the activities for KS1, or nursery with more helpers. There is a photo school chapter at the end of the book, which is ideal for older children who have been inspired to take their interest in photography a step further.

Anita Loughrey

Anita's recent publications include: *Children's Encyclopedia of Technology* by Anita Loughrey and Alex Woolf, published by Arcturus

Pop Inside Animal Homes

Mariana Ruiz Johnson, pub. Templar Books

This is a book with a full 100% quota of "wow" factor. It looks inside the homes of several animals via huge pop-ups; on opening each page the reader is given a small summary about the animal in question with cut-outs to entice you to look further.

On lifting up the page, or exploring the cut out sections you are treated to an inside view of the particular home of the animal under investigation with further flaps to lift, windows to peek into and an additional array of fascinating facts to explore.

The animals featured include honey bees, beavers, bats, clownfish, weaverbirds and rabbits – an interesting and eclectic collection. The illustrations are bright and bold, and the creatures are shown doing various tasks - see the beehive nurses nurturing the eggs; mother beavers grooming the kits and female rabbits fighting over the best room in the warren (complete with boxing gloves).

The animals have been given fun and individual personalities, and the facts are sure to enthrall; did you know that the largest fish in the Clown fish family is the only female and when she dies the biggest male will change into a female to replace her? Pop inside one of these many and amazing animal homes and see what you can learn. A book for browsing, a book for learning, a fascinating and clever book.

Barbara Band

Powers of a Girl

Lorraine Cink, illus. Alice X. Zhang, pub. Studio Press Books

There is no denying that the world of Marvel characters has had a huge resurgence in recent years. But what about the women of the Marvel universe? There are more than most people realize and this book sets out each with a full biography, their skills, super-powers, and quotes.

As the title of the book suggests, this book is using the Marvel universe to portray women as being equal to the men. It compares them against the male Marvel characters but shows that they are just as strong, powerful, and fierce. It talks about their careers, mentoring, and being role models for other young women. The language is empowering and shows how women can be both physically and mentally strong.

The illustrations are probably the highlight of this book. Zhang has done a phenomenal job of using bold colours and the effect of painted portraits to bring the characters to life. Additionally, there is diversity across the characters so every girl (and boy!) can feel represented and relate to the characters.

The language used in the book is fairly accessible although younger readers may need a little help here and there.

This is a wonderful book which I think would be particularly popular with girls aged 9+, or anyone of any age who loves the world of Marvel.

Laura Roach

This is my World

pub. Lonely Planet Kids

A wonderful book containing snippets from the lives of over eighty real children from around the globe. The children featured are aged 8 – 12 years of age, so this book has a wide age appeal.

An incredibly diverse range of children and families are presented including Cooper who uses a wheelchair and lives in Melbourne; Yousef from Syria and currently living in a refugee camp in Jordan; Leo, an Iñupiaq child living in Alaska. Each double page spread introduces the child with some information about what it is like where they live, what their lives are like, and further details such as their favourite animal or hobbies, and whether they have any pets or siblings – all facts which other children find fascinating about each other.

The book focuses on what is unique about each child giving the reader a real insight into different lives. There is a world map showing all the places where the children live, each page has a flag of the country in question and fast fact boxes present fun information, explain words or unfamiliar concepts.

The layout is bright and appealing with lots of photographs and small amounts of texts making the book very accessible. A lovely idea is that each child describes themselves in three words. With plenty to take from this book there are lots of learning opportunities presented here too and it would work very well in a classroom setting.

Highly recommended.

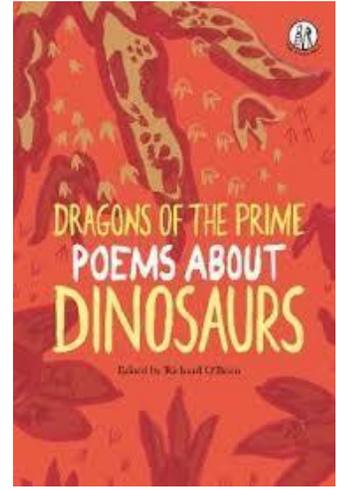
Barbara Band

Dragons of the Prime

Richard O'Brien explains to Ishika Tiwari the inspiration behind his *Dragons of the Prime: Poems about Dinosaurs* and reveals his very own dinosaur qualities!

Dinosaurs have captivated the human imagination for a long time, what sparked your interest and inspired you to compile a poetry book about Dinosaurs? I wrote in the introduction to the book how I used to read books and magazines about dinosaurs with my Nan when I spent time at her house as a kid. Kids have always been interested in dinosaurs — I think partly because they're so massive and strange to us that they seem almost magical. And they have these long, complicated names you have to learn how to say, and I feel like wrestling with those very early on was maybe when I first started to get interested in the power of language. So mostly I just wanted to put together something for the kind of young reader that I used to be, because I know I would have loved to have a book like this about my favourite subject.

Dragons are mythical creatures, whereas Dinosaurs are real ones as scientific evidence suggests, what is the significance of the titular phrase *Dragons of the Prime*? This title comes from a famous poem, by the Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson — from a section which is also the source of the phrase 'Nature, red in tooth and claw.' When Tennyson was writing, it hadn't been many years since the term 'dinosaur' was invented. Scientists were still trying to make sense of these enormous beasts



buried under the earth, and what they meant for our understanding of history and evolution. So when he calls them 'dragons', he's sort of saying that they seem so strange and fantastic that they might as well be creatures from fantasy. The 'prime' means something like 'the early days': again it's like they're shrouded in the mists of time. All the Emma Press anthologies for children have had titles taken from famous historical poems, so that if they inspire people to read poetry throughout their lives then readers might find it fun recognizing those phrases again in the future!

