



Armadillo

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

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Picture Book Reviews

A Dog's Tale

Rob Stevens, illus. Tony Ross, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

A Dog's Tale is all about an older dog giving a younger dog advice about the big and small things that might happen in life and which the younger pup might be scared or unsure of, anxious or sad about. The tale invites the reader in from the first lines, telling the child that "An adventure begins ! It's your very first bite of an epic life story that YOU get to write".

Through Rosen's superb poetic style, children are given reassurance and gently and humorously told that they can achieve much throughout life and have a lot of fun along the way. There will also be times when life isn't easy for them and they might get knocked down, but what matters is how they get up and keep going forward. Sometimes they might be sad, someone they love might die but they won't be alone because they have friends who love them and will be there for them, just as they too will be a friend to others who need them.

The author / illustrator 'marriage' between Michael Rosen and Tony Ross, has struck gold again. Ross' illustrations have taken Rosen's lively, thoughtful and meaningful words and translated them into an exquisite visual narrative. The combination of text and illustration transmits the messages of the story with humour, joy and understanding, making them very accessible.

This really is one of those very special books that comes along now and then. Like the *Sad Book*, it's a book that once read will stay with you always. It is a book that should be in every home, school and library and one that will be read, shared and enjoyed over and over again because its underpinning messages are relevant whether you are 4, 14 or 40+.

Annie Everall

A Mouse Called Julian

Joe Todd-Stanton, pub. Flying Eye Books

Julian is a solitary mouse. Life is just easier if he keeps to himself and he is pretty savvy on his own, sidestepping potential hazards. That is until he has an unexpected face-to-face with a fox who's up to no good and who gets stuck, Pooh Bear-style, half in and half out of Julian's house. This encounter has unexpected consequences ...

This book has rich ‘upstairs-downstairs’ illustrations. There is the underground world depicting snug domestic arrangements and the intricate interior décor of little burrowing creatures, who are all interconnected – apart from Julian. Above ground is the bold, lush countryside, day and night, fair and foul, and a range of fearsome predators. (There’s a lot to chat about en-route!) The colours are intense and earthy.

Children who are particularly sensitive might be unnerved by the mounting sense of jeopardy which results in Julian getting eaten! However, all’s well that ends well and my three-year old reader sat rapt with anticipation in the tense lead up and then giggled helplessly at Julian’s re-emergence. It is very skilfully written and reminded me that even tiny readers love the rollercoaster of emotions books evoke.

For those of us who are not the life and soul of the party and who like our own space, this is a lovely story letting us know that we are fine that way. Nevertheless, as Julian discovers, friendship doesn’t have to be suffocating and having somebody to watch your back is very good indeed.

Jackie Spink

Big Cat

Emma Lazell, pub. Pavilion Books

A modern-day classic with overtones of familiar stories *Big Cat* is a delight, easy to read, full of fabulous illustration and ideal for sharing with little ones – exactly as expected from a picture book!

To summarize the story without revealing too much - while searching for her Grandma's glasses Isobel finds a cat- but not just any cat, a tiger! To Isobel’s surprise, having explained to her Grandma that she has found a cat, Grandma assumes it is a normal cat and invites the cat to stay with them until they find his owners.

The book features hilarious text and brightly coloured illustrations that really bring the story to life, lifting it off the pages and guaranteeing you will laugh at the craziness of the situation Grandma and Isobel find themselves in. There is a real *The Tiger Who Came To Tea* feel to this book, indeed there is a nod to this title in one of the illustrations featured within the book. The illustrations’ traditional feel gives *Big Cat* a modern day classic feel that young audiences will enjoy sharing.

Samantha Thomas

The Big Stink

Lucy Freegard, pub. Pavilion Books

The Big Stink is a likeable take on *The Heist* that's mildly styled with a 1930s American aesthetic, enough to make it distinctive, but not so much that it clashes with the story-telling approaches Reception and Years 1, 2 and 3 commonly see.

I think it's worth mentioning that there's a mismatch between the book and its back-cover promotional copy. From the cover I inferred police officer Rita would be a much more important character, and her pursuit of criminal mouse Charlie would be a more dominant part of the story. This isn't so. This is the story of the heist itself, by 17 pages to 6 (with 3 more to establish Charlie's criminal pedigree, and 3 covering Charlie's punishment and rehabilitation).

Charlie joins the ranks of other crafty cheese-stealing mice memorably, partly because of his methodical methods but also because Lucy Freegard imbues him with such longing. Her art is clean and simple, but Charlie still wears his heart so very much on his sleeve. Nicely done.

I like the care she takes over Charlie's heist, its planning and its execution. Not that I'd want readers to feel inspired to steal, but the detail I think will provide lots of material for role-playing games.

It's that sort of book. Not the sort where you get to the end and admire it, but the sort that fills you with ideas and energy. Children may well want to play 'heist' afterwards; equally they may feel inspired towards creating art. With its cheesy take on several masterpieces – Charlie's after a statue called The Stinker (poor Rodin) – I can see some wanting to cheesify other classics (Mr and Mrs Clark and Paneer anyone?) themselves.

So, this is a book as a tool: well-conceived and executed, charming, engaging, motivating, energising. I see its natural home being more in guided and group reading. I do think that having read it, I'd want to be able to go off and do something. A daytime rather than a bedtime book. A welcome and fun addition to any classroom.

As an aside, *The Big Stink* does have a really nice 1930s feel. I suspect Lucy Freegard has a cracking period picture book in her that's all mean streets and giant searchlights and aimed at more of a junior rather than an infant readership. I hope we get to see it.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

The Bookworm

Debi Gliori, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Max has a need to own a pet. He begins by asking for the most obvious one: a puppy. But Mum turns that one down, as well as the next four pets and critters Max requests. Not discouraged, Max decides

to find a pet on his own. With several failures, he settles on an average worm found in the yard, that he moves from its outside home to Max's bedroom. There, he sings and reads to the worm and names it, the "Bookworm". Throw in a little more imagination from Max, and the Bookworm soon becomes a dragon that flies away. Not discouraged this time either, Max, returns to Mummy's idea of owning a goldfish as a pet. And, voila! Max can imagine the goldfish is slowly morphing into a shark.

Mummy and Daddy never believe the dragon story, of course. But, that's still okay with Max. In the end, the Dragon "Bookworm," returns to Max's room to hear another bedtime story.

Unique in its concept, as well as its play on words *The Bookworm* validates Debi Gliori's understanding of how the minds of little ones think and imagine. The illustrations in this seventeen-page board book, include many soft-faced characters, and detailed surroundings.

The imagined worm-turned-dragon changes from a small, pale earthworm into a big, bright, red dragon. The book, short in text, (even though there is an occasional word not for a young child, i.e. "decided") sells on "believability." Are Ms. Gliori's talents of writing and illustrating "all in the wrist"? Or, perhaps, it's better to declare that hers are, "all in the mind."

Patricia A. Timbrook

Dare

Lorna Gutierrez, illus. Polly Noakes, pub. Tiny Owl

I love the simplicity of the words and pictures matched with the powerful message to all children in this book.

There are so many amazing books about girls and boys who have dared to be different, and they are wonderful for older readers. This book allows younger children to share a similar message about being brave, being bold and being you!

The words and pictures are accessible, easy to read and understand but what this book is doing is sending a powerful message to children to dare to do things. Children need to explore their world, understand their emotions, and speak up when they don't like things. Children have a natural curiosity and let's be honest, no filter. They see things in an honest way, and they question it! We all need to dare to do things we want; protect those we love and dare to be who we truly are.

Adults need to listen to the message in this book as well.

I love the illustrations and their bold colours set alongside black and white sketches. This book would be a brilliant read aloud for all ages. The message isn't for the very young but for all children and adults too. I think a whole school assembly would be a wonderful way to share this book.

Erin Hamilton

Dog on Wheels at Sunny Sea

Gillian McClure, pub. Troika Books

Dubbin sets off on his skateboard for a day at the seaside with his friend Tod. When Tod's bouncy blue ball gets them into trouble and Tod ends up in the cold sea at the end of the pier, Dubbin must race to rescue him.

This is the third *Dog on Wheels* book, following *Dog on Wheels* and *Dog on Wheels goes snowboarding*. All three are a delight. It's impossible not to be charmed by Dubbin and Tod, and their close friendship. The dynamic between them is one that will feel familiar to many young readers who have a best friend. Dubbin is big, brash and exuberant; Tod is small and cautious, needing Dubbin to spur him on or get him out of a scrape. A third, mysterious dog tags along behind in each book, visible only in the illustrations and never explicitly mentioned in the story.

The text has visual shape and movement which reflects the racing pace of the dogs' adventures and the subtlety of the rhyme and rhythm makes the story a joy to read aloud. In the illustrations there is wit and warmth, with just enough detail for a child to pause and point to without interrupting the romping pace of the story. The dogs charge through soothing pastel backgrounds; text and illustrations move and blend together beautifully to bring the story to life.

Yvonne Coppard

Yvonne Coppard is a Writing Fellow with the Royal Literary Fund and co-author, with Linda Newbery, of *Writing Children's Fiction*, pub. Bloomsbury

Don't Go There!

Jeanne Willis, illus. Hrefna Bragadottir, pub. Andersen Press

It may be fun to find the Baby Martian in your bedroom, and he may well have 'the sweetest little face you've ever seen' – but soon he's causing messy mayhem all through the house. The problem? He doesn't know how to use the loo.

The only hope, it seems, is to try and teach him The Toilet Song...

This is a fun, good-natured little book, full of smiley faces, laughs and lessons. Children will love chorusing “Don’t go there!” with the narrator almost as much as they love the raucous (toilet) humour as the little Martian keeps on getting it wrong. The simple rhyming language Jeanne Willis uses is warm and accessible, and Hrefna Bragadottir’s illustrations strike the perfect balance between an appealing cuteness and gleeful, messy humour. A full-page illustration of a stinky surprise left in the birdbath, and the horrified birds’ reaction to it, holding their beaks (!) and covering their eyes, is a particular highlight.

Don’t Go There! is also, of course, intended as a toilet-training companion, and it succeeds on this level, too. It is easy to see how the clear and memorable message of The Toilet Song – ‘Lid up, pants down, bottom on the seat/ Sit still, just chill, till the job’s complete’ – could be a helpful aid in real life. The real achievement here, though, is that it never feels like a lesson: *Don’t Go There!* is a fully-imagined little story, which will engage younger readers as a humorous tale in its own right, rather than as a palely educational book.

Don’t Go There! should be accessible for very young children, though it will be most relevant for those learning or about to learn how to use the loo.

Olivia Parry

Duck and Penguin Are Not Friends

Julia Woolf, pub. Andersen Press

Duck and Penguin are the beloved toys of best friends Betty and Maud. Betty and Maud adore spending time together, and wherever they go, Duck and Penguin go too. So far so good, except that the girls are delightfully oblivious to the absolute disdain their toys have for each other. Despite their fluffy butter-wouldn’t-melt stuffed animal exterior, Duck and Penguin are most definitely NOT friends. And whilst Betty and Maud build sandcastles together in perfect harmony, Penguin takes great glee in stomping on Duck’s creative masterpiece, no doubt in revenge for having been pushed off a swing by Duck earlier in the day.

Things are no better in the kitchen, when Betty and Maud take to baking. The girl’s exaggerated enjoyment is humorously contrasted against the increasingly uncooperative Duck and Penguin, whose grumpy demeanours are gloriously brought to life by Julia Woolf’s vibrant illustrations. In the end, the toys end up battling rather than baking and pelting not painting. The turning point comes when they unite in their horror of having to play ‘itty-bitty babies’ by Betty and Maud. Left alone while the girls fetch their bottles, Duck and Penguin escape their prams and venture back into the playground. This time, without being pressured to play as friends, the duo actually have fun together.

It's a relatable tale for parents and children alike. It's hard at any stage in life to navigate friendships, but what this picture book shows is that however divided we think we are, there is always some commonality that eventually brings us together. It's also a gentle reminder that children thrive best when they are not forced.

Duck and Penguin Are Not Friends is a perfect read out loud story, packaged in a carnival of colour with gorgeous illustrations by Julia Woolf. The detail in the drawing of these adorable rogues (Duck's wing hangs by a thread and Penguin is losing his stuffing) is what makes them so utterly charming, even when they are at their grumpiest. A picture book to treasure.

