



Armadillo

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

Contents

Book Reviews

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------|
| 1. Picture Book Reviews | Page 2 |
| 2. Junior Book Reviews | Page 22 |
| 3. Young Adult Book Reviews | Page 43 |
| 4. Non-Fiction Book Reviews | Page 64 |

Features

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| 5. 40 Inspiring Icons | Page 81 |
| 6. O is for Old School | Page 83 |
| 7. The King Who Banned the Dark | Page 85 |
| 8. You're Snug with Me | Page 90 |

Books Reviewed

Page 92

Picture Book Reviews

Aleph

Janik Coat, pub. Geko Press

Aleph is a big, bold and bright book that is designed in a contemporary format like none I have ever seen. The illustrations are perfect for sharing with babies, as their colourful and simple design will appeal to them instantly.

Beginning with simple shapes the book progresses to familiar objects and then story characters. For the imaginative parent, you could create many stories along the way for your little one to enjoy.

This large format book, containing graphic images, culminates with a ‘playful list of first words creating a first dictionary.’ Each of the words corresponds to one of the images.

It is a book that you can pick up again and again and each time you could create a new story. I’m sure many parents and children will enjoy this original book time and again.

Victoria Wharam

Angry Cookie

Laura Dockrill, illus. Maria Karipido, pub. Walker Books

Angry cookie is furious!

Cookie was trying to sleep when someone opened the book, woke them up and won’t leave them alone. Whatever cookie says they just keep turning the pages. Cookie eventually decides to tell the reader what made them so angry: it was an awful day that began with a cactus roommate playing the recorder, a bad haircut and a too-small hat, and ended with an ice cream shop that had run out of ice cream and a vicious pigeon attack. Fortunately, after venting about all the terrible things that happened, cookie feels a lot happier and is ready to make friends.

Angry cookie uses an immersive, interactive style, one that has become popular recently, where the main character speaks directly to the reader. This makes the book particularly engaging to read aloud. I read it to a Reception class and they thought it was hilarious—particularly the idea of a cookie with hair! Plus, of course, anyone can relate to feeling angry and frustrated—the children actually liked angry cookie more than they liked happy cookie.

Angry cookie is beautifully brought to life with captivating illustrations by Maria Karipidou. Cookie is super-cute, with tiny denim dungarees and huge expressive eyes and the cover is a particularly eye-catching luminous orange colour.

Angry cookie is a funny, entertaining, story with a constructive message about friendship. It is about being able to express your frustrations and allowing others to express theirs too. I thoroughly enjoyed it and I can highly recommend it for reading aloud to young children - though my twelve-year-old loved it too!

Rebecca Rouillard

Beyond the Fence

Maria Gulemetova, pub. Child's Play

Picture books deal with difficult emotions: jealousy, sadness, anxiety, grief. This one deals with a state of being which is more elusive yet fundamental to happiness. It's about a piggy who has no agency over his life.

Piggy lives in a beautiful country mansion with Thomas, a boy who decides everything for him. In a series of simple, highly expressive illustrations, we see Piggy's life being 'done' to him – he's dressed up in silly clothes that make him sad; he's coerced into games that make him sad; in whatever Thomas gets him to do, he's sad. One day, Thomas takes his eye off the ball and Piggy, looking brighter, goes for a walk. There, out on the moors, Piggy meets Wild Pig, shaggy and natural and free. Now Piggy knows there's another way to live and he longs for his chats with Wild Pig. A sunset rendezvous looks as if it might be scuppered but, mustering all his courage in a 'now or never' moment, Piggy leaves Thomas, shedding his silly clothes as he goes, and with never a backward glance, he takes himself beyond the fence and into a life where he can be free.

I wouldn't normally reveal so much of the plot in a review, but I felt that in this case, it could help to clarify who might really benefit from reading this book. Read it with a child who is sad because of unhealthy relationships or being somebody they don't want to be – or any number of situations a child passively endures – and it could help to put the feeling into words. Read it with a child who is secure in themselves to help them empathise with others in a situation they find hard to comprehend.

I wouldn't say it is a happy book, although it has a happy ending. The darkness of coercive relationships is close to the surface throughout. There is a moody, watercolour spaciousness, emphasising how small Piggy feels - until the final spread, which is a burst of golden sunset. It is also a quiet, sombre book – so much is unsaid but it's there in Piggy's expression and body language. As just a picture book, I think it might be enjoyed briefly but not join a child's favourites. However, as a

timely book to be shared, in the truest sense of the word, I think it could be one that is remembered for life.

Jackie Spink

Business Pig

Andrea Zuill, Sterling Children's Books

Jasper is not like his siblings. He wears a suit, drinks from a cup, reads newspapers and really doesn't like rooting around on the ground getting muddy. All of which is pretty unusual for any baby, let alone a piglet.

The volunteers at Sunshine Sanctuary, where Jasper was born, have identified that Jasper is "a genuine business pig". They set him up with his own little office in one of the barns, and let him do their accounts. The other animals at the farm aren't too keen on his charts and business cards, though.

Jasper is having trouble finding a forever home. Lots of people visit Sunshine Sanctuary to find a farm pet, but nobody ever wants to adopt Jasper. So, he – like any sensible business pig – takes matters into his own hands, with a series of adverts and promotions, marketing himself as the ideal pet. Is he successful? You'll have to read it to find out.

Business Pig is a charming tale of how someone (or some pig) can take full advantage of their differences, shine in their own way – and find their tribe. It would be a lovely story to share with any child who feels out of place or different in some way.

This picture book is delightfully illustrated by the author; the pictures really add another dimension to the story, hinting at what's to come for the eagle-eyed reader. *Business Pig* would be ideal for children up to the age of 6 or 7 - it uses quite complex vocabulary, so I'd recommend it for being read aloud.

Antonia Russell, (with help from Caitlin, age 6)

Cleo and Corneilus. A tale of Two Cities and Two Kittens

Elizabeth Nicholson, Janine Pibal and Nick Geller, illus. Michelle Thies, pub. The Paul J Getty Museum

Can you imagine what it would be like to be a little kitten in a country and at a time when cats were considered sacred, to be treated like gods and goddesses and even have festivals in their honour.

There is nothing for a cat to do under these circumstances other than eat, relax and feel pampered. That is unless you are Cleo and Cornelius, then there may just be an adventure or two to be enjoyed!

Cleo and Cornelius introduce their reader not only to the myths and legends of ancient Egypt but also to those of ancient Rome in this, their first adventure story.

With simple language, part story, part fact the two cats take us off on a journey across the ocean from Egypt to Rome where we discover just how different the two places were.

Based on one of Aesop's fables but with plenty more silly puns the cats emulate some factual material – cats really did travel on ships – they were vermin catchers! Cats were kept as pets and they were of course very welcome in Rome.

Enjoy the story with its sparse words and marvel at the pictures as they take you on a journey into the ancient world with its many wonders. Remember to look closely at the details to fill in some aspects of the story and of course when you are done start all over again and vary the story!

Fact lovers will be pleased to learn that at the back of the book is a double page spread with a lot of detail about the history and additionally several objects to spot – all of which can be found in the Paul J Getty museum should you ever have the opportunity to go.

An ideal class book for those studying ancient Egypt or ancient Rome, and a wonderful cross-over picture book and non-fiction title.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Dragon Post

Emma Yarlett, pub. Walker Books

Upon opening *Dragon Post* we find the lead character, Alex, facing something of a conundrum. A dragon has arrived in his house and, quite understandably, he is keen to keep it. However, he is the first to admit that he is no expert where dragon husbandry is concerned; and he fears for its wellbeing under his care. As such, he does what the book (rather brilliantly) describes as the 'obvious thing'. He writes to the Fire Brigade for advice and eagerly awaits their reply. *Dragon Post* then skilfully moves through a truly delightful plot told via letters from butchers, zoo keepers, angry neighbours and, finally, Alex's best friend. Gradually, we realise that as much as you may love having a dragon as a pet, perhaps it is kinder after all to set it free.

There is so much to enjoy in this book. The letters, each of which can be pulled - in a 'Jolly Postmanesque' homage - from its envelope is perhaps the most obvious element to draw small

children in. However, its richness and depth go far beyond a simple ‘touch and feel format’. The language is wide ranging, sophisticated and has layers of meaning and humour that allow for years of reading and discovery as children grow. Similarly, the illustrations are not only beautiful, but on occasion tell a different story to the words on the page – which provides a wonderful springboard for discussion. Furthermore, in the tradition of all great children’s literature, there is a powerful moral message buried within the story, and one that is handled with subtlety and charm.

This book became, within two readings, a firm favourite in our house. It is pure pleasure to see a new children’s book that combines spark with sincerity, and humour with humanity. More like this please!

Laura Myatt

The Elephant that Ate the Night

Bing Bai, illus. Yuanyuan Shen, pub. Everything with Words

The elephant that ate the night is a charming story that any child or adult will enjoy; perfect for a bedtime read. Gently tackling the issue of being afraid of the dark, this book reassures you that there is nothing to be afraid of, in fact, the dark can be good!

The characters include Duoduo, the little bear cub, Taotao, the baby monkey, Zhazha, the little porcupine who are all afraid of the dark and Awu the hungry elephant, who arrives in Mushroom Forest looking for something to eat. He isn’t however your usual elephant as he doesn’t eat leaves or grass or fruit, he enjoys nothing more than having darkness to eat.

The illustrations in this book fully compliment the story and bring the characters to life. They are colourful, detailed and appealing, adding more enjoyment. They will allow plenty of discussion between child and adult and add humour to the tale.

As the adventure unfolds, it becomes clear that the inhabitants of Mushroom Forest begin to miss the night-time and tire of constant daylight. It is up to Awu the elephant to once again save the day, but you will have to read the book to see if he is able to!

Victoria Wharam

Froggy Day

Heather Pindar, illus. Barbara Bakos, pub. Maverick Books

This is a delightful and whimsical story for the very young reader. When the weather announcer talks about it being 'froggy' no one thought that she meant it literally, but they were very wrong. There are frogs in the shops, on the buses and even doing backstroke in a builder's mug of tea, so everyone is glad when the day is over. However the next weather report says it is going to be very 'bunny'! I leave that to your imagination, but it might make for another book.

The author and illustrator have really brought this story to life; it is all about the play on words that we are so very fond of and young children will be delighted when they grasp what is being said. The illustrator has created a fun world with bright and humorous pictures that really add to the whole story. The pictures are easy to connect with, although the American style barn seems slightly out of place. It is the kind of book that you can read to an individual or to small groups; you need to get the audience close to the images so that they can pick out some of the quirky goings-on that they might miss at a distance.

Overall the whole idea of using a single word and then manipulating it in a variety of circumstances would create some fun activities for the classroom.

Margaret Pemberton

Giraffe Problems

Jory John, illus. Lane Smith, pub. Walker Books

Poor Edward the giraffe is agonisingly self-conscious. He is in fact a perfect specimen, but he is horribly, cripplingly, ashamed of his neck. It's 'Too long. Too bendy. Too narrow. Too dopey. Too patterned. Too stretchy. Too high. Too lofty. Too...necky.' And, despite his best attempts to conceal it, and reassurances from his Mum, he fails to see either its beauty or its ability. Until he meets Cyrus, a tortoise. Cyrus has a scrawny 'excuse for a neck'. And it stands in the way of his achievements. By presenting Edward with an entirely neck based challenge, he enables him to finally appreciate, and even celebrate, its virtues.

In addition to the immediate charm of the story, there are several striking elements to Giraffe problems that make it an outstanding children's book. The language is, at times, complex and sophisticated. Jory John sets the bar high, and invites children to step up to it. However even young children can grasp what is going on due to the (second striking element here, topic sentence fans) rich and expressive illustrations. Its crowning glory though, is a very particular brand of Muppet-like humour. It is anarchic and perfectly timed; never patronising or crude.

The sheer range of this book means that you could quite legitimately buy it for anyone of any age group, and they would find something to enjoy. And of course, the message, that perceived

'difference' is (a) normal and (b) actually quite good, is a life lesson that we would all do well to remember!

Laura Myatt

I Was Made For You

David Lucas, pub. Andersen Press

A cat is knitted out of orange wool, a Christmas present from a mother to her daughter. But on Christmas Eve the curious cat breaks free from its wrapping paper and leaves the house without realising that a thread is caught in a nail.

As Cat skids down the steps, fights his way through the snow, climbs up on top of a rock under a starry sky, is carried by the wind, falls into a river and gets lost in a wood, he continues to ask the question "Why was I made?".

During this adventurous journey Cat's knitted body unravels until nothing is left. On Christmas morning though the little girl and her mum follow the thread and gather it into a ball from which Cat soon emerges again and finds the answer to his existentialist question in the friendship he develops with the little girl.

This is a delightful, festive tale, which is fun to read aloud and whose illustrations are delicate and suggestive.

Laura Brill

King Leonard's Teddy

Phoebe Swan, pub. Childs Play

Put simply, the plot goes like this: King Leonard is (obviously) a king. He has (like most kings) lots of money. Therefore, when something is old, dirty or broken, he (like lots of us) just throws it away and buys a new one, until the day when his favourite teddy splits down its seams, and is broken. King Leonard loves that teddy more than anything. To him it is totally irreplaceable. So now King Leonard has to learn a vitally important lesson (like lots of us)!

Phoebe Swan's picturebook elaborates and continues the story, and it all ends very happily for Leonard and his subjects once he discovers how and why we need to learn to REDUCE, REUSE and RECYCLE.

Swan writes a simple story in which Leonard searches for a repair shop, finds that the big shops only want to sell him a new teddy, and the small repair shops have all shut because everybody now wants new things. However, in amongst all the broken things he has at home he finds what he needs to mend his teddy, and teaches himself how to sew. Once he has his beloved Teddy fully restored he realises that most of his old 'rubbish' could be reused, or mended, or passed to someone who could make use of it. I love the image of a broken bike, inverted, and used as a frame for a plant to climb up – truly recycled!

The great extra in Swan's excellent picture book is the bright, clear, funny images which tell us so much more of the story, from the type of things King Leonard has always thrown away (lying in piles outside his castle), to the ingenious uses he puts things to once he realises their true (rather than monetary) value. Very noticeable is the new enjoyment people get from reusing and recycling. There's so much to spot in the pictures and discuss with young readers, and so much for older readers (especially adults) to learn from the advice at the end of the book. Oh, and Leonard even stops wearing his crown all the time!

Bridget Carrington

The King Who Banned the Dark

Emily Haworth-Booth, pub. Pavilion Books

Emily Haworth-Booth's debut picture book is about a young prince who is so afraid of the dark he vows to ban it when he becomes king. What happens next is a parable for modern times. The palace advisors convince the king that for him to remain popular his ban must be driven by his subjects. They spread false rumours about the dark, successfully scaremongering the public into demanding the ban. Anti-dark laws are imposed and for a while everyone seems happy, but is it really possible to live without the dark? Unable to sleep in perpetual light, the people realise they've made a terrible mistake and plan a revolt. Will they change the king's mind?

Packaged as a fairytale, this is sophisticated and compelling storytelling about the machinations of politics and manipulating the populace. It is ideal for ages 5 to 8 years looking for a book that is challenging yet highly entertaining. The illustrations provide a feast for the eyes complementing the story with comical and delightful touches: the clever use of yellow even gives the impression of a torch being shone directly in your face.

The story offers some fascinating discussions points for older readers; the abuse of power, misinformation, selfish ideals, but most importantly, that change can happen if you stand up for what is right. The King who Banned the Dark is a deft reminder of how easy it is to be misled by the wrong people, a vital lesson for any child to learn. After all, who is the real villain, the king or his advisors?

Hear more about the author of this thought-provoking picture book in my interview.

Matilde Sazio

Little Bear Dreams

Paul Schmid, pub. Phaidon

It's difficult to remember what it's like to be four, or three, or even two. Certainly what it's like being one. Am I the right person to review this?

This is a book for the very littlest readers, but also for the people who read with them (which I do at least remember doing). You won't wish you were doing something else. It's a book to read and discover together, then to relive as a shared experience. I think it's a book where you'll both go, "Let's read that one again." I would have.

It's confidently simple. A parent and a child polar bear ponder what they might dream of, before curling up together to sleep. Their thoughts encompass the expected (bright snowflakes) and unexpected (cold pizza), the profound (straight horizons) and mundane (short tails). I can't read the words without hearing them spoken in a warm, hushed voice. Tamsin Greig could rock the Christmas Day animated adaptation. They could comfortably stand alone as poetry, and are broken into easily-grasped images that are ever so nicely backed up by the art. The art is wonderfully well composed. The second to last double-page spread is a print waiting to adorn a dozen thousand nursery walls. There's another that could become the most brilliant bookends. It's clear, clean, simple, endearing. It doesn't put a paw wrong. These are the gentlest, most inquisitive polar bears imaginable.

All in all, reading this book is a fuzzy, snuggly experience. I think some of its pairs of readers will end up being Little Bear and Big Bear in each other's eyes and be inspired to look at the world in wonder. All of us will appreciate the calming, arctic oasis of loveliness it represents. Quite highly recommended.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Little Wise Wolf

Gijs van der Hammen, illus. Hanneke Siemensma, trans. from Dutch by Laura Watkinson, pub. Book Island

Little Wise Wolf is a reader. That's a good thing, right? He learns a great deal; he is passionately absorbed in his quest for knowledge and his enjoyment of reading. His interests are wide and varied,

from medicine through biology to space. But he is so busy learning new things and enjoying his reading that he doesn't have time to answer questions from his friends. It's only when he's forced to take time out to help someone that he drags himself away from his books and his scientific investigations. Inevitably, he learns that all his book-learning is not enough to make life go smoothly and he needs help from others after all. Little Wise Wolf is not street-wise (or forest-wise). Luckily, all the friends whose questions he batted aside are tolerant and generous enough to help him.

His learning is put to good use, and the story is not as anti-intellectual as it looks in danger of being. Different kinds of knowledge, humility and empathy are all validated in the end. He learns that knowledge is not the same as wisdom, and also that knowledge is most valuable when shared or used.

The lesson he learns is handled with tact and compassion, but it did make me uncomfortable that Little Wise Wolf's lack of empathy is associated with his being a reader and a scientist. Reading is a great builder of empathy, non-fiction no less than fiction. And book-loving (and science-loving) children are often already the butt of teasing and bullying, so the book seems a little clumsy in perpetuating a damaging stereotype. That's my only quibble, though, with an otherwise delightful and quite gentle book.

The art is beautiful and defuses any implicit criticism of Little Wise Wolf by its portrayal of him. He is engaging, he's small, and he has bright red wellies that lift the muted palette. His smallness and lack of wolfish ferocity suggest a benign naivety that undermines the text's presentation of him as a bit sullen, selfish and growly. The images suggest that he will learn. He is young and foolish, he has childish wellies, and his certainty can be unpicked. On the final spread, some of his friends are shown also enjoying science and books which, while not mentioned in the text, helps to validate the activity and focus the book's criticism on his previous attitude towards it instead.

Ann Rooney

Maybe the Moon

Frances Ives, pub. Michael O'Mara Books

This is a stunning book. The illustrations are bold, colourful and full of lovely details. You feel as though you are in the story with Eric and his mother.

Eric lives in the forest and has a garden and lots of animal friends. It looks idyllic and Eric is the "happiest boy in the world". Every night he sees the moon and feels that light in the dark is looking down on him, his family and animal friends. The repetitive verse throughout the book supplies continuity and expands on the importance of the moon to Eric and his world.

When Eric leaves the forest, the double page spread, speaks for itself. Bright colourful forest in one corner, stark grey city in the opposite corner, and a journey in between. The distance between known and unknown feels long and arduous, and I felt worried on behalf of Eric.

Moving to a new home can be incredibly daunting and scary. Eric uses the moon to help him adapt - his continued light in the dark. Eric's curiosity and sense of wonder lead him through the city streets, and he learns new and wonderful things about his new home. Embracing the new experience has allowed him to expand his understanding of the world.

This book is beautiful and would be lovely to share with children who are new to a school, town, country, or with someone who might be moving. It might just give them the confidence to embrace their new experience.

Erin Foote

Moon River

illus. Tim Hopwood, pub. Oxford University Press

This picture book is based on the classic song 'Moon River' written by Johnny Mercer and Henry Mancini and made famous by a variety of artists including Andy Williams, Louis Armstrong, Audrey Hepburn in 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' and even Morrissey. Here, Tim Hopwood has brought new life to the words of the song with his own distinctive style of illustration - bringing it to a whole new audience. The book even contains a singalong cd with Andy Williams' version of the song and 'a reading with page-turn signals'.

Initially I wasn't sure how well this would work. However Tim Hopwood is a hugely talented illustrator and has produced a lovely book. The pictures show a little girl going to sleep, tucked up in bed with her favourite teddy bear and the moon shining in through the window. The book takes the reader into the little girl's dream as she rides out into the night on her white (rocking) horse and joins her bear in a little boat. Together they travel through the night, taking in familiar landmarks and exploring new places, encouraging children to see the beauty of the world.

Following on from his previous titles, *What A Wonderful World*, *Walking in a Winter Wonderland* and *Singing in the Rain*, this book with its dreamlike illustrations makes for ideal bedtime reading and listening.

