



# Armadillo

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

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### Books Reviewed

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# Picture Book Reviews

## **A Home on the River**

Peter Bentley, illus. Charles Fuge, pub. Hodder Children's Books

*A Home on the River*, written by Peter Bentley, is a heart-warming rhyming story full of friendship, joy and adventure. It explores the importance of sharing, kindness, and showing compassion and care for the world. This is the second book in the series of adventures with Bramble Badger and his friends.

The story follows Bramble Badger who discovers that he has no water where he lives — and his friends are also out of water too! They soon discover that the reason behind the lack of water is because the bed of the river is completely dry — and poor Tipper the toad can't even swim!

Bramble decides to follow the river and is determined to help his friends and find out the cause of the problem. Bramble soon comes across the cause of the problem and ends up making a new friend along the way. The story ends with a very heart-warming scene that is guaranteed to make you smile — I know I did!

Fuge's illustrations are beautiful and full of detail, with soft colours and earthy tones. He brings the story to life through his detailed life-like illustrations and shows the emotions of the characters wonderfully.

*A Home on the River* is a beautiful and fun book, with clever end rhymes and sound words that make the story flow and sing beautifully. I thoroughly enjoyed it and I highly recommend it for reading aloud to young children. A perfect story for bedtime, story time — or anytime!

**Katy Crosby**

## **All are Welcome**

Alexandra Penfold, illus. by Suzanne Kaufman, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

My first impressions are delight: the book is large and bright making it easy to read to a group or fit well in the hands of younger children, and I liked the feel of the glossy, well-made book, which is something I would expect from this publisher.

The story itself takes the reader through a typical day of a class in school, one which welcomes all, starting with the bell ringing and ending with the children heading for home. The focus of the book is

the idea that everybody feels safe and welcomed, regardless of race, religion or other defining qualities. This message is very clear from the cover and delivers exactly what it promises; a heart-warming and kind book that teaches children to accept all others even if they aren't like you. It's a lovely lesson to teach and does so very well without sounding preachy or pushy.

In the book families of all kinds are represented, including those with same-sex parents and people with disabilities – almost any child could pick out a familiar face or someone just like them: something so important for children's books, ensuring the child can relate to and understand the message. Each character has been well fleshed out and it really does look like a classroom case study: different clothing, hairstyles, expressions and cultures. It was no surprise to then read that it was inspired by the authors' daughters' school as it was very true to life.

While the story includes lots of activities that children will be familiar with, such as art and music, there isn't any particular drama or action that leaps out, rather, it seems to focus more on the illustrations telling the story, the words taking a back seat, being set smaller on the page and a little dull. I couldn't help but feel that I'd have liked more excitement in the words themselves to make the story of the book more memorable. However, the main message and theme of the book; 'All are welcome' is repeated throughout, so that children will recognise the phrase and be able to join in when reading or shout it out several times. Other than that, the details of the story are quite forgettable and are basically a list of school activities.

The illustrations, luckily, do make up for the lack of a storyline and take the book into the realm of fun and brightness. Suzanne Kaufman's quirky, sketchy pictures have a nice hand-drawn feel, and often span across double spreads which make quite an impact on a book of this size. There's plenty for little eyes to hunt for and details to keep younger children. If anything, there really should have been more of this in the pictures, there are a couple of blank white spaces which had they been filled in a little more, would have enhanced the effect.

Despite finding the story itself a little disappointing, I can easily see how this book would work well in a classroom environment, yet still appeal to families and one-on-one reading. The book's message makes it applicable to any child and the icing on the cake is the colourful illustration filled with speech bubbles that display 'Welcome' in many languages. Parents will love the educational element and the caring message, and I'm sure children will love trying to read new languages and repeat the phrase; "ALL ARE WELCOME"

**Izzy Bean**

**Amazing**

Steve Antony, pub. Hachette Children's Books

*Amazing* by Steve Antony is a fun-filled and sweet story about a little boy and his pet dragon Zibbo, who are the best of friends.

Simple language and action-packed illustrations show us all the wonderful things that the little boy and Zibbo do together. This book beautifully shows the possibilities that arise when we build our friends up and help them to believe in themselves. The little boy teaches Zibbo to fly and, in turn, Zibbo teaches him to roar.

Zibbo is a very lovable character who is full of life and sometimes gets over-excited. Even though Zibbo is different, the little boy loves him because he is amazing, “just like everyone else.”

I thoroughly applaud Steve Antony for his depiction of a little boy in a wheelchair as being just as able as the other little children in the story, and for celebrating all of the fun things he can do. That the boy is in a wheelchair isn't mentioned in the text, further bringing home the powerful message that it doesn't matter: we all valuable, amazing and have more in common than not.

I highly recommend *Amazing* as a story to share in classrooms and homes. It cannot but leave young and older readers feeling happy at the strong friendship between this fun pair.

## **Evelyn Bookless**

### **The Big Angry Roar**

Jonny Lambert, pub. Little Tiger Press

*The Big Angry Roar* is an illustrated children's book focusing on the theme of anger. It tells the story of Cub who has a fight with his sister and does not handle being blamed well, the result is that he starts to feel angry. During Cub's journey of anger, he meets various different animals who all offer to show him different ways in which they each handle their anger.

The book is a humorous and heart-warming tale about learning patience and thoughtfulness, with an abundance of feeling.

Reading this book to my little girl presented many opportunities to make loud noises including imitating the cub stomping, splashing, and roaring, all of which made her laugh.

I like the way the book explores the different stages of anger and different ways to overcome it such as shouting, stomping around and deep breathing. The book has great illustrations of the animals and the action they are taking and my little girl could not wait to turn the page to see what was happening next.

The book is aimed at children who are experiencing feelings of anger and what to do with them, and although my young daughter does not have these feelings she (and I) still thoroughly enjoyed the book. It is perfect for bedtimes as well.

**Francesca Jones**

## **The Bluest of Blues – Anna Atkins and the First Book of Photographs**

Fiona Robinson, pub. Abrams Books for Young Readers

*The Bluest of Blues* is a beautiful picture book biography of Anna Atkins, a British botanist and photographer, the first person to publish a book of photography.

Having spent her childhood being raised by her scientist father and consequently receiving a privileged education based entirely around science that would fuel a lifetime passion for the subject, Anna became a botanist in her early twenties and illustrated guides to benefit the identification process for others.

In 1841 her father introduced her to the art of photography having given Anna one of the first ever made cameras. This was followed a year later with being shown the process of Cyanotype print by a famous scientist and it is this process that Anna used to catalogue her vast collections and ultimately led to her publication in 1843 aptly named *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*.

The illustrations featured in *The Bluest of Blues* are breath-taking, and I fell in love with the choice of colours from cover to cover, particularly as blue is the recurrent colour (as expected from the title). Other colours are used to draw attention to a specific feature within the telling of the story, my favourite being the poppy.

Whether you share this stunning picture book with younger readers, captivating them with the high-quality content, or use the book to subtly educate your audience on an undoubtedly amazingly talented woman, this book is bound to be a treasured addition to any bookshelf.

**Samantha Thomas**

## **Boom! Bang! Royal Meringue!**

Sally Doran, illus. Rachael Saunders, pub. Andersen Press

King Monty and Queen Alice are so proud of their daughter Princess Hannah. She is polite, considerate, and terribly well behaved. For her birthday, they decide to get her an extra special birthday present – The Marvellous, Magical Pudding Machine. But the King and Queen are in for a

quite a shock – it appears they’ve forgotten to teach Princess Hannah how to share! Will Princess Hannah learn a valuable lesson?

*Boom! Bang! Royal Meringue* is an illustrated picture book filled with wonderful rhyme to captivate and delight young imaginations. The story depicts Princess Hannah refusing to share and throwing a tantrum before she realises that by not sharing she is actually missing out on the fun. It goes on to explore how, by sharing, Princess Hannah has even more fun than she may have done by playing with her present alone. Once Princess Hannah discovers the joy of sharing, before they know it she and all her guests see wonderful cakes abound and finally a huge meringue for all to enjoy.

As well as being fun to read and beautifully illustrated, the book has features such as a page spread that needs to be turned around to be read and also stunning endpapers which differ at the start and end of the book.

Every part of the book and story is well considered. It is perfect for story time with children aged between 2 and 5 years and is ideal for introducing the concept and benefits of sharing. However, be warned, the rhyme and rhythm is bound to be a hit with youngsters who will want to hear this story over and over again!

**Laura Roach**

## **Captain Cat and the Treasure Map**

Sue Mongredien, illus. Kate Pankhurst, pub. Macmillan Children’s Books

*Captain Cat and the Treasure Map* is a book that will ‘purrfectly’ appeal to that tricky age group of new readers who want to move from picture books to chapter books, but who still need themes that charm their tender young minds. Kate Pankhurst really outdoes herself with detailed but fun illustrations that hugely add to the enjoyment of the book and help the reader to both understand and imagine what is going on in the story.

Firstly we are introduced to all of the main characters – the crew of the Golden Earring. This is very helpful, as initially it can be hard to distinguish who is speaking to whom - being able to flip back and forth serves as a useful reminder. There is an interesting dynamic between two factions of the ‘cast’ - the animals and the humans. The animals are able to speak to each other and understand the humans, but they are not able to make themselves understood by the pirate crew. I found myself envisioning it working incredibly well on stage, however, it was a little difficult to get hold of on the page.

The story begins on board the Golden Earring. There is a mundane feeling to the pirates’ jobs that makes a lovely setting for the exciting adventure that they are about to embark on. Sue Mongredien

clearly knows how to appeal to this age group with a large helping of toilet humour that will have readers giggling and grimacing to their hearts content.

The pace of the story quickly kicks up and a race ensues to reach the treasure. However, not everyone on board thinks it's a good idea to go after the treasure, after all, it promises certain death to the finder.

This book promises fun and excitement and is the perfect introduction to literature beyond picture books.

## **Emily Hamilton**

### **Cats and Robbers**

Russell Ayto, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

In Russell Ayto's familiar spiky style, three robbers plan to rob what they think is an empty house. What they don't know is that two cats are ready to stop them, and mayhem ensues. The robbers, 1, 2 and 3, are dressed for burgling in stripy tops and eye masks, and one even has a Batman mask. One carries a swag bag, and one has a robbing list - they have spied through the windows and through the letterbox, and discounted much of the contents of the house, but plan to focus on the safe, which looks "splendiferous and superior", and must be full of loot.

The cats are equally well prepared- they have spied through their spy cams, listened through their spy mics, and checked their security list: springs, litter tray, cat flap and carrier crate. The purpose of all these items is soon revealed, as the robbers 'tip-toe, tip-toe, tip-toe', and are scratched by the spring-loaded paw claw, then 'sneak, sneak, sneak', and are hit by the litter-tray launcher, 'Yuck! Poo! Plop-ee!' then 'creep, creep, creep', and 'peek, peek, peek' at the safe - but before they can blow the door off, they drop through the cat flat trap into the escape-proof carrier crate labelled 'for the police', watched by the gleeful cats. When the little old lady who is the owner of the house returns, she suspects that the cats have been catching things again before opening the safe to get their tins of cat food. No wonder they had guarded it so carefully!

This book is great fun, with the triple repeated sneaky words, the triple exclamations as the robbers comment on their plight, and the slapstick. Russell Ayto has produced another highly recommended picture book.

## **Diana Barnes**

### **Chatterbox Bear**

Pippa Curnick, pub. Hodder Children's Books

Gary the Bear is the world's biggest chatterbox. He talks absolutely everywhere, he talks absolutely all the time. In the bath, at the supermarket and most annoyingly (for the other readers), in the library. All the other bears want some peace and quiet. Feeling rather sad that nobody appreciates him, or wants to talk as much as he does, Gary decides to find a place where they love to chat as much as he does.

This is how he comes to be on an island inhabited by squawking birds. Unfortunately, Gary and the birds can't understand one another's language. Then one bright bird notices that the bear has very expressive eyebrows ...! Working together, with the birds gaining an interesting selection of eyebrows along the way, Gary and his new friends discover a way to talk to each other. Until a new creature arrives on the island ...

This is a delightful, humorous picture book which Pippa Curnick has written and illustrated in neon colours. She helps her readers to celebrate (and understand) friendship, diversity, co-operation and tolerance. *Chatterbox Bear* is the perfect book for sharing and, yes, talking about!

**Jayne Gould**

## **The Colour of Happy**

Laura Baker, illus. Angie Rozelaar, pub. Hodder Children's Books

The first thing I noticed as I unwrapped this book was the vibrant colour of the front cover and I was hopeful that this was setting the scene for the whole book. Flicking through the pages I was not disappointed. Each double-page spread was bold and colourful, complementing the words of the story perfectly.

In brief, this book is a story about a little boy who finds a special present that he wants to give to his mother. On his journey home, we are taken through a kaleidoscope of emotions, each represented by its own colour, as he loses and then finds the present once more, making a friend along the way.

This is a brilliant book for introducing children to emotions and how to deal with feelings that could be very new to them. It allows adults the perfect opportunity to talk about these important emotions, this is especially significant with the recent practice of mindfulness being encouraged in schools.

The story is written in an easy to read rhyming format. The text is big and bold and simple, making it appealing to everyone. You really do get the impression that this book has been written with feeling and care.

This book would be a great addition to any home, classroom or library and is one that could be enjoyed time and time again.

**Victoria Wharam**

## **Cyril the Lonely Cloud**

Tim Hopgood, pub. Oxford Children's Books

On a lovely day what can be better than a picnic?

Our story begins, with the big bold words 'Let's have a picnic'. All (we are not told who the all are) agree this is a wonderful idea and it is going so well until ... well I am sure you can guess what the until is ... yes, a rain cloud. This is not ordinary rain cloud however, this is Cyril.

Meet Cyril. It is very sad, but whenever anyone meets Cyril they are not pleased. Are you? Poor Cyril always gets the blame for ruining everyone's fun. Why? After all he only wants to have a look on the world and see the happy smiles. For some reason though they seem to disappear when he appears. All people think of when they see Cyril is 'I wish that cloud would go away'.

Poor Cyril.

Drifting away, looking for a friendly face what can we expect but a few tears? When you have been rejected and are feeling sad this is what happens, is the message we are presented with. There could be trouble ahead however for as Cyril drifts he gets bigger and bigger. When, one day he comes across a new land, a land parched, hot and ... in need of water, our hopes lift. His shadow cools the earth and Cyril finds himself welcome. Cyril's tears are now tears of joy. Now there are smiles.

As the book progresses it is equally important (I feel) for the reader(s) to note not only the words and the change in mood but the way that Tim Hopgood so eloquently expresses these in his illustrations. We move from bright sunny days to muted colours before discovering an explosion of colour as Cyril's sadness grows and is finally expelled. The first people we meet are angular and, well slightly awkward. By the time Cyril finds his new home and his new friends the book positively bursts with love, energy, light and colour and the animals fill the pages with their joy, their smiles, their welcome shape and size.

This is an expertly crafted story in words and pictures that has much to teach, much to share and great joy to bring all who dip in for a read.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Dinosaur Department Store**

Lily Murray, illus. Richard Merritt, pub. Buster Books

Eliza Jane is an unusual child. Most children would be happy with a rabbit for a pet. Not Eliza Jane. She would rather have a dinosaur. Despite their initial dismay, her doting parents agree, so off they go to the Dinosaur Department Store.

At the Dinosaur Department Store we meet the eccentric Mr. Magisaurus and his collection of rip-roaring raptors, honking hadrosauras and stomping sauropods. Eliza Jane's parents can't believe their eyes, but Mr. Magisaurus had better watch out, the little girl might have an ulterior motive ...

*The Dinosaur Department Store* is a terrific picture book. The illustrations are colourful, stylish and bolder than Eliza Jane herself (which is really saying something). There are plenty of delicious details to discover on each page. The tiny rabbit hailing a taxi, after our heroine decides a pet dino is more to her taste, is a particular favourite.

It's also an absolute joy of a book to read out loud, so much so that the six-year-old and I have had a mighty argument over which one of us gets to read it to the three-year-old! It's an argument we've had often because the three-year-old has demanded we read this book approximately fifteen gazillion times since we got it!

I cannot recommend this dino-mite book more highly. It's a must for every young (and old) dinosaur fan and it's stomped its way straight to the tricera-top of our favourites list.

**Abby Mellor**

## **Has Anybody Seen a Story?**

Mandana Sadat, pub. Thames & Hudson

I have to confess, I couldn't wait to get my hands on Mandana Sadat's new book. Mandana is an acclaimed French author and illustrator who studied at Les Arts Décoratifs de Strasbourg. Her books have been translated into several languages. The bi-lingual amongst you might know of *Movi la mano/ I Moved My Hand*, *Mon lion*, or my favourite *De l'autre côté de l'arbre (The Other Side of the Tree)*. Her illustrations are whimsical, layered and enchanting. In short, books that make you go 'ooh'.

*Has Anybody Seen a Story?* is the tale of three 'Thingummies': Sadie, Smudge and Spike. These three live in the middle of Nowhere in a place called Floatyfish, surrounded by soft fluffy clouds. Life is

pretty good if rather samey. They have air and water and food, but nothing much to do until Sadie challenges her friends to find adventure, and the three of them set off in search of a story.

The trio eventually happen across a crossroads with a choice of intriguingly named paths: Fairytale Trail; Bedtime Boulevard; Poetry Path or Future Freeway. They decide to first explore Fairytale Trail, but it unexpectedly leads them to the Zombeast, a 5,000 year old monster with a face only a mother can love. He threatens to shrink them into tiny spots, so off they go again, back to the crossroads and their next adventure. Each of the paths leads to an equally bizarre character, where they also encounter some decidedly silly and funny creatures, (watch out for Gloria and Harry who I'd love to see get a sequel).

Do they find a story? Eventually, but the lesson is that every experience whether good or bad has contributed to their tale, and the only way they found it was by not giving up.

If you're looking for surreal storytelling to spark your child's imagination, then this is the book for you. Visually compelling, there are so many elements to enjoy. Even the page numbers offer a cheeky running commentary. This is the kind of book that will reveal something new each time you pick it up. Indeed, it even forewarns the reader to remember what our three protagonists look like, and that's advice not to be ignored, because the book is chock-full of anarchic and fabulously bonkers characters, and it's a fun game in itself to work with your child to spot where Sadie, Smudge and Spike are hiding. At 45 pages long it's also a generous helping of words and pictures. A book for reading aloud to young children, and which also works for the older child who can have fun enjoying the screwball humour.

## **Matilde Sazio**

### **Isle of You**

David LaRochelle, illus. Jaime Kim, pub. Walker Books

*The Isle of You* is a gorgeous book that really celebrates emotions and mindfulness. In a time when children are being encouraged to express their emotions this makes a timely appearance in the children's market. Schools and homes around the world would benefit from this book on their shelves.

I loved the idea that each child has an 'Isle of You' to escape to when emotions are running high or when they need time to be alone. The illustrations are wonderful, full of colour and imagination. I could get lost in the *Isle of You* anytime, especially with the tutu clad dancing polar bears. You will of course need to read for yourself to discover why these quirky characters feature!

What a wonderful bedtime story this would make, to be read over and over again - especially when children have had a bad day. Helping the children to express their emotions would be a lovely way for them to let go of sad, angry or frustrated feelings before bed.

There is a clever play on words that really become clear at the end of the book and I must admit it brought a tear to my eye.

Buy it, read it and create your own 'Isle of You'.

## **Erin Hamilton**

### **The Kiss**

Linda Sunderland, illus. Jessica Courtney-Tickle, pub. Little Tiger Press

This story puts me in mind of 1970s Eastern European animated fables like *Little Mole*, and that makes me really quite happy. It's gentle and sweet, and the colourful and slightly abstracted aesthetic is just right.

Essentially, the story is driven by a Pay It Forward premise. Edwyn gifts his Grandma a parting kiss to brighten her day, and she in turn shares the kiss with anyone who needs it. Conflict arises when a man steals the kiss and makes it exclusively his own. Resolution centres on him realising he's done a wrong.

*The Kiss* is a simple idea very nicely and effectively realised. It carries, appropriately, a sense that you and I could own this story: the words aren't composed in clever rhymes, and the art looks clearly like it was drawn with coloured pencils. I feel closer to the book for it, like some version of it could conceivably be passed on by me.

Yet at the same time this book drips with thought and craft. Its apparent simplicity hides huge talent, no part of it could've been done better, it's poetry. I'd like to highlight Jessica Courtney-Tickle's faces – her expressions could've carried Linda Sunderland's words by themselves, they're finely judged. Equally, I'd praise Linda Sunderland's restraint with punctuation and vocabulary – it lets her story soak into your head without drawing attention to itself, and in a way that is this book: don't notice me, accept my story, let it be part of you.

That is my concern: that *The Kiss* will be overlooked, that people will see it and think 'that's nice', but move on to something more frantic or garish, that perhaps is or reminds them of whatever movie or meme is popular that week. That isn't this book. This is an enduring book. This is a book that will be part of the process of shaping your child's view of the world, that will, when they're a little older, be a

warm memory and a nudge to be better, that will be when they're old enough a thing that, like the kiss, they'll want to pass on.

Confidently recommended for pre-school story-time, but also for thoughtful discussions with Years 2 and 3.

**Dmytro Bojaniwskyj**

## **Kiss the Crocodile**

Sean Taylor, illus. Ben Mantle, pub. Walker Books

Are you brave enough to play Kiss the Crocodile? Anteater, Tortoise and Monkey are playing silly games together when they spy out a potential playmate - Little Crocodile. Little Crocodile wants to play a new game with them, but the others are not sure about it - he has very sharp claws and lots of teeth. Anteater and Tortoise bravely give Little Crocodile a kiss without waking him, but Monkey takes a bit longer to work up the courage. I was a little concerned that Monkey was going to get eaten (do not try this at home), but fortunately it all works out in the end and the animals have a fantastic time playing together.

Ben Mantle's beautifully-textured illustrations are saturated with life and fun and make the book a joy to read. I particularly loved the double-page spreads of each animal 'kissing the crocodile' and I can imagine children would find them hilarious, too.

It was also lovely to read a picture book focused on simple, age-old playground games with no batteries required. (*Kiss the Crocodile* reminded me of a game we used to play as children called What's the Time, Mr Wolf?)

Children will thoroughly enjoy this story about being afraid to make a new friend but then discovering that they might not be as scary as you thought they were.

*Kiss the Crocodile* is a riotously-silly, heart-warming story about friendship, kindness, co-operation and play.

**Rebecca Rouillard**

## **The Light in the Night**

Marie Voigt, pub. Simon & Schuster

Night time poses no fears for Betty. All the best stories take place at night and her bedroom wall is filled with photos of her own night time adventures. She's up a very tall ladder, searching for a good book by the light of her lantern, when we first meet her.

The book she chooses is about Cosmo, 'the bear who was afraid of the dark'. Settled back into bed with the book open on her lap, Betty wishes she could show him that he doesn't need to be afraid. Suddenly, she experiences that special alchemy that comes from immersing yourself in a great story and ... hey presto! A big, cuddly, white bear appears at the end of her bed. Seizing the opportunity, Betty proceeds to introduce him to the wonders of the dark.

This is a very sweet tale about helping one another to overcome fears – for although Betty has courage enough for both of them in the magical darkness, she wobbles when she can't remember how to get home and it is Cosmo's encouragement that brings them scampering back in high spirits.

This beautifully illustrated picture book is a pleasure to share. Who doesn't love silver writing and mysterious sparkles on a midnight blue front cover! Marie Voigt's spectrum of colours make the different kinds of darkness enchanting. She evokes a quality of light which is full of life and energy, made up of sparkly particles. There is a blurring of boundaries between the real world and the storybook world – which bookworms, young and old, 'know' to be true. When Betty wakes up in the morning, wondering if it has all been a dream, playful visual details 'prove' that her encounter with Cosmo was real.

This is a gentle, reassuring consideration of potential night time fears. It is also a great story even if you're practically fearless, like Betty.

**Jackie Spink**

## **The Lost Book**

Margarita Surnaite, pub. Andersen Press

What a super story about Henry and his dislike of books this is.

Everyone around Henry loves books but he prefers the adventures of his own making- being outside climbing trees and playing sports. 'What's so special about all these books? he wondered.'

Haven't we all heard that before ... the challenge to find the book that might change a child into a reader? Henry does find a book and, in the quest to return it to its owner he has exactly the type of adventure he craves, although he does feel lost. Luckily, he is found and eventually gifts the book to his new friend. Upon arriving back home, Henry has changed and wants to tell the bedtime story.