Matilde Sazio

Five More Minutes

Marta Altes, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Who doesn't feel the need for just those magic 'five more minutes' in any day at any time, in fact I could make use of them whilst trying to write this review and juggle the demands of others around me – five more minutes is all I ask, it is sometimes all many of us ask but do we ever get it and will we be able to take a leaf out of Marta Altes story and learn from her characters?

A bunkbed with one sleeping fox and one very wide-awake fox greet us after the delightfully relaxing end papers with their calming yellow tone swathes of grass. But what are these foxes up to? If you can tell the time then this book will resonate, if you are learning to tell the time it will be incredibly useful and not just for the clocks which feature on its pages but also because the five more minutes of the title are about to become very significant. One little fox whose dad talks about the time all the time believes he may know more about it than dad – what will this lead to we wonder? Of course, ... we should have known ... it is time for the little fox and his sibling to wake dad up. Wake up time is, as we all know, very important, and what better way to ensure it happens than two very enthusiastic cubs jumping on the bed? In turn this allows for breakfast preparations – how much can you spot that has spilt or fallen on the floor? When dad comments there is no time the cubs know differently, there is always time for puddles, friends, games ...

To any time-short, harassed parents out there this book will be some light relief when they discover they are not alone and some of the reasons why there is never quite enough time, unless of course it is story time. A true delight, this book will leave you grinning from ear to ear and thanking Marta Altes for those five more minutes that her exuberant story and delightful illustration combination have allowed you.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Go, Go, Pirate Boat

Katrina Charman, illus. Nick Sharratt, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Yo ho! It's time to raise the anchor and set sail across the salty sea with Katrina Charman and Nick Sharratt's book, *Go, Go, Pirate Boat*. It is a bold, entertaining adventure full of all the pirate classics: scrubbing the decks, searching for treasure and walking the plank, but in addition this story can be sung to the tune of Row, Row, Row Your Boat, which I imagine would go down particularly well in a rhyme time or story-telling session.

The two pirates and their parrot-captain also have a splash with dolphins, brave a storm with a whale, escape a hungry shark, and make it back home in time for tea. The illustrations are cheerfully rendered in Nick Sharratt's trademark exuberant style.

I love the concept of setting a story to the tune of a well-known nursery rhyme and *Go, Go, Pirate Boat* is the second book in this series. (The first is *Car, Car, Truck, Jeep*, sung to the tune of Baa Baa Black Sheep.) You could try to read this book without singing, but I think you'd battle to resist the oceanic lull of the rhythmic sentences. And while my ten-year-old rolled his eyes at me warbling this book to myself, the simple, sing-along text and bright colours make it perfect for pre-schoolers.

Shiver-me timbers, what a sunny, sea-shanty of a book!

Rebecca Rouillard

Have you seen my Blankie?

Lucy Rowland, illus. Paula Metcalf, pub. Nosy Crow

Have you seen my Blankie? is a very captivating story as Alice takes a journey to trace where her blankie has gone, asking her brother and others along the way. Each page holds another interesting and intriguing key to where it may be found.

I liked the giant inviting her in for pies and the witch saying it made a good cloak, but to find out that the naughty and yet not at all scary dragon was the culprit and that he got upset, had tears and was unable to sleep without the blankie really touched a chord - that even those you think may be strong and capable may also need comforting, comfort that could include using such things as a small comforter.

The end is brilliant and to think Lucy Rowland had to keep trying to find an alternative and with trial and error came up with a win-win situation for both Alice and the dragon was really endearing and inspirational for young audiences to consider.

Illustrations within the book are second-to-none with interesting, colourful pages of Alice and all the characters that really bring the story to life.

Susan Thomas

How to Light Your Dragon

Didier Lévy, illus. Fred Benaglia, pub. Thames & Hudson

What?! Not another dragon picture book, right? But, wait a hot-breath minute, all you non-dragon-loving reader friends. Don't you secretly want to know the answer to the question?

The title on the cover of this picture book—a definite “gotcha” —strikes interest in even the least of non-dragon-lovers' hearts. So much so, that they may find themselves opening its pages quicker than yelling, “Fire!”

Author Didier Lévy sets up a simple “how-to” format from start to finish. In 22 pages, eight different sources of fire, heat, flame, or warmth are attempted by a young friend to help revive the Dragon's non-working flame. When every attempt fails, the Dragon's friend remembers their fun times together, and with a kiss on the dragon's nose, the problem starts to resolve; now, renewed in spirit, the dragon's nostrils roar out a rainbow fire.

The text, written in second person — perhaps, so that the reader can claim the dragon as his or her own – is tight and humorous; with big, scratchy font; and fast-paced, exactly what kids love.

Illustrator Fred Benaglia, artistic director at Bayard Presse, expresses the story through bold and wacky characters, reminiscent of television cartoons in the 1960s. He paints the six double-spread illustrations, and twelve single pages, repetitively in only chartreuse, sea green, red, and pink; with black and white for contrasts. Both the Dragon and his friend's facial expressions complement the text, so-much-so, that non-reader s could understand the unfolding events.

And, at the end of the story, when the reader is expecting to see the proverbial fairy-tale flames whoosh from the Dragon's nostrils, a rainbow shoots out, instead.

Writers of children's picture books may learn a lesson or two, or three, from Didier Lévy's, *How to Light Your Dragon*. And maybe this will spark even more of those awful, yet wonderful, dragon tales.

Patricia A. Timbrook

I Am A Tiger

Karl Newson, illus. Ross Collins, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

The tone of this cheerful and funny book is already set by the cover where a super-confident mouse stands boldly in the curl of a tiger's tail. The illustration immediately after shows the same mouse peeking out from the stripes of a tiger's coat. This is no ordinary mouse.

'I am a tiger,' the mouse says but an indignant racoon advises fiercely that a tiger is much bigger with a much growlier growl. Tigers can be small, too, says the mouse, and I am a tiger. There's a lovely illustration of a doubtful racoon sitting alongside an equally doubtful fox who has pointed out that tigers have stripes. Some do, says the mouse airily, but I don't, and I am a tiger.

The snake is totally unconvinced. Tigers climb trees. Can the mouse climb a tree? Climb to the moon if I want to, comes the irrepressible reply but when its suggested mouse does just that, it turns out to be lunchtime. Tigers hunt their lunch, cries a bright, colourful bird and mouse instantly pushes aside a dandelion stalk to hunt for lunch.

But then a real tiger turns up. This gorgeous illustration of the huge tiger growling crossly at the small mouse will enchant any child. Incredibly, hilariously, the mouse not only convinces the tiger it is really a mouse, it convinces all the others too.

I absolutely love the creatures in this story and when the mouse says the bird is a lollipop, I wanted to reassure them all that they are who they say they are. Finally, we are left with a dear little group of demoralised creatures who go straight to the reader's heart. And that mouse? Now it's convinced it is a crocodile.

I Am A Tiger is a loving, funny, laugh out loud story, with wonderful illustrations.

Gwen Grant

I Don't Want To Be Small

Laura Ellen Anderson, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

This is a really fun picture book written in rhyme and brightly illustrated by Laura Ellen Anderson, all about a little boy that wants to be tall.

Firstly we discover what the little boy finds so bad about being small. He has to stand on tip-toe in a crowd, he's not allowed on the best rides with his taller friends and he even gets hand-me-down clothes that don't fit from his big brother. Eventually, the little boy gets so mad that he throws his teddy bear up into the air. When the bear gets stuck in the branches of a tree he discovers something else bad about being small – he can't reach the bear.

He tries different things to get the bear back, stilts, standing on a box and more, all to avail. The little boy even attempts to make himself grow by eating more greens and sitting in a plant pot like a flower – all of which backfire on him one way or another. It's not until a very tall girl comes along and they work together that he is able to rescue the trapped teddy bear and learn the value of friendship and working together.

This is a great book to read aloud and share, and humorous illustrations make it a book that can be read and enjoyed time and time again with lots of laughs.

Vicky Harvey

I Have an Idea

Hervé Tullet, pub. Chronicle Books

Wow! What a fantastic book this is. Open it and wonder, have I actually started reading – the answer is a resounding 'yes'. Why would the reader not recognise? Because this is a picture book which truly is written for the young reader. Not for their adults though I defy adults not to be drawn in too. Here however is a picture book the youngest reader can relate to, read and enjoy alone, understand and share.

Based on a simple idea, the concept of the idea we, the reader, begin with the moment when the idea first occurs, when "a puff of breath" indicating an idea has formed. Problem is that when an idea forms we then tend to start looking (in vain) for it until, suddenly it comes back again. What a fantastic feeling, to find the idea not just once but at least twice! Follow the story and discover just what happens when that magical moment, that idea, becomes reality and begin to follow it, we start a journey of magic, exploration, wonder and surprise.

In Tullet's truly creative style and genius this book is sparsely worded, sparsely illustrated but at the same time absolutely bursting with story, with ideas, with colour, with the imagination of the reader. It is a rich exploration of the imagination, its colour palette changing as the imagination of the reader begins to realise that magic is happening – we move from a subtle monochrome to an absolute rainbow of light and bright. Simple line drawing may appear naive and child-like but are incredibly sophisticated, speaking directly to the reader with exhilaration and wonder.

A magical, creative, imaginative and packed book which allows the imagination to investigate the not-so-simple suggestion of an idea, develop it, let it grow, accept it. A masterpiece of writing for young readers.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

In the Swamp by the Light of the Moon

Frann Preston-Gannon, pub. Templar Books

In this book, gorgeous illustrations combine with a satisfying rhyme to create a really lovely read. Frann Preston-Gannon's illustrations are just stunning, full of rich night time colours and texture, with animal characters who are full of charm.

The musical frog in the story is looking for a way to make his song feel complete, but something doesn't feel quite right. He goes on a journey to find that missing something. Finally, he notices what, or who, he needs to complete his song.

The Light of the Moon begins the story of the *Very Hungry Caterpillar* and he, like the frog, is looking for something to fill a hole. In the case of the caterpillar it's in his tummy, but for frog it's about people and belonging. My daughter Sylvia Webber (age 8) said: "Everyone can sing by themselves, but together they made one song".

With a traditional, wistful feel, the poetry is so gentle but quirky, resonating with Edward Lear and reflecting his characters' yearning for completeness.

There is much to see in the illustrations, including some clues that you need to read the book twice to find. I imagine this will be a lovely book to read with a class and talk about things like including everybody and encouraging shy folk to join in. Equally it would be a calming and enjoyable bedtime story for any little one.

Deborah Webber

It's Your World Now!

Barry Falls, pub. Pavilion Books

This very colourful picture book has various adults, probably but not necessarily parents, taking to their children about the world and the opportunities that are available to them, all in rhyme: "I will tell you, as we go, some things a little one should know".

Lesson number one is that the world is full of wonderful things: "Like brightly coloured butterflies, like rock and roll and lullabies. Like midnight feasts and morning cuddles, autumn leaves and splashy puddles", and the child can find much of this illustrated on the double-page spread. On the next spread the child learns that "kids like you, undoubtedly, can choose whate'er they want to be and be that thing, quite splendidly, the best that-thing in memory". Various careers are pictured, with male

and female represented not at all stereotypically (female racing driver, male nurse) the result of “hard work and application”, and next, more possibilities: “the power of you is yours alone”.

But of course, it’s not that simple. Lesson number two is that “Things won’t always go your way”: on a darker, cloudy page, a boy stands in the rain: “you will not always live the dream or be the cat that gets the cream”, and next that people will always want to tell you what to do.

Then the adult ponders that, because this is how things worked out for him, it’s not necessarily going to be the same for the child. “Your life is yours and yours alone...” and lesson number three is: “The only thing you need to know. Above all else, I love you so” on a page full of pink, white and red hearts. Finally, “So go and play and live and learn. It’s your world now. This is your turn...to think and ask and make and do. This world is magic, just like you!” , and the message about doing one’s own thing and the loving are repeated on the very last spread.

Barry Falls is a talented and experienced artist from Northern Ireland, with a range of work including posters and adverts, book covers, very realistic portraits of well-known people, and this is his first picture book. The illustrations are packed with details and items to discover, including a ladybird on every page- sometimes quite difficult to find, but it is always there.

