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Picture books

A Pinch of Love

Barry Timms, illus. Tisha Lee, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

What a delightful tale that follows a young girl as she learns to bake with her grandmother. The important ingredient is a 'pinch of love' and this is shown to be central to all the other activities that she undertakes to help those in her community. Whether she is sharing biscuits with the neighbours or people working in the area, it is all about the way that we interact with others. This pinch of love can mean so many things; whether it is 'thank you', or 'I am sorry', it acts as a soothing balm in our lives and we need to make sure it is shared.

This is a wonderful book to share with the very youngest and has many lessons that we can learn, not only at home but also at nursery or school. There is very simple rhyming text that makes this very suitable for those just starting on their reading journey and the bright and simple illustrations help the young audience understand and link to the story. Central to the whole story is the idea of family, friendship and community. Whilst the setting appears to be somewhat American, the same principles apply here in the United Kingdom. These sentiments seem to reflect many of the good things that local communities are doing to support those most in need during the very difficult time that many are coping with. This is a book that should find a place in homes and nurseries around the country, as it gives the reader a warm glow and a big hug.

Margaret Pemberton

Balloon to the Moon

Becky Davies, illus. Jennica Lounsbury, pub. Little Tiger

A magical bedtime story, *Balloon to the Moon* uses meditation and mindfulness techniques to ease your child into slumber as part of a relaxed night-time routine. The written narrative is gentle with a lulling rhyme, soft alliteration, and repetitive language. This is a book to be savoured slowly at the end of a busy day. The evocative descriptions are harmonised by the whimsical artwork of this gorgeous picture book, detailed and illustrated in a reduced palette of purple and pinkish hues; milky yellow; and soft blue; the muted images are gentle on sleepy eyes.

A child and their teddy go on a night-time journey, safe and snuggled in their bed. They travel through the starlit sky until they eventually reach the moon. By then they are already fast asleep.

There are lots of lovely details peppered throughout the story. The child and their teddy meet the soft toys from their bedroom, all tucked up in their own beds also travelling to the moon. Some young readers might also appreciate the nod to counting sheep as a sleep technique when the characters fly past a flock of jumping sheep. The endpapers also feature the same sheep – wide awake at the beginning of the book and sound-asleep at the end. This sort of delightful inclusion adds to the magic of the book and is sure to be spotted by many observant children!

Pauline Bird

Friends are Amazing

Hughie Higginson and Freddie Xavi, illus. Erica Salcedo, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

This is a heart-warming, playful book with a clear message: the importance of friendship, for us all. Friends are amazing! The book's pair of eleven-year-old child authors, Hughie Higginson and Freddie Xavi share their thoughts on the traits you'll find in a good'un and why you should be a great friend to others. A not-quite picture book, it is a book full of illustrations and suggestions from playing on the swings to drawing chalk pictures on the ground that will appeal to children of picture book reading age and above.

Bold and bright illustrations bring to life the ultimate belly laughing with friends, the squeeze of a hug with a bestie, and scenes young readers would find themselves in with their peers. It is lovely to read a book that is not just meant to be through a child's eyes, but has genuinely been beautifully written by one. Covering the need for listening and sharing, to being supportive and instilling courage in others, it is a great read to help little ones understand and explore their feelings towards, and expectations of, others.

Hughie and Freddie raised more than £250,000 after Hughie was diagnosed with Leukaemia and best friend Freddie vowed to help him thank his nurses and doctors. They won the Pride of Britain Young Fundraiser award in 2021. For each copy of this book sold, 25p will be donated to Royal Manchester Children's Hospital Charity.

Amy Ellis

Ghost Orchid

Fiona Lumbers, pub. Andersen Press

Have you heard of Ghost Orchids? The Ghost Orchid has no leaves, just roots that wrap around the trees, they flower for just one or two weeks and their locations are kept secret to protect these rare

flowers. However, Ava's explorer parents have been granted funding to find this mysterious flower ... and Ava is going with them!

What starts out as an exciting prospect for Ava is soon diluted. Rather than savouring the wonders of their journey across the world, her parents hurry past all of nature's delights fixating on one goal – get to the Ghost Orchid before its short-lived bloom fades. Ava, knows that the journey can be just as magical as the destination ... but can she convince her busy parents?

A stunning picture book, illustrated in bright watercolours and inks, it serves as an important reminder to slow down and enjoy every moment. Life can get busy with school, clubs, and a full schedule of activities that children are rushed to. Sometimes what children, and we all need is a slower pace and time to savour the small things. After reading this book, I will be definitely trying to be more mindful and stop over-scheduling and hurrying my own little one.

Pauline Bird

The Grizzled Grist Does Not Exist

Juliette McIver, illus. Sarah Davis, pub. Gecko Press

Although, from the title, this sounds rather like *The Gruffalo*, it's very different.

Ms Whiskersniff (Ms Whisk when in a hurry) is fully equipped for all contingencies with her overflowing rucksack, and about to take her class into the wilderness for an adventure in the Dismal Hills. The children lay claim to various forest skills, but Liam's skill of hiding is mocked by the other children. Fortunately, his hiding skills mean that he notices things e.g., a warning sign about the Gruesome Grizzled Grist, a huge footprint, and other clues, but 'Miss' flicks her wrist, declares that the Grizzled Grist does not exist and strides on.

Ms Whisk has her hands full, saving her charges from falling down the mountain, from eating poisonous fungi, and being attacked by a bear: not tamed by the child who claimed he could. It's quiet Liam in his hiding place who tempts the bear away with berries, and it's Liam who saves everyone when they are caught by the blue and furry Grizzled Grist and are about to be made into Cream of Children Soup! Everyone escapes and collapses in relief, and Liam leaves an alternative source of food for the Grist, with a sign to say so and all is well.

'Whisk' is only the first of the highly inventive rhymes for 'Grist/exist' that 'persist' all the way through this delightful picture book, which will be great fun to read aloud and share with children who might join in. The multi-national children are all named and identified at the beginning, and the illustrations are fun, with lots of detail to spy. The final endpaper: 'How to spot a non-existent Grist',

shows a reclining Grist with arrows pointing out inventive descriptions, for example his tummy is a gurglebucket.

This is a hugely enjoyable book, which your reviewer plans to put aside for the new granddaughter.

Diana Barnes

I Did See a Mammoth

Alex Willmore, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

What do you believe in? I hope that the answer to that question will include the words fairies, dragons, unicorns, Father Christmas and of course mammoths. Because Alex Willmore believes in mammoths and so do I, especially after having read *I Did See a Mammoth*, the book he has both written and illustrated. Incidentally, I also believe in all the above mentioned! Now, back to the book in question. Thanks to Farshore for publishing it we now have a book that wants to tell us all about that mammoth that we really did see.

We are in the Antarctic with an intrepid explorer, well a whole bunch of them really, and they are making an in-depth study of penguins. Everywhere they (and we) look there are penguins to be seen, so many penguins, but what is this? One of the young explorers has found something a little bit different, something totally wild, spectacularly cool and that should (by all accounts) be totally extinct! Are you ready to have an exciting adventure, to turn the pages and explore, to keep those eyes peeled for the unexpected and to possibly, just maybe, if you look very carefully, find a mammoth?

Dress up warm, get stuck in, remember there will be lots of laughs and many return visits. Very much a book for winter, for Christmas too, a book to share, to giggle at and to have some great adventures with!

Louise Ellis-Barrett

I'm (Almost) Never Bored

Anna Milbourne, illus. Åsa Gilland, pub. Usborne

Right from the start this book is fun, with a hole in the cover showing a smiley face peeping through: we open the cover to find crazy doodles, including more faces, animals, and birds. The title page has another hole: an open cardboard box, and a unicorn inside, looking thoughtful.

Then the story starts. The brown-skinned girl has a busy life, with school, dance class and ukulele lessons, and so many cartoons to watch and games to play, but when Daddy says that's enough screen

time, she claims to be boooored. But busy Daddy smiles and says “being bored comes RIGHT BEFORE having a Really Good Idea” and sure enough, she spies the box that he is unpacking, grabs her coloured pens, and turns it into a Magic Train. Girl and Unicorn have adventures in lots of places, and the next day it’s busy Mummy who is looking after her, encouraging her to have a Really Good Idea, so an angry scribble gets turned into a tangly and very hungry Spaghetti Monster.

On we go, with more ‘What if?’ ideas, and she is in the garden - while Daddy is hanging out the washing - wondering what it’s like being a bug in the grass, when the boy next door pops up. “I’m bored! You look like you’re having fun, Can I play?” She tells him what comes next when she’s bored.

Åsa Gilland’s quirky and cartoony illustrations are very entertaining: her partnership with Anna Milbourne has also produced *I’m (Almost) Always Kind*. Both are established in their own specialities, and this works very well indeed, with the holes sure to be an added attraction.

Diana Barnes

If Winter Comes Tell It I’m Not Here

Simona Ciraolo, pub. Walker Books

This book is about a little boy who loves having fun in the summer, especially swimming and eating ice cream. When his sister tells him that winter is coming he does not like the idea of that at all. She makes it sound like it will be very boring and cold. After spending time dreading the upcoming winter, it finally arrives and he realises it’s not that bad. He enjoys wrapping up to play in the snow and rain, and having fun with his family, even when they must stay indoors.

I thought this book sent out a great message about the perception of winter for children. The author manages to capture the essence of a real sibling relationship dynamic, full of teasing, and the anxiety of the unknown future months for the little boy. I really liked the way the illustrations portrayed a scary pending winter, one that was sure to bring nothing but dull and rainy days ahead. I found myself relating to the anxiety the little boy felt as myself, and most people I know, do not particularly look forward to cold weather either, however, we forget how beautiful the whole season is. The story then switched to show how magical and special those festive months can be; lit up coffee shops, sledging, ice skating and puddle jumping and, of course, Christmas.

I would recommend this book for ages 3 to 10, an age range who will relate to this story the most, it would also do well in schools to prepare children for the cold season. I will definitely read this story book to my 4-year-old niece, I know she will love it! All around a great book with fantastic illustrations. The author and illustrator should be very proud of it.

Izzy Bean

Loving Kindness

Deborah Underwood, illus. Tim Hopgood, pub. Andersen Press

There is a form of mindfulness in Buddhist Meditation known as Loving Kindness which focuses on promoting benevolent and loving energy towards yourself and others. This simple, repetitive, and vibrant picture book seems to embody this practice. Following a melodic pattern of simple statements in a mantra chant style the book begins with the focus on 'you are', before moving to 'she is', 'they are', and finishing with 'everyone is'. Each focal group is taken across the same sentiments, (just that first word is different); sentiments that emphasize compassion and connection to yourself, each other, nature and the environment, and the whole world.

The affirmations begin with you are a blessing and you are loved and love; before moving to reassurance that it's okay to make mistakes; they then build a connection to the wider world by stating you breathe the air, feel the sun's warmth, and finally touch the earth; the earth that connects us all.

Hopgood's vibrant engaging lively images are engrossing, full of texture, pattern, colour, and lovely graphic images such as the ladybird sat on the giraffe's nose or the little girl learning from her mistakes.

This title goes hand in hand with the author's 2019 picture book *Finding Kindness* and can be used as a meditative moment within a school day or as part of wider collections for events such as World Kindness Day or Earth Day. For such as simple repetitive read this is a deep powerful book.

Natalie McChrystal Plimmer

Timid

Harry Woodgate, pub. Little Tiger

In the privacy of their home, Timmy loves singing, dancing and generally enjoying performance. Their ambition is to take to the stage and show everyone that they are full of talent. Unfortunately, Timmy always feels shy in front of others and finds it impossible to show their true self at school; so, when a school show is announced, Timmy does not have the confidence to apply to take part. Then, when Nia, a classmate, starts talking about the show in the playground, Timmy plucks up courage to explain about their fear lion which appears whenever they are trying to do something new or different. Over the next few weeks, Nia helps Timmy find ways of coping with their fears, but it looks as if it all might fail on the night; that is, until Nia suggests that the lion might also need some reassurance. The friends face their fears and shine on the stage.

This is a wonderful look at how children can face their fears and learn coping mechanisms in all kinds of situations. It is also a very positive look at diversity and how people actually see themselves. Timmy has to learn how to be brave and show their true self to those around them; something that can be very difficult, especially for the young. The illustrations are absolutely gorgeous, with wonderfully vivid and energetic images that carry you through the story. I particularly love the lion and the magnificent rainbow mane that they have. This book gets five stars.

Margaret Pemberton

Whose Footprints Are These?

Gerda Muller, pub. Floris Books

Lovers of Gerda Muller's series of board books celebrating the four seasons will be delighted to discover another classic to add to the collection.

In this wordless picture book, a child and a dog enjoy the snow, and we follow their adventures by following their footprints across each page. Without a word, readers are invited to tell their own story, and answer for themselves the questions the pictures raise: I love the way this book inspires a sense of wonder and engages the reader's imagination. The book also offers a wonderful introduction to learning about the tracks of familiar animals and birds. We see a blackbird, for example, leaving its distinctive paired tracks, side by side, as it hops over the snow.

Muller's illustrations are a delight as always. Clear and uncluttered, they also include carefully observed details of home life and of the natural world, that children will recognise from their own experience. In my home, we have a basket of favourite Christmas books, which we bring out every Advent. Only a few treasured titles make it into the Christmas basket – this book will be one of them. A joyful celebration of playing in the snow, warmly recommended.

Dawn Casey

The Zebra's Great Escape

Katherine Rundell, illus. Sarah Ogilvie, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

There are so many things to say about this marvellous picture book that I am honestly not sure where to start. Perhaps by saying that this is a picture book for the older reader of the genre, for it has a lot of text. Of course, it can still be read to younger children and every reader or listener will find so much about the story to love with its fantastical and silly story vibrant and bold illustrations. Katherine Rundell and Sarah Ogilvie have outdone themselves with this story.

Beginning at the beginning with Part One, I told you this was an unusual picture book, we meet Mink a little girl who doesn't believe in bedtimes and loves nothing more to be on the swing in the park, but what is this? Will you spot the clues in the picture before you hear it in the words? A noise, a cough-growl-sneeze-hiccup a face and a tongue! We are about to meet a zebra, one who needs help and who it seems can communicate with Mink. While Mink tries to hide the zebra (Gabriel), we glimpse the rather unpleasant man zebra is running from and through a series of pictures into Mink's mind we learn Gabriel's story. Part Two takes us to the next morning - yes a lot happened in one night - and a meeting with Rainbow, next door's dog, who becomes a helper in what is about to become the most exciting of adventures and rescue missions.

This story has a girl, a zebra, a dog, a squirrel and a great adventure. It is perfect for children who don't believe in bedtimes, for readers who love lots of action, pictures, and fun. It is a book of extraordinary imagination.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Junior Books

Bramble Fox

Kathrin Tordasi, trans. Cathrin Wirtz, pub. Pushkin Children's

Twelve-year-old Portia is staying with her mother's aunt Rose and Rose's partner, Bramble, in a beautiful, cluttered house deep in the Welsh countryside. She last met them when she was three and has never visited them before. As she goes into their living room for the first time she is astonished to see a bold fox watching her, a fox the adults clearly do not want anywhere near them.

The fox's strange behaviour leads her to discover a mysterious key in a secret desk drawer. She stuffs it in a pocket, and before long is following the fox further and further from the house. After a long and difficult walk Portia sees a mysterious door. At the fox's insistence, she opens it with the key. Suddenly there is no longer a fox beside her, but a man. Meanwhile an injured bird that Portia's new friend Ben has rescued has transformed into a tiny person. He tells Ben and Rose, who have met by chance, that Goodfellow has opened the door. A perilous quest begins. Can Portia, Rose and Ben somehow join forces? Can they save the human world and the land of Faerie from the evil Grey King of the Borderlands, who has been roused from a lengthy slumber by the opening of the door, and his terrifying ghostly army? Fearful dangers await.

Ably translated from the original German, Bramble Fox weaves together fantasy, adventure, Welsh legend and even some recognisable Shakespearean fairies along with interesting protagonists. Middle grade lovers of fantasy novels will enjoy the human and the supernatural characters and the excitement. At nearly four hundred pages, it demands reading stamina.

Anne Harding

Duck's Backyard

Ulrich Hub, illus. Jorg Muhle, pub. Gecko Press

Using a crutch to help with her wonky leg and too afraid to go out, Duck is lonely in her backyard. However, when a chicken wearing dark glasses turns up unexpectedly, searching for adventure and the place where your most secret wishes come true, Duck is a little unsure of what to do. Chicken is blind and needs a guide to help her, but Duck will need support to travel without her crutch. Persuaded by Chicken, Duck somewhat reluctantly agrees to go along and together the pair set off on their quest, encountering no end of incredible obstacles along the way.

As they travel through a scary, black forest, cross a cavernous gorge, and even climb the tallest mountain what evolves is a true voyage of discovery in every sense as Duck and Chicken learn about what it means to be a friend. Together they talk, they bicker, they argue, hurl insults, face dangers and even dance with sheer joy. But Duck is hiding a secret...and what will happen when Chicken finally finds out?

Oh, what an absolute joy this book was to read! It made me laugh and it made me a little sad at points but above all else it made me think. Ulrich Hub's wonderfully philosophical story about two strangers, examines what friendship is in all its glory as Duck and Chicken learn how to overcome their differences and discover that perhaps their secret wishes aren't what matter most at all. This delightful book offers so much to discuss about leadership, support, kindness, and empathy, all wrapped up in a fast-paced and humorous tale, whilst the incredibly clever illustrations by Jorg Muhle, depict Duck and Chicken's struggles perfectly and intimate that perhaps the biggest challenge they face is their struggle to accept each other.

Tracey Corner

Evil Emperor Penguin: Antics in Antarctica

Laura Ellen Andersen, pub. David Fickling Books

The Evil Emperor Penguin demands nothing less than to conquer the world. In his secret Antarctica domination station, he hatches deadly and devious plans that will soon bring the world to its knees. The terrifying Evil Emperor-bot. The Fearsomitron. The Ferocious And Really Terrible machine (but don't mention the acronym!)

Helping their evil master is Number 8, the Evil Emperor Penguin's right-hand man or to be more exact right-eight-limbs-Octopus and the lovable Eugene, chief minion and engineer extraordinaire making all his evil master's dreams, a reality, if only there weren't a few hilarious spanners in the works, big red buttons to press and generally things to break.

To top it all, the Evil Emperor Penguin must now contend with a new arch-nemesis, Evil Cat. Evil Cat is more evil than any other talking cat and willing to do anything to end the Evil Emperor Penguin's reign, even luring away Eugene and kidnaping the Evil Emperor Penguin's sister, Ruth-less. Just when everything seems over and even Evil Cat is outwitted by his thirteen cousin, twice removed Evilyn, Keith comes to the rescue. Keith, a flying unicorn. Who else were you expecting? There is however more pressing business as the Evil Emperor Penguin's spaghetti hoops are stolen.

Antics in Antarctica is another mad caper through the imagination and creative genius of Laura Ellen Anderson, regularly published *The Phoenix* magazine. Each chapter, a separate adventure, suitably

titled with plenty of puns and humour as we follow the real hero of the book, but don't tell the Evil Emperor Penguin, it's Eugene.

Simon Barrett

Mountainfell

Katharine Orton, pub. Walker Books

Erskin lives in a village in the shadow of a cursed mountain; legends tell of witches, beasts and a dragon that can only be kept at bay with human sacrifice. She and her family (mum, dad and sister Birgit) are outsiders because of her father's job, which is to keep watch on Mountainfell to give the village warning if anyone - or anything - crosses the massive wall built to protect them. An earthquake has the townspeople worried that the dragon is becoming restless again; it hasn't been seen in years but suddenly appears in the sky and swoops down, snatching up Birgit before disappearing.

This captivating story follows Erskin as she attempts to rescue her sister, sneaking out of her home to cross the wall into the enchanted forest. As she climbs Mountainfell, she begins to question the village legends and discovers a terrible secret that threatens life as she knows it.

With help from unexpected friends, Erskin encounters magical creatures and real danger on a daring adventure with multiple twists and turns. She also learns to accept and believe in herself, just as she is.

Themes which might interest young adult readers include the environment and the damage humans can do, gender fluidity, friendship, and the corruptive influence of greed and power. This is Katharine Orton's third book. Her other two books, *Nevertell* and *Glassheart* are not connected with this story, but are both set in "the place where the real world meets the realm of imagination, ideas, folk and fairy tales" and I'll be definitely picking them up to share with my children.

Antonia Russell

The Mystery of Raspberry Hill

Eva Frantz, trans. Annie Prime, pub. Pushkin Press

The grown-ups all think she's going to die soon, she can see it in their eyes. Still, when twelve-year-old Stina is sent to be treated at Raspberry Hill Sanatorium, she can't believe her luck. She even gets to ride in a motor car to the magnificent old hospital, hidden deep in the forest. But as Stina explores the long eerie corridors of her new home, she senses it is hiding a dark secret, determined to solve the mystery, but as she gets closer to the truth she finds herself in danger.

This is a truly amazing book which I absolutely recommend.

The main character Stina is suffering from tuberculosis and is sent to a Sanatorium to receive care and try some experimental treatment, something that was extremely common in the time this book is set. When we first meet Stina she is extremely ill and from a poor background and not expected to live. We are in the car when she has her first ride and, when she gets to Raspberry Hill, we can picture the house and grounds: there is a really good description of autumn, and you can even smell the rotting leaves. We meet an excellent cast of characters and, I'll be honest, the writing is so good that I believed in every character and I misjudged all of them! The ones I thought were good turned out to be bad and the ones I thought were nasty turned out to be good. To me this is excellent writing. We also learn how ill people with tuberculosis were and how it felt to have it. There's also a mystery about why there are hardly any children in the Sanatorium, who Reuben is and why her mother hasn't been in contact.

As I read on, I became hooked and would find any second in my day to read the story. I thought I knew where it was going but I was completely wrong. I couldn't believe where it was going and had to reread a couple of chapters to make sure I hadn't missed anything. I hadn't. The twist towards the end was mind-blowing and looking back now it fits the story completely. There are no clues it's coming, and I won't spoil it for you.

This book deals with a lot of sensitive issues very well, and you can tell that a considerable amount of research went into it. *The Mystery of Raspberry Hill* is an amazing book that deserves to be read by lots of people. I definitely recommend it.

Helen Byles

Once Upon a Hillside

Angela McAllister, illus. Chiara Fedele, pub. Head of Zeus

This is a really beautiful book, gloriously illustrated by Chiara Fidele and designed by Jessie Price. I've read it twice already and I expect I'll read it again: it's that kind of book. It's set on a hillside, a down: I don't think we're ever told exactly where. It's a series of short stories, the first being set in the Neolithic and the last in the present day, which are used as a framework to tell us the history of the hill, and, by extension, of Britain. The stories are charming in themselves.

The first, for example, is the tale of a girl called Tani, who is not very good at the jobs that women usually do – but has a gift for 'reading' the forest, tracking animals and so forth. Eventually the shaman decrees that she should be allowed to be who she is, and that she is a valuable part of the community. Apart from the setting, the stories are linked by motifs. So, for instance, Tani has a

special flint stone which contains the image of a white bird. Her father makes it into an arrowhead. She loses this special arrow, but it is not lost for ever; a character in one of the later stories finds it.

The concept is similar to that of Edward Rutherfurd's books for adults, which I've always enjoyed: the first, *Sarum*, is a history of Salisbury, told through the histories of several interlinking families from the earliest times to the present. It's a clever idea which works really well. *Once Upon a Hillside* is a very special book which would make a present to be treasured.

Sue Purkiss

Snow White and Other Grimm's Fairy Tales

illus. MinaLima, pub. HarperDesign

Snow White and other Grimm's Fairy Tales is the ninth book in the - there is no other word to do it justice other than - deluxe, series of illustrated classics from the design studio team of MinaLima. *Grimm's Fairy Tales* are already classics, children and adults alike are familiar with their tales but with this book they are given a whole new life. The innovative take on the stories by MinaLima breathes a whole new life into them and allow very reader to have the opportunity to interact with the amazing features that are included from pop-ups to spinners and sliders to fold outs it is all here alongside the story beautifully told and stunningly illustrated in full colour.

Snow White and other Grimm's Fairy Tales includes twenty-three for the classic fairy tales, bringing them into one collection for collectors of fine books and fairy tale lovers alike. This book is a magnificent way to share the fairy tales, some of which are not always as kind as they seem at face value, with young children who can interact with the story as it is told. Before we meet Snow White, or any of the other characters, we are given a map of The Fairy Tale Kingdom, helping us to orient ourselves as we read. *Snow White*, or Snowdrop, is our first story and we are soon introduced to the first special element of the book with a stunning 3D pop-up forest, can you spot the seven dwarves? A sliding mirror helps us to see who might be the fairest of them all. All the fairy tale princesses have their stories included and we also find classics including *The Elves and the Shoemaker* alongside the less well-known tales, *The Travelling Musicians*, *Twelve Dancing Princesses* and *Hans in Luck*.

Enchanting, a book of fairy tales classics to treasure, to share.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Space Band

Tom Fletcher, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

George, Bash, and Neila play together in a rock band called The Earthlings. A massive fan of rock legend Max Riff, and founder of the band, George is keen to beat rival group Bonehead in the school's Battle of the Bands. In the middle of their performance the three children are lifted from the stage and transported to a stadium at the edge of the universe. Here they must play against bands from other planets in a competition created by Megavolt, a rock star who aims to maintain his popularity through the contest. Catapulted in this scenario, George and his friend must win to save the Earth, as the cost of every elimination is the obliteration of the players' planet of origin.

The winner of the competition must then battle against Megavolt himself and if successful, can opt to play the Gravity Gamble, hence saving all planets condemned during the course of the competition. Round after round George, Bash and Neila find ways to outshine their opponents and to wow the alien crowd. Making new friends, meeting a cosmonaut believed lost for ever, and finding a precious unreleased Max Riff's song are only some of the events that fill this incredible adventure in space. Having reached the final, The Earthlings face Megavolt, but a final twist reveals the true identity of one of The Earthlings and puts the band and all the contestants in jeopardy.

This a fun and engaging story for the lower middle grade readers. Music, aliens, a nail-biting competition: what's not to like? The text is interspersed by lovely drawings, cartoons and the words of George's songs. By scanning the QR code next to each song, readers can hear it played by McFly, a novelty that will delight readers. Fletcher is on familiar territory here, and in good form. The cast of alien characters are amusing and perfect material to entertain the readers. Little play-on-words along the way will amuse too: aliens from planet Tenalp called Mot and Annavoig, for example.

At this time of the year a lovely gift, but also the kind of book that won't spend much time sitting on a library shelf.

Laura Brill

Tyger

SF Said, illus. Dave McKean, pub. David Fickling Books

Tyger is an immortal in a mortal body, dying and needs humanity's help.

Set in an alternative dystopic London, the landed gentry are despots punishing with impunity. Runaway slaves are hung at Tyburn gallows. The common lands are enclosed, forcing many into workhouses. Foreigners live in a ghetto, showing their papers at guarded checkpoints, whenever they wish to do business in the rest of the city. Hate and anger simmers in the streets, fuelling racism and teetering on the edge of revolution.

Here, Lord Maldehyde and his servants, hunt for Tyger, hiding in derelict land and discovered by Adam, a foreigner from the ghetto. Adam wants to help and Tyger encourages him to open inward doors, allowing him to access incredible powers of perception, imagination, and creativity to see a new, different world, full of possibility. Adam, an artist, and with the help of Zadie, full name Scheherazade, the mythical storyteller, seek the Guardians who have the knowledge and skills to open a fourth, final door, connecting this world once more to the infinite. The Guardians are however no more and the location of the fourth door forgotten. It seems Lord Maldehyde will triumph, and all hope will be extinguished, unless Adam and Zadie can discover their past and become their true selves.

It is a story deeply inspired by William Blake's poem *London*, which also later influenced Aldous Huxley, who the author SF Said references in the story as a member of the Underground Library. The story, on a spiritual plane, is a cosmic conflict between those who, like Lord Maldenhyde, want to restrict and oppress humanity and those, such as Tyger, championing human freedom, encouraging human beings to see and fulfil their full potential and throw off the manacles of control. While the story can be enjoyed without this background knowledge – although young readers may have this knowledge as this poem is included in GCSE English literature syllabi - I wonder whether readers will gain a deeper appreciation of the story by having this Blakean mythology and context in mind.

Tyger is a story that stirs up deep questions about human existence.

Simon Barrett

Young Adult Books

Activist

Louisa Reid, pub. Guppy Books

Activist is a raw, hard-hitting story about speaking up in the face of adversity, no matter your age.

When Cassie's school tries to dismiss allegations about its rape culture after an anonymous accusation is published online, she and her friends take the situation into their own hands to ensure the safety of their fellow students, no matter the consequences. *Activist* portrays feminism in its many forms and informs its reader what it really means. It also focuses on the kinds of people feminism represents, and those that are sometimes marginalised by discourse.

As in her previous novels, such as *Wrecked* (2020), author Louisa Reid disguises prose in poetic form to convey raw emotions in short bursts. It's a powerful story with unforgiving imagery, which is reflective of reality not being all sunshine and rainbows. However, hidden within is the encouragement for the reader to follow in Cassie's footsteps - to speak up even when all seems against you. The spacing also helps to convey the meanings of individual words and phrases, as the short paragraphs group together to become mini chapters on each page. This makes reading *Activist* a pleasure, as it can be read all at once or in short bursts. This pick-up-and-read nature makes Reid's latest novel more friendly to a younger, post-modern audience who are normally addicted to screens.

When writing *Activist* Louisa Reid was inspired by the real-life story survivors of rape culture, in 2022, sharing their stories via the Everyone's Invited website. It was clear that society was not doing enough for young people, so Reid chose the title to inspire others like them to not give up in the face of adversity; that indeed their energy, empathy, resilience, and creativity can be a continued source of amazement and inspiration for people around them. *Activist* is a powerful piece of Young Adult fiction, that could also be read by adults - parents and teachers alike will find inspiration from its pages.

As Cassie says, 'the war's not won,' but with a whole ensemble of characters ready to stand up and fight alongside her, it could be.

Chris Kenworthy

Bloodmarked

Tracy Deonn, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Bloodmarked is the second instalment in the *Legendborn Cycle*, continuing the tale of Bree Matthews. After the tragic death of her mother, while Bree was only in her teens, she turns her back on her family until a magical vision gives her an insight into the woman her mother really was, shocking her to the core and sending her in search of answers. Despite the efforts of renowned magician Merlin, Bree clings onto her memories – for, although a magician, Merlin isn't the only one with powers. The unstoppable Bree sets off in search of the Legendborn, descendants of Arthur's famed knights of the round table, and finds out that a magical war is on the way.

This instalment sees Bree caught in the depths of the magical war and still desperately trying to find answers about her family, and her mother's death, while grappling with the weight of her own ancestral powers.

A truly magical tale this book and series will appeal to all YA fantasy fans. Tracy Deonn perfectly weaves the Arthurian legend in with modern themes to give a story that seems simultaneously familiar and sparkingly fresh, and impressive accomplishment when retelling a tale from the 5th century. Deonn's writing is wonderfully immersive and helps bring the reader into the story, making you feel all the grief and the heartache that plague the central character, going above and beyond the standard YA tropes of teen angst. I loved reading Bree's internal struggles around her powers, something that I don't feel has been explored enough in the fantasy genre.

Devoted fans will, I'm sure, be thrilled to read that a third instalment is on the way, but it may be a couple of years away – we will all have to be patient and wait!

Rosie Cammish Jones

Creature

Shaun Tan, pub. Walker Studio

I was torn when deciding how to share this book. It is breath-taking and if it was possible, I thought, I would share with the world each and every picture it includes. It's not really possible so the next best thing will be to share some pictures (remember to look at our social media accounts for these) but to also share the book with a review and that is what I am now doing. I shall try to give you a sense of the power of this book, whether or not you are familiar with the work of Shaun Tan I can tell you that this book is a must. It is solace. It is wonder. It is joy. This is, as you may have noticed, a very personal review for the book truly resonated with me.

As a librarian I have long been aware of the work of Shaun Tan who creates illustrated books covering social, political and historical subjects with his dream-like imagery. It was an art teacher friend who opened my eyes to Tans' work, and I have never looked back. This collection of painting, drawing and

reflections on the creatures that are our constant companions, in our lives in our minds, in our hearts and it creates a masterful narrative perfectly complemented by the few words in the book.

Perhaps the most important to me was that a creature is not necessarily one thing or another, it just is. A creature is a mysterious being in a world of mystery wanting to fit in, be unique or make sense so as to exist. Just like us. All the creatures in this book are Tan's creations, some never seen before all delving deep into the allure of the subject. A book for writers, artists and dreamers.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Friends Like These

Jennifer Lynne Alvarez, pub. Penguin Random House

Gripping stuff this teenage novel, which combines a lot of sex, drugs and drink, secrets galore and murder. *Who needs enemies when you have Friends Like These*, and indeed this full title is the very core of the entire unputdownable book.

Set in Connecticut on the eastern coast of the USA, around super-rich eighteen-year-old Tegan Sheffield's annual end-of-summer beach party, we are skilfully drawn into the lives of half a dozen school friends. As the novel unwinds, we are taken back to earlier events, some of which emerge from friendships many years earlier when the teenagers were primary age children. Tegan herself comes from a background where she lacks for nothing and expects that others will always do what she wants. Hers is apparently a perfect life, but many others in the same school group have had far less entitled experiences, and some have old scores to settle. When a video prank from the party goes seriously wrong, becomes viral and a body is discovered on the beach, past histories begin to emerge amongst the schoolfriends and spiral into some terrifying situations amid the spooky east coast fogs.

Though the initial scene setting is rather slow, Jennifer Lynne Alvarez portrays her teenage protagonists with a deep understanding of young people, and before long we are absorbed in the narrative. Alvarez's central characters are Jake and Jessica, and there is a definite undercurrent of Shakespeare's teenage Romeo and Juliet in their passion for each other. Neither of them has had anything like Tegan's entitled life, but we find that, whatever your background, the same teenage fears, frustrations and angst exist. Alvarez divides the book into fifty-five short chapters, split between Jake and Jessica with reminiscences from Tegan. For the teenagers, the party which goes so wrong, the deaths and the denouements, are a tangled web of fact, fiction, and fear, and we as readers find ourselves attempting to unravel the protagonists' stories. In so doing we also are drawn into the narrative, and the eventual outcomes. Terrific reading, exciting narrative, but a fair-few lessons to be learnt by readers.

Bridget Carrington

Miles Morales: Stranger Tides

Justin A Reynolds, illus. Pablo Leon, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

A feast for the eyes, a punchy storyline and plenty of teenage superhero angst thrown in for good measure, this book was a hit with my eleven-year-old son, who is a fan of graphic novels. *Miles Morales: Stranger Tides* is the sequel to *Shock Waves*, which you don't need to have read before enjoying this one.

Miles Morales is the newest Superman in Brooklyn – Peter Parker is his friend and mentor. Like Peter Parker before him, Miles is doing his best to keep the streets safe incognito, whilst juggling homework and school commitments. When Miles is invited to the glamorous launch of a new video game, he is horrified to discover that it freezes anyone who looks at it. The super villain of the piece is the sinister Stranger, who has a touch of Dr Strange about him. Hell-bent on teaching humanity a lesson for their lack of discipline, through his nefarious plan, he hopes to see mankind destroy itself. Once again, Spider-Man, in this case Miles, has to literally save the world from destruction, with the help of his ex-enemy Trinity and his trusty friend Ganke. When their friend Kyle is frozen, the fight becomes personal.

The illustrations are incredibly dynamic and urban, full of movement and noise; they are clear, crisp, vibrant and eye-catching. We liked that the book is conveniently separated into chapters, for easy bedtime pauses. As Miles rushes around the city, warning his loved ones not to use their laptops and phones, for those searching for deeper meanings, this could certainly be read as a cautionary tale about the insidious power of technology in our lives. This feels appropriate for younger teens.

Stephanie Robertson

Princess of Souls

Alexandra Christo, pub. Hot Key Books

Selestra Somniatis leads a solitary existence: she is imprisoned by the volatile King Seryth, promised freedom only when the time comes to replace her mother as the King's witch. The magic they both possess is closely intertwined with death: they can predict its arrival and harvest a soul from a body once death has been and gone. King Seryth puts this power to foul use, and Selestra's mother must extract as many souls as the king demands. Any witch in their family line is bound by blood oath to share this responsibility, feeding souls to Seryth to ensure his immortality.

Stepping into Selestra's world and into her mind means entering a chaos of conflicting emotion. Her story is immediately intriguing, and her fearsome potential is at odds with her desperation for a life

far beyond Seryth's castle. Selestra is only too aware of the vanity that drives Seryth to use her family's magic and she grows increasingly afraid of having to follow her mother's path. Selestra's unrest worsens with the arrival of Nox Laederic, a headstrong, reckless soldier with a personal score to settle against the King. Nox is determined to end the rule of Seryth, but neither Nox nor Selestra are prepared for the way this will interweave their fates.

At Selestra's side is her one true friend: Irenya, the castle's apprentice dressmaker. Their friendship is fierce and witty, as is the loyal bond between Nox and his best friend Micah. These four share a story that contains sharp combat, magical creatures, unexpected connections, and a furious determination to forge their own path.

Jemima Breeds

Scattered Showers

Rainbow Rowell, illus. Jim Tierney, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

In a series of short stories, short and incredibly sweet that I just had to read in one sitting but which I can see myself coming back to and dipping into, Rainbow Rowell captured my heart and her mind with her lyrical storytelling. I truly believe she must have a magical pen, so beautiful are her stories and so perfect is her ability to tell a short story perfectly. Everything is fitted in, we do not feel that we have been short-changed, we get to know and understand the characters, their settings, their feelings, their story. Each story is completely personal to its characters and yet we are left feeling that somehow all the stories and their characters connect to one another.

With opening title pages stunningly illustrated by Jim Tierney this collection feels that it could be read at any time of year and although its theme is very much one of winter, of Christmas and New Year celebrations it is also one of love and that transcends time. Add to this the fact that it is a rainbow of stories, its *Scattered Showers* title fitting it perfectly, giving readers (you won't need it I assure you) the option to read this collection at any time of year.

So, what is inside the covers? There are nine beautifully crafted love stories awaiting the reader. They range from offering irresistible characters to hilarious dialogues, lots of kissing opportunities and offer us the chance to reconnect with characters we may have met in her other books as well as the chance to meet new ones. Of the stories, four have never before been in print! A real treat. We move from girl meets boy outside a movie theatre to best friends debating the merits of dances, to a prince romancing a troll, a girl romancing an imaginary boy and even the return of Simon Snow for a holiday adventure. My favourite? *Midnights*. A series of New Year's Eve midnight rendezvous over the course of a few years. I wonder what yours will be.

A truly magical and enchaining set of rainbow reads. Highly recommended by this reviewer.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Secrets So Deep

Ginny Myers Sain, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

A seriously spooky YA novel for reading in the long dark evenings, but with a much more serious underlying narrative based around childhood trauma. Set on the rocky coast of Connecticut, we meet Avril embarking on a month's drama camp at a remote cliff-top theatre run by her dead mother's charismatic best friend.

At seventeen Avril has never forgotten the night when her five-year-old self was rescued from the ocean, almost dead, sadly her mother had drowned before she too could be rescued. Avril's life is constantly interrupted by terrifying flashbacks, and by what appear to be signs that the events of twelve years earlier, are about to restage the tragedy. Moreover, the play the teenage actors are presenting echoes aspects of Hamlet, and Avril and Cole, her new boyfriend, become increasingly drawn into the play, as well as the shared past they discover.

Read at a superficial level this is an exciting murder-mystery, with elements of the paranormal which readers can attempt to solve while they shiver. The curious, often terrifying, situations which she becomes part of again become overwhelming and we follow Avril and Cole's gradual descent into a conviction that the tragedy is inevitably recurring. Sain creates a varied and true to life group of teenagers, some with dilemmas of their own, but it is Avril's trauma which draws us into the dark.

Exciting, frightening and thought provoking, who can ask for more?

Bridget Carrington

Tasting Light: Ten Science Fiction Stories to Rewire Your Perceptions

ed A.R. Capetta and Wade Roush, pub. Walker Books

This is an anthology of ten science fiction stories for young adults. Each one is a classic science fiction story about young people discovering themselves. The stories range from intimate to far-reaching and feature technology from the future in personal ways. This collection is exciting, unusual, and certainly very different. For young readers opening their minds and questioning their perceptions is definitely a challenge; this book and its stories will encourage them to rise to the challenge. It presents a world where robots with human characteristics roam and a society where you can change how you look, sound, and interact.

Tasting Light is a brilliant and interesting collection of science-fiction stories featuring a teenager, who braves the 'reinvention room' to accept a gift from the dead and, in an accidental city in space, a young apprentice who holds neighbourhoods together with braided carbon filaments. Other themes covered are drug use, white privilege, hope, innovation, anger, and tenderness. Young Adult readers should find each story a challenge.

In another story, featuring 'Cadence', the character gets a new voice. 'Extremophiles' is written in the form of letters and presents readers with a very well written concept and different idea. The book and its collection of stories will leave readers wanting to know more about science. 'Smile River' is another incredible story, giving readers a lot to think about. 'The Memory of Soil' is presented in comic book format. These examples show just how different and unusual this fascinating collection of science fiction is.

Gary Kenworthy

We Are All Constellations

Amy Beashel, pub. Rock the Boat

When she was ten years old Iris's mum died in a fire, which has made her dad a little overprotective. Particularly as Iris is into 'urbex', urban exploration, which comprises sneaking into abandoned buildings—often at night. But Iris is fine. As her mum wrote four times inside the paper fortune-teller she gave Iris before she died: 'You will be strong.' Iris is always strong. But when she discovers she's been lied to about her mother's death fissures start to appear in Iris's strong façade and in the memories she has of her mum. If she allows the thoughts and memories to emerge she may just have to acknowledge that her mum wasn't perfect and that perhaps she is just like her. As the cracks deepen, Iris pushes everyone away but ultimately learns that we are never just one thing—we are all constellations.

Every single relationship in this book is exquisitely realised and written; Iris's relationship with her socially awkward stepbrother, Noah, her friendship with her best friend, Tala, who is finding her voice and exploring her own asexual identity, and the new romance sparking with Orla, a gymnast who is also the daughter of her mum's best friend.

Amy Beashel's prose is incredible poetic and powerful, and I loved how Iris congratulates herself on her vocabulary throughout the book, a verbal tic inherited from her mum. Iris's repressed thoughts are expressed in strikethrough text, an effective device for hinting at the turbulence below the surface. This book does deal with a lot of heavy issues, but the author handles them responsibly with great warmth and sensitivity. I would highly recommend it for age 13+.

We Are All Constellations is a brilliantly insightful, heartbreakingly lyrical book. I have a new favourite contemporary YA writer. Amy Beashel is a shining constellation of stars and I will look out for whatever she writes in the future.

Rebecca Rouillard

Non-Fiction Books

A Dinosaur A Day

Miranda Smith, illus. Jenny Wren, Juan Calle, Xuan Le, Max Rambaldi, Olga Baumert, pub. Farshore

Did you know that there are enough dinosaurs to learn about a new one every day of the year? I didn't until I discovered *A Dinosaur A Day* and its gloriously fact-packed pages. I know many children who will love to open the book each day of the year, learn about the dinosaur for that day and then share the facts they have learnt with family and friends alike. I have no doubt the book will also inspire some budding palaeontologists too! Researched and written in consultation with Professor Mike Benton, an expert on palaeontology the book does not only take readers on a journey of learning and discovery for the world of dinosaurs but also introduces the other animals who lived alongside the mighty dinosaurs.

With a brief introduction to the rise of the dinosaur around 240 million years ago (it was 800 million years ago that life on earth first began, 360 million years ago that cold climate caused mass extinction before a warming of the earth bought back reptiles on the land and flying creatures in the skies) and a brief what do we know about them fact box, we can turn to January 1st and the Eoraptor. The Eoraptor was one of the earliest and smallest dinosaurs. We are told, for this and every entry, which period lived in, its family, diet, length, weight, height and where the fossils have been found. At the end of the book a pronunciation guide helps with all the names, but I would have liked a timeline running along the pages to help me understand the time periods. There are familiar and lesser-known dinosaurs alongside one another, newly discovered species and long-time favourites all complemented by stunning illustrations from the team of illustrators and of course plenty of facts for a year and beyond.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

A is for Bee

Ellen Heck, pub. Pushkin Children's

People who love this book (I'm among them) will properly love it. People who don't will understand its purpose, may appreciate its cleverness and admire its illustrations, but could be left with a feeling of 'so what'. It's built around the idea that we're over-familiar with English-based schemes for learning the alphabet – 'A is for apple, B is for book, C is for cat...' – and that by challenging that cosy and stale familiarity with the words of other languages, something interesting happens in the mind and worldview of the reader.

So, this is an 'A is for apple' book, but a random page instead gives us: 'T is for octopus,' and it is but in Japanese (tako), Hebrew (tmanun) and German (tintenfisch). Every alphabet letter is likewise matched with an animal, its name given in as many as 5 different languages. In all, 68 of the world's languages are represented (24 European), none more so than Japanese (4 times); elephant in Japanese is zo, the biggest animal, the smallest name. Apart from the delightful otherness and poetry of the words themselves – in Albanian butterfly is flutur, (how lovely) – the way it aims to break self-centring in younger readers is fantastic, as a learning tool is invaluable simply for that.

As an object, it's gorgeous. Heck's illustrations are deeply detailed, lightly impressionistic powerful etchings made vivid with strong, serious colours. The composition is forceful, the typography feels hand carved. It's a very tactile, woody aesthetic that I'd keep on the shelf to glance at occasionally for fun and use for inspiration. It's a wild book that asks you questions; it's unsettling in the very best way. I'd look for it in every library, school or otherwise, but wouldn't be surprised to see it on a A-Level art project mood board or as an icebreaker in a creativity workshop. It really is an all-ages book. Very interesting, very thought-provoking, quite beautiful.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Animal Super Powers: The Most Amazing Ways Animals Have Evolved

Dr. Nick Crumpton, illus. Viola Wang, pub. Walker Books

Nick Crumpton is a zoologist who has worked for both the BBC and Natural History Museum and is known for his rather fun titles *Everything You Know about Dinosaurs is Wrong* and *Everything You Know about Minibeasts is Wrong*. This book takes a similarly unusual approach and looks at the skills and body parts that animals have developed around the world to help them thrive and survive.

It explains that the reason why animals look so different is because of where they live and what they eat but that the same skills can be found in animals who lives miles away from each other because they have evolved and developed comparable superpowers. It explores animals that use body armour and spines as a means of protection; how some animals have prehensile tails that they use as an extra limb to help them move around the treetops; how wings are an efficient way of travelling; how some animals survive by being toxic to eat; and a rather gruesome section on animals that drink blood. Known as hematophagy, the most well-known of these is probably the mosquito but there are vampire ground finches in the Galapagos Islands who will feed on the blood of Boobie birds if fruit is scarce!

The book is aimed at 7-10-year-olds and there is enough grisliness and yuckiness to please this target group. I would have liked an index for ease of access, but this interesting and informative book is ideal for dipping in to as well as supporting the topic of evolution.

Barbara Band

Around Antarctica: Exploring the Frozen South

Tania Medvedeva, illus. Maria Vushinskaya, pub. Thames & Hudson

The quality and range of non-fiction books for children is better than it has ever been so attracting attention in a crowded market isn't easy. *Around Antarctica* is a triumph, guaranteed to stand out from the rest and eminently pick-up-able with its innovative quarter circle shape, and icy colour palette. As if that wasn't enough, enormous globe foldouts add impact and interest.

It tells the story of Tom, an intrepid journalist whose dream of visiting this harshest of continents comes true when he is invited to join a scientific expedition. We follow his journey across the world from home to base station, journeying alongside him, learning more about this unique, special landscape, the pioneers who first explored it and the real-life scientists who work there today, through a series of highly illustrated interviews and speech bubble-style conversations. Astronomers, meteorologists, climatologists, glaciologists, and oceanologists explain everything from the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect to ice cores, circumpolar currents and convergence, wildlife adaptations and satellites.

The engaging text packs in a huge amount of scientific detail but is always accessible and complex ideas are very clearly explained. Tania Medvedeva is a STEAM expert, currently investigating the impact of Antarctica on global warming. With this book she aims to help children explore the history and future of our shared planet, to inspire them to preserve it. No reader can be left in any doubt about the urgent need to slow down global warming and its irreversible impact on our world after sharing Tom's journey through these pages. Detailed, colourful and quirky illustrations from Russian artist Maria Vyshinskaya have real child appeal too - completely capturing the interest and uniqueness of the fragile landscape, cleverly simplifying complex scientific concepts, adding movement and often humour. As you'd expect from Thames & Hudson, production values are superb, page layouts are beautifully designed and the tough, high-quality globe foldouts provide space for the huge ideas, emphasising the vastness of this unique continent, its importance in our world.

Around Antarctica is stunning, timely and important, it cannot fail to inspire our next generation of scientists, explorers, and eco-warriors. An ideal present it is sturdily packaged enough to earn shelf space in libraries and classrooms too. Perfect for cross-curricular projects at KS2 or lower KS3, for browsing, for sharing, for poring over in groups or for reading from cover-to-cover, this is definitely one for your shopping list.

Eileen Armstrong

An Atlas of Lost Kingdoms

Emily Hawkins, illus. Lauren Baldo, pub. Wide Eyed Editions

Subtitled *Discover Mythical Lands, Lost Cities and Vanished Islands* this is a book with great promise for all those who love a touch of mystery and wonder, for detectives, for adventurers. Prepare yourself for a journey around the world, the book touches on every continent, and there is even a special entry for the Lost Continents for this is no ordinary atlas, Emily Hawkins writes, “it is an atlas for those with a hunger for mystery and adventure.” Its locations are the places found in myth and legend, some will be familiar, some new to you but equally fascinating. Many of them have been searched for over centuries by explorers and yet still elude us all, yet they remain in memory, in story.

While some of the places are purely mythical, some real, each and every one of them plays an important role in the cultures of the people whose lives they interact with. It may not be possible to travel to the places mentioned but the countries, continents that they have emerged from are real and so you can start your exploration of the world of lost kingdoms with this atlas and maybe one day visit them for yourself, perhaps on your own quest? So where does the atlas take us ... to the famous underwater city of Atlantis, known of since ancient times and yet still eluding explorers! There is also Carthage the once great city rivalling Rome and the ancient city of Troy from Greek Myth. Iram of the Pillars, the Atlantis of the Sands, which appears in the Thousand-and One-nights stories is explored. Each city comes with tales of explorers searching for it, with clues such as maps, cryptic carvings, manuscripts, and mythical supposed locations.

A fascinating blend of myth and history this book will have the curiosity of every reader piqued.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Bedtime Book of Impossible Questions

Isabel Thomas, illus. Aaron Cushley, pub. Bloomsbury Children’s Books

Well, this is going to be someone’s favourite book. It’s excellent present material, there’ll be some readers who’ll be excited just by the contents page. As its title suggests, Thomas poses questions, then discusses them. There’s nothing especially ‘bedtime’ going on, that’s simply a hook that isn’t really followed up, and honestly doesn’t need to be, though it would’ve been cute had the illustrations reflected it more.

Thomas pitches a science book, and many questions fit this: ‘What are atoms made from?’ and ‘Are cats liquid or solid?’, but a lot are more properly thought of as philosophical: ‘How do I know I’m not dreaming right now?’ or ‘How do we know that unicorns have never existed?’ Some speak more to socialisation and a maturity in engaging with others: ‘Do wasps know that they hurt people when they sting?’ In all, there’s 70 questions, plenty for hours of solid pondering or a year of dipping in. By now you’ll know whether this is the sort of book you’re interested in, but is it done well?

Largely yes. The questions are well-chosen, varied and given good, solid answers. Thomas does a great job of explaining and encouraging curiosity and thought. Cushley has a lovely feel for colour and composition and the illustrations are characterful and engaging. Where I have a reservation, it's over tone. I feel the book tries too hard to be accessible to the youngest readers. There's a jarring mismatch between content and presentation – the exclamation marks, the many words in bold or in capitals, that this is 'The Bedtime Book'. There isn't the commitment to excess that works in say Captain Underpants, and the result is a bit random. It's a shame because the material here could happily sit in Year 5 discussions but comes off quite Years 1 and 2.

But that's my only problem here. Thomas and Cushley have produced a great and well-constructed torrent of ideas and knowledge, from which you could pick hundreds of 'did-you-knows', and off the back of which you could spend days thinking deeply about a single thing. Certainly a highlighted library book, an intriguing learning and discussion book, an often-consulted shelf book at home, and ok maybe for some readers a bedside book of things to think about while falling asleep (see page 83).

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Epic Animal Journeys: Migration and navigation by air, land and sea

Ed J Brown, pub. Cicada Books

So many animals take journeys throughout their lifetimes for a variety of reasons. This book explores the navigations and migrations of animals by sea, land and air and explains how so many animals are capable of taking such long journeys, and why they choose to do so.

Divided into sections which each explore a different type of migration, those made on land, those in the air and those by sea, along with a final section which explores how animals navigate change the book is highly accessible. The pages are full of colourful illustrations and small paragraphs of text which explain a different aspect of the migration being explored.

Children interested in animals, and in particular knowing how and why they take such onerous journeys, will really enjoy this book.

With a page on how migration is being impacted in a changing world, it is vital that young people understand how, and why, they can make a positive difference in supporting animals around the world with the journeys that they need to take. Whether an area of land is a resting point for a bird, or home to a mammal, it is so important that humans start to make changes to the way that we live to prevent the harm that is happening to other species.

The illustrations by Ed Brown are terrific as is his writing! They are full of colour, include intricate details and show how flights can be possible with things like thermal currents.

Tom Joy

Inside the Body: An Extraordinary Guide to Human Anatomy

Joëlle Jolivet, trans. Bethany Wright, pub. Thames & Hudson

Inside The Body: An Extraordinary Guide to Human Anatomy is a rather amazing, large format book that explores the wonders of the human body through a series of layered illustrations. There are four large scale folded figures that can be opened out covering muscles, the circulatory system, the nervous system, and skeletal structure. Other illustrations feature multi-layered annotated flaps that can be raised to discover a myriad of facts and information.

The book is meticulously detailed listing even the smallest body part, for example, the inside of a tooth and the areas of the tongue. Some of the images, such as the head, foot, and hand, are life-size whilst others, such as the ear and eye, are larger-than-life allowing an exceptional overview. Other areas that are explored include the heart, the respiratory system, eating and digestion, and getting rid of waste. The final section looks at the reproductive organs and the different stages of pregnancy from two to nine months. Very unusual and visually exciting, the pages are sturdy and illustrations bold, but it is a case of look-and-find for there are no contents or index pages.

Although marketed at middle grade readers, younger children may struggle with the vocabulary, and it is certainly a book that older readers – especially those interested in human biology – would find fascinating.

Barbara Band

It's the Journey Not the Destination

Carl Honoré, illus. Kevin and Kristen Howdeshell, pub. Magic Cat

‘When you slow down and take your time, you notice the details that make each place unique. You meet people and learn about their history and culture. You discover new sounds, aromas and flavours.’

The opening statement of *It's the Journey Not the Destination* explains the reason behind it so well – there are so many magical journeys to make on this planet that it is important to make sure you slow down, take in the detail and enjoy every experience that you find yourself in.

The book is split into four parts, each with a different mode of transport that will take you on the journeys within that section. Travelling by foot, bike, boat, and train gives a different viewpoint to explore from and enables you to see different environments; you would struggle to experience the Great Wall of China by boat, after all! With forty journeys to take in total, you will explore more by reading this book than most people are able to in their lifetimes!

On each double-page spread, there are incredible illustrations that bring the experience to life along with small chunks of text which are informative, in a similar style to that of a tour-guide. The pages include drawings of groups of people experiencing each place which allow you to feel even more included on the journey as an explorer.

What I love about this book is that it provides the opportunity to explore places around the world that you may not otherwise get to experience. Travelling from Costa Rica to China then to Jordan simply by turning a few pages is such an inclusive way to learn about some of the greatest sights of the world.

If you are a young explorer who wants to see the world, this book is perfect for you!

Tom Joy

Snot, Sneezes and Super Spreaders

Marc ter Horst, illus. Wendy Panders, trans. Laura Watkinson, pub. Greystone Kids

Written after the Covid-19 outbreak, this topical book will certainly inform and answer the major questions of that time that many children will now have as we continue to live with the disease. Questions include, but are not limited to: Where did it begin? How did it spread? What was the world doing? Questions that of course apply to illnesses and super-spreaders other than Covid and which it is important to answer for and explain to children.

While the book itself is text heavy, it is entirely comprehensive and filled with stories of people impacted by the disease and pandemic. Tracking the progress of the disease as it traversed the globe and looking into what it means to be a super-spreader. This is a fascinating look at Covid but also disease and viruses in general. It also looks back through history at other huge diseases that affected the world, like AIDS, the Ebola virus, and the plague. A lot of research and evidence have been pulled together to ensure truth reigns over panic and worry.

Older readers, in Year 6 through to Year 9, will find scientific evidence of super-spreaders, past scientists working on vaccines and hope in the help that vaccines, cures and science offer. Hugely factual, highly interesting, I can see older readers gaining a lot from reading this book.

Erin Hamilton

Picture books

A Pinch of Love

Barry Timms, illus. Tisha Lee

Balloon to the Moon

Becky Davies, illus. Jennica Lounsbury

Friends are Amazing

Hughie Higginson and Freddie Xavi, illus.
Erica Salcedo

Ghost Orchid

Fiona Lumbers

The Grizzled Grist Does Not Exist

Juliette McIver, illus. Sarah Davis

I Did See a Mammoth

Alex Wilmore

I'm (Almost) Never Bored

Anna Milbourne, illus. Åsa Gilland

If Winter Comes Tell It I'm Not Here

Simona Ciruolo

Loving Kindness

Deborah Underwood, illus. Tim Hopgood

Timid

Harry Woodgate

Whose Footprints Are These?

Gerda Muller

The Zebra's Great Escape

Katherine Rundell, illus. Sarah Ogilvie

Junior books

Bramble Fox

Kathrin Tordasi, trans. Cathrin Wirtz

Duck's Backyard

Ulrich Hub, illus. Jorg Muhle

Evil Emperor Penguin: Antics in Antarctica

Laura Ellen Andersen

Mountainfell

Katharine Orton

The Mystery of Raspberry Hill

Eva Frantz, trans. Annie Prime

Once Upon a Hillside

Angela McAllister, illus. Chiara Fedele

Snow White and Other Grimm's Fairy Tales

illus. MinaLima

Space Band

Tom Fletcher

Tyger

SF Said, illus. Dave McKean

Young Adult books

Activist

Louisa Reid

Bloodmarked

Tracy Deonn

Creature

Shaun Tan

Friends Like These

Jennifer Lynne Alvarez

Miles Morales: Stranger Tides

Justin A Reynolds, illus. Pablo Leon

Princess of Souls

Alexandra Christo

Scattered Showers

Rainbow Rowell, illus. Jim Tierney

Secrets So Deep

Ginny Myers Sain

Tasting Light: Ten Science Fiction

Stories to Rewire Your Perceptions

ed. A.R. Capetta and Wade Roush, contributors

William Alexander, K. Ancrum, Elizabeth Bear,

A.R. Capetta, Charlotte Nicole Davis, Nasugraq

Rainey Hopson, A.S. King, E.C. Myers,

Junauda Petrus-Nasah and Wendy Xu

We Are All Constellations

Amy Beashel

Non-Fiction books

A Dinosaur A Day

Miranda Smith, illus. Jenny Wren, Juan Calle,
Xuan Le, Max Rambaldi, Olga Baumert

A is for Bee

Ellen Heck

Animal Super Powers: The Most Amazing Ways Animals Have Evolved

Dr. Nick Crumpton, illus. Viola Wang

Around Antarctica: Exploring the Frozen South

Tania Medvedeva, illus. Maria Vushinskaya

An Atlas of Lost Kingdoms

Emily Hawkins, illus. Lauren Baldo

The Bedtime Book of Impossible Questions

Isabel Thomas, illus. Aaron Cushley

Epic Animal Journeys: Migration and navigation by air, land and sea

Ed J Brown

Inside the Body: An Extraordinary Guide to Human Anatomy

Joëlle Jolivet, trans. Bethany Wright

It's the Journey Not the Destination

Carl Honoré, illus. Kevin and Kristen
Howdeshell

Snot, Sneezes and Super Spreaders

Marc ter Horst, illus. Wendy Panders, trans.
Laura Watkinson