



Armadillo

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Books Reviewed

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Picturebooks

A Happy Place

Britta Teckentrup, pub. Little Tiger Press

This picture book has evidently been created with bedtime reading in mind.

The little girl's busy mind won't let her sleep, but a shining star seen through her window (and there is a cut-out here) invites her to follow it to find a happy place. This may be a dream, but she goes into the dark blue night, past the sparkling river, and into the moonlit woods, with the moon at the top and part of each cut page as they are turned. Eventually we dance and sing in the light of the moon, joined by a tippytoed squirrel, a bushy-tailed fox, and other animals, until they all drift away and it's just the girl and the star, embracing the world, until it is time to go home. Now the girl can sleep peacefully until morning, when she "will awaken to a beautiful, bright new day."

The night makes all the colours muted, but this remains a beautiful book, and the cut-outs through which we are given glimpses of the next page are fun, though care must be taken to share this book with a child old enough to appreciate it and treat it with respect.

Award-winning author, illustrator and fine artist Britta Teckentrup has, since 1993, written and illustrated over 120 picture books, some of which have been translated into over 30 languages. Born in Hamburg, she moved to London to study Fine Art and remained in the UK for 17 years, but now lives and works in Berlin with her Scottish husband and their son. Her experience shows, and this lovely book may be just what a tired parent needs to calm a child and encourage sleep.

Diana Barnes

A Way To the Stars

David Almond, illus. Gill Smith, pub. Walker Books

Sometimes we look up to the night-time sky and all we see is an inky blue-black, perhaps it is only just dark, and the stars are not quite shining yet. Other times we look up and the sky is simply filled with a glittering wonder. The stars should be classified as a wonder, they are beautiful, mysterious and form shapes that we may have named but really, we know little about. We do know the night sky has been a source of wonder for thousands of years, history and the evidence of past civilisation show us this. I am sure that many of us have wondered, just like I am sure our predecessors have, how we find a way up to the stars. Yes, there are rockets that send astronauts into space but is that the same as going all the way to the stars?

Well, if, like me, you look longing at the stars with a feeling of wonder every time, you will love David Almond's *A Way To the Stars*. His touching story will pull at your heartstrings and the rich, layered illustrations created by Gill Smith will fascinate.

Joe wants nothing more than to find a way to reach the stars that he sees from his bedroom window. The illustrations show us that he clearly loves outer space, take time to look at the sketchbook open on his bed, the picture hanging on his wall, the mobile... There are clues everywhere in this story, for those who pay close attention. Attention is what Joe discovers he needs to see the stars and all their glory too. His friends think he can only find a way up there in his dreams, but his dad knows better (or he will do after he has finished his cup of tea!) His first idea is to climb a ladder but... Whoops. Maybe a tower of boxes will be more successful? Idea after idea they try to find a way to reach the stars, nothing too outlandish for this pair. When dad asks Joe if he wants to give up? "In your dreams..." is the reply!

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Dress In the Window

Robert Tregoning, illus. Pippa Curnick, pub. Oxford Children's Books

What a wonderful exploration of individuality and the importance of feeling happy in your skin.

When a young boy and his mother are walking home from school, they pass a second-hand shop, and he spies the most dazzling red dress in the window. From that moment he is determined to buy the dress and goes about helping his family and neighbours with various chores in order to save enough money. We really feel his hurt and disappointment when he goes to buy his dream dress (on his birthday) only to find that it has been sold. Arriving back at home, he finds a wonderful party with all the people he has helped and lots of presents. However, it is the mysterious and very squidgy present from his mother that really makes the day, for of course it is his much-desired dress, and he has the thrill of wearing and dancing in this gorgeous outfit.

There are some books that just lift the spirits, and this is one of them. We are not told the names of any of the characters, but the love and caring are very self-evident in the writing and in the illustrations. Whilst the text is short, it is also written in rhyme and with a lot of humour. The illustrations are delightful, with a huge amount of energy and a format that really leads us all through the book. There are lots of opportunities for children to be involved and to act out the story. Of course, this is also a story with a theme, showing the importance of inclusion, diversity and understanding in a way that children will comprehend, and it is highly recommended.

Margaret Pemberton

The Egg Incident

Ziggy Hanaor, illus. Daisy Wynter, pub. Cicada Books

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
couldn't put Humpty together again.
But is that the truth?

Humphrey is an egg. An egg who has very overprotective parents. "Remember Humphrey; never run, never jump and never ever EVER sit on a wall. You remember what happened to your uncle..." So it is that Humphrey lives a very quiet and cautious life, until the day he bumps into Princess Jean (PJ) in the park. An adventurer through and through, PJ can't understand why Humphrey doesn't allow himself to have any fun. She tells him tales of all her antics and mishaps, they talk for so long that they don't notice the park is closing. Now there is only one way for them to get out... Over the wall...

This is a laugh-out-loud book which asks the question, what happened to the Humpty Dumpty and his family after the famous Egg Incident. They became, it appears, overprotective towards little Humphrey, and of course that means no fun. That is until the day he is out, in the park and he meets the fun-loving princess PJ. This is also when he learns an interesting truth about his uncle Humpty, on that will help him change his outlook on life, but will he be able to change his parent's minds? The story is relayed using dialogue and illustrations helping us to fully engage in the story, the character expressions and the scenery around them. The aside comments add to the humour. A fun book to encourage discussion about finding the balance between activities that are dangerous and being too safe.

Helen Byles

Get Off Bear!

Tony Neal, pub. Oxford Children's Books

This story forms part of a cleverly created series about mathematical and physical challenges we face day to day. In this wintery adventure, Bear is keen to go sledging but hasn't yet worked out how to move his sledge. While he sits in the sledge, his friends rally around and use "push" and "pull" to get him moving. Small mouse zooms past with a helpful piece of advice - "You need to get off, Bear."

Once they figure this out, all the friends have a brilliant race down the hill and we continue to enjoy an engaging, light-hearted, colourful story. It is of course perfect for the winter months, and if we get any snow children will be able to follow the example of Bear and friends, get their own sledge's out and

know exactly how to get them to move. The rest of the year? It is still a brilliant book for sharing when the sun is shining down and the summer is upon us, we can simply apply the principles in a different way and continue to enjoy the story and the learning opportunity.

Told in easy sentences and with delightful illustrations helping young readers to envision the challenge of push and pull, this entire series would be a welcome addition to any home or school library. Perfect for early years concepts building. It is clever, funny, engaging, and perfect for young readers who won't even realise they are learning some complex maths and physics proving you are never too young to learn!

Erin Hamilton

The Last Stardog

E.K Mosley, pub. Flying Eye

The first word that came to mind on receiving this book was 'stunning.' It is a truly sumptuous book to just sit and enjoy, especially the remarkable illustrations that infuse every page. The story itself is delightful one of facing challenges and overcoming them, with help from friends along the way.

Stardog lives in the heavens and every night dreams that a pack of other star dogs roam the sky and that he is not alone; unfortunately, every morning brings disappointment and the gradual erosion of his magic, until one day he falls to earth from the heavens. What follows is a quest to find other star dogs, who can help him renew his magic and return to the stars. The journey is full of encounters with other creatures, each of whom tells their own story. The question is whether Stardog will be successful in his quest.

This beautiful story takes the reader on a journey, which in some way is replicated by the tales told by each of the animals. They have all had dreams and challenges and have found ways to start making changes. Along the way they have all discovered friends and a sense of belonging, even if the community they find is very different from what they had imagined. There is a magical ending as the creatures prove that friendship can really change lives and that belonging can be found in the most unexpected places. This is a truly gorgeous book with a wonderful message, which is perfectly reflected by the illustrations.

Margaret Pemberton

The Panda's Child

Jackie Morris, illus. Cathy Fisher, pub. Gecko Press

The Panda's Child is a simple, evocative, beautiful story that will both enthrall and excite the reader as they find themselves drawn into its wonder. The story even encouraged me to do my own research because pandas are an endangered animal. Very few people will ever see them in the wild, not many have cubs, and this book celebrates the love between a she-panda and her adopted baby panda, its beautiful simplicity made me want to know more about these gentle giants. *The Panda's Child* is a chapter book but one that I feel sits well in the picturebook category and could be shared with younger readers too. It would make a lovely storytime book.

Jackie Morris' text is big, bold, simple, and yet layered with meaning. It allows Cathy Fisher's delicate illustrations to tell the story yet gives younger readers some words to follow too, an aid to their understanding of the development of the tale which takes us to a faraway forest, a place where a mother is laying in the warm sun with her baby. She drifts to sleep and awakes to find her child gone. The villagers search with her and, just when all seems lost, seven days later they find the baby in a cave, being cared for by a panda. Years later when the boy has grown into a young child strangers come to the village, they have captured exotic animals including a baby panda. The villagers want nothing to do with these men who need someone to look after their captives. The young boy volunteers and the villagers turn their backs on the perceived traitor but is the boy really a traitor or is he going to become a saviour?

A human child was once in danger, he was rescued by a mother panda. A baby panda is in danger, can he be rescued by a human? Stunning.