There is plenty to be pored over, perhaps at bedtime, and the reassuring message may leave a child happily dreaming of potential future careers.

Diana Barnes

King Otter

Jane Porter, pub. Simon & Schuster

King Otter is a lovely, subtle story of friendship and of how, if the give and take of friendship becomes simply the take, the whole relationship sadly disappears.

When Otter finds a box of beautiful clothes, with a crown, boots, and an impressive coat inside, he puts them on and decides he looks so splendid, he must be King Otter and, as King, Otter orders his friends to bow to him. The hedgehogs, so near to the ground, anyway, do bow and the squirrels do build him a beautiful throne of wood and leaves and flowers but will his friends continue to be so good natured and put up with Otter’s selfishness?

Then King Otter demands a parade and his friends to clap and cheer him as he passes by. When the parade is over, he gives an order for seventeen cakes of different colours to be waiting for him so that he can eat them all by himself.

His friends make him an impressive golden coach for the parade, and they clap as he passes by but, it was a hot day, and Otter and the coach are too heavy to pull. The ropes snap and the coach rolls downhill, tipping King Otter into the mud but when he demands help, no-one goes to help this selfish and greedy King.

It is then that King Otter realizes he has taken but not given friendship and he has lost his friends because of his thoughtless behaviour. Taking off the crown, he asks his friends if they will let him play with them again and, generously, they do. Washing his paws in the water, he plunges in and swims, happy he is simply Otter again.

The illustrations in their bright, clear colours are very appealing. Despite Otter's selfishness, he is a sweet character and the reader cares about him, hoping he learns how to be a friend. The cheerful, caring friendship offered to him is very moving but I especially liked the little hedgehog faces as the coach broke free.

King Otter has much to offer.

Gwen Grant

Little Cloud

Anne Booth, illus. Sarah Massini, pub. Egmont

"Once there was a dream of a cloud, waiting, hiding..."

The little cloud appeared from nowhere, in a blue sky over a seaside town. As it grew, the little cloud charmed and delighted the townspeople with its delicate beauty and clever shapes. But all clouds eventually grow bigger and darker, filling with rain that just has to fall. The people who had so admired the little cloud ran away and hid when it rained, and the poor little cloud was confused and sad: it had been so proud of what it could do! Not everyone hates the rain though, and the little cloud was pleased to hear that the flowers and the farmers, the fish and the puddle-jumping children were glad to see the rain falling.

Gently covering themes of change and difference, growing up, finding friends and - ultimately - being accepted and loved for who you are, this is a truly multi-layered picture book. The text never feels forced yet delivers some powerful messages; it would make a great conversation starter, an early introduction to nature and the water cycle or simply a charming bedtime story about a cloud, with a lovely rainbow at the end.

Boys and girls will find lots of different things to take away from the book and the experiences of the little cloud (who isn't assigned a gender, interestingly). Each of Sarah Massini's detailed and colourful

illustrations has lots to look at, laugh about and discuss, perfectly complementing the rhythmic prose from Anne Booth. It's a joyful, uplifting and thought-provoking tale suitable from birth to independent reading that children (and adults) will return to time and time again.

Little Cloud would make a lovely gift for any family - who knows how many future cloud-spotters, rain-lovers and meteorologists will be inspired?

Antonia Russell

Little Green Donkey

Anuska Allepuz, pub. Walker Books

Little Donkey is a very fussy eater. He absolutely loves grass and despite all his mother's best attempts he will not eat other foods. Then one day he discovers he has eaten so much grass that he has turned GREEN; he tries to camouflage himself, but his mum soon sees what has happened. She gets him to try lots of other foods, but he doesn't like any of them – until he tries carrots. You can guess what happens then! He changes colour once again.

This is a really funny and yet gentle story about a topic that many parents can relate to; that of the very fussy eater. Whilst most children will eat more than one kind of food, this is a good way to introduce them to the concept of eating a range of foods, especially fruit and vegetables.

Little Donkey is a delightful character who is quite happy with his choice of diet, but he is less happy with his colour change, so he needs to learn the concept of a balanced diet. The illustrations are very simple, almost childlike, but they contain a lot of humour, especially on the last page spread. This will make for an excellent read at home and in nursery.

Margaret Pemberton

The Marvellous Fluffy Squishy Itty Bitty

Beatrice Alemagna, pub. Thames and Hudson

Edith, Eddie to her friends, is five and a half years old. Her dad can speak multiple languages, her mum has a wonderful singing voice and her sister is 'a brilliant ice skater', but Eddie has always thought that she isn't good at anything – until, that is, she discovers her talent for finding a certain thing... a Fluffy Squishy Itty Bitty.

Mum's birthday is coming up and when Eddie overhears her sister talking about buying her a present, Eddie decides that she should get something too. But what? Overhearing the words 'fluffy... squishy...

itty... bitty...' Eddie decides that whatever she gets will have to be made up of all these things. Not really knowing where to look for the thing that she wants, or what the thing actually is, Eddie decides to go and visit local shops to see if her friends, the shopkeepers can help.

Starting at Bruno's Bakery (Boulangerie) Eddie asks if he has 'a Fluffy Squishy Itty Bitty for sale?' Bruno replies 'A fishy squidgy what?' and lets her have a warm sticky bun instead.

Eddie tries the flower shop, the fashion shop, the antique shop, and finally the butcher's but all of them mis-hear her and lets her have something else instead. Only the butcher sends her away with nothing – yelling that he is too busy (as we can see from the fold out page).

Eddie is ready to give up when she spots something on a roof, something that fits what she's been looking for. In order to get the Fluffy, Squishy, Itty, Bitty home to her Mum she has to use all of the things that the other shopkeepers have given her.

A bright a lively story with lots to look at – and a delightful energetic character that children will love.

Vicky Harvey

Meet the Penguins

Mike Brownlow, pub. Oxford University Press

Everybody loves penguins, right? *Meet the Penguins* is the charming tale of two penguins who just want someone to play with. But of course, this is more difficult than it sounds.

Elephant has big things to do, Fox is in the middle of something and Hippo is worried the penguins might make a mess. There's a litany of excuses from all the other animals, sadly it seems like no one wants to play with the penguins, until a little bear interrupts shyly to ask if he can play with them. The penguins unpack their little suitcases (of course, the penguins have suitcases!) to reveal a whole circus-full of exciting toys and games. The penguins and the bear are having a grand time when all of the other animals suddenly notice what fun they're having and, naturally, want to join in.

"We'll think about it," the penguins tease them.

The story is beautifully illustrated by the author with a range of quirky animal characters in vibrant, interesting scenarios. The penguins, in particular, are full of personality, verve and humour, and the pages are filled with whimsical details that will delight children.

You're probably familiar with Mike Brownlow from his popular '*Ten Little...*' series, (*Ten Little Robots*, *Ten Little Dinosaurs*, *Ten Little Monsters* etc.) *Meet the Penguins* is of a similar length and

has the same bright colours, gentle humour and a simple but compelling concept—ideal for reading aloud to toddlers and playgroups. A lovely story about friendship, kindness and inclusivity—I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Rebecca Rouillard

The Night Bear

Ana De Moraes, illus. Thiago De Moraes, pub. Penguin Random House

Nightmares are a bit like single use plastics. Wouldn't it be great if you could pack them carefully into a box and put them out to be collected by someone who is able to give them another, purposeful lease of life?

The Night Bear presents its readers with such a solution. Each night, children pop their bad dreams (bandits, monsters with claws) into a box, put them out on the doorstep and head off to bed, safe in the knowledge that they will not be plagued by night time nasties. Then, as they sleep, The Night Bear - a bumbling, friendly old soul - does his rounds of each house, eating the nightmares as he goes. Better yet, nightmares are the Night Bear's favourite food. Monsters with hideous eyes ... taste like burgers and fries. Dragons with a fiery bite ... taste like Turkish delight. And so on.

However, complications arise when the Night Bear chances upon a dream about unicorns and rainbows that has been left out by accident, and he is forced to enter the world of dreaming children in order to resolve the problem.

As is so often the case, different children will take different things from this book. For those who suffer from nightmares, it could provide a comforting narrative and means of dealing with an issue. There are even a set of instructions inside the front cover explaining how to make your own 'nightmare box' so you too can benefit from the Night Bear's services. Other children may enjoy the humour created by the Night Bear's disgust at stumbling upon a pleasant dream.

For many though, the key appeal may lie in the potential of the rhyming game for different nightmares. Storms that crash...taste like sausage and mash. Scary pirates being mean...taste like strawberries and cream. The back page of the book revels in this silliness, with endless rhyming possibilities, each accompanied by a tiny but perfect cartoon illustration. I would hazard a guess that it is this page, perhaps more than the story itself, that many children will want to pore over.

This book has a warmth, charm and empathy with children. I hope that somewhere, a small person is taking great comfort by packing away their bad dreams at bedtime, and leaving the curtains open ajar, just in case the Night Bear should pass by. A reassuring addition to any nursery library; with the added boost of rhyme and wordplay as children grow.

Laura Myatt

Paper Planes

Jim Helmore, illus. Richard Jones, pub. Simon & Schuster

Ben and Mia are the best of friends and love making and flying their paper planes. They live in a small community on the edge of a big lake and dream that one day they will be able to make a plane that will fly across the lake. However, their dreams seem to be dashed when Ben and his family have to move away and Mia is left on her own. She is angry and frustrated that her friend has gone and concerned that he will forget all about her, but then a magical dream helps her see things in a different light.

This is a delightful story about the power of friendship and of the imagination. The pictures have a light and yet powerful feel about them; with a charming mix of naivety and sophistication that really brings the scenery to life. The feelings that Mia has as a result of Ben leaving are such a believable mix of sadness and anger because she thinks that the dreams they shared will no longer be possible. How this situation is resolved makes for a very satisfying ending to the story; one which has some important and positive messages for all of us.

This is not only a beautiful story to read to younger children, but it is also useful for work around friendship, migration, dreams and even the science of flight.

Margaret Pemberton

The Phoenix of Persia

Sally Pomme Clayton and Amin Hassanzadeh Sharif, pub. Tiny Owl

The Phoenix of Persia is a beautiful, sensual immersion into the literature, music and language of Iran. It is based on a story from *the Shahnameh* (translated as the 'Book of Kings'), an epic Persian poem written by the 10th century Iranian poet Ferdowsi.

The Phoenix of Persia begins with the creation of the world as the mythical bird, the Simorgh, nests on the Tree of All Seeds on the Mountain of Gems, flapping her wings until the seeds scatter across the world. Life begins. Time passes. Prince Zal is born, a legendary king and great warrior in Persia. Rejected by his father King Sam however, Prince Zal is brought up by the Simorgh in a moral story about human fallibility -- even our parents and wise leaders make poor decisions -- and the need to forgive.

In addition to the printed book an audio version of *The Phoenix of Persia* is available. The narration on this audiobook has a good pace, allowing younger readers to follow the words on the page whilst enjoying the illustrations by Amir Hassanzadeh Sharif. The pictures are richly coloured, using tone to vary the intensity of the colours. Accompanying the narration is an original composition using Iranian instruments and performed by musicians of Iranian heritage with each instrument representing a different character in the story. There is further information at the back of the book to help guide readers when listening to the music. There is however a simple pleasure in listening to the recording and reading the book.

There is also a Teacher Resources booklet available, primarily for Key Stages 2 and 3, but the activities can be adapted. The Teacher Resources are cross-circular including geographical and historical research tasks, creating a dramatic performance, various art projects and composing music. In addition there are resource boxes that can be accessed via Tower Hamlets Schools Library Service, giving children an opportunity to handle some of the artefacts contained in the book. More information and other material is available at <http://tinyowl.co.uk/phoenixofpersia/>.

The Phoenix of Persia is an inspiration story, accompanied with so many creative resources for schools to give their students a real insight into Iranian culture.

Simon Barrett

The Really, Really, Really Big Dinosaur

Richard Byrne, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Little dinosaur, Finlay, is happily counting jelly beans from a jar when he is confronted by a big dinosaur, who wants to take them all away. Finlay patiently explains that the jelly beans belong to a friend. The claims of an increasingly furious big dinosaur are politely and invariably refuted by Finlay. A little clever twist settles the score in the end and grants a very happy ending.