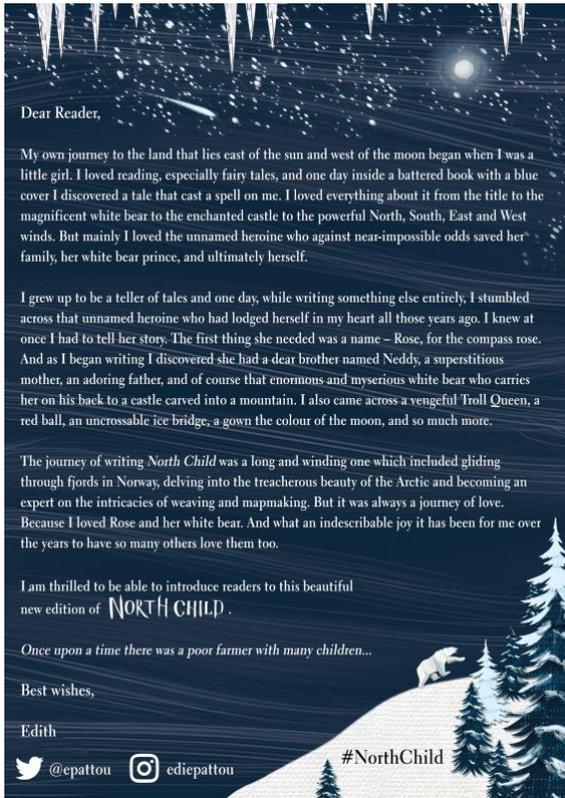
When you're not reading or writing, what occupies your time? I like to cook vegetarian recipes (or as the dinosaurs called them, 'herbivore recipes'), and I've recently got into baking, though I'm not particularly good at it! I also like going for walks in the park, and around cities, and visiting historical houses and things like that. My day job is working at a university, where I teach classes about poetry and Shakespeare's plays.

Which Dinosaur's qualities resembles you the most? I'm probably more like the snuffling small mammals that scurried around trying not to get eaten by the dinosaurs, if I'm honest with myself. But you could also say I'm a bit like the Iguanodon, whose skeleton first got put together out of order, in that I'm not always confident that I'm the right way up a lot of the time.

What is the message the book is trying to spread through the poems about/for Dinosaurs? I don't know if I have a message

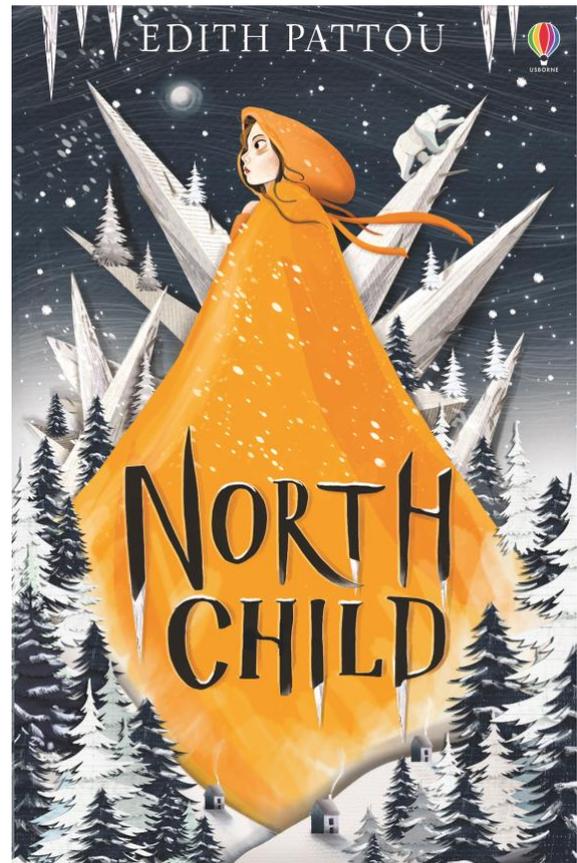
for dinosaurs specifically, other than to say 'You did good, kid' — it would be nice to know you were still famous 66 million years after you died. But I hope readers will come away from the book feeling like I did when I first read about dinosaurs as a kid: that they were awesome and exciting and worth finding out more about. Because no one alive today has seen a dinosaur, we have to use our imaginations to picture them — and it's always important to let our imaginations run away with us from time to time.

North Child



enchantment, a darker temptation, and the key to her true destiny...

A spellbinding adventure to curl up with on



Earlier this year Usborne announced it was publishing *North Child* by Edith Pattou. This was met with intense interest, it was the release of a title that had proven popular when originally published in 2006. In 2006 the book was published under the title *East*. Please read on for a description of the book, a short bio of, and Q & A with, Edith Pattou.

“A beautiful, epic story of destiny, magic and love... Reborn for a new generation of readers.”

Rose is an unusual child, a North Child. For Rose was born facing north, and the old stories say she is destined to travel far from home on a dangerous journey. Making a pact with an enormous white bear, Rose travels on his back to a mysterious castle that holds a dark

long winter nights.”

“Edith Pattou has been writing since the age of seven. While writing *North Child*, Edith became an expert in mapmaking, seamanship, Scandinavian languages, Norse mythology and the



Arctic, journeying by ship through the fjords of Norway”.

<https://edithpattou.com/>

@epattou

#NorthChild

I was incredibly lucky to receive a copy of *North Child* from Usborne. I also asked whether there could be an opportunity to interview Edith for Armadillo Children’s Book Review Magazine. Amazingly, the answer was yes. So I owe a huge thank you to Louise Ellis-Barrett, Armadillo Magazine Editor, to Jacob Dow for liaising between myself and Edith and to Edith herself for taking the time to respond so wonderfully.

This epic adventure is rooted in folk tale magic and has an incredibly brave female lead in Rose. The story is told via the different characters in the book with some chapters dedicated to Rose’s voice, others to Neddy and the White Bear himself. It is a fascinating read and one which I encourage you to pick up! Jacob and I drafted some questions for Edith and she was so lovely in her responses.