A brilliant book to share with younger readers coming into KS1 to show them how to find adventure, use this adventure to create a story and to develop a lifelong love of reading.

The illustrations are soft and clear - I especially like the presence of modern technology in the city scenes. It quietly proves a point about the absence of books, 'But the creatures he met did not seem to care.'

I loved it!

**Erin Hamilton**

### **Maisie's Scrapbook**

Samuel North, illus. Jo Loring-Fisher, pub. Lantana Publishing

Maisie is a bright and spirited little girl with a love of life and an inquisitive nature. Her 'Mama' and her 'Dada' are different but they both love Maisie very much and both share things from their own unique cultures, fuelling her imagination.

'Mama wears linen. Dada wears kente cloth.'

'Mama says tomato. Dada says aamo.'

They cook different foods, they play different instruments.

Dada shares African stories about Anansi and Africa, he shows her pictures of ancient cities made from cloud patterns in the sky.

Mama keeps her more grounded, playing hide and seek in the trees, teaching her that the bull behind the fence is not a pet.

The gentle text takes us on a journey through the seasons of Maisie's life which is always filled with love and a joy of learning. Jo Loring-Fisher's combined use of a variety of illustration techniques – print, collage, paint – really bring this book to life. Through her artwork we see Maisie's day to day life, and also life through her imagination as she becomes the hero in Dada's stories.

*Maisie's Scrapbook* is a scrapbook of a little girl's life as part of a multicultural family. It's a real celebration of the enriching differences that are brought to the family and how love is the one thing that everyone has in common.

**Vicky Harvey**

### **Mira's Curly Hair**

Maryam al Serkal, illus. Rebecca Luciani, pub. Lantana Publishing

I wanted to read and review *Mira's Curly Hair* because it reminded me of myself! I have curly hair which is sometimes quite unruly, and I thought of how, as a child, I wished for nothing more than it to be straight. Long or short it just would not behave so I wondered what I, and other children with curly hair could learn from Mira.

It seems that Mira is just like I was, and I am sure like many curly-haired children are too – she longs for straight hair. The brushes, combs and tubes the cover the end papers as well as the pages of the story prove that Mira, just like all of us, tries everything. Pulling it down won't work – it just pops up again; standing on her head doesn't do the trick, old books won't help either. What is Mira to do?

Mama has straight hair, this is why Mira wants hers to stop curling – also she can look just like mama, therefore imagine her surprise when a walk in the rain transforms mama, bringing out her curls and making her beautiful and free.

A simple story, repeating words for children to remember and yet progressing at a good pace. A clever story demonstrating that we need to accept ourselves for who we are. Explaining to children how we are all different, each of us unique and that it is our very uniqueness which makes us who we are.

A story for all those with curly hair who every wished for it to be straight.

A story whose words are reinforced by bright and bold illustration.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Mole's Star**

Britta Teckentrup, pub. Orchard Books

*Mole's Star* by Britta Teckentrup is a cosy picture book about sharing and empathy told in fourteen spreads.

Each night Mole sits on his favourite rock, gazing at the twinkling stars. One day he sees a shooting star and makes a wish. He wishes he could own all the stars and his wish comes true. Mole fills his burrow with star light and loves it.

But after several days Mole misses his favourite rock so pops out of his burrow and finds the world is in darkness. He is shocked to discover all the other animals are upset about this. When he made his wish, he had not considered the effect it would have on the whole forest and had not realised the other animals loved the stars as much as he did.

Mole finds the wishing star and sets about putting the stars back with the help of the other animals so they can all enjoy the magical star light together.

This is a book for sharing. I think every child will enjoy comparing the dramatic contrast of the night sky with and without stars, which Britta Teckentrup's portrays in her delightful illustrations. I particularly like the way some of the ladders are made of tiny little stars.

This timeless book about the night sky is ideal for reading at bedtime to children from birth upwards. It has an enchanting lyrical feel that will calm and relax your child ready for a good night's sleep.

It could also be used at Key Stage One as the basis of classroom discussion on sharing and considering other's feelings.

### **Anita Loughrey**

Reviewer's Website: [www.anitaloughrey.com](http://www.anitaloughrey.com)

### **Monster Match**

Caroline Gray, pub. Hodder Children's Books

*Monster Match* provides us with a delightful look at a group of monsters as they each audition to become the favourite companion of a child.

The story is set at bedtime and the monsters definitely take central stage in the book, with the child not seen until nearly the end of the book; even then he is just a shadow.

Are these real monsters, or are they just toys that want to share the bed with the central character? Whilst we appear to get the answer to this at the end of the book, we are left wondering 'who is the character looking in through the bedroom window?'

This is a bright and vibrant book with illustrations that are full of energy and movement. The use of strong colours and the variation in page layout make the whole book really attractive to the reader and there is a wonderful sense of fun. The monsters are quite scary at first, until you realize that they are all smiling and just want to be friends.

The text itself is short and in rhyme, which makes the whole story flow easily and gives the opportunity for a playful use of words and images. This will work well not only with single children but also with those in foundation classes.

### **Margaret Pemberton**

## **Pencil Dog**

Leigh Hodgkinson, pub. Simon & Schuster

This is the delightful story of a young girl and her companion Pencil Dog. They do everything together and have the most marvellous adventures, using the girl's imagination and her companion's drawing ability. But gradually the young girl begins to see that Pencil Dog is slowing down, getting smaller and less able to do what he had in the past and then suddenly, he is not there!

Discovering how his friend copes with this loss provides a satisfying ending to this story. You can read this story on several levels, all of which make it a lovely tale to tell the young child. It is a story all about friendship, sharing, imagination and the wonderful world that can be created using the simplest of accessories. It is also a story about loss and how we cope with it.

The illustrations are bright and childlike across most of the book, but the introduction of greys and muted tones really emphasizes the moment that the girl discovers that pencil dog has gone. The pictures are the main focus of the story with the short sentences of text just moving things on slightly.

Altogether this is a wonderful story for young children, but perhaps used with individuals and small groups unless they have been prepared for the concept of loss.

## **Margaret Pemberton**

### **Perfectly Polite Penguins**

Georgiana Deutsch, illus. Ekaterina Trukhan, pub. Little Tiger Press

*Perfectly Polite Penguins*, written by Georgiana Deutsch, is a laugh-out-loud story which explores some very important messages throughout — promoting the importance of kindness, having manners, respect and consideration for others.

This is a story about Polly — a not-so-polite penguin! Polly thinks being polite is BORING! Polly sometimes forgets how other penguins feel, she doesn't like picking up her toys, nor does she behave well at the dinner table. Polly simply doesn't have very good manners at all — not like the other penguins, who are all —perfectly well-behaved.

But then, when Polly takes someone else's food — a fight breaks out amongst the penguins. All of the perfectly well-behaved penguins start to misbehave — and it's all Polly's fault! While the others are all fighting, Polly comes across Baby Peter, who is hiding away from the noise and doesn't look very happy. Will Polly finally change her ways and if so — for how long...?

The visual appearance and design of the book is bright, bold and colourful, with cheerful eye-catching block colour illustrations by Ekaterina Trukhan. It is clear that Trukhan's major influences come from the mid-century design and illustration styles.

The language used throughout the book is simple, with short sentences, and the use of the speech bubble dialogue throughout the book initially helps break up the words while adding extra information to the story — making it fun and engaging for young children and reluctant readers too.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book — it is a super-cute, emotive and amusing read!

*Perfectly Polite Penguins* is perfect for young children age 3-6 years, and one that will also appeal to parents. It is a perfect story time read for at home or at school.

## **Katy Crosby**

### **Rosie is my Best Friend**

Ali Pye, pub. Simon & Schuster

This picture book tells the story of a day in the lives of a girl and her dog, a happy day, because they spent it together.

Yes, their day did start a bit earlier than everyone else's, but they were very quiet - well, they thought they were ... They practised dog instructions, helped around the house until the grown-ups decided that was enough helping, went to the park and got muddy playing with friends, had a bath and played at being adventurers, then went to bed in expectation of another good day tomorrow.

If this all sounds a bit careful, that's because the punchline is: Rosie is the very best friend that a dog could ever have, which is not what we have been thinking throughout the book - we are so used to the human person being the storyteller.

The illustrations of the close relationship between girl and dog are delightful. Rosie has dark skin and straight black hair in plaits, so she could be of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin, but not necessarily. The style is mixed- her dress looks like collage, but Rosie's hair and that of their friends, both human and doggy, and some of the furniture looks as if drawn with wax crayons - the result is slightly wacky and fun to look at.

When an author illustrates her own story, she knows exactly how it should book. Ali Pye has illustrated a lot of other people's books as well as her own, so she is fully experienced and knows what works for her.

This will be fun to share, and to see if the child audience works out who is the best friend of whom!

**Diana Barnes**

### **The Sea Saw**

Tom Percival, pub. Simon & Schuster

For any child who has lost a cherished toy, this lovely story, *The Sea Saw*, will be a great comfort.

On a day at the seaside with her father, Sofia loses her much loved, old and tattered bear. Sofia and her bear did so much together. Picnics, walks and now splashing together in the quiet blue sea but when a sudden storm sends them racing for the bus, unseen, Sofia's bear falls out of her bag.

The illustrations of the storm and falling bear are darkly compelling.

The forlorn little bear alone on an empty beach will have many a child reaching out a loving hand. Luckily, the sea saw everything and when a seagull pecks the bear, it decides to help him get back home and swooshes him away.

Sadly, Sofia has searched everywhere but her bear is nowhere to be found. He's not on the beach, no-one has seen him, and no other bear can take his place. All she has left of her friend is his little blue scarf, a snippet of which she puts in her locket.

The bear's journey home is very exciting. The sea takes him past dolphins, octopus and shining fish, over lakes and rivers until, one day, drifting down a stream, a little girl sees him, lifts him out and takes him home to her grandmother, home to Sofia, who is now old but who has never forgotten her bear and hugs him to her.

The story is told clearly and plainly. The illustrations are exquisite with their fresh, subtle colours, each picture detailed and interesting giving much to look at.

A book to be read over and over again.

**Gwen Grant**

### **Shhh! I'm reading!**

John Kelly, illus. Elina Ellis, pub. Little Tiger Press

*Shhh! I'm Reading!* is several books in one.

It begins in the bedroom of Bella on a 'wet and windy Sunday afternoon'. Very wisely, Bella has settled down with a good book. An excellent book in fact, with some particularly good bits near the end ... if only she could manage to get to them. The trouble is that Bella's imaginary world is peopled with a cast of thousands, who simply won't keep quiet and allow her to read in peace. She is variously interrupted by pirates, penguins (dancing penguins, of course) and a squad of aliens seeking to attack the planet, all of whom make significant demands on her attention. The reader is therefore catapulted through not one but a series of fantastical scenarios, before Bella finally finds a way to keep the various characters occupied.

For me and my three-year-old daughter (whose opinion is probably rather more useful) the standout element of this book is the illustration. Each page works as a standalone 'tableau' of the imagination – rich in detail and with enough small elements to spot something new on each reading. The flapper penguins are particularly charismatic. The names of characters are also rhythmic and ridiculous with (pirate) Captain Bluebottom the Flatulent and (Alien) Emperor Flabulon the Wobbulus as the stars of the show. The storyline is perhaps slightly contrived, but if read as a celebration of the imagination (as opposed to the slightly heavy handed 'reading is great' propaganda angle that the blurb promotes) it is enjoyable and entertaining.

The illustrations and range of characters in this book would make it appealing to 3-6-year olds, and particularly children who have reached a stage where they enjoy imaginary play.

**Laura Myatt**

## **The Whale, the Sea and the Stars**

Adrian Macho, pub. Floris Books

Gerda is a young whale preparing to leave the comforts of the only home she has yet known.

Comforted by her mother's song, and carrying it in her heart - a song, a story of adventure in the big wide world and the beauty of the unknown, a song that reassures Gerda one day she will find a place that truly is home – Gerda sets off. Carried by the currents of the ocean she meets and plays with penguins, having so much fun until she remembers the words of her mother's song reminding her to explore shallow and deep, far and wide. A grumpy octopus, chattering gulls, it is all exciting and new but yet Gerda cannot but help feel that she needs more guidance.

The narwhal and the stars come to her aid. Whilst the narwhal is wise and old, giving sage advice, the stars are her guide and along with the song in her heart she continues until one happy day she finds ... Well I will have to let you discover for yourself what she finds and why she might decide to call it home.

As we follow Gerda on her journey we learn not only more about the creatures that inhabit the sea, but how much of life is a journey of discovery. Children will gently be encouraged to look around them and explore, safely for themselves too, knowing one day they will be allowed out into that big wide world but that they will never be alone.

Learn how to follow your heart, young and old and everyone in-between. Be captivated by the simply stunning artwork, see the sun's rays penetrating the darkest deeps, admire the stars twinkling in the dark skies, see the sunrise over the lighthouse and admire the colours of the creatures in the oceans deep. Above all, for me at least, marvel at the beauty and elegance of Gerda.

A note at the front of this book tells us the illustrations were hand drawn on a graphics tablet and then finished with natural colour palettes and textures – this evident attention to the tiniest of details and the skill with which it has been applied make the book even more special and it is certainly one that I am going to treasure for a very long time.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **When Sadness Comes to Call**

Eva Eland, pub. Andersen Press

*When Sadness Comes to Call* is an illustrated children's book about sadness, how to deal with it and how it can come upon us unexpectedly.

What I really like about the book is that it touches upon a subject that many parents might find difficult to explain to a child. Therefore, this book would help a parent who is trying to deliver this message.

The book focuses on sadness in general so can be used to help in many different scenarios. The illustrations throughout the book share the message that sadness is not within the person but portray it as a different character so that the book ultimately shares a message of hope - that there will be a day when sadness will go away.

At various points throughout the book activities to do in order to help with the feeling of sadness are mentioned. These include some of the simplest and easiest that we can all do - going for a walk and listening to music.

This book is not for everyone as it shares the message of sadness it would not be a normal bedtime reading choice but is perfect for explaining sadness to a child who may be feeling its effects - those with a family illness or who may have experienced other upsetting events perhaps.

The book will help parents to deliver a message about how sadness feels and help the child to understand and share their feelings.

## **Francesca Jones**

### **Wish**

Chris Saunders, pub. Words & Pictures

This new picture book by Chris Saunders gave me all the feeling and warmth I needed on a chilly February night.

Once every year wishes take flight, filled with hope and twinkling light. They dance in the air, with a swirl and a swish, you have to be lucky to be chosen by a wish.

*Wish* tells the wonderfully charming tale of a little rabbit who one day is lucky enough to be chosen by three wishes! Wishes are magical things, and unsure what to wish for Rabbit sets of to seek the advice of his friends, Mouse, Fox and Bear, to see what they would wish for.

A wish to fly, a wish to write and a wish to explore encourages Rabbit not only to share his gift but also to grant the wishes of his friends, and with that comes a touching tale about kindness, generosity and the magic of friendship.

Saunders illustrations are equally as enchantingly atmospheric as his way with words despite the slightly stilted rhyming scheme, but that doesn't make this book any less heart-warming and wise.

It looks like **Wish** is the first picture book by Saunders so I'm anticipating many more to come.

## **Fern Tolley**

### **Wisp. A Story of Hope**

Zana Fraillon, illus. Grahame Baker-Smith, pub. Orchard Books

Before we even get to the story, the lovely illustrations on the title pages of *Wisp* remind us of hope, for in the middle of the tattered refugee camp, stands a small vase of red flowers. A child would focus on these bright flowers in the middle of darkness.

A small boy, Idris, sits in the doorway of an old shack, in a dark world where every person seems alone. The bleak, moving illustration shows children and grown-ups standing aimlessly next to rolls of barbed wire.

But when a small bright wisp drifts out of the sky, falling to the ground, it is Idris who picks it up, his face alight with interest. The wisp flutters along the bleak tents and fences, landing at an old man's feet. As the old man takes it into his hands, memories flood back and he begins to sing, his song flooding into the world, reminding everyone of what used to be and what could be again. Here, a glorious illustration of a boat sailing on a wave of foam and light, the sailor's open arms welcoming freedom.

The wisp, in little starbursts of hope, brings memories to all who say, 'Once...' until sunshine and butterflies, trees and water, not only remind them of the lovely past but also lead them into the hope of a settled and lovely future.

But Idris only has memories of the refugee camp, making him sad until he understands the wisp is not a memory for him, it is a promise of a new world of light and homes, streets and a bike.

This beautiful book will gently help children in their understanding of the demanding world of the refugee child.

**Gwen Grant**

# Junior Book Reviews

## **A Pinch of Magic**

Michelle Harrison, pub. Simon & Schuster

Michelle Harrison weaves an engrossing story of magic, enchanted objects, curses and imprisonment. The three sisters – Fliss, Betty and Charlie – must work together to break the curse that forces them to remain on Crowstone Island for eternity, a curse that has held the Widdershins girls captive for centuries. Their granny reveals to Betty on the eve of her thirteenth birthday the horrible truth that she will never ever be able to adventure beyond the confines of the island whilst imparting her magical inheritance of the nesting Russian dolls (her sisters each have their own magical object). Betty's desire to explore and her unwillingness to accept a dull life of working in the family pub, The Poacher's Pocket, drives her to try and break the curse.

She believes the mystery of Sorsha Spellthorn and her imprisonment in Crowstone Tower for witchcraft somehow holds the key. Folk tales told by old timers in the pub, combined with her desperation, lead her to believe that a prisoner who claims to know how to break the curse should be trusted. Trust in strangers is difficult in ordinary times and this is anything but an ordinary situation as Betty races against the clock to not only save herself but also her sisters and in doing so, hopefully breaking the curse. The sisters bond together, each using their own magical object, to help uncover the truth. Friendship and support come from unlikely people who recognise the innate strength, bravery and goodness of these remarkable girls.

A truly enjoyable read with Michelle Harrison conveying some heart-warming themes of identity, self-confidence, teamwork and trust.

## **Sheri Sticpewich**

## **The Adventures of Anatole**

Nancy Willard, illus. David McPhail, pub. New York Review of Books

Although well known in her native USA, and a recipient of the Newbery Medal in 1982 for her poetry picturebook *A Visit to William Blake's Inn*, Nancy Willard is largely unknown in the UK. Once again the New York Review of Books has addressed this oversight by adding the Anatole stories to its list of outstanding, neglected and out-of-print books for young people.

This collection comprises the three books published in 1974, 1979 and 1982, *Sailing to Cythera and Other Tales*, *The Island of the Grass King*, and *Uncle Terrible*, but not her other Anatole story, *Strangers' Bread* (1975).

Anatole has a knack for seeking and finding adventure among familiar things, often with his cat Plumpet, and he is determined to help those around him, and right the wrongs he discovers in the strange worlds he travels to in his dreams. For me, *The Island of the Grass King* is the outstanding story, a fast-moving fantasy-adventure, in which Anatole and Plumpet set out to find fennel for his grandmother's asthma, accompanied by her coffeepot Quicksilver (running on its little legs), a giant rabbit, and a glass girl!

The original illustrations by David McPhail are reproduced. Detailed, intricate work which holds the key to these stories, particularly referencing Tenniel's illustrations for Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and Hughes' for George Macdonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871). Although Anatole is very much a twentieth-century child, nineteenth-century echoes pervade narrative and images. In the Anatole stories (and many of her other writings) Willard's themes are clearly allied to those in Kingsley's *Water Babies* (1863), Baum's *Oz* stories (1900-20) and Lewis's *Narnia* (1950-56), all of which place children in fantastic, dream-engendered and dangerous places populated by fairy-tale and often frightening creatures, but ultimately provide resolution with good triumphing over evil. Among her tales Willard takes direct quotations from a Shakespearean fantasy, *The Tempest*, and Plumpet quotes Carroll's Cheshire Cat, while there are confused proverbs worthy of his Caterpillar.

Altogether these are fascinating stories for children and adults alike, which thoroughly deserve to join the UK's already rich world of fantasy.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Asha & the Spirit Bird**

Jasbinder Bilan, illus. Helen Crawford-White, pub. Chicken House

*Asha & the Spirit Bird* had me gripped from the moment I met Asha hiding in a cow shed, consumed by her dreams of the night before and pouring over her Pa's last letter – for four long months he has been missing. The cowbell in the corner of the breeze-less barn clangs, and clangs again. Asha's best friend, Jeevan is suddenly shouting for her to come, and then Asha's world threatens to change forever as she sprints to her mother's side to fend off a moneylender ransacking their home. They have until Divali – also Asha's 12th birthday - to repay the debt otherwise Asha, her Ma, her brother and sister may have no choice but to leave India, forever.

Magic and reality are intertwined with immediate effect in this thrilling Indian adventure as Asha and Jeevan make a pact to find her father under the guidance of a majestic bird that Asha believes to be the spirit of her grandmother. We travel from the foothills of the Himalayas: through its forests and across its jagged peaks into the chaos of the city. Two children on a journey to discover the truth about a missing father and testing their belief in each other and Asha's special powers that connect her to her ancestors. They encounter the magnificent spirit bird; a green-eyed tiger; wolves; heartless grown-ups and then those who remind you that there is goodness and kindness in the world too.

Jasbinder Bilan's writing is beautifully descriptive, without overkill. She paints the scenes on each page with imagery that is often mouth-watering and frequently heart-stopping: 'My head is heavy with sleep as the train follows the long slow curve of the steep mountain path, creaking higher and high, jolting me awake. The golden light from the setting sun hooks into the crack and spreads like honey into the carriage...'

*Asha & the Spirit Bird* is ideal for readers aged 8+ and also as a text to read as a class as there are so many points of discussion, in terms of poverty, culture, faith and belief. There are dark elements such as when the children are captured in the city and sold off to slavery in a dump, which is totally heart breaking, but there is also the flip side of city life for orphaned children, with kind grown-ups, who only want to help.

Jasbinder Bilan presents the stark reality of poverty; the cruelty humans are capable of alongside nature's beauty and harshness, and ultimately the kindness and strength of human nature.

Jasbinder Bilan was born in Northern Punjab on a farm close to the Himalayas, moving to the UK when she was little. One of the questions she asked herself when writing this book was, 'What if our ancestors stay with us in spirit form to help in times of need?'

It is a wonderful 'What if' and one that feeds into the magical realism thread of this story, which is set quite beautifully in contemporary India. *Asha & the Spirit Bird* really is a vibrant feast for the mind - the reader just needs to stick with Asha, and all will be fine.

**Anja Stobbart**

## **The Boy Who Flew**

Fleur Hitchcock, pub. Nosy Crow

What a triumph of a book! Murder, mystery and mayhem! Perfect for a lazy Sunday afternoon.

Athan, the only boy in his family, gets caught up in a mystery surrounding the murder of his friend and employer Mr Chen. Mr Chen and Athan are inventors and creators of many devices, one of which

is a flying machine. They just need the right conditions for flying ... but sadly Mr Chen is murdered before they can test their bird.

Athan and his friend Tod, are roof runners and travel around the city via rooftops. This helps them to rescue the flying machine, the plans to finish it and to escape from the mysterious Colonel Blade. The man is dangerous, murderous and intent on getting the plans all for himself.

A prize of 10,000 guineas is offered to anyone who can fly the first proven flight. Athan knows his family needs that money and so the pressure is on to complete the flying machine. Colonel Blade has other plans for Athan and his family. The race is on to protect his family, the plans for the flying machine and the legacy of Mr Chen.

A fast paced, emotional adventure. I was glued to Athan, his bravery and love for his sisters. He is a brilliant character and I was so proud of him for facing up to Colonel Blade.

At the midway point I was worried, scared, hopeful and needed to read just one more chapter. Then just one more ... and on it went until I was finished. I love books that keep you hooked until the very end. My emotions were in tatters but I thoroughly loved this book.

I will certainly be recommending it to my 10-year-old. I think he will enjoy the adventure, thrills and chills held within the pages.

**Erin Hamilton**

## **Call Me Alastair**

Cory Leonardo, pub. Scholastic

This debut novel is an intriguing read about a pair of parrots, an old woman, and a twelve-year-old boy; all are lonely in their own ways but they each find comfort and happiness through connecting with the others. Told through the voice of Alastair, an African Grey parrot, we follow him from the moment he hatches alongside his sister Aggie in an American pet shop.