This story was initially published in 2012 and appears now in the Oxford University Press edition. The colours are bold and attractive; the text is printed in a variety of fonts and sizes, which underlines passages of the story. The background includes delicate drawing of archaopteryx, trilobites and ammonites which add another layer of interest. The end page includes a list of suggestions of questions and activities inspired by the story. This is a delightful book for young children who love dinosaurs but is also as a useful tool to discuss the value of sharing and kindness.

The young children with whom I shared this book loved its characters and while initially they were rather attracted by the jelly beans, they soon turned their attention to the little details that each page added to reveal the mysterious friend. This audience was thrilled by the story and loved guessing and

anticipating the turns of the plot. They were all delighted by the outcome and most definitely joined in the counting and sharing of the jelly beans at the end. A triumph.

Laura Brill

Somebody Swallowed Stanley

Sarah Roberts, illus. Hannah Peck, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Stanley falls into the sea and floats in amongst a swarm of shimmering jellyfish. At first glance, Stanley could almost be mistaken for just another sea creature, but:

“...his stripes were too straight and his tentacles too few. He just floated in the sea, not sure what to do. You see Stanley was no ordinary jellyfish.”

Stanley is a plastic bag and we all know what happens next—Somebody Swallowed Stanley. Stanley escapes from the first creature only to be swallowed by a series of other creatures. Stanley doesn't mean to hurt anyone, but he doesn't belong in the sea. (Who knew you could feel sorry for a plastic bag?) Eventually, Stanley is rescued from the ocean and put to better use where he can no longer be a danger to unwary sea creatures—a happy ending for everyone.

Hannah's Peck's illustrations are strikingly beautiful. I particularly love that she's used a very dark blue, instead of the traditional cyan of picture books about the ocean—in contrast the sea life appears intensely vivid and luminous. The typography swoops and flows like water currents through the book.

The author, environmental expert Sarah Roberts, is well placed to deliver this important message about plastic pollution, but she has also created a poignant narrative with a deft lightness of touch that will charm children as well as educate them.

Somebody Swallowed Stanley is a gorgeously illustrated book with a critical message—highly recommended.

Rebecca Rouillard

Sophie Johnson Detective Genius

Morag Hool, illus. Ella Okstad, pub. Simon & Schuster

The first thing that grabbed my attention as soon as I picked up this book, was the multi-coloured dots that cover the cover with shiny, holographic bits. It catches the light to look like glitter and it

definitely attention grabbing and unique! I got the impression that this was a high quality, well-made book that had been executed well. The book is a good size that little hands will be able to hold well.

The title and front-page illustration is a good indicator of what to expect inside the book: a detective girl and her dog look for clues to solve mysteries. What wasn't expected however, was the funny twist that while the main character moans about how useless her dog is, the dog is actually solving more crimes than she is. While she talks to the reader, the burglars burgle and crimes happen in the background. It's not only a well written story but a funny one with lots of things happening on every page to keep the reader's attention. I could really see younger viewers having fun looking for clues and details in the background of the illustrations.

The illustrations are quirky, sketchy and whimsical. In a sort of scribble-style that appears professional and colourful yet still simple and child-like. There was something about the illustrations that I didn't quite like, but I couldn't put my finger on it until after I'd read the book a few times, and I realised that in some places, the illustrations jumped from being a realistic scene in a household (Sophie looking for clues, the dog barking at the window, a typical living room scene) to a very abstract and almost surreal scene (the tree being a lollipop with sweets, a unicorn in the background). I felt it would have been more effective to stick to one or the other as switching was a bit confusing.

It's nice to see stories with a little girl as the main character, and especially one that isn't blonde haired and blue eyed. Not only does this make her stand out more opposed to competitive stories, but she's relatable and real. The story is told from her point of view and written in a convincing way to portray a young girl's thoughts at that age. I did find the story amusing and I wanted to know what would happen next!

With a good, well written story and nice illustrations to back it up, this is certainly the kind of book children want to read over and over. It has that charm the kids seem to love. There isn't a message as such, or any life-lesson to be learnt, just a loveable, funny story that is heart-warming and easy to read.

Izzy Bean

There's a Spider in my Soup!

Megan Brewis, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Little Spider wants to explore, but Mum Spider and Dad Spider think she'd be better off staying close to the web. The human house they live in is a scary place for spiders after all – there are just so many ways to be squished! But Little Spider isn't convinced ... and before long she's in a steaming soup-bowl of trouble...

Written and illustrated by Megan Brewis, *There's a Spider in my Soup!* is a charming and cheekily-humorous adventure. The illustrations are bright and engaging, incorporating lots of interesting textures and fun little details which will provide something new to spot over multiple readings. Spiders of course aren't always the most appealing members of the household, but children will surely love the resourceful (and rather cute) Little Spider, especially as she proves that mums and dads aren't always right.

Creepy crawlies are enjoying something of a moment in middle grade and chapter books at the moment – think M.G. Leonard's *Beetle Boy* series or Emma Read's upcoming *Milton the Mighty*, also about an adventurous spider – encouraging younger readers to be curious about the insect world, rather than scared of it. *There's a Spider in my Soup!* is aimed at an even younger audience (0-5 years), but hopefully will inspire its readers to be kind if they encounter an eight-legged friend – even if it is in their soup!

Olivia Parry

Super Sloth

Robert Starling, pub. Andersen Press

Poor Ordinary Sloth....he does the same thing every day until he finds a strange looking leaf. The leaf turns out to be a superhero comic and Sloth is amazed and totally engrossed in the adventures of the superhero. Inspired by the story, Sloth finds a cape, he already has a mask, and hears a cry for help!

However, even with his cape on sloth is a bit slow and he doesn't have much luck in catching Anteater, who has been stealing all the food! Something must be done to stop Anteater before the animals all starve. Sloth comes up with a genius idea!

In true superhero form, sloth figures out a way to use his strengths to help save the day! No one suspects a thing and sloth sneaks up on Anteater and his stronghold of guards. Super Sloth to the rescue! From this daring deed onwards, Super Sloth will always be ready to save the day ... eventually!

A wonderful book with beautiful illustrations that show how using your strengths can make your ordinary life extraordinary!

The facts about sloths on the end pages of the back cover are an excellent accompaniment to the book. It gives children the opportunity to learn important information about the sloth, a sometimes overlooked but fascinating animal.

Erin Hamilton

The Tide

Helen Welsh, illus. Ashling Lindsay, pub. Little Tiger Press

I must admit that when I received this book I had not done any research on it and had no preconceptions of what to expect and boy did I get more than I was expecting!

Looking at the front cover I thought it to be a story about a grandad and his granddaughter on holiday at the beach and it was, but not how I was imagining. Within reading the first page I understood that this book had been written to explain in a gentle and honest way how our older relatives may become forgetful over time. It explored the frustrations and fears this may cause to others but how ultimately family will always love and support each other, even during difficult times. It also remains positive, encouraging us to create new experiences and make new memories, even if some of them may be forgotten.

The Tide benefits from simple and sympathetic illustrations that help tell this important story that so many children will be familiar with. The colours are beautiful and give a calming effect. All of them will make you smile and leave you with a warm feeling.

Whilst this will not be a book for everybody's bookshelf, it will be a great addition to those families who need to find a way to explain what is happening to grandad or grandma, allowing for further discussions and providing some comfort to what can be a very confusing and sad time.

Victoria Wharam

Tony T-Rex's Family Album

Mike Benton, illus. Rob Hodgson, pub. Thames & Hudson

Mike Benton is Professor of Vertebrate Palaeontology at the University of Bristol, so he knows what he's writing about, and he is evidently keen to enthuse and educate young dinosaur fans.

Tony T-Rex explains how a dinosaur becomes a fossil and how it might be uncovered and reconstructed, then goes back 201 million years to tell the story of the first dinosaurs, the megalosaurs and dilophosaurs in the Jurassic Period. It's full of facts, but also quite jokey, e.g: "Half of the 3 tonne weight of a megalosaur was in its tail. Avoid getting sat on at all costs." Tony T-Rex refers to some of these as his family, like Stegosaur Great Uncle Spike. It is interesting that a dead allosaur was found with a hole in its vertebrae that exactly matched the spike at the end of a stegosaurus tail: probably young readers will enjoy that kind of information. Cruella the Allosaurus is so tall that she has to be shown with the book held sideways, but Great-great-great grandpa Bill the brachiosaurus, who never

stopped eating greenery and was the largest and heaviest animal ever, is shown from a long way away, which, as he would have suffered from dreadful wind, is probably just as well...

There is humour in Rob Hodgson's textured cartoon illustrations too- he has previously illustrated *Monster Activity* and *An A-Z of Monsters and Magical Beings*, so large animals are a speciality. There are certainly a lot of very sharp teeth, some with added blood. Iguanadons like Uncle Magellan were apparently the first to chew their food instead of swallowing it, and the 15 km wide meteorite that landed 66 million years ago was responsible for the death of all four-legged animals over 25 kg- smaller animals managed to survive and develop.

Your reviewer has learned a lot from this book! 64 pages of fascinating facts are aided by an Index and a Glossary, and this will be enjoyed for junior readers at home or in school.

Diana Barnes

Wakey Birds

Maddie Frost, pub. Templar Books

The Wakey Birds' myriad of reasons for not sleeping will probably be familiar to most parents; they can't get comfortable; they get itchy; they are easily spooked and they have lots of BIG thoughts. Although the 'Soothing Shushers' and 'Go-To-Sleep-Leapers' settle the Wakey Birds, the Littlest Wakey Bird is just not tired. As the roguish Wakey Birds get louder, they need to be careful not to disturb the one animal that should never, ever be disturbed. The Dreaded Jungle Beast. Gulp!

Maddie Frost uses different found textures to create her bright pictures through a process of digital collaging. A colour palette of midnight blues, blacks, bright pinks and yellows is vibrant and stylish, and her lively characters are full of fun and personality. My favourites are the Wakey Birds who, like most toddlers I know, are full of mischief and very cute.

Every sleep-deprived parent will know that sometimes a good story is the only thing for an overtired Wakey Bird so, if a lack of sleep is turning you into a Dreaded Jungle Beast, this book might just be the answer.

There are bits you'll want to whisper and bits that will make you shout at the top of your voice as the naughty Wakey Birds wake the animals in the jungle. But, as you'd hope, by the end of the story, everyone is fast asleep, making this delightful picture book the perfect bedtime read.

Abby Mellor

Junior Book Reviews

A Girl Called Justice

Elly Griffiths, pub. Quercus

Justice Jones is so named as her father is an eminent barrister and her mother the author of books about a classics professor and private investigator named Leslie Light. With parents like this it's not surprising the twelve-year-old has an active imagination and an interest in murder mysteries. Justice has always been homeschooled but after her mother passes away Justice's busy father worries she might not be able to take care of herself at home so sends her to a boarding school.

The story begins with Justice being driven to Highbury House Boarding School for the Daughters of Gentlefolk. She's not really sure what 'gentlefolk' are but she knows that the school looks unwelcoming - a cross between Dracula's Castle and a prison. The taxi driver can't tell her much about the place, but he does say that his brother, an undertaker, went there the week before. In her journal, Justice notes that the place has 'a potential for murder high.'

Once at school, Justice discovers that a serving girl named Mary had died but no one is willing to talk about it. Justice is determined to find out the truth behind what happened, but this only the start of the mysteries and strange goings on. Justice is sure there's a murderer in school and she steadily builds up a list of possible suspects in her notebook.

The book is well plotted and well written with clues and red herrings aplenty to keep Justice and the reader guessing until the end – making it a real page turner. At first it's hard to know when the story is set as Justice is travelling in a taxi. Highbury House Boarding School with its unwelcoming Matron, suits of armour, wooden panelled walls, turrets and stone staircases are placed in the past – as is the language of the other girls – but it's only things like the absence of mobile phones and travelling in Dad's 'smashing car' (a Lagonda) at an impressive 'thirty miles an hour' that really give it away.

A book clearly set (I'm guessing) in the 1930's might put off some readers but the fact that Justice herself is a modern thinking homeschooled girl gives the book a more modern feel. I loved it and would highly recommend it to anyone wanting a good age appropriate murder mystery.