Over the summer in Canada I actually found and read *East*, which is titled *North Child* in the UK. It is a wonderful adventure full of heart-warming but also heart-breaking moments. I’m sure this new edition will be a huge hit in the UK with a new generation of readers. How do you feel about the book and its UK title and new cover?

I am thrilled with this new UK edition of *North Child* and I think the new cover is brilliant! As to the title *North Child*, I have to confess that when I first heard about the change I was a little unsure,

being so used to thinking of it as *East*. But if I’m being honest I actually believe *North Child* is a better title (please don’t tell my American publisher I said this!) because it is truer to the story and to its heroine, Rose.

There has been a surge in brilliant children’s fiction this year, many are willing to call it a golden age and your book will certainly be a part of this. Do you feel that children’s fiction goes from strength to strength? The US market is very different and I wonder if the same is being felt in the US?

Well, I am very honored for *North Child* to potentially be included in this new golden age of children’s literature! I do agree that children’s fiction is flourishing, with so many excellent writers on both sides of the pond. In the US there has definitely been a boom, especially when it comes to the ever-increasing diversity of voices and cultures being represented, with many authors pushing the boundaries of form and content. As a lover of fantasy I have been delighted by the immense talent and range of today’s fantasy writers. And of course the presence of so many fierce and independent female protagonists is especially exciting.

Can I ask about the inspiration for the book and your characters? Originally I know it came from the Norwegian tale *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*. What about this tale sparked *North Child*?

It is a lesser known tale for the children today. I discovered the fairy tale *East of*

***the Sun, West of the Moon* when I was a child. My mother worked in a bookshop and one day she brought home a book of fairy tales edited by Andrew Lang. It was a compilation of tales from all different cultures and while it included standards like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, I was immediately drawn to this Norwegian tale with its poetic title and a unique and amazing unnamed heroine. Unlike *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* this girl had guts and a persistence that defied the odds. She actually rescued the prince, rather than the other way around. Plus, she got to ride on the backs of the North, South, East and West winds! This unnamed heroine and her enchanted white bear stayed with me over the years until finally I realized that I needed to give her a name and tell her story.**

The superstitions are an interesting part of the family and wondered if you had heard of these before or if they came from you?

Writing the character of Eugenia was a treat and I did do a fair amount of research into superstitions, those from Scandinavian countries as well as other cultures. But the main one, the one that partly drives the plot—the birth direction superstition held by Eugenia’s family—is one I came up with myself. And it has been so fun talking to readers over the years, many of whom are convinced it must be a real thing!

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Rose’s adventures, but it was not only hers. It was wonderful to know what other characters were

thinking and feeling and I finished the book with a greater understanding of each one. Was this a planned part of your writing process?

Yes, it was in the very early stages of writing the tale that I decided it should be told from multiple points of view. As I was starting to map out Rose’s story I had just finished reading a book called *The Poisonwood Bible*, which is a novel written for adults by the US author Barbara Kingsolver. I loved how she told the story from the viewpoints of five women in a family and how she captured each voice so perfectly. And I decided I wanted to try that with my *East of the Sun, West of the Moon* story. It was a challenge but I loved how it enabled readers to get to know the other characters in the story, especially dear Neddy, who I have had readers tell me is the heart of the story.

Many children are inspired by powerful stories. What would you like to say to readers delving into *North Child* or *East* for the first time?

As a young girl I journeyed with an unnamed heroine to the land that lies east of the sun and west of the moon and it left an indelible handprint on my heart. I hope you will enjoy your own journey to this world of enchantment I created, inspired by the world in the fairy tale. It is filled with icy landscapes, ruthless trolls, swirling northern lights, a moon dress, a story knife, and a rainbow bridge, among many other things. But most of all it features an indomitable heroine named Rose who I hope touches your own heart the way

**that unnamed heroine touched mine
many years ago.**

Interview by Erin Hamilton

Proud

Proud is an anthology of LGBTQ short stories by debut authors, three of whom kindly contributed their thoughts to Fern Tolley's Q&A's which we share here ...



Kay Staples is a writer from the Midlands. After studying creative writing at the University of Birmingham, Kay now works in marketing as a content writer in London and listens to an awful lot of alternative music. @OkStaples

What was your reaction to being included in this unforgettably bold and thought-provoking anthology? Thrilled! I think it's such an important anthology, and there are some incredible writers whose work I'm really proud to have mine next to.

On the Run tells the moving story of two young teens who run away from their house estate after winning the lottery. What was your favourite part about writing On the Run? And did you face any particular challenges during the writing process? I like writing relationships and how they form, so the whole formation of Nicky and Dean's life together was a lot of fun. The big challenge for me is that I don't really write short stories! I had to re-learn how to do it and then, somehow, actually make it good.

Dean, in particular, was an unexpectedly refreshing voice and seamlessly broke down a lot of stereotypical images associated with his character. Where do you get your inspiration to write your characters? I've actually been quite surprised by a lot of readers' reactions to Dean, which I suppose partly answers the question. I didn't grow up in a block like my characters', but I have encountered a lot of Deans: kids who lashed out and grew tough and aggressive because they didn't know what else to do, or because it seemed like the only way to survive. There's quite real frustration or pain under the surface. I went to primary school with some absolute bastards who I've since looked up on Facebook to find that they're doing great - they've channelled their anger, found happiness, got jobs or degrees that they love, entered happy relationships. I felt those were stories that deserved telling.

Acceptance and love are both strong themes in your story. What do you hope readers take away from reading On the Run? I hope they take away the message that everyone is worthy of that love and acceptance, including themselves.

Your story is set in a Travelodge, but I'm curious to know, where and what do you envision Nicholas and Dean doing next? The whole world is their oyster but they don't really know what to do with it, bless 'em. I think they'll get the lovely little house down south together that they want, before soon realizing that all the excitement is in the cities and they'll move there instead. Nicky will continue

studying and go to uni, and guiltily re-connect with Mum along the way. I can see Dean starting his own business, maybe opening a bar.