With the aid of letters written by Mrs Albertina Plopky and pages taken from Fritz Feldman's journal, which appear intermittently throughout the book, we discover that Alastair is not such a reliable narrator. Alastair distrusts both the humans and is always plotting his own and his sister's escapes, but through the inclusion of those other voices, we learn that just because things look one way to one set of eyes does not necessarily mean that that is how things truly are.

The location of the pet shop provides humour, energy and a lot of characters, although it was noticeable for me that the presence of animals such as hedgehogs and hermit crabs, kittens and

puppies, will probably be ones that a child entering a UK pet shop would not encounter. Alistair increasingly learns about the world through eating various sources of paper that he finds; as he digests them the words take on flavour, tasting of information, which Alastair describes as “not exactly pleasurable, but satisfying in a different way.” He particularly enjoys eating poetry, savouring the many flavours it develops as it “blossoms” in his mouth. This desire in turn develops into a talent for creating his own poetry in particular amending and altering established poetry particularly through word-play like puns. I found this aspect of the book equally intriguing and sometimes comical but also quite irritating with Americanisms and a sometimes schmaltzy feel.

This is an interesting addition to the theme of animal narrators, an unusual approach to consider the beauty of poetry and the effect it can have on people (or parrots), and I am sure that young readers who enjoy animal stories will appreciate this quirky read.

**Natalie McCrystal Plimmer**

## **The Cosmic Atlas of Alfie Fleet**

Martin Howard, illus. Chris Mould, pub. Oxford Children’s Books

Every so often a book comes along which is way easier to read than write about. *The Cosmic Atlas of Alfie Fleet* is one such. A breathlessly inventive comic fantasy quest, whisking the reader through a whole universe of wacky wonders, peopled with eccentric and oddly-named characters.

The main character, Alfie, is an immediately endearing anti-hero, intent on trying everything in his power to save enough money to buy his hard-working, fish-gutting, single mum a Sole Sensation 6000-foot spa (with Soothejet Technology and Vibrating Toe-Polishers) for her birthday. To this end, he replies to a newspaper classified ad for one day’s work “lifting and carrying”, little knowing he will in fact be working for the absent-minded Professor Pewsley Bowell-Mouvemont, President of the space-travelling, map-making Unusual Cartography Club as he attempts to update the Cosmic Atlas (of which he is the sole reader).

Travelling on the unreliable and slightly rusty moped of infinity, Betsy, the unlikely twosome bounce, via a rotating stone circle in the basement, from Planet Maureen to Brains-in-Jars World to Outlandish, encountering all manner of twang bears, gold-hoarding dragons, aliens and lightning-bolt-throwing locals along the way - helped by Sir Brenda the knight and a girl called Derek.

This is not a read for the faint-hearted. There’s a fine line between silliness and genuine giggle-making humour but Howard gets it right for those looking for something slightly more imaginative from their funny books. Think Barry Hutchison, Douglas Adams, Terry Pratchett. The kind of story you could imagine adapted as a Monty Python style sketch show.

*The Cosmic Atlas of Alfie Fleet* reads very much like the first zany adventure in a very funny series - but is none the worse for that. It's an addictive mix of humour, drama and adventure with a kind heart. Quirky illustrations from the genius Chris Mould bring the crazy characters and wacky time travel to vivid life and make this a book you will want to revisit.

The publisher promises the series will put maps on the map of kids' lit offering an alternative to the doodle books of Tom Gates and the diaries of Wimpy Kid. Only time will tell - but wildly imaginative and intelligently funny fiction such as this deserves to find a wide audience.

## **Eileen Armstrong**

### **The Darkdeep**

Ally Condie & Brendan Reichs, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

*The Darkdeep* is the first book in a new series (and the first collaboration) by Ally Condie and Brendan Reichs. The series should have great appeal to fans of Goosebumps who are looking to move on with something else to read in a similar genre.

Nico and his friends, Tyler and Emma are test flying his new quadcopter drone high up on the cliffs near Still Cove 'a dead-end backwater ringed by cliffs and covered by perpetual fog.' Still Cove is a place that all the locals avoid due to its inaccessibility by land and sea, and by horror stories passed around about 'The Beast.'

After a run in with some local bullies (among them the cool Opal – an old school friend of Nico), Nico slips and falls down into Still Cove. In a bid to rescue him, the children find what appears to be a deserted island but exploring it they have the feeling they are being watched. On the island they discover an old houseboat containing a variety of strange items – and perhaps strangest of all, a basement with a strange swirling pool of water. In exploring, the children are plunged into a supernatural world in which things from their imagination come to life.

*The Darkdeep* is well written in a style that will have lots of appeal to boys and girls – especially as chapters alternate from Nico's and Opal's point of view. It's fast paced from the start and guaranteed to pull readers in, keep them hooked and leave them wanting more. I'd recommend this to any and all reluctant readers.

## **Damian Harvey**

### **The Day I Was Erased**

Lisa Thompson, pub. Scholastic

This story is from the author of *The Goldfish Bowl* and *The Light Jar*, both well received by critics and readers.

Lisa Thompson writes in a style which is easy to read and understand; the short chapters make this a very readable book for children around 8 to 10 years old. It is also a very thought-provoking story, tackling real life issues, such as parental break up, dementia and death. It is a story about family and friendship and the values of life. Many children will no doubt connect with its content and take comfort from what happens to Maxwell.

Many child readers will identify with some very interesting and likeable characters. The main character, Maxwell, is 12 years old and lives with his mum, dad, sister and dog Monster. Maxwell is naughty and is always in trouble. He is desperately trying to find his way in life. He struggles with his mum, dad and sister and his friends and teachers. Despite this, Maxwell does have a very kind and likeable side. He rescues a stray dog from being run over by a car, he visits a lonely, elderly neighbour after school for a chat and biscuits.

This is also a story with a gripping plot and an unusual mystery. Maxwell plunges the whole school into darkness and after this he believes all his friends hate him. Only when his life is snatched away from him, does he realise how much he actually loved his old life. He now sees that what he wished for is not really what he wanted. The mystery is working out why and how Maxwell has been erased.

This is a great story. Brilliant characters, with a good and mysterious plot, a cabinet of curiosities and some important and very relevant modern-day themes explored.

## **Gary Kenworthy**

### **Ghost**

Jason Reynolds, pub. Knights Of

Castle Cranshaw, or Ghost as he prefers to be known, has spent his life running: from his father with a gun, from the memories, into and out of trouble. He is naturally fast, with raw talent, though he has ambitions to play basketball rather than be a track athlete. Until he chances on the try outs for the local athletic team and impresses Coach, who sees something he can nurture in Ghost. But in order to succeed Ghost needs to stay on track, both at school and with the team.

His circumstances are not easy, living with his mother in a tough neighbourhood, without much money and often getting into altercations at school. Though the principal is sympathetic, Ghost often finds himself in his office, explaining his actions. With the guidance of Coach and the support of his fellow new team members, Ghost finally has a chance to run towards a new life.

In an involving story, Jason Reynolds brings the urban setting vividly to life, exploring the relationships between the characters and depicting the reality as well as the hopefulness. You will find yourself cheering on Ghost as he runs and hoping he makes the right choices in other aspects of his life; a book full of honesty, compassion and humour.

*Ghost* is the first in a quartet of novels entitled *Run*, which will follow the other three new members of the team. I look forward to making the acquaintance of Patina, Sunny and Lu later this year and in 2020.

**Jayne Gould**

### **The Girl with Shark's Teeth**

Cerrie Burnell, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Minnow is different from other girls and she knows it – the delicate scars behind her ears and her affinity with water proves that. All her life she has lived on her mother's boat and adored the ocean. One night her mother is snatched by a trio of men, wanting to use her help to capture a mermaid. Knowing she is the only hope her mother has, Minnow sets off with the aim of rescuing her. A peculiar map, childhood stories and a Icelandic boy aid Minnow on her quest to discover what has happened to her mother.

*The Girl with Shark's Teeth* is a beautiful read with a mysterious, unique voice that makes you want to read on. Burnell's writing has a magical edge to it that is shown extremely well through her world building. It is so expressive and immersive that you can just imagine yourself in Minnow's world. Books that feature magical realism are very hard to get right, but with this one it was perfect.

The plot itself is very fast paced and from the first page you are pulled into the action. Every piece of the story is relevant and keeps you engaged and alert when reading. Each chapter ends with intense cliff-hangers, meaning you have no choice but to carry on reading. At times you could say *The Girl with Shark's Teeth* is adrenaline inducing, as you get so into everything that is going on. Minnow, as a character is determined, fierce and courageous, who's love for her mother has no bounds. She will fight for her no matter what. You could even say that Minnow is a role model that young girls need.

In this story Mermaids aren't like what you'd imagine them to be like. Yes, they are beautiful, but they are also powerful and dangerous. This brings that uniqueness to the story yet again. It was also great to read about other creatures like sharks and also pirates (which you'd expect to be part of a story like this).

*The Girl with Shark's Teeth* was a magical, addictive, fantastic read. It is a story that youngsters will be able to pick up, devour and talk about within days.

**Amy Grandvoinet**

## **Guardians of the Wild Unicorns**

Lindsay Littleton, pub. Floris books (Kelpies)

Lewis really didn't want to spend a week on a school trip in the highlands of Scotland. He was terrible at kayaking, abseiling and anything that was deemed 'outward bound' and it was not helped that he had to endure bullying from some of his classmates. Even Rhona, who tried to help him, could not help the situation. Then suddenly Lewis was confronted by something that was totally impossible. Unicorns. And these unicorns are not the rainbow coloured glittery beasts of imagination; these are solid strong and wild creatures who have found sanctuary in this rugged part of the country. But the animals are in danger and Lewis and Rhona find themselves at the centre of the attempts to save these wonderful creatures.

This is a fantastic story that links a creature of fantasy with the realities of living in a large city and the challenges that people have to face. Both Lewis and Rhona have secrets that they hide from everyone and it is only through their shared adventure that they are able to open up about these issues.

Kelpies are a brilliant imprint for young people and the stories are all set in Scotland, however this in no way limits their audience, because the issues that are dealt with tend to be universal. I don't think I have ever been disappointed by a book by this publisher and this story does not change my very positive view of their titles.

**Margaret Pemberton**

## **Hotel Flamingo**

Alex Milway, pub. Piccadilly Press

Hotel Famingo was once the sunniest hotel in the town but the hotel Anna has inherited from her Great aunt is dilapidated to say the least. Luckily for us, the reader, and the would-be guests of this hotel Anna will not let a little bit of flaking paint and a few cracked windows deter her from the daunting task ahead – to make the hotel once more the best in town. There may be one slight problem though. All the guests who are expecting to stay here are animals ... and so too are the staff. Can Anna truly rise to the challenge she has been set? With an eclectic mix of human and animal staff Anna sets out to welcome flamingo, penguin, hippo, giraffe and even cockroach to her hotel. She refuses to be bullied by other local hotel owners or the hotel inspector. Anna is courageous and

strong-willed. As we read this early chapter book we will see her to win and somehow we just know she will.

Not only do the title and cover suggest flamboyancy the illustrations positively jump off the pages with it. Here is an exuberant book, full of excitement, life and determination. Alex Milway has had great fun with his clever cast of characters, the silly yet compelling story and also the wonderful models he built along the way – see his Instagram posts for more on this!

I can say with some certainty that by the time you have read only a few pages of this delightful story you will have been drawn in hook, line and sinker and parents beware – the children will be clamouring to stay, in the book, in the hotel – and hopefully this is just the start of a new series from a very talented author/illustrator allowing them the chance to stay with the books at least!

## **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

### **How to Rob a Bank**

Tom Mitchell, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Dylan Thomas (namesake of the Welsh poet) is aged fifteen and likes football. Despite his dislike of work, he has taken a Saturday job to appease his parents. In a tragicomic error Dylan convinces himself he has been responsible for burning down his best friend's house. His friend Beth has been obliged to move to an apartment. But her family are struggling to find the rent. She may have to move and therefore to change school.

Dylan decides that the obvious way to extricate his friend from her financial difficulties is of course to rob a bank. Banks have plenty of money.

Mitchell's novel poses the questions of whether Dylan can actually succeed in his daring mission and what consequences flow from his crazy plan.

This is a deliberately farcical book. Any reader looking for a narrative rooted in reality will look in vain. The pace of the book is enjoyably sustained. It is also amusing to speculate as one reads what madcap escapade will occupy Dylan next.

There is however one feature of the narrative that is disturbing. One of the characters, Tom, is described as having a brain injury. The only symptom of his impairment is a fixed vacuous grin, even in circumstances which would make such a response totally inappropriate. The author might have contemplated two options, either to give a considered explanation of Tom's condition or to omit any mention of an impairment. What is on offer simply does not function.

This single flaw mars the pleasure of reading an otherwise enjoyably comic heist caper.

**Rebecca Butler**

## **How to Win a Nobel Prize**

Barry Marshall, illus. Bernard Caleo, pub. Rock The Boat

No false claims here: Barry Marshall, author of this book, has actually won a Nobel prize, so he's in the ideal position to advise anyone.

A time-travelling adventure based on a true story (apart from the time-travelling bit), we follow a young science fan called Mary who tags along to an event with her mother because she wants to meet a Nobel prizewinner. Instead of having a simple conversation with Dr Marshall, Mary stumbles upon him hosting a secret meeting of Nobel Prize-winning scientists past and present. Together they visit those scientists in their labs, offices and workplaces - in their own time.

In the style of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* and *Stories for Boys Who Dare to be Different*, readers learn biographical details about the lives of scientists as varied as Albert Einstein and Tu Youyou, who discovered a therapy for malaria based on ancient herbal remedies. But, as Mary chats to them, in their own time, it feels closer somehow. I like that the author also includes details of the unsung assistants who made incredible contributions hugely but were excluded from the Nobel prize.

Each chapter ends with a science experiment for you to try at home, from extracting a strawberry's DNA to observing the effect of radiation on seedlings (using a microwave - no radioactive ingredients required!).

A recommended read for science fans - and future Nobel prize-winners - aged 8 and over.

**Antonia Russell**

## **The Last Zoo**

Sam Gayton, pub. Andersen Press

Pia is a strong female lead character who lives in a scientifically impossible world. Any creature that can be imagined, can potentially be created into existence. This is all due to a 'reality bomb' that changes how the human world works and even makes angels, demons and genies an essential part of the world.

I'm a big fan of Sam Gayton and have seen him live in action! His language really does bring mythical creatures to life. Also, the flaws he gives the main characters, children and adults, make them easy to identify with i.e.: loneliness, jealousy.

It took me a while to fully settle into the world he has created, but once I understood the concept of the 'reality bomb' and the implications (a world with no limits, except from your own imagination), I began to really enjoy the story. The issues dealt with include: the environment, romance, grief, friendships, imagination (or lack of it) and coming of age.

This book would appeal to both boys and girls because there are strong female and male characters. I would recommend it for Year 5 and upwards. It would be a good class read, especially when discussing the environment, climate change or technology. Imagining a world without technology would be a good class challenge. Additionally many chapters end on a cliff-hanger, making it a good read aloud text.

This feels like the beginning of a series. There are big changes at the end of the novel, and I think children will be keen to know what happens next. There are plenty of 'what ifs' to explore for what could happen next to save the world (and relating that to the world we live in today). Current issues are reflected in this book, especially around the themes of recycling and damaging the world we live in (i.e. manmade pollution and climate change). So, it would be ideal for reading extracts or the whole book and then following this up with class discussions and looking at non-fiction texts.

## **Sophie Castle**

### **Lightning Mary**

Anthea Simmons, pub. Andersen Press

The arresting jacket design of this book tells us we are dealing with a brave, determined girl, as we see her standing before the storm-lashed cliffs, hammer in hand, fossils at her feet. This is Mary Anning, renowned 19th Century fossil hunter and scientist, who from hard, humble beginnings, advanced our understanding of earth science by her discovery of fossilised creatures on the Dorset coast.

I whipped through this book and completely fell in love with the character of Mary Anning. We first meet her as an 8-year-old, fossil hunting with her father as part of their struggle to eke out a living by selling these "curiosities" to rich visitors. She is an uncompromising and fierce personality, deeply frustrated by the limitations assumed by others on account of her poverty and gender. From a young age she refuses to bend to the expectation to be a wife and mother and nothing else. At the age of 15 months she was marked out as different when she survived a lightning strike which killed the others she was with – hence the name.

Poorly educated, she is fiercely intelligent and inquisitive and by sheer grit and character, carves out (literally) a place for herself in science and history, although her contribution was not fully recognised at the time and she has never been made a member of the Royal Geological Society.

This is a story of family and friendships too, set against the often extremely harsh and precarious background of a poor family in 19th Century Dorset. But all is not grim – the story is alight with the spark and humour of this unique young woman and her wonder at the creation of the earth and its creatures.

We learn history best through stories, and Anthea Simmons manages to intelligently encompass ideas of class injustice, gender inequality, religious debate and the dawning of the understanding earth science in this highly readable book.

Great for sparky Year 6 Girls and boys who can cope with a girl on the cover!

## **Rose Palmer**

### **Little Bird Flies**

Karen McCombie, pub. Nosy Crow

The story opens on the Isle of Tornish, Scotland, 1861. Our narrator is Bridget MacKerrie, affectionately known as Bridie, or Little Bird.

Born with a damaged foot and hand, she has survived against the odds and is now 12 years old and bursting with life and vigour. She lives in the small island community with her stonemason father, two older sisters and a younger brother. The living is hard, but the surroundings are wildly beautiful. The local laird owns the island and its people. He is kindly and paternalistic but alas, when he dies suddenly, the islanders discover that his successor is not of the same inclination. It soon becomes clear that life on the island is about to change – and not for the better.

This is a wonderfully warm but unsentimental yarn, populated with vivid characters, from the directness of Bridie with her dreams of seeing the wider world to the odious daughter of the new laird with her spitefulness and snobbery.

Balance is achieved with the sympathetic English characters of the artist and the mysterious lady in black. The fragility of island existence is contrasted with the courage and stoicism of the inhabitants. Maybe it's a little romanticised but this is an elegy to a lost way of life and to a diaspora generation forced to leave their home and travel far across the ocean to forge new lives in America and Canada, or to the big cities of the mainland.

*Little Bird Flies* would be a treat to read aloud to a class of Year 5 or 6 pupils; it has real heart and heart-in –the-mouth scenes to keep them desperate to know what happens next.

## **Rose Palmer**

### **The Midnight Hour**

Laura Trinder and Benjamin Read, illus. Hannah Peck, pub. Chicken House

Emily is so frustrated with her parents. She thinks her dad is SO boring and her mum is embarrassing – and she’s not afraid to let them know how she feels. But, one night, a letter arrives that changes everything. Her mum disappears and doesn’t come back. And then, her dad goes looking for her mum, and he doesn’t come back either.

Emily finds herself all alone. It is up to her (along with her hedgehog, Hog, or Hoggins if you want to be formal) to find her parents who are being held captive in another time. Victorian London is not quite what Emily expected, especially since the residents are rather ... different.

So, Emily sets off on an exciting and scary adventure, and along the way, she might just learn one or two things about herself ...

*The Midnight Hour* is an action-packed, fast-paced novel that you will not be able to put down. It has a wonderful mix of real-life issues, history, fantasy, and magic. It’s also laugh-out-loud funny, mainly because Emily says all the things most of us want to say but politeness dictates that it’s not typically the done thing.

There are some slightly scary parts and a little bit of gore, but it is written in a way that is meant to be humorous and induce some “Ew!”s and “Ergh!”s from the reader.

Children aged between 9 and 12 are guaranteed to fall in love with the wonderful characters and the magical Victorian world. It is not just for children – readers of all ages, particularly Harry Potter fans, will appreciate what is hopefully the first instalment of many.

This book is perfect for a rainy day during the school holidays when you can curl up and disappear into the midnight hour.

## **Sophie Castle**

### **A Moon Girl Stole My Friend**

Rebecca Patterson, pub. Andersen Press

This is a wrenching but fantastical story: for anyone who has found themselves isolated from former friends, the bullying that Lyla faces will hit home as a reminder that, despite how unfairly you're treated, being yourself is enough – even in 2099, in a world of flying bikes, rockets, and robocats, the loss of friendship comes with no easy answers, and hurt is a part of experience.

The world of 2099 explored in this book is an enjoyable one, if slightly predictable, and its innovations are fun – but flying, bat-shaped sweets and moving stickers may not be all they're cracked up to be and the advent of robotic teaching assistants makes misbehaving that little bit harder- but not impossible! A school where the surrounding weather can be regulated is somewhat tempting, and a thought-provoking image given contemporary struggles with climate. Plenty of humour arises from the year six school trip, on which Lyla's class learn about history: you may find yourself re-thinking exactly how cutting edge your new trainers really are ...

When Petra, new girl at school (arrived from the swanky moon colonies), draws the attention of Lyla's best friend Bianca, the pair quickly become inseparable – and Petra has no time for the supposedly unfashionable, immature and introverted Lyla. These new divides make for an emotive read, but new relationships may not be as far away as they seem and provide valuable opportunity for learning. And unexpected new bonds are accompanied by the realisation that maybe, just maybe, not all friendships end for good – only time will tell.

## **Jemima Breeds**

### **Now or Never. A Dunkirk Story**

Bali Rai, pub. Scholastic

Faisal Khan is an Indian aged fifteen (though he pretends to be older) who finds himself in Dunkirk on the eve of the 1940 evacuation. He has come to Europe to join the British forces resisting Nazi Germany. Faisal and his Indian comrades are in charge of a mule train supplying the fighting forces. They have received some basic training in firearms, but they are now not permitted to fire shots. Bali Rai asks two significant questions. Will Faisal escape from Dunkirk, given that saving him and his comrades will not be a high priority? And if he manages to reach England, what kind of reception can he expect?

The history of the Second World War is of course on the curriculum for Key Stage 2. But the picture presented to pupils has hitherto been incomplete. Citizens of many different Commonwealth countries took part in the war. Some died or were wounded. Some served out of loyalty to the British Empire. Others fought because they hoped to be rewarded with post-colonial freedom after the war. The contribution of these Commonwealth citizens is briefly acknowledged in some accounts of the conflict. A detailed study of their role and their suffering, a study featuring an Indian protagonist and

one in which the portrayal of most of their British masters is to say the least unflattering, such a study has been missing and long overdue.

I recommend this book to be read alongside the standard history of the war 1939 to 1945.

**Rebecca Butler**

### **Our Castle by the Sea**

Lucy Strange, pub. Chicken House

Set during the first two years of the Second World War, from Autumn 1939 to Spring 1941, Lucy Strange's second novel is a moving, gripping tale of life in a lighthouse on the Kent coast and a family who face danger, not only from events across the Channel but also their own community.

Petra and Magda Smith are the daughters of the lighthouse keeper and his wife, who is German. As an "enemy alien", their beloved Mutti is sent to an internment camp and the sisters face the suspicions of the villagers, especially when acts of sabotage start occurring, as well as learning to cope with her absence.

Petra in particular seeks solace up on the clifftop, where she feels an affinity with the megaliths known as the Daughters of Stone and the legend as to how they came into being. She can feel and hear the song they are meant to sing; this is truly home for her and she is determined not to leave. Nightmares of the Wurm, the sandbank that the lighthouse warns of, haunt her dreams as danger looms.

When tragedy strikes as her father and sister help with the evacuation from Dunkirk, family secrets are revealed, and Petra finds herself having to fight for all she holds dear.

Absorbing, thrilling and with a hint of the mystical, this is a wonderful evocation of wartime life, told from a different angle. There is the privation of rationing, the threat of invasion, the sight of dogfights in the sky above and the sound of the guns in France combined with impossible choices to make in a novel which is guaranteed to keep you reading. Ideal and highly recommended for readers of 10+.

**Jayne Gould**

### **The Peculiar Peggs of Riddling Wood**

Samuel J. Halpin, illus. Hannah Peck, pub. Usborne

When Poppy is sent to stay with her grandmother after the unexpected death of her mum, the sleepy town of Suds couldn't be more normal. But just beyond Poppy's dusty windowsill, chilling rumours of

children turning grey and disappearing creep out of the dark and dangerous woods, and a set of very peculiar rules that must not be broken suggests that not everything is as it seems. And so begins a web of mysterious events, curious characters and a chilling secret that must be unravelled.