Damian Harvey

A Wolf Called Wander

Rosanne Parry, illus. Monica Armino, pub. Andersen Press

Every library ought to have a copy of this book for a variety of valid reasons.

The first and most important one is that this wonderful story is written with lyrical, powerful language and its subject matter is a universal tale of love, loss, survival and belonging.

The second is that it is based on a real character and it offers plenty of valuable material useful to readers interested in ecology and the life of wild wolves. At the end of the book there are also pages offering facts on wolves and the habitats of the Pacific Northwest.

The third reason is the beautiful artwork that accompanies the narration. Monica Armiño's drawings are vivid and very evocative. I spent equal time observing them as reading the words of this book.

A Wolf Called Wander is based on the true story of a grey wolf called Oregon 7 – later renamed Journey by a group of schoolchildren. Journey was born in Oregon, USA, and at the age of two left his home and travelled hundreds of kilometres, reaching northern California. Here he found a mate, who also had moved from a previous location and had followed Journey's scent. They had a number of litters and established themselves in an area where no wolf had been seen for nearly ninety years. Amazingly, although Journey's travels took him through areas populated by cattle and sheep, he did not kill any livestock. All this is known because Journey was fitted with a collar which allowed researchers to track his movements and learn about wolves' behaviour.

On the basis of this scientific observation Rosanne Parry has crafted a touching story told by the wolf himself, here called Swift by his parents, as he was the first to stand up and walk in his pack. We learn through Swift's recount about his relationship with his mother, father, siblings and the rest of the pack that inhabits their beautiful area of the mountains and about his development from defenceless puppy to young wolf, keen to take part in the pack's hunts and to follow in his father's footsteps. The arrival of a rival pack and a disastrous fight pushes Swift away from his original territory. Lost and wounded, Swift uses his existing skills and learns many more in order to survive in unfamiliar territory. Respectful of life, especially of the ones he has to take to feed himself, it is interesting to see how Swift's perception of himself is also based on the prey that he is forced to hunt.

In some vivid and dramatic scenes, Swift encounters hunters, finds and loses again part of his family, learns the perils of crossing a road and is caught in a devastating fire. Then, when he has finally found a place he can call home, a companion that Swift thought he had briefly met and lost, reappears. This tale closes to open a new one. This significant moment is acknowledged by the wolves assuming new names; exit Swift and enter Wander!

Readers will be moved and swept away by the epic adventures of Swift. Characters and situations are carefully observed and vividly rendered through a richly descriptive narrative.

Laura Brill

Beverly Right Here

Kate Di Camillo, pub. Walker Books

Beverly Tapinski is 14, her mother is a drunk, her father disappeared to New York years ago and the only thing that makes her challenging life bearable is her beloved dog Buddy and her friends Louisiana Elefante and Raymie Nightingale, both of whom face family challenges of their own and so understand hers. But Louisa has gone to live in Georgia with her crazy Grandma and she and Raymie have just buried Buddy. Desperately grieving and faced with the prospect of a life without Buddy and with a mother who cares for nothing but her next drink, Beverly runs away.

She ends up in a small coastal town where despite her initial reluctance she finds herself taken under the wing of elderly resident Iola, whose eccentricities match Beverly's stubbornness. Slowly, gently and despite her determination not to let them, Elmer, Doris, Charles and the other people she meets there manage to slip under her seemingly tough and invincible exterior to reach the achingly vulnerable girl hiding underneath. Between them they help her realise that she is somebody who is worth loving, that they care for her and that she can hope for and make changes in her life.

This is a follow-on novel from *Raymie Nightingale* and *Louisiana's Way Home*. Each of the books are stand-alone telling the stories of one of the three girls but the three link together.

Beautifully written, with short chapters, accessible language and a very readable style. Kate Di Camillo has such a gift for drawing the reader in from the first page and making them fall in love with her characters who are wonderful cameos of small town residents. Small town life is perfectly captured, and the characters highlight the hopes, dreams, quirks and challenges that they face. The book made me laugh, made me angry and made me cry all in the space of a few pages. I fell in love with these characters, they will stay with me for a long time and they reinforced my belief in the power of love and the basic goodness of most people in this world.

With all of Kate Di Camillo's books, I find that when I get to the end of them I give a small involuntary sigh – partly a sigh of satisfaction at finishing such a wonderful reading experience and partly a sigh of sadness at having come to the end of a book that I want to have the pleasure of discovering and reading anew. If you haven't yet read the first two books my advice would be to move them to the top of your to be read pile straight away and add *Beverly Right Here* as well. This is storytelling at its absolute finest and I just LOVED it!

Annie Everall

Bloom

Nicola Skinner, illus. Flavia Sorrentino, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

There's a certain kind of reader who's going to love this book, a reader who is, I suspect, often hard to please. A voracious reader, an accomplished reader, a lover of words.

Allow me to illustrate: "...with her forehead squished up against the window, staring at the blue sky like it was someone else's birthday cake and she knew she wouldn't get a slice."

Oh my. Oh. My. Many times. Nicola Skinner just smashes it like that. Her writing is elegant and flowing and witty in the way books described as "for fans of Terry Pratchett" aspire to be. You don't read this book, you inhale it; you read faster, cleaner, more effortlessly than you thought you could.

I think it's exceptionally well written.

It isn't just the word-lovers who'll love this book but, you know, they will savour it. Story? Nicely positioned off-trope so that it's restlessly interesting, but still provides moments where you can wallow in the build-up to a narrative punchline. Very nicely constructed, good strong shape – I was sorry to reach its end, but it did so, so satisfyingly and completely. How much should I reveal?

It centres on compulsive achiever Sorrel, whose narrative voice stays squarely in our face the entire time, providing a kind of breathless immediacy. This book is her relating to us her tale by way of warning us what to possibly, potentially expect now we've begun reading. What may already have begun happening.

It begins when she's driven to go to the tree in her garden from which she's been warned to stay away, when upon in odd and eerie circumstances the ground splits to reveal an old packet of seeds that Sorrel cannot resist, and which begin to exert an influence on her once she has retrieved them – no, once they have retrieved themselves upon her...

Because concrete order and wild nature have been locked in conflict for generations in Sorrel's town and order's winning, order's almost won, and nature appears to have pulled Sorrel out from its sleeve as its last, trump card...

Sterile conformity is the enemy here, and it manifests in a variety of ways, both carrots and sticks. I liked that it starts out as attractive to Sorrel, with her not appreciating its corrosive effects. I liked that she was scared of nature but fascinated and compelled by it. I like the apt metaphors.

I'm getting close to giving away the plot, which I don't like doing. Those seeds Sorrel found? They want to grow. They grow. People don't like it when they do. Let's leave it there.

I have to mention Neena. “Neena went through a lot of eyebrows in the name of science.” Friendships in books often feel contrived and unnatural. Sorrel’s friendship with Neena is pleasingly organic and comfortable. It’s refreshing to read.

I also need to mention Flavia Sorrentino’s wonderful visual flourishes to the story. They’re sparsely utilised but gorgeous, and the contrast between the front and end papers underlines the care the entire production team appear to have taken.

In the end *Bloom* is a fable that has found a right moment to be read. It’s provocative in its embrace of nature and individualism, in its challenge to conformity and economic growth, but these underpinning thoughts don’t intrude on it being a lovely story about a girl that tries hard to be good and harder to make things better.

I’ll be actively nudging this in the direction of most readers from Year 4 up.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Boot

Shane Hegarty, illus. Ben Mantle, pub. Hachette Children’s Books

‘I woke up with only two-and-a-half memories,’ the small robot Boot tells us rather sadly at the beginning of this charming chapter book adventure from Darkmouth-author Shane Hegarty. His screen is cracked, his voice is glitchy and he has no idea how he’s ended up in the Krush-em-Kwik scrapyard. All he knows is that he had an owner called Beth and that he has to find her – but that’s a big adventure for a small robot...

The lovely thing about Hegarty’s storytelling is that it is so sensitively attuned to what matters to children (here aged maybe 7+). This may seem an obvious feature of, indeed, a children’s book – but in fact it’s perhaps not all that common. It’s a real skill to be able to tell a story through the ideas and feelings which represent how children, especially younger children, experience the world, which is of course distinct from how adults experience the world – what they find funny, worrying, sad, thought-provoking. Boot manages this consistently in the threat from its genuinely scary villain, the angry and obsessive Flint, as well as the friendship between Boot and his robot companions, and the sadness of feeling like an old robot who may no longer be needed.

There is a gentle link here to how we can relate to older relatives who are maybe not as well as they have been, though the more poignant parts are well-balanced with lots of fun and boisterous humour. Telling the story through Boot’s voice is also very effective: he has no memories, and so approaches the world with an endearing (and childlike) curiosity.

Although the premise is a familiar one, pitched between *Wall-E* and *Toy Story* with a touch of *Pinocchio*, *Boo!*'s storytelling always feels fresh and engaging. The chapters are well-constructed to hold the attention of younger readers, with amusing titles ('I am not a biscuit!'), and just the right amount of illustration to break up the text and help the audience to imagine the characters.

Olivia Parry

Cloud Boy

Marcia Williams, pub. Walker Books

A story about quilting might seem like an unlikely hit at KS2 and yet this is an astonishing, original and unforgettable book. Nine year olds Harry Christmas and Angie Moon were born almost on the same day, live next door and even share a tree house straddling both their back gardens. It's a place for Angie to write and draw and for Harry to spot cloud formations - and for lots of sweet-eating. It seems inevitable that, growing up together, the pair will become best friends - almost twins. Inseparable, until the time that Harry's headaches become so regular he is taken into hospital. As everything falls apart, Harry needs his best friend more than ever to patch his life back together.

Cloud Boy is Angie's diary during the year of Harry's illness. Her entries are honest and capture her every raging emotion, not just the sadness, fear and confusion but her determination that Harry must get better and the anger and resentment when he just isn't around to spend time together in their newly-finished treehouse.

Interwoven with the diary entries are letters written by Angie's grandma Gertie who has come for an extended stay. These letters were written during her time as a child prisoner in the harsh Changi camp in Singapore during World War Two. They provide a welcome distraction for Angie and also provide the inspiration for her to create a secret quilt for her seriously ill friend - just as the girls in the camp made a quilt in secret for their leader, and the women made quilts for the men in the camp containing secret messages. The two stories cleverly unfold in tandem, showing the bravery and resilience of the girls in camp but also of Angie as she comes to terms with her best friend's illness.

The diary format adds to the pace, immediacy and emotion of the story, making this ideal for a wide range of readers while the interwoven letters make this a refreshingly new addition to the wealth of World War Two-inspired fiction for middle grade readers. Williams doesn't shy away from the horrors of war but instead makes them completely accessible for her readers. In a historical end note she explains the real, little known and completely fascinating story of the quilts of Olga Morris which inspired her debut novel.

This is a brave, sensitively-told and very moving story about what it means to have, and be a friend. It is about the importance of love, courage and hope in the most adverse of circumstances. It will also

be invaluable to every child who has to cope with someone close to them being diagnosed with a serious illness. Without giving too much away about the ending this is not at all an easy read, but it is, nonetheless, an important one.

Until now Williams has been best known for her detailed, witty and beautifully illustrated comic strip retellings of classic stories. Hopefully, she has many more stories like *Cloud Boy* still to tell.

Other highly recommended stories about coping with illness and loss for this age group include *Ways to Live Forever* by Sally Nicholls; *A Library of Lemons* by Jo Cotterill; *The Dollmaker of Krakow* by R M Romero; *The Closest Thing to Flying* by Gill Lewis and *Our Castle by the Sea* by Lucy Strange. All provide a new and refreshingly different take on World War Two.

Eileen Armstrong

Check Mates

Stewart Foster, pub. Simon & Schuster

Stewart Foster has done it again! First the exceptional *The Bubble Boy*, then the timely *All the Things That Could Go Wrong* and now the utterly unforgettable *Check Mates*; Foster is firmly making his mark amongst the likes of Ross Welford, Christopher Edge and Lara Williamson.

Check Mates tells the heart-warming tale of Felix, a charming 11-year-old protagonist with ADHD, his grandfather and a relationship that blossoms in amongst the black and white chequers of a chess board. But when Felix's grandfather first suggests learning chess to help with Felix's attention span, Felix couldn't think of anything worse. Yet sometimes the best lessons come in the most unexpected of places, and Felix soon learns that there's always something to play for.