Do you have any tips for those writing their own short stories? Read lots and write lots. For short stories in particular, what I found worked for me was writing in scattered bits - I had random paragraphs clustered all over the place that I gradually brought together. Really the trick is just to give it a go and see what works.

Why is LGBTQ+ important to you? It's my community. We look out for and accept each other. I find it especially important in books for young people because I didn't have them when I was young; I could have found that community a lot sooner if I had.

And on the subject of pride, what's your proudest moment? Getting to tell my parents that I was about to be published, that was a biggie.

What's your favourite LGBTQ+ inspired novel out there? I go back and forth on this but it's either *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz, or *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara.

What else is on the horizon for 2019 for you? I'm currently focusing on my day job, but also working on a novel in my spare time.



Cynthia So (*The Phoenix's Fault*) was born in Hong Kong and lives in London. She graduated from the University of Oxford with a BA in Classics in 2016 and has been working in higher education since then. She writes YA, speculative fiction and poetry. Her work can be found in magazines such as *Uncanny*, *Anathema* and *Arsenika*.

What was your reaction to being included in this unforgettably bold and thought-provoking anthology? The email telling me that my story had been accepted for the anthology came through while I was on the tube and I honestly just wanted to burst into song and dance like I was having a moment in a musical, but what I did was just clap my hands over my face and scream silently. It's such a dream to be part of this anthology with such a range of LGBTQ+ voices, something I desperately needed while growing up, and honestly I still can't get over the fact that I'm alongside all these brilliant authors like David Levithan and Moira Fowley-Doyle. The first time I got to read the whole anthology I was so overwhelmed. All the stories and poems and art in it are so good, and it is incredibly surreal to get to be among them and know that I'm going to be empowering readers to feel proud of themselves.

The Phoenix's Fault tells of a mythical world where a Chinese lantern-maker has to choose between the Emperor and her friend. What inspired you to combine the theme of pride with fantasy and

mythology? The phoenix and the dragon form a real symbol of heterosexual marriage in Chinese culture, and they're both thought of as proud creatures. Back when I was fifteen, I wrote a poem about my anxieties surrounding this symbol and my own queerness, and I have always wanted to return to this idea and expand it. There is a lot of power in taking a myth that is ingrained in your culture and transforming it into something that, rather than alienating you, makes you feel like you belong.

*What was your favourite part about writing *The Phoenix's Fault*?* Taking something that is a very heteronormative symbol in my culture and making it extremely, extremely queer!

What are some of your favourite myths and legends? I studied Classics at uni, and I've always been fond of Greek mythology. Lately I've been obsessed with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. If you don't know the myth, it goes like this: Orpheus is the most famed musician in all the world. He falls in love with Eurydice, but on their wedding day, Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies. Orpheus goes to the underworld to bring her back to life, and plays such sublime music that he moves even the god of the dead, who agrees to let Eurydice go on one condition: she must follow behind Orpheus, and he must not look back until they reach the land of the living. Orpheus almost makes it, but just as he glimpses the light at the end of the tunnel, as it were, he turns back. And she dies, all over again. Irretrievable.

It's a terribly sad myth. I really liked how it was reimagined with a Mexican setting and a happy ending in the beautiful film *The Book of Life*, but most recently I was stunned by how the Tony Award-winning musical *Hadestown* brought this myth to life for me in a way I've never seen it before, with such clarity. It becomes, more than ever, about making art in the face of darkness, about perseverance in the face of self-doubt and insecurity, about the power of trying your best to tell a story, even if it might end badly.

*You write that the phoenix is a sign of good fortune, and represents the 'ideal wife – honest, faithful and obedient'. Do you think this is the case in *The Phoenix's Fault*?* I think that in *The Phoenix's Fault*, the phoenix is a blessing, something you can draw comfort from. She shows you that you can be whatever you want to be. You don't have to conform to expectations; you don't have to contort yourself to try and become what people think of as the ideal. You can just be you.

*Family pride is an important theme across *The Phoenix's Fault*, and there's one beautiful moment where you write,*

"Just... be happy, Jingzhi. That's all your mother wants."

"And what about my grandparents? Will they understand?"

"They understand love."

What do you hope readers take away from reading your story?

I hope they know that their existence is valid, and they don't have to limit themselves to what they've always been told. The world is full of possibility. In my story, the main character's blood family is supportive of her, but family is wherever you find your support. It doesn't have to be people you are related to by blood, but whoever sees you and understands you and is proud of you, that's your family.

Do you have any tips for those writing their own short stories? I think the most important thing is just to enjoy it. A short story is a really low-pressure way to explore an idea, so have fun! And it's much easier in a short story to just focus on the feelings that you want to convey. Do that. Follow the emotional thread of the story. Think of one or two images that really strike you and work the story around them.

Why is LGBTQ+ important to you? I realised I was queer when I was eleven and it's always been important to me that there is a history of other people like me, and a community. It's a great source of strength and joy and inspiration.

And on the subject of pride, what's your proudest moment? Being published in this anthology, definitely!

What's your favourite LGBTQ+ inspired novel out there? *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily M. Danforth. It's such a compelling and honest lesbian coming-of-age story that captures all the fears and desires of queer adolescence perfectly, drawing every little grief and every little hope in vivid and exhilarating detail.

What else is on the horizon for 2019 for you? I've just finished the first draft of a contemporary YA novel so I'm going to start working on the second draft of it soon, and we'll see where it goes from here! I'm very lucky to have the wonderful Alice Sutherland-Hawes of Madeleine Milburn Literary, TV & Film Agency as my agent, and excited to work with her on this book!



Karen Lawler (*I Hate Darcy Pemberley*) is an American living in London with her awesome wife and extremely cute dog Buffy. She loves reading, especially sci-fi, fantasy, YA, and historical non-fiction, and she funds her book habit by working in children's publishing. She loves a good teen movie (*10 Things I Hate About You* is the best and she will fight you on that). This is the first time her writing has appeared in print.

What was your reaction to being included in this unforgettably bold and thought-provoking anthology? I think my immediate reaction was mainly WHAT, with a side of nuh uh, come on, WHAT? But I can't tell you how proud I am to be involved – it's such an incredibly necessary book, especially right now, and I'm honoured to have been a part of it.

What inspired you to base your short story on Jane Austen's classic novel Pride and Prejudice? I've always loved Jane Austen, and I've always loved high school movie adaptations of classics. Clueless and 10 Things I Hate About You being two of my favourites. But I wanted a lesbian version. So that's what was in my mind when I wrote my story.

Was it important for you to set your story in a school? I think there is something very 1800s English High Society about high school!

Proud is utterly uplifting and inspiringly relevant. What do you hope readers take away from reading I Hate Darcy Pemberley? Well, I hope they're rooting for Lizzie and Darcy to get together in the end! I felt very strongly that I wanted to show a world where my characters' sexuality wasn't an issue, but rather the will they/won't they of traditional romcom was the main focus. But also, I think people can surprise you, and I love that both Darcy and Lizzie learn how to see each other differently. Your story was accompanied with artwork by Kameron White, is it exactly how you envisioned your story looking like? Kameron's art is basically the coolest thing I've ever seen. It's perfect. I'm completely obsessed. I actually have a beautiful full-colour print hanging in my living room!

Do you have any tips for those writing their own short stories? Just keep going! I think the thing that everyone underestimates about writing is the importance of persistence and resilience.

Why is LGBTQ+ important to you? Because our rights are still so under threat, both in the UK and around the world.

And on the subject of pride, what's your proudest moment? I think it's when I married my wife.

What's your favourite LGBTQ+ inspired novel out there? Fingersmith! Hands (ha, excuse the pun) down!

What else is on the horizon for 2019 for you? I'm working on a top-secret project – stay tuned.

The Phoenix of Persia

The Phoenix of Persia is an exciting multi-media project, re-telling stories from the Persian epic, the Shahnameh. First reviewed in the summer edition of Armadillo, Simon Barrett wanted to find out more about the inspiration and perspiration behind this beautiful creation. He was able to interview Laudan Nooshin by email and meet Sally Pomme Clayton in person in an independent cafe near Clapham Junction. The interview in person followed a different thread that strangely intersects at times with the questions Laudan answered.



Recording The Phoenix of Persia.

(from left to right: Delaram Ghanimifard, Laudan Nooshin, Saeid Kord Mafi, Nilufar Habibian, Sally Pomme Clayton, Arash Moradi, Soosan Lolavar, and Sophie Hallam)

The Phoenix of Persia is my first encounter with the Shahnameh. When did you first hear the stories of the Shahnameh?

Laudan: I remember my uncle telling me some of the stories as a child. I didn't grow up in Iran so I wasn't introduced to them at school as I would have been there; *the Shahnameh* is studied in school like Shakespeare is here.

Sally Pomme's interest in the *Shahnameh* is more circuitous. She describes her enduring interest in Central Asian and Middle-Eastern epics from Arabic, Iranian and Turkic sources. Travelling widely throughout Central Asia, listening to story tellers, Sally Pomme retold some of these stories in her 2004 book *Tales told in Tents* published by Frances Lincoln.

Then in 2006 Sally Pomme was involved in the British Library's 'Inside Story' project, working with schools to engage with a number of manuscripts, including the British Library's Shahnameh manuscripts. Sally Pomme began to tell the story for the first time as part of this project. She also undertook additional research and met with Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, responsible for pre-Islamic Iranian coins in the British Museum. Sally Pomme recalls how Vesta eloquently explained the huge

cultural and historical story of these little coins and showing Sally Pomme for the first time a coin with the image of a King, wearing a crown with features that features in *The Phoenix of Persia*.

What draws you to the stories in the Shahnameh?

Laudan: There are some wonderful characters and stories; the stories mix actual history and myth and explore some very universal human themes of love, loyalty, power, forgiveness, and so on.

Sally Pomme seems drawn to epic stories generally. She explains that epics are stories within stories within stories, and in Central Asia today, it takes literally months to narrate these stories with audiences returning time and time again to hear more. Sadly, this is now a historic tradition in Britain, when bards would have told epics, such as *The Mabinogion* through words, song and music. It is this form of epic or bardic singing that Sally Pomme says she enjoys exploring in her own writing, performances as well as collaborations. Her motivation: to keep these epic stories alive.

Which is your favourite story in the Shahnameh?

Laudan: I think it has to be Prince Zal and the Simorgh.

The Simorgh preoccupied much of **Sally Pomme** and my time during the interview. Since publishing the *The Phoenix of Persia*, Sally Pomme has created a number of different performances, including a solo performance of the story. When telling this story, Sally Pomme narrates other little stories about the Simorgh. As she explains the Simorgh is a character in other Middle-Eastern and Persian folklore, poems and songs, representing the human soul. So Sally Pomme enjoys drawing upon these extra stories, re-telling them in a fun, poetic way.

For me The Phoenix of Persia is an absolute sensual delight. When did you decide that The Phoenix of Persia should be a multimedia project, bringing together the words, art work and the music?

Laudan: The initial idea for introducing this story to British children came from attending the London Philharmonic Orchestra's Funharmonics family concerts with my own children many years ago, when I heard a piece by composer Brendan Beales based on a story from the Finnish epic Kalevala. This planted the seed of the idea of introducing British children to Iranian music, culture and storytelling through one of the Shahnameh stories and that was the basis for the project that I ran with the Education and Community Department at the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 2011-12, and which resulted in a specially-commissioned piece for orchestra, Iranian instruments, key stage 1 violinists and story-teller by composer David Bruce, with the story adapted by Sally Pomme Clayton. Even back then, it seemed to me that this would make a perfect story for a children's picture book, but it took me another few years to turn this into reality!