Poppy and Erasmus are brilliant protagonists both born to stand out – Poppy is incredibly fierce and kind, and Erasmus’ intelligence and righteousness doesn’t fall short of that of Sherlock Holmes. What particularly stood out to me was Poppy’s acknowledgment of her anxiety.

Children’s books addressing emotional and mental health and wellbeing are currently a significant and necessary theme right across children's publishers at the moment and to see a young protagonist learning about and dealing with her anxiety was refreshingly real and makes for a great conversational approach for parents and their children.

The development of Poppy and Erasmus’ friendship, and also Poppy’s relationship with her Gran is full of both heart-wrenching and heart-warming moments. But there’s no shortage of spine-tingling moments either, as Halpin masterfully blends this reality with a thrillingly gothic fairytale and ghoulish figures lurking in the shadows.

Deliciously dark in tone but glistening with imagination and heart, Halpin has crafted an original and clever page-turner, full of twists and turns in all the right places. An impressive debut with fantastic illustrations by Hannah Peck. Perfect for fans of Helena Duggan’s *A Place Called Perfect*.

## **Fern Tolley**

### **Royal Rebel**

Carina Axelsson, pub. Usborne

Lily loves fashion and loves vlogging about it. Her Tiara Girl postings are getting more and more views. She spends lots of time thinking up each vlog, often when she should be concentrating on her school lessons, and particularly enjoys involving her pet dog and guinea pig, dressing them up to match her costumes, accessories and hairstyles. But there’s a problem. Lily is not the normal teenager she longs to be. She is in fact Her Royal Highness Lillian Athena Isabella Marie, the Crown Princess of Waldenburg. She is about to turn fourteen and is being trained in the etiquette required of the future queen. It is certainly not acceptable for the crown princess to be seen to be interested in fashion, let alone vlogging about it. It’s a big secret to keep, especially now that she has to contain the excitement of her first official dinner appearance, where she will be wearing a real tiara. Thankfully her best friend Leonie as ever has practical suggestions.

That’s not the only complication though. Some of the boys at school have started a campaign for equal rights for boys. They object to the lack of opportunities for boys in the Queendom of

Waldenburg. Lily begins to understand and to a certain extent sympathise with their views but realises that in her position she must react carefully and appropriately. And just to make things more difficult, she's about to be interviewed for the influential magazine *Teen Me*, first as *Tiara Girl*, and then, just minutes later, as *Princess Lilian*. It's crucial that she's not recognised.

*Royal Rebel* is a light, accessible novel, written in first person diary format. Carina Axelsson is a former model who obviously understands the importance of fashion in the lives of some pre-teen and teenage girls. The glittery silver cover with its fuchsia pink writing and illustration clearly indicates the target audience, with whom it's likely to be very popular. Lily's growing social and political awareness is interesting and welcome in this context. This is the first in a series, with two sequels due out later this year.

### **Anne Harding**

#### **The Star-Spun Web**

Sinéad O'Hart, pub. Stripes Publishing

Having grown up as an orphan Tess is happy conducting science experiments alongside her friends and pet tarantula Violet at the children's home she lives in, happy that is until a gentleman named Mr Cleat arrives unexpectedly and claims to be a long-lost relation of hers. Mr Cleat is intent on taking her away. Revealing just how brave she is Tess agrees to go with him in the hope that she will learn more about her family heritage but before long Mr Cleat's behaviour becomes irregular and his motives questionable, leaving Tess all alone seeking out the answers she needs using experimentation and investigation, all of which is focused around a small device left with her as a baby, tucked inside her blankets when she first arrived at the children's home.

This book is absolutely captivating - with a sprinkle of magic across its pages, a strong heroine lead and duplicitous villains. The story of *The Star Spun Web* is told so vividly that you feel instantly immersed within an extremely interesting and emotional adventure story. The combination of anticipation and adventure make this an unbelievable story which portrays the importance of family, friends and self-belonging perfectly. I would love to see this title feature on school library shelves and be shared as a class read. It would not disappoint its audience.

### **Samantha Thomas**

#### **Storm Hound**

Claire Fayers, pub. Macmillan

Storm of Odin is a fearsome mythical stormhound of the Wild Hunt who races across stormy and lightening-filled skies alongside the great warrior Odin. With fur as black as the deepest midnight, and a body as tall as a crimson-tailed horse, Storm has longed for the time to be able to join Odin's prestigious hunting party. But on the night of his first official Wild Hunt, Storm's nerves are the least of his worries after he falls behind his pack and tumbles through the thunderous clouds of the Otherworld onto the A40 just outside Abergavenny. And to make matters worse, his once mighty, horse-sized physique has transformed into an adorable, tiny puppy.

Much to his disgust, Storm is rescued and taken to the local animal rescue centre where fate brings 12-year-old Jessie who just so happens to be looking for a new pet. Struggling herself to adjust to a new life in Wales after her parent's separation, Jessie and Storm quickly become inseparable as they begin to navigate a new and unfamiliar territory together.

But with an unmistakable air of magic lingering and mysterious strangers plotting against the legendary stormhound, Jessie and Storm are thrown head first into an unforgettable mythical battle. What follows is a fast-paced and hilarious tale that leaves Storm with a life-changing decision to make, and Jessie to confront her own past.

Whilst full of wild adventures, shape-shifting magic and troublesome characters, Storm Hound is foremost a heart-warming and powerful tale of belonging, friendship and trust. With subtle exploration into parental separation and house moving, Fayers' shows through both Jessie and Storm that 'home' is much more than geographical location but rather a sense of belonging.

Fayers' has created a clever blend of myth, magic and wry humour that's perfect for fans of Maz Evans' equally hilarious series, *Who Let the Gods Out*. I can only hope that Fayers' takes us on more mythical adventures with Storm and Jessie in the future.

**Fern Tolley**

## **To Nightowl from Dogfish**

Holly Goldberg Sloan & Meg Wolitzer, pub. Egmont

The email from a perfect stranger upsets the life of Avery A. Bloom, only daughter of New-York-based architect Sam. The email is from Bett Devlin, a twelve-year-old Californian girl who reveals that her dad, Marlow, and Sam are in a relationship. The unbelieving Avery starts an email exchange with Bett which reveals the gulf that exists between their lifestyles, characters and outlooks. Not only must Avery reconcile herself with the fact that Bett is correct, but also with the fact that the Californian girl will join her at her summer camp, a plan hatched by the dads to encourage the girls to get to know each other before becoming one family. Bett and Avery agree on doing their utmost to thwart the plan. Yet, despite themselves, eventually they form a bond so close that it survives even the failure of

their dads' relationship. In a total reverse of fortunes, now the girls plot to bring the two men back together.

Charming, funny, touching and unpredictable, written in epistolary style by two skilled American authors, this book is impossible to put down once started. The voices of the two protagonists are endearing and joined by a diverse cast of characters, including dads, grandmothers, long-lost mothers, friends and summer camp staff, which flesh out and provide insights into the delightful exchange between Avery and Bett. Whether the love story which initiated the girls' exchange will eventually have a happy ending becomes irrelevant, as their blossoming friendship is the focus of this tale.

An ode to diversity written for the young readers, this story touches not only same-gender relationships, but also the differences built by learning attitudes, personalities, life choices and age. By keeping communication channels open, even when it is very difficult to do so, by agreeing to disagree, and by behaving ultimately in the most mature way, Avery and Bett hold a masterclass in how to work at a relationship.

This is a book which is written for children but should be recommended to adults too.

**Laura Brill**

## **The Truth about Martians**

Melissa Savage, illus. Doron Parton, pub. Chicken House

This book, set in 1947 near Roswell, New Mexico, uses the real-life reports of a UFO crash landing as a backdrop to the story of Mylo and his friend Dibs. Dibs is crazy about Martians and comic book superheroes while Mylo is still reeling from the death of a much-loved older brother. Together they find the wreckage of a strange craft and, more importantly, a survivor. Both boys, and a group of their friends, conceal the survivor, who they name Moon Shadow, and set about trying to get her back home.

There are a lot of references in the book to life in mid 40s' USA (baseball vocabulary, foods, comics etc.) which may seem strange to the modern UK reader but the story will draw the reader in. Both Dibs and Mylo are appealing characters with their talk about comics, their neighbours and school friends and there is a lot of humour in the exchanges between them. Dibs, however, is the son of a father deserted by his wife who takes out his anger and confusion on Dibs, either through neglect or beatings and Mylo is constantly trying to keep at bay what he calls 'the grey' – that feeling of unending despair when he thinks about his brother Obie. He is emotionally mature enough to recognise that feeling in his neighbour, Mordecai Lord, and, eventually, in Dibs' father who he starts off hating for what he does to Dibs but by the end of the book realises that he too is suffering.

The latter half of the book deals with the attempt by this group of children, aided by Mylo's father and Mordecai Lord, to hide Moon Shadow from the army, to reunite her with the creature already captured and somehow get them both back to where they belong. This is clearly a very tall order and the way they gain access to a top-secret American army base is somewhat farfetched as is the neat ending, but it really does not matter by this stage; readers will want a happy, or rather hopeful, ending for Mylo, Obie and Moon Shadow.

At the beginning, the book seems too set in its time and place to appeal more widely to a UK readership but the heart of the story (friendship, grief, courage) has universal appeal and confident independent readers of 10+ will recognise bits of themselves in the friendships of the children and their passion for comic books and sport.

## **June Hughes**

### **Two Sides**

Polly Ho-Yen and Binny Talib, pub. Stripes Publishing

This book is a real treasure trove, both in how it looks and what is found inside. It's thick, heavy, beautifully illustrated binding speaks of its content – the depth and strength of childhood friendships, the joy and pain that they bring and the experiences that ripple on throughout life.

The premise of *Two Sides* is simple, familiar and every-day, but it captures something of the profundity of a close friendship begun in infancy and being tested through childhood and emerging adolescence.

We meet two ordinary girls – Lenka and Lula. Their shared experience as well as their individual quirks are celebrated within their relationship. However, one day something happens that shakes their bond to its very core. The dilemma is laid out for us, is this something worth fighting over? Is it important? Can these girls understand something from the others point of view or will their differing opinions pull them apart forever?

Polly Ho-Yen and Binny Talib seem to have an extraordinary talent for understanding and taking most seriously the emotional experiences of childhood that so often get minimised or dismissed as superficial or unimportant by adults. This lovely story is told from the two girls perspectives. This cleverly demonstrates the internal dilemmas of each, the journey of emotional work that they embark on and the resolution that is reached at the end.

This book might be a real lifeline for parents, teachers and those supporting the emotional development of primary aged children. It provides the opportunity of opening up a conversation

about the trials and tribulations (that are such a common occurrence in the playground) in such a gentle and hopeful way.

## **Emily Hamilton**

### **Vote for Effie**

Laura Wood, illus. Emma Trithart (cover) & Mirelle Ortega (inside), pub. Scholastic

Euphemia Kostas (Effie for short) has big hair, a big voice, big daydreams and big opinions. She's just started a new school, half way through the first term, and knows no-one. So how did she end up running for student president?

It mostly started with chocolate cake but has snowballed into Effie launching a campaign against Aaron Davis, the current president, who also happens to be captain of the football team. He's good-looking, cool, entitled and annoying. His only - and incredibly popular - campaign promise is to get more pizza in the cafeteria. How on earth is she going to win?

Slowly, Effie gathers around her a rag-tag team of people who support her ideas - for making the school greener, for supporting clubs other than boys' football, and for making sure no-one eats alone. Her parents, usually so supportive, are doubtful about the wisdom of Effie's campaign, with everything else going on. But her new neighbour Iris, a feisty pensioner with a foul-mouthed parrot, and her little sister Lil are more supportive.

Does Effie win the election? You'll have to read the book to find out, but she does have lots of interesting experiences along the way - and finds herself a fantastic group of friends, who may (or may not) include Aaron Davis ...

Vote for Effie has a strong feminist undertone and would be great for readers aged 8 and up who are interested in women's rights, politics and equality - or anyone who just enjoys seeing people stand up for themselves, for others and for what they care about.

## **Antonia Russel**

# Young Adult Book Reviews

## **A Danger to Herself and Others**

Alyssa Sheinmel, pub. Atom

This 331-page first-person narrated YA novel gradually reveals to the reader the truth about seventeen-year-old Hannah Elizabeth Gold, her life and her condition.

The author writes a disclaimer that her book, ‘... is not meant to educate readers about mental illness or institutionalization.’ But the detailed account of Hannah’s life in a Californian mental institute has both veracity and considerable accuracy.

I don’t wish to spoil the slow reveal which is the mechanism by which this well-written book involves and holds the reader’s attention. We gradually realise that Hannah is an unreliable narrator, but not in every respect. As the judge comments in a hearing towards the end of the book, she integrates her fictional characters into her real life. So, her account of her relationships with ‘best friend’, Agnes, boyfriend Jonah and roommate Lucy appear to the reader initially as real as they do to the deluded Hannah.

This approach rewards close reading, as clues to Hannah’s mental state are initially very slight. The slow pace is also challenging especially in the first third of the book, but short sentences and an accessible vocabulary make this approachable for early to older YA readers. Mental illness, its treatment and frequent associated social stigma is much in the news currently, so this unsensational book will complement our understanding of the impact of a specific condition on personal relationships.

## **Trevor Arrowsmith**

### **A Girl Called Shameless**

Laura Steven, pub. Electric Monkey

*A Girl Called Shameless* written by Laura Steven, is a modern young adult novel about friendship, feminism and fighting back – the hilarious sequel to her bold and brave debut novel, *The Exact Opposite of Okay*.

At first read, I soon realised that this was a second book in a series, and although I never personally read *The Exact Opposite of Okay*, I didn’t find that it caused me any problems to understand

everything — and quickly too. The book begins by summarising what happened in the first book, so I easily got to grips with the story and background, and it didn't take me too long to get completely invested into the life of eighteen-year-old protagonist, Izzy O'Neill.

*A Girl Called Shameless* tackles a wide range of important debates and issues, such as, revenge porn and slut-shaming and covers social media, gender, sexuality, feminism, diversity and politics. The story follows Izzy O'Neill — a writer, activist and waitress and we learn that it's been two months since an explicit photo of Izzy was leaked all over the internet and that she was slut-shamed and betrayed by one of her best friends, Danny. The result of the humiliating revenge porn instantly turns Izzy's life upside down.

Izzy spends her life juggling high school, a boyfriend, a waitressing job to support herself and her grandma Betty, as well as writing a screenplay and career plans. Then there is the start of a popular website and YouTube campaign, 'Bitches Bite Back' which inspires other teenage girls to stand up for what they believe in. But when another's girl's explicit photo is leaked they decide to take serious action. The campaign soon becomes viral and political, and Izzy and her friends, try to do everything that they can to put a stop to the shaming ... and help change the state law on revenge porn.

Izzy's life is certainly full of ups and downs — but her brand of humour and constant jokes never go unnoticed. She is full of fun and character, and her story is told through a series of blog posts. It is packed full of strong female characters, comedy, and references to social media, memes, slang terms, hashtags and emojis making this the perfect modern and relevant teen novel for 'now'.

## **Gary Kenworthy**

### **A Story About Cancer (with a Happy Ending)**

India Desjardins, trans. Solange Ouellet, illus. Marianne Ferrer, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

Five years ago, a young girl, now fifteen, was diagnosed with leukaemia. As the novel opens, she walks down the hospital corridor with her parents towards the room where she will find out how much time she has left to live. As she walks, she reflects on the journey that has brought her this far.

As the title would suggest this is a no-nonsense, shoot-from-the-hip kind of story. We know the ending. It made me think about other YA books about cancer and the potentially unsavoury trap of being hooked, the wish to see whether the protagonist will survive or not, when this uncertainty is reality for countless people. India Desjardins met a 10-year old girl with leukaemia who only found sad endings in stories written about girls like her. She didn't want to read them. She asked the author to write a book about cancer with a happy ending, 'with laughter and romance'. This book is the outcome.

This is a very short but fully-formed, illustrated novel. The text is pruned and spare. It packs a punch. The illustrations however evoke a kind of dreamscape: endless corridors and industrial lighting; blood bags and bald heads; silhouettes and light and shadows. Lush, natural plant structures give balance. The colour palette is muted, almost translucent. Text and illustration work in perfect symbiosis.

The reader is shown the narrator's lowest moments and her most desperate thoughts. We see the strain on her parents and her sister, how they each struggle in their own way to cope - how inadequate they all feel. But life isn't all about hospitals and treatment: strong, kind Victor comes into her life. It is important to her, she thinks, as she awaits the verdict, that she knows what it is to have been in love. All the characters have a realistic life force, despite the brevity of the story.

If I was to generalise, I'd say this is probably a book the 11 to 15 age group would enjoy most. It is a compelling and emotional read, even with the spoiler in the title!

The author's afterword is a fitting conclusion: 'Today, eight out of ten children who are diagnosed with cancer are cured. This story was written to give any child who has cancer hope.'

**Jackie Spink**

## **A Tudor Turk. The Chronicles of Will Ryde and Awa Maryam Al-Jameel (Book One)**

Rehan Khan, pub. HopeRoad Publishing

The year is 1591. Will, a young Englishman kidnapped as a child in London to serve first as a swordsmith's apprentice in Marrakesh and then as a galley slave on a Moroccan ship, falls into Turkish hands after a battle. Noticed for his skills, he is given the option to join the Ottoman Empire's army, and to serve in the newly-formed Janissaries' unit called Rüzgar, or Wind.

Awa, the learned daughter of an African nobleman, is a warrior who is fighting to protect her Songhai nation from the attack of the Moroccan armies. Captured by the enemies and enslaved she is eventually forced to perform as a gladiator to entertain betting crowds.

Will and Awa's paths cross when the young man is sent on a mission to Egypt to retrieve the 'Staff of Moses', a relic stolen from the Sultan's palace in Istanbul, just as the girl finds an opportunity to escape the arena. Awa's fighting abilities earn her a place in the Rüzgar unit and freedom. From Egypt to England the unit faces dangers and forms close bonds. Awa and Will though are nostalgic for their own homelands and Will's loyalty is particularly tested once in England in pursuit of villain Sir Rathbone, who is in possession of the stolen relic. Having survived an ambush, Will and Awa face

an impossible challenge and possible death. To succeed they must reach London, where Will also hopes to find his long-lost mother.

Historical fiction for the young audience is a testing ground for writers. Occasionally their settings are no more than a pretext with little attention to the period they are depicting or, conversely, pedantic accuracy can dull the plot. In both cases the lack of balance between providing an entertaining read and a believable setting is lost. Neither is the case in this book.

Rehan Khan's adventure focuses on the Mediterranean region, when the Ottoman Empire, the Republic of Venice, Spain, Portugal and Morocco were jostling, seeking to hold or increase their trading power and influence. The sketching of this backdrop is accompanied by insights into the Arabic culture. In this setting the two main characters survive by observing, learning and thinking carefully. Will in particular conveys the message that open and curious minds can overcome barriers built by different languages and traditions.

Wiser than their ages would suggest, Will and Awa are a formidable team whose quests are as exciting as those of many protagonists of modern dystopian or spy novels for this age group. Fights, chases and conspiracy plots make this into a fast moving and exciting read. Khan does not take what could have been the obvious romantic route instead allowing Awa and Will to develop a true friendship based on their respective skills and qualities. Also, he does not shy away from hinting about the risks a girl in Awa's circumstances could have faced, which makes this book more suitable to the young adult market.

Khan's writing is fluent, and the wealth of details enriches the plot without slowing its pace. The author clearly explains that some historical facts have been altered to suit the narrative, but this still remains an insightful, fascinating and gripping story.

**Laura Brill**

## **All the Lonely People**

David Owen, pub. Atom

I enjoyed reading this book. It was very entertaining, gripping and well-crafted.

The story begins in a secondary school with a schoolboy prank. Wesley Graham and his friends Luke and Justin force fellow student Kat Waldgrave to close down her website. And as we read through, *All the Lonely People* we begin to see the positive and negative effects of the internet.

By alternating between Wesley and Kat's home lives the reader is made aware of their contrasting struggles and issues. Wesley has a fairly miserable existence living in block of flats, in a dysfunctional

working-class family. Many will identify with a familiar background such as Wesley's. Conversely Kat's background may start off seeming to be recognizable but it soon develops into something quite different. As Kat's online presence diminishes her physical presence shrinks. Her scenes depict a mysterious, fantasy-type world as she encounters Safa.

From time to time Wesley's and Kat's worlds interact, merge and even collide with dramatic results. Wesley desperately wants to have friends and to be accepted, however, he is faced with the moral dilemma of being coerced into violence. He also wants to provide for his family. There is a sense that Wesley would like to escape from his dodgy friends. His world becomes more complicated and dangerous by associating with the company he keeps. Wesley is shown to have a moral conscience; and even though he makes mistakes, he finds a way to resolve them. In terms of action, there's plenty to keep the reader interested – there's the mystery of the missing boy Aaron to solve and there's a protest march. Kat's involvement in the story takes on a mysterious surreal fantasy twist with scope for wide interpretation.

The story is crisply told without a single word being wasted. The narrative unfolds at great pace with vivid descriptions and convincing dialogue. Themes of bullying, isolation and the dependency of the internet will resonate with a teenage audience. As for the character of four-year-old Evie, I felt I would recognise her if I saw her! Many will be charmed and curious by entering Kat and Safa's fantasy world. The characters are believable. This book deserves to be successful.

### **Marion Griffiths**

Marion Griffiths is the author of the books *Study Skills for 11-18 year olds – A Guide to Success* available on Kindle and *Study Skills and Dyslexia in the Secondary School – A Practical Approach* published by Taylor Francis

### **Becoming Jo**

Sophie McKenzie, pub. Scholastic

Can anyone follow in the footsteps of the classic that is *Little Women*? Well if anyone can Sophie McKenzie could be the one to do it, she excels at writing books with strong female protagonists and Jo is certainly one of these. Luckily for us Sophie McKenzie is a very skilled writer whose ability to capture not only her audience but also the story and her characters is clearly evident in this reimagined story.

*Little Women* – Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. Four girls whose story is possibly ingrained in many an adult female's heart. Theirs is a story of love, loss, hope and sisterhood. It was written many years ago (for those too young to have yet read it) and it remains a staple, a classic that all should read. If my young audience are wondering why then they may perhaps want to start instead with *Becoming Jo*. Set in

the here-and-now, the 21st century, just as Louisa May Alcott's story was set in the here-and-now of the late 19th century, this is the story of four sisters (their mother and their absent father).

But why *Becoming Jo*? Because Jo is probably everyone's favourite sister and yet not necessarily the one who got much of the limelight in the original story. Here she is now in all her glory. We first encounter the four sisters as they plan their Christmas shopping – they decided it will be a treat for mum from the four of them this year as dad continues to serve (he is a priest) with the army abroad. Mum has little money and never give herself anything so the sisters (almost unanimously) decide to pool their resources for her. Taking advantage of the rare occasion of sisterly togetherness Jo convinces them all to help her act out the next part of the story she is writing – one day she dreams of being a novelist herself. As the story progresses Jo's story takes over her words and deeds, not always to the best effect and so when a devastating action by one of the sisters turns her world upside down maybe it is for the better – Jo, lovely as she may be, does have a few lessons to learn, as do they all.

Sophie McKenzie has captured the romance, the exuberance and the spirit of the original story yet she has given it a modern setting and a very wide appeal for a modern audience. *Becoming Jo* is certain to capture hearts and minds, demonstrating that stories are timeless. Another classic?

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Burning**

Laura Bates, pub. Simon & Schuster

For fifteen-year-old Anna leaving her home in the bustling city of Birmingham and moving to Scotland is a huge upheaval. She is still grieving after losing her dad to cancer, is in the middle of her GCSEs and has never even seen her new house or visited her new school. Officially, the sudden move is because Anna's mum has been transferred through her job in the NHS. But Anna is leaving behind a terrible secret and running from a past she and her mum hope will never find them in the tiny fishing village of St Monans.

Desperate for a fresh start Anna is convinced that her secret is safe as nothing can link her to her past life and the 'incident' which forced her to run from everything she knew. But just as she starts to make friends the whispers start, followed by brutal bullying and Anna knows she is about to relive the nightmare all over again.

*The Burning* is a powerful exploration of how exposed we are in the world of social media, a world which knows no geographical boundaries. Anna can run but she cannot hide from a past posted on the internet which cannot be buried, and which continues to haunt her. Bates cleverly plays with this idea as she intertwines Anna's story with that of Maggie, a young woman living in St Monans hundreds of years ago who was accused of witchcraft. Both Anna and Maggie are vilified by their

communities in a way which highlights how sexist attitudes to women have changed little since the Middle Ages. Whilst the barbaric practice of burning women at the stake for falling pregnant out of wedlock would be condemned in our modern world placing Maggie's story alongside Anna's serves to highlight the frightening hypocrisy and embedded gender stereotypes and misogynist attitudes which are still apparent today.

Although, ultimately, *The Burning* is a celebration of female empowerment and young women taking control of how they are viewed possibly equally important is Bates' exploration of other modern issues. The impact of online bullying is tackled as is the need to react against inertia and the anonymity which allows vitriolic online attacks to go unchecked.

Perhaps one reservation is the portrayal of the male students as collectively complicit in the persistent sexualisation of female students other than the lone voice of Robin who is condemned by his fellow students for speaking up for Anna. Whilst I agree that tackling the 'pack' mentality is vital in instigating change it is also important to acknowledge that not every boy is part of the pack. On the cover of *The Burning* acclaimed YA author Holly Bourne adds her endorsement saying: 'This is a book teen girls NEED to read.' I agree. But it is also important to get these messages out to boys too.

**Anja Stobbart**

## **The Closest thing to Flying**

Gill Lewis, pub. Oxford Children's Books

When Semira comes across an unusual looking hat on a market stall she feels drawn to it, amazing even herself when she purchases it and carries it (in its original hat box) home. Once home Semira is swiftly reprimanded for wasting valuable money by the man who helped she and her mother leave their home country and come to live in England. When the hat box gets damaged during their ensuing argument it reveals something hidden inside it and Semira discovers a diary, belonging to a girl called Henrietta who lived a century ago.

*The Closest thing to Flying* then goes on to tell us the story of both girls' adventures with alternate chapters for each of them. Whilst Semira lives in the modern day, dealing with the daily struggles faced by an immigrant such as bullying and starvation, Henrietta lived in a period of history when women had no value, with all control and responsibility going to males. Henrietta is lucky though, she gets to meet other women who are determined to see this change.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the two girls' perspectives on their worlds and being able to understand their differences and their similarities, such as the struggle to be accepted, whether that is as a female or an immigrant.

I particularly enjoyed the link Gill Lewis makes between the girls who both have a passion for cycling, as it enabled us, the readers, to share their initial experiences with a bike and it also depicts the sense of freedom both characters felt when riding a bicycle. This so vividly and truly immersed me in such a poignant moment for each of them as freedom is so important.

*The Closest thing to Flying* is an ideal class read or title to enjoy within a book group, this is a truly beautiful story featuring two strong willed, rebellious female characters intent on embracing change.

## **Samantha Thomas**

### **Colour Me In**

Lydia Ruffles, pub. Hodder Children's Books

Arlo is nineteen, a successful TV actor with a promising career ahead of him. But his mental health is fragile and a sudden and tragic bereavement sends him spiralling into darkness. Arlo gets on a plane and disappears to a far-off country (it is not given a name). Following his arrival in this new place Arlo meets Mizuki, who is also far from home. They strike up a friendship and travel on together, each struggling with painful memories of loss and abandonment. Gradually, friendship starts to grow into something deeper – until Arlo's inability to trust parts them.

Lydia Ruffles deftly explores the silent pain of a generation growing up with societal pressure to be someone- anyone - other than their true, vulnerable selves. Cities and landmarks are never mentioned by name, although it's possible for the reader to guess. The places Arlo and Mizuki seek out are abandoned, forgotten structures; once vibrant hubs of activity but now decommissioned and abandoned. This landscape of displacement and decay quietly emphasises the disconnection and isolation from the world that has led to Arlo and Mizuki needing to escape. The characters are sensitively drawn and their vulnerabilities realistically portrayed.

It's a dark tale but not without warmth and humour. There is no conventional tick-box ending but ultimately, this is a story suffused with hope and energy.

## **Yvonne Coppard**

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

### **The Colour of Shadows**

Phyllida Shrimpton, pub. Hot Key Books

Whilst researching for an A-level project seventeen-year-old Saffron discovers a secret, one that changes both her past and her future. Ten years ago, she was told that her mother had died, however

Saffron learns that her mother is alive and that her father has been lying to her. Angry at her father Saffron goes off in search for the truth about what happened to her mother. However, things don't go the way she plans and soon Saffron is homeless and alone.

*The Colour of Shadows* was an emotional, heart-wrenching read that had me welling up on more than one occasion. The way that the issue of homelessness was tackled was outstanding and you really got to experience the gritty side to it. Nothing was glamorised and you could tell that a lot of research and work was put in to make it just right. As well as homelessness the book also took on topics such as alcoholism, drug abuse and grooming. Again, these were tackled in an appropriate way and I don't know how anyone else will feel, but as soon as I finished the book I had a new perspective on all of the issues mentioned.

The plot itself was very easy to follow and took place over the course of a week which I felt was the right amount of time to get Saffron's story out. The story itself is told as a split narrative by Saffron, herself and from Saffron's nineteen-year-old friend Tom. I love reading different perspectives within novels and this was no exception. Reading two different points of view about the same situation is always eye opening. I must admit though that I did like Tom's parts just a little bit more than Saffron's. That's not to say that her parts weren't great.

The only negative thing that I found with *The Colour of Shadows* was that Saffron was a hard character to like. I found her to be very self-centred, self-absorbed and highly materialistic. If she'd only taken the time out to listen to her father and see his point of view instead of overreacting at the first sign of trouble then the story could've taken a different turn. However, come the end of the story I found myself warming up to her as she did start to realise her mistakes and I felt that the ending for her was justified.

*The Colour of Shadows* is a hard hitting, powerful, wonderfully written book. The powerful themes within it make it stand out and will have you seeing those said issues in a completely different light.

Trust me.

**Amy Rush da Silva**

## **Courting Darkness**

Robin LaFevers, pub. Andersen Press

Rules are made to be broken, especially when it is the person who set them breaking them! Well that is what I have told myself as I am breaking one of my own rules with this review ... *Courting Darkness* is the fourth book in the *Fair Assassin* series and as a rule we don't usually review books in series after book one ... BUT ... this book could stand alone or it could be read within its sequence and it is

just so very good I have to share it, I have to encourage many readers to get themselves a copy and immerse themselves in the world of medieval France, a France teetering on a knife edge, a France not as we know it but as a series of kingdoms whose closeness, whose rivalry hangs in the balance.

The story continues apace yet at the same time a new reader could come to this book and feel they can follow the story – just enough back story is provided that those familiar with the series will not be bored and those new to it will know exactly what is going on and begin to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

Alternately told through the eyes of Genevieve and Sybella this is a story of passion – love and hate. It is a story of battles – of the heart, of wills and of armies.

Sybella is probably the most gifted of all Death's daughters, a skilled fighter and a woman with a very strong passion. She must serve her Duchess, the soon to be new Queen of France, protect her young sisters, nurture and understand a blossoming love and uncover, from their secret hiding places, her fellow assassins who may have been too long now enjoying the pleasures of courtly life.

Genevieve has been under cover in court for so long now that she has lost sight of what it is she's fighting for. She needs direction but she does not know where to look for it. A mysterious prisoner deep in the dungeons of the castle may hold the key to helping her but only if she can accept her fate is tied up with his, if she can begin to understand the gift that she was given by Death himself and if she can keep her head and her wits about her for long enough.

Powerful story telling weaving myth with fantasy action and adventure this is a book that it is truly impossible to put down. LaFevers has her reader hanging on every word and renders them almost breathless.

Am I forgiven for breaking the rules? I do hope so, for I have done it to follow in the footsteps of these strong women and introduce you to an outstanding author.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Devoted**

Jennifer Mathieu, pub. Hodder Children's Books

*Devoted* is the story of Rachel, daughter in a large religious family in the States. Her family have renounced the world; their lives are devoted to Jesus, to God and to their church. Rachel accepts her life without question, the Sundays at church, the helping to care for her younger brothers and sisters, her modest clothing, the poverty. She doesn't, however, completely accept her future as an obedient wife and mother of many children. She looks at her older sister, who already has a child, and fears her

duty. She is also a reader, a dreamer and is clearly intelligent. She helps her father run his business from a home computer and the basic education she has been allowed has not entirely satisfied her.

The next alarm signal for Rachel is a young man in the community who has been sent away to a cure camp – ‘Journey of Faith.’ The story opens with his, embarrassed, awkward return, as he stands burning with shame before the congregation. Rachel tells us that a couple of teens are sent to this gruelling camp every year or so. It inspires enough fear in the others to keep them in line.

I was really excited to review this novel, as religious brainwashing of young people and their escape from it is always a fascinating topic to someone who grew up with *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Mathieu spends a great deal of time showing Rachel in her everyday life, and how accepting she is of it. And that makes it hard to understand her sudden decision to break away from it. Lauren, who inspires her to flee, isn’t someone she knew well before she left the church. There is a discomfort that builds and builds during the story as it seems inevitable Rachel will be caught communicating with Lauren. It feels so unlikely that she will have the courage or the means to break away from her family.

There are some scenes that are truly heart breaking and believable, especially later in the story. The relationships feel very real. While not quite the feminist power-read it was billed to be, *Devoted* is an absorbing tale and the reader is rooting for Rachel to escape and live the life she chooses.

### **Marie-Louise Jensen**

Marie-Louise is the author of historical fiction for teens, such as *The Girl in the Mask* and of short novels for younger readers.

### **Enchantée**

Gita Trelease, pub. Macmillan Children’s Books

Camille and Sophie Durbonne are teenager sisters living in Paris on the cusp of the French Revolution. They live in poverty with their brother Alain, a drunkard and a gambler. Their parents died of smallpox six months before the opening of the book.

Their mother had a talent. She called it ‘ordinary magic’. She could turn objects temporarily into different objects. Camille has inherited this ability. She turns fragments of scrap metal into coins to gain a precarious living. Their mother had another skill termed ‘the glamour’. She could turn herself temporarily into someone else. It requires huge energy to exercise this skill.

After Alain has behaved violently, Camille decides to use the glamour to visit Versailles, where she will gamble. She transforms herself into the wealthy and aristocratic Baroness de la Fontaine. The novel poses the questions whether Camille can succeed in this impersonation and if so, at what cost?

Trelease's novel might be viewed as a retelling of the Cinderella story. There is a good deal of similarity. The reader becomes genuinely invested in the story of the young sisters. The reader's engagement with this long book (nearly 500 pages) demands sustained interest. At points the engagement of this reviewer did tend to flag. An editor might have sustained the pace. On the whole however interest is maintained, and an informative light shed on a period of history neglected in most curricula.

## **Rebecca Butler**

### **Five Feet Apart**

Rachael Lippincott with Mikki Daughtry and Tobias Iaconis, pub. Simon & Schuster

Stella and Will are opposites. She's a rule-keeper who likes lists and micro-managing every aspect of life she possibly can; he's a rebellious poor little rich guy. When they first meet, the sparks that fly are antagonistic rather than romantic, though it's obvious they are in fact Made For Each Other. So far, so rom-com. In fact, the novel – yet another U.S. import, at a time when it would be great to see homegrown YA being better supported – is the novelisation of a forthcoming film.

But Stella and Will have something bigger to contend with than how to fill the pages with wit and kooky misunderstanding until the happy ending. Both are living with the life-limiting condition Cystic Fibrosis, and they meet in hospital. And lest you think we're simply in that other genre, the sick kids love story, it's more complicated: Will is suffering from an infection exposure to which could kill Stella and certainly jeopardise her chance of the lung transplant which is her only hope. They fall for each other, but they can't touch; in fact they have to stay six feet apart at all times.

So the stakes are pretty high. The novel certainly shows its film-script origins – most of the scenes are very visual, almost set pieces: expect snow and fairy lights juxtaposed with medical emergencies. However, it's a smart, thoughtful and genuinely moving read. For both characters – it's a dual narrative – there's more going on than the illness/love story.

I started the book rather cynically but I was sucked in by the likeableness of the characters and a genuine concern for how their unusual love story might end.

I can certainly imagine teen readers falling in love with this book.

And yes, I might well go and see the film.

## **Sheena Wilkinson**

## **The Haven**

Simon Lelic, pub. Hodder Children's Books

With the strapline of: 'Our city. Our secret. Our rules' - I was intrigued from the start. The story follows Ollie Turner, whose life gets changed completely when he and his guardian are kidnapped in the middle of the night. The reader goes on the journey with Ollie as he runs for his life, meeting several memorable characters along the way. A whole new world is discovered under the streets of London and an organisation that try to save kids, but the twist is that The Haven is run by kids for kids.

I didn't spot the immediate connection to *Oliver Twist*, but once Dodger was introduced I began to notice the character names were reminiscent of Charles Dicken's characters. It was interesting to adapt Sikes into a female character and she is just as vicious as the original Sikes. Even down to Bullseye, who even as a different breed of dog was still menacing.

This would make an ideal read aloud book for Year 6 or 7. Although it is being marketed as 11+ I think that mature Year 6s of both sexes would enjoy it. It's an exciting read and most chapters end on a cliffhanger. I didn't spot the traitor among Ollie's friends, but it would be interesting to ask students to play detective and guess who the saboteur is from the clues given by the author.

For any KS3 students studying *Oliver Twist*, it would be a good text to compare as it is a much more modern interpretation of some of Dicken's characters. The fast pace also makes it very readable and more accessible to lower ability readers.

I hope this will be the 1st in the series because it's an ideal book to recommend to reluctant readers. The themes it covers include: gang culture, friendship, romance, betrayal, family, identity, grief and belonging. It's an enjoyable read and not everyone escapes. Highly recommended.

## **Sophie Castle**

### **Internment**

Samira Ahmed, pub. Atom

Very much a novel to fit the times we regrettably live in, *Internment* is set 'fifteen minutes in the future' in a non-inclusive United States that we can easily imagine may indeed be imminent.

An Islamophobic President and his administration, insistent that all the country's ills derive from its Muslim population, has imposed an escalating series of restrictions on them, starting with enforced registration, through book-burning, immigration bans and finally internment of all Muslims. There have been a few Muslims who evaded being sent to the camp (Mobius) particularly if they look white,

but apart from those, within its electric fences it holds people of all ages and from a multiplicity of backgrounds, segregated in mobile homes arranged in ghettos according to their occupants' ethnic origin. Each ghetto is overseen by complicit Muslims who enforce the rules around assembly and curfew, and the entire camp is overseen by CCTV, even in the mobiles, and by drones, and guarded by armed military.

Layla is seventeen, and she, together with her parents, has been interned, leaving behind her Jewish boyfriend, David. Distraught at being unable to contact him, she receives help from an unexpected quarter and, together with internees young and old, embarks on an attempt to rebel against the psychopathic Director (a noxious little man, whose character is not unlike a vicious version of the Wizard of Oz!), inform the outside world of the reality inside this supposed show camp, (its motto is Unity. Security. Prosperity.) and set the internees free.

Ahmed's portrayal of her main characters, particularly Layla, is compelling and convincing, and will undoubtedly engage teenage readers. But the strength of the book lies in its parallels particularly with memoirs from those who were deemed undesirable during the extremist political situation in Europe in the 1930s and 40s. Michael Gruenberg's outstanding memoir *Somewhere There is Still a Sun* (Aladdin, 2017) is the deeply moving diary of a boy's four years in the Nazi show camp Terezín (Theresienstadt) in Czechoslovakia, and provides a chilling parallel record of the inhumanity which continues to arise from intolerance and hatred of the 'Other'.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Joe Quinn's Poltergeist**

David Almond, illus. Dave McKean, pub. Walker Books

Davie doesn't know if he should believe his friend Joe Quinn's stories of a poltergeist in his house. Joe Quinn has told so many fantastical stories in the past that no one knows when he is telling the truth. Not knowing whether to believe seems to be the beginning of Davie's journey down a rabbit hole.

The story is set in the middle of the school summer holidays, an oppressively hot and seemingly stifling tedious summer with little to do. There is a retrospective feel to the story. It feels as if it is set perhaps sometimes in the 1980s: there are vinyl records and housing estates with open doors, occupied by mums serving chips and buttered bread.

Davie is the main character in David Almond's story. Davie's head is full of romantic thoughts about Josephine Minto, questions about religion and what he should believe. His questions are unanswered by the adults around him including the new priest on the brink of lapsing, and conversation with his mother about his dead sister, Barbara, is halting. There seems to be no anchor to reality and

uncertainty seems to give opportunity for wild imagination. Cups are thrown, plates smash against walls and glass is broken. Somehow Davie must make sense of it all.

Dave McKean's illustrations are incredible, using a variety of techniques to present the story. There are splashes and opening/closing transitions, such as Joe Quinn's dream sequence. He also uses standard comic book frames but is creative in the use of borders. For example, on one double spread the frames are in the shape of midget gems that had fallen onto grass, and in another instance the silhouette of Davie's face is the border, placing him outside the frame looking in. Finally, there are tiers, singular rows of panels, often spreading across a double page with the story in accompanying text boxes. Moreover, Dave McKean's illustrations vary between realism and gestural. Overlays, using different palettes at different points in the story from the greens used in the park to the sepia tones inside the houses. The colours also convey the mood of the scene, such as the contrasting reds and blues, showing Joe Quinn laughing when his sister died, like a demented clown.

Together David Almond and Dave McKean weave a tense, psychological story of a teenager searching his soul for answers to the past and hope for a future.

## **Simon Barrett**

### **Kick the Moon**

Muhammad Khan, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Protagonist Illyas faces many challenges. He has GCSEs at school. He is small for his age. His father constantly tells him to "man up". There is pressure too for him to join the family business. He is compelled to be a member of the DedManz gang. He is helped at first by unlikely friend Kelly Matthews, but she then also gets drawn into the world of DedManz and becomes the girlfriend of bad boy Imran. However, Illyas's greatest interest is in creating a comic book with an inspiring superhero character.

The novel ends on an optimistic note though the reader is left to decide what happens next.

Muhammad Khan presents us with some believable rounded characters. Some of the dialogue is impressive and really captures the voices of the struggling teenagers. However, at times the words and thoughts seem far too sophisticated for the young people here. Illyas quakes inside but speaks out aggressively and at times philosophically.

Illyas's relationship with Kara and Kelly is not sexual but Kelly and his sister are sexually exploited. We watch Illyas grow and acquire a little more confidence. This growth, the references to sexuality and the somewhat open end make this suitable for young adults. Illyas is however quite naïve so the text would also be suitable for younger teens.

## **Gill James**

Gill James' *Clara's Story. A Holocaust Biography* is published by Chapeltown Books.

## **Marly's Ghost**

Devid Levithan, illus. Brian Selznick, pub. Egmont

Ben's life is devastated by the loss of his girlfriend Marly. As Valentine's Day approaches Ben becomes increasingly cold and resentful. Turning his back on his friends he becomes 'as solitary as an oyster' until Marly's ghost arrives and Ben is forced on a very unusual journey accompanied by three even more unusual spirits. Travelling through Valentines past, present and future Ben learns a little about love and a lot about life.

*Marly's Ghost* has been described as 'a remix of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* with a Valentine's twist and the Levithan magic. The author wrote *Marly's Ghost* with a copy of Dickens' novel on his lap, translating it line by line. And it shouts!

Although much is entirely new, many of Dickens' original lines appear verbatim and though it takes a while to get used to his words being spoken by modern, teenage characters, Levithan has twisted them so cleverly, it is nothing short of genius.

The illustrations in *Marly's Ghost* are also direct adaptations from the original and they are just as skilfully remixed as the text.

Modern characters and setting both juxtapose and meld perfectly into Dicken's classic to create something intriguingly new yet comfortingly familiar. I loved it.

## **Abby Mellor**

## **Nowhere on Earth**

Nick Lake, pub. Hodder Children's Books

I went into *Nowhere on Earth* not really knowing what to expect (as very little is revealed in the books description) but hoping that the book would live up to its captivatingly whimsical cover. For me, it did, and it didn't.

What begins as a very ominous story of survival – a plane crash in the snowy Alaskan wilderness – quickly turns into an unexpectedly intriguing thriller when men in white begin hunting the main protagonists, sixteen-year-old Emily and her younger brother, Aidan. Why are Emily and Aiden on

the run? Why are they being hunted? Will they survive? Are just a few of the questions that ran through my mind as this epic story began to evolve. However, Nick Lake was quick to create a story that I was far from anticipating.

Without giving too much away, as the unknown element is a great allure of the book, *Nowhere on Earth* makes for a tense, fast-paced, 'out of this world' read, and one, which Hodder has deemed perfect for fans of *Stranger Things*. Lake's writing is real and raw, and his ability to explore complex issue based around science yet effortlessly diffused with emotion is rare.

Whilst the book's cover and pitch were targeted more towards YA, I personally felt at times the writing came across younger despite Emily being sixteen. But in this sense it makes a great book for teens transitioning over from middle grade books.

Overall, I can't help but think of the different paths Lake could have explored after the initial plane crash, and I must admit that if I had known about the crucial plot of the book then I probably wouldn't have picked it up. However, the underlying messages of love, humanity and empathy offer a necessary reflection on our current society, and it was refreshing to see such an intelligent and strong-minded female at the forefront of this typically male dominated genre.

I have no doubt that this book will captivate the hearts and minds of many readers.

**Fern Tolley**

## **Paper Avalanche**

Lisa Williamson, pub. David Fickling Books

This is a deeply engaging and emotional YA novel from Lisa Williamson, who won the Waterstones Children's Book Prize for *The Art of Being Normal* in 2016.

Ro Snow is a 14-year-old, trying to hide in plain sight to escape the consequences of her home life being discovered. She lives with her failing club singer mother, Bonnie, who is a compulsive hoarder. Bonnie fills the house with paper and bulk purchases until the only spaces are Ro's own locked bedroom, white and minimalist, and the narrow avenues between the stacks.

Forced to manage the household finances and an increasingly incapable Bonnie, Ro's life is very different from her peers and there is no help from her father who has saved himself, escaping into a ready-made new family. As their home teeters on the brink of collapse, Williamson gives a compelling portrait of the mingled love and frustration of living alone with a parent in the grip of a mental health crisis.

Into this tense situation comes Tanvi Shah – a girl back from a year fighting cancer and almost inexplicably determined to be Ro’s best friend - and Noah - a boarding school boy moving in next door whose empathy tempts Ro to risk a connection. Tanvi is a wonderful, ebullient character who crowbars her way into Ro’s world, opening an outlet for Ro to shine. But these two links are threats as well as lifelines in Ro’s carefully camouflaged life.

I was immersed and filled with desperate hope reading this novel – rooting for Ro and deploring the selfishness of her parents as they fail her. It is a beautifully written tale of Ro’s frustrating journey to a realistic but uplifting ending. I am looking forward to seeking out Williamson’s other writing.

**Saira Archer**

### **Proud. Stories, Poetry and Art on the Theme of Pride**

with contributions from 12 authors and illustrators, ed. Juno Dawson, pub. Stripes Publishing

A very welcome anthology of a dozen short pieces covering the everyday highs and lows of life as part of the rainbow community that is youth Pride. Juno Dawson is well known as an award-winning author of a dozen YA novels (and a Doctor Who spin-off) and has used her expertise to select material from both established and new writers and illustrators who are themselves LGBTQ+, and whose work spans that spectrum. Two-thirds of the book is short stories, with poems heading and closing the collection, and a longer, blank-verse/stream of consciousness poem/memoir, *As the Philadelphia Queer Youth Choir Sings Katy Perry’s ‘Firework’* making a third. Because the characters are all teenagers there is a focus on the difficulty of ‘coming out’ to parents and peers, but also to themselves, discovering who they really are, and striving to become that person with pride and happiness. Throughout the book the overwhelming emotion conveyed is one of pride, a determination amongst the characters to be true to themselves, and to their feelings, and to create a world where they exist on equal terms.

The stories are mostly set in the modern world in the UK and Ireland, but debut writer Cynthia So’s *The Phoenix’s Fault* and Fox Benwell’s *The Courage of Dragons* venture into gaming and fantasy. Among others, Simon James *Green’s Penguins* is a wonderfully funny situation comedy, but there are also stories which reflect the heartache which is so often the precursor to the pride in being free to be proud of who you really are.

Dawson’s powerful Foreword puts the LGBTQ+ scene into focus historically. She shows just how far things have come thirty years since the era of over-exaggerated scare stories about AIDS and Thatcher’s appalling Section 28 legislation. The legislation effectively withdrew any ability to publicly support those young people who had LGBTQ+ uncertainties added to the already fraught issue of being an adolescent. Hopefully those cruel days are behind us, never to be allowed to return, and

Proud confirms that our society has gone a long way towards a more mature understanding and celebration of difference.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Rayne and Delilah's Midnite Matinee**

Jeff Zentner, pub. Andersen Press

Originally, Delilah was going to host a TV show with her best friend Jesmyn, but she moved to Nashville, leaving Josie to fill her shoes. Josie's ambition is a dream career on mainstream TV with her flawless teeth, long honey-blond hair and Scarlett Johansen voice, but she knows absolutely nothing about horror movies. In contrast, Delilah is a horror movie fanatic but lousy at TV. Together they make a great team. Every Friday night they become Rayne Ravenscroft and Delilah Darkwood hosts of their own public access TV show, Midnite Matinee, on the local cable station TV Six. They dress as vampires, perform crazy stunts involving skeleton raves and dog weddings, they show low budget horror movies which used to belong to Deliah's dad and roast viewers letters about the show with the help of their trusty puppet, Frankenstein W. Frahn-ken-shteen.

Written in two voices - Josie and Delilah's, the theme of this novel forms a loyalty and friendship versus following your dreams split. Josie and Delilah are at a crossroads in their lives. It is their last year at school and they have some big decisions to make. Delilah is searching for her Dad who walked out on her and her mum ten years ago. Her last connection to him are the horror movies they show on Midnite Matinee, which they used to watch together before he left. She has hired a private investigator to find him. She believes, if Midnite Matinee becomes a success, her dad might see it and get in touch, that Josie won't leave for university and they will get experience on the national Food Network.

Josie is torn between staying and pursuing her television dreams in a new city. Meeting Lawson, one of the show's guest performers, a talented MMA fighter with weaknesses for pancakes, fantasy novels, and Josie, is making her tough decision even harder.

Jeff Zentner's snappy dialogue is brilliant. He epitomises the character's quirks and idiosyncrasies perfectly. I laughed out loud several times, especially at the idiot twins, Colt and Hunter McAllen who only have a bit part, but in my opinion deserve their own book.

The story gallops full speed ahead in an eclectic mix of narrative, emails, texts and letters that conveys a realistic picture of society today and how social media and instant communication rules over our lives.

A fun read that encompasses all the twists and turns of modern family life in a small American town.

**Anita Loughrey**

## **Scavengers**

Darren Simpson, pub. Usborne

This is the story of a young boy called Landfill who lives with Babagoo, an older man who has raised him from a baby within a disused plot of land and outbuildings that they have built up. There are walls to protect them from the outside world and they live on allotment vegetables and freshly caught seagull.

In order to ensure their survival Babagoo has a set of rules that must be followed but as Landfill starts to grow up he becomes more curious about what lies beyond the walls that have always surrounded him and is determined to find out – even if it means breaking the rules!

The suspense and curiosity raised by not knowing the reason as to why Babagoo is so fearful of the outsiders makes this a compelling read and this story portrays the relationship between the man and boy beautifully as they have their own special way to greet each other and communicate via very simplistic language. This aspect of the story gives the reader an appreciation of what is really important in life.

I thoroughly enjoyed becoming more immersed within the pages of this book, learning about what a day in the life of a Scavenger involves. At the same time, as the details of the story are gradually revealed the book kept my interest through to the end, curious as to how the story would conclude. Scavengers would be a brilliant addition to any library, and I would definitely recommend this book to 11-year-olds and over, particularly those who enjoy adventure stories with a greater depth.

**Samantha Thomas**

## **Thirteen Doctors 13 Stories**

with contributions from 13 authors, pub. Penguin Random House & BBC Children's books

*Thirteen Doctors 13 Stories* is a collection of thirteen short adventures starring each of the Doctors and their companions, written by a 'Who's Who' of young adult fiction writers. This collection of stories was first published in 2013 as *Eleven Doctors 11 Stories*, re-published in 2014 with an additional story about Peter Capaldi's twelfth incarnation as the Doctor and now the thirteenth Doctor played by Jodie Whittaker. Naomi Alderman takes on the mantle of writing the thirteenth story when mysteriously everyone has forgotten the year 2004 on Earth.

Each story is classic *Doctor Who* in which the Doctor and companions must solve a mystery that threatens entire civilisations, if not the entire universe! The adventures feature some of the Doctor's greatest foes with twists, including the Archons in Michael Scott's visit to *The Nameless city* and peace-loving Daleks in Malorie Blackman's *The Ripple Effect*. As well as this the Doctor has to deal with other Time-Lords: The Master and Rani. London features in many of the stories, but there are also stories from across the Doctor Who universe, including an orbiting tree from the Hegelian Structure in Philip Reeve's *The Roots of Evil*, a world of the Troubleseekers books by Annette Billingsley and of course stories across time from the very beginning of time and space itself in Neil Gaiman's *Nothing O'Clock*, to ancient Babylon and Earth's twentieth century. Naomi Alderman's story finds the Doctor caught between the British Museum, 28 April 2019 and the National Air and Space Museum, Washington DC, 2004, a web of deceit and a web of moths from Exabin Seven that might be flesh eating.

Each author brilliantly captures the distinctive characters of the various incarnations of the Doctor and some of his/her most-loved companions, such as Susan, the Doctor's Granddaughter in Eoin Colfer's *A big hand for the Doctor*. Doctor Who fans will no doubt enjoy the caricature and perhaps comment on their faithfulness to the original characters. Some of the stories also allow for a greater emotional exploration of the relationship between the Doctor and other characters including companions, often notably in a companion's absence, such as Holly Black's *Lights Out*, when Peter Capaldi's Doctor buys a coffee for Clara Oswald and discovers a murderer on the loose. Above all however the stories are brilliantly conceived, expertly written adventures in miniature that are thoroughly enjoyable and pure escapism.

## **Simon Barrett**

### **The Turnaway Girls**

Hayley Chewins, pub. Walker Books

*The Turnaway Girls* tells the story of life in Blightsend, where girls who turned away from their reflections as babies are handed over as infants to live in the cloister, a place hidden from the sea and sky. Here the girls are expected to turn music into gold with their hands. The music belongs to the masters, the best of which are rewarded every twelve years, with each choosing a Turnaway Girl to make gold for them personally. Those girls who aren't fortunate enough to be picked remain confined within the walls of the cloister. *The Turnaway Girls* focuses on the story of Delphernia Undersea, one of the girls who has spent all twelve years of her life in the cloister.

This book depicts the most breath-taking story, and as such I found that taking my time reading *The Turnaway Girls* allowed me to truly understand and appreciate the greater depth of the story that Hayley Chewins was telling.

Immersing readers into the magical world of *Cloisterwings*, *Childer-queen*, *Shimmer* and *Sea-Singer* Hayley Chewins adds a dark undertone throughout the book, this helps to transport you to a seemingly unimaginable place. By the end of the book this seemingly unimaginable place feels undeniably real and familiar...

Delphernia is a strong female lead character and her refusal to conform to society's expectations of her leaves the reader eager to see if she can overcome the challenges that lay ahead, and there are plenty of unexpected twists in her journey to carve her own destiny.

Definitely a book for 10 years of age plus and those who enjoy a literary journey of deeper comprehension, this beautifully covered book would enhance any book shelf.

## **Samantha Thomas**

### **Two Can Keep a Secret**

Karen McManus, pub. Penguin Random House

The title, *Two Can Keep a Secret*, sounds foreboding and certainly the story starts dramatically with the murder of a much-loved teacher just as Ellery and Ezra are moving to New England to live with their grandmother. Their new home, Echo Ridge is a picturesque small town in New England and as they quickly uncover, Echo Ridge has its share of secrets, what with the vanishing of high school senior Sarah Corcoran in 1995, the murder of homecoming queen Lacey Kildruff five years ago and now new turmoil.

Ellery and Ezra are forced to join their grandmother, who they barely know, after their mother is admitted to rehab for a drug addiction. The twins know little about their family, with a father they have never known, an aunt that went missing in her senior year of high school and little information from their own mother and grandmother to alleviate their concerns. As things spiral out of control upon their arrival, Ellery, who fancies herself an amateur sleuth, tries to uncover who is behind these incidents and how people may be related to the previous murders and disappearances. The author creates a great deal of suspense and certainly throws up clues that lead the reader to make assumptions, often incorrectly, about who is involved in the recent scare tactics.

Everything changes, however, with the disappearance of one of this year's homecoming queen candidates and Ellery finds her own life threatened.

Throughout the story, Karen McManus depicts the usual struggles of young people in high school – navigating sexual awakenings, school bullies and people's need to judge others. These help to alternatively lighten and heighten the unsolved mysteries, as the characters question the honesty and motives of the people around them. The adults in the story are equally, but superficially, complicated.

A quick read with a heady mix of intrigue and some clever plot twists.

## **Sheri Sticpewich**

### **Watch us Rise**

Renée Watson and Ellen Hagan, pub. Bloomsbury

Artivism. *Watch us Rise* is a celebration and a tool-kit for readers, to help them understand, appreciate, and engage with art for action toward social justice. Renée Watson and Ellen Hagan co-work to present a politically sharp and loving text that delivers into the hands of their readers jewels of lessons and examples in challenging and changing ideas and behaviours in your immediate environment. It is proper grass roots style.

When marches, demonstrations, and campaigning (think #MeToo) may appear mystified in media outlets around us today, *Watch Us Rise* unpacks what it means and what it takes to create movements, tracing the lives of two junior year high school students Jasmine and Chelsea.

Amsterdam Heights boasts acclaim as a most progressive NYC school, but the two young women find themselves having to confront racist and sexist agitation coming from both the student body and teaching staff alike. And they're not content to sit and keep quiet about it.

Using their school's pride in its collection of critical clubs and societies, Jasmine and Chelsea set up a new project to tackle the issues they face – 'Write Like a Girl' is born, a feminist blog from which grows poetry, prose, bus-stop theatre, fly-posting, spoken word, illustrations, printed t-shirts, and walk-outs. They reach out in collaboration with local bookstore Word Up, the local press, and neighbouring high schools. Jasmine and Chelsea make a buzz, with massive style, in spite of (or maybe because of) big shifts going on in each of their lives.

Embroidered with beautiful names of beautiful souls throughout – Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Frida Khalo, Margaret Atwood, to name a few – *Watch Us Rise* features a comprehensive directory of signposts, reading lists, and links to further radical education on intersectional feminism at the back pages. It makes accessible a rich heritage of solidarity and a struggle to those who might be yet without fellow warriors.

Jasmine, Chelsea and friends question their own decisions and directions as well as applying theoretical critical thinking to what they see around them day-to-day: Watson and Hagan, while navigating some seriously disturbing historic and contemporary material, do a grand job in putting forward a change-making approach that has integrity, is nuanced, outspoken, and is ultimately about the act of love. Nice work.

Find both Watson and Hagan on lively Twitter pages, or at their respective websites:  
<http://www.reneewatson.net/> and <http://www.ellenhagan.com/>

## **Amy Grandvoinet**

### **Whiteout**

Gabriel Dylan, pub. Red Eye

*Whiteout* is Gabriel Dylan's 359-page debut novel. His formative reading consisted mostly of zombie comics, which accounts for the subject matter and tone of the novel. Adolescent outsider Charlie is with his school mates on a skiing holiday at Keldgallen, in the Austrian alps. There is excitement from chapter one, when as a snowboarder, Charlie defies advice and tackles a snow run on the forbidden side of the resort, with near-fatal consequences.

We are introduced fairly quickly to a large number of characters, many with two-dimensional characteristics: the bully rugby-player, Jordan, and his physically impressive mate, Ryan. A whining spoiled student, Tara. And local, Hanna, the hostile bar-girl who is their undergraduate coach Stefan's girlfriend. Mysteriously and in the face of bad weather predictions, all the villagers and teachers leave the resort overnight, abandoning the student party and Stefan.

The novel is structured around a series of attacks on the party by zombies bearing the usual attributes: exposed canine teeth, swift movement and the behaviour of predatory pack animals. Over several nights they plunder the party leaving only a handful alive to evade/defeat them. During this process, the storm howls mix with the bitching exchanges between the students. Hanna leads, driven by a desire to find how her brother died years back on the mountain. In-between the clashing, slashing and chasing, we learn more of the key characters including Charlie who is trying to live-up to the memory of his deceased father.

In small print towards the bottom of the reverse cover there is a warning in red: Not for Younger Readers. This volume joins a series of supernatural-horror novels in the Red Eye series. Following a predictable showdown dénouement, the almost total absence of redeeming goodness in the novel left me with a negative sensation. The writing is uneven and limited in its descriptive power. Yet, the brisk pace aided by short chapters and sentences will undoubtedly appeal to those readers who crave pursuit, violence and spite-driven relationships.

## **Trevor Arrowsmith**

# Non-fiction Book Reviews

## **A Day in Nature. 101 Activities Inspired by the Outdoors**

Debbie Powell, pub. Bloomsbury

Working in conjunction with the RSPB, Bloomsbury and Debbie Powell have created a handbook for nature lovers and all those who need inspiration for activities involving the outdoors.

Step outside your door – front, back or side – and say hello to nature. It is just there, waiting for you. It is waiting to welcome you and guide you, there is so much to do. In the morning for example you might want to design a nature trail which you could then follow in the afternoon. Another day think about designing some bunting for a garden party which could of course take place on yet another day. And don't forget that at night-time you can spot the constellations that dance across the sky.

There are ideas for spotting – look at the leaves on the trees, when they fall in the autumn can you match the leaves to the tree? There are games to play (perhaps if the weather is too inclement to be outside) – try the bee maze, spotting the ducks on the pond or bring out your artistic side and enjoy a colouring activity– what will your butterfly look like? Follow the instructions on the nature trail pages and remember to look for objects, sniff for scents and take care where you walk ... Collect things that have fallen but be kind to the world of nature too. Explore, learn and enjoy.

This is the perfect book for introducing young children to the wonders of nature, for encouraging them to look, smell, feel the world around them. To learn about animals, about plants and about all the wonderful life which is out there. Use it in schools, at home, in clubs. Here is a book bursting with life and with inspiration.

## **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **A Year of Nature Poems**

Joseph Coelho, illus. Kelly Louise Judd, pub. Quarto Publishing

Mother Earth paints her canvas with distinct colours each season and all creatures step up to help her with their unique talents. I see it all reflected in the award-winning poet Joseph Coelho's and folk artist Kelly Louise Judd's vibrantly illustrated poetry collection *A Year of Nature Poems*.

This Spring I invite you to wallow in this commingling of words and art - to discover each season softly, poetically, nostalgically: January brings its murmurations; February its abundant pools; March

walking hand in hand with Cordelia - the Goddess of nature; June with its solstice celebration and again the cycle goes as each month passes.

'A love letter to nature', as the author puts it - this collection will surely bring back to the surface all those pleasant memories of changing seasons - their gifts, adventures and delicacies, with a gentle plea for its preservation.

Each page is a visual and intellectual reminder of what we did, or do or know about the seasons: did you know that the detachment of leaves from branches of trees in Autumn is a process known as 'abscission'? Or how climate change is affecting the weather in Northern Hemisphere? These and many more facts are coupled with themes of celebration, sadness, childhood, fairy tales, love, death and rebirth.

Here's how the beautiful illustration of pastel hues of January with its flocks of birds has been merged with these words by the poet -

“Winter flew into spring,  
black storms colliding with hot nights.  
The murmurations twisted through one another  
winter desperate to stay,  
Spring determined to arrive.”

This book will take you on a delightful trip! Keep it as a beautiful gift for anyone who wishes to please their inner child or gift it to someone - be it a young teen or an adult - to relish in memories with each word and each sight, etched like an ornament from nature's bounty.

**Ishika Tiwari**

## **Amazing Transport. Journey through the History of Transport**

Tom Jackson, illus. Chris Mould, pub. Usborne

This is an entertaining exploration of transport history. The text by Tom Jackson provides interesting and intriguing information about the evolution of a variety of different transport types over the ages.

Who knew that the first helicopter was a toy created in China? Or that the biggest wheeled machine ever made is a digger with an engine four million times more powerful than the best racing car? Vehicles explored include not just the expected ones such as trains, aeroplanes, cars and bikes, but also rockets, hot-air balloons, submarines and tanks. Sufficient information is given to satisfy curiosity but not to overwhelm. Explanations are typically paragraphs of between fifty and a hundred words. Sentences are short and easy to understand. But the most striking and appealing aspect of the

book is its numerous detailed and quirky illustrations by Chris Mould, which bring everything vividly to life.

Heavily illustrated double-page spreads about each form of transport depict significant inventors and inventions in date order, with a timeline below. The succeeding two pages explain each element of the spreads with key pictures replicated.

A few cavils. The layout is initially confusing, though most readers will fairly quickly work it out. Some of the graphic timelines are hard to follow. There are some minor mistakes. Diesel engines do not 'choo-choo-chug along', for example. A book of this scope cannot cover everything, but a few gaps are surprising, such as the lack of any reference to electric bikes. The absence of an index page is very frustrating.

However, without doubt *Amazing Transport* will be, and deserves to be, popular. It's a fairly large book, and it's easy to imagine two or three children together poring over it and pointing out fascinating facts to each other.

## **Anne Harding**

### **Around the World in 80 Ways**

Illus. Katy Halford, pub. Dorling Kindersley

From a dugout boat to a moon buggy, find out all the ways you can travel the world in this stunning, illustrated book by Katy Halford. *Around the World in 80 Ways* explores exactly 80 different modes of transport that could take you part way around the world.

This eclectic mix of vehicles takes the reader on a fun and exciting journey through time. It is full of amazing facts about when the different types of transport were invented and by whom. This book features some highly eccentric ways of travelling that will have you laughing as you imagine yourself travelling the world on a self-balancing scooter, or on an elephant, or zooming off with a jetpack, or even on a husky dog sled.

Katy Halford's bold illustrations bring the world to life, with simplistic and entertaining details and pages full of happy smiley faces, which will keep a child entranced for hours. They will be fascinated to find out what a Gondola, Vaporetto, Maglev and a Tuk-tuk are and how cars and aeroplanes changed people's lives. This book would make an ideal addition to the class book corner, or to support a class topic on vehicles.

Although, 80 different ways of travelling sound a lot when I'd finished the book I could not help thinking about the ones that were not included and wondered at Katy Halford's reasoning for picking

the ones she did and leaving others like the International Space Station out. Maybe she plans to illustrate a sequel?

It also highlights the new trend in acknowledging the illustrator and not the writer. I was left wondering if this book was written in-house, or if they had a ghost writer.

**Anita Loughrey**

Reviewer's website [www.anitaloughrey.com](http://www.anitaloughrey.com)

**Astrophysics for Young People in a Hurry**

Neil deGrasse Tyson, ad. Gregory Mone, pub. Norton Young Readers

Neil deGrasse Tyson is an astrophysicist at the American Museum of Natural History and has written the best-seller *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*. This is an adaptation of that book aimed at young people.

*Astrophysics for Young People in a Hurry* covers the nature of space and time including concepts such as dark matter, dark energy, the space between the galaxies, the nature of light and the invisible universe.

Neil deGrasse Tyson's interpretation of the subject is relatable and written in a humorous style including stories from the author's childhood thus, at times, making it more of a memoir than a science book. This approach enables the reader to grasp complex concepts without getting bogged down in dry factual text. Every chapter is broken up by full colour photos, infographics and diagrams, and there are also extra explanations for trickier ideas such as quarks and antimatter. Fact statements in different fonts and trivia proclamations in speech bubbles break up the text further.

Whilst not a casual read, this is perfect for the budding scientist, ideal for extended reading and also for reading linked to the curriculum.

Hardback and paperback editions of this title have been simultaneously published allowing you to choose which format to buy!

**Barbara Band**

**Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species**

Sabina Radeva, pub. Puffin Books

Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was a ground-breaking work when it was published in the nineteenth century. To condense it and make it accessible to an audience of twenty-first century children is quite an achievement and it is one that Sabina Radeva has can claim.

The significance of this work should not be underestimated, it is as relevant today as it was when it was first published. Reading this book will introduce children (and quite likely a few adults too) to the amazing theory of evolution. Readers of all ages can discover just how every variety of life on the planet fights for its survival every day. From the smallest of bacteria to the tallest of trees Darwin's theories about evolution may no longer be quite so ground-breaking (science has stepped in to confirm or in some cases change the theories) but they are still relevant and useful to any students of the natural world. In fact the theories are useful to anyone who wants to understand more about the world we live in.

The accessible text and charming illustration which support it not only explain how the natural world works but show us too. Quotes from Darwin's original text are put into a simpler language:

"Every organic being naturally increases at a rate that, if not destroyed by the earth would soon be covered by the progeny of a single pair"

is wonderfully illustrated by a page of elephants, and, on the next page a bird with an insect in its beak competes with another, a snake searches for birds eggs and we are told:

"Animals compete for food and shelter – things they must have if they are able to survive and have babies. It's a struggle to live in the wild and only the best adapted will succeed"

Followed by another quote from Darwin:

"I estimated that the winter of 1854-55 destroyed four-fifths of the birds in my own grounds".

Fascinating, original and accessible this book has much to recommend it. I enjoyed learning more about Darwin and his theories as well as about the natural world around us and how it works. Children will soon find themselves engaged and engrossed too. Another book for home and school, in either setting it will find an avid and rapt audience.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Everyday Journeys of Ordinary Things**

Libby Deutsch, illus. Valpuri Kerttula, pub. Ivy Kids

We probably take for granted the processes that keep our lives running smoothly, but most everyday things, from the post to money, electricity and phone calls have been on an incredible journey before they reach us.

*The Everyday Journeys of Ordinary Things* traces those journeys with cartoon style illustrations and informative explanations of the different steps involved. These steps are indicated by arrows as progress moves across each of the double page spreads. This means that as readers we can follow a pair of jeans from the planting of the cotton seeds through manufacture of the cloth, to the factory where they are made and the arrival at a shop to be bought.

It is not however just physical items which are covered in this book; what happens when you make a phone call, log on to the internet or switch on the television are journeys that are also described.

The book is written in a lively and informal style, encouraging children to think about what happens to bring the ordinary things the book describes to us.

This is a book I can see enquiring children poring over, with plenty to keep their interest, and it may well even prompt further research of topics they may want to find out more about.

**Jayne Gould**

### **Explorer: Mammals!** and **Explorer: Plants!**

Nick Forshaw, illus. William Exley, pub. What on Earth Books

Are you ready to become an explorer? Is that a 'Yes' I hear? Wonderful. Let me introduce you to Agent Osprey, who as your guide, and as a time explorer extraordinaire, will make sure that you leave nothing to chance. She will ensure that you ask questions of everything as you set out to uncover the fascinating world of plants and learn more about the mysterious world of the animal kingdom. With fierce and friendly encounters in both books there is plenty to discover and learn plus a magnificent 1.8-metre-long timeline in each book to reinforce the learning, to use as a display, or even to test yourself with!

Nick Forshaw has created a journal for young explorers to share in. Read all about Agent Osprey's discoveries, share her questions, admire her collection of facts.

In *Explorer: Mammal!* the first thing you will learn is what a mammal is before exploring their variety from ancient to modern and not forgetting the human mammal! Discover more about their unique habitats and their extensive family types. 280 million years of mammal facts are covered in a fully accessible, fully illustrated volume. We can trace, in brief, the history of evolution and pore over detail in the scrapbook journal entries and sketches.

*Explorer: Plant!* takes the same approach, the format is identical – an illustrated journal (complete with glossary, index and fold-out timeline). This title however takes the reader back through 400 million years of history, plant history, to the Devonian period, working forward to the present day. Follow plants from spore to seed to fully grown, learn how they have evolved to be more efficient, how they are extremely intelligent and have managed to both thrive and survive the ravages of time. This volume even comes complete with a plant quiz.

A fascinating pair of books, perfect for all budding young explorers, for the classroom and for anyone with a keen interest in the natural world and its instinct for survival. Produced in conjunction with the Natural History Museum this series of books is sure to be a hit with children of all ages.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Fantastic People Who Dared to Fail**

Luke Reynolds, illus. M S Corley, pub. Simon & Schuster

Have you ever been called a loser, or been bullied, or rejected, or shamed when you've been 'unsuccessful'? You are not alone - all your role models have faced this and they have definitely faced failures, but they strove hard to be where they are now. Failure is common, as Luke Reynolds makes clear in *Fantastic People Who Dared to Fail*.

A new year, 2019, is here and Spring is the season of blossoming, developing, unleashing our powers. This book is the perfect companion to give your resolutions a boost! Beautifully inspiring, it demolishes all the myths woven around the word failure and its meaning.

The chapters are based on 65 living and non-living legends and stars, whose failures are highlighted to make their success even more luminescent and awe-inspiring: from Nelson Mandela to Malala Yousafzai; from Vincent Van Gogh to Frida Kahlo; from Seabiscuit the racehorse to La Fabricá a cement building! - each has a powerful message to contribute, to motivate us.

Did you know that renowned Hollywood director Steven Spielberg was rejected twice by film schools he applied to? Or Ilhan Omar - who became the first woman of Somali American Muslim origin to be elected as a politician - was a refugee and had escaped war? That JK Rowling - the creator of Harry Potter - had her manuscript rejected by twelve publishers consecutively before Bloomsbury published it ... These are just a small sample of the stories present in this book to humanising failure and preaching the core message of resilience.

The author, in his conversational and humorous tone, shares powerful thoughts of these winners and gives deep insights into the essence of humanity and failure as a stepping stone towards victory. For

example he uses this revelatory remark by JK Rowling - “Failure meant a stripping away of the inessential.”

The book achieves its aim well - targeted for budding youngsters, it can be read by anyone in need of a quick pep talk. I would suggest gifting this book equally to those without hope and those with many - to read one narrative a day, to imbibe the messages and to keep it as your personal coach too.

**Ishika Tiwari**

## **From Tiny Seeds. The Amazing Story of how Plants Travel**

Émilie Vast, pub. Thames and Hudson

This is a delightful account of how seeds travel and then grow into plants, from author, illustrator and photographer Émilie Vast. This edition has been translated from the original French.

Seeds go on some amazing journeys and this book shows the many interesting ways that seeds can travel. They fly, creep, spin, bounce, cling, explode, float and are eaten, buried and helped by humans. Fascinating facts are presented and illustrated in a way that can be understood and enjoyed by young readers.

The simple and basic illustrations are a delight, mostly black line drawings with the minimum of colour, but very effective. The text is also to the point and easily understood. Younger children may need some help with the more difficult words, such as the names of plants and flowers.

Some extra and interesting detail is included in the book. This includes lists of continents and countries where different plants originate from. There is also a short list of scientific names for the ways that plants spread. Difficult names, but it is always good to challenge a young reader. Finally, there is a lovely and simple little drawing naming the parts of a plant.

Adults will love the references to conkers, chestnuts and the helicopter like sycamore seeds. There are simple and basic references to the bees, ants, squirrels, birds and mice, which will delight the younger reader. There are fascinating drawings showing how berries and seeds travel through a blackbird and a mouse and how they are deposited somewhere else. All will appeal to both children and parents reading the book together.

Overall, a very simple format which is so effective. It is a pleasure to read and browse and is very educational at the same time. What I thought might be dull and uninteresting, turned out to be completely the opposite.

**Gary Kenworthy**

## **Hello Animals. How do you Sleep?**

Loes Botman, pub. Floris Books

This is the latest in a series of board books aimed at babies and pre-school children. Other titles include *Where Do You Live?* and *What Makes You Special?* This title *Hello Animals. How do you Sleep?* looks at a range of animals and considers how they sleep. So here we have, amongst others, calves curled up warm in the hay, squirrels tucked in their tails and cats cozy on cushions.

The book is an ideal size for small hands to grasp and take hold of, and at the same time it is sturdy enough to withstand the wear and tear it is certain to be given from younger readers. Each double page spread contains two animals fast asleep in similar environments, such as nests, dens and straw. There are minimal words and the animals are not named so the book presents a great opportunity for adult and child to work together in order to identify and explore each creature and what they are doing.

There is a lot of alliteration within the words which are present so that when you read the text aloud it becomes almost like a chant, very soothing and slightly compelling, and the illustrations are soft and gentle.

An ideal book to read at bedtime.

## **Barbara Band**

### **Hello Lighthouse**

Sophie Blackall, pub. Orchard Books

“On the highest rock of a tiny island at the edge of the world stands a lighthouse”

And so begins the story of the lighthouse keeper.

In this story, *Hello Lighthouse*, we learn how the lighthouse keeper polishes the lens, refills the oil and keeps the lamp in motion. One day his wife arrives to help him, and she carries on this work even when he is ill, for the light needs to shine to keep sailors safe. All this is until one day the light is replaced with a machine the lighthouse family pack their bags and leave as they are no longer needed.

This wonderful book gives the reader a glimpse into the world of the lighthouse keeper. It is a nostalgic poignant story written in expressive lyrical text and illustrated with imaginative yet realistic

images. We see the lighthouse stand against fierce storms, enveloping fog and never-ending ice whilst inside it is warm and cosy.

There is a good use of space on the page; you really do get a sense of the lighthouse isolated amidst the elements and yet there are small details to spot such as the round rugs, pictures of boats and books about whales that add a touch of humour.

Perfect to read aloud, this book also introduces you to the history of lighthouses and how jobs change over time.

**Barbara Band**

### **The Human Body. A Pop-up Guide to Anatomy**

Richard Walker, illus. Rachel Caldwell, pub. Templar Publishing

The human body is a miracle of nature and this book, intended entirely for the use for students of anatomy of course, is a guide to its intricacies. It is not for the faint-hearted because this book will take you inside the human body, to the gruesome (and amazing bits) – the blood, guts and core (to put it into child-friendly language).

Our complex bodies do everything – they move, they sense, they grow, they think. They can defend themselves, they can repair themselves. We know what they look like from the outside. We know about some of these amazing things they do. However, many of us do not really know how the body actually works. This is where the author, Richard Walker, an expert on the human body – he has also written for children *The human machine: an owner's guide and Frankenstein's body book*) – and debut book artist Rachel Caldwell provide us with all we need to know and see.

If you know a budding scientist or doctor, or any child who is not too squeamish, then this is the ideal book for them. Of course, I must say it is ideal for adults too – my first reaction was an unreserved wow! Opening the pages, seeing the paper engineering pop out at me, I was stunned and fascinated. Paper engineering is such an art but to have done it with such attention to detail – don't miss the tabs to lift for an even closer look at the frontal lobe of the brain or into the nose, then there are the flaps for the ears, ears and mouth and so it goes on.

Set in an imaginary Victorian operating theatre this is a very thorough exploration of the human body, of human anatomy. Starting with the head and its 22 bones we are given facts and explanations – there are around 80 billion neurons in the human brain alone – as well as layers to explore. Section 2 takes us to the upper body with its thorax, chest and arms and here we learn about the circulatory system. In the abdomen we learn that the Victorians discovered how the spleen was useful for

defending the body and that they first learnt if they were to drink and wash with clean water they could eliminate even more germs!

Here the book comes to a close, with a glossary and a lovely end page illustration of what I imagine a typical Victorian medicine cabinet would look like!

It is very well produced and fascinating to read and explore but my one disappointment is that they did not include another section focusing on the lower half of the body. Aside from this small disappointment it is a book I would highly recommend for children to be reading and learning from at home and at school. Adults – you may want to occasionally dip in and learn a few things too!

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **My Big Wimmelbook – Animals Around the World**

Stefan Lohr, pub. The Experiment

There are currently four Wimmel books in this series: *Animals Around the World*; *At the Construction Site*; *Cars and Things That Go*; and *On the Farm*. These large format board books open with a diverse cast of characters, both people and animals, that the reader is then invited to find on each page.

*In Animals Around the World*, each double page spread covers a different scene in which we might expect to find animals, from the forest to the plains to polar lands. Animals are shown in their natural habitats doing lots of things we would typically expect and want children, young readers, to learn about such as rearing young, making nests, flying, eating, etc.

The pages are also filled with people undertaking all sorts of activities giving readers a myriad of details to discover. Touches of humour have been introduced, such as the fisherman finding an old boot or the pirate selling ice-creams on the beach.

This title and the others in the series are fascinating and absorbing books, perfect for sharing with younger children to help language development or for older children to explore by themselves.

Apparently "Wimmel" means 'to teem' in German and these books certainly do that! There is something new to discover on every reading.

**Barbara Band**

## **My First Book of Birds**

illus. Zoe Ingram, pub. Walker Books

Most children love watching animals and one of the easiest ways for them to enjoy this is by hanging up a few well-placed bird feeders or putting out a bird table. This delightful little book encourages you, the reader, the adult, the child, to do just that and it contains information on twenty-three of the most common birds you are likely to see in a garden. Maybe in your garden.

Listed in size order according to length, each double-page spread contains a large and clear illustration of the bird in question with its name and additional details to add interest. Facts included range from the information that blue tits rarely fly more than 20km from where they hatch to the information that great tits are particularly loud singers. These facts are complemented by the “bird fact” boxes containing information about each bird’s length, wingspan, conservation status, diet and habitat as well as an illustration of its egg with size and clutch number details.

The illustrations are large and thorough making identification easy and the index serves as a spotter’s page allowing children to tick those they have seen. Together with its larger format and sturdy pages, this is an ideal introductory book for the young ornithologist.

**Barbara Band**

## **My Little Book of Big Questions**

Britta Teckentrup, pub. Prestel

My little book of big questions asks profound questions for children to ponder, reflecting upon their own experiences and observations of the world around them. The questions are intensely personal as to what I, or you, can do, think or feel, ideal for children to think about, reflect and phrase their responses.

Britta Teckentrup asks a range of big questions about life, the universe and everything, sometimes following a train of questioning across a number of pages. There are questions about a child’s place in the world: What will become of me? Am I special? -- and a child’s relationships with others: Why do we always have to argue? Will you be my friend? There are questions about the natural world: Do animals think? Is it possible to understand the whole universe?

Other questions reflect upon society, such as: Is it good to step out of line? More metaphysical questions ask: Is the world inside or outside of me? whilst there are questions to encourage children to think about thinking: If I think long and hard, will I discover the meaning of life? These are however questions for children to share with adults, encouraging a rich conversation with some answers more satisfying than others, without being necessarily definitive.

*My Little Book of Big Questions* is beautifully illustrated with one hundred pieces of original artwork by Britta Teckentrup, in typically soft hues with silhouetted design, strikingly delineated on the page, a range of different textures from solid blocks of colour to more often shading or variegated colouring is used. In addition to the aesthetic value of the illustrations they also help the reader to explore the questions. For example, one double spread shows a mirror image of a child's head, but the interior of one silhouette is an autumnal scene in shades of reds, greens and browns, whereas the other interior is a dark, coniferous forest. The question is: Why do I like a person who is completely different from myself and has completely different things in their head? The two interiors show this contrast in terms of season, flora, time of day, colours and movement in the picture. In addition, the illustrations often take a child's perspective or include elements children will be able to relate to. For instance: Will I find what I'm looking for? is illustrated with a scene showing two children, blindfolded - perhaps enjoying a child's game - with one holding a wooden spoon and an upturned saucepan in the corner; very common household objects. The artwork suggests a range of possible things a child might be looking for, from objects, to a person, or perhaps a relationship with a friend.

Britta Teckentrup is an award-winning author and artist. The publisher Prestel is a renowned art publisher. Together, author-artist and publisher have produced an accessible and appealing book that no doubt will be a much-loved book for children to peruse.

*My Little Book of Big Questions* is the English translation of Britta Teckentrup's German edition *Worauf Wartest du? Das Buch der Fragen* published in 2016.

**Simon Barrett**

## **Natural Wonders of the World**

Molly Oldfield, illus. Frederica Bordon, pub. Wren & Rook

*Natural Worlds of the World* presents thirty astonishing natural phenomena found on the Earth. It includes natural features that have taken hundreds of thousands of years to form; plants, some of which have lived for 3,000 years; colonies of animals and birds in their thousands; millions of butterflies and fish that light up. The contents page includes a world map showing where these natural phenomena can be found.

The photographs are amazing. Using a mixture of ground-level photography, close-up, distance, and aerial photography, the book showcases natural phenomena brilliantly. Moreover, the scale and size of some of these natural features is breath-taking. Some of the photographs include people, trees and animals, conveying how extensive and large these natural features are. The top of Uluru in Australia is 9.4 kilometers in diameter because most of the rock is still underground, and the General Sherman, a Giant sequoias tree in North America, stands 83 metres tall. The aerial photography is particularly stunning, but more difficult to imagine the size of. For example, the Amazon river in South America

stretches for 6,800 kilometers, 840 kilometers at its widest and around 14 million cubic metres of water flows out into the Atlantic Ocean every day. The photographs are supplemented by Federica Bourdoni's colourful illustrations, perhaps widening the appeal of the book. For me, however photographs alone are preferable in this kind of book, showing the wonder of various animals, birds and fish.

Molly Oldfield's descriptions of these natural phenomena is sublime. She captures the reader's imagination in her first sentences, describing what it must be like to see these natural phenomena for the first time and immerses you in an imagined experience of what it is to be there. She then deftly explains the science behind the phenomena, summarising up vast periods of geological time and complex processes in a straight-forward, accessible way as well as drawing out the significance and scientific importance of such species and places. Moreover she presents the human stories associated with them. There are the superstitions and myths - Fingal's Cave in Europe being built by giants. Stories of human occupation - in the Ngorongoro crater, Africa, also called the 'cradle of mankind' Lucy, the oldest human skeleton was found, (she lived around 3.2 million years ago). Molly Oldfield also documents the threat humans present to these natural phenomena and suggests how we can maintain these unique and often fragile ecosystems.

*Natural Wonders of the World* is a fascinating tour of our beautiful planet.

**Simon Barrett**

## **RHS The Magic and Mystery of Trees**

Jen Green, illus. Claire McElfrick, pub. DK & RHS

In this collaboration between the well-established publisher of non-fiction for both an adult and child audience, Dorling Kindersley, and the charity dedicated to nature, in particular plant life, the Royal Horticultural Society, we find ourselves discovering how much there is to learn about the trees that grow all around us. The trees that fill our gardens, parts, towns, cities and countryside. The trees that form woodland and forest. The trees that we wander past, wander through and so often probably take for granted. Wander with the trees again, through the pages of this book and you will not look at them the same way again, in fact you will learn to actually look at them.

To begin we learn just what a tree is – and even if you thought you knew it is good to read this page for you will learn, among other facts, that every part of a tree has to work to keep it alive. The see the map of the world, covered in trees and discover just how far and wide they spread, and how many different species there are! Learn about how they live, eat whilst at the same time providing much needed oxygen for animals and humans alike. Discover all their parts and then see how they work through the seasons of the year. Learn about their families, how and where they live – from cliff edges to grassy plains some are even fireproof!

Having spent time discovering more about the not-so-humble tree and its life the book comes to a close with a useful glossary and a fascinating list of national trees. Whilst I can see this book being perfect for the KS2 classroom where children and teachers will enjoy sharing the facts and applying them to project work, it works equally well as a fact book for libraries in any setting, including the home. For the budding nature enthusiast or the curious child (adults too) this book is easy to pick up and refer to, it tells a fascinating story, provides an endless source of fascinating facts and uses realistic, intelligent and child-friendly illustration to support. An all-round must-have.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Sensational Butterflies**

Ben Rothery, pub. Ladybird Books

If I was asked, I would say that butterflies are most certainly (along with dolphins) one of my favourite creatures. Why? It is their simplicity and beauty that captivates me. I can spend hours sitting in the garden watching them flutter about. I can equally spend hours admiring their markings and colours. It would take more than hours to see them all however for, as I have now learnt thanks to Ben Rothery, there are (along with their relative the moth) around 180,000 of these amazing creatures and they can be found across the globe.

Ben Rothery is a natural history illustrator – what an amazing job to have – and in this oversize, elegant volume he brings the natural history of the butterfly and moth to readers big and small. This is not just an illustrated volume, it is a really rather fascinating introduction to these creatures, their life-cycle and the sheer wonder of their variety.

For the novice -such as me – the introduction may contain lots of unpronounceable Latin words for the families that make up moths and butterflies – try saying Herperiidae, Lycaenidae, Nymphalidae, Papilionidae, Pieridae and Riodinidae – but there are also lots of fascinating facts about how to tell a moth from a butterfly including the different times of day they fly and why.

We are then introduced to the life-cycle, the way that the butterflies and moths eat, drink, see before meeting some of the specific species. On these pages look out for the labelled illustrations, maps showing where in the world these creatures can be found and interestingly a measure running up the sides of the pages helping readers to visualize the actual size of the creature under consideration.

There is so much more that I could write about this book, but I won't because I want you to explore it for yourselves. I want you, adults and children, to learn, just as I have, more about these magnificent creatures. Go out and get yourselves a copy of this book, it is the perfect reference for home and school, a book for the family and the classroom, a book for learning from, for sharing and for

marvelling over. Ben Rothery is clearly a highly skilled artist and his work deserves considerable attention, let us start by giving this book all of our attention!

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Silk Roads. A New History of the World**

Peter Frankopan, illus. Neil Packer, pub. Bloomsbury

The silk roads have been an important interchange for centuries. They are known as roads of exchange. Cultural exchange and the exchange of goods have happened on these roads and here, in this fabulous book we can discover more about their fascinating history.

The book is sumptuous, there is no doubt about that. A large format hardback with a soft silky-feel cover and a blue background dotted with laden camels as well as the images of cities – skyscrapers and other buildings demonstrating the different worlds at either end of and along the silk roads. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. The story of the silk roads begins in the ancient world, but also with the knowledge that these are not real roads. The term refers to the description given to trading routes, a network of people, ideas, goods and sadly disease. Frankopan describes them as the “central nervous system of the world” and just as the human nervous system is under the skin, so the real workings of these routes are under the soil, they are the inner workings of the world almost, to understand how they work they must be seen in their entirety and in context too.

Now back to the ancient world where empires ruled vast swathes of the world. The Persians were key among these groups and it was one of their kings, Hammurabi, who laid down some of the world’s oldest laws. He understood the importance not just of these laws but of connections to other peoples, other parts of the world. We are given a brief oversight of his rulership, that of Alexander the Great, the man who was to bring about considerable change in the ancient world before being taken to the next phase in the history of the silk roads, the road of faith and the development of religion.

The book continues, with a tantalizing glimpse into periods of history and their impacts on the world that are just too detailed to include in full in this book but that are treated with full respect. We are given just enough detail to ensure we understand how all these periods, people, cultures link to one another, how developments in technology, architecture, religion, adventure and more besides have carved their place in the world and made it what it is. This is the Silk Roads, this is a compact and insightful history of the world for children. This book is a phenomenal attempt to bring history to children in a nutshell and it does it admirably well for it has a very exciting story to tell.

Peter Frankopan’s text is pitched at exactly the right level for children to read and for adults to share with them. The illustrations of Neil Packer are completely captivating, bringing the words to life in full colour, vivacious as we would and do expect of these parts of the world, intricate in their detail

and capturing the vibrancy of these sweeping periods of history, complementary and certainly not dominating the text, this is a perfect marriage and a book to treasure.

## **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

### **Speak Up!**

Laura Coryton, pub. Red Shed

*Speak Up!* is a handbook for the young activist helping them to learn how to make their voices heard. The publication is timely, with increasing youth activism on a range of political and social campaigning including, in the UK, school children campaigning on climate change in February 2019. It seems there are a burgeoning number of young campaigners, fed-up with the inactivity and ineffectiveness of the political establishment, successfully calling for change.

*Speak Up!* presents a five-step toolkit, advising how to start a campaign by:

- (1) identifying your goals
- (2) finding your decision-makers
- (3) doing your research
- (4) deciding on your platform
- (5) planning your launch.

Each step has its own chapter, breaking the stages down further into easy sections with practical advice from Laura Coryton, who draws upon her own experience of successfully campaigning to abolish tampon tax, and other campaigners. (This is perhaps one limitation of the book as the author's toolkit is based on her experience and reflections on her campaign and everyday feminism. She does however try to include a breadth of other voices in youth activism.) Each chapter concludes with an 'Actions tip for Activists' summing up the main points of each step that an activist could usefully tick off when complete.

*Speak Up!* is anything but a boring manual. Laura Coryton writes passionately and optimistically, with a good dose of common sense and realism about young activism, including many messages of encouragement and practical advice on overcoming difficulties and challenges. For example, there is a significant discussion about trolling on social media, categorising different levels of trolls and in the most serious cases, involving the police. In addition, the text is accessible and communicates Laura Coryton's personality. Headings and subheadings break up blocks of text and there are text boxes, inserts and graphics that make the chapters easy to read and engaging in a cohesive orange, black and grey design.

*Speak Up!* is an essential read, waking young people up to activism and helping those who have awoken.

**Simon Barrett**

## **Stories for Boys Who Dare to be Different 2**

Ben Brooks, illus. Quinton Winter, pub. Quercus

Ben Brooks presents a second volume of inspirational stories of more than 100 boys and men who have made, or are working to make, our world a better place. The book is arranged alphabetically by first name and is therefore delightfully idiosyncratic, juxtaposing the most unlikely individuals next to one another.

Once again *Stories for Boys Who Dare to be Different 2* profiles a diverse selection of boys and men across cultures, ancient and modern: from the Great Persian King Cyrus and the ancient Greek Philosopher Socrates to Skateistan, the charity begun by Oliver Percovich in 2007 promoting skateboarding in Afghanistan and extending now to many other countries and the Lost Voice Guy comic, Lee Ridley, winner of Britain's Got Talent 2018. In addition, the book introduces famous individuals, such as the street artist Banksy and the global musical phenomenon that is Ed Sheeran, as well as individuals history might have forgotten. These include for example, Dashrath Manjhi, who, following the death of his wife after she was crossing a mountain spent twenty two years building a 360 foot long road through the mountain.

A good proportion of the stories are about activists. These are boys and men who have tackled a whole range of social and environmental issues -- child labour; conservation; education; equality; land mines; indigenous rights; mental health; workers' rights; victims of crime -- challenging and changing people's attitudes so that it might be considered irrational to somehow not support them. This includes the amazing story of Henry Dunant who, horrified by the consequences of war at the Battle of Solferino during the Second Italian War of Independence, formed the Red Cross and negotiated a series of treaties known as the 'Geneva Conventions'. Sadly, he died in poverty and alone. More recently John Wood established 'Room to Read', quitting his job at Microsoft to build schools and school libraries, donating books and helping pay for girls to go to secondary school across the world.

Each story is presented on a double spread. Ben Brooks' short, accessible biography, detailing important aspects about each boy's life, highlighting their achievements and continuing impact on the world is accompanied by Quinton Winter's full colour illustration of the person and objects or scenes pertinent to their story. There is also the possibility for readers to create their own geodesic dome of inspiring individuals, based on the invention of Richard Buckminster Fuller, a man who believed everyone was born a genius and we just need to remain dedicated to what we are most passionate about.

*Stories for Boys Who Dare to be Different 2* is a wonderful testimony to boys and men, past and present, showing us how we can change the world.

**Simon Barrett**

## **What's Going on Inside My Head?**

Molly Potter, illus. Sarah Jennings, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Molly Potter is the author of several books that deal with PSHE topics such as feelings, friendship and bereavement, and this is the latest volume in the series.

Mental health issues amongst children are increasing so it is important that we are able to talk about this topic with them and give them strategies for coping. This is a perfect book to use as a starting point for discussions with guidance for parents/carers, and its aim is to help children develop self-awareness and improve their emotional literacy.

Chapters include: What is happiness?; Dealing with positive and negative emotions; What to do when someone upsets me; Who can I ask for help; How can I be a better friend; Strategies and ideas for coping; How a healthy body can help you have a healthy mind; and Meditation. All of these are questions children will ask, either of themselves or of others and are therefore particularly usefully addressed here.

The illustrations are bright and cheerful using a diverse range of characters and are accompanied by simple explanations. There are additional tips and "good to know" boxes to explore topics further if necessary.

Not a book for children but one that parents/carers and those working with young children would find informative.

Personally I would have also liked to have seen some useful websites listed.

**Barbara Band**

## **The Woodland Trust. Nature Explorers Woodland Activity and Sticker Book**

illus. Clover Robin, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Four woodland friends, Hetty Hedgehog, Rosy Rabbit, Bobby Blackbird and Felix Fox, invite young explorers to join them on their nature adventures. Take a walk through the woodlands and see how many trees, leaves, flowers and creatures you can find.

This slim paperback volume is packed full of creative activities for children and the family to enjoy. Some of them utilize the enclosed stickers, whilst in others children are encouraged to come into contact with nature by collecting fallen leaves, twigs, pine cones and feathers to use to make collages, prints and more. There are also drawings to try, spot the difference, matching, counting and mazes to follow. In short, the book offers a wealth of opportunities for children to engage with nature in different ways and on different levels.

If adults can offer help for younger readers then this will make the perfect companion for a walk in the woods or park (it may even encourage such walks to take place as there will be activities to keep the children entertained too), opening children's eyes to the wonders of nature and keeping them absorbed for hours. There are snippets of information and fun facts throughout the book, which is a friendly introduction to a familiar habitat.

**Jayne Gould**

# Events

## The Kid who would be King

Twentieth Century Fox and Working Title Films

Written & Directed by: Joe Cornish

Release Date: 15 February 2019

On Sunday 3 February, an excited ten-year-old and I arrived in Leicester Square for the London Premier of *The Kid Who Would Be King*. Writer and Director, Joe Cornish introduced the film and the cast, followed by a heartfelt tribute by Sir Patrick Stewart to the young heroes of the film but also to young people in general who are ‘not just the future’ but will be the ‘saving of our world’.

The Legend of King Arthur has been retold in a multitude of different ways but never quite like this. Alex (Louis Ashbourne Serkis) is an ordinary kid in contemporary Britain, who only has to worry about normal things (being on time for school, homework, coping with bullies), until the day he pulls an ancient sword from a stone in a construction site and an evil force begins to stir. With some advice from a delightfully eccentric young Merlin (Angus Imrie) and older, wiser Merlin (Patrick Stewart), and support from his best pal Bedders (Dean Chaumoo), Alex must rally his knights (schoolmates) at an Ikea round table and learn how to fight according to the knight’s



code in order to defeat the sinister Morgana (Rebecca Ferguson). Former enemies unite, there’s a madcap race across the country via Stonehenge and a final epic battle, plus plenty of *Lord of the Rings* references—what more could you want?

*The Kid Who Would Be King* is an exciting adventure that the whole family will enjoy with lots of action, some humour (particularly from the scene-stealing Young Merlin) and a lot of heart. It’s also a timely contemporary fable—as much as the swords, suits of armour and fiery hell-creatures seemed incongruous, the apocalyptic news cycle definitely didn’t. These days we could all use some encouragement to stand up to bullies and unite against forces of division. The ten-year-old’s verdict on the film: amazing, thrilling, 10/10.

**Rebecca Rouillard**

## The Dragonsitter in the Land of Dragons

Josh Lacey, illustrated by Gary Parsons  
Andersen Press

Release Date: 7 February 2019

This event was extremely well attended by many of Lacey's young fans. There was a substantial queue to meet him and Garry. Many of the adult attendees said that their offspring had not been keen readers before finding Lacey's books. One, in particular, told me that her seven year old son had read seven of the ten volumes over one weekend. She knew he was alright because there were regular guffaws coming from his room.

Lacey's books are considered rare among the 5 to 8 years age range because they can be enjoyed on a number of levels and by girls as well as boys. They have been translated into thirteen languages and sold over half a million copies.

I was very taken by the humour and the pace of the story and the courage of the mother in

## A Year of Nature Poems

Joseph Coelho, illus. Kelly Louise Judd  
Wide Eyed Editions (an imprint of Quarto)

Release Date: 3 January 2019

On a particularly miserable night at the beginning of February I made my way to Kew Bookshop for the launch of Joseph Coelho's latest book, *A Year of Nature Poems*. I'd never

knowingly keeping a dragon in her house!  
Parson's illustrations add much to the



character of the dragon and to the reader's understanding of the dragon's emotions. He was as well received as Lacey by the younger guests.

This is a great addition to a series which is already loved by many and is likely to be enjoyed by many more, to judge by my impression, including adults.

### Rebecca Butler



been to Kew Bookshop before, it is right next to Kew Gardens Station and features a particularly vibrant selection of children's books—it's well worth a visit.

It's an exciting time for poetry. [According to Nielsen BookScan](#), poetry sales topped £12 million in 2018 and children's poetry must be counted a significant portion of that equation—particularly as *I Am the Seed That Grew the Tree* did so well last year. It's wonderful to see publishers like Nosy Crow and Quarto producing these stunning illustrated editions of poetry, but even better to know that people are actually buying them.

As the title suggests, the book contains an illustrated poem for each month of the year. The poems are primarily concerned with childhood recollections: pond-dipping for frogspawn, the agony of a jellyfish sting, scrumping fruit from other people's trees, and crying in a rainstorm. But these poems are more than mere nostalgia, there is also an undercurrent of sorrow—at the demise of contemporary children's exposure to and connection with nature, and the increasing loss of plant and animal species due to the destruction of their habitats.

*A Year of Nature Poems* is also a strikingly beautiful book—the front cover looks almost like a William Morris design. Kelly Louise Judd's charming illustrations have a retro appeal that perfectly complement the poetic reminiscences.

For the launch event Joseph Coelho read the first poem from the collection, 'January', which was inspired by an ancient legend of warring starlings over the city of Cork in Ireland:

*They were the Rorschach of the winter months,  
the folding of sky-shadows,  
of air-shoals pirouetting into the January nip,  
swarms riding the frosted winds,  
silently testing the sky with their ink-magic...*

It's an arresting concept and this was also my favourite illustrated spread—a host of soaring silhouettes against a backdrop of sunset sky.

At the end of the evening we all went home with a daffodil in a pot. There's something wonderfully symbolic about carrying a daffodil shoot home in the snow.

**Rebecca Rouillard**

# Laurence King Publishing

Laurence King publishing produce a range of Children's books encouraging active reading, including activity books, activity kits, colouring books, sticker books, puzzle books, games as well as practical how-to-do books. The publications also encourage families to share the love of reading by re-telling stories and playing games together. This feature reviews four recent publications by Laurence King.

*Ocean Bingo* illustrated by Holly Exley uses pictures of sea creatures instead of numbers. The tiles that are drawn out of a bag, the player bingo boards and caller's master board are robust and beautifully designed with a picture and name of a variety of different sea creatures. As a tile is taken out of the bag, players can use the picture and name to help them identify whether it is on their bingo board. This therefore makes the game accessible for the whole family, with perhaps a little grown-up help needed for the younger ones.

Concentration and listening skills are rewarded when players have fun shouting 'bingo!'

The game is well-designed with a number of different player bingo cards, so it is possible to play a number of times in succession. This repetition allows children to build up confidence in identifying and saying the names of different sea creatures. Simon and I enjoyed the game so much that we shared it with our nephews and the game is now at grandma's for family gatherings.

The instructions include further information about each of the sea creatures, allowing children to learn as they play: adults can share these facts as everyone is enjoying playing *Ocean Bingo*.

*Ocean Bingo* is one of a variety of themed bingo games published by Laurence King.

*Super Happy Families* designed by Aidan Onn and illustrated by Kirsti Davidson combines the fun of the card game Happy Families with the popular appeal of superheroes. The object of the game is to collect as many superheroes and super villains as possible.

There are 44 cards to collect and playing the game means plenty of fun plus learning. Repeatedly reading the words on the cards develops children's word recognition and memory, providing considerable educational benefits. There are some challenging tongue-twisters too. Oh, and superpowers are not required!

*Dino Domino* illustrated by Caroline Selmes is a family game for anyone aged 3 and above. Intended for two to four players, there are 28 dino dominoes with 7 different designs of prehistoric creatures to match up. The aim of the game is to simply put all your dino dominoes down first and earn the title T-Rex! The competition will be as fierce as the creatures on the cards.

Caroline Selmes designs are colourful and cute with a strong appeal to children, whilst teaching children to recognise some of the more popular dinosaurs, including the Brontosaurus, Tyrannous-Rex, Triceratops and Stegosaurus. Each design is also distinctive with a two-tone coloured background, making matching up easier for the youngest children.

The cards could be difficult for younger children to handle. Moreover the principles of dominoes may be difficult to grasp at the beginning.

The dino dominoes can be safely stored away in strong, sturdy decorated box between games.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett and Simon Barrett**

Laurence King publish a number of dinosaur themed-publications and a colours and numbers domino set.

*Fairy Tale Play: A Pop-Up Storytelling Book* by Julia Spiers encourages children to be both imaginative and creative. It provides an opportunity to play out their favourite fairy tales but at the same time create new, original stories from a variety of pop-up scenes. A child's story can dive under the ocean, step into a forest, explore a castle or delve into a dark cave.

Complete with four plays to read and act out - *The Little Mermaid, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella* or *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* – there are many tales to be told assuring hours of entertainment and story-telling.

# Tiny Tree Children's Books

Small, independent publishers are very special. Not only do they contribute to a growing market of books for children (and adults) but they provide a space for voices that may not often be heard. They are willing to take on those books which they consider important for many reasons – perhaps it is the words of the story they tell, maybe it is the illustration style, perhaps it is both. Quite simply they offer a voice, a variety of choice and produce books that might otherwise be missed.

Tiny Tree is one such publisher and they recently sent me a lovely big bundle of books to share.

All, in appearance, are picture books but on opening some of them I quickly realised that here were some books with pictures yes, but much longer text. They are not quite the traditional picture book that we all know and love but neither are they the chapter book that children would traditionally move on to enjoy. I have no idea what we should call these books but I can assure you I was captivated and I believe that children who are quite able readers will enjoy them whilst at the same time adults, any adults who work with or have children, will find the benefit of having a longer book, with pictures, to share over a number of days. These are books with a story, they are also books with a message. These are books to read together and to learn from. These are books that would be as at home on the shelves of a library as on a personal bookcase. These are fabulous books whose voices need to be heard and I will introduce you to all of them here ...

*Binx the Jinx* by Michelle Hird is a book featuring cats ... Binx is a black cat so that of course means all assume he must be bad luck! There is however a silver lining. Finding a new friend in one particular cat Binx is able to show

that he is in fact the luckiest cat around! A delightful story demonstrating the importance of realising that we should not judge what is inside by what we see on the outside.

*Portia the Pear* by Nicola Hume, illustrated by Elena Mascolo is, to me, a version of the classic ugly duckling story except that here we have an ugly pear, one who happily avoids a hungry caterpillar but becomes the best of friends with a beautiful butterfly! Pay close attention to the illustrations in this one, the expressions on the fuity faces are ingenious and laugh-out-loud funny! A charming story.

For a gentle bedtime read *Danny and the Dream Dog* by Fiona Barker and Howard Gray is a book to enjoy for its lively, fun and intelligent story, the laughs it will produce and the important message about caring not just for the people around us but the animal life too. If this doesn't sound much like a bedtime read when you open the covers and see the gentle tones and hues of the illustration, their dream-like quality you will certainly agree.

*Sherlock and the Baskerville Beast* by Corrine Gosling and Andrea Alemanno takes us back to

the not-quite-picture-book not-quite-chapter-book format with a story to introduce younger readers to one of literature's greatest detectives. In this story Sherlock however is a sheepdog with a very important task – to rid how town of a beast with black fur. Beautiful illustration complements an excellent story. *Robots don't say please and can't eat cheese* is the quirky title of Lucy Keeling and Kris Smith's hilarious story of one little boy and the robot that he is trying to teach good manners too! Mum and dad would love both Barney and Robot to have the very best of manners but no matter how hard they try Robot just can't get beyond affirmative. Will Barney ever be able to teach his friend good manners or will dad need to get that toolkit out?

*Ilias' Mountain* by Lilian Kars & Steffie Padmos is my starting point and of the selection it the longest and perhaps the most involved story. Meet Ilias, an ordinary boy who lives in a small village with his family. Now meet Ilias again, an ordinary boy he is not. Ilias is actually a courageous, brave and bold boy he just doesn't know it when the story starts out. Ilias looks at things differently from those around him – he sees the wings of the angels in the town square gradually eroding every year and worries if they will still be able to fly. He sees the smiles and laughter of those around him. One day he feels brave enough to question all he has been taught, he goes against the habits of generations ... he is courageous and brave, he dares to be different and, as a result, little miracles begin to happen. Perhaps readers of this charming, bold story might be inspired to do the same.

Helen Marshalls' *The Mole and the Flower* reminded me very much of the Ladybird books

I was once enchanted by as a child. With its delightful vegetative illustration's courtesy of the talents of Christopher A. Martin this is an adventure story with a message. One little mole is very determined, determined to follow her quest for the most beautiful flower. What she finds is a very grumpy and old bloom. Mole takes the bloom by surprise for it is not often he has visitors but all too soon he is called into action, he must offer little Mole some protection ... a storm is brewing and the pair need to weather it (pun intended). Will they learn that the best friendships occur regardless of age? A story helping children to learn that elders should be respected and at times admired too.

In *The Wall* by Mauro Lirussi one little girl delights in her new home until the day she becomes unwell. Until she is well again the little girl cannot go outside and enjoy the delights of the garden and that of her neighbour's too. But what is this she discovers when she opens her windows one bright, better day? A wall. The lovely neighbour and his fantastic garden have disappeared, behind the wall. It is not only they who have gone, lots of things disappear and we soon learn it is up to us to protect them. Will you join the League of Guardians and help to make sure that the disappeared may be gone but will never be forgotten?

Finally, and this may be last but it is not least, this is just the way I was working through the stack, *More than a Me* by Lilian Kars and Steffie Padmos is an important little book. Little in format – a square hardback book perfect for small hands, it is also a book from which War Child will receive 10% of the profits of each sale. Why War Child? Because here is a

story, told in rhyme and stunningly illustrated, about a little drop of water who has a very big adventure. He must travel a long way, he must be away from his friends and family but along the way he will learn that he is more than just a little drop, he is part of a much bigger world and there are many out there who will look after him and be his friends. Just like this little

drop, many of us will go on long and difficult journey's but we will find adventure and return to our friends and families with new stories to tell.

Just remember, you are more than you.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

# When Sadness Comes to Call

I first met Eva Eland at the Andersen Press Christmas party where we had a great chat about her forthcoming book, one that I had recently read and one that had me choked up with emotion. We spoke about her move to the UK, her experiences on the illustration course at Cambridge and her joy at being chosen (mid-course) to put words to her pictures and publish a book. We also spoke about plans for Christmas and the coming year. Fast forward a few weeks. An invitation came through the mail and a chance to meet Eva again, this time in a more official capacity as published debut author. It was Blue Monday, the third Monday of 2019, and I made my way to the charming bookshop Tales on Moon Lane in London's Herne Hill to meet Eva again for a quick chat with her about the debut picture book *When Sadness Came to Call* which had now been officially published.



Blue Monday, a book about sadness – not so cheerful you are probably thinking? Quite the opposite in fact. Eve had spent the day designing a delightful window setting complete with window painting – a cuddly blue figure of sadness. This she told me was probably harder than writing the book had been!

*When Sadness Comes to Call* had been two years in the planning. Eva had begun with the idea of the uninvited guest, this one a very personal uninvited guest and one that we will all have occasion to meet at some point. Yet Eva did not want her guest, her book to be one of sadness, rather her idea was to offer comfort, to help children understand different emotions. A challenge for any author or illustrator but Eva stuck with her theme, the pictures came, and it seemed to her that here was the ideal book. A book about sadness with no words. A book of pictures that would allow its reader to tell their own story, to explore their own emotions. The problem was Eva, her tutors (and later her editor) found that it just didn't quite work. As much as she wanted it to be seen as a menu with readers making their own choices there was something missing.

Let us back-track for a moment. Eva was studying at Cambridge. She had a project, her tutors loved it and could see its relevance. It was not initially intended for children. A collaboration between Eva and her tutors then Andersen Press, who saw the work at a show and loved it, followed. When it was first on show Eva's work was only in its infancy, she was only in her first year, there were two and a half years still to go.

In these two and a half years Eva perfected her work, the words came, the initial ideas remained but the language developed as did the image, the drawing and the artform. Eva drew on her experiences as a fine art student, a visual design student and realised that the words and the pictures combined could still give the reader space to explore, to learn, to be. The final result? A book that for Eva fits the subject, offers balance and offers her audience the chance to learn, to understand, to enjoy.

Blue Monday wasn't so blue for Eva, for me, or for the jovial crowd of friends, family, librarians, bloggers and publishing staff. As we raised a glass to Eva Eland and her debut picture book there were smiles all round. Eva is at the start of an exciting and promising journey, she has more ideas she told me and I for one can't wait to see how they will look on paper and read the stories that they will form.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Picture books**

### **A Home on the River**

Peter Bentley, illus. Charles Fuge

### **All are Welcome**

Alexandra Penfold, illus. by Suzanne Kaufman

### **Amazing**

Steve Antony

### **The Big Angry Roar**

Jonny Lambert

### **The Bluest of Blues – Anna Atkins and the First Book of Photographs**

Fiona Robinson

### **Boom! Bang! Royal Meringue!**

Sally Doran, illus. Rachael Saunders

### **Captain Cat and the Treasure Map**

Sue Mongredien, illus. Kate Pankhurst

### **Cats and Robbers**

Russell Ayto

### **Chatterbox Bear**

Pippa Curnick

### **The Colour of Happy**

Laura Baker, illus. Angie Rozelaar

### **Cyril the Lonely Cloud**

Tim Hopgood

### **The Dinosaur Department Store**

Lily Murray, illus. Richard Merritt

### **Has Anybody Seen a Story?**

Mandana Sadat

### **Isle of You**

David LaRochelle, illus. Jaime Kim

### **The Kiss**

Linda Sunderland, illus. Jessica Courtney-Tickle

### **Kiss the Crocodile**

Sean Taylor, illus. Ben Mantle

### **The Light in the Night**

Marie Voigt

### **The Lost Book**

Margarita Surnaite

### **Maisie's Scrapbook**

Samuel North, illus. Jo Loring-Fisher

### **Mira's Curly Hair**

Maryam al Serkal, illus. Rebecca Luciani

### **Mole's Star**

Britta Teckentrup

### **Monster Match**

Caroline Gray

### **Pencil Dog**

Leigh Hodgkinson

### **Perfectly Polite Penguins**

Georgiana Deutsch, illus. Ekaterina Trukhan

### **Rosie is my Best Friend**

Ali Pye

### **The Sea Saw**

Tom Percival

**Shhh! I'm reading!**

John Kelly, illus. Elina Ellis

**The Whale, the Sea and the Stars**

Adrian Macho

**When Sadness Comes to Call**

Eva Eland

**Wish**

Chris Saunders

**Wisp. A Story of Hope**

Zana Fraillon, illus. Grahame Baker-Smith

## **Junior books**

### **A Pinch of Magic**

Michelle Harrison

### **The Adventures of Anatole**

Nancy Willard, illus. David McPhail

### **Asha & the Spirit Bird**

Jasbinder Bilan, illus. Helen Crawford-White

### **The Boy Who Flew**

Fleur Hitchcock

### **Call Me Alastair**

Cory Leonardo

### **The Cosmic Atlas of Alfie Fleet**

Martin Howard, illus. Chris Mould

### **The Darkdeep**

Ally Condie & Brendan Reichs

### **The Day I Was Erased**

Lisa Thompson

### **Ghost**

Jason Reynolds

### **The Girl with Shark's Teeth**

Cerrie Burnell

### **Guardians of the Wild Unicorns**

Lindsay Littleton

### **Hotel Flamingo**

Alex Milway

### **How to Rob a Bank**

Tom Mitchell

### **How to Win a Nobel Prize**

Barry Marshall, illus. Bernard Caleo

### **The Last Zoo**

Sam Gayton

### **Lightning Mary**

Anthea Simmons

### **Little Bird Flies**

Karen McCombie

### **The Midnight Hour**

Laura Trinder and Benjamin Read, illus.

Hannah Peck

### **A Moon Girl Stole My Friend**

Rebecca Patterson

### **Now or Never. A Dunkirk Story**

Bali Rai

### **Our Castle by the Sea**

Lucy Strange

### **The Peculiar Peggs of Riddling Wood**

Samuel J. Halpin, illus. Hannah Peck

### **Royal Rebel**

Carina Axelsson

### **The Star-Spun Web**

Sinéad O'Hart

### **Storm Hound**

Claire Fayers

### **To Nightowl from Dogfish**

Holly Goldberg Sloan & Meg Wolitzer

**The Truth about Martians**

Melissa Savage, illus. Doron Parton

**Two Sides**

Polly Ho-Yen and Binny Talib

**Vote for Effie**

Laura Wood, illus. Emma Trithart (cover) &  
Mirelle Ortega (inside)

## Young Adult books

### **A Danger to Herself and Others**

Alyssa Sheinmel

### **A Girl Called Shameless**

Laura Steven

### **A Story About Cancer (with a Happy Ending)**

India Desjardins, trans. Solange Ouellet, illus.  
Marianne Ferrer

### **A Tudor Turk. The Chronicles of Will Ryde and Awa Maryam Al-Jameel (Book One)**

Rehan Khan

### **All the Lonely People**

David Owen

### **Becoming Jo**

Sophie McKenzie

### **The Burning**

Laura Bates

### **The Closest thing to Flying**

Gill Lewis

### **Colour Me In**

Lydia Ruffles

### **The Colour of Shadows**

Phyllida Shrimpton

### **Courting Darkness**

Robin LaFevers

### **Devoted**

Jennifer Mathieu

### **Enchantée**

Gita Trelease

### **Five Feet Apart**

Rachael Lippincott with Mikki Daughtry and  
Tobias Iaconis

### **The Haven**

Simon Lelic

### **Internment**

Samira Ahmed

### **Joe Quinn's Poltergeist**

David Almond, illus. Dave McKean

### **Kick the Moon**

Muhammad Khan

### **Marly's Ghost**

Devid Levithan, illus. Brian Selznick

### **Nowhere on Earth**

Nick Lake

### **Paper Avalanche**

Lisa Williamson

### **Proud. Stories, Poetry and Art on the Theme of Pride**

with contributions from 12 authors and  
illustrators, ed. Juno Dawson

### **Rayne and Delilah's Midnite Matinee**

Jeff Zentner

### **Scavengers**

Darren Simpson

**Thirteen Doctors 13 Stories**

with contributions from 13 authors

**The Turnaway Girls**

Hayley Chewins

**Two Can Keep a Secret**

Karen McManus

**Watch us Rise**

Renée Watson and Ellen Hagan

**Whiteout**

Gabriel Dylan

## **Non-Fiction books**

### **A Day in Nature. 101 Activities Inspired by the Outdoors**

Debbie Powell

### **A Year of Nature Poems**

Joseph Coelho, illus. Kelly Louise Judd

### **Amazing Transport. Journey through the History of Transport**

Tom Jackson, illus. Chris Mould

### **Around the World in 80 Ways**

Illus. Katy Halford

### **Astrophysics for Young People in a Hurry**

Neil deGrasse Tyson, ad. Gregory Mone

### **Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species**

Sabina Radeva

### **The Everyday Journeys of Ordinary Things**

Libby Deutsch, illus. Valpuri Kerttula

### **Explorer: Mammals!**

Nick Forshaw, illus. William Exley

### **Explorer: Plants!**

Nick Forshaw, illus. William Exley

### **Fantastic People Who Dared to Fail**

Luke Reynolds, illus. M S Corley

### **From Tiny Seeds. The Amazing Story of how Plants Travel**

Émilie Vast

### **Hello Animals. How do you Sleep?**

Loes Botman

### **Hello Lighthouse**

Sophie Blackall

### **The Human Body. A Pop-up Guide to Anatomy**

Richard Walker, illus. Rachel Caldwell

### **My Big Wimmelbook – Animals Around the World**

Stefan Lohr

### **My First Book of Birds**

illus. Zoe Ingram

### **My Little Book of Big Questions**

Britta Teckentrup

### **Natural Wonders of the World**

Molly Oldfield, illus. Frederica Bordon

### **RHS The Magic and Mystery of Trees**

Jen Green, illus. Claire McElpatrick

### **Sensational Butterflies**

Ben Rothery

### **The Silk Roads. A New History of the World**

Peter Frankopan, illus. Neil Packer

### **Speak Up!**

Laura Coryton

### **Stories for Boys Who Dare to be Different 2**

Ben Brooks, illus. Quinton Winter

**What's Going on Inside My Head?**

Molly Potter, illus. Sarah Jennings

**The Woodland Trust. Nature Explorers  
Woodland Activity and Sticker Book**

illus. Clover Robin