Full of humour, compassion and encouragement, whilst skilfully woven together with an exceptionally underrated historical twist, *Check Mates* is a book that will no doubt resonate with a lot of middle grade readers out there, particularly with Felix and his approach to life.

Felix is written with such authenticity and warmth that he radiates a sense of familiarity in us all. I'm sure we've all at times been lost to our daydreams or lacked the concentration to focus yet Felix's ADHD finds himself struggling at school and constantly in trouble. Felix's ADHD is a massive part of his identity, (similar to Alex's OCD in *All the Things That Could Go Wrong*), and Foster boldly approaches this representation with a strong sense of honesty and vulnerability. Through these stirring insights, I found myself rooting for Felix in his difficult moments and moved by his growing confidence.

But personally, for me, it was Felix's grandfather that was the star of the book - an utterly fantastic character, full of depth, patience and understanding. His story moved me to tears, yet its backdrop to the Cold War and the division of East and West Germany with the Berlin Wall is one that will stir a sense of curiosity and importance in children.

There is so much to love about this story, with running themes of perseverance, self-belief, and the importance of family. And you don't have to know about chess to enjoy this book, but who knows, you too might find yourself wanting to learn!

Fern Tolley

D-Day Dog

Tom Palmer, pub. Conkers, an imprint of Barrington Stoke

War is for Jack very much like the D-Day game he plays: a first-person shooting computer simulation where no-one really gets hurt. This all changes as Jack and his classmates prepare to go on the school trip to the D-Day landing beaches.

Through the story, author Tom Palmer, draws out the human cost of war across a number of different historic and current conflicts. First there is the story of a real paratrooper Emile Corteil who on 6th June 1944 landed in France with his dog, Glen. Jack is researching Emile and Glen's story but struggles to understand how Emile could put his dog's life at risk. Then, there is Kasandra, a refugee from Syria, whose family fled the violence. Her family is part of what Jack learns is called 'collateral damage'. Jack also meets a British paratrooper who survived the Falklands conflict in 1982, who talks about the glory and the fear of battle. Finally there is Jack's dad, an Army Reservist whose notice of mobilisation threatens to break-up his family. All these stories are brilliantly woven together in this one book.

It is however an emotional roller-coaster for Jack. Unsettled by the arguments at home, his dad leaving and a thoughtlessness that gets him into trouble at school, he reacts angrily towards family and friends, ending up dreading the school trip that he had so looked forward to. Tom Palmer seems to accurately describe a young boy's pent up emotions, anxiety and confusion. It is however unlikely friendships that help Jack to begin to understand his own feelings as he works through the complexity of emotions and motivations in war. *D-Day Dog* feels like a story of redemption. Jack, always a kind-hearted child, becomes a better person, more empathetic and more nuanced in his understanding. There is also a sense of Jack fully appreciating the true meaning of the fact that so many 'gave their today for our tomorrow'.

Moreover, there are a great selection of classroom resources on Tom Palmer's website to support the book and the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings on the 6th June 2019. Specifically there are a

number of videos with Tom Palmer on location in the places described in his book that are well-worth watching: Omaha Beach and Ranville Cemetery, the grave of Emile and Glen. All this can be found at www.tompalmer.co.uk/dday-dog.

D-Day Dog is a true tribute to soldiers, civilians and animals caught up in conflict.

Simon Barrett

Dancing The Charleston

Jaqueline Wilson, illus. Nick Sharratt, pub. Doubleday Children's Books

This is a very inventive, exciting story, all about the 1920s. It's about a girl called Mona who lives with her aunt in the grounds of Somerset Manor. She has everything a 10-year-old could possibly want - however, one day a giant change strikes that will alter her life forever when the Lady of the Manor dies. The ending is quite surprising, and you can't guess at all by the rest of the book.

The mood of the book varied a lot from happy to sad, exciting and intriguing which was like a rollercoaster ride. I didn't know anything about the 1920s until I read the book; now I know much more and found all the details really interesting.

Mr. Benjamin, who is related to Lady Somerset, inherits the house and changes it completely. Mona has to face a few problems but then makes great new friends with Mr Benjamin's nephews and nieces. One day he takes them on a magical day out to the Great Exhibition, where she discovers a secret that changes everything.

Dancing the Charleston is a book I would definitely recommend to fans of Jaqueline's previous books. It's very much a rollercoaster ride book – thrills and spills; ups and downs!

Hazel Sullivan

Evie and the Animals

Matt Haig, illus. Emily Gravett, pub. Canongate

Throughout history tales of animals have been popular – animals that change transform, animals that have power, animals that can speak, sometimes even animals that have power over humans. More recently tales of animals have been popular in children's literature. From true stories of animals suffering and overcoming hardship to stories of animals as man's best friend and evens stories just set in animal kingdoms, real and make-believe. In many of these stories the animals, of course, naturally, can speak. It was Hugh Lofting who was one of the first authors to introduce books for children in

which the people and the animals interacted and spoke with one another. Following in his footsteps have been a number of equally successful books and stories.

Matt Haig and Emily Gravett have come together as author and illustrator to bring us a human-animal story that is a true delight. Bringing a smile to the face of the reader, engaging them in a captivating and charming story, delighting them when they see how eloquently the story has been brought to life in the illustrations.

What, you are now wondering, is the story about? Evie. Evie is a little girl who loves animals and, as we are soon to learn, has a very special talent. Evie can hear the thoughts of animals. Evie's dad called her special which might have been nice if it hadn't been so complicated and this is where the story opens. Fear not for despite the reason for Evie being a complicated type of special the story is not ... yet ... it has its twists and turns and its fair share of adventure for our heroine because above all else Evie's special talent can be dangerous. It is not the act of freeing the school rabbit from its cage or the aftermath of meeting the lion which are the biggest problems Evie will face. It is the danger that every animal in the town faces, and the danger of a very mysterious man from her past with a talent even more powerful than Evie's.

Written with Matt Haig's trademark light and gentle touch, illustrated beautifully throughout and with chapters short enough to engage younger, independent readers, and keep older ones reading and powering through as they determine to help Evie and discover more about the importance of being a very special type of 'special'.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Fearless Five

Bannie McPartlin, pub. Piccadilly Press

It's 1990, Ireland is doing well in the World Cup, and Jeremy and his friends have just broken up for the summer holidays. All should be great, but Johnny J's mother has cancer and her treatment isn't working. Jeremy hates to see what his closest friend is going through and can't bear to contemplate how either of them would feel if, as looks likely, Johnny J's horrible Auntie Alison takes him to England. If they could get the money together, they could pay for his mother to go to the States, where they're sure she would find a cure. The friends come up with and discard one idea after another, until only Jeremy's idea remains. They are going to have to stage a heist.

An unlikely band of robbers, twelve and thirteen years old, and most of them neither super-fit nor super-bold, they lay their plans. But things don't work out well, and Johnny J's mother is getting worse. There's no choice: now they are going to have to steal from a security lorry. The press portrays

them as the 'Fearless Five', but fearless is certainly not how they feel, especially once they go on the run.

Bannie McPartlin has created an attractive cast of characters. Jeremy is timid and frightened of change. Brian, always known as Sumo because of his huge size, likes nothing better than spam sandwiches. Walker is tiny and plagued with allergies. Johnny J is very cool, everyone likes him. He's getting more and more friendly with Charlie, and she's gradually infiltrating the group, much to Jeremy's annoyance. He doesn't want girls around, though as time goes on, he's grateful for her quick-wittedness.

Despite the cancer theme (Johnny's mother doesn't get better), there is plenty of broad humour in *The Fearless Five*, which will make it appealing to lots of readers, as will the fast-moving plot. Many children will be pleased by the hint at the end that this won't be the last time they meet the friends. The book is over 350 pages long though, so some will be daunted.

Anne Harding

The Fire Maker

Guy Jones, pub. Chicken House

Alex Warner is having a tough time of it. His parents are divorced, his dad is always working, his lifelong best friend has turned into his worst enemy, spreading rumours around school and beating him up, and his favourite thing in the world - doing magic tricks - is not what the popular kids are doing. The only person who can make magic cool is Jack Kellar, rockstar illusionist and Alex's hero.

One day, while running away from his former friend and a gang of bullies, Alex stumbles into an unlocked garden to hide and sees three hypnotic, floating fireballs that he just can't explain, nor can he stop thinking about them and the way they seemed to communicate with his mind. Sneaking back to see them again one day, he meets their guardian, Mr Olmos, and is drawn into a world of magic way beyond disappearing pennies and card tricks. Along the way he also enters a national magic competition, learns unbelievable new skills and meets his hero, who turns out to be just like Alex ... or is he?

This is a great book for anyone who feels a little bit different, whether it's because they like magic, or hate football, or just feel unlike all the others at school. Guy Jones covers all sorts of topics that might make a child feel like an outsider, including divorce, disability and being bullied. Refreshingly, there's no magic cure to any of this in *The Fire Maker*, and much of Alex's life at the end of the book is just the same as when we meet him, but he's worked out a few of his problems in the normal, non-magic way. I imagine it would make anyone encountering any of these issues feel a little bit less alone.

While *The Fire Maker* concludes satisfactorily, after a dramatic finale, plenty of threads in the book are left dangling, leaving it primed for a sequel that could roam across continents and centuries. I'd definitely enjoy reading more about Alex, Sally and their friends.

A magical adventure for girls and boys of 8 and up, or confident younger readers, *The Fire Maker* is an enjoyable standalone novel from the author of *The Ice Garden*.

Antonia Russell

The Good Thieves

Katherine Rundell, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Vita Marlowe has a mission. Her beloved grandfather, Jack, has been cheated out of everything he owns by a notorious conman with Mafia connections. Vita is determined to set things right, so she devises a plan to outwit Jack's enemies. She finds a young pickpocket, working the streets of the city. Nearby, two boys with highly unusual skills and secrets of their own are also about to be drawn into her defiant plan.

Vita's motto is "Impossible doesn't mean it's not worth trying."

Katherine Rundell, in her previous children's books has proved to be a wondrous story-teller. Her latest offering, *The Good Thieves*, lives up to and beyond anticipation. The message is in the title's oxymoron of Good and Thieves, and instantly signals her playful plotting and the moral heart of the yarn.

One of the great reading pleasures of this book lies in Rundell's prestidigitation of the traditional elements of children's literature that leads us into a magical mix of traditional, yet untraditional tale. So, we follow a quest with a motley crew of children as they take up arms against a dastardly villain. We have a stolen castle, the search for a precious jewel, animals and their rights, the circus. But this plays out in a New York setting of the 1920s, which becomes an integral character in the tale, providing the generic backdrop of speakeasies, prohibition, criminal gangsters, Carnegie Hall; you name it!

It's all great fun, a romp with a great heart; a moral tale of friendship across diversity, teamwork, the value of family listening and understanding and the power of strength in adversity. When all's said and done, the title of this highly recommended novel is *The Good Thieves*.

Recommended reading age: good readers of 10+, many adults who love a good plot and people who like planning, students of literature who gleefully enjoy genre- spotting, readers who previously enjoyed Katherine Rundell's *The Explorer* and Rundell's splendid back catalogue of children's fiction.

Morag Charlwood

Harsu & the Werestcoat

Barbara Else, pub. Gecko Press

Harsu became very ill when he was six years old. His father, who was both a warrior and a physician, cured his son but died before he could finish teaching Harsu to read. Harsu's illness had left him scarred, which mightily displeased his perfectionist mother Daama, who was a demon and a werestcoat: she could at will transform herself into a stoat. Finding Harsu with his facial scarring to be an unsatisfactory offspring, Daama resorts to kidnapping other people's children.

The questions posed by this book are whether Harsu can bring about the reunion of the kidnapped children with their families and whether he can free himself from the clutches of his evil mother. Daama is, unlike most fictional mothers, a model of extreme viciousness.

A crucial point in Barbara Else's book is literacy. It becomes absolutely essential that Harsu should learn to read and to assimilate texts if he is to stand any chance of completing his missions. A further point made by the book is the power of cooperative effort. Daama is in search of a single perfect child. All the children she acquires, being human, manifest some imperfection or other. Yet working together these imperfect children find that they can achieve significant successes.

The book is a powerful fantasy for readers aged ten to twelve.