Sally Pomme remembers Laudan's invitation to write the text that David Bruce set to music for the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 2011-12. It was a huge project. The completed work, *Prince Zal and The Simorgh*, was part of the London Philharmonic Orchestra's 'Brightsparks' series, a fifteen minute orchestral work including professional Iranian musicians and narrated by Sally Pomme. But she credits Laudan for continuing to pursue the idea of publishing the story, made possible, when Tiny Owl publishing established in 2015, agreed to the project. The book is therefore very unusual, involving many collaborators and belongs to many people. Sally Pomme characterizes Laudan appreciatively as the 'mother' of the project, bringing it all together. Laudan's official role was producer.

Where do you begin with such a project? How do you know who to involve?

Laudan: I began discussions with Tiny Owl in June 2017, almost a year before work started on the music. It was a complex project and took a long time to bring the various elements together. Tiny Owl chose which artist to invite (Amin Hassanzadeh Sharif). I had worked with Sally Pomme Clayton on the London Philharmonic Project. Early on, I invited my PhD student, composer Soosan Lolavar to help create the music; in fact, Soosan was originally going to compose the music. But after much discussion we decided to invite the Iranian musicians to workshop and compose ideas from which the music would be created. We weren't sure what form that would take when we started and it was a bit of a risk, but once the workshopping started, it became clear that there were some lovely ideas emerging. We also decided early on that each instrument would represent a different character in the story (rather like Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*), which worked well. We selected musicians who we felt would be open to working in a collaborative way. Arash Moradi had also worked on the LPO project. I was also keen to include a female musician because there are so many talented female Iranian musicians who simply don't get the opportunity to be heard because of the way that the industry works, so it was really great that Nilufar Habibian was available to work on the project.

What surprised you most during the project?

Laudan: Generally, I have been surprised at the rich potential of the project, particularly in relation to the extended educational activities and the wonderful teacher resources that Tiny Owl produced. I'd particularly like to mention Sophie Hallam at Tiny Owl. Sophie brought so much enthusiasm and vision to the project, taking it in directions that I could not have imagined at the start. I have also been struck by the interest and enthusiasm of the school teachers and pupils that we have had contact with, and the general public, for instance at the book launch at the British Library at the end of May. Everyone seems to love the book!

The boy finding a coin in his pocket at the end of the story was a delightful surprise for **Sally Pomme**. He showed the coin to her. This is the same coin Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis showed to Sally Pomme. In her mind, and as Sally Pomme writes in the story, the feathers on the King's crown are those of the Simorgh, and when the Simorgh flies over the King, the King would receive Faar or divine

light of wisdom. Sally Pomme believes Vesta sowed a seed that day, which grew in her unconscious, finally appearing in her story. She even searched eBay for Sasanian coins and found this exact coin! Sally Pomme describes the coin arriving beautifully wrapped up and when she opened it, the coin was minute, the size of a finger-nail. She made a bigger version of the coin so she could show children at her performances.

The Phoenix of Persia begins and ends in Daneshjoo park, Tehran. To what extent is story-telling a public event in Iran? Why do you think it is important to hear a story being told, accompanied by music and pictures? (I was interested to read that storytellers in Iran painted their stories onto large canvases.)

Laudan: Yes, story-telling still takes place in public. As in many story-telling traditions around the world, music and pictures help bring stories to life and give them a whole different experience/dimension. In the school workshops we encouraged children to think about how music brings stories to life, for instance in films or video games!

See **Sally Pomme's** answer to how she first heard the Shahnameh at the beginning of the interview and what draws her to this story.

The book includes two stories: the creation of the universe and an adventure about Prince Zal. Why this selection?

Laudan: The choice of the Prince Zal story dates back the original LPO project of 2011-12. We felt this was a story ideally suited to the age of the children (Key Stage 2) that the project was aimed at, with its themes of understanding and valuing difference, forgiveness, and so on. Sally Pomme decided to add the creation of the universe section at the start.

What do you think you gain most when working collaboratively? How did you bring all the creative elements - words, music and art work - together?

Laudan: The music compositional process presented a number of challenges, particularly since some of the musicians had not worked in such a collaborative way before. But the most fruitful aspect of the project was that everyone brought their own ideas and perspectives, and I believe this ultimately enriched the resulting music.

The first step was that Sally Pomme adapted the story from the LPO project to a length that was suitable for a children's book. Tiny Owl then started working with the artist, Amin. Meanwhile, in May 2018, we brought the musicians together and started working on the music. Sally Pomme was integrally involved from the start, so that the music was composed around the storyline. This process took several months, followed by three months of recording and editing.

Sally Pomme enthusiastically recalls working on the recording and the amazing experience of collaborating with such talented musicians. The idea of framing the story with modern day Iranian children listening to a story-teller was so she could introduce the different musical instruments. The text however was written and remained unchanged so readers could listen to the recording and read the exact words on the page. Whereas Sally Pomme explains normally during a live performance she would make changes, not to the plot, but to the words. She was grateful for the opportunity to do a recording and the privilege of having all their voices heard in readers' private spaces, perhaps a bedroom or sitting room.

When did you know you had crafted a great story? What do you think Ferdowsi might say?

Laudan: I think Ferdowsi would love this retelling of his story. We realized very early on in the LPO project that this story has great potential, both in the power of the story itself and all the extended curricular work that it enables.

Sally Pomme was more reticent about Ferdowsi's approval. She compares him to Chaucer and Shakespeare also part of an oral tradition, writing down the stories that had been passed down by countless generations. Ferdowsi spent thirty years writing these stories down. The king was paying him a bag of gold for every couplet, which is why, wryly, Sally Pomme said he may have written so much. Sadly the artistic relationship between Ferdowsi and the king broke down, Ferdowsi believing he had not received enough praise and the king refusing to pay so much. Ferdowsi went back to Tus. Sally Pomme continued that the king repented and sent a huge caravan of gold, ivory and elephants to Tus, but sadly Ferdowsi died before the caravan arrived. Ferdowsi's daughter used the money to fulfill her father's wish to build a bridge over the river that would survive any flood. Famously Ferdowsi said:

"The houses of today will sink beneath shower and sunshine to decay.
But storm and rain, will never spoil the palace
I have built with my poetry."

And his palace remains. This is because every king since has commissioned an illustrator to make a new manuscript of *the Shahnameh*, which is why there are so many copies of the manuscript. Sally Pomme suggests *The Phoenix of Perisa* is another copy of Ferdowsi's manuscript. She remained uncertain whether Ferdowsi would have liked it, but for her the book follows on the tradition he started and keeps his words alive.

I know you have visited many primary schools. What format did the school workshops take?

Laudan: The music workshops have been run by myself and Nilufar Habiban, composer and qanun (plucked zither). We start off by introducing Iran the country; then Nilufar plays her qanun and the children are encouraged to talk about what the sounds bring to mind for them and also how it is

similar or different from other stringed instruments that they are familiar with or even might play. We also talk about how music can bring stories to life and ask them to think of examples of this and talk about them. We then teach them an Iranian song and then move on to the children creating their own rhythmic or melodic ideas, depending on their previous musical experience and what instruments are available. In doing so, we ask them to create music for a character from the Phoenix of Persia story.

What did you enjoy about going into schools?

Laudan: The genuine enthusiasm of the children - about the music, the story and learning more about this country called Iran that they don't know much or anything about. Children are so open and have fewer pre-conceptions generally than adults that it has been an absolute pleasure to introduce them to Iranian music, culture and story-telling.

What do you think the children gained most from your visit?

Laudan: Learning about a different music and culture. The children seemed to enjoy listening to the qanun, learning an Iranian song and creating their own melodies and rhythms. See also the answer to the next question about what children gained.

For me The Phoenix of Persia is more than a story. It is an immersive cultural experience, especially if a school also arranged to receive The Shahnameh Box, a resource box comprising of cultural artefacts, books and objects. The only sense not piqued seems to be taste, but then I noticed a section on Iranian food in the teachers resources booklet! What would you like to share most about Iranian culture?

Laudan: One of the aims of the project was for British children to learn about aspects of Iran that they might not normally through the news and mainstream media; and particularly to offer an alternative to the generally negative representations and stereotypes of what Iran is. We wanted to challenge those kinds of representations, to show that beyond the politics there is a deep and rich culture and history and to 'normalize' Iran in the minds of British children and show that it is a country like any other with its own music, culture, food, etc.

For **Sally Pomme**, particularly reflecting upon live performances, is about communicating often quite complex ideas, usually introducing an unknown culture and tradition to a new audience. She enjoys making the ideas accessible to the audience, opening the door to a new world. When telling the story of *The Phoenix of Persia* Sally Pomme likes to finish encouraging each member of the audience to identify with the Simorgh, so this story, this culture becomes familiar and a part of their life. The story also remains contemporary, reworded and enjoyed by an audience today.

How do you think our world is enriched through the sharing of such epic stories?

Laudan: As well as the very human lessons of the story itself, I think these stories help children learn that we are all human and that no matter what culture you look at, there are common human themes and emotions that we all share. Again, this sends a very different message from the mainstream media which tends to ‘demonize’ Iran to the extent that British people have no conception that people in Iran just live normal lives just like anywhere else! I took a group of music students from City University to Iran on an educational trip in 2008 and one of the things they commented on was how ‘normal’ everything seemed!

Sally Pomme emphasized the importance of stories - fairy tales and epics - to plant seeds in our unconscious and begin to evolve, adding to these stories and filling in the spaces. Like a well, she continued, everyone can dive into our imagination as long as you believe. Sally Pomme spoke with conviction that we all have the imagination, we just need a few keys to unlock it: imagination is crucial for children, so they can solve problems creatively.

Finally, like Shirin eager to hear the next story, when might we hear more about King Zal?

Laudan: Very soon, I hope! The complexity of the project meant that it was quite expensive to run and we depended on funding from Arts Council England, City, University of London and Iran Heritage Foundation, without whose generous support the project would not have been possible. So any further projects are likely to depend on securing further support.

Thank you so much for having produced The Phoenix of Persia.



British Library Launch May 2019

Picture books

Aife and Stray

Stevie Westgarth, illus. Emily Ford

Arabella and the Magic Pencil

Stephanie Ward, illus. Shaney Hyde

Billy and the Dragon

Nadia Shareen

The Bookworm

Debi Giori

The Boy in the Big Blue Glasses

Susanne Gervay, illus. Marjorie Crosby-Fairall

The Boy Who Knew Nothing

James Thorp, illus. Angus Mackinnon

The Bug Collector

Alex G. Griffiths

Clem and Crab

Fiona Lumbers

Don't Mess with a Princess

Rachel Valentine, illus. Rebecca Bagley

Don't Worry, Little Crab

Chris Haughton

Grandad's Island

Benji Davies

Hello

Fiona Woodcock

Is 2 a Lot?

Annie Watson, illus. Rebecca Evans

Just Read!

Lori Degman, illus. Victoria Tentler-Krylov

Little Red Riding Hood

Beatrix Potter, illus. Helen Oxenbury

Lunch at 10 Pomegranate Street

Felicita Sala, pub. Scribblekidsbooks

Mr Nogginbody gets a Hammer

David Shannon, pub. Norton Young Readers

Naughty Narwhal

Emma Adams, illus. Katy Halford

One Fox

Kate Read

Prudence and her Amazing Adventure

Charlotte Gastaut

Quill Soup

Alan Durant, illus. Dale Blankenaar

Ravi's Roar

Tom Percival

Red Red Red

Polly Dunbar

The Runaway Pea

Kjartan Poskitt, illus. Alex Willmore

Sneaky Beak

Tracey Corderoy, illus. Tony Neal

Song of the River

Joy Cowley, illus. Kimberly Andrews

Swarm of Bees

Lemony Snicket, illus. Rilla Alexander

This is Frog

Harriet Evans, illus. Jacqui Lee

This is Gus

Chris Chatterton

Together We Can!

Caryl Hart, illus. Ali Pye

Treacle Street: Marcel's Parcels

Kate Hindley

The Truth About Dinosaurs

Guido Van Genechten

Junior books

A Pocketful of Stars

Aisha Busby

The Accidental Rock Star

Tom McLaughlin

The Adventures of Harry Stevenson

Ali Pye

Agent Weasel and the Fiendish Fox Gang

Nick East

An Unlikely Spy

Terry Deary

Caterpillar Summer

Gillian McDunn

Cookie! ...and the Most Annoying Boy in the World

Konnie Huq

Dark Blade: Whispers of the Gods

Steve Feasey

The Dragon in the Library

Louie Stowell

Dragons of the Prime: Poems about Dinosaurs

Richard O'Brien

Fire Girl, Forest Boy

Chloe Daykin

The Garden of Lost Secrets

A. M. Howell

The Girl With Space in Her Heart

Lara Williamson, cover illus. Julie McLaughlin

I, Cosmo

Carlie Sorosiak

Jack from Earth

Chris Wooding

Jemima Small Versus the Universe

Tamsin Winter

King Dave: Royalty for Beginners

Elys Dolan

The Last Spell Breather

Julie Pike

The Longest Night of Charlie Noon

Christopher Edge

Milton the Mighty

Emma Read

The Monster Who Wasn't

T.C. Shelley

My Parents Cancelled My Birthday

Jo Simmons, illus. Nathan Reed

Peril en Pointe

Helen Lipscombe

Princess BMX

Marie Basting

The Princess Who Flew with Dragons

Stephanie Burgis

The Return to Wonderland

Various

Spylark

Danny Rurlander

Tulip Taylor

Anna Mainwaring

Under a Dancing Star

Laura Wood, cover illus. Yehrin Tong

The Unexpected Find

Toby Ibbotson

What's That in Dog Years?

Ben Davis

You Won't Believe This

Adam Baron, illus. Benji Davies

Zanzibar

Catharina Valckx

Young Adult books

A Hurricane in My Head

Matt Abbott

All the Bad Apples

Moira Fowley-Doyle

All the Things We Never Said

Yasmin Rahman

Because of You

Eve Ainsworth

Becoming Dinah

Kit de Waal

Bone's Gift

Angie Smibert

The Boy in the Black Suit

Jason Reynolds

Chinglish

Sue Cheung

Dead Popular

Sue Wallman

Dear Evan Hansen

Val Emmich, Steven Levenson, Benj Pasek and Justin Paul

D.O.G.S

M.A. Bennett

Girl, Boy, Sea

Chris Vick

The Glassblower's Children

Maria Gripe, trans. Sheila La Farge, illus. Harald Gripe

Glitch

Sarah Graley

Gloves Off

Louisa Reid

Heart Struck

Rebecca Sky

I Hold Your Heart

Karen Gregory

Jelly

Clare Rees

The Kingdom

Jess Rothenberg

The Million Pieces of Neena Gill

Emma Smith-Barton

No Big Deal

Bethany Potter

Only the Ocean

Natasha Carthew

See All the Stars

Kit Frick

The Sharp Edge of a Snowflake

Sif Sigmarsdottir

Somebody Give This Heart a Pen

Sophia Thakur

The Starlight Watchmaker

Lauren James

The Switching Hour

Damaris Young

That Asian Kid

Savita Kalhan

The Weight of a Thousand Feathers

Brian Conaghan

What Magic is This?

Holly Bourne

What She Found in the Woods

Josephine Angelini

The Wishing Bones

Michelle Lovric

Non-Fiction books

1001 Ants

Joanna Rzezak

ABC of Opera. The Academy of Barmy Composers: Baroque

Mark Llewelyn Evans, illus. Karl Davies

A Planet Full of Plastic

Neal Layton

All of Us: A Young People's History of the UK

Yvan Pommaux and Christopher Ylla-Somers, illus. Yvan Pommaux

The Big Book of the UK

Imogen Russell Williams, illus. Louise Lockhart

Body Brilliant: A Teenage Guide to a Positive Body Image

Nicola Morgan

Brain Fizzing Facts-Awesome Science Questions Answered

Emily Grossman

Celebrations Around the World

illus. Katy Halford

Cherry Blossom and Paper Planes

Jef Aerts, illus. Sanne te Loo

Discovering Architecture

Berta Bardi i Milá, illus. Eduard Altarriba

Every Child A Song

Nicola Davies, illus. Marc Martin

Hedy Lamarr's Double Life: Hollywood Legend and Brilliant Inventor

Laurie Wallmark, illus. Katy Wu

How to be Extraordinary

Rashmi Sirdeshpande, illus. Annabel Tempest

Kids Fight Plastic

Martin Dorey, illus. Tim Wesson

The Language of the Universe

Colin Stuart, illus. Ximo Abadia

My First Book of Relativity

Sheddad Kaid-Salah Ferrón, illus. Eduard Altarriba

Photo Adventures

photos Jan Von Holleben, text Monte Packham

Pop Inside Animal Homes

Mariana Ruiz Johnson

Powers of a Girl

Lorraine Cink, illus. Alice X. Zhang

This is my World