Colin Paterson

The Pandas Who Promised

Rachel Bright, illus. Jim Field, pub. Orchard Books

The red panda is not, as you might first think, a relative of the giant panda. Their name comes from the Nepali word 'ponya' which means bamboo eater and they were first discovered in 1825. They share similar habitats and eat similar foods but they are otherwise very distinct creatures. Red pandas love to live in trees and are incredibly acrobatic. The pair we are about to meet in Rachel Bright's *The Panda's Who Promised* are beautiful, and full of mischief.

Just look at those eyes that Jim Field has given them, I think I would do anything for this pair, and they would never get into trouble, they just look far too adorable. They are Popo and Ketu, cubs who live on a high misty mountainside with their mother and they promise her that, as they grow, they will always stay close to home. Popo was quite content to do just that for she was happy to think whilst Ketu, well she was happiest when she had something to do. They have lots to do in their treetop home and have promised their mother they will do everything together, not stray and stay out of the daylight. That is until Ketu could no longer quell the feelings tumbling inside her, she needed to visit

the mountain and explore which means Popo has a big decision to make – keep her promise to their mother or look after her sister...

This is a funny, touching and awe-inspiring story. The funny and touching come very much from the story Rachel Bright tells us, her red panda sisters are irresistibly cute. The awe comes from the stunning illustrations Jim Field treats us to. From the treetop home of the pandas to the wildlife surrounding the mountain and the stunning views. This is an expressive, vibrant and epic story of familial love, and the power of promises. A story not to be missed, a true treasure.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Red is Home

Emma Bettridge, illus. Josephine Birch, pub. Graffeg

Picturebooks are so much fun, truly they are. There are so many things you can do with them, especially as it is very likely that they are going to be read aloud to an audience who just love to engage with what they are seeing and hearing.

The combination of Emma Bettridge and Josephine Birch's words and illustrations have made sure that their picturebook, *Red Is Home*, is going to be adored, and read out loud a lot! They bring us the story of a dog, Red, who is going through the ups, downs, and anxieties of moving house. The story will immediately appeal to any young readers who are going through a time of uncertainty or change and by the time they have read all fears will have been left far behind!

Red is a very lucky dog for he has two homes. He lives here, with Chino and Maude. He also lives there with Sita and Claude. Here is a house and there, for now, is a boat (my dream!) This of course means that he does different things in each place. At one home he can jump on the sofas, at the other he can splash about and chase birds... When he is with Chino and Maude, he does this and that, sometimes that and this. When he is with Sita and Claude, he jumps here and there, sometimes there and here! But when Monday comes Sita and Claude are moving house. When he thinks about what he might do he finds himself spinning all around but luckily for Red his humans are all there for him, and he is about to find a wonderful treat of a place just for himself.

May Ellis

Salat in Secret

Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, illus. Hatem Aly, pub. Andersen Press

Muhammad wants to pray. Now that he is seven years old and his dad gave him a prayer mat, or salat rug, for his birthday, Muhammad is old enough to pray five times a day. He will however be at school for the midday prayer of Dhuhur and he is convinced he must find somewhere secret to pray.

Muhammad's anxiety about finding somewhere secret to pray contrasts with his dad's confidence to pray wherever he is, regardless of what others around him might think or say. He is an ice cream seller and, whenever it is time to pray, he puts his salat rug out and begins. People in the street are not always understanding, however. Nonetheless, Muhammad wishes he could be as brave as his dad.

Salat in Secret follows Muhammad at school as he tries to find a place to pray and considers the problems of praying in school before he plucks up the courage to ask. The author, Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, brilliantly conveys the way that Muhammad's challenge dominates his thoughts through the whole day and how school bells and timetabling create a sense of urgency. Hatem Aly's illustrations are particularly expressive as Muhammad worries about where to pray.

A story for everyone that encourages an understanding of this important pillar and the obligation, within Islam, to prayer.

Simon Barrett

When the Fog Rolls In

Pam Fong, pub. Greenwillow Books, an imprint of HarperCollins

Ordinarily, I wonder if you and I are the same. Do you expect that, typically, the story you read will fill the pages of the book that contains it, with plenty of words on each page? Do you expect your picturebooks to do the same, only with the addition of illustrations of course! Pam Fong's *When the Fog Rolls In* surprised me. Of course, it has a story, there are words on each page and there are evocative illustrations. But the surprise came in the form of the presentation of the story.

The text is layered. There are simple lines, statements even, on each page urging you to stop, read, take your time to take the words in. Just as a fog which often hangs about, the words hang in the mind of the reader, thick with meaning, suggestion and so much more. It is intelligent, surprising and beautiful in its simplicity. Add to this the lush atmosphere created by the illustrations, so real that you feel almost as though you are indeed lost in the fog with the little puffin. It all adds up to one of the most evocative, age-defying, beautiful picture books that I have enjoyed this year.

The puffin we follow through the story is nameless as are the adult and child we see on the titlepage, but they need no introduction. The puffin and its flock love to fly, to see the world around them but all too quickly the fog can roll in and when it does it is easy to be confused, to lose your way. Staying still may sound like a good idea but it won't make the fog move and it could be dangerous, so the direct

path is always the best and its revelations a joy. The fog can be scary and so can the everyday. With this book parents and children can and should share in its joy and its important messages.

Colin Paterson

The Wild

Yuval Zommer, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Written in the form of a fairytale, *The Wild* imagines the earth's biomes as a striking, dragonsque creature. Accompanying marvellous illustrations, the carefully considered narrative explains that the vast Wild nurtures all the flora, funga and fauna which adorn and roam its body. In perfect symbiosis, it is one with the seasons, weather, cycles of life, and provides for all creatures.

As the fable progresses, it portrays the emergence of humankind and civilizations, their shifting priorities and the damage they inflict upon nature. The incredible art depicts the verdant creature succumbing to these changes, until, like in all good fairytales, a hero emerges.

Like many environmental stories, the warning and moral lesson of the tale is clear and an incredibly important one for all generations. However, at no point does it engender a sense of shame or preach to the reader. For all those that have the pleasure of picking up this book, it is an empowering story which celebrates the gift of nature and exemplifies how we all have the power to make a positive, impactful changes, for immediate and future gains.

Read and enjoyed with a four-year-old, *The Wild* is a beautifully illustrated picture book which sensitively captures the fragility and majesty of nature, whilst delicately reminding us that we all have a part to play in protecting the wonderous creature that is Planet Earth.

Alexander Wilde

Junior Books

The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha

Michael Foreman, pub. Templar Books

Ali Pasha is a survivor with a fantastic tale! Travelling all the way from Gallipoli back to Britain during World War I, Ali Pasha became a national treasure. *The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha* recounts the journey that Ali Pasha went on with his lifelong companion, Henry Friston.

This beautiful wartime story involves a real tortoise who was picked up by Henry Friston, a 21-year-old sailor, during the battle of Gallipoli. During the hardest days of his wartime experience, Henry came across Ali Pasha on the beach during a heavy attack and became very fond of his new friend. Once the pair were able to, they made it back to HMS Implacable where they continued their service until the end of the First World War. Once back in Britain, Henry took Ali home to live with him and he soon became a local, and later, national superstar who made headlines all over the world for his incredible story.

The way that the story is told is brilliant. With discussion between Henry and young Trev, the office boy turned young reporter for local paper, The Lowestoft Journal, carrying the majority of the story. The two develop a bond after Trev is asked to report on the emergence of Ali Pasha after his hibernation. Henry recounts his experience of the War and Trev listens intently, noting down the details for the story and asking great questions along the way. Henry also shows Trev his diary and the book integrates these entries into the tale.

The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha is an enjoyable wartime story which is as much a tale of friendship as it is of history. Michael Foreman cleverly tells the story in an engaging way which is pacy and keeps you connected to the characters throughout. A lovely, heart-warming read!

Tom Joy

Best Friends Forever

Lisa Williamson, illus. Jess Bradley, pub. Guppy Books

Best Friends Forever is a book about moving up to middle school and dealing with making friends. The main character is Lola, a girl who has just started secondary school with her best friend Evie. However, when Lola and Evie get put in different classes, Evie starts hanging around with a girl called Cleo. At first, Lola doesn't really mind Evie having a new friend – as long as they can still stay best friends – but she soon learns that Cleo is selfish and loves to make fun of Lola. She and Evie met as

babies and have been best friends ever since, and the thought of Evie being stolen away makes Lola feel anxious and upset. Lola also has to deal with her mum and dad's divorce and moving away from the house that she was born in (literally).

The style of writing and illustrations are similar to those of Jacqueline Wilson, so readers who enjoy her books are bound to enjoy this. The illustrations are cute and funny, and the words are easy to understand without being too simple, so readers of all ages can enjoy the story. It is perfect for anyone who has just or will soon transition to middle school. The characters, especially emotional Lola and joyful Evie are very relatable characters that everyone will identify with a little bit.

Each chapter unveils a new situation, location, or character, each one unique and nostalgic. My favourite part of this book was the accurate descriptions of middle school, the classes, friendships, and clubs. Overall, this book is extremely relatable, funny, and entertaining. I would recommend this book for ages ten and above.

Mya Grant (age 11)

Casander Darkbloom and the Threads of Power

P. A. Staff, pub. Walker Books

Every day of his young life Casander has woken up without memories. Drawn by the Curious Mrs Crane's Shop of Even Curiouser Curiosities, where an astonishing collection is displayed. One day he is invited to enter the shop. And, to Casander's own astonishment, he breathes life into a stuffed raven. In the chaos that engulfs the shop after that revelation, Casander is dragged away by the shop assistant and led into a parallel world. Here, magic rules and its skills are learnt at Wayward School, where Casander is identified as the Foretold, the child whose destiny is to fight the Master of All and his army of Heretics.

Casander, believing himself to have finally found the place to which he belongs, embraces the fight, surrounded by a brave group of friends. Rather than answering Casander's many questions, though, the quest unravels further mysteries and finally provides an unexpected denouement which leads to further adventures.

It is difficult to read a book about a group of friends attending a school to be trained in magic arts without thinking of the Harry Potter saga. While there are some nods to that story, the tale of Casander maintains its own character. The author is keen for her work to be inclusive, and her characters not only celebrate differences: they become their strengths. The description of the settings is skilled and imaginative, and the dialogues are used well to reveal aspects of the characters and to move the story forward. Librarians will love the depiction of the library and its intrepid guardian, Ms

Crane. This is a highly readable book, whose final twist opens to further adventures, which readers will want to explore.

Laura Brill

Girls

Annet Schaap, trans. Laura Watkinson, pub. Pushkin Children's

What a wonderful collection of familiar stories twisted and spun into something new and a little bit more modern that some might be used to. While the titles have been changed, to reflect the retelling, the stories are inherently familiar from Red Riding Hood to Hansel and Gretel, Beauty and the Beast and not forgetting The Frog Prince. This is a classically modern collection of stories giving girls the power.

With strong female lead in each of the stories, it seems as though the familiar trope of the girl, the princess, waiting for their prince remains evident and a strong theme. Then, as you continue reading you begin to see that, within each of these retellings each girl holds her own power and makes her own choices. The Girls of the title have been given the power. With modern twists to each story, adding technology such as computers and phones as well as adding in larger society's, these stories have the added charm of being both legendary and modern at the same time.

They are easy to read, thrilling and entirely enjoyable. I particularly enjoyed The Frog Prince and the enjoyment the princess gets from kissing the frog, even though he never changes into a prince! They are soon settled into a routine together and even though she does try to find a new prince the princess soon discovers that she misses her frog.

Brilliant and modern!

Erin Hamilton

Leila and the Blue Fox

Kiran Millwood Hargrave, illus. Tom de Freston, pub. Orion Children's Books

Kiran Millwood Hargrave is a poet and multi award winning author of *The Girl of Ink and Stars*. *Leila and the Blue Fox* is Kiran's second collaboration with her artist husband Tom de Freston – the first being *Julia and the Shark*. In *Leila and the Blue Fox*, Kiran combines her poetic skills with her storytelling ability to create a beautiful and moving tale that looks at themes of migration, belonging and climate change.

Leila and her family migrated to England after fleeing from Syria to escape the war. Her mother, a scientist, left to work in Norway and Leila hasn't seen her daughter properly for six years. The story starts with Leila arriving in Norway to spend some time with her mother, and hoping to connect and perhaps understand why she left her behind. Leila's mother, Amani, and her scientist partner, Liv, have been tracking Miso, an Arctic fox who, due to climate change, has itself been forced to migrate and go in search of a new home. The story becomes a migration story, based on the real journey of an Arctic fox that walked the over 2000 miles from Norway to Canada. Leila joins her mother and Liv as they travel by boat and then on foot across the ice, following the fox. A journey that lets them experience the wonders and dangers of nature whilst also allowing Leila and her mother to have much-needed time together.

Leila's narrative is interspersed with that of the fox's – atmospherically told in the author's poetic style which helps capture the otherness of the fox's natural world. Tom de Freston's atmospheric artwork perfectly complements Kiran's writing, and beautifully helps depict the arctic world. I'd highly recommend this to anyone with an interest in adventure and the natural world.

Damian Harvey

Life

Elli Woollard, illus. Dorien Brouwers, pub. Penguin Random House

Goodness, what a delight this book is for both the senses and the soul!

A true celebration of our planet and its rich history, all told in the most beautiful verse, Elli Woollard takes the reader on a journey through time. From the 'time before time', and the very beginnings of our beautiful planet, to the present day. Starting from when the 'Earth was a big burning ball,' to the tiny, microscopic bacteria which heralded the start of life, through dinosaurs and the ice ages right up to our time as humans, Elli Woollard has created a rich poetic tapestry blended with science and history. However, this book is so much more than a story of evolution. Adorned with the stunning illustrations of Dorien Brouwers, it is a lesson in life and love with a powerful message at its heart. A message which creeps up on you, quite by surprise, and reminds you of the fragility of our own lives and of our beautiful planet which is in need of so much care.

I don't know what I expected from this book, but I was wonderfully surprised and found myself deeply moved by it. This is a book for all readers young and old, a lyrical blend of storytelling and immersive illustrations. It is a book which inspires, a book which teaches and a book whose message is so incredibly pertinent. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Tracey Corner

Man-man and the Tree of Memories

Yaba Badoe, illus. Joelle Avelino, pub. Zephyr, an imprint of Head of Zeus

Man-man and the Tree of Memories feels as if it is set in contemporary London, at the Notting Hill Carnival, although the time is never specified. This vagueness adds to the magical realism of the story as Man-man, real name Emanuel, calls upon the help of a mysterious Queen of Revels.

Man-man's family is complicated. Man-man's mother, Trilby, has an unexplained illness, something her Grandma Gatsby had, and she seems to be deteriorating. Her mum and Man-man's Nan, Fedora, has come from Jamaica to look after her. Fedora is forthright in her parenting advice and very clear about the wickedness of carnival and its African roots. Asking Fedora to come to England at all had been a difficult decision for Man-man's dad, Jules: they didn't get on! She seems to have disapproved of Jules, a villager from Haiti, marrying her daughter Trilby, an uptown girl in Kingston, after they met at a carnival. None of this dissuades Man-man and his older sister Panama from practising their dancing and preparations for the up-and-coming carnival.

At the height of the carnival the book slips into magical realism as Man-man, Panama and his best friend, Kareem are spirited away by the Queen of Revels. She takes them to a mysterious memory tree holding the secret to Trilby's illness and a grandmother begging for slavers to release her granddaughters. Man-man draws upon powerful west African mythology of Shango, a Yoruba God of Thunder, Lightning and Justice as well as historic people, Toussaint, and Dessalines (leaders of the Haitian Revolution who liberated themselves from French colonial rule) as he tries to break the chains of his mother's illness.

Man-man and the Tree of Memories is an addictive read, accessible with likeable characters. Man-man and Pan are both strong characters, continuing to do what they believe is right, loyal to each other and, for Man-man, loyal to his friend Kareem. In addition Joelle Avelino's artwork becomes more abstract and expressive complementing the magical realism of the book and yet anchoring the story in different times and places. The choice of palette and style seemingly evoke an African landscape.

Above all, *Man-man and the Tree of Memories* is about justice, remembering the pain of slavery but also celebrating the joy of freedom.

Simon Barrett

Mexikid: A Graphic Memoir

Pedro Martin, pub. Guppy Books

This is a story about a Mexikid called Pedro. A Mexikid is a child born in America whose parents are from Mexico. The story is about the challenges of being a child from two different cultures. This presents a unique and very different adventure story. It is centred on a family made up of more than one generation with its nine children, mother, father, and grandfather.

Mexikid is an easy-to-read graphic novel packed full of very colourful pages and dialogue. The illustrations and quirky artwork are brilliant throughout. They are detailed and often very funny. There is a particularly good two-page spread showing a detailed plan of the Winnebago, the family motorhome. The very readable and sometimes hilarious text contributes well to this dynamic and captivating graphic novel and its story.

When Dad suddenly announces that the whole family, yes, all eleven of them, will be driving the 2000 miles south from California to Mexico to find, and bring home their legendary grandfather, we know that a brilliant adventure and fascinating story is about to unfold. This is their exciting crime fighting grandfather who was part of the Mexican Revolution. The journey will turn out to be the road trip of a lifetime and one that is full of family history and adventure. This graphic novel is a very personal, hilarious, chaotic, and absolutely brilliant memoir. Many mistakes are made by the family and lessons learned along the way. It features the sights, sounds and tastes of America and Mexico. In summary, this is a very different and enjoyable novel.

Gary Kenworthy

The Miraculous Sweetmakers: The Frost Fair

Natasha Hastings, illus. Alex T Smith, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

This is the sort of book that makes you long for snow, a cosy fire to snuggle up in front of and nothing pressing to do for the next eight hours. It took me back to the first time I read *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* and walked with Lucy through the back of the wardrobe into Narnia. It has the feeling of a sweeping series in the vein of Lewis or Pullman.

Set during the great frost of 1683 (a lovely history tie in), a young girl Thomasina and her family experience the tragic loss of her brother Arthur. This is quite vividly told as we experience Arthur having an undiagnosed asthma attack. The shock of Arthur's death leaves Thomasina's mother unable to speak and bedridden and her father shut off from the world. An epic adventure that is full of emotion *The Miraculous Sweetmakers* weaves the experience of Thomasina living with grief and self-blame for Arthur's death, whilst struggling to cope with her family's mental health.

Thomasina's family are sweet makers, but times are hard, and people are not buying sweets and gingerbread. Until that is the great frost settles and freezes the Thames, a true fact that should send children reaching for a history book or at any rate Google to find out more. Thomasina and her father

decide to set up a stall on the ice, as others do and the novelty pays dividends. At the same time as the frost arrives new friends start to enter Thomasina's life too. A girl called Anne who works in an apothecary; a boy called Henry who has been sent by the ice folk to help her; an ice bear and a mysterious character called Inigo with a Jack Frost-esque persona. Their growing bonds offer brilliant moments of true friendship or is it all deceit (I'm not going to say) as our heroes band together. Inigo offers Thomasina the tantalising temptation that he has the power to bring Arthur back to life. For a price of course. The price, to give her memories of her brother which will be taken over four visits to the Other Frost Fair where grey cloaked beings, frost folk, and ice animals roam, hidden from mortals and held by the power of Father Winter a frost bearded, brittle old man with a face from a crypt (whom I would not be at all surprised to learn was the brother of Narnia's White Witch.)

If you love your reads to have the depth and description that comes with epic adventures, effortlessly blending fantasy, myth, legend, history, emotional loss and heroic tales of friendship then look no further you've found your next read and with a sequel due next July this looks set to be a series to watch. Suitable for 9+, those of a sensitive nature may find Arthur's death and the impact it has on the family upsetting. The detailed nature of the book and long build up at the beginning probably won't make this book one to entice in reluctant readers.

Emma Burnside

Oscar's Lion

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

This is a magical tale accompanied by some very effective black and white illustrations by Benji Davies. It is a lovely piece of storytelling, which parents can share with their children, or young readers will enjoy reading independently, its short chapters being perfect for this.

Oscar's Lion is (perhaps unsurprisingly) about a young boy called Oscar and a lion. Oscar awakes one morning to discover that his parents have disappeared, and their bed is occupied by an enormous lion. At first Oscar is terrified. When did the lion last have a meal? Will the lion be looking for his next meal? Imagine a lion coming to live in your home to babysit you and look after you for the whole weekend! Oscar eventually begins to relax a little when he realises that with a lion as a babysitter he can eat as many biscuits as he wants to. The lion is also an excellent reader and Oscar is allowed to read his favourite book as often as he likes. Perhaps the lion coming to visit isn't as bad after all. The lion is even willing to take Oscar to school and he helps Oscar to tackle a bully.

There are some unanswered questions in this story; Is the lion real? Is this all a big dream? Where are Oscar's parents? What has happened to them? There are also some messages for young children which they may want to talk about with adults. For example, coming to terms with grief is touched upon, as is the question of being a good parent. This is a very exciting adventure story. The lion can

change into animals and the two of them have lots of fun. A seagull and a den are featured. There is Lord Nelson and a battle at sea. Then there is an aircraft, and they are suddenly parachuting to the ground. Overall, this is a brilliant story to be enjoyed by young readers.

Gary Kenworthy

The Taming of the Cat

Helen Cooper, pub. Faber & Faber

I cannot tell you how thrilled I was to be reviewing a new book by Helen Cooper, whose *Bear Under the Stairs* was a well-worn favourite of my children when they were young. However, I had no idea what a treat I was in for until I opened the package and held *The Taming of the Cat* in my hands.

Everything about this book is magical, from its size, its cover to its simply stunning illustrations - I was in love before I'd even read a single word! And then it began, a story set in a cold and draughty cheese shop, where Gorgonzola the cat waits at night for the mice who may dare to try and steal the cheese. Our hero Brie, however, is a mouse most unlike the others that live within the walls, preferring bread to cheese and only wanting the cheese labels so he can dream up stories to tell the birds in the summer. The other mice think Brie is rather odd, so, when caught in Gorgonzola's claws, Brie is left to save himself and a story is the only way he knows how. As Brie begins to weave his wondrous tale he has no idea if it will save him from being eaten, but he is determined to try.

This is no ordinary story of cat and mouse. It is a story within a story. A tale of missing queens and runaway princesses, of a silk black cat who can grow to the size of a panther, an enchanted feast, a family of foxes and even a dragon. It is a story of facing fears, finding friends and of daring to be different. A fairytale style story so incredibly plotted that the stories weave together seamlessly, this was an absolute joy to read and so difficult to put down. I wanted to savour every single page! The death of a character does come as a bit of a shock and without warning but is carefully handled. Aimed at readers 9+ this story is exquisitely written and illustrated. Simply stunning!

Tracey Corner

Xander and the Pen

David Lawrence, pub. Exisle Publishing

Xander and the Pen is the second story in a series that began with the amazing *Ruby and the Pen*. Can you imagine solving all life's problems with a pen, a simple everyday object? David Lawrence can and has translated that into his stories with descriptions of characters so detailed that you can see them in your mind just as I am sure he does.

Xander is bullied by the self-styled Bruise Brothers, Tony, and Jeff Clagg — who are cast as comically stupid young thugs with an equally thuggish dad who employs many of the adults in the town. But Xander, running from the bullies, stumbles across a market where he finds a strange pen that he feels compelled to buy. When he uses it for his superhero sketches, he soon discovers its magic. It begins well enough. He transforms life for his sister who is a wheelchair user, helping her run again. Then he garners a spot representing his school in a national maths contest in Canberra and his father catches a special fish, winning a large monetary prize. He also gets his own back on the Bruise Brothers. But each apparent triumph quickly turns sour.

All too soon his once funny and loving parents are squabbling, and he's alienated his friends. Worse yet, under the pen's influence, his formerly bubbly disposition takes an ominous turn to the bitter and spiteful. Luckily, Xander has a moral compass in his sister, Phoebe. Readers will cheer Xander on as he resolutely sets out to right matters and, for finishing touches, see the nefarious pen and all three Clagg louts justly dealt with. With fantastically detailed illustrations, filled with detail this book promotes messages about bullying, family dynamics, disability, and the environment.

A fast-paced, entertaining middle grade fiction that will resonate with kids everywhere. After all, who wouldn't want to fix all their problems with the stroke of a pen!

Helen Byles

Young Adult Books

100 Tales From the Tokyo Ghost Café

Julian Sedgwick, illus. Chie Kutsuwada, pub. Guppy Books

I was really looking forward to this as I had been such a fan of *Tsunami Girl* by these same authors. I love this mix of prose interspersed with manga illustrations and if possible, I think with this second collaboration they have blended the story even better than the first. *100 Tales* is not a sequel though, it follows its own story of two friends, Julian and Chie, on a journey through Japan. They meet and help a young boy, Akira, who has been lost and is trying to get home, however he has lost his memory which returns slowly and in flashes as the team make their way close to Akira's home in the mountains. As the group travel towards their destination, we meet spirits, helpers and guides from Japanese folklore and myth. The juxtaposition of reality and the world of the Yokai (spirits) gives the book an otherworldly feel, indeed the story exists in that twilight space between what is real and what is not.

Many smaller tales are woven through the main narrative and all fall under the story arc of the 100 Tales tradition – where 100 candles are lit and 100 stories are told, usually ghost stories. As each story is finished the candle is blown out when the teller leaves the room. The spooky feel of this tradition sets the scene perfectly for the stories to come in this book. It has been described as both 'cosy,' and 'creepy' which I think sums it up well in terms of the level of spookiness the reader feels.

The writing is heartfelt and honest and at once engages the reader in the journey that Julian and Chie take. The tales are told with such skill and are interwoven so intricately that by the end of the book, when the last candle has been extinguished, I was left to wonder – was it real or did I imagine it all?

Marianne Degiovanni

All That It Ever Meant

Blessing Musariri, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

I was not sure what to expect when I first saw this book – as it turned out it was a classic case of 'never judging a book by its cover'! I thought it was for middle grade readers, possibly an adventure. Once I began to read it, it became clear that the story was intricately woven, following fourteen-year-old Mati as she retells the circumstances of a family trip to Zimbabwe, taken with her father, sister and brother after their mother has passed away.

Mati is a true storyteller, as is Blessing Musariri, who wrote the book. You can feel this through the rich use of language and description crying out to be read aloud. You can clearly imagine Mati telling us this story and she will not be rushed!

Mati meets Metacais a 'gender-neutral spirit or ghost' who only she can see, and who helps her navigate her haphazard relationships and her feelings of grief after the loss of her mother. Mati has much to explore about herself, about her family and about the meaning of the trip to Zimbabwe. During this process she considers the relationship she has with her father, little brother Tana and her big sister Chichi. She also talks about her mother and her sense of loss, so this is a book for mature readers or teens who are happy to explore some sad content. It will make you cry but also uplift you. The writing is so beautiful that I found myself returning to certain pages to read them again.

Musariri captures the emotions of this family so well. Imagine you were sitting by a fire – outside on a summer's evening listening to a tale of family arguments, teenagers growing up and the sadness and regret that comes from some of our choices - That is how she has written the book, as if she is telling you the story face to face. It is all the more captivating for it.

Marianne Degiovanni

And Don't Look Back

Rebecca Barrow, pub. Hot Key Books

The more that I find myself exposed to YA thrillers the more I think I find myself drawn to this genre. As a teen they were most definitely on my "I am not reading that" list but either that is because I am so very old the thrillers for teens in my youth were mostly adult books or because my reading tastes have matured. I like to think it is the latter. Maturity is important in Rebecca Barrow's *And Don't Look Back* too, in an unspoken manner it is there, along with a number of important issues, none of which are pushed at the reader but carefully woven into the story mix.

Harlow has lived her whole life on the run which, as you might imagine, raises plenty of questions, ones she desperately wants the answers to but knows better than to ask. That is until her mum is killed and Harlow is left alone. It's not so much that she could possibly now ask all those questions but that she now needs to. Harlow needs to know who she is; why she and her mum have always been on the run; what they have been running from. It is perhaps made all the more challenging by the fact that every new place they went to meant new names, new stories. Harlow has so many identities that it is a challenge to know where to start. A key that will open a hidden safety deposit box gives Harlow her first clue and she soon finds herself in her mother's hometown. As the reader we know this could now go very well or very badly. In fact, it doesn't quite do either. What it does is turn Harlow's world upside down.

This is a multi-layered story. There is the thrill of the ride, of never knowing what is coming next, of who Cora and Harlow are, if even those are their real names. There is crime, after all this is a thriller, there is family drama and there is powerful dialogue. It is truly a compelling read and one that will answer your questions but leave you with plenty to think about.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Bad Magic: A Skulduggery Pleasant Graphic Novel

Derek Landy, P.J. Holden, Matt Soffe, Rob Jones, Pye Parr, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

For anyone unfamiliar with Skulduggery Pleasant, this is a dark fantasy book series comprising 15 novels, written for YA readers. The books follow the adventures of Valkyrie Cain, a young detective, and Skulduggery Pleasant, a magical and mysterious, walking, talking, skeleton. With Skulduggery as her mentor Valkyrie fights dark forces and evil creatures throughout the series, and this new adventure is no different.

Bad Magic is set in a small Irish town, Termoncara, the sort of town that is normally super boring and uneventful - but that wouldn't be much fun for a story, would it? Skulduggery and Valkyrie arrive in the town after a series of mysterious deaths, only to find that a monster is on the loose. When they dig a little deeper, with Valkyrie in full detective mode, it turns out that the recent deaths are just the tip on the iceberg and that Termoncara has a very dark and shady past. Then they meet Jamie, a boy whose best friend, and crush, has disappeared. Worse still, his parents seem more concerned with whether he attends a school dance than the fact that his friend has gone missing. Thankfully Valkyrie and Skulduggery are more enthusiastic about getting to the bottom of this mystery. Cue an epic monster hunt.

This book has everything a teenage fantasy fan could ask for, mystery, fellow teens you can identify with, and more monsters than you can shake a stick at. And this isn't just an awesome story, the illustrations are fantastic, and really bring the story, and all the fantastical monsters, to life.

Loved this book and hungry for more Skulduggery action? The 16th instalment in the series of novels is due out in 2024.

Rosie Cammish Jones

Catch Your Death

Ravena Guron, pub. Usborne

Would you survive being locked in a mansion with a murderer and a group of people you've never met before? This is a question for the reader, but it is the reality for Devi, Lizzie and Jayne in Ravena Guron's *Catch Your Death*.

Devi was travelling to see her Nani when she got stuck at the Vanforte Mansion due to a bad snowstorm. When her car breaks down, she has no way to get to her destination so is stuck in the mansion with people she's never met before. Lizzie was delivering a necklace to the infamous Mrs Vanforte when she became stuck in the same snowstorm and finds herself having to stay the night in the mansion too. Jayne is sent to look after them, a role that becomes increasingly important when the night takes a deadly turn and Mrs Vanforte is found dead. Not knowing who to trust, the three girls are desperate to solve the crime and protect themselves until the police can get to the mansion the next day when the snow clears. As more and yet more secrets are revealed, it is clear no one can be trusted and more importantly that no one is safe at the Vanforte mansion.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and found every page to be filled with a new secret that kept me reading and turning those pages. I couldn't put this book down or predict what was going to happen on the next page. Its multiple point of view structure was beautifully written and flowed seamlessly which made the book even more of a joy to read. As a reader, I felt like I was one of the characters, solving the mysteries with them and experiencing the shock with them as more and more plot twists were gradually revealed. This book was incredible: a thrilling, exciting tale that I just couldn't put down.

Gemma Walford

I Loved You In Another Life

David Arnold, pub. Hot Key Books

Teenage romcom? By no means... Yes, we have teenagers, romance, and comedy but we have so much more in this many-layered novel. David Arnold's 352 pages are something else – a novel which makes readers dig deep, explore our own feelings, and leaves us with as many questions as answers.

Arnold is an American through and through, and the setting, the conversations and life itself is superficially very different from that which teenage UK readers experience. Some aspects of his characters are closely linked to the young person, the teenager he was once, to the young people and teenagers he has known, for example the seven-year-old Will is based on the behaviour of Arnold's own son when he was a small child with a passion for E.T.! The teenagers are very much part of US life and, particularly, US school and college. Evan and Shosh, the main characters who grow to realise that each feels that 'I loved you in another life', are about to move on to College, each outstanding in their own artistic and stage achievements but each equally held back by major traumas in their lives

recently which afflict Evan with appalling panic attacks, and Shosh relying on alcohol to soften the devastating death of her older sister, amongst other life-threatening family worries.

Interspersed with the storylines of Shosh (her story always in the third person) and Evan (his always in the first person) are short chapters relaying parts of the lives of couples in the past, which Arnold uses as glimpses of Evan and Shosh in other lives, from the early nineteenth century through to the early twenty-second, and crucially 2066. There are also songs which can be accessed by readers via the QR code at the end of the story. I would heartily recommend readers to look at Arnold's Q&A with Publishers Weekly

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/93334-q-a-with-david-arnold.html> which shows us how he wanted to expand this novel way beyond the teenage romcom. It also demonstrates how and why he composes a novel.

This is quite an eye-opener, and certainly doesn't follow the current uninspiring and dogmatic rules for UK National Curriculum writing! Simply unputdownable...

Bridget Carrington

In Every Generation

Kendare Blake, pub. Hyperion Teens

Sometimes mannerisms pass from one generation to another, other times it could be personality traits or even genetics such as the colour of your eyes or hair, your height. What doesn't commonly pass from one generation to the next, at least I didn't know it did until I read Kendare *Blake's In Every Generation*. It doesn't have a subtitle but under the title, on the front cover, the tagline "the stakes have never been higher" along with gothic-esqe gates and bloodied dagger suggests that the generational succession in this story could be a bloody one. It is, after all I don't think it is possible for fictional characters to be world-savers without a few battles.

Frankie Rosenberg is the next generation. A sophomore in New Sunnydale's High School she knows she has magical powers. But at the same time as trying to survive sophomore year she only wants to use these powers for good, to make the world a better place. Her town is becoming a better place, her High School newly built and life is blissfully quiet for the residents. But it wasn't always that way and the signs are that it might not stay that way. Frankie is the daughter of Willow. Her aunt is Buffy. Both were members of the Scooby Gang who destroyed the Hellmouth, saving the world from the First Evil. Frankie wasn't even alive when all that happened yet now her world is plunged into danger again and she is about to learn that there is something her mother 'neglected' to mention about her true identity...

Suddenly Frankie has to grow up and take responsibility very quickly as people are looking to her to take the lead, speak up, answer questions. None of the above are things she has been confident with before now and, oh by the way, her mother is one of the world's most powerful witches. Not too much to live up to there? This new generation needs its own saviour, its own Scooby Gang, it needs Frankie to be a slayer and to save them all as well as herself. A brilliant rollercoaster of a read and the perfect homage to its predecessor, the Slayer stories.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Rosewood Hunt

Mackenzie Reed, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

The Rosewood Hunt is a thrilling story that follows the smart but ambitious teenager Lily Rosewood, as she vows to follow in her grandmother's footsteps to become the head of the family's luxury fashion company, Rosewood Inc. However, before Gram can teach Lily any business skills, she dies unexpectedly. Gram's cryptic will, written in invisible ink, sends Lily on a treasure hunt for the family's missing inheritance, which could change both her own life, and the fate of the company. The reader is treated to a complex but captivating story as Lily's treasure hunt becomes a dangerous journey that threatens her survival. This results in Lily teaming up with three other teens to solve the clues and uncover the secrets of Gram's will, and the twists and turns along the way will keep the reader engrossed in the story.

The characters are strong and well-developed. Lily's cousin Daisy, who Gram had sent to Milan for an education in fashion, is now a social media star; Quinn, who is a risk-taker, and thus the most chaotic member of the group, does not like Daisy; Caleb is the smartest person in the group; and Leo is Lily's estranged childhood friend. Throughout the story, Lily and Leo's friendship also evolves into a teenage romance. Interestingly, each member of the group not only needs the money, but also has an intriguing reason for joining the hunt. When Daisy turns the treasure hunt into a social media sensation, the fast-paced narrative becomes especially entertaining, as the quartet realize they are not the only people searching for the Rosewood inheritance.

In *The Rosewood Hunt*, author Mackenzie Reed explores the themes of loyalty and trust, and how people can become afflicted with power and money. It is a lesson about the real world that Young Adult readers may appreciate, intertwined with the thrilling narrative of a treasure hunt. Although fans of mystery novels will love the story, the often-witty dialogue between the strong but relatable characters means a wider readership may also be enticed by Reed's debut novel.

While *The Rosewood Hunt* is a standalone novel, it is also a gripping Young Adult adventure that leaves room for a sequel - one that this reviewer would certainly await with pleasure!

Chris J Kenworthy

The Scarlet Alchemist

Kylie Lee Baker, pub. Hodderscape

Fan Zilan is seventeen. Her Chinese mother is dead. Her Scotian father abandoned the family many years ago. Now she lives with her aunt, uncle, and cousins. The poverty they face in their remote Chinese village is extreme. To bring in money Zilan secretly and illegally uses her alchemical skills to bring people back from the dead. She gets a clandestine visit from someone seeking her services if, and when, as he suspects, the Empress kills him. She wants nothing to do with him, even when she finds out that he is the Crown Prince.

Zilan and her cousins are determined to sit the hideously difficult civil service exams for government jobs, in Zilan's case as a palace alchemist. Their chances are low. They are not high-born. They do not have the right accents. They cannot afford the books they need. They study endlessly and against the odds they all succeed. But their lives in the capital are full of fear. The court is a treacherous place, especially for outsiders. The Empress has ruled tyrannically for hundreds of years, kept alive and young through alchemy and her diet of gold. She is ruthless. Zilan may be apprenticed to the most skilful alchemist in the land, but will her extraordinary talents be sufficient to save her and her family, and the Crown Prince, with whom she finds herself unexpectedly enmeshed? Dark magic, death and destruction on an unimaginable scale are about to be unleashed. Zilan discovers that her abilities come at a terrible price.

The book is set in an alternate Tang Dynasty China, a China with corruption, cruelty, and brutality at its core, where ordinary people suffer utter destitution while their ruler lives in unimaginable luxury and will stop at nothing to achieve eternal life. Zilan too sacrifices scruples. She is an interesting protagonist, vastly intelligent and skilful, but with a ruthless, unforgiving streak of her own, a consequence perhaps of the racism, classism and sexism that have been heaped upon her. She mourns very few of the victims of the bloodletting. At over 400 pages, and with a great deal of violence, this is certainly not for everyone, but Baker's storytelling and her inventive setting and characters will win it many admirers, who will eagerly await the second in the duology. For fourteen-year-olds and above.

Anne Harding

Sincerely Yours, Anna Sherwood

Beth Reekles, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

Annalise Sherwood holds on tightly to the idea of her dream career. She has worked hard to earn a place on the Arrowmile internship and is determined to build herself a future with the company after

university. Any distraction would be a risk - but sometimes, unexpected encounters are not easily forgotten...

On the night before the internship, Annalise crosses paths with an intriguing stranger: Lloyd. Though their meeting is accidental, they quickly come to feel comfortable in each other's company. It is warm and exciting all at once, stumbling so suddenly across someone who may want to get to know all sides of you - to share the small things and the deeper worries. To want you for more than the surface. As much as this evening with Lloyd makes an impression on Annalise, she knows she must stay focused on the work that lies ahead. Studying has often been a comfort, something to get lost in when she is left on the edge of a friendship group - or left out altogether. With the internship comes a chance to turn these studies into a secure future. But the first day soon feels overwhelming and it is made worse by a rather large complication: Lloyd is working for Arrowmile too.

Annalise must forge a way forward, working hard among a whirl of nerves and awkwardness - along with the possibility of seeing Lloyd around every corner. He shows a different side to himself at work, and Annalise feels keenly the vulnerability of having opened your true self to someone new. But she longs to make the most of this opportunity, and we follow the rush of her emotions closely, quickly drawn into the intensity of all that this summer holds...

Jemima Breeds

The Undying of Obedience Wellrest

Nicholas Bowling, pub. Chicken House Books

Gravedigging apprentice Ned is a socially outcast young lad whose best friend is a fly. Obedience Wellrest is the brilliant daughter of local but impoverished gentry with a serious interest in science. They meet when her late governess is buried in the church graveyard, and thus begins their unlikely story, set in the 1830s. A new person appears in Obedience's life, with promises of marriage, money, and collaboration on scientific experiments. But why is he so interested in her long-dead ancestor?

This is undoubtedly a dark tale; death is all around, and the story often lingers in the spaces between life and death. Fantasy, magic, and science are blended in to a thoroughly believable but unexpected adventure. Plot twists abound – some that I anticipated, a few that crept up on me, others that genuinely caught me by surprise – but the story never feels forced and was a very engaging read. The author is skilled at dropping in gentle clues – a nameless grave here, an inherited locket there – whose importance is only revealed later on. The point of view switches between the main protagonists, with very realistic little pen and ink drawings scattered throughout the book.

The Undying... is definitely one for fans of gothic horror; it reminded me of Frances Hardinge's *The Lie Tree* in tone and pace (is it a coincidence that Ned's fly and the heroine of Hardinge's first novel

Fly by Night share the same name?). This would be an interesting companion read for anyone studying Mary Shelley at school – in fact, the author cites a study on the science behind Frankenstein as an important reference work.

Content warnings: character deaths, grave robbery, experiments on corpses, unnatural sciences, persecution, danger. Not for those of a sensitive disposition; suitable for older teen readers.

Antonia Russell

Wish of the Wicked

Danielle Paige, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

There can't be many people who haven't heard/read/seen the story of Cinderella. Told to children throughout the world, and in numerous and various versions throughout the ages. US author Danielle Paige's take on the story is interwoven with a very complex and wordy twenty-first century YA fantasy. Paige's internet site offers a brief explanation of the intricacies of her new fantasy series, 'Everyone knows that a fairy godmother helped Cinderella get to the ball where she met the prince. No one knows that the fairy godmother's motives for helping Cinderella might not have been as charming as they seem. Until now...' It is this backstory which the 467 pages begins, with, we are assured, further books to come.

Of course, the early versions of Cinderella, from Ancient (6th century BCE) Egypt to ninth-century CE China, via first-century CE Greece, weren't created as children's stories, and many pages of these, in collections by such authors as the late seventeenth-century Perrault and especially the nineteenth-century Grimm brothers, are full of violent, wicked, and bloody situations. Would you chop your toes off so that the glass slipper fitted? No? Well, the stepsisters of the Grimms' version do just that in their 1812 *Ascenputtel*, and the 1819 version sees the stepsisters getting their violent punishment. I think we can assume that Paige will probably deliver a similar outcome in a second, third or however many novels she intends to complete the story.

By the conclusion of the first novel in the series we have had public burning of 'witches', the term given to the members of the Entente, a rival magical Queendom to the wicked Queen Magrit who has stolen the throne. We have also seen most of the Entente vanish, and the Queen's son marry. Our heroine, Farrow, is instrumental in the latter – a fairy godmother – and the promised sequels are likely to continue her importance to the story. This first volume is 71 chapters long, thankfully generally quite short, but nevertheless certainly a weighty means of engrossing readers in the forthcoming dark and dreary days of winter. Just right for reimagined fantasy!

Bridget Carrington

Non-Fiction Books

An Animal A Day

Miranda Smith, illus. Kaja Kajfež, Santiago Calle, Mateo Markov, Max Rambaldi, pub. Red Shed

A fabulous, large format book with a bright cover and red binding. Full colour illustrations abound in this high-quality volume. The introduction explains how animals are grouped into vertebrates and invertebrates and then further subdivided. It also introduces The International Union for Conservation of Nature, (IUCN), red list which rates how likely each animal is to become extinct.

The main body of the book is an “animal calendar, with an awesome animal for every day of the year.” Each animal has an illustration, a short paragraph and additional information including, the scientific name, the animal group to which it belongs, its length/weight, diet, location, and status on the IUCN red list. Within the sections for each month animals are also grouped together by shared characteristics, such as living in particular climates or geographical areas I particularly enjoyed the *Living With A Volcano spread* that looks at “animals that live successfully in habitats that may be destroyed at any moment if there is an eruption.” The book covers a vast range of animals such as the ugly Blobfish that live off the coast of Australia, the Brown Recluse Spider from North America which has a venomous bite and lives in warm places such as inside drawers or behind furniture, and the Goliath Frog from western Africa which is the largest frog in the world, weighing about the same as a pet cat. Despite its size it can jump an amazing 3m in one leap and lift heavy stones out of the way when building a nest.

There are familiar animals too such as the powerful American Bison, the largest and heaviest animals in North America. “They are surprisingly quick on their feet, reaching speeds of 55km/h.” The African ostrich are excellent parents. “Males and females take it in turns all day to protect their young from predators. They use their bodies to cast shadows over them in the intense heat of the sun and show them how to eat and graze for food as they move around.” We learn about a variety of ecosystems and habitats across the world. The book is well planned and easy to navigate. At the back there is information about conservation of the threatened species, a heartening section on Conservation Success, together with a quiz, glossary, and index. Informative and entertaining, it also inspires. A gem. Perfect for anyone age 6 and over.

Brenda Marshall

Celebrate!

Laura Mucha, illus. Hannah Tolson, pub. Nosy Crow

This new gift book from the British Museum and Nosy Crow has a charming concept at its heart, bringing together information on different cultures, religions and countries under the umbrella of celebrations. It's heartwarming to think about what brings us together in our own communities, but this book also gives us the opportunity to learn about celebrations on the other side of the world too. Some of the celebrations will be familiar to many of us – Chinese New Year, Christmas, Rio Carnival – but others are delightfully obscure, to me at least! I feel all the richer for learning about Kurentovanje, a Slovenian rite of spring which sees locals dress as mystical characters called Kurents to chase away evil.

The pages are quite busy with small text, which allows lots of information to be packed in but could be slightly intimidating for younger children. Regardless, they will enjoy the artwork - the illustrations are bold and bright, chockfull of little details. The pages devoted to the Lotus Lantern Festival in South Korea, and Las Parrandas in Cuba are particularly beautiful. One other note of caution – some of the celebrations discussed, such as the festival of near-death experiences in Spain and the Toraja funeral rites of Indonesia, may be a little macabre for sensitive readers.

Covering fifty celebrations, the book includes a comprehensive glossary and an index at the rear of the book, making it easy to use if you want to learn about something specific. As well as being a beautiful gift, I can see it being used widely in schools throughout the year, and children immediately pounced upon it with excitement when it arrived in my school library.

Louise Clover

Cotton Cloud Refuses to Rain

Elizabeth F. Hill, illus. Hannah George, pub. Five Quills

Cotton Cloud is determined to make people happy and be the best cloud ever! She thinks she knows how to do this by making shapes in the sky and dressing up in the sun's bright colours at dawn and dusk. One thing she is certain of is that she should never rain. Rain makes people sad. So even when the plants wither, the ground cracks and the lake dries up she still refuses to rain. She blames the sun, the wind and the waterfall, anyone but herself. Nimbostratus tells her off and calls her selfish. As she looks at the hot, tired people, she sees they are not happy and begins to cry. Even then she still thinks her rain will make people sad until she sees the plants blossoming, the waterfall flowing and finally the people smiling again.

This is a beautifully illustrated gentle story of the importance of harmony and balance in nature. The water cycle is introduced with a light touch and parallels can be drawn with human themes of working together and empathy. Cotton Cloud is stubborn and thinks she knows best but with a little guidance starts to see another point of view and to understand her role in the world.

The gorgeous and detailed illustrations give a panoramic view of the landscape and people below from the cloud's perspective. There is much to talk about in the story and the wonderful pictures give an added dimension and source of conversation. This is a book that children will relate to and enjoy sharing with an adult. It would be a useful addition to empathy collections as well as science, nature, and outdoor learning.

Janet Ling

Curiosity: The Story of a Mars Rover

Markus Motum, pub. Walker Books

The rover is part of NASA's exploration programme to Mars and its mission is to explore the planet's surface. In November 2011, Curiosity was launched from Kennedy Space Centre, successfully landing on Mars eight months and ten days later. Since then, the vehicle, which is about the size of a small SUV, has travelled over 30 kilometres collecting evidence about the geology and climate of the planet.

This book tells its story. It begins by detailing how the rover was designed and built in sterile conditions at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory near Los Angeles, California; how it was taken across the USA to the launch site in Florida; the launch and journey through space to Mars; and, finally, the landing procedure.

For anyone interested in space exploration, the book is a must; it would also pique the curiosity (no pun intended) of most children! Visually stunning, the illustrations make great use of the landscape format, often using two pages to convey vast distances and wide-open spaces. The text is on several levels. Curiosity's journey can be read as a simple story for younger children but for those who want to discover more, there's lots of interesting information and facts to devour although this is, occasionally, quite technical. Aimed at 7 – 12 years, younger children would also enjoy the book if shared with an adult.

Barbara Band

Legendary Creatures: Mythical Beasts and Spirits from Around the World

Adam Auerbach, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

Legendary Creatures celebrates the weird and wonderful beasts, spirits, and monsters from traditional folklore around the world. It features a fascinating array of creatures depicted in delicate, understated watercolours, including a beautiful fold-out spread of a Chinese water dragon.

Some familiar favourites appear – alongside dragons you will find merfolk and unicorns - as well as the Khodumodumo, a swallowing monster from Lesotho, and the Mishipeshu, a lynx-like beast which roams North America's Great Lakes. Fans of Harry Potter may spot some sources of inspiration for J.K. Rowling, including Fenrir, a gigantic wolf from Scandinavian folklore.

My personal favourite is the very cute-looking Baku. Originating from Japan, this patchwork creature made from leftover parts of other animals will come and gobble up your nightmares if you call it three times. But call on it too often and it may eat your good dreams too! There is a nice balance between illustration and text; each picture is accompanied by a block of text broken down into three sections so it's easy to read with just the right level of detail for young fans of mythology. Children aged 6 and up will enjoy this and shouldn't find anything too scary between the pages but remember – if you have nightmares, call on a Baku!

Louise Clover

Live Like A Goddess: Life Lessons from Legends and Lore **Jean Menzies, illus. Taylor Dolan, pub. Hachette Children's Books**

Live Like A Goddess: Life Lessons from Legends and Lore is a compilation of inspiring stories of twenty-one deities from around the world. This book is a joy to behold. I particularly liked the bright pink end pages that catch your eye from the moment you open it.

The book is split into three parts: Looking Around You; Looking Inwards; Looking to Others.

At the beginning of each story Jean Menzies provides a bit of background information on the goddess, the story itself is told respectfully without judgement and at the end of the story she gives her perspective of the story and the message it brings. In this way each story highlights sonder - how everybody has their own lives with their own problems. For some the realisation that each random passer-by is living a life as vivid and complex as your own may come as a revelation, which is great for encouraging empathy and discussing diversity.

Live Like A Goddess: Life Lessons from Legends and Lore provides a truly multi-cultural perspective of females throughout the myths and legends. Even the black and white illustrations by Taylor Dolan to accompany each story are drawn in a way that matches each cultures heritage, from the Hawaiian goddess of volcanoes and fire to the Bantu goddess creator of the world.

I predominantly liked the way Jean Menzies invites the readers to look deeper for their own interpretations of the stories to give meaning to their own lives. This requires readers to read for comprehension and interrogate the text meeting the requirements of both key stage two and key stage three programmes of study. Consequently, each story can be understood in the readers own unique

way and each carries a message of wisdom that will inspire even the most reluctant reader to look at their life with hope and empowerment.

Anita Loughrey

Reviewer's Website: www.anitaloughrey.com

Stones and Bones: Fossils and the stories they tell

Rob Wilshaw, illus. Sophie Williams, pub. Cicada Books Ltd

A wonderful book. Pages are a generous size and enable Rob Wilshaw to explore “Fossils and the stories they tell.” We travel through the past four billion years and examine the planet’s fossilised record learning about how the earth has evolved and all the living things that have inhabited it. The contents page sets out the stages of our journey. I particularly enjoyed the “What is a Fossil?” section, and the explanation of palaeontology. Mary Anning has always been one of my favourites and her pages are clear and informative. We move through the Precambrian and Paleozoic eras to the Mesozoic and the Cenozoic eras.

Throughout the book there is a good balance between text and visuals. Information is in bite-size portions that are easy to understand. Attractive illustrations accompany the text and there is a variety of formats including pages from notebooks and scrapbooks, timelines, diagrams with captions, flow charts and pictures. There are also little snippets, such as “The word “fossil” comes from Latin and literally translates as ‘obtained from digging’.”, the quotation from Charles Darwin “The most important result of these findings is the confirmation of the law that existing animals have a close relationship with extinct species.” and the caption that the “andrewsarchus is the largest known meat-eating land mammal that ever lived. At around 3.5m long, this omnivore looked like a cross between a wolf and a wild boar, although it was in fact more closely related to whales and hippos.”

The columns on What We Know About Dinosaurs and What We Don’t Know about Dinosaurs were thought provoking. I loved the case studies, especially The Lystrosaurus, Archaeopteryx and The Terror Birds of the Paleogene & Neogene, (53 million years ago!). The “Gallery of Extinct Megafauna from the Pleistocene” is fascinating.

At the back of the book there are sections on Palaeontology Today; How Does A Dinosaur Get to a Museum; What Happens In the Museum, and Tools of the Trade. Then we learn How to Become a Palaeontologist and are told How to Hunt for Fossils. The book concludes with an explanation of why Palaeontology is important, and there is a comprehensive glossary. What impresses me most about the book is that complex thought-provoking information is presented with a light touch and entertains and engages. A highly recommended book.

Brenda Marshall

The Stories and Secrets of Colour

Susie Brooks, illus. Sirjana Kaur, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

A superb addition to any library or personal book collection, this book is an eclectic compendium of facts, and a treasure trove for anyone wishing to find a fiendish question for a quiz (along with the answer of course!)

An overview of colours, with a scientific and historical information to complement each one, is followed by chapters whose order follows that of the colours of the rainbow. From an explanation on the various levels of colour blindness, to the ability to associate colours to sound and scents – synaesthesia; from the mention of the first synthetic pigment (Egyptian blue) created 2000 years ago, to the ultra-black perfected in 2019 by American engineers, this book provides readers with an incredible array of information. There is also detail on the meaning behind colour and its uses around the world. For example, the Tuareg people of North Africa and their striking blue clothes are given consideration as is why saffron is so expensive and flamingos are pink. Discover no end of fascinating information in this book. Of course, artists' work and how they have been influenced by the introduction of new colours have a prominent space.

Needless to say the presentation of this work is an explosion of hues, from cover to cover. The information is provided in short, clear, and engaging language. The research that supported this book and its careful editing make of it an excellent multi-disciplinary work.

Laura Brill

Storyland: Discover the Magical Myths and Lost Legends of Britain

Amy Jeffs, pub. Hachette Children's Group

Storyland is written and illustrated by Amy Jeffs. Amy is an art historian specialising in the Middle Ages. She gained a PhD in Art History at Cambridge in 2019 and has worked at the British Library's Dept of Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts. She lives in Somerset and works as a full-time author and artist printmaker. Her first book *Storyland: A New Mythology of Britain* was a Sunday Times bestseller. And now she has produced a junior version, hoping to introduce children to tales of "magic, adventure, giants, demons, princesses and prophecies" that existed in medieval times between Orkney in the north and Cornwall in the south. British mythology for the over 9's.

Amy Jeff's stories, 30 in all, include why Britain was once called Albion, and how it acquired its name. The origins of the Welsh, Scottish and the English and who was the founder of Bath. The origins of Stonehenge and the conception of King Arthur sit alongside too. How two dragons were hidden in a

hill, Merlin's first prophecy, and Gogmagog and the Norman Conquest are just a sample of the thirty stories included. The book has an academic flavour and might suit children who may come to share the author's love of myths and legends. Her unpretentious black and white prints decorate the book whilst the prose assumes an anachronistic tone and is a blend of fictional retelling and analytical commentary. Storyland is embellished with an impressive cover and a friendly print size and is a book that may work within a school setting.

The text struggles to meet the descriptions on the cover, which is misleadingly inviting. The storyline is dry and requires determination to stick with it. A possibility for the budding historian with a love of mythology perhaps?

Liz Negus

Super Space Weekend: Adventures in Astronomy

Gaëlle Alméras, pub. Greystone Kids

This super graphic novel explores space through three friends getting together for a weekend of camping in a tree house observatory.

The three friends explore the night sky and into space beyond where they learn about meteorites, comets and how to find the North Star amongst other things. Whilst Orni is more reluctant than Castor to investigate the night sky, he soon comes round to the idea once he is exposed to some of the wonders it contains!

Super Space Weekend is told in a really fun way and the illustrations do as much of the teaching as the words do. With a small amount of text on each page, this book is really accessible for all levels of readers so that anyone interested in space can learn from reading it. It also includes a section at the end of the book titled 'Now it's your turn to be an astronomer', where tips are given to young readers to prepare them for finding out about space on their own. Seasonal tips help budding astronomers to find where to look to see different constellations and diagrams of the Moon help readers to know when the best times are to see the craters of the Moon.

Children interested in space will adore this book; with its fun style of delivery and amazing illustrations, young readers will love deepening their knowledge of all things other-worldly!

Tom Joy

Up and Down

Jane Burnard and Tracey Turner, illus. Dawn Cooper, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

This is an intriguing flip book; open it one way and you are taken on a journey up, up, up. Through flying insects, the world of bats and birds, cloud formations, various planes and rockets, the atmosphere, past satellites to the moon and the sun, and into space visiting the stars and solar system before finishing at the Big Bang.

Turn the book over and the reader is taken down into the deep depths of the Earth through layers of soil, past animals who live underground, beneath a city, glimpsing fossils, rock formations and caves, exploring volcanoes and tectonic plates, discovering the deep sea until finally you reach the Earth's core which you'll find is almost pure iron.

The pages are full of facts and information, busy with illustrations in bright colours, all of which is perfect to catch and retain the attention of readers. And there are so many topics covered that everyone is bound to find something of interest in its pages. Curious about birds? Then you'll discover that the peregrine falcon can reach the same speed as a racing car. Inquisitive about what's under cities? Then learn about the Paris catacombs that contain the bones of 6 million people. A great book for 7 – 9-year-olds who love to explore the world they live in; this would also make a useful addition to the school or classroom library.

Barbara Band

What's Science? What's Technology? (Series: Discoveries and Inventions) Frances Durkin, illus. The Boy Fitz Hammond, pub. b small publishing

The best things really do come in small packages as this innovative new series; *Discoveries and Inventions*, proves. Never have so many big breakthroughs been packed into so few pages! There are two titles available so far.

What's Science? explores the people behind 13 scientific discoveries which completely changed the world: what motivated them; why they did what they did; when they did it and with whom, through a series of immediately engaging, colourful, double-page spreads. They cover everything from fire and gravity to atomic energy and evolution, anaesthesia, immunisation, and radiation. The companion book; *What's Technology?*, adopts a similar, user-friendly format to explain the who, where, why and how of the 13 major technological inventions which transformed the world as we knew it. From stone tools, cameras and lightbulbs to the printing press and AI.

Pitched perfectly for the 8-12 audience, each breakthrough or invention is clearly explained and presented. The tone is natural and chatty, the illustrations bold and lively and the design superb, with a mix of 'Fun Facts' boxes, timelines, caricatures, and speech bubbles as well as 'Take It Further' stars

and cogs posing make-you-stop and think questions. You can't help but want to find out more after reading these books.

b small specialises in books which celebrate children's natural enthusiasm and passion for learning new things. Each of these books ends with a handy glossary and an inspiring 'Take It Further' page inviting young readers to stop and think about their favourite invention or discovery, how they use technology and which scientific questions they'd like to answer or research. Never has STEM seemed more relevant or more do-able - and for everyone. This is fact-packed, narrative non-fiction at its finest for a pocket money price. The series needs to be in every KS2 classroom and school library. Both books would make perfect and affordable gifts for the budding scientist and inventor too. I very much hope there will be more to come in this series. I can't recommend it highly enough!

An excellent accompanying Educational Resource Pack produced by Scott Evans, *The Reader Teacher*, is free to download from the b small website. Including lesson plans and printables, comprehensive Links to KS2 National Curriculum Objectives and an extensive list of Additional Activities and Innovative Ideas, it will be invaluable to time-pressed teachers everywhere.

Eileen Armstrong

Picture books

A Happy Place

Britta Teckentrup

A Way To the Stars

David Almond, illus. Gill Smith

The Dress In the Window

Robert Tregoning, illus. Pippa Curnick

The Egg Incident

Ziggy Hanaor, illus. Daisy Wynter

Get Off Bear!

Tony Neal

The Last Stardog

E.K Mosley

The Panda's Child

Jackie Morris, illus. Cathy Fisher

The Pandas Who Promised

Rachel Bright, illus. Jim Field

Red is Home

Emma Bettridge, illus. Josephine Birch

Salat in Secret

Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow, illus. Hatem Aly

When the Fog Rolls In

Pam Fong

The Wild

Yuval Zommer

Junior books

The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha

Michael Foreman

Best Friends Forever

Lisa Williamson, illus. Jess Bradley

Casander Darkbloom and the Threads of Power

P. A. Staff

Girls

Annet Schaap, trans. Laura Watkinson

Leila and the Blue Fox

Kiran Millwood Hargrave, illus. Tom de Freston

Life

Elli Woollard, illus. Dorien Brouwers

Man-man and the Tree of Memories

Yaba Badoe, illus. Joelle Avelino

Mexikid: A Graphic Memoir

Pedro Martin

The Miraculous Sweetmakers: The Frost Fair

Natasha Hastings, illus. Alex T Smith

Oscar's Lion

Adam Baron, illus. Benji Davies

The Taming of the Cat

Helen Cooper

Xander and the Pen

David Lawrence

Young Adult books

100 Tales From the Tokyo Ghost Café

Julian Sedgwick, illus. Chie Kutsuwada

All That It Ever Meant

Blessing Musariri

And Don't Look Back

Rebecca Barrow

Bad Magic: A Skulduggery Pleasant Graphic Novel

Derek Landy, P.J. Holden, Matt Soffe, Rob
Jones, Pye Parr

Catch Your Death

Ravena Guron

I Loved You In Another Life

David Arnold

In Every Generation

Kendare Blake

The Rosewood Hunt

Mackenzie Reed

The Scarlet Alchemist

Kylie Lee Baker

Sincerely Yours, Anna Sherwood

Beth Reekles

The Undying of Obedience Wellrest

Nicholas Bowling

Wish of the Wicked

Danielle Paige

Non-Fiction books

An Animal A Day

Miranda Smith, illus. Kaja Kajfež, Santiago Calle, Mateo Markov, Max Rambaldi

Celebrate!

Laura Mucha, illus. Hannah Tolson

Cotton Cloud Refuses to Rain

Elizabeth F. Hill, illus. Hannah George

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