Rebecca Butler

High Rise Mystery

Sharna Jackson, pub. Knights Of

Two sisters with a penchant for solving mysteries, living on a high rise estate in London, become embroiled in the suspicious death of a neighbour, whose body is found in the refuse area. Eleven-year-old Anika – Nik for short – and her thirteen-year-old sister, Norva, are determined to discover the truth behind the death of their friend, Hugo Knightley-Webb, antiques dealer and art teacher. It's the height of the summer holidays and life on the estate is hot and steamy.

Norva is addicted to TV crime drama and is the intuitive side of the duo who feels things "in her waters". Nik is analytical and methodical - together they are "the Gut and the Nut" - a formidable crime-busting pair, without whom the local police would not have solved the murder.

Life on the estate is vividly and convincingly realised by the author, peopled with a colourful cast of characters amongst whom are several suspects – in the best *Midsomer Murders* tradition. Sharna Jackson weaves a complex plot through which we are guided by our sisterly sleuths.

This is a sassy and funny read, rich in dialogue while lighter on descriptive passages. The style is sharp and crisp, the word-smithery impressive. Jackson mixes street with erudition, with language such as “chagrin”, “palpable” and “hypothesis” alongside “Dial back the blunt”, and “I can’t even begin to even with this situation”. There is so much flow and rhythm to the text that it is a joy to read. Alongside this, we really warm to Nik and Norva who have a close, supportive relationship and whose opposing character traits complement each other perfectly. They are depicted not simply as a crime-busting duo, but as young people living in a close family unit with their father who is caretaker for the estate. There is emotional depth as we see Norva as an early teenager starting to be interested in boys, and both of them having to come to terms with their father perhaps wanting a partner of his own, not to mention the trauma of Dad actually possibly being involved in the murder.

High Rise Mystery is a much needed addition to the slowly increasing canon of literature written by BAME authors and a really positive and proud representation of great characters who just happen to be black. I look forward to more in the series.

Confident readers age 10 up who like a crime mystery in a realistic setting will enjoy this book.

Rose Palmer

Lily and the Rockets

Rebecca Stevens, illus. Harriet Taylor Seed, pub. Chicken House

Hands up all those who think women’s football is something new! It most certainly isn’t, and Rebecca Steven’s latest history-based novel, which focuses on the First World War, and the roles that women took over when the men were fighting in Europe, shows just how significant it was a century ago.

Lily Dodd is fourteen and has just left school. Her mother died when Lily was little, and so she grew up an only child with a football-mad Dad, taken to watch the Woolwich Arsenal team playing just streets away from her Plumstead home. At five foot ten Lily also learns to be a goalkeeper as she plays football with her Dad, and when she gets a job working in the munitions factory (having easily convinced them that she’s the required age of eighteen) she finds the girls there are keen footballers in their lunch break. When they form a team she becomes one of the Woolwich Arsenal Rockets, but when the men return at the end of the war, the women are no longer needed, and the Rockets appear to be a thing of the past. But Lily’s not going to give her football up that easily, and she finds a different way to keep playing.

While football is a major strand in Stevens' middle-grade novel, readers also learn a lot about life in an ordinary working community during WWI, and the decisions that many teenage girls had to make then. Like many girls and women during the war, Lily realises how lonely life must be for the young men out in France, and while some knitted gloves and socks for them, the girls at Woolwich Arsenal slipped little notes into the boxes of munitions they sent to the soldiers. Lily begins a correspondence with a soldier, and romance follows, but not quite in the way readers expect!

Stevens' earlier books have been time-slip novels, but this is a first-person account from Lily herself, and its immediacy carries readers into the spirit of adolescent life a century ago. Stevens includes an interesting afterword about the history of women's football.

Bridget Carrington

Malamander

Thomas Taylor, pub. Walker Books

Malamander is positively drenched in the atmosphere of a seaside town in winter. Storms blow in, sea mist drifts through the streets, and in Cheerie-on-Sea, the first two letters fall off the town sign. In the Grand Nautilus Hotel, Herbert Lemon is busy(ish) – in his job as Lost-and-Founder, with responsibility for sorting and storing lost stuff. Then, one day, a girl scrambles through his window. She's in a panic, because she's being chased by a sinister figure, a man in a long sailor's coat that's drenched in sea water, with a large iron boathook where one of his hands should be.

And so it begins. The girl is called Violet Parma and she's searching for her parents, whom she and everyone else lost when she was only a baby. The place she lost them was this very hotel, and now she wants Herbie to help her find them – after all, he's a Lost-and-Founder, isn't he? She won't take no for an answer, and soon Herbie is caught up in her adventure, and the story of the mysterious malamander and its search for its lost egg. And Boathook Man? Well, you'll have to read the book to find out where he fits in.

This is a lovely rich fantasy, permeated with the atmosphere of the seaside in winter. There's a terrific cast of characters, many of them with names that continue the theme – the hotel staff are Mr Mollusk, Lady Kraken and Amber Gris. Then there's Jenny Hanniver, who keeps the Eerie Book Dispensary, and Mrs Fossil with her Flotsamporium. It's a tale full of mystery, danger and treachery, but though you'll catch your breath sometimes, you always know that Herbie and Violet, brave, loyal and funny, will eventually triumph.

Sue Purkiss

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

The Maker of Monsters

Lorraine Gregory, pub. Oxford Children's Books

The Maker of Monsters sets the tone of the book from the outset with its setting of a 'mouldering old castle in the middle of the sea'. The main character, Brat, is longing to be loved by his master, the Lord Macawber, a man driven by anger and mania. Brat is a complex boy and it's hard not to feel sympathy for him. His only friends are 'creations' that have been rejected by Lord Macawber, who through magic has sewn together dead creatures and brought them back to life. The experiments of Brat's master just get larger and more dangerous, as he seeks to create the ultimate creatures of war and revenge. It is when these creatures escape the castle that Brat must become a hero, even though he doesn't feel up to the task.

I was immediately reminded of Frankenstein's monster and I think this is a child-friendly version of that gothic atmosphere. This would appeal to both sexes and is a very exciting and gripping read. I liked that it wasn't a predictable read and there are plenty of twists and unexpected incidents that occur.

It deals with the theme of grief very well, as Brat struggles to overcome the loss of his parents he realises that although they cannot be replaced he can still be loved by other people. The book also deals with self-esteem, self-worth, friendship, family, revenge and the environment.

The quest that Brat is sent on is really a journey of self-discovery. The reader discovers more about the world Brat is struggling to survive in and how those in power can abuse those powers to the detriment of everyone else. This would be an interesting book to use with a class because it's an exciting read aloud text, but also questions the motives of those in power. It would be interesting to see what choices pupils would make if they were in that same position of power.

I would recommend this for Year 5 and upwards. It would also work with Year 7s and 8s, especially if they designed their own potential war monsters.

Sophie Castle

Midnight at Moonstone

Lara Flecker, illus. Trisha Krauss, pub. Oxford Children's Books

This unusual, magical debut novel has a Nesbit quality to it. Twelve-year-old Kit feels overlooked and not as important as her older successful siblings and a disappointment to her famous and distinguished father. When he disappears for another long working trip and she is handed yet

another itinerary of when she is expected to stay with agency nannies or her two siblings for intense study sessions she decides she has had enough and is going to her late mother's childhood home, Moonstone, an old grand house turned into a costume museum. This is somewhere where she has never been but has always felt a close affinity to especially due to her treasured doll's house, inherited from her mum, which is a replica of Moonstone.

As she arrives, and meets her gruff grandfather for the first time, Kit is shocked by the crumbling ramshackle that Moonstone has become but is also surprised by the strange things that happen as the clock strikes midnight. For Flecker follows in the footsteps of classic novels such as Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* and once the clock has struck that magical hour all of the mannequins, in their authentic antique costumes, come to life. Each night they collectively grieve their now dishevelled appearances and also deal with long-held rivalry across the centuries, a bewildered and unstable Captain who has become separated from his other half, his portrait, and the disappearance of Minna, their youngest inhabitant.

Intriguingly, these characters are inspired by real museum costumes from around the world and we are given a brief biography of several at the end of the book. This is such a clever way for Flecker, herself a professional costume maker and specialist, of encouraging readers to further enter the world of costume history and maybe visit a museum or stately home themselves. It is also a unique way of bringing the wider subject of social history, (gender, wealth, social class, and so on) to life because as the blurb says every costume as its own story.

Kit involves herself in these dramas at night and during the day tries her best to get along with her grandfather, who is unaware of his home's enchanted inhabitants. This relationship reminded me of Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*. However, it is not until the future existence of Moonstone and the mannequins is in jeopardy that Kit uses her creativity, determination, and willpower to unite her family and the mannequins in restoring Moonstone to its former glory. Kit is a clever and brave heroine, and this is a story of her realising her true worth as well as a tale about undertaking a mission and the challenges, self-doubts, and rewards that this traditionally involves.

The black and white ink illustrations complement the story wonderfully and I think this could be the start of a well-loved series of adventures with the impressive Kit and the enchanted costumes of Moonstone Museum.

Natalie McCrystal Plimmer

The Missing Bookshop

Katie Clapham, illus. Kirsti Beautyman, pub. Stripes Publishing

Milly loves nothing more than visiting her local bookshop for story time. Every week she, and a handful of other children sit on Miss Minty's rainbow carpet and cushions and avidly – so the pictures show us – listen to a story. Miss Minty's storytelling is almost legendary, after all she knows every book in the whole world and no matter what challenge Milly sets her there is always a book to match. Bears, pirates, ponies, aliens there is even the perfect book waiting for Milly on the day that she has saved enough pocket money to buy her own.

But what is this? As Milly waits for Mum to find her pocket money she starts to really look at the bookshop. Paint is peeling, curtains are faded, cushions are worn and even Miss Minty has suggested she is feeling creaky. There is nothing to worry about though is there for there are still shelves upon shelves of books. Mum tries to put Milly's mind at rest, explaining that when something gets a little old and creaky it just needs to be treated with care and so Milly sets out to take the very best care of Miss Minty she can ... until ... the bookshop has a closed sign on the door. What are Milly, and all the children who visit going to do? The bookshop is now missing. Milly's mum has a plan to cheer Milly – she encourages her to paint a picture of the bookshop for Miss Minty, wherever she may be. The picture gets hung on the door of the missing shop and soon ... well you will just see what happens from here on in when you read this most inspiring and delightful story for yourself.

A stunning debut and a book that perfectly bridges the gap between picture and chapter books this is at once clearly a book written by someone with experience of bookshops (Katie Clapham is a bookseller) and someone who loves stories. It is a book to warm the heart. A book that celebrates the importance of books, reading and bookshops as a place to share in this. The rich illustrations with their depth of colour and child-like innocence capture the story and reach seamlessly into its heart to bring out the story and more. A true delight and a wonderful book for any fan of reading at any age.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Monster Who Wasn't

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

A monster is born, the offspring of a sigh and a laugh. Monsters are usually born only from a sigh. Because the eponymous monster was born from both, he takes a largely human form and possesses many human qualities. The monster, who remains nameless, befriends three gargoyles, Spiggot, Wheedle and Bladder. Together the four of them meet an angel named Daniel. The monster confides in Daniel: he is desperate for a name and a family. Daniel takes the monster to meet a human family called the Kavanaghs. There is a link between the monster and this family. He was born on the same day that grandfather Kavanagh died.

The monster is soon on good terms with the Kavanagh family – they give him the name of Samuel – and becomes attached to their baby Beatrice. But there is another claim on him from the world of

monsters. The monster king Thunderguts, wants Samuel to undertake a task for which his human attributes uniquely fit him. Samuel must take a sword, the vorpal sword with which the Jabberwock was slain. By doing so Samuel will liberate the monsters and leave them free to wander round the earth above the ground. To pressure Samuel to obey him, Thunderguts kidnaps baby Beatrice. Samuel must rescue her and survive, while preventing the monsters from invading the human world.

Shelley's book has three definite advantages. The book places emphasis upon Samuel's determination to acquire language, and the way in which his progress is charted. At one point he states that a person can hunger for words as well as for food. A warm friendship is established between Samuel and the gargoyle Bladder, though Bladder almost refuses to acknowledge it. The book gives a passionate account of the affection Samuel feels for the Kavanagh baby, and the determination he shows to rescue her.