Vicky Harvey

My Friend Sleep

Laura Baker, pub. Words and Pictures

This is a lovely journey into the magical world of dreamland. It is a wondrous, enchanting story to scare a little, but delight any young child. Here is a perfect and wonderful bedtime story for adults to share with little ones.

It is a beautifully written and superbly illustrated story full of wonder and joy. It will surely help children to deal with the very real and common problem of nightmares.

Through her dreams, a little girl goes on a journey with sleep. Together they meet friendly aliens and ride on a dragon's back. They fill their tummies with sweets and treats. They see 'candyfloss clouds' and experience a fun, magical fairground. They eat ice cream sundaes and crystal jellies. This is an exciting and fun series of adventures that all children will love.

Eventually they meet a scary, menacing monster in a gloomy and dark cave. The monster turns out to be not so scary after all, as it shrinks down to the size of a dog. Throughout the scary bit the child is constantly reassured by her friend sleep.

The marvellous text and fantastic illustrations are a delight to look at and should reassure young children about their night-time fears.

Gary Kenworthy

Pea Pod Lullaby

Glenda Millard, illus. Stephen Michael King, pub. Old Barn Books

Brave and beautiful, *Pea Pod Lullaby* is a very special book. It began its life as a series of illustrations as part of the Manning Regional Art Gallery's wall project. Glenda Millard wrote the verses as Stephen Michael King drew the scenes while members of the public looked on.

On the title page there is a full spread illustration of a mother running with her children. The barbed wire, surrounded by a cloud of red, tells us she is running from something terrible. The next haunting image shows her putting her children into a boat, we assume, because it is the only way to keep them safe. The family then journey across the vast sea to what we can only hope is a place of safety. 'I am the small green pea, you are the tender pod, hold me.'

The text is made up of a series of metaphors so beautiful they read like music. Tender and moving, they speak of love, courage and strength. When the family stop to help a stranded polar bear the metaphor is as powerful as those lyrics that dance across each page. The illustrations, like the words, are almost fluid. Flowing over the pages, they are somehow both full of detail and stunningly simple.

This story isn't just about the relationship a mother has with her children; it's about the whole world and our place within it. It's a gentle way of introducing some big issues to younger readers. This is a story that needs to be told today. Ultimately, it is a story of hope.

Abby Mellor

The Rescue of Bunny Wunny

Emma Chichester Clark, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

'Imelda snorted like a warthog'. It is interesting that Imelda is illustrated with a nose like a warthog. She is indeed a nasty child, who is thoroughly spoilt by her parents. She rampages around her playroom, unchecked by her parents. Yet they see her as the kindest, sweetest little darling. I am sure that readers will be hoping that Imelda changes and that the story eventually has a happy ending.

Bunny Wunny is Imelda's favourite toy. Despite this, Imelda isn't very kind to Bunny Wunny. To the extent that, one day, Bunny Wunny decides that he must leave Imelda and run away. After all, it is not easy being the favourite toy of a very bad tempered little girl.

Then a real rabbit with magical powers comes into Imelda's life.

Young readers will like this latest twist. But nothing happens. Imelda's naughty behaviour just continues and there seems no end to it. Readers will still be looking for a happy ending for little Bunny Wunny.

Will there be a happy ending?

'Some people will never change'.

Gary Kenworthy

Silent Night

Joseph Mohr, illus. Lara Hawthorne, pub. Lincoln Children's Books

Silent night relates the first verse of the lovely Christmas Carol that tells the story of the birth of Jesus, those gentle lines written at the top of the pages, emphasizing the sense of happy peace that lies in this book.

The illustrations are bright and lively and, as a Christmas story, we are short of nothing. There's Mary and Joseph, their donkey, sheep in the fields, palm trees, stars and moon. The detailed and charming pictures full of colour and movement lead us sweetly up to the stirring events of that night.

It is when the baby is born that things get more dramatic. The great star shines in all its brilliance as through the starry night skies, the red robed angel comes to tell the shepherds of the birth, the shepherds almost propelling themselves off the page in their amazement.

Silent Night is full of interest, simply and beautifully presented; the three Kings arriving in the busy town on their camels, a glorious picture of houses and trees, people and animals all around them. Then the peaceful stable as they bring their gifts to the baby.

With a very Christmassy cover full of shining stars and words, there is much for a child to look at in this steady and gentle recounting of that silent night, plus, they can sing the story, as well, if they want to.

Gwen Grant

Sleepy Book

Charlotte Zolotow, illus. Vladimir Bobri, pub. Bodleian Children's Books

From the spikey, two-coloured stars spread across its inside cover, to the entwined horses standing amid flowers on its back cover, this is a brilliant book to hold. Full of muted blue, purple, green and black, it has a cosy warmth and each page draws in the eye – it's hard to choose a favourite scene!

A contented looking crescent moon holds the letters aloft on the book's title page, which is then followed by a meeting with all manner of different creatures and their sleeping habits, moving through animals, insects, fish and humans.

Each two-page spread, with text one side accompanied by image on the other, is given to a different being, exploring where they sleep and how, with the same opening phrase but varied levels of description.

They are very sensory descriptions, often giving texture, colour, light and temperature, encouraging in readers a sensitiveness to their own surroundings – especially if read at night as a way to wind down. The words are staggered down the pages in slightly different shapes, in an appealing chunky font made from a handcut blockletter.

Sleepy book's illustrations are formed from shape and colour rather than lines, filling each right-hand page in different ways – some reach to the edges with their close up immersion in a landscape, while

others depict bold objects nestled in the blue grey background. Detail is slight and minimal, focused on texture, and there are subtly expressive faces.

Acknowledging human connectedness to the millions of other beings and ecosystems on the planet is a crucial act of awareness in anytime – but has potentially never been more pressing than in this era of climate crisis. By helping to resituate humans as one among many kinds of life, Sleepy book plays an important role in reminding us of who else our actions affect - as well as being enjoyable to look at whatever your age.

Jemima Breeds

Stories of the Night

Kitty Crowther, pub. Gecko Press

Stories of the night is a most magical storybook containing three gentle tales of bedtime and sleep set against illustrations of what can only be described as Scandinavian inspiration.

It comes as no surprise then that author and world-renowned illustrator, Kitty Crowther - and Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award winner 2010 – is half Swedish. The characters could have been conjured up in Moomin Valley and the lakes and berry-picking straight from the life of Tove Jansson herself (I presume Finnish influences were prevalent in Kitty's home too!).

There are three stories for bedtime, and three characters on a quest for sleep in this rather quirky and modern fairytale of a book – but it is one whole, held together quite beautifully by Mummy Bear and Little Bear:

“Tell me three goodnight stories, please, please, please,” asks Little Bear.

“Three!” said her mother.

“Yes, I said please three times!”

After each tale we return to the eager Little Bear and his next request, always asked in a child-like way that every parent will recognize: when a child can't remember the title, they sum up the gist of the story quite simply. I love this use of language: it is real, uncomplicated and magical all at once.

“And now for the second story,” said Little Bear.

“The little girl with a sword who gets lost.”

First, Little Bear hears the story of the Night Guardian, who lives in the woods and makes sure all the animals go to bed. But who tells the Night Guardian when it's bedtime? The second story is about the brave girl Zhora, who has been sent out by her mother to find berries. When she is lost her friend, Jacko Mollo the bat finds her and in turn she discovers the perfect sleep in his treetop home. In the third tale we meet Bo, the man with the big overcoat who finds it hard to sleep. His otter friend

suggests he takes a swim, which he does and soon – after a lucky find - happily returns home and to sleep.

All the main characters find sleep, and a happy and peaceful one to boot too after each of them have achieved or solved their predicament. There is also a lovely little twist after Mother Bear says goodnight to Little Bear, and quite lovely it is too.

The book quite literally glows with the neon-like pink that runs across every page, be it the floor, the lakes, the walls, the stars or the rocks. To add to this colourful delight it is quite a treat to discover that this eye-popping hue was created with make-up. Proof that when little hands find your favourite blusher, or snaffle away that lipstick such ‘creativity’ may pave the way for something rather impressive one day!

My daughter also read this eye-catching book and she looked at me afterwards and said: ‘It’s really lovely, Mummy’. She is eleven and I really think if a picture book is able to still resonate with older children - and adults (I loved it) – it could well become a classic.

Anja Stobbart

Storm

Sam Usher, pub. Templar

We’ve already enjoyed *Rain*, *Sun* and *Snow* so Sam Usher’s latest (and, regrettably, last) picture book about a boy and his grandad in really stormy weather is especially welcome this autumn! When the Boy wakes up and looks out of the window he can see the autumn leaves flying up in the air, and hear his window rattling with the fierce wind. As ever in these books, he’s keen to get his Grandad to take him outside to enjoy the weather, and they decide their kite is just what they need, BUT where did they put it? All kinds of other things emerge as they search for it, and bring back memories of other seasons and other adventures, but the kite is well tucked away. When they do eventually find it off they go to the park, where they have a wonderful time flying it. Once they’re back home they sit down and agree that adventures are best when they’re shared. As in the earlier books, the Boy tells the story, but as his Grandad never addresses him by name we never learn who he is. This of course means he could be any child being read to, or reading, the book. Grandad himself is pictured as an elderly, friendly character, who is always ready to engage with his grandson, and enjoy an adventure with him.

In each of the books Usher creates an experience that will be familiar to readers, but there’s always something which makes it a little bit extra-exciting, even slightly scary, but with a comfortable resolution, with both the Boy and his Grandad sitting down in the kitchen having a drink and discussing their day.

Usher's illustrations are full of life – we really feel the gusty wind – and we can spot many details in each spread which will be familiar to young readers both at home and outdoors. There's plenty of discussion to be had from what we can spot on every page. There are also items which will be familiar to those who have read other books in this wonderful series. More weather/seasons please Sam Usher!

Bridget Carrington

The Tall Man and the Small Mouse

Mara Bergman, illus. Birgitta Sif, pub. Walker Books

The tall man and the small mouse is a charming and accessible story about how two very different characters find they can help each other and become friends. It's a story children will relate to, being small themselves and living in a world where it seems almost everyone is taller than they are.

The tall man goes about his everyday life doing big things, picking apples out of tall trees, rescuing cats, catching a falling baby bird. Big things to suit this tall person. The mouse is equally busy, finding pins, pegs and corks, a watch, a biscuit and other small things.

But when the tall man has to repair the big Town clock, he is too tall to get inside it to where the broken part is. That night, when he falls asleep, the small mouse finds a cosy bed in one of his boots. In the morning, when the tall man sees the small mouse, he says, 'I wonder if I can borrow you to do a most important thing?' for the mouse is small enough to get inside the clock. Soon the mouse has repaired the broken piece with her cork and pin and peg and, once again, the clock goes, 'Tick Tock. Tick Tock.'

The story is told in simple rhymes that marry well to the wonderful illustrations with their close detail, friendly characters and lovely clear colours on paper so silky, it invites small fingers to touch. The illustration of the mouse inside the deep purple clock with her small golden light is totally enchanting, as the book itself enchants.

Gwen Grant

Time for Bed Miyuki

Roxanne Marie Galliez, illus. Seng Soug, pub. Princeton Architectural Press

It's a conversation we all know. You tell a little one it is time for bed and, suddenly, there are a thousand excuses. They're hungry. They're thirsty. They're not tired. Little Miyuki is no different.

In this wonderful bedtime story, Miyuki's grandfather is trying to persuade her to go to bed. But Miyuki protests. There's a canopy for the dragonfly queen to be built, vegetables to be watered, and the snails need to be rounded up, amongst many other things.

This book contains the most stunning of illustrations, brightly coloured yet muted so they are soothing and the perfect companion to winding down for a good night's sleep. On each page you will always spot some small new detail that you have not seen before and adds to the book's wonder.

The author, Roxane Marie Galliez, uses language that seems to glitter and sparkle into the fading day. Ultimately, and most importantly, the book concludes with Miyuki falling asleep to dream of adventures for the next day.

An enchanting story to be enjoyed by all children and adults alike.

Laura Roach

The Way Home for Wolf

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

The Way Home for Wolf is a tale of friendship in a time of need written in beautiful lyrical rhyming text. Jim Field's illustrations are magical. His winter wonderland helps to transport the reader right to the heart of the action.

Wilf, an independent little wolf cub, makes for an adorable main character as he wants to be all grown up and tough like the big wolves, but he isn't quite there yet. The other wolves laugh at his suggestion to lead the pack but Wilf, strong-willed and proud, does his best to keep up at the back. Eventually, the cub loses his way during a blizzard. Wilf, shown in a powerful double-page spread, finds himself all alone in the white night, lost. A combination of sore throat and pride hold him back from howling for help.

The tension really ramps up as he gets into deeper trouble. But with some help from a 'Sea Unicorn' and some other cold climate critters, the little 'Wilfling' is lead back to his pack. Overjoyed to see him, they celebrate their little one in a way that lets Wilf know he is truly loved.

The overriding message is one of the importance of friendship. Wilf learns that "when ALL come together, the darkest of times are easy to weather." Wilf vows to do his best to help others whenever he can, leaving the reader promising to do the same.

A gorgeous introduction to a variety of Arctic animals that children will adore and which adds to the re-readability of the book.

Evelyn Bookless

The Wizard of Oz

adapted Meg McLaren & Sam Hay, pub. Egmont Publishing

A beautifully illustrated picture book that stays close to the original whilst seamlessly including some modern twists to make this classic appealing to today's generation of readers.

Dorothy has become "Little Dot" and alongside Toto embarks on a journey to follow the yellow brick road meeting and making friends with Lion, Scarecrow and Little tin can along the way - Donning Sparkly silver boots (gone are the ruby shoes) defeating Boiled Sweets and Jelly Snakes (yes indeed!) along the way.

The characters appearances would appeal to nursery/reception aged children and beyond given their modernised features courtesy of illustrator Meg McLaren.

Staying true to L. Frank Baum's original, Lion is reminded of just how brave he is, Scarecrow is shown that he is indeed very clever and Little tin can is told how he already has a heart and the story continues to celebrate the value of friendship, courage and the significance of home.

The front cover of this book is dazzling, with its emerald green holographic foil and newly designed characters walking along the yellow brick road, it's bound to capture young readers and older alike, especially those already fans of The Wizard of Oz and all things emerald city.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this adaptation because it remains true to the original in all the aspects that matter whilst updating the story in a way that makes it fun with a hint of suspense, making it an ideal book to share.

Samantha Thomas

You're Snug With Me

Chirita Soundam, illus., Poonam Mistry, pub. Lantana Publishing

The first thing I noticed about *You're snug with me* was the illustrations because it is very different in style and feel to other children's picture books. I wondered what my own daughter would think of it.

Sharing it with her I found out that she loved the illustrations, as I read she was smiling at them, reaching out to touch the pictures and helping to turn the pages.

The story itself shares a powerful message with the reader about global warming but it takes this very serious matter and deals with it in a very nice way through the story of two bear cubs.

The story starts from the birth of the cubs and takes us right the way through to their first steps on the snow. Throughout the book the cubs ask Mama Bear about the world around them from the snow and ice to the ocean and the darkness. As a good mama bear she always answers their questions and always reassures them with the repeated phrase 'you're snug with me' helping her cubs to feel safe and secure and reassuring the reader too.

You're snug with me is a great story for introducing children to one of the challenging issues facing the world today. The author, Chitra Soundar shares a nice message in the back of the book on the issues which is important for parents, teachers and others with a responsibility for a child's education. I also liked the fact that the story wasn't too short yet at the same time is just right for bedtime reading.

Francesca Jones

Junior Book Reviews

A Storm of Ice and Stars

Lisa Lueddecke, pub. Scholastic

Strange red lights have appeared in the skies above the island of Skane, bringing with them the threat of plague, engendering fear and suspicion. The inhabitants of Janna's village resolve to barricade their borders, allowing no-one to enter or leave, in a desperate attempt to keep the sickness out.

Janna is horrified by this; as a free spirit she wants to be able to continue to roam the forest. But she also refuses to turn her back on those beyond the village who need help. Viewed with deep mistrust by her neighbours, who accuse her of witchcraft, she flees deep into the wilds of the island, in the grip of an icy winter, where she must overcome storm-ravaged plains and far-flung mountains, where danger and death lurk.

Atmospheric, shot through with the glitter of ice and dark magic, this is a thrilling fantasy adventure, perfect to curl up somewhere warm with, whilst you travel the snowy landscapes of Skane with Janna. It is a companion piece to Lisa Lueddecke's previous book, *A Shiver of Snow and Sky*.

Jayne Gould

The Adventures of Catvinkle

Elliot Perlman, illus. Laura Stitzel, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

This is the story of a beautiful, but unlikely, friendship. Catvinkle is a much-loved, long-haired cat belonging to kind Mr Sabatini, an Amsterdam barber. One day, after worrying that Catvinkle might be lonely, the barber brings home a lost Dalmation called Una. Initially insulted, Catvinkle starts to love Una after smelling her deliciously musky fur.

The book is separated into three parts: The Surprise, when Una is brought home to meet Catvinkle; The Plan, when the friends team up to help out two young children who've lost their special ball in the garden of a scary dog; and The Competition, in which Catvinkle competes in the 'National Kitten Baby-Shoe Dancing Competition' against her enemy, Twinkiepaws.

Along the way, the pair make friends with the two children, a Russian wolfhound, a llama, the big scary dog and the famous singing cat, Ketzington, from New York. For a cat who'd never even thought of talking to dogs before, it's all quite new for Catvinkle, but she discovers that friends can come from all sorts of places.

Catvinkle also has a secret - she can fly! (This isn't a spoiler as it's on the back cover.) Whether this amazing ability adds to the book, and story, is questionable, but it does help out when Catvinkle and Una are on their ball-rescuing mission and might prove useful on other adventures if there's ever a sequel.

This would be a great read for young animal lovers who are gaining their confidence in reading novels. Lots of delicate pen-and-ink drawings throughout the text illustrate the story nicely.

Antonia Russell

The Afterwards

A.F. Harrold, illus. Emily Gravett, pub. Bloomsbury

Sometimes solutions emerge from places you least expect – but they can be a long time coming, and in the meantime staying in control is hard. Especially when the problem is on a scale you're struggling to process.

Ember and her Dad have a close relationship built on understanding and communication; they even have phrases from their own language. But when Ember learns of the death of her best friend Ness, there are no easy answers for how best to cope. Both of them struggle, when often all you can do is guess.

The unbearably painful news of Ness' death comes wholly unexpected, and so too does the behaviour of Ember's uncle that follows not long after. He ends up bringing Ember back into closer proximity with Ness than she ever imagined possible. Travelling between home and a grey, shadowy version of her world, Ember's confusion grows but so too does her determination – she believes it may not be too late to bring Ness back. But unforeseen obstacles abound, and Ember wrestles with putting on a brave face and simultaneously feeling like things may be falling very rapidly apart.

It's alright not to have answers, to be learning and hurting. A. F Harrold's story is brilliant for exploring the difficulty of accepting sadness and longing, of processing emptiness and frustration. The colouring of the pages, black for night scenes, add to the book's immersive world and pair well with the muted, sketched full page illustrations (very atmospheric towards the end, in depicting the afterwards), as well as with a range of smaller illustrations of the characters worked in around the text.

Some sentences form staggered drops down the page, or follow a spiral shape, while other words appear in larger dark font; this movement of the printed words adds to the excellent examination of

confusion and uncertainty, of thoughts jumbled and feelings plummeting – as do the single word sentences and three-line chapter that make for intense moments of reading.

Ember sees things inside those closest to her that are hard to witness, but she learns to keep living, without always rushing, while keeping those she misses in her mind.

Jemima Breeds

Agatha Oddly – The Secret Key

Lena Jones, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Thirteen-year-old Agatha Oddlow is a bit of a misfit at the prestigious St Regis School (hence the nickname Oddly) but she's a clever, mischievous and bold young girl with aspirations of being a detective like her literary hero, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot. She and her school friend, Liam Lau have already set up a detective agency ... all they need now is a case to solve and it's not long before one comes their way.

Agatha lives with her father, head warden at Hyde Park in London, in Groundskeepers Cottage and walks through the park on her way to school. One morning a woman is involved in a hit and run incident - a motorcyclist was riding through the park - and here begins a mystery that starts with a key tattoo and sees red slime oozing through the river, gushing from the taps and causing a water shortage across London as well as a secret organization called The Guild.

During her investigations, Agatha is drawn into an unfamiliar and potentially dangerous world where no one is quite the way they seem and it's up to her to unravel things to get to the bottom of what's happening in the city.

Lena Jones is the pen name given to the team of writers that have worked together with Tibor Jones, a literary management company 'dedicated to building the careers of bestselling authors and creative leaders in their fields', to produce this first Agatha Oddly book. While the idea of writing or producing books in this way may sound manufactured, *Agatha Oddly – the Secret Key* is a lot of fun and has lots of positive elements that will greatly appeal to readers that enjoy a mystery/detective story.

Damian Harvey

Between Worlds

Kevin Crossley-Holland, illus. Frances Castle, pub. Walker Books

Kevin Crossley-Holland is a Carnegie Medal-winning author, a well-known poet, and a champion of tales which would have been as familiar within various cultures across Europe as Eastenders or Coronation Street are to us. His translations and retellings of Anglo-Saxon (Beowulf) and Norse myths, and of the medieval Arthurian legends are, as were they, legendary.

Once the tales would have been in peoples' heads, not written down, and different versions would have grown up in different places, as people misremembered or embroidered the tale they themselves had heard, and told their own version to others. He has also recreated, in writing, the ancient tradition of folk-tale telling, and *Between Worlds* is a collection of stories from Britain and Ireland, some of which he has retold over many years.

Crossley-Holland gives us four dozen tales, some no more than a couple of pages long, others long as a fairy's hair, but each of them telling us no more or less than is necessary for a wonderful story. We meet favourites from his own earlier retellings, such as *The Green Children*, *The Peddler of Swaffham*, and *Tam Lin*, some of which he has recreated into plays and operas. The tales are sorted by theme, so we have six categories to choose from, depending on our mood: Magic and Wonder; Adventures and Legends; Fairies and Little People; Love; Wits; Tricks and Laughter, and Ghosts. Because many of these tales come from places and times when the names of people and places were different from those we are familiar with, there's a helpful pronunciation guide at the front, essential if (as they should be) the stories are read aloud. The tales are told simply, but this does not lessen their eeriness, their magic or their humour. The book ends with a new story, to explain why everyone needs to be able to tell a story, and, very helpfully, there are several pages of sources and notes.

Frances Castle's evocative black and white illustrations and her page borders add immeasurably to the magic of this beautifully produced book, to create a truly timeless treasure trove.

Bridget Carrington

Buttercup Sunshine and the Zombies of Dooooom

Colin Mulhern, pub. Maverick Children's Books

The quiet routine of Granny Fondant is shaken one morning when granddaughter Buttercup Sunshine runs along the pathway to her cottage screaming and holding a chainsaw. Once locked in the safety of the house, Buttercup explains to her granny how the previous night, while on a recognition tour of the nearby wood, she had seen a green glowing light crossing the sky and falling into an abandoned cemetery. Would-be-detective Sunshine had rushed to the site to witness the raising of zombies, which are now in her pursuit.

Under siege by the creatures seeking to eat their brains, grandmother and granddaughter deploy a counterattack.

A story equally dark and funny, this book introduces a character who is feisty, practical and fearless. Confronted by imminent danger Sunshine reacts with a totally rational approach, which offsets brilliantly the wacky scenario producing laugh-out-loud moments.

This thrilling story has enough comic gory details and humour to appeal to young readers who will also enjoy the funny cartoons that punctuate every chapter.

This book is presented in a friendly and accessible layout to attract reluctant readers as well.

Laura Brill

The Curious Crime

Julia Golding, pub. Lion Children's Books

Set in an alternative Victorian era, in a fabulous, Gormenghast-esque institution known only as the museum, *The Curious Crime* has lots going for it. Good writing, good storytelling, strong characters.

The museum is one of the strongest characters. Like an amalgam of the Natural History Museum in London, a zoo, the British Museum and a huge university packed with boffins, the museum building has grown over centuries to house many different schools of thought and scientific ideas in a rambling network of chambers, tunnels and halls. The one thing it excludes is religion. Oh, and women.

Recent leaps in scientific understanding have led the men in power to outlaw religion. Any mention of god can lead to transportation or even death. Not only that, they have dictated that the laws of evolution mean that women must be excluded from the academic work of the museum. The women are kept in separate quarters, and only venture into the men's areas at night, to do the cleaning.

Our hero is a young teenage girl called Ree whose father falls victim to the repressive museum regime. Her partner in solving crimes is Henri, an Algerian student who is, like Ree, stopped from fulfilling his potential, but because of his African origins rather than his sex. Together they set out to solve a series of hideous murders, and through their questioning and investigating, challenge the status quo.

The back cover of the book carries several reviews from individuals at the Royal Institution and Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, among others. The foreword by the Faraday Institute explains that the book will inspire readers to 'ask questions, explore their world, and take their place in the irresistible search for answers handed down from one generation . to the next'. If this sounds rather formidable (and possibly slightly depressing) the good news is that if it has worthy intentions, the book itself doesn't make heavy weather of them. You could probably use it as a school text to

discuss topics in religion and science, if you really wanted to, but simply as a murder mystery it was original and fun.

Rather long at 300 pages of small print, the murders don't start until well into the second half, and it wouldn't hurt to trim down quite a bit of the first third of the book. There were a couple of details that troubled me. Henri accidentally starts a fire by dropping a lump of sodium metal into water and manages to put it out within minutes and still make it to his exam. I am pretty sure that if you handle sodium with bare hands you'd get skin burns immediately. Additionally Henri's pet crab-eating macaque was supposed to be a tiny creature that leaps onto people's shoulders and grooms their hair? The internet tells me that macaques are about two feet tall and weigh a few kilos, so I'd be surprised if they could sit on a person's head with impunity.

The book didn't try too hard to investigate the philosophical basis of the conflict between religion and science. The narrative seems to promote a broad and modern idea of an inclusive society where differing views are accepted. It also examines the role of belief in science and exposes extremism in both science and religion. I felt that the backdrop of female suppression was almost more important to the story and created a very enjoyable set of characters including the terrifying laundresses and the all-powerful cook. The book left you wanting to read more adventures with Ree and Henri.

Deborah Fajerman

Dear Professor Whale

Megumi Iwasa, illus. Jun Takabatake, pub.Gecko Press

Dear Professor Whale, the follow-up to the charming *Yours Sincerely, Giraffe*, centres around a whale who is a retired teacher and professor who now lives a leisurely yet solitary existence in the calm, ultramarine waters off Whale Point.

Professor Whale whiles away his days swimming, snoozing and imagining what it might feel like to fly with enormous wings. He sometimes reminisces about the good old days when the waters were teeming with his friends and family and all other sorts of wondrous critters. Sometimes he felt just a little lonely...

Aside from snoozing and swimming and admiring the colour blue, the Professor has been very busy writing letters and sending them to all sorts of places via the ever-dependable delivery Seal. These mysterious letters started with:

“Dear Whoever you are, who lives on the other side of the horizon...”

One day, just as Professor Whale is about to doze off after a swim he hears a familiar voice, and notices a shiny dark shape coming toward him in the water. It's Seal, the trusty mail and delivery critter of Whale Point.

“I've got a letter for you, sir.”

The Professor's heart lit up like a bright blue sky.

“Really? That's wonderful!”

No one has ever replied to any of Professor Whales' letters, until now. Professor Whale hurriedly opens the letter and reads with delight the words on the page that has come from so far away. Little does he know this letter will draw him into an enormous adventure, one that will ensure he'll never feel lonely ever again.

Dear Professor Whale is a gorgeous read for children aged 6-8. Early readers will appreciate the easily flowing story progression and the sparse text with white space on each page. The illustrations are delightful – they are cartoonish, sketch-like, full of movement and character and they perfectly support the text and the plot development on each page.

The story has a simplistic and naïve feel to it, the phrasing can sometimes feel clunky, but I feel this also gives the book it's unique voice and a sense of a story being told out loud. *Dear Professor Whale* is a charming, energetic, fun book filled with kind, friendly characters who embark on an amazing and heart-warming adventure that anyone would adore.

Sara Wade-Vuletic

The Dodo Made Me Do It

Jo Simmons, illus. Sheena Dempsey, pub. Bloomsbury

Danny is not looking forward to spending his summer holidays, yet again, with his Granny in the far-off village of Kinoussie on the west coast of Scotland; a place 'untouched by time'. He craves excitement and adventure but is resigned to the usual boring experience of past years. Then he finds a dodo; definitely extinct according to received wisdom but equally definitely alive if Danny is to believe the evidence before his own eyes. The problem then is; what do you do with a creature long considered extinct?

The answer is; you try to get him to fly to the natural habitat of the dodo (Madagascar) and you try to keep it a secret from everyone, on the basis they will take him to a zoo and treat him as a curiosity, subjecting him to experiments and such-like.

The two main characters are well drawn and likeable. Danny wishes his life could resemble that of his favourite comic character, is impetuous and daring but becomes overawed by the enormity of the task ahead of him when the difficulties of getting a dodo to Madagascar from a remote part of Scotland become apparent. Susie, his only friend in Kinnousie, is reasonable, practical and fond of research but provides Danny with a telling lecture on not shirking the responsibilities he took on when he first moved the dodo. There are a host of other madcap characters that flit in and out of the story; Granny Flora and her everlasting supply of porridge, Roddy Aye who always knows more than he lets on and Wee Jimmy, a man who is not as nice as he seems.

There is much humour interspersed in this story of a boy and a dodo and the plentiful illustrations add greatly to this. The image of the dodo, disguised in a hooded sweatshirt, riding in a wheelbarrow is just one detailing the antics of this rather uncontrollable and unpredictable visitor from the past and there are many funny episodes to entertain the reader.

With its reasonably short chapters, clear and well spaced-out text and illustrations, this book will appeal to confident, independent readers looking for an interesting story and an absorbing read. They will identify with Danny and Susie and their attempts to deal with a very unusual situation, admire their pluck when faced with the villainous Wee Jimmy and hopefully take to heart their persistence and determination in the face of apparently insurmountable difficulties.

June Hughes

The Dog Who Lost His Bark

Eoin Colfer, illus. P J Lynch, pub. Walker Books

From the brilliant author of the *Artemis Fowl* series, Eoin Colfer, this new book is for a slightly younger age range.

The beautiful front cover illustration gives us the hopeful impression that this is a straight-forward rags-to-riches, happily ever after story, however, there is added depth to it. There is a painful twist in the plot which is hinted at all the way through - the separation of parents, that might resonate with some children, but also gives the story another blast of tense, heart wrenching anticipation.

Patrick is our hero, but it is a while before we meet him. The story starts from the perspective of 'Dog', and I feel I should offer some warning that Dog's beginning in life is pretty harsh. He is cruelly mistreated and eventually left for dead. However, this rather harrowing start leaves us with a real understanding why Dog finds it so hard to trust his new owner - Patrick, however kind and gentle he is. Colfer describes the growing relationship between Patrick and Dog, now named Oz with such tenderness, it is a joy to read. However, it makes a harsh contrast to the denouement of this book, a twist that reminds us that life rarely holds simple happy endings, even for the most deserving of us.

A final line to note the quite remarkable illustrations of P.J Lynch. Honoured with many prestigious awards, this book hold yet further examples of P.J's ability to capture the nuance of complex emotions in both humans and their canine companions.

Emily Hamilton

Dragon Daughter

Liz Flanagan, pub. David Fickling Books

I was captivated from the first chapter of this spell-binding book. From the first line even, “Milla was hiding in an orange tree on the day the dragons returned to Arcosi”.

What a fantastic beginning and hook to keep me wanting to read more- dragons? What kind of dragons? Fierce fiery ones or small scary ones? Do they come in peace? Are they ridden by strangers from a strange land? The entire first chapter is fast and intense. I couldn't wait to read more.

Milla, the main character, might be small but she is fierce, curious and brave. She knows little of her past yet strives to form a future for herself with the dragons. A brilliant friendship with the dragons and their humans is formed through learning more about the creatures and about the danger they all continue to face.

Battles are fought, friendships broken and loved ones lost. It is a book to read carefully and to savour slowly. Milla, her friends and the dragons lead her to discover who her true identity is and what the means for the future of Arcosi.

The language is rich and wonderful for older readers. The descriptions of Arcosi and the characters are so well written they almost leap off the page. I was thrilled to learn of more in the series and I can see this fast becoming a favourite across the UK! It would also make a brilliant movie or series for children.

Just wonderful to read! Milla was firmly in my heart and I wanted so much good for her and the dragons. Danger still lurks, and more dragons are in the future- what will happen next?

Erin Foote

Evie's War

Holly Webb, pub. Scholastic

I have been a fan of Holly Webb's books for several years, but she has surpassed herself with this ultimately uplifting, but often very sad story of life in the First World War.

Evie and her family live in Whitby and are just trying to overcome their sorrow at the loss of her youngest brother from pneumonia when the war breaks out. Her oldest brother, even though he is only 16 years old, decides to enlist and the rest of the family try and carry on their lives. However, war always intrudes, as friends lose family members and then Whitby is shelled by German warships. The book follows the family through major ups and downs before there is the beginning of hope as the Armistice is finally signed.

There have been a plethora of books to commemorate the First World War, and specifically the Armistice, but Holly Webb has taken two lesser known events and activities and brought them into her story. The shelling of the seaside towns of Whitby, Scarborough and Hartlepool in 1914 is not well known outside of the Yorkshire area, but it caused devastation and death, with anything up to 600 injured and 130 killed. It really brings the reality of war to the characters and encourages many young men to join up, even if underage.

The second theme that we see is the handing over of pet dogs to be trained as sniffer and messenger dogs for the trenches; in this it is similar to *War Horse* by Michael Morpurgo. All of these things really bring the story to life and the audience can truly empathize with the characters. Whilst the central characters are girls, this is very much a book for all young readers and it has the makings of a classic for the future.

Margaret Pemberton

The Girl, the Cat & the Navigator

Matilda Woods, illus. Anuska Allepuz, pub. Scholastic

This book has been described as: 'An enchanting, charming story of bravery on the ice-tipped ocean, with stunning art by Anuska Allepuz on every page'.

Curious, pin-bright Oona Britt dreams of setting sail with her ship's captain father for a life of excitement on the wild waves. She has read stories of a magical creature - the Nardoo - who swims through the stars at night and stows away on whaling boat the Plucky Leopard for an adventure full of myths and marvel among the ice-caps.

Oona is a strong female lead character and through her journey the reader is able to explore the meaning of family, relationships, love, grief, destiny and life choices. This text is ideal to explore with KS2, especially with the partnering of the text and illustrations. The illustrations tell their own story

and fit so beautifully with the text that children can create their own version of the story with just the images.

This would appeal to both boys and girls. Oona is a great heroine and although she wasn't born a boy (as was foretold), she proves that she can achieve anything with determination and hard work. There are also parts of the story that are humorous, and this would work really well as a class read aloud book.

Sophie Castle

The Great Sea Dragon Discovery

Pippa Goodhart, pub. Catnip

Two boys, lots of a mud and an ichthyosaur — what's not to like?

Pippa Goodhart's story set in Victorian Grantchester (a village just outside Cambridge) is a rollicking good yarn in traditional style. She evokes the harsh life of working people brilliantly, with the central characters perpetually balanced on the knife edge between getting by and catastrophe.

A seam of anxiety runs through the book, and it's something our time shares with that of the characters. The central figure, Bill, has a lot of anxiety-inducing circumstances to deal with — they come thick and fast after a first, misguided, act drops his family in trouble.

Grantchester is Pippa Goodhart's own village, and her familiarity with the place and its history greatly enriches the story. She has captured the place exactly, the cold, foggy winter rendered even more dismal with no electric lighting or heating at the end of the long walk home. There are several real historical figures here alongside the invented protagonist and his family, and there's plenty of genuine science and history of science. Readers who get to the Natural History Museum in London can even see some of the fossils that feature in the story.

The themes of deception, justice and their entanglement with money and poverty are explored from different angles, and difficult questions are raised. There is plenty for thoughtful readers to take away and think about further, and no easy answers. It's a thoroughly enjoyable book that evokes its world with unnerving realism.

Ann Rooney

Head Kid

David Baddiel, illus, Steven Linton, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Ryan is the biggest prankster in Bracket Wood, a school that has consistently been ranked inadequate by the Offhead inspectors. Now they are due for another visit. Ryan's latest practical joke has led the headteacher to resign in despair. Mr Carter takes over. He is determined to turn the school round. If he fails it will be closed down. He imposes strict new rules and enforces them rigorously. It's not long before Ryan is called to his study after yet another caper. A strange musical box there has an extraordinary effect.

When Mr Carter and Ryan wake up in hospital Ryan finds himself in the body of a 43-year-old headteacher and Mr Carter has the body of a naughty 11-year-old. No one believes their stories, so Ryan is now headteacher. His rules could not be more different to Mr Carter's. Chaos ensues. The prospect of closure brings glee to Ryan and the pupils. All but two of them. Not to Mr Carter and not to Dionna. If Bracket Wood closes she will be forced to go back to Oakcroft, the posh school where she was bullied horribly as a scholarship pupil. And Dionna is Ryan's best friend. Suddenly the imminent Offhead inspection is a terrifying threat. The only chance to stave off closure is cooperation between Ryan as Mr Carter and Mr Carter as Ryan, both of whom have begun to change in their new incarnations, and Dionna as her quick-witted self.

David Baddiel's previous novels for children have been big hits, and *Head Kid* is destined to be another one. The characters, particularly Ryan, will be very popular, as will the zany humour and the body-swap plot. A book that will provoke lots of laughter, it also raises important issues such as bullying, intolerance, care for family and loyalty without in any way being preachy. The illustrations by Steven Linton complement the text well.

Anne Harding

Inkling

Kenneth Oppel, illus. Sydney Smith, pub. Walker Books

Ethan is struggling to live up to everyone's expectations and is barely coping with the strains of family life and the demands placed on him by others. He is not the only one seeking a way forward, however, as shown by his father's inability to engage with home life and his failure to produce the next masterpiece of a graphic novel.

The family has suffered a tragic loss and needs some catalyst to get them all back on track. This catalyst comes quite unusually in the form of an inkblot creation that escapes from his father's sketchbook. Fantastically, this creation, named Inkling, has so many human characteristics and an amazing way of adapting to and learning from its environment. Such a strange protagonist but it suits the story so well and readers will really identify with Inkling and Ethan as they navigate the complexities of helping others to realize their full potential.

In addition to supporting his younger sister Lucy as his famous illustrator father tries to free himself from a massive 'writer's block', Ethan has been given the task of illustrating a comic book for a school project. The only problem being he is not as talented as his father.

Inkling has an incredible ability to understand everyone's individual needs and so wants to please – often at the expense of his own health. One of the lovely things about Inkling is that he 'feeds' on books and devours them whole, regurgitating their wonderful ideas, characters and tone. The reader does fear for Inkling's wellbeing and the security of Ethan and his family, however, when Ethan's arch-rival Vika gets wind of some strange goings on at the Rylance family home. The conflicts heighten in tension but unravel in a delightful way.

Definitely an imaginative story that young readers will thoroughly enjoy.

Sheri Sticpewich

It's Only the End of the World

J.A. Henderson, pub. Kelpies Edge

I've started a lot of 'good' books that I didn't finish, books that were elegant and grammatical and polite. Books written by the book. This isn't one of those. I will end this review positively, but first I've got to say a few negative-sounding things so that you understand the sort of book it is. I have to emphasise: none of the negative things are going to matter one bit, this book is capital-F fun. But this is a review, so you should know. Let's go.

This is the sort of book Dwayne Johnson would star in the film of. It's Hollywood-Stupid. The characters say and do whatever the set-piece they're in requires them to. The plot exists to get you from set-piece to set-piece.

Characters gain a second dimension only if a plot twist demands it. They can do anything the story needs them to. Their words are clunky, expositional and inauthentic. They banter. Ineptly. Constantly. Oh, the banter. The writing at times gets a little confusing where the writer makes unhelpful style and word choices.

The pop culture references are dated. It's difficult to tell exactly what age the book's readership is supposed to be. The characters are unconvincing as 14-year-olds, the cover and coyness suggest readers who might be 8 or 9.

Description? In places it's over-done, in others too sketchy: a pitched battle (with explosions) takes place in a space that's probably little bigger than a bathroom. But let's not dwell on any of that. The

keyword here is 'Hollywood'. This book is a Hollywood holiday blockbuster, giant box of popcorn with your mates, having a good time romp.

Or, since we're discussing books, it's a page-turner. It is resolutely, unashamedly not a 'good' book, it's an entertaining one: over-cooked, hi-energy, sugar-frosted hyper-real. It's like the 'Mission Impossible' films it resembles: disparate borderline super-heroes thrown together seemingly by circumstance to take down a Big Bad Threat to the world. Whilst making bad jokes.

Its shortcomings can be frustrating for the first hundred pages, but its virtues wrestle you to the ground. Every time you think it might lose you, it grabs you back until finally you stop caring and just enjoy it on its own unrealistic terms. Accept it for what it is, and you'll have fun. Don't get bogged down trying to follow a logic it doesn't need.

Pay attention and you'll see some really thoughtful work driving the story along. There's nicely developed use of philosophical ideas, free will, morality and paradox. They're here not for the sake of looking clever, but to make interesting impacts on the story.

Arguably, the entire book is about coming to grips with being a teenager in both an obvious and a subtle way. There are some great heist genre sequences, with some really well-thought-out schemes. Overall, it services the genre pretty nicely. The plot twists pleasingly; without heavy signalling, but without surprise. When it happens you never think you couldn't see it coming, but equally you never think the previous paras and pages were pointing at the imminent arrival of the twist. It is well-paced; the denouement's cracking.

And the clown sequence is inspired. I felt jealous of that one.

Yes, as a 'good' book it could benefit from, well, take your pick of editor's notes, but that would spoil the purity of what it actually is: a great big, big great party of a story.

Recommended for wet afternoons, long journeys and moments when smiling isn't coming as easily as it should.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Max Einstein. The Genius Experiment

James Patterson, illus. Beverly Johnson, pub. Penguin Random House

This is a story with a message, aimed at young girls (8 to 12 years old) with a potential interest in science. It is from an author who has written many successful books, who says that this will be part of the most important series he has ever written for children. James Patterson is proud of the fact that

the series has been officially approved by the Albert Einstein Archives. It should, indeed, raise awareness of the famous scientist, particularly amongst girls. It highlights the importance of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) skills.

Max Einstein is the 12-year-old female lead, who is fascinated by all things Einstein. She starts the story living with a group of squatters above a stable block in New York. Max is a genius, she is smart, clever, brave and creative; the perfect heroine for young female readers to follow. She is an unusual and dynamic character for these young readers to identify with. Max is very much into science.

This is an easy book to read, helped by the very short chapters. It is a very different and unique story, with some fascinating characters and enough action to keep the reader interested. There is an abundance of quality and fun black and white sketches to add to the delight of the text. A great read, especially if you love science and an exciting, young female lead character.

If you do read and enjoy this story, you will be pleased to know that Book 2 is coming soon.

Gary Kenworthy

The Missing Barbegazi

H. S. Norup, pub. Pushkin Children's

A story of loss, grief, families and friends. This especially moving and yet bright adventurous story of Tessa, a young girl with a feisty spirit for adventure and a determination to do the right thing for all is moving, beautiful, almost more than words can say. It will leave readers with a lump in their throat and a smile on their faces. It is honest, unusual, distinct.

Tessa lives in a village in the mountains – we are not given an exact location but for me it is the depths of the Swiss or Austrian alps. We learn immediately that her grandfather has recently died and that she, along with all of her family, are finding the grief very raw and difficult to deal with. However, Tess, despite the apparent coldness of her so-called best friends, is determined that she will keep her grandfather's memory alive with her rediscovery of the fabled Barbegazi who once saved his life.

No-one truly believes they exist, or at least they say they don't, they claim these are a figment of the imagination, a fable, a tale her grandfather told but Tessa feels differently and whilst she yearns to find them, and ask her friends for help, she is not sure who she can trust.

In the meantime family concerns for grandma are deepening and Tess needs to balance all of this with the upcoming trials for the skiing competition.

Alongside this story we read the story of the Barbegazi, the elf-like creatures who live in the mountains, live off berries and thrive on avalanches. Their story is equally touching and real. They are much older than we humans, by hundreds of years, but the parents still treat the young ones as children – much to their chagrin – so typical of children! They are equally adventurous and whilst Tessa is eager to meet them Gawion is (quite) keen to find a human but more so desperately wanting to find his sister.

It won't be a spoiler to tell you that Tessa and Gawion meet but it would be to tell you what happens ... so I will just tell you that a wonderful adventure awaits, an adventure that will surprise them both, and their families. Tessa will find out more about what friendship really means and what are the most important priorities to her and her loved ones. She will also learn that secrets can sometimes be important and that some should be kept forever.

Eloquent and beautiful with the most delightful chapter headed illustrations. This is a forever book – one that you can read time and again for it is timeless, striking and heartwarming.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Mr Tiger, Betsy and the Blue Moon

Sally Gardner, illus., Nick Manland, pub. Zephyr

Oh! what a delicious feast of fairy tale fantasy! *Mr Tiger, Betsy and the Blue Moon* is a story that is hard not to devour in one sitting. With just the right portions of good versus evil, a generous sprinkling of magic and bowl full of the sweetest ice-cream wishes to finish, Sally Gardner pulls you into a world of literary wonder as you follow Betsy and her friends on their quest to save a toad from a giant on an island as far away as Sunday. Yes.... it's truly bonkers!

Betsy comes from an unconventional family. She is the daughter of a famous ice cream maker and sees her mother, a mermaid, every Wednesday when she comes to shore. Her parents, despite all their obvious differences and living separate lives, are still very much in love. Together, with the help of some curious, gigantic and gutsy friends they go in search of the impossible ... a blue moon and some Gongalong berries! Berries which can be turned into the most wishably-delicious ice cream and grant a wish that the friends hope to use to help save a rather royal toad.

At first glance, you might assume the blue text that this story is written in has a link to the title of the book 'blue moon' (I certainly did). However, Sally Gardner, who is dyslexic herself, has chosen to publish this story in 'Dyslexie', a font specially designed to make reading easier for dyslexic children. She is passionate about dyslexia being recognised as 'the gift of creativity', and her writing certainly reflects this; she has a brilliantly quirky way with words. Her sentences conjure up such interesting

and curious images, which come to life within Nick Maland's intricately detailed illustrations. The pages are a delight to turn and the story leaves you feeling perfectly full of happiness and cheer!

Anna Stebbing

Peril in Paris

Katherine Woodfine, illus Karl James Mountford, pub. Egmont Publishing

It is 1911. On the outside, Sophie Taylor and Lilian Rose look like your typical Georgian women. Yet they are anything but ordinary. They are the proprietors of Taylor & Rose Detective Agency and agents for the Secret Service Bureau. Their job is to go undercover and seek out what others are desperate to hide.

The world is changing. In Arnovia, the country under threat from their neighbours. The heirs to the throne, Prince Alex and Princess Anna, know that their grandfather, the King, is worried. However, when Alex and Anna are appointed a new governess, Anna is distracted. Something just doesn't seem right about Miss Carter, who less than strict in the schoolroom.

Meanwhile, in Paris, a man lays dead. Allegedly murdered in a burglary gone wrong. The Secret Service Bureau are not convinced this is the case, and so, Sophie is sent undercover to investigate.

Peril in Paris is a wonderful, heart-stopping adventure. Full of strong, intelligent and wildly adventurous female characters who are prepared to face their fears in order to protect their country and see justice done.

A superbly manifested plot, perfect for youngsters with a thirst for mystery and adventure. Ideal for confident readers and for fans of Katherine Woodfine's *The Sinclair's Mysteries*.

Laura Roach

Snowglobe

Amy Wilson, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Clementine lives with her Pa, abandoned by her mother at the age of two, which leaves her confused and feeling as though she doesn't fit in.

One evening, after an incident at school, Clementine is given her mother's diary by her Pa who hopes it will answer some of her questions and give her some much needed clarity. After glancing through it and feeling restless Clementine wanders round her home town and happens upon a strange house

that looks identical to one her mother has drawn inside the diary. Curious for answers she creeps inside and finds a house filled with snowglobes - on shelves, along corridors, even hanging from ceilings on chains! It is here she sees her friend Dylan trapped inside one of the Snowglobes in an eternal winter.

Unable to function knowing that Dylan is trapped, Clementine begins a magical journey that sees her travel through the mesmerising worlds of the snowglobes to release him. It is upon this voyage that much is discovered, and much is at stake, especially as all actions have consequences - a lesson Clementine will learn along the way.

Fans of Abi Elphinstone's *Sky Song* (myself included) will be overjoyed to be with Clementine as she ventures through such a beautiful world of magic and mystery. This book would delight such fans of who are hoping to be entranced by a beautiful world of magic and mystery with a hint of danger. *Snowglobe* does just that.

Samantha Thomas

Storm Witch

Ellen Renner, pub. Nosy Crow

Storm is thirteen, ready to undertake ritual of The Choosing to become an adult. On this night Storm must visit each of the shrines dedicated to one of the four elements - Air, Water, Earth or Fire - and whichever one chooses her determines her role and work for the rest of her adult life. The choice of the elementals is however surprising.

Storm is a misfit, desperately wanting to be normal. Her village of Yanlin is a rigid society with clearly defined roles for men and women, subdivided further according to each person's element and where everyone is expected to contribute to the life and defence of the village. Storm is a girl with a boy's name. After the night of her choosing, her role remains uncertain and she must learn to use her magical powers, no-one can teach her. Whether her magical powers will aide or hinder the village is unknown. Meanwhile life in the village is precarious, reliant upon the success of the fishermen for its food and trade and fearful of attack from pirates called the Drowned Ones. Adrift, Storm must find her place in the world.

Moreover Storm's character must overcome many personal challenges, including the grief she still feels after losing her father when she was five, the bullying and the transition from acting like a child to thinking like an adult. There is the additional fear of disobeying her community when she does not immediately kill a stranded boy on the island, instead she begins to fall in love. Sadly, he will cause her great personal tragedy and anguish with consequences that continue into book two.

Storm Witch is set in a compelling new fantasy world where the cosmic forces of the four elements are seemingly in a battle that somehow centres upon Storm. There are therefore hints that Storm's role is bigger than a village Storm Witch, who ensures a good harvest of fish from the sea. The prophetic words uttered at The Choosing are ominous: 'Much is needed from you'.

Simon Barrett

Tilly and the Bookwanderers

Anna James, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Sometimes even from the very sentence of a book - you just know ... *Tilly and the bookwanderers* is very definitely one of THOSE books. A book to cosy up with, a book to lose yourself in for hours, a book to remind you about the magic of books and just why you love reading.

Eleven-year-old Matilda Pages has lived above the bookshop run by her grandparents since her mother disappeared shortly after she was born. With its "familiar scent of just-blown out candles, dark chocolate, and of course, books" Pages and Co is made up of all the things you love most about your favourite bookshops.

Tilly herself finds comfort and escape in the pages of the books there until one day she notices that her favourite characters are appearing in the shop and that she can follow Anne (of Green Gables) and Alice (of Wonderland fame) back into their worlds through the magical power of bookwandering. Tilly is convinced this ability will help unravel the mysterious disappearance of her mother but when she ventures into the Underlibrary of the British Library the truth becomes more sinister and much more dangerous...

This spellbinding adventure has so much to recommend it - the inspired chapter titles, the evocatively drawn settings, the dastardly villains and sinister subplots, the magical shenanigans in the Underlibrary. Tilly's warm relationship with her caring and protective grandparents, her imperfect friendship with Oskar, her quest to find her mother, the troublesome transition to secondary school, the painstaking worldbuilding, the carefully explained mechanics of bookwandering - and the skill which all of these elements are so cleverly interwoven.

Taking characters as iconic as Anne and Alice and creating something new is a huge risk but James pulls it off with aplomb, creating something very special. This is a book to make the reader believe that extraordinary magic exists in the real world every day, lurking just around the corner, if only you look for it.

Bookworms will adore spotting their favourite book characters, reading the original stories and imagining their own bookwandering adventures. Those as yet unfamiliar with the originals will be

drawn into the mystery of Tilly's past. Adults will love the nostalgic feel and being catapulted back to their childhood reading. This is storytelling at its best, a love song to all things literary, which deserves every success. Because as the cover tagline reminds us, "there's nothing like getting lost in a good book."

Fans of *Nevermoor* and *A Place Called Perfect* will devour this imaginative, slightly creepy adventure which sits comfortably alongside *Inkheart* and *The Lost Magician*. Hats off to Harpercollins too for the stunning packaging, stylish illustrations and accompanying online storycards providing young writers with extra plot ideas from Tilly when they get stuck. It bodes well that future bookwandering adventures might be planned for Tilly. I can't wait to see who she meets next!

Eileen Armstrong

The Train to Impossible Places: a Cursed Delivery

P G Bell, illus. Flavia Sorrentino, pub. Usborne

I liked this book before even starting the first chapter, why?, underneath the dust jacket, the hardback cover is beautifully illustrated. As a school librarian I have learnt that children are unable to resist removing the dust jacket, so I am often left with a rather dull looking book - but not this time!

So, this marvelously inventive story describes what happens when our heroine, Suzy, encounters a train rattling into her perfectly ordinary house late one night. I wasn't surprised to read in the author bio that P.G. Bell once worked as a rollercoaster operator; the reader is whisked away on a tumultuous journey, twisting and turning through a series of Impossible Places - from under the sea to on the moon.

Suzy has found herself on the Troll postal delivery service - a train which runs on bananas, stoked by a large blond lady bear and staffed by trolls. She becomes embroiled in an existential struggle between two powers - The Observatory located in the Ivory Tower, and a sorceress, Lady Crepuscula, whose base is the Obsidian Tower. But all is not quite as it seems, as the reader will discover.

This is a fantasy shot through with actual science - how many other children's books feature Newton's Laws of Motion? - and Suzy is a physics whiz. Our olive-skinned heroine is sharp, logical and fearless. She uses intellect and knowledge to defeat the enemy - "that's physics. It's what I do."

Young fans of steam punk will enjoy the descriptions of the trolls' ingenious inventions as they reuse and rework old machinery. The author shows a real fondness for craftsmanship and real artefacts as opposed to the increasing use of virtual/computerised methods.

This is a real parable for our times with its theme of ownership of information and its implications for democracy. A jolly good read.

Rose Palmer

Youth Adult Book Reviews

A Sky Painted Gold

Laura Wood, pub. Scholastic

It is the 1920s. We find ourselves in Cornwall, land of the magical, the mysterious, the beaches, the countryside, the romance – even now. Taking us back in time to a bygone era, one of parties, of glamour, of high society, a time when, post-war, the upper classes were enjoying themselves and the lower classes were finding their place, and all were growing in the confidence that war was behind them and only bright, glorious days lay ahead.

The young were full of energy and life in the roaring 20s and Lou is a young girl with big dreams, fitting for the period, yet at the same time she knows that unless something very unlikely happens she is destined to stay local, marry her local sweetheart and become a housewife in her traditional Cornish village. Her young summers are therefore full of romance and adventure, in her head, and (all-too-soon) in reality too.

Just beyond the village is a causeway, the road to adventures, the road that takes Lou, for a time, out of the village and into her Agatha Christie world of mystery and adventure. Here she can climb trees, steal apple, explore the grand house. Here is where she can be alone with her imagination. Alone until the day that the Cardew's arrive. This is their summer house and this particular summer, for reasons that will unfold as you read, the Cardew's have come here for their summer. The impact of this on Lou's life, on her sleepy Cornish village and on the Cardew's themselves is almost indescribably huge. The wheels that are set in motion though the simplest of acts and comments will have a profound effect on all concerned.

With its hints of Gatsby-esque drama, the charm of I capture the castle and its own unique voice, this book will engross and delight readers as they enjoy plumbing the depths of the characters, engaging with the multi-layered and multi-faceted story and allow themselves to be taken on a surprising, at times dangerous journey into a world where classes clash, unite and danger lurks just beneath the surface.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

And the Ocean was Our Sky

Patrick Ness, illus. Rovinia Cai, pub. Walker Books

In *Bathsheba's world* the dark abyss of the deep is home - sprawling technologically advanced cities - and the water of the ocean is her sky whilst she sails on her ship as third apprentice. It is a world where the hunted is the hunter and *Bathsheba's* captain, Alexandra, is a whale hunter with a fearsome reputation. For *Bathsheba*, and whales like her, hunt humans - breaking up their ships and drowning their crews. It is a world where whales and humans are at war.

It is misleading however to describe Patrick Ness' new book as retelling Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* from the perspective of whales. Captain Alexandra, like Captain Ahab, is singularly obsessed - her mission is to kill the supposed human captain Toby Wick, responsible for the broken harpoon embedded into her, a harpoon surgically too dangerous to remove. Her fixation, and that of other whales, on destroying Toby Wick elevates to levels of religious fervour as they see signs of impending doom and eagerly rush to their deaths. *Bathsheba's* character is the sceptic, questioning the blind madness around her. In so doing *Bathsheba* befriends a human captive, Demetrius and begins to see her actions from another's perspective. Sadly, she must remain obedient to the chain of command, following the orders of her captain and ship-mates.

And the ocean was our sky explores how we make the devils we are compelled to hunt. *Bathsheba's* struggle is to not become the devil that she seeks to destroy, trying to achieve some sort of absolution by refusing to kill Demetrius. Captain Alexandra however seems happy to become a devil, to kill a devil. More hauntingly at the end of the book we learn how the stories of devils become myths, immortalizing them for future generations, and the cause of future conflict. It is certainly a book that deserves re-reading to plumb its depth of meaning.

Rovinia Cai's illustrations beautifully capture *Bathsheba's* underwater world with its grey hues and stark red of blood flowing through the water. Her illustrations brilliantly challenge our conventional assumption of ships sailing on top of the water, particularly when *Bathsheba* travels to the margins of ocean's surface and we have to literally flip our human perspective. Additionally there are a number of sequences of double page drawings where Rovinia's illustrations poignantly complete the telling of the story.

And the ocean was our sky is a literary and artistic masterpiece.

Simon Barrett

City of Ghosts

Victoria Schwab, pub. Scholastic

A book in four parts which starts with us meeting the 'Inspectors' - Cass and her parents, parents who write about ghost but don't really believe in them and a daughter whose best friend, Jacob, is a ghost. In part two - *City of ghosts* - we are with the family in Edinburgh. The parents are there to film a

documentary about the ghosts they cannot see, hear or feel and have no idea what this is doing to Cass.

The reader discovers more about Cass' unusual story whilst she is in Edinburgh, and it is here that the majority of the book is set. As she gets closet to the other side in this most haunted of cities her life hangs in the balance and the darkness which, at the start of the story was a presence, becomes increasingly threatening.

By part three - Ghost hunters – I was getting quite scared, it gets very spooky and the introduction of some questionable characters – Lara and Findlay among them - adds to the suspense. I found myself wondering who was actually real!

Part four – The Raven in Red – is the darkest the story gets, Cass and Jacob are trapped on the other side in a snare set by the Raven who steals Cass' life force which in turn forces Cass and Jacob to take unsavoury and very dark attempts to thwart her plans.

The story closes with part five - that's a wrap – alluding to the end of the filming process, the end of Cass' own camera film but also some new understandings and new beginnings. There is the suggestion of more to come but at the same time the questions that hang in the air suit the book entirely. Be brave, have a read but maybe do it in the daylight and remember your mirror necklace!

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Definition of Us

Sarah Harris, pub. Piatkus

Manor Lane is the final tier of the child and adolescent mental health care system. It's much-loved psychotherapist, Howard Green, is unexpectedly and mysteriously absent. Four of his patients, feeling they cannot manage without him, set off to find him. In true road-trip style, they wend their way across the country, following clues and encountering a range of trials and tribulations. It is a well-trodden narrative arc but its strength is the compassionate depiction of the young people's struggles with their own vulnerabilities.

Florence, Jasper, Wilf and Andrew have a wide range of issues to contend with, including severe depression, eating disorders, ADHD, ASD and OCD. Whilst these challenges are the drivers of the novel, in that the students feel ill-equipped to manage them without Howard, they are not the most important aspect of it – “as soon as people know you've got problems it's all they see”.

I felt a little cheated by the ending, however, this can partly be explained due to allusions to *The Wizard of Oz*. Like the wizard, Howard Green is not as mighty as the students have built him up to

be; it is an eye-opener that adults like him can be vulnerable too. As Wilf says, “he’s a bloke not a magician’. During their quest, they also discover that they aren’t lacking or deficient, as they had felt at the start, but that they had all that they needed within them all along and, together, they were a formidable team.

Many young people suffer from mental ill-health in one form or another. An effective element of the novel is Florence’s notebook in which she models different ways of thinking to help combat anxiety and depression. For instance, ‘unhelpful negative thoughts’ are replaced with ‘positively crushingly good thoughts’ in her Life Lessons to Remember. There is a section at the end of the novel with contact information for readers who need advice and support.

Far from being heavy, as the subject matter might suggest, this is a very readable novel, full of the funny banter you can only get away with if it comes from a place of affection. Although the main characters are sixth formers, young people of fourteen years and up would find it rewarding, written as it is with warmth and compassion for young people struggling with the pressures of the world today.

Jackie Spink

The Dreadful Tale of Prosper Redding

Alexandra Bracken, pub. Quercus Books

I loved *The Dreadful Tale of Prosper Redding* by Alexandra Bracken! What a great, rich story, with layers of history, detail, and magical characters, written with incredible imagination, timing, and excitement. And ultimately, with a sense of what is to be human. Readers have a lot to get their teeth into!

Prosper’s story is about family, the Redding family, settlers from England who founded the town Redhood, USA in 1687. Bracken’s often comic and at heart intrinsically good hero must confront both the burden of his settler ancestors - in the form of a pact made and then broken by Honor Redding, the family’s founding patriarch, with a demon fiend, signed in order to forever guarantee the family’s success – as well as protecting the lives of the loved ones that undeniably form the core of his self.

When a mysterious ceremony in the eerie dungeon of the Cottage (the Redding mansion) explodes into chaos, Prosper’s twin Prudence is taken, and he is rescued by an unknown relation - only to discover a greater web of dreadful lies and revenge.

The fragility of the human heart, its vulnerability to power on one hand and to love on the other, is explored throughout the novel. Inside Prosper – speaking to him through bold italics on the page, a split narrator – is Alastor, the demon fiend or Malefactor itself, trapped inside. Alastor has outlived a

spell and bided enough time – nearly 13 years – in order to regain energy and finally enact revenge on the Redding family for the pact Honor Redding broke.

Bracken's invention of the novel's anti-hero, Alastor, is a captivating, creepy-voiced character, literally feeding off the human world's misery, and disgusted at the sweet taste of guilt, compassion, or trust he finds in Prosper's incorruptible mind. The malefactor, in this way, speaks to many, if not all, human stories, as the potential for light and for dark within us. Bracken deftly explores this theme, using different narrative perspectives, as Prosper confronts Alastor, but wisely listens to him too, lets the fiend in when needed, and plays with the idea of 'contract' – the root, of course, of all the Redding family legacy and ruin. But Prosper is never bound to it, or sells his soul; for though he is not like his family, he is 'still a Redding' after all.

This is an adventure in magic across all the four dimensions - in howlers, hobgoblins, ghouls and fiends, of dreams as mediums for communication between the realms, of mirrors as silvery bendable portals between them. A book of spells blazes in white flames ... ogres stink and stench ... a feline apparition haunts a dream ... miraculous strength and speed powers human bodies in moments of near death. There are twists in this twisted novel that will surprise. I think, too, that the history of the Settlers is perhaps timely as society confronts colonial pasts and visits their ramifications, as well as the history of the witch trials; for young adults, Bracken's introduction to the issue could ease open paths for curious minds.

The complexity of the past and family before you, of past deceit and lies, of loss, bear down considerably on the destiny and identity of one's self, entwining and entangling. As it is for Prosper, it is often up to us – up to children – to navigate these dark and dreadful histories.

Laurence Tidy

Every Colour of You

Amelia Mandeville, pub. Sphere

Zoe and Tristan have never met before until one day when they're both in the same hospital waiting room and Zoe catches Tristan stealing a pack of cigarettes from someone's bag... The two twenty-somethings never expected to see each other again after this embarrassing incident, but fate or something else maybe, sees Tristan starting a job at the very supermarket where Zoe is working. Zoe's work-mates tell her that Tristan used to be popular but that something happened to him and he 'lost it', left town and spent time in a mental health facility.

Zoe is an incurable optimist, and she loves to be the centre of attention. She's into dyeing her hair, drawing smiley faces, doing yoga and taking photos on disposable cameras. She likes things to be bright and bubbly and spontaneous. She may seem like she doesn't have a care in the world, but as

the story progresses, it is clear that she is not exactly what she seems, and despite her sunny disposition Zoe is grappling with something deeper. Maybe the rainbow she tries to create around her is nothing but an illusion?

By contrast, Tristan is quiet and morose. He has been touched by a profound loss and struggles to live with the grief and sadness that he feels and the impact it has had on his family and his life. He used to be popular and 'a bit of a lad'. He had a future and friends, but it all seemed to vanish after his father died and he can't seem to see a way out of the darkness that shrouds him.

Initially, Tristan sees Zoe as an annoying ditz. Zoe sees Tristan as a project ... she wants to bring colour back into his life. Tristan doesn't know how he's going to make it through the next day. He is self-absorbed and obsessed with his own sadness - it doesn't seem like he has anything to give to anyone, let alone someone so upbeat and so different to him. But Zoe sees something in Tristan. They embark on an unlikely friendship, Zoe persisting in cheering up the sullen, apathetic and at times plain obnoxious Tristan. But slowly, he sees something more than a purple-haired, irritating do-gooder.

Every Colour of You is both uplifting and poignant. It is gently paced with a slow-burning plot building to a strong emotional resolution. It shouldn't be viewed as a guide on treating mental illness or depression, but it weaves this subject matter and its impact on so many young people into a charming and engaging story which is admirable.

May Vuletic

Giant Days

Non Pratt, pub. Amulet

Three friends a new home and a new family. A wonderful warm and funny read. Based on the hit graphic-novel series from BOOM! Studios.

Remembering that day when I dropped my own daughter off at university and drove away hoping that all of the years with her family had rubbed off enough for her to make new friends, and look after herself. This book brought back those memories and allowed an insight into what could have happened in her new 'university land'. Combine this with the fact that this university is in Sheffield and one of her choices and I was sold.

The three main characters are so well drawn that if I met them in the street I would say hello. What do they have in common? Only the fact that they have been allocated rooms in the same flat. They are all very different. Susan is super intelligent and quite a dark character, Esther is vivacious and dramatic and would be studying English if she ever made it to any lectures and Daisy who has been

home schooled and hates to upset people. They create a unique bond in their very first week and learn to watch out for each other as they navigate university. All three girls are trying to find their place in this new environment and through this find out who they are as well. Daisy's naivety leads to an ongoing mystery that holds the book together and leads to a hilarious conclusion.

The whole 'fresher's fair' chapter with Daisy signing up for clubs, willy nilly, had me roaring with laughter and the consequences led to the reader being able to understand Daisy's strengths and emotional needs. She just wants to fit in, somewhere.

Susan and Esther are very protective of Daisy but have their own foibles. Esther's chameleon like nature and passion for the disdainful Vectra is a wonderful juxtaposition to Susan's more spiky and dominant character and need to hold McGraw to a very formal contract. I really want to know more about McGraw, Susan's nemesis, and many of the other side characters who pop up and help to keep the narrative flowing.

Travelling through the halls and accommodation areas of Sheffield University this book is a joy to read and I can't wait for this mismatched group to move into their second year at Uni. I am hoping that Esther doesn't turn into another Elise ('Zign of Zoise', a criminal yoga group), but with her close friends as checks and balances, perhaps not.

Sue Bussey

Impostors

Scott Westerfeld, pub. Scholastic

Twenty-six minutes separate the birth of identical twin sisters Rafi and Frey and place them a world apart. Rafi is the heir to their father, the ruler of the city of Shreve. Frey is her bodyguard. One girl is trained to shine in the limelight, the other to move stealthily. One loves socializing and is a keen fashionista, the other undergoes intense training sessions and loves the thrill of the battle.

As part of a delicate negotiation, it is arranged for Rafi to spend some time with the neighbouring powerful family, the Palafoxes, effectively a hostage to secure fair play. In reality Frey is the one who travels to Victoria, the Palafoxes' capital.

The existence of a twin sister is such a well-kept secret that not even Col Palafox, the family heir, can imagine the truth behind the apparent incongruities in the behaviour of the girl he assumes to be Rafi. As Col and Frey become closer, the negotiations are abruptly brought to a halt by Frey's father's sudden and violent attack on Victoria.

For Frey, the time in Victoria has provided the opportunity to consider her life in a new light. The realisation that her father is willing to gamble her life, and possibly that of her twin sister, in order to follow his ambitions leads her to reconsider her loyalties. Determined to rescue Rafi, Frey reveals her true identity to Col and becomes part of the movement fighting back against the powers of Shreve. *Impostors* is the first instalment in a new dystopian series of four novels by Scott Westerfeld which, according to the author, will see a new book being published every year. He returns to the world he created in the *Uglies* series, and in fact characters from that saga are included – or at least mentioned – in this book. No previous knowledge of that series is needed to enjoy this new story, though Westerfeld is very clever in his allusions to an older world and its history. The beginning of the book is exciting, and the twins' complex family dynamics is intriguing. The reader understands immediately that nothing should be given for certain, neither in Shreve nor in Victoria, and that in order to survive Frey needs all her wits and skills.

The tale is told through the point of view of Frey and the development of her character is well managed. Romance, politics and warfare are aptly combined to make this a satisfying read.

Laura Brill

Jinxed

Amy McCulloch, pub. Simon & Schuster

The industrialised world has grown weary of personal technology: computers that bind you to a desk; smart phones that move out of range or run out of charge; people who have lost touch with the real world and feel lonely and isolated.

Monica Chan, an idealistic young entrepreneur has invented the baku, an individualised animal robot that is charged by your own body. A baku is the ultimate, swift-response smart phone and it's also your constant companion and your perfect pet. Think Pullman's daemons, but hard wired and (theoretically) infallible.

Monica's invention led to the Moncha corporation that dominates and controls the community. Lacey Chu, a gifted student with a passion for technology, is desperate to get into Moncha's elite and secretive Profectus Academy. But she cannot afford the essential high-grade baku she needs - until, by a twist of fate, the mysterious Jinx comes into her life. Jinx is damaged, unpredictable, and astonishingly powerful. He is Lacey's ticket into Profectus but once inside the Academy, Lacey begins to understand the chilling tactics Moncha uses to protect its dominance.

This dystopian story, the first in a series, stands out because it feels uncomfortably prophetic. The plot has depth and complexity; the pace is satisfyingly fast but not bewildering. Lacey is a grounded

and believable character, an ordinary girl in an extraordinary situation. This is a genuinely gripping read which will, no doubt, make readers keen to see more as the series develops.

Yvonne Coppard

Yvonne Coppard is the co-author, with Linda Newbery, of *Writing Children's Fiction*, published by Bloomsbury. Her latest novel, *Amelie's Secret* is available on Kindle.

The Key to Flambards

Linda Newbery, pub. David Fickling Books

When I heard that this book was in the offing I was thrilled. And terrified. Thrilled because I have been a huge Flambards fan since I was twelve. Terrified because I have been a huge Flambards fan since I was twelve.

When you love a series of books you feel a sense of ownership. You know what the characters did next even though the author hasn't written it. The characters and setting in K M Peyton's four Flambards novels are so vibrant that they have always lived off the page and in my heart and imagination. I can spend hours with like-minded friends on such dilemmas as 'Mark versus Will?' and 'Mark and Christina – will it work out?'

So when I heard that Linda Newbery was writing a companion novel which would take the story of Flambards into the 21st century I was simultaneously delighted and disturbed. Would this destroy my own thoughts about the characters? Might it be like when your friends came and played with your Sindy dolls and gave them the wrong voices? One thing I knew for sure: if anyone could pull this off, it was Linda Newbery. Not only is she good friends with K. M. Peyton, who endorsed and encouraged the project, but she is one of the best writers around – thoughtful, literary and serious, with solid knowledge of the period, as shown in previous novels such as *The Shell House* and her own WW1 trilogy. A part of me envied Linda's having this chance, but a larger part would have been terrified. The task must have been so difficult – to write a contemporary novel which worked on its own terms, and yet satisfied the many readers who bought it because of the Flambards connection. Balancing that must have been a nightmare.

Of course Newbery succeeds brilliantly. The main storyline is of fourteen-year-old Grace, an athletic girl recovering from the trauma of losing a limb. Grace and her mother come to spend a summer at Flambards, which is their long-lost ancestral home, Grace being Christina's great-great granddaughter. The action is set over the summer and autumn of 2018, and the WW1 centenary commemorations help bind past and present.

Grace is a very engaging heroine, determined, sensitive and resourceful. Her gradual falling-in-love with Flambards and country life – including horses – echoes that of Christina, but also works as a story in its own right. The surrounding cast is well drawn, too, with the adult characters as nuanced, flawed and interesting as the teenagers. The setting is vivid; I loved the idea of Flambards as a kind of Arvon centre, and wished I could book in immediately. Some of the details, such as the neighbouring house being called Badstocks, were wonderfully redolent of the original Flambards, giving a sense of continuity without being in any way intrusive to the ‘new’ reader, who won’t notice.

There is a lot going on here, much of it echoing the themes of Flambards and its wartime setting – PTSD and disability being the most obvious, but also horses, saving an old house, nature and conservation. Newbery also explores sexuality, Brexit and blended families, as Grace struggles to come to terms with her new reality. At times I wondered if there was almost too much happening? I felt some of the issues were resolved rather easily – especially the outcome for Flambards – but I think that’s really just a sign that I wanted more of this lovely book, (and also a sign that I am fifty, not fifteen).

Newbery uses various clever devices to get both Grace and the reader involved with the wartime stories of Christina and her cousins – letters, recordings, etc. And without there being any hint of the supernatural, Grace and the reader very much feel the spirit of Christina in the house. (Newbery excels at evoking the atmosphere of houses.)

As for Newbery’s ideas about what Christina (and Mark, Dick, Tom, Isobel, etc.) did next ... well, they differed from mine – of course, but I found them believable and satisfying though in the case of Mark’s death (hardly a spoiler – we know these characters are long dead!) almost unbearably tragic.

I loved the book; it’s vintage Newbery – intelligent, immersive and intriguing – and, as well as sending readers towards Flambards I hope it wins new fans for her own impressive back catalogue.

Sheena Wilkinson

Sheena Wilkinson’s *Star By Star* is published by Little Island.

The Light Between Worlds

Laura Weymouth, pub. Chicken House

It is 1944. Bombs are falling. Three siblings, Philippa, her younger sister Evelyn and her brother Jamie, are in an air raid shelter in London. Evelyn is curled into her sister in a desperate state of terror. She says she would wish to be anywhere but here. The three of them are transposed into a different world, a world called The Great Wood, which is also at war. Evelyn, unlike the other two, finds herself more at home in The Great Wood than she felt in our world. She would like to stay.

Philippa has made a promise to her parents that she would look after the other two. For this reason she feels honour bound to bring them home, despite Evelyn's preference. The novel poses the question how the siblings will cope with their unique situation.

The question constantly in the reader's mind is whether these events are supposed to be unfolding in an alternative reality or whether they are taking place only in Evelyn's imagination. The question is never quite resolved. The reader is thus confronted with a powerful representation of the way mental conflict affects both the individual experiencing the conflict and those around him or her. Since the story is narrated first by Evelyn and then by Philippa, alternative perspectives on reality are provided. This is a deeply affecting novel.

Rebecca Butler

No Fixed Address

Susin Neilsen, pub. Andersen Press

This is the compelling story of Felix Knutsson, a teenage boy who has started living in a van with his mum Astrid since things haven't worked out for them and they have nowhere to live. Felix has had to change school regularly in the past as his and Astrid's circumstances saw them moving around a lot but when they run out of options and luck Astrid suggests they live in the van for the summer. It soon becomes apparent it will be for longer than that. Although this enables Felix to start at a new school, the one he has always wanted to go to, and study subjects like French that he really enjoys, he has to keep a promise he made with his mum. He has promised that he won't tell anyone about their living arrangements - not even his best friend Dylan. He has been re-acquainted with Dylan after a time apart, they were friends in a previous school but still Felix cannot tell him everything.

The story opens the readers' eyes up to the problems people with NFA (no fixed address) face on a daily basis and how they overcome them too. There are no wash facilities in a van so Felix and Astrid make weekly trips to the community centre to use the showers. Add to this the lack of storage in their vehicle which means that have to leave behind any items that aren't of practical benefit and you will understand, or begin to, how this fuels a determination in Felix to change his, and Astrid's, circumstances. What does he do? He enters himself on to a children's version of a game show that he grew up watching with his grandma. Using his natural gift to recall facts from memory to win the substantial cash prize which he hopes will enable the two of them to find somewhere to live.

There are plenty of bumps in the road to success for Felix and they make the story both funny and tearful to read, but having nothing to lose only strengthens Felix's refusal to accept failure. It is easy to see why *No Fixed Address* has been endorsed by Amnesty International.

Samantha Thomas

Odd One Out

Nic Stone, pub. Simon & Schuster

From the New York Times bestselling author of *Dear Martin*, this American YA novel is written in three narrative voices, exploring the friendship of Courtney, Jupiter and Rae. Courtney Cooper (Coop) and Jupiter Sanchez (Jupe) have been neighbours and best friends since childhood and Rae Chin is the new girl to the area and catalyst for change in their lives.

Jupe is the biracial daughter of gay fathers who idolises Freddie Mercury and identifies as lesbian. She is a charismatic force of nature who cheerleads for local good causes. Coop is her heterosexual sporty friend who is finding their very close (they usually sleep curled round each other) relationship increasingly difficult. Rae is a multiracial newcomer and logophile who is delighted to be befriended by this golden couple and then disturbed to find that she is attracted to them both.

Rae's attraction to Coop catapults a thunderstruck Jupe into realising she has feelings for Coop, as well as fancying Rae – and she begins questioning her identity. In fact, they are, all three, attracted to each other. Confusing and complex? Yes. However, the three distinct narrative voices draw in the reader, and maintain a page-turning focus.

The characters betray and hurt each other, and controversial attitudes are explored, notably questioning attitudes towards trans people. Stone calls out prejudice in the different groups, avoiding stereotyping. She says the book was what she needed growing up and this novel fearlessly depicts teen sexuality; its inclusivity will help readers who live in atypical families, who are multiracial, who struggle with their sexual identity and feel they do not fit in.

Finally, Jupe's courageous decision to reject the labels by which others define her, and who she can love, will surely resonate with all readers.

Saira Archer

The Punk Factor

Rebecca Denton, pub. Atom Books

Seventeen-year-old Frankie is more into punk than school, and drops out, determined to take her punk rock girl band into stardom. Unusually, Frankie's decision is supported by her parents, who provide a lively, loving background to their daughter's adventures. Frankie's workaholic best friend Haruna is a talented drummer, for whom the band provides a temporary escape from the increasingly

restrictive and cruel home life with her timid mother and her religiously extreme step-father. Aimee, a happily gay guitarist aiming for a place at medical school, makes up the numbers.

While Frankie is the centre of the novel's action, in many ways it is Rebecca Denton's portrait of Haruna's life is the most compelling aspect of the novel. Frankie is gobby, someone who can persuade for England, 'borrow' without hesitation, and a compulsive - though not dangerous - liar, who routinely promotes the band (curiously called 'Seven' despite there being only three members) to others by stating that they have been promised gigs and record deals, when it's just wishful thinking. Nevertheless Frankie's heart is absolutely in the right place, and she proves to be a true friend to others when they need one. Her on/off relationship with former boyfriend Doc will ring true with many readers, as will her initial irritation with Jules.

When Haruna's own settled love-life takes a less-than-welcome turn, Frankie puts friendship and support for her above the band's immediate future, and uses her celebrated powers of persuasion to help her friend escape her abusive home life. Haruna, whose Japanese father deserted her mother when Haruna was much younger, had always relied on the money he had put aside for her future, but she discovers that her stepfather, as well as being emotionally and physically cruel to his wife and step-daughter, has also spent most of it. She is determined to visit Japan to find her family, but her life falls apart before this can be contemplated: cue Frankie...

Denton has worked in the music industry and knows her subject inside out. This makes for a YA novel filled with vivid, authentic detail, featuring recognisable and engaging characters.

Bridget Carrington

Run, Riot

Nikesh Shukla, pub. Hodder Children's Books

Taran and her twin, Hari had never wanted to move to Firestone House. Things had to change when their parents' rent was doubled and their father's chemotherapy treatment meant that he could not continue to work. The twins had to adjust to making a new home in the tower block and over time they learned the value of being part of a strong community where people looked out for each other. This is the point at which we enter the story.

At first, Taran and Hari take little notice as flats are boarded up and glossy flyers start advertising expensive apartments locally. Bit by bit, however, Hari is caught up in the related tragedy of a murder on the estate and the 'Run' of the novel's title takes on emphasis as the teenage protagonists of justice attempt to uncover the sinister truth of what is going on behind the scenes of Firestone House-the tower block which just happens to be ripe for "development".

What follows is a pacey thriller, with a fast-moving plot, energised by frequent twists and turns which keep the reader engaged. Major contemporary themes such as the social price of property development, the human cost of area gentrification, of institutional corruption and power are pitted against a paean of praise for community values and team work.

This novel is a teenage thriller, tense, absorbing and provocative.

At times, prescient of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, it is hard to remember that it is a teenage thriller. It seems ripe for cross-over status to this reviewer. Clearly the relative lack of complication which underpins the plot solutions and the agency of its teen protagonists keep it fictional; but it is also truthful. The ultimate fate of Firestone House is sealed. The relevance to us all of this disgrace makes the novel deserve a much wider readership. Nikesh Shukla, for me, says it all:

“Everywhere is chaos.

Ellie and Sarah; Shabana and Shazia; Mo, Ahmed, Paul; Uncle Terry; Alice and David; Cody and Alice; Chloe, Cody and Rizwan ...

Every resident.

They all have names.

They all live here.”

Morag Charlwood

The Survival Game

Nicky Singer, pub. Hodder Children's Books

The survival game is clearly a dystopian novel, but one essentially different from much of the genre. For while the likes of *Mortal engines* and *The hunger games* imagine a world where our own is all but forgotten, and near-future stories such as *The handmaid's tale* rely on a plausible but hopefully unlikely political shift, the setting of *The survival game* is all too likely to become reality within our lifetimes.

It is a few years from now. The average global temperature has continued to rise, by enough to plunge nations into chaos and exacerbate the migrant crisis. The more inhabitable countries have fully militarized their borders, Scotland has seceded from the Union, and fifteen has become the internationally recognized age of majority.

Mhairi's papers say that she is fourteen. Having been detained and processed at Heathrow after arriving from Sudan, she is returning to her native Scotland - travelling alone, though we are yet to discover why. Hardened by the need to survive, she finds herself burdened with a five-year old refugee boy. To abandon him would be an act of unimaginable cruelty; to take him with her means

not only slowing her journey, but perhaps endangering her life. As the story unfolds, we learn not only what a risk Mhairi is taking by allowing herself to show compassion, but what her journey so far has done to her and to those she loves.

Nicky Singer pulls no punches in this hard, harrowing, skillful story, which shows how thin the facade of civilization is and how easy it is to brutalize not only a person but an entire society. There is hope - at its heart, Mhairi's tale is that of a human being, desensitized by necessity, learning to connect once more.

But overall, the tale is as bleak as it needs to be, a stark warning of what may await us, soon, if the world's governments fail to take action; and there is no happy ending.

John Dougherty

This Mortal Coil

Emily Suvada, pub. PenguinRandomHouse Children's Books

This is a fast-paced novel where the stakes and the tension remain high. The young people, and in particular protagonist Catarina Agatta, take huge risks. They face pain and violence. Certainly here we come across Christopher Vogler's 'trials, allies and enemies' or Joseph Campbell's 'road of 'trials' in their respective story theories.

Emily Suvada presents us with a thoughtfully conceived world. The story takes place as the planet is swept by a dangerous virus. Some people are secured in bunkers, but this comes at a cost. People are coded and programmed like computers. Even DNA can be altered by the cleverest of the programmers such as Catarina's father Lachlan Agatta.

It's difficult to understand this technology but Suvada herself has checked out her facts and indeed I've also run them past a scientist. A world like this can exist and probably will in the future. We're heading that way already. That alone makes this book very readable. There is some sexual tension as well as Cat operates with three young men. This is not the main thrust of the story, however.

We can read this book on two levels. It can be taken at face value as a dystopian thriller or we can see the plague itself, its side effects and the way it is tackled as symbolic of society, even of our current society.

A riddle is solved by the end of the book but we are straight away presented with another. Suvada leaves the way nicely open for the sequel.

Gill James

Gill James' *Clara's Story: a Holocaust biography* is published by Chapeltown Books.

Three Strikes

Lucy Christopher, Kate Ellis & Rhian Ivory, pub. Firefly

This collection is three for the price of one; and the subtitle is Dark and chilling tales. There is a novella by each of the three authors, each of which is long enough to be truly engaging.

Lucy Christopher's story *The Darkness* is the story of Kasha, a teenager who tells us she has killed her own mother and has volunteered for 'The Tribe', an immersive psychological programme to deal with trauma. The group of teens she is now part of have been taken to a remote tropical island, given tasks, and then their leaders have simply vanished. As the group try to track them down, nothing is as it seems.

In Kate Ellis' ghost story *The Twins of Blackfin*, Bo finds her mysterious town even stranger than usual after her best friend drowns in an unfortunate accident. Bo, spending hours by her friends' grave talking to her, leads the story to some dark and grisly events being set in train. Be prepared for murder, rotted corpses and dank underground tombs.

Rhian Ivory's tale *Matchgirl* is a story of grieving and all the loss this can bring with it. At its heart lies a dark father-daughter relationship that is a twisted tangle of protection and control. If you know the story of Hans Andersen's *Little Match Girl*, this will chill you to the bone as you read, and the ending is suitably ambiguous and dark to live up to its namesake.

If you enjoy dark teen fiction with plenty of gothic and some horror thrown in, this is the book for you. These are excellently conceived and written stories with real quality. If you are easily spooked, keep the tales for daytime reading.

Marie-Louise Jensen

Tomi

Tomi Reichental's Holocaust Story, retold by Eithne Massey, pub. The O'Brien Press

Tomi Reichental was born in Merašice, Slovakia, a small village where his family had lived for generations. Growing up on a farm Tomi's idyllic life sadly came to an end when the Nazis occupied Slovakia during WWII and joined by Slovakian collaborators, enforced anti-semitic policies and persecution. When he was nine Tomi and his family were sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Tomi's story is a comprehensive account of his experience of surviving the Holocaust.

It begins by introducing his life, and that of his family, prior to the war. They were living a relatively comfortable and safe rural life, feeling a part of village life with many friends and notably the regular visits from the Catholic priest Father Harangozo. The story continues with Tomi's growing consciousness of his Jewishness as the Nazi occupation led to increasing restrictions upon the Jewish community and removals to camps, Tomi's family included. First his grandparents are removed, despite them having the right to remain, and finally he and his immediate family. Tomi's story then moves on to describe the horrors of Bergen-Belsen. We see this all through the eyes of a child facing starvation, disease and death every day. We also witness, through Tomi, the confusion that reigned during the liberation of the camp. The story ends when Tomi, later in life, agrees to tell his story to the children at his grandson's school - speaking out against the atrocity of the Nazi regime.

Tomi's story therefore is not just an account of what happened to him, but also presents some of the reasons for the Holocaust. It narrates how Nazi politicians made the Jewish people scapegoats for everything that was wrong in Germany and Europe generally. It begins to explain why neighbours collaborated and informed on each other – the jealousy between Jews with some having more than others. Finally it considers how power fed the excessive cruelty and brutality of the SS soldiers and officers. In the story however there are also good people willing to help and risk their own lives to help Tomi and his family. Although Tomi and his family are captured, it perhaps brought them time, limiting the months they were finally held at Belsen-Bergen.

Eithne Massey's retells Tomi's story in an accessible way for children aged 10+, managing to include his whole story in 172 pages. The story addresses many of the concerns within Holocaust education: that often educators do not contextualise the lives of Jewish people; that we fail to humanise those being persecuted so children do not empathise with them; that children do not fully understand the different forms of persecution of the Jews and other groups assuming everyone went to death camps and that we rarely include the post-Holocaust experience in our classrooms. Tomi's story is a rich classroom resource that can help address these concerns. More importantly it is a story of a human being, a young boy, confused by the way the world is changing round him, forced to live through the twentieth-century horror of the Holocaust.

Simon Barrett

The Universe is Expanding and So Am I

Carolyn Mackler, Bloomsbury Children's Books

Chirpy first-person narrative, present-tense; frequent lists; high-school rivalries; exasperating parents; too-good-to-be-true new boy on the scene with eyes "blue-green like sea glass" – so far, so commonplace in YA fiction, especially in North American YA fiction. But this sequel to *The Earth, My Butt and Other Big Round Things* is an absorbing and timely read which looks at important issues of body image and fat-shaming, family pressure, privilege and autonomy.

This story, although published fifteen years after *The earth ...*, picks up a few months after the first novel ends. Byron, the brother of narrator Virginia, has been accused of date rape and suspended from Columbia University, an episode his parents call 'the ordeal', believing it to have been dealt with. But it's not over: Byron's victim, Annie, belatedly presses charges. Virginia is aware of her parents' sense of entitlement as they engage lawyers and worry that Byron's future will be jeopardised if he's put on a sex offenders' register – disregarding, she feels, what he actually did, and the lasting effect on Annie. Having sought out Annie soon after the event, she's now brought into unexpected proximity through her potential new love, Sebastian of the sea-glass eyes, a relationship both feel obliged to keep hidden. How should Byron atone? Is he truly repentant, or concerned only for his future prospects?

Another important theme is Virginia's feeling that – unlike her formerly golden brother, Byron, and still-golden sister Anais – she is a disappointment to her parents. In the first book she compiled *The fat girl code of conduct* and hid her size beneath baggy clothes. Now she wears the clothes she likes, colours her hair purple and green, is 'making out' with Froggy, and her current list is *How to make sure skinny girls aren't the only ones who have boyfriends*. But she's still keenly aware that she's not living up to the expectations of her high-achieving parents, and her partial new confidence doesn't shield her from unkind remarks from bitchy girls at her private Manhattan school. Both her close friends are away for the summer, and Sebastian is the only person she can confide in – but because of their respective families, certain subjects are off-limits.

Virginia is a most engaging character. Readers will readily side with her as she struggles to find self-belief and negotiate the sometimes contradictory attitudes of her parents, and will share her relief when she finds someone who values her for her own worth.

Linda Newbery

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

Unstoppable

Dan Freedman, pub. David Fickling Books

A family tragedy pulled the Campbell family apart. Can another one bring them back together?

Unstoppable is a gritty, urban story about two twins - Roxy and Kaine - with the sporting potential to take them to the top of the game. Sadly home life is not great. Dad lost his job, began drinking, started alienating Kaine and pushing Roxy to the limit. Mum works all hours to pay the bills. Roxy is desperately lonely. So is Kaine. Kaine however is getting in trouble at school and is now at risk of getting involved in the local gang. It seems a perfect storm from which there seems no escape.

Roxy and Kaine are great characters, strong, determined, ambitious, but also flawed. Despite her sporting prowess as a tennis player, Roxy is deeply insecure about herself and lacks the confidence to finally say yes to AJ's overtures. AJ is Kaine's best friend. Kaine is a skilful football player who is quick to lose his temper and unable to control his anger. He is lashing out at everyone, blaming them for his failures. Moreover, the twins continually antagonise each other, seemingly jealous of each other's attention. It is these dysfunctional characters and their relationships that brings them to a precipice from which they both need to retreat, making for compelling reading.

The subplot of the murder of Mrs Campbell's brother, which took place when he and Mrs Campbell were teenagers, adds to the tension in the novel. It forewarns what could possibly happen to Roxy and Kaine leaving Roxy to possibly have to mourn the death of her brother too. In an added twist the murder was also unsolved, implying that the killer is still at large in the neighbourhood.

The epilogue is particularly interesting, it includes two newspaper articles. The first one gives some hope that the culture of fear preventing communities reporting crimes to the police and police action might reduce or stop the knife crime that has dominated the UK news recently.

The book's title poignantly asks the question what is unstoppable? Is it Roxy's and Kaine's meteoric rise to sport stardom? Or is it the implosion of their family and the gang life on the estate?

Simon Barrett

We See Everything

William Sutcliffe, Bloomsbury Children's Books

We see everything is set in a London of the future: probably, (disturbingly), the not-too-far-distant future.

Lex lives in the Strip. It's three miles wide and runs from Hampstead south to Brixton, and its inhabitants, the 'rebels', are not allowed to leave. There is an obvious parallel with the Gaza Strip, which was the territory for a previous book of Sutcliffe's, *The wall*.

Lex is one of two narrators. The other one, Alan, is the same age as Lex. He's a drone operator and a skilled game player. It's the drones which 'see everything'. Alan has a specific target: his job at first is simply to observe, but as hostilities escalate, it will be his job to kill – at a distance, using the drone. The target is Lex's father.

I'm not normally keen on dystopias – probably because I prefer not to contemplate that the future may be as dark as they suggest – but this is a remarkable book. The writing is tight and dramatic, powerful and controlled. The two narrators are very different characters - Lex has a close family

background, whereas Alan, who is initially far less likeable, has never known his father and is at odds with his mother – but we come to care about them both, and as their fates inexorably converge, the tension mounts.

There's no easy happy ending. There's great sadness, but there's also very real hope for change, both at the individual level and in terms of the strife between factions. An unusual and thought-provoking read.

Sue Purkiss

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

What If It's Us?

Becky Albertalli and Adam Silvera, pub. Simon & Schuster

Arthur is 16, he's from Georgia but he's working at his Mum's law firm in New York for the summer. He loves musicals and he's definitely not what you'd call cool.

Ben is also 16. He's a Puerto Rican New Yorker spending his vacation at summer school. He's nursing a battered heart after a breakup.

Arthur and Ben probably would never have met nor even crossed paths ... unless maybe they were meant to?

The two boys meet by chance one day in the post office. One is running a work errand and wearing a hot-dog tie. The other is clutching a box of keepsakes from his ex that he plans to mail back in the hope it will draw a line under their relationship and help him to move on.

They speak. There's definitely a connection, but then, before they know it, they are each thrown back out into their separate lives. They are both left wondering if maybe their meeting was something more, something special, something that was meant to be? Perhaps this was the universe trying to tell them something?

But what to do about it? Nothing, or everything?

What if it's us? is a sweet, intelligent and witty take on what could easily have been a cheesy fairy-tale romance. The characters are endearing, textured and rendered with a depth and sincerity enabling them to touch on some pretty hefty issues with honesty, dignity and humour while managing to avoid being cautionary, glib or didactic.

The book moves at a nice pace and provides an interesting insight into contemporary young lives as they negotiate friendships, pair-ups, hook-ups and break-ups with ever-present anxiety, social media, fear of heartbreak, misunderstanding and unrequited love.

What if it's us? was a really delightful read. Brave, funny, sharp-witted and utterly charming. I can't wait to see it turned into a Broadway musical!

Sara Wade-Vuletic

Non-fiction Book Reviews

A Pile of Leaves

Jason Fulford, illus. Tamara Shopsin, pub. Phaidon Children's Books

A pile of leaves is unlike any picture book I've ever read.

Inspired by the way artists see the world, this beautiful board book is made up of pictures of things you might find on a woodland walk in the Autumn. What makes it unique is that each picture is printed onto a see-through page, creating a striking collage of a pile of leaves.

I love the fact that the collage you start with is quite different to the one you see at the end of the book. As you turn pages filled with different types of leaves, it almost feels like you're rummaging on the forest floor. Ants, a grasshopper, a misplaced mitten and a forgotten key add texture and interest and provide extra talking points.

The images themselves are flat, block coloured silhouettes – a real celebration of shape and colour. Russet reds, golden yellows, burnt oranges and fir-tree greens evoke a wonderful sense of Autumn. The key on the final page is a helpful way of teaching young children the names of the different leaves and might even inspire a woodland walk.

If this book doesn't make you want to run outside and crunch in a pile of freshly fallen leaves, I don't know what will.

Abby Mellor

A Whisper from Grey

Louise Greig, illus. Lo Cole, pub. Egmont

Grey is an unremarkable, some might say nondescript, colour but that is to vastly under-rate it, as shown in this delightful picture book.

Grey might be quiet and a little shy, but it is the colour of creatures large and small, raindrops and puddles, a breath and a footprint. It is the colour which helps all the others to glow and the blanket of dusk which signifies the night and time to rest. Other colours might shout, squawk or roar but Grey whispers gently.

Featuring illustrations of plants, animals and birds depicted with bold shapes and colours, with cut outs revealing glimpses of each new page, this is an innovative look at colour for young children. A lovely book to share.

Jayne Gould

Absolutely Everything! A History of Earth, Dinosaurs, Rulers, Robots and Other Things Too Numerous to Mention

Christopher Lloyd, illus. Andy Forshaw, pub. What on Earth Books

Christopher Lloyd's wallbooks are well-known, and popular, being large and very visual. *Absolutely everything!* has a different style and is more encyclopaedic in appearance.

The contents are divided into fifteen chronological sections from the beginning of the universe through to the present day, each with a unique coloured stripe on the edge of the page that links to the contents list for easy location. Each chapter is placed along a world timeline so that readers are able to link it within the history, discoveries and inventions occurring in other parts of the world. There is an extensive index and glossary along with references to the quotes and suggestions for further reading.

The text, rather than being a list of facts, information bullet points and soundbites, is written more in the format of a story; for example

“Columbus was gripped by a big idea. Like all educated Europeans of his day, he knew the world was round. He had also read a lot of books , including stories of the riches of the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan ...”.

The book gives an overview of both natural and human history which is very readable and accessible, and is illustrated with annotated drawings, photographs, maps and quotes. Each period covers the history of the time, linking key moments and events together with important discoveries and inventions as well as significant people – as the title says “too numerous to mention”.

Although aimed at middle grade (8 – 12 years), it is text heavy so likely to appeal to a more-able reader or one fascinated by the history of the world. The book would also work well with younger students at KS3 (12 – 14 years).

Barbara Band

The Atlas Obscura: Explorer's Guide for the World's Most Adventurous Kid

Dylan Thuras & Rosemary Mosco, illus. Joy Ang, pub. Workman Publishing

A confession - I adore atlases and maps of any sort, and will happily spend hours looking at them.

However, this book was not what I was expecting as it is so much more than “just an atlas”. The cover itself draws the reader in with its array of mysteries and marvels and, before you even begin your adventure, you are given a “packing list” including goat treats – in case you run into hungry goats, of course!

Each double-page spread follows a similar layout and is filled with colour and enticing illustrations. There’s a globe pinpointing your present location, basic information about the country and an obscure fact. The main text details two features from each country which range from abandoned amusement parks, such as the Ho Thuy Tien water park in Vietnam, to the Museum of Gingerbread in Poland to DIY trains in Cambodia. Each article finishes with a small globe showing the next location and an arrow encouraging the reader to carry on travelling.

The range and types of places explored are far too numerous to mention and there’s sure to be something that appeals to most within this book. The pages are made from thick paper, so it will stand up well to a lot of handling. There’s an index although it is arranged in “routes to try” rather than alphabetically, such as “Watery Wonders”, some suggestions for further reading and also some tips for exploring.

There is so much packed into this book that it’s hard to believe only 47 countries have been visited. I do hope there’s a volume two as this is a perfect way to introduce children to some of the weird and fascinating places in the world.

Barbara Band

Bright Sparks. Amazing Discoveries, Inventions & Designs by Women

Owen O'Doherty, pub. O'Brien Press

This book is an information book and an inspirational book, and I am so pleased to see that the flurry of texts focusing on great women and girls was not a one off moment: *Bright sparks: amazing discoveries, inventions & designs by women* carries the baton on – dare I say – brightly!

There are exactly 50 inventions and creations by women, listed throughout the book – illustrated in beautifully simple, pencil sketches and vivid matt-colours – and each of these significant moments in time are highlighted in clear detail to explain the importance of the discovery or invention and it’s significance today. Readers will discover everything from the inventor of the pedal bin, to Patricia

Bath and her laser for cataracts, Margaret Hamilton's 'Coding to the moon' success, and even how Bertha Benz improved the brake pads in the first car.

Reading this with my daughter, I discovered that it not only fills in gaps in what we know, it also gave us many, "I wish I'd invented that!" moments. She was convinced she could have discovered how to give a paper bag more strength if it had not already been done! All it needed was a rectangular base ... but someone had to imagine it first! Margaret E. Knight had that revelation back in 1868.

Inventions and discoveries for everyday things to life saving procedures and equipment – they all started within someone's imagination: This book passes that on with grace and simplicity to show the next generation what is possible, even if it does not yet exist.

Brilliantly there are inventing tips: Step 1: Be curious; Step 2: Pick an idea, set a challenge; Step 3: Try things out; Step 4: Make it! There is also an inventor's glossary and advice on how to look after your ideas. Clearly, when author Owen O'Doherty pulled together these women of worth he did not mean for their stories to simply sit in the book, they are meant to inspire, and the top tips shared only encourage this.

Bright sparks is a lovely, well-rounded book that highlights some incredible women in history and how they changed the world we live in - and subtly encourages the future generation.

Anja Stobbart

Famous Family Trees

Kari Hauge, illus. Vivien Mildenerger, pub. Lincoln Children's Books

Kari Hauge has collated the family histories of 25 people who lived from 100BC to AD2013 into one magnificent book. Some, like William Shakespeare, have complicated trees stretching back hundreds of years. Others, like Cleopatra VII and Mahatma Gandhi, have ancestors who are only known through myths, or stories passed down orally over the years.

Each person included, from Julius Caesar to Martin Luther King, is covered by a double-page spread. The left-hand page provides a brief concise historical profile of the person. The right-hand page contains the elaborate family tree. The 'How to use' section is an essential part of this book. It explains how family trees work and how they have been laid out in this book to fit onto a single page.

Famous Family Trees supplies the answers to such questions as:

Who did Cleopatra grow up with?

Did Marie Antoinette's extravagance cause the French Revolution?

Where did Genghis Khan's fierce nature come from?

What were Charlotte Bronte's pseudonyms?
What was life like in the Kennedy household?
How did Annie Oakley stand up for women's rights?

The beautiful, detailed illustrations by Vivien Mildenberger look as though they have been hand drawn with water-colour pencils to give each portrait a vintage, historical touch.

Readers from 8+ to adult will love to pour over and trace through the intricate webs of all of the historical and literary figures' ancestry. This book would be a useful resource in the classroom to compliment any history topic. It would also make the ideal present for a gifted and talented child. A book to be treasured.

Anita Loughrey

Reviewer's website: www.anitaloughrey.com & blog <https://anitaloughrey.blog>

Find Me and Follow Me

Hannah Duffern & Sophie Schrey, illus. Lucie Sheridan, pub. LOM Art books

This pair of board books for toddlers are a bright new addition to the catalogue of books from publisher LOM Art. Sheridan is an established textile and fabric designer, and this shows in the vivid print-style illustrations of these two books.

Find me is a classic lift-the-flap style book where the text and the illustrations invite the child to tap and lift and find the animals hiding underneath the different shaped flaps. The animals are cheery and stylized and Sheridan's illustrations are bold and eye-catching. The flaps are robust enough to stand a toddler's eager grasp, and the imagery is of familiar and recognisable objects that a child will find easy to engage with.

Follow me has the same style of illustration, but this time the child's experience is more tactile. The book has raised patterns on each page that show the trail left by the creature (or in one case, the tractor!) and the child can trace them along. The tracing of these patterns is undoubtedly a great idea, but I do feel the publisher has missed a trick by not having a raised outline on the creature itself. The text invites the child to "follow the lines to the butterflies" and "follow the bees to the hive", but the butterflies, bees and hive are not raised and so (particularly for a visually impaired child) this only gives half the possible fun, and literally half the picture!

All in all, a very enjoyable pair of board books that will introduce very young children to new words and new concepts with jolly illustrations and in a format that is tough enough to withstand even the most excitable hands.

Dawn Finch

Hello World: Animals

Nicola Edwards, illus. L'atelier Cartographic, pub. 360 Degrees

This “amazing atlas of wildlife” invites children to become explorers, travelling the world, discovering for themselves over 180 of the most incredible, exciting and awe-inspiring creatures. Each animal is stylishly illustrated on a sturdy mini-flap or panel, to make the reading experience completely interactive. Each flap reveals the common name of each animal described as well as a fascinating bite-size fact. The facts are easy to understand but never dumbed down, introducing key vocabulary relating to habitats, life cycles and adaptations.

Organised by continent, each double-page spread of this highly interactive atlas focuses on the animals indigenous to each one - from the blue whales of Antarctica, each as long as a swimming pool, to the chameleons of Madagascar which can fit on the head of a match! Side panels and information boxes provide additional information about the habitats and the uniqueness of the creatures within each one. Page layouts are colourful and busy, highly-illustrated but well-organised and never cluttered. What this atlas lacks in traditional navigational devices - contents and index - it more than makes up for in the potential for serendipitous discovery and wonder, sparking curiosity in the natural world.

Whilst the focus is clearly on diversity in the animal kingdom, the author never shies away from the harsh realities of deforestation, its impact on wildlife worldwide and the need for better protection and action to ensure survival.

Hello world: Animals is definitely one of those eminently pick-up-able, “did you know...?” books, every bit as interesting to the adults who share it as to the children it is aimed at. A superb gift, it also needs to be in every classroom and school library at KS2 and even into lower KS3.

Fortunately, it is large enough in format to allow several readers to pore over it at once and the board pages and sturdy flaps are strong enough to withstand repeated re-readings - with new animals to be discovered every time. Educational and engaging.

Eileen Armstrong

I Am the Seed that Grew the Tree

Poems selected by Fiona Waters, illus. Frann Preston-Gannon, pub. Nosy Crow

Winter is approaching as I sit delightfully in my bed and begin Autumn with a flavour of all seasons, with Fiona Waters' *I am the seed that grew the tree: A nature poem for every day of the year*, a vibrant collection of poems, illustrated by Frann Preston-Gannon, that bursts into innumerable hues of nature; the words strike a symphony into its pages, ablaze with colours of each season.

The picturesque cover shows a motley of gifts bestowed by nature to us during its different moods. As the book begins one feels carried into the spirit of different months of the year one by one through words and colours, well known and evergreen.

Poetry of canonized writers like Robert Frost, DH Lawrence, Amy Lowell and many more have been included in this collection, and words as enchanting as these are diffused with the birds, fishes, flowers and fragrance of each season-

“Inside a shell
There is whisper of a wave. ...
Inside an ember
There is the memory of a flame.”

Scenes peculiar to a certain season have been painted so brightly and poetically that they get etched on the reader's mind as one feels it in confluence with the poetry, altering the senses and painting the imagination. A fox stands in a verdant field, a blue butterfly passes through it, and the poet writes-

“A big fox stands in the spring grass,
Glossy in the sun, chestnut bright, ...
Forepaws delicately nervous,
He takes the air for the scent,
Of the train rushing by.”

It's a treasure of light, refreshing verses and one feels captivated by the beautiful illustrations and words on the page. Fascinating for both children and adults alike, one must say like the Dormouse in December,

“Now winter is coming,”
The Dormouse said,
“I must be thinking
Of going to bed.”

Go to bed indeed, but with this delightful and refreshing poetry collection, to breathe many seasons in one.

Ishika Tiwari

Little Otter Learns to Swim

Artie Knapp, illus. Guy Hobbs, pub. Ohio University Press

The story of a brave little otter who, on the occasion of her first opportunity to venture into the big river is filled with trepidation. She is soon to learn how much fun the river is. She can swim, float, dive and even play with the unsuspecting frogs – the illustrations here really capture this moment beautifully – the innocence of a childhood game. It takes weeks of practice for the little otter to become confident in the water. Then, just as her confidence is beginning to build other wild animals appear. The Bobcat, the eagle. Little Otter is understandably scared, and perhaps just a little relieved that although she is scared of the Bobcat the eagle misses him too. When mum returns it is to comfort her, and help little otter learn that in the river, she is safe.

A story but with plenty of fact which is why I have chosen to include it as non-fiction. Children have a great opportunity here to learn about the life of a river otter, about animals on other continents and why they are so important in the cycle of nature. If you can ignore the seemingly unnecessary rhyming of the text this is a lovely story and the illustration - well I thought it was computer generated. I was pleased to be proved wrong. The paintings take the reader straight to the heart of the otter's world and the author has included a double page spread at the end of the book with interesting and useful facts that teachers would find useful too. An all-round interesting read.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Planetarium

Raman Prinja, illus. Chris Wormell, pub. Templar

Welcome to the Museum. If this is your first visit then prepare to be amazed, and with this title taken out of this world. Raman Prinja takes us on a journey into space and, thanks to the accompanying illustrations of Chris Wormell you will, I assure you, become immersed in the universe and astrology. Remember too that the Museum is open all hours and it has an incredible collection to be visited time and again...

So, let me introduce you to some of the galleries and their exhibits. On entering the Museum, we find ourselves just learning how we fit into the wonder that is the universe. As we move deeper and deeper into the galleries we travel further from earth and discover the hidden depths of an, at time, unfathomable universe. You have all the time in the world. You will need all the time in the world for not only is this book crammed with facts that will take many readings to explore and learn, there is no known end to the spaces beyond our planet, many of which it would take a lifetime to reach.

I found it challenging to move past the sweeping, shooting, graceful Laniakea, a region of space which contains around 100 billion stars, it is captured so captivately but I had to turn the page in order to find out more and then ... well my imagination was captured, my brain was firing questions and so I

just had to read on. Some of the facts are mind-blowing – did you know that among the next generation of telescopes one, the European-Extremely Large Telescope, will have a diameter of 39cm! This means it will be able to gather 8 million times more light than Galileo did with his in 1609!! And so it goes on. One mind-blowing fact after another, all accompanied by elegant, sophisticated illustration. The narrative takes us step-by-step through the galaxy, explaining with plenty of detail, facts and technical language yet managing to not bamboozle the reader with sophistication. At the foot of each page is a key to the accompanying plate, just as an exhibit in a museum would have an accompanying label.

Our curators, Chris Wormell – self-taught engraver, printmaker and children’s book author/illustrator is accompanied by Raman Prinja – professor of astrophysics specialising in massive stars and the evolution of galaxies. Two very talented, intelligent contributors who have curated a notable exhibition and addition to Templar’s Museum. Add this to your own growing home Museum and, like me, keep returning for more, especially if you find the time to make use of the recommended additional learning suggestions! I guarantee there is more than a lifetime of fascination in this title.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Raise the Flag: Terrific Flag Facts, Stories and Trivia

Clive Gifford, illus. Tim Bradford, pub. QED

This book does exactly what it says on the cover – gives you flag facts, stories and trivia. It is packed full of interesting information and is the sort of book that can be picked up, delved into and poured over , it will provide a new discovery every time.

Did you know that the flag at the top of Canada’s Peace Tower is only flown for a day and then given away to a member of the public?

The book begins by looking at flag designs from their earliest use to the present day, the parts of a flag and the history of them including links with knights and heraldry. There follow chapters covering each continent showing individual country flags, together with national, regional and local flags, and detailing their development. Flags at sea, flags for communication, flags in sport, flags at the Poles and on the moon ... nothing is left out of this comprehensive guide.

The pages are a mix of quirky and fun illustrations, drawings, photographs and maps. The text is clear and broken into segments with subheadings. Each page deals with a new topic making the contents accessible and it is all printed on strong paper with muted coloured backgrounds. There is also a quiz, glossary and index. Definitely more than your usual flag book.

Barbara Band

Rebel Cats! Brave Tales of Feisty Felines

Kimberlie Hamilton, illus. various, pub. Scholastic

This book is a celebration of all things feline. There are facts about cats, myths about cats, tips about living with cats as well as potted biographies of 30 of history's most famous cats. In short, this is a book for just about any cat fan.

There are seventeen illustrators (short notes about each of them appear toward the back of the book) listed in the credits with pictures of cats appearing everywhere. At the heart of the book, however, are the biographies of a number of real-life cats from history, including Humphrey from 10 Downing Street, Stubbs who was appointed honorary mayor of an Alaskan town and Felicette, the first (possibly only) cat to go into orbit. Each double page spread consists of a page of text accompanied by a full-page colourful illustration of the cat in question.

The illustrations are delightful, capturing the individuality of each cat (my particular favourite is Towser, 'the World's Deadliest Distillery Cat' on page 120, which catches Towser glaring at an audacious mouse). The chosen cats come from all parts of the world and from various periods of history, highlighting the long and close relationship between humans and cats.

In true fact book style for young readers, there is a comprehensive index, a glossary and pointers to further reading and useful websites. The text is clearly laid out with headings and the use of bold font. The text in the biography spread, interestingly, is centred rather than left aligned, which somehow just makes the whole spread look very attractive and appealing. As the book itself says, this would be 'purr-fect for cat fans of any age'.

June Hughes

Really Remarkable Reptiles

Jake Williams, pub. Pavilion Books

The first thing you notice about *Really remarkable reptiles* is the illustration, enough to make my son go Wow! From the start you know it is going to be a new style of non-fiction book- one to pour over and enjoy. The title is brilliant and fun to say over and over again as well.

Reptiles appeal to boys and girls alike and Jake Williams has created a fun new way to learn more about these fascinating creatures. The text accompanying the illustrations is rich in vocabulary and highly informative. It is an excellent choice of book for key stage 2.

Before delving in and learning about specific reptiles, Jake explains about reptiles in general- things that make them unique. We can also see the life cycle and a time line of when they first appeared on Earth.

The real star of the book is Jake Williams' unique style of illustrations. There are clean lines, colourful shapes and designs. Simple, colourful and a joy to look at.

My son and I pounced on the book as soon as it arrived, and we spent many happy times reading through and admiring the reptiles and learning more about each one. My son has a happy fascination with Komodo dragons and Gila monsters. He was thrilled with those pages as well as the illustration on the back cover. This book is just wonderful to share with all ages! I hope there are more Jake Williams books in the future as this could be the start of a beautiful collection!

Erin Foote

Sports are Fantastic Fun

Ole Könnecke, pub. Gecko Press

There are so many sports, and they are all fantastic fun!

This book helps young readers discover a wide range of sports from around the world, including football [soccer and the American game] boxing, skiing, athletics and tennis, and encourages them to maybe have a go. In a picture book format and design, it features friendly animals in humorous illustrations, with a short introduction and snippets of information accompanying the pictures.

The highs and lows of taking part in sport are covered; it is not fantastic fun when your team doesn't score any goals, for example, but perseverance can lead to a new world record, as the giraffe succeeds on his third attempt at the pole vault.

No matter whether you want to enjoy a team game or a solo activity, something requiring agility and strength or an altogether quieter sport like billiards, then you'll find out about it here.

Jayne Gould

The Story of King Tut

Patricia Cleveland-Peck, illus. Isabel Greenberg, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Tutankhamun is probably the one name that everyone can say, the one pharaoh that everyone knows about and the one who gave Egyptology – the study of ancient Egypt - the glamour it exudes today. The boy king, his untimely death, the romance of the finding of his tomb, all this is now very much common knowledge for children who will learn about it all when they study ancient Egypt at school and adults who will read about it and most likely watch programmes about it. So, what does Cleveland-Peck do to stand out from the competition? The story is the same, almost, in just about every book you read – some may try to add a little more drama, horror or glamour but at its essence the facts of the story cannot be changed so what Cleveland-Peck does is present it as a narrative for children and adults to read as though she is telling a story.

We start, in Part One, with the death of the king. It might be possible to say that this is the middle of his story, it is certainly not the end. Not only did the ancient Egyptians believe that their lives would continue after death – as Cleveland-Peck will explain later in the book – but Tut (as he is affectionately known) was to have yet another life after the discovery of his tomb. However, back to the death of the king. We are introduced to Tut, his family and their beliefs. Cleveland-Peck's narrative is interspersed with pages of facts – here we learn about Aten – the sun god – and his fact box is surrounded by images of the pantheon of Egyptian gods, colourfully and artfully depicted by Isabel Greenberg whose angular style is bold and colourful with a naiveté that will appeal to younger children and a layer of sophistication for older readers.

Read on and follow the life of Tut, understand the way in which the ancient Egyptians lived, died and cared for their dead before encountering Howard Carter, world-famous archaeologist. Discover how he almost failed to find the tomb, what happened during and immediately after the amazing discovery, how it altered our understanding of Egyptian history, raised many questions – some still to be answered - and maybe, just maybe, was the cause of a few mysterious deaths too.

Travel back, and then forward in time to the world of the ancient Egyptians, be spellbound by the story of one of their most famous kings, learn more about how they lived and how this single discovery was world-changing. The perfect book for all those learning about ancient Egypt at school, anyone with an interest in the subject and any budding Egyptologists and archaeologists!

Louise Ellis-Barrett

There are Fish Everywhere

Brita Teckentrup, pub. Big Picture Press

This is the first in a series of non-fiction picture books by Britta Teckentrup for Big Picture Press, described as "non-fiction with spark and personality." Personally, I can't wait for the others if they're all as impressive as this which, knowing Britta Teckentrup's work, they will be.

This is a large picture book with the most beautiful tactile cover, glinting with gold and literally covered with fish. It opens onto end pages busy with a myriad of fish. There are 12 double page sections, some interactive, which move logically from What is a Fish? to how fish and humans coexist.

The colour palette is rich and jewelled, ranging from the yellow pop of the Bluestripe Snapper to the bioluminescent blue of the Spotted lanternfish.

The language uses proper scientific terms which are clearly explained and the text has a lyrical quality, with a light touch and humour.

Throughout the pages the fish swim around manageable chunks of information, nicely spaced across the page. Boys in particular will love the weird and surprising facts contained in this book and will have great fun spotting things on the page. Teachers will find plenty of inspiration for art and science activities.

Rose Palmer

Timelines of Everything: from Woolly Mammoths to World Wars

pub. Dorling Kindersley

Timelines of everything is an illustrated history of the universe.

Broadly chronological, *Timelines* traces history from prehistory and the beginning of the universe to 3000 BCE; the ancient world and the great empires stretching from China, the Mediterranean and across into Europe; the medieval world across the globe; an age of exploration from 1450 to 1750 CE, conquest and colonialism; the age of revolution with changing geographical frontiers and frontiers of knowledge; and finally the modern world since 1914 and the start of World War I. In total there are more than 100 timelines stretching across double page spreads, sumptuously illustrated with naturalistic artwork, cartoons, computer graphics, reproductions of art, and photographs.

The timelines are thematic and therefore typically extend before and after the chronological section they are included in. There are timelines that will interest every reader from natural history (dinosaurs and astronomy), the sciences (namely biology, chemistry, and physics), technology (industry, telecommunications, aviation), political change (great empires and kingdoms, revolutions and independence) as well as social change (rise of the samurai, news and feminism). Beginning with the most up-to-date events however is absolutely fascinating for the reader who will quickly realize

how much progress has been made in relatively short time. The first road trip took place in 1885 and 126 years later the first driverless car was tested on public roads! The first mugshot was taken in 1888 and by 2017 a 3D image can be made of a person's face and matched against a database of millions of facts... From today's voice command technology around the home, the first modern radiator was plumbed in 1872.

Each timeline cleverly shows time passing appropriate according to its theme. For example, the story of painting is shown as different floors in an art gallery with escalators down to the next level, whilst the history for the Soviet Union follows the arc of a worker's hammer strike and the history of the US civil rights movement is depicted a series of newspaper articles in date order. In addition, timelines are inclusive, presenting a global history from every continent as well as contributions by men and women. Finally, there is a great mix of historical information and trivia, making Timelines engaging and fun. Did you know that Volvo first introduced the seatbelt in 1959, making the patent open so all car manufacturers could use it?

Timelines of everything is a Dorling Kindersley publication at its very best: authoritative, educational and visually appealing.

Simon Barrett

What Can a Citizen Do?

Dave Eggers, illus. Shawn Harris, pub. Chronicle Books

Young readers and those being read to will be pulled into this call-for-action of a picture book by Dave Eggers with the satisfying rhyme, humour and empathy all of which are drawn together by Shawn Harris's endearing papercut out illustrations.

What can a citizen do? is a story for our time, but also a timeless reminder of how throughout history it often takes just one person to stand up to instigate a bigger change. This book demonstrates that even children have a role to play in making a difference in our world, and it all starts with thinking about others.

In fact *What can a citizen do?* will most definitely draw questions and hopefully discussions on helping and being kind to our friends, and including those left out. How this translates into making the world a better place is obvious: these actions of kindness are life-long skills. Tellingly, the illustrated children, through play, turn a lonely island into a flourishing community – no one hides or tries to avoid helping, children of different ethnicities work and play happily together - and being part of the adventure is reward enough.

“A Citizen can right a wrong.

A citizen can turn things round.

A citizen can get things right side
That have been upside down.”

The words alone are strong and clear, but, add the illustrations and they soften to the level of a child. A trumpet is played ‘wrong’ but it can be turned round – and so sound wonderful! A turtle struggles ‘upside down,’ but with the help of a child ‘can get things right side’ up again. I love this symbiosis of text and pictures working together to create the whole, and much bigger picture.

It is no surprise to learn the author; Dave Eggers is co-founder of Voice of witness, an oral history series focused on human rights, and ScholarMatch, which connects donors and under-resourced students to make college possible. He is clearly a man on a mission.

What can a citizen do? is a picture book for today, to raise questions about the tale between the pages, but a story that extends far and wide. There is a strong message in these simple words, one that will hopefully help children navigate the world: doing good, being kind and helping others.

Anja Stobbart

When the Whales Walked and Other Incredible Evolutionary Journeys

Dougal Dixon, illus. Hannah Bailey, pub. Words & Pictures

When the whales walked is a fascinating account of the evolution of life on earth, produced in a stunning hardback edition. Following the trend for narrative non-fiction in manageable, bedtime-story-sized chunks, the author, Dougal Dixon, gives a short, informative paragraph for each animal. The text is accompanied by Hannah Bailey’s charming illustrations, which reminded me of Jackie Morris’s retro-naturalistic style in *The lost words*.

The book begins with a clear and concise explanation of evolution and natural selection, and a timeline of life on earth so far. 540 million years ago animals evolved the first hard shells, which meant that their remains were preserved in fossil form, allowing us to trace the evolution of life from that point onward. From there it becomes a collection of intriguing origin stories—how crocodiles used to be warm-blooded, how snakes had legs, and how whales descended from small land mammals that looked rather like otters with eyes on the tops of their heads. Among my favourites were the Quetzalcoatlus, a giant pterosaur with a neck like a giraffe, and the Epidexipteryx, an early ancestor of the bird that looked like a cross between a pheasant and sloth.

The book finishes with a sobering question—are we experiencing a mass extinction? It seems we are, but while we endeavour to conserve the species that remain and halt our destruction of the earth’s resources, there is something comforting in the idea that after we’ve gone, perhaps we will have made

way for a new species, as the dinosaurs made way for us. In the words of Jurassic Park's Ian Malcolm, 'life finds a way'.

When the Whales Walked is a captivating book, brilliant for dinosaur fans or anyone interested in natural history.

Rebecca Rouillard

Who are you Calling Weird?

Marilyn Singer, illus. Paul Daviz, pub. Word and Pictures

This quirky and unusual non-fiction picture book for older readers (mid-grade+) contains an array of bizarre creatures that at first glance you would not be blamed for believing are the creation of science fiction. But all of the animals in this book are real and alive today.

Marilyn Singer takes the reader on a fascinating journey to explore the strange and exotic wildlife that live in unique habitats all over the world. She describes their features and examines the purpose of their specific behaviours and adaptations.

Each double page spread has a bold, eye-catching illustration of each incredible creature. Find out about the Aye-aye lemur from Madagascar, ponder over the incredible armoured Pangolin, be amazed by the hairy frog with claws like Wolverine and intrigued by the legends that evolved around the Narwhal, a real-life unicorn.

This book could be used in the classroom to support work on biospheres, food chains and adaptations. *Who are you calling weird?* is indeed a cornucopia of diversity every child will love to devour.

Anita Loughrey

Reviewer's website: www.anitaloughrey.com & blog <https://anitaloughrey.blog>

Young Heroes

Lula Bridgeport, illus. Federica Frenna, Isabel Munoz and Julianna Swaney, pub. Stripes Publishing

This absolutely brilliant book tells the true stories of over one hundred extraordinary young people, from all over the world, who were all passionate about something from a young age. They went on to use this passion to become famous in their own field. The book is divided into seven sections such as Business, Sport, Arts and Literature and Environment and includes all manner of people. Some are already well known to children such as Justin Bieber, Daniel Radcliffe and Malala Yousafzai but others were completely new to us, such as Payal Jangid, a children's rights activist from India,

Michelle Kwan, a figure skater from America and Boyan Slat, founder of the Ocean Clean-Up from The Netherlands.

I read this with my seven-year-old son who absolutely loved it. We read about two or three heroes each night and were both very disappointed when we had finished the book. My eleven-year-old then read it by himself and enjoyed it immensely too.

The message to young (and older!) people is very inspiring indeed - that with enough passion, hard work and dedication, they can really make a difference for themselves, people around them and the world general. One of the best chapters is at the end – ‘Ways to be a Hero Every Day’ - which outlines small ways in which children can make a difference at home, at school, in the community and in the wider world. I could tell that both my children thought about this chapter long after the book had been read. The writing is perfectly pitched for children - inspiring and educational but in no way boring or patronising. The brilliant, full colour illustrations are the icing on the cake and really make this a book to treasure and to refer back to both for factual information and inspiration for years to come.

Jo Grosvenor

<p>Fantastic Footballers A definitive list of the best 40 footballers ever will inevitably omit some deserving players. It is a truly inspiring squad including players from around the world - past, present and up and coming stars - men and women.</p>	<p>Greek Mythology This book presents information about the main pantheon of Greek gods -- including the twelve Olympians -- and many of the popular heroes and malefactors. A comprehensive guide to Greek myth.</p>	<p>Music Legends This book profiles 40 famous artists and groups that have shaped the history of rock and popular music across the decades. No doubt the final 40 will be contentious with readers arguing the merits of bands not in the book.</p>	<p>People of Peace People of peace includes famous peacemakers known by a single name - Gandhi, King, and Mandela - and lesser known peacemakers, from the nineteenth century up to the present day. Not all peace icons are dead men!</p>
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40 Inspiring Icons

40 inspiring icons is a new non-fiction series published by Wide Eyed editions. The books present short biographies of iconic figures in football, music, mythology and peace activists. The concept, content and graphic design of the series is brilliant and the word ‘icon’ seems to work on a number of different levels in this series. **Simon Barrett** interviewed the editorial team.

The title of the series alone is appealing. We all want to read about icons, and in each book, reading through the contents page, while it’s likely we know a little about many of the icons we can always read about those that we don’t! These are individuals or groups who are iconic, but what for you defines an icon? Perhaps more importantly, how do you hope these icons are inspiring?

Every subject has a few icons most people can call to mind but the spotlight in these books is shared among the top 40 chart busting icons of each subject. Some are lesser known, but if you read a bit about them, you will see why each one has been chosen and they are certainly all inspiring in their own way. We have looked at people from all around the world who each have different outlooks, ideas and talents that have helped shape the special subject they have become an icon of.
Are some icons more iconic than others?

Some icons might be more well-known than others but that doesn’t mean they are more important! Each of the 40 icons in all of the books represent an important moment in the history of their field so they each deserve a spot in the hall of fame.

How did you ever manage to decide on 40 icons for each book? How long were some of the lists of who to include and how long did it take to agree the final selection? Why did you decide to limit it to 40 icons?

It’s always hard to limit a subject to just a handful of important moments or influential people but the top 40 seemed like a good number. Pop has a top 40 chart, why not everything else?

The graphic design of the book is amazing. On books profiling icons, the graphic designers have created icons of these individuals or

groups. What inspired you to create icons of icons?

Creating icons of icons is exactly what was appealing to us. The nature of an icon is that it sums up lots of important meaningful ideas in one picture and historically, an icon is an image to be revered. This made perfect sense for each of the people featured. Each person has a single icon of themselves to sum them up and we decode the pictures with little captions whizzing off them.

What are the essential elements in the design of each icon? What were the challenges to creating these icons? How did you know when an icon was finished?

Each book is illustrated by an illustrator whose work we admire. They all work in a stylish graphic way and they all try and capture what the person is all about through their clothes, expression and the things that are surrounding them, a bit like in an old-fashioned portrait.

Why do you think these icons are so appealing?

The cast of icons we have chosen each made waves in their field, but they also stand for something important. We want to show that you can be the top of your game no matter who you are or where you're from or how silly other people might think your idea is at first.

How satisfying is it seeing the complete set of icons?

It's always very satisfying to see a book you have been close to come to life. What is nice about these books is not only are they an international look at a subject, they also work as a potted history. They usually start with the earliest icon and end with the most contemporary. It is also rewarding to see the series sitting all together on a shelf, like a brightly coloured library of brilliant people.

The series is described as a fact-file, and I know I keep randomly opening pages and finding out more about an icon. By writing a fact-file what were the restrictions on the content of information about each individual or group? Why do you think the format of a fact-file is so popular?

As you say, it's nice to learn factoids about different moments in the history of your favourite subject, be it music or football. Tying information to a person makes it much more memorable, especially if the snippets of information you read are funny or surprising. This way, you become really knowledgeable, almost by accident.

What can we expect next in the series?

Expect to meet movers, shakers and innovators from the realms of art, science, literature and sport.

Look out in February for the next two releases:

- *Black Music Greats*
- *Super Scientists*

O is for Old School

James Tyler has written, Ellen Cohen illustrated a fantastic new picture book - or is it alphabet book? - for adults – with a twist! Not only is this delightful little hardback actually an alphabet book for parents, it is ‘old school’ but not as we know it!

A melting pot of opposites is presented here thanks to the birth of a baby, the vision of an author and the trust of an agent and publisher! *O is for old school* subverts all that we might think we know about alphabet books, books for babies and of course hip-hop.

Throw away your preconceptions and be prepared for a very amusing, satisfying learning journey. Before you read the book, or whilst you are giving it some consideration, read a little more about its genesis here. Louise was thrilled that both James and Ellen could give up some of their time to answer her questions, so it is with thanks to them and Christopher Ransom for facilitating ...

First some questions for James. A hip-hop alphabet – was it created out of a need for yourself, friends and family?

My hip-hop-loving friends had a little boy called Ellis and I couldn't find the perfect present for them. So, I decided to create one. It was originally planned as a poster but as the idea grew it turned in to this book. O is for Old School is out just in time for Christmas, so I get to give it to Ellis as his present this year. He better like it...

How much research went into the book – are you a user of hip-hop terminology, and, even if you are, did you have to research to check you had the correct language?

I was already pretty nerdy about hip-hop and hip-hop culture, so the alphabet hasn't changed too much from the first

versions I came up with but getting to research even deeper in to the genre and pass it off as ‘work’ has been a dream. It really is very unique – how did you convince an agent/publisher to take it?

We were pretty fortunate that our agent, Lauren and publisher, Wide Eyed Editions both fell in love with the concept and really understood the tone from the start.

Did you grow up with hip-hop and would you like to have produced some yourself?

Ha – I'm pretty unmusical but if I could have produced some hip-hop myself – I'd have produced the whole of *The Low End Theory* by A Tribe Called Quest. I'm a middle-class kid of the 90s so of course I grew up loving hip-hop.

Do you think the hip-hop community will become fans?

I really hope so – I'm a fan of theirs so if it got any love from people that I love that would be unreal.

Can you see this becoming bigger – longer picture books in hip-hop?

My friends are all having babies like crazy at the moment so the more I can give as gifts the better.

Was this your first publication and can you see yourself / would you like to subvert more genres as a result?

This was my first publication, I do have a plan for a further series of genres. Hopefully I can convince Wide Eyed Editions to fall in love with those ones too 😊

And now questions for Ellen. Were you very surprised by the challenge of illustrating hip-hop?

I was mainly surprised by the idea of bringing together the world of young parenting and hip-hop. The common visual representations of the two are quite different, so I was happy for the challenge of mixing them up.

How did you go about designing the illustration as it lends itself very well to the genre – bold, very visual and very funny.

James and I were both going for a minimalistic approach, both with copy and image making. We really liked the works of Dick Bruna, which are easily recognisable for their graphic shapes and primary colours. It was important for me that even though the book is mainly aimed for adults, it would still be visually appealing to toddlers.

Did you work closely with James or were you left to your own devices?

It was a lot of back and forth. After James came up with a list of jokes he would send them over, often with an initial idea for an image. Some of the ideas took longer to refine than others. My job was mainly to make sure the jokes land right away, but the images are still rewarding and interesting as standalones.

Is this a similar style to your usual illustration or something quite out of the ordinary?

I would say the book is still within my style in terms of shapes and composition choices. I did experiment quite a lot with colours. Some previous versions featured bolder colours, which is where I feel most comfortable. The opted for colours are a bit more childlike.

Thank you to James and Ellen for creating the book and the team at Wide Eyed for making it happen. Now dear reader it is over to you – time for some contemporary reading...!

The King Who Banned the Dark

Having read and greatly enjoyed *The king who banned the dark*, **Matilde Sazio** was lucky enough to be able to ask some questions of its author, Emily Haworth-Booth. The result is insightful and intriguing, read on to see for yourself...

What made you transition from comics and graphic novels to picture books?

Funnily enough I began studying on the MA in children's book illustration at Cambridge School of Art in 2014 in order to develop the visual language I was using in my comics – and of course, with all that exposure to wonderful picture books, couldn't help but want to try making some myself, so it turned out that my final projects were picture books rather than comics! It was a form I had been interested in during my early twenties, then left behind for comics and other things, so in some ways *The king who banned the dark* is a very postponed realization of that ambition. I'm still slowly working on my graphic novel (it's just a very long-term, quite epic project...) so I wouldn't exactly say I've transitioned from comics

to picture books as much as added another stream to what I'm doing – one more format in which to tell stories.

How did you find translating a story to younger readers and did you have any specific challenges in writing in a different format?



I don't have children, so sometimes I worried that I didn't know whether or not a child would enjoy the book. However, I tried not to dwell on that too much and just focused on telling a good story. After all, we were all children once, and I think my inner child is



still alive and well. Much of the readership for a picture book is adult anyway (the parents and teachers who share the experience), and children are often cleverer than we give them credit for, so I tried not to dumb it down. My publishers were great in that respect. A few people suggested that we make the king a child character and Pavilion were keen that we keep him as an adult. I think that's great. Lots of people, publishers particularly, think children can only empathize with children or child characters, but that's a bit ridiculous. Children are so empathetic, so good at relating! Sometimes I did need to make my writing clearer than I might have bothered to if I was writing for adults, and use slightly simpler language, but that was a great discipline for me as a writer – to think, what do I want to say, and am I

saying it as clearly as possible? I often referred to the rules George Orwell sets out in 'Politics and the English Language':

(i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

(ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.

(iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

(iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.

(v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

(vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

The biggest challenges for me technically were the compactness of the picture book form – (the first dummy was 50 pages and we spent weeks trying to fit it into 32 pages, which amazingly we managed without losing any of the plot twists, and I think it became much stronger for it) and learning to handle those big double page spreads when I was used to

working in tiny boxes in the graphic novel form. It seemed like an overwhelming amount of space at first – now I'm more used to them, although I still find the form highly challenging.

This is a powerful story with a strong message that is very relevant for our times, naming no names! Why as a picture book?

Thank you! I think the simplest answer is that I was on a children's book illustration course and I wanted to make a picture book. The idea came second, rather than having the idea and then deciding that a picture book would be the best form for it.

The idea was part visual impulse – I had been working on a project that was quite jolly and with lots of bright colours, but as winter approached and the nights drew in I remembered how much I loved drawing dark, shadowy things and so tried to think of an idea in which the darkness would be forefronted, really just as an excuse to get my inks and conté pencils out! I

thought that the best way of showing how wonderful the dark is might be to show what the world is like without it – from there, the idea of a powerful, idiotic ruler followed, and as this all happened at almost the exact time as the US election in November 2016, and not long, of course, after the Brexit vote in this country, I quickly put two and two together and drew inspiration from the clownish actors on the world stage.

What is the main thing you want readers to take away from *The king who banned the dark*?



I hope that it might provoke discussions about power and its uses and abuses – and to make children aware that governments, unfortunately, do not

always act in the best interests of the people – to give children a little healthy cynicism about those in power, while reminding them of their own great power to act. I would love it if readers (young and old!) were inspired to take direct action themselves, reminded of the possibility and effectiveness of civil disobedience.

Congratulations on your three-picture book deal, what can we expect from your next two picture books?

I'm working on the second book with Pavilion right now. I can't say much yet except that it continues the themes of social justice and ecology – though with a different story, characters and setting. As for book number three – who knows?!

What stories do you like telling best?

I do love a good human-against-nature tale – that theme seems to come out in all my work somehow, from picture books to my graphic novel, which is, among other things, about

climate change, activism and denial. Often my characters realize that what they resisted at the beginning is something they grow stronger by learning to embrace or at least accept. I'm very interested in story structure; the more I've studied it, the more I've come to believe that all stories are really the same. In my work for adults I love memoir and autobiography, but with a magical, fictional slant.

What does a typical workday look like for you?

I love routine and am really quite boring! If it was up to me every day would be exactly the same. It's probably quite healthy for me that life gets in the way and prevents that from being the case. But doing the same thing at the same time stops me spending too much energy trying to decide what to do when.

That means I can put all that energy into my writing and drawing instead.

I find writing really tiring, so I try to do that first thing. I'll usually get up and write for at least 40

minutes, then do half an hour of yoga, have breakfast, then write a bit more. I find it helpful to write in 20-minute blocks, putting the timer on. Around mid-morning I'll shift my energy to another aspect of a project, usually drawing, as this takes less mental energy for me, so I can do it when I'm slightly less fresh. My brain gets too fuzzy to do any serious work between about 12 and 4pm so that's when I do emails or reading/research, shower and get dressed (shamefully late in the day!), walk my dog, have lunch, do some more admin or housework, and then nap time. I love naps but if I'm on deadline they tend to get quite minimal – more of a power-nap. I try to keep to my early-morning writing routine on Saturdays and Sundays as well if I possibly can. I told you I was boring!

I try to work again in the late afternoon when my brain starts to wake up again, but I teach a couple of nights a week at the Royal Drawing School in Shoreditch, so on those evenings I get ready and

head out. I love teaching because it connects me to a community of makers, drawers and writers, intelligent, passionate people who share my interests in storytelling. It's always such a treat and I come back feeling so inspired and revived.

Describe your work process as a writer/illustrator.

I go back and forth a lot between the text and images. My process is always evolving; I used to always draw first, write second, but I'm going through a phase where I tend to write the story in words first and start thumb-nailing the pictures later. If I get stuck I'll usually try switching modes – from words to pictures or back to words. It often helps to see something drawn out if it feels like an idea is getting too abstract. I also use story structure and map things out onto a three act diagram in the early stages or when there are problems. I like working on loose sheets or squares of paper so I can move spreads/panels around and experiment with the

spacing. My drawings start off super simple and very unclear, and get gradually more refined as I get closer to the final artwork. The most important tools in my writer's kit are my friends! I have a small circle of trusted friends who I ask for help when I'm stuck with a story (which happens a LOT), and I try to do the same for them in return. I think conversation is the best way out of most problems (and that goes for life as well as writing/illustration).

What has been one of your most rewarding experiences as an author?

My first school visit was one of the best experiences I've had as a writer. I've mentioned above that I don't have my own children, so being able to read my story to a big group of children for the first time and see from their faces that they were really engaged with the drama of what was happening – and then to answer their many questions about the themes, process and ideas

afterwards – was so wonderful!

And finally, are there any nuggets of wisdom you can impart to aspiring writer/illustrators?

Here are my five nuggets!

- 1. Write everyday – writing a tiny bit every day (even just 10 minutes) is better than writing a lot once a month, because if you write every day your mind keeps working on it while you're going about your business in the time between sessions. If you let too long pass you drop the thread and it takes more energy to reconnect and get it going again.**
- 2. Keep going! Unless you get really lucky it takes a long time to get good. Focus on getting good before you worry about finding a publisher.**
- 3. Build a community of other writers around you and help them with their stories – that will make you a better writer as well as providing you with a community of editors to**

help you with your own work when you need it.

4. Don't expect to do good work every day. Every writer/illustrator produces a lot of rubbish, though readers just see the edited result, the good bits. The writing process always produces a LOT of bad

stuff – Stephen King talks about this so well in his memoir 'On Writing'. Making bad work means you're experimenting, out of your comfort zone. That's how you get to the good stuff.

5. Read as much as you can – both inside your chosen field and

outside of it. Non-fiction books, for example, are just so brilliant for giving you ideas for children's picture books or fiction novels, while literary novels, memoir or poetry will teach you how to make a sentence sing.

You're Snug With Me

Having reviewed *You're snug with me* (written by Chitra Soundar, illustrated by Poonam Mistry, published by Lantana Publishing) a book that may look familiar to readers who enjoyed the pair's first title *You're safe with me*, Francesca Jones took the opportunity to send a few questions to the author and illustrator. Read on to learn a little more about the book(s) and the creative processes which lie behind the words and pictures we see on the pages ...

You're snug with me shares a strong message about an issue currently going on in the world, what made you decide to write about that?

Chitra: We didn't start with the purpose of giving a message. It's simply a story about newborn bear cubs learning about their environment, and learning about our habitat includes caring for it. By teaching the cubs, we hoped the readers would also absorb the message.

How long did it take to write and illustrate *You're snug with me*?

Chitra: The second book always happens faster than the first. From idea to final draft it took a month and about 7 drafts. And then of course we tinkered and chiselled towards the end again after Poonam has worked her magic.

Poonam: It took roughly 3 months to illustrate the whole book. This included the roughs, re-roughs and drawing out all the images in ink. The time for each spread really depends on the complexity of the image. Some of the illustrations took me around 5 days to complete. Others took just under two weeks.

You're snug with me is beautifully illustrated but very different to other children's book why did you take this approach?

*Poonam: Thank you. My style is usually heavily patterned. I wanted the illustrations to be highly decorative and didn't feel it needed to look simple just for children. I think it's good to try different things and take risks. It was important for the art to look sophisticated and really highlight the beauty of the world around us. When I was illustrating *You're Safe With Me* and *You're Snug With Me* I would often ask my 5-year-old nephew what he could see just so I knew that it wasn't over done or too complicated. To be honest I was really nervous about how the book would be received and how people would react to it as the art is very different but luckily it's had such a wonderful response.*

If you had to describe/sum up in a sentence *You're snug with me* what would you say?

Chitra: Instead of a sentence, I'm going to quote Walt Whitman who wrote this – and I think it applies to the story at both levels – to Mama Bear and her cubs, to us humans and nature.

MOTHER AND BABE.

**I SEE the sleeping babe, nestling the
breast of its
mother;
The sleeping mother and babe—hush'd, I
study them
long and long.**

Poonam: I would say it's a story that focuses on the bond between mother and baby and the importance of looking after the world around us.

How close do you work together on *You're snug with me* and will you be releasing more?

Chitra: We actually don't talk to each other about the book at all, before or during the process. If lucky, we'd meet for an event after the book's out. We have one more title in the series coming out next year. Shh!

Poonam: As Chitra said we didn't talk at all during the process of creating the books we

have worked on so far. In fact, I first spoke to Chitra on the phone just after the artwork for the second book was completed.

Apart from your own books what is your favourite children's book?

Chitra: That's the hardest question to ask me. From my own childhood to reading many a week, it's hard to pick one from both classics and contemporary writers. But I would urge everyone to read widely, outside of their experiences because that's what made me a writer.

*Poonam: Ohh that is a difficult question. I couldn't pick one. As a child it would have been *Peace at Last* by Jill Murphy. My current favourite picture book is *I Want My Hat Back* by Jon Klassen. From all the books I own *Ramayana: The Divine Loophole* by Sanjay Patel is by far my favourite. It is utterly beautiful and a wonderful retelling of the story of Rama and Sita.*

Picture books

At this Very Moment

Matthew Hodson

Book Hospital

Leigh Hodgkinson

The Day Fin Flooded the World

Adam Stower

The Dragon Who Didn't Like Fire

Gemma Merino

Escape: One Day We Had To Run

Ming & Wah, illus. Carmen Vela

Finn's Garden Friends

Rachel Lawton, illus. Lia Visirin

Grandad's Camper

Harry Woodgate

Growing Pains

Alison McLennan, illus. Melissa Johns

The King's Birthday Suit

Peter Bentley, illus. Claire Powell

The Lion on the Bus

Gareth P Jones, illus. Jeff Harter

Little Faces: Be Careful, Dragon!

Carly Madden, illus. Hanako Clulow

Papa Penguin

Lindsay Camp, illus. Momoke Abe

Rita's Rabbit

Laura Mucha, illus. Hannah Peck

The Screen Thief

Helen Docherty, illus. Thomas Doherty

The Wind in the Willows

Kenneth Grahame, adapted by Timothy Knapman,
illus. E.H. Shepard

Junior books

Burning Sunlight

Anthea Simmons

The Caravan at the Edge of Doom

Jim Beckett, illus. Olia Muza

The Exploding Life of Scarlet Fife

Maz Evans, illus. Chris Jevons

The Greatest Inventor

Ben Brooks, illus. George Ermos

The House of Secret Treasure

Kita Mitchell, illus. Isabelle Follath

How To Save The World with A Chicken and An Egg

Emma Shevah, illus. Kirsti Beautyman

Indigo Wilde and the Creatures at Jellybean Crescent

Pippa Curnick

The Life and Time of Lonny Quicke

Kirsty Applebaum

The Magical Bookshop

Katje Frixe, illus. Florentine Prechtel, trans. Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp

Oddity

Eli Brown, illus. Karin Rytter

The Outlaws Scarlett and Browne

Jonathan Stroud

The Peculiar Tale of the Tentacle Boy

Richard Pickard

Saint Ivy: Kind at All Costs

Laurie Morrison

Sequins and Secrets

Lucy Ivison, illus. Helen Crawford White

Something I Said

Ben Bailey Smith

Young Adult books

Boy in a White Room

Karl Olsberg

Curses

Lish McBride

Destination Anywhere

Sara Barnard, illus. Christiane Fürtges

The Great Godden

Meg Rosoff

Let's Go Swimming on Doomsday

Natalie C. Anderson

The Lucky List

Rachael Lippincott

Not My Problem

Ciara Smyth

The Paper Girl of Paris

Jordyn Taylor

Six Crimson Cranes

Elizabeth Lim

Small Favors

Erin A. Craig

The Summer We Turned Green

William Sutcliffe

These Hollow Vows

Lexi Ryan

Things To Do Before the End of the World

Emily Barr

Tsunami Girl

Julian Sedgwick and Chie Kutsuwada

You & Me at the End of the World

Brianna Bourne

Non-Fiction books

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Eds. Shakirah Bourne, Dana Alison

Clare Beaton's Make Your Own Castle

Clare Beaton

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Barbara Taylor, illus. Steve Collins

How to Be a Vet

Dr Jess French, illus. Sol Linero

Little Brown Bear: It's OK to Make Mistakes

Georgia AnnelieseDraws

Little Brown Bear: It's OK to Need a Friend

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Marc Martin

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Elizabeth Shreeve, illus. Frann Preston-Gannon

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