Though this book is set in a world of fantasy, the characters are convincingly portrayed and the narrative well sustained. The reader believes in this strange world.

Rebecca Butler

No Ballet Shoes in Syria

Catherine Bruton, pub. Nosy Crow

No Ballet Shoes In Syria is a book able to immediately invest readers in its protagonist: she is warm and strong, anxious but capable and caring, with a love for ballet that will reinvigorate readers' own attachment to their own favourite ways to be creative. So too does the story create family relationships that are both emotional and heartening, without removing their complexities: amidst her mother's illness and father's disappearance, Aya also remembers their happier years, and seeks a way to restore her mother's wellbeing. She also simultaneously loves, resents and questions her baby brother Moosie, who's mischief is infamous in the overcrowded Manchester community centre where the story begins.

This community centre is where most action occurs as the story unfolds, for Aya, her Mumma and Moosie are seeking the administrative and legal support that will enable their permanent residency in the UK – support supposedly offered by 'Manchester Welcomes Refugees', a project with its base in the run-down social building. Having been forced by government/rebel conflict to leave their home in Aleppo, Syria, Aya's thoughts throughout the novel demonstrate the difficulty of reconciling past and future after experiencing trauma. It is a subject whose importance cannot be overstated, here foregrounding the traumatic and extensive process of seeking asylum.

At the centre, this process becomes intertwined for Aya with a renewed pursuit of ballet: when she comes across a dance class occurring upstairs, there may be a chance, however remote, for her to take

up her ballet shoes once again. The girls she encounters upstairs are a mixture of friendly and cruel, and Aya's experience of spite and taunts about a stereotyped 'refugee' identity iterate the consistency with which racism is still perpetuated among communities.

Such hostility iterates the importance of this novel: Aya's difficulty in securing both a home and a chance to dance again, while developing new friendships and struggling with loss, encourages a reading practise revolving around books outside of the reader's own experience - crucial for working to dismantle this racism in a time of Brexit. The kindness of strangers is returned to as a theme, which though feeding a slightly romanticised tone does not wholly undermine the intensity of the flashbacks to Aya's experiences in Syria, Turkey and Greece. Indeed, the story's non-Eurocentric perspective emphasises the instability and bias of the British legal system, and invites readers to reconsider the society around them and their own position within it – as well as showing the possibility for eventual moments of joy to co-exist with upset, just as past and future intertwine.

Jemima Breeds

Not My Fault

Cath Howe, pub. Nosy Crow

Maya and Rose are sisters, born just over a year apart. They were the closest of siblings, until the accident that damaged Maya's leg. Maya blames Rose for her part in what happened and perhaps their parents do as well, while Rose herself feels guilty for performing the action that led to Maya's injury. Now they are off on a residential school trip together. Their parents tell Maya not to do anything risky and tell Rose to keep an eye on her. Things are not looking good for an enjoyable trip even before the egg throwing incident. The cover drawing of a grumpy thundercloud with a lightning flash sums up the state of the girls' relationship and the way this trip is likely to proceed.

This book, about difficult sibling relations, alternates between Maya's and Rose's accounts of the same events so the reader can get a real sense of how easy it is to misinterpret actions and motives. Maya, having been asked to look after Bonnie (a pupil with special needs) proceeds to cause mischief and upset, getting both herself and Bonnie into trouble. Rose's things seem to disappear mysteriously from her room and then turn up in a peculiar state. Other characters become embroiled in the ripples of this relationship. Clemmy wants all Rose's attention for herself, Archie wants help from Maya with the pet he has secretly brought along and feels let down by her actions. The teachers too are not immune and unwittingly seem to make matters worse. Eventually, Maya's impetuous behaviour puts herself and Bonnie at risk and, when Rose tries to help, they all end up in danger.

This book would make a great class novel with its emphasis on feelings and friendships. The format of the book, with its to-ing and fro-ing between the viewpoints of both Maya and Rose, is a brilliant device to bring out the way in which actions can be misunderstood. There are a number of characters

to explore, not just Rose and Maya. Clemmy, Bonnie, Archie and Jack, for example, all present topics for discussion as do the sisters' parents and their Gran. The book would also be good preparation for a class before its own school trip, examining some of the issues that arise in the book, clarifying expectations and allaying concerns.

June Hughes

Pay Attention, Carter Jones

Gary D. Schmidt, pub. Andersen Press

This story starts when Mr. Bowles-Fitzpatrick, an English butler, turns up on Carter Jones doorstep. Carter's family are getting ready for the school run. It is chaos; everyone is frantically trying to get ready for school; the dog has been sick, and they have run out of milk. Carter doesn't have time for a strange man standing at the door, speaking with a weird accent and dressed in unusual clothes. Or has this man turned up at just the right time to save the day?

Here we have a typical American family; Carter, his mum and his three sisters. Dad is in the army and is away in Germany. Then we have the butler, who is typically English. A strange combination for a story aimed at 9 to 11-year-olds, but it actually works really well. Right from the start it is funny and is a very easy read. What also works very well is that the rules and features of the English game of cricket are woven throughout the story. Each chapter starts with a short explanation of one aspect of the game.

The characters are brilliant, especially the butler. The relationship between Carter and the butler is also brilliant. The butler is a stickler for good manners and kindness. He teaches Carter to drive in his purple Bentley. He helps the chaotic Jones family and in particular he helps Carter through some sad and difficult events in his life.

One of the delights of the book is the way the cultural difference between the Americans and the English are tackled. The butler is always trying to bridge this divide. He teaches Carter and his friends how to play cricket, he takes them to a Turner art exhibition, and he takes them to the ballet. The story could be compared to the tale of Mary Poppins. The butler even turns up with an umbrella! He is there because grandad has died. It turns out that dad doesn't want to come home to his family but decides to stay in Germany. With the help of the butler, Carter has to cope with this mix of humour and tragedy.

All in all, this is a really great read. It has a very unusual plot. It has fantastic characters. It is sad. It is very funny. Well worth reading and adults will enjoy it as much as 9, 10 and 11-year olds.

Gary Kenworthy

Pog

Pádraig Kenny, pub. Chicken House

In Pádraig Kenny's story we find an eerie, encroaching supernatural realm; encounters with this realm are placed alongside examination of the loss and pain residing in our own. Often the most difficult emotion seems incompatible with words, but this impasse is something Kenny's book conveys well, iterating how stories and their words may offer relief despite such incompatibility.

The book's opening shares the thoughts of an altogether less sinister manifestation of the supernatural, a magical non-human creature who struggles with doubt, loss and sadness. That these are made visceral in both their physical and mental manifestations prove a comforting reminder that such feelings are shared and need not be as isolating as they appear. Indeed, they are shared within the novel, found to be akin to those of the story's human protagonists David and Penny, who have just moved to the large and empty house - belonging to their great grandparents- where this creature has long resided.

With their mother's death being disclosed in the first pages, the story follows David and Penny as they argue and reconcile and struggle with their dad's own grief; but the presence of this creature soon provides insight into the nearness not only of bad memories but also of those that are good. This is not a glib treatment of grief that overrides the weight of intense emotion, but rather is gestures to the small moments where this weight may lift however slightly - bit by bit. Such a shift only occurs by going through the discomfort, repeatedly, with the characters often experiencing an inability to communicate even to those they are closest to, suppressing - out of guilt- what feels like unfair anger, and inadvertently clashing over their opposing forms of grief. As such, the complexities of loss are every bit as vivid as the wonderfully evoked forest atmosphere, containing many strange goings on - occurrences that it is more rewarding to leave unrevealed, for when they appear, they are startling.

The characters' developing awareness of some small sources of comfort is accompanied by discoveries of an altogether more fraught kind: many threats are building behind a magical gateway that, though guarded, may not be as secure as its guardian had hoped. These dangers pose risk to the entire forest, and Padraig's story is a valuable reminder to de-centre the human perspective – considering, as well, the view of those creatures who exist alongside us. For they have their own families - and fighting abilities! - coming together in times of need, emphasising the possibility of finding eventual flashes of warmth even amidst deep pain.

Jemima Breeds

Rumblestar

Abi Elphinstone, pub. Simon & Schuster

Rumblestar is a wonderfully magical tale of two unlikely heroes given the overwhelming task of defeating the evil harpy, Morg from claiming the magic of the Unmapped Kingdoms for her own devious devices. The story moves quickly from the ordinary world of the Faraway, so named by the Unmappers, to the altogether spellbinding world of Rumblestar, one of several kingdoms. The two main characters, Casper and Utterly Thankless, are truly enjoyable and the reader can readily identify with their quirky traits, character flaws and misguided but well intended actions and comments throughout the story. Casper, the horribly bullied little boy who would prefer to hide in baskets, keep detailed lists and avoid human interaction at all costs finds a gateway into the Unmapped Kingdoms and is confronted by Utterly Thankless, the aggressive rule-breaker who literally fears nothing. Perhaps they are not an ideal match but it is obvious that they are each other's only hope for saving the marvels from being destroyed in the Unmapped Kingdoms and thereby saving the Faraway from its recent spate of disastrous weather conditions.

Abi Elphinstone's imagination is breath-taking and the reader can easily visualise this magical world of miniature dragons, bridges made of sleeping cloud giants, vegetarian trolls and drizzle hags. Some of the magical devices are reminiscent of other fantasy stories but Elphinstone's pace and creativity are infectious. The reader roots for the underdogs, hopes they find the friendship they both so desperately need and ducks and weaves whenever Morag's Midnights are overhead.

A truly enjoyable read but perhaps overly long on moral discourse at times with slightly too obvious summations of the benefits of taking risks, doing something out of the ordinary and trusting people. But perhaps those are the very things one needs to be reminded of these days! Good fun.

Sheri Sticpewich

Runaway Robot

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, illus. Steven Lenton, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Frank Cottrell-Boyce's latest adventure for children is jam-packed with his trademark humour, brilliant characters and some fantastic illustrations by Steven Lenton.

Runaway Robot tells the brilliantly original tale of Alfie, very much human but with a bionic hand, and the life changing day when he finds an enormous one-legged robot called Eric in the local Airports' Lost Property. Striking up an unlikely yet utterly heart-warming friendship, together, Alfie and the charmingly chivalrous Eric, try to recall the memories behind their missing body parts without leaving too much chaos and carnage in their wake!

Accompanied by a Class A cast of characters, all fantastically thought-out and diverse, I couldn't help but love them all, particularly Shatila, a young girl who's at the Limb Lab with a bionic foot after stepping on a mine in Bosnia. But it's Alfie's boyish charm and distinctive voice that really drives the narrative forwards. Cottrell-Boyce has a knack for capturing the first-person voice of a child and it's this confidence and flair that enables the reader to really connect and root for Alfie as he struggles to remember the accident that left him with his bionic hand.

The Limb Lab was a really fascinating setting for me; I mean super intelligent 3D printers that create perfect bionic body parts is unreal! And Cottrell-Boyce doesn't stop there. He's created a wonderfully warm and witty world inspired by all things science and technology with robot street cleaners, self-driven buses and charming houses that greet you upon arrival. But as our own world gets closer and closer to a machine-led future, *Runaway Robot* makes for an incredibly thought-provoking and timely narrative that will evoke many questions for both young and older readers surrounding humanity, machines and our roles together. What essentially makes us human? What possibilities are there in an automated future? What does artificial intelligence reveal about our own humanity? How will human and machine co-exist in the future?

Confidently written with heart and humour, the unputdownable *Runaway Robot* will have children roaring with laughter and wanting a best friend robot of their own!

Fern Tolley

Starfell: Willow Moss and the Lost Day

Dominique Valente, illus. Sarah Warburton, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

In this story we are quickly brought into a world where, like many children's stories, magic is the order of the day. However, in *Starfell*, things are a little bit different, a little more mundane, or at least they were ...

Willow Moss tumbles in, and we find in her an unlikely heroine. She is the sort of child that is rather ordinary, not especially stunning, or clever, or talented, just reliable and solid; a classic side-kick.

Valente contours up a world in which magical folk live side-by-side with non-magical folk. Furthermore, magical skills are few and far between. Willow's sisters are classically beautiful witches with impressive skills, but Willow is much more homely. Her magical skill lies in her ability to find lost things, but more centrally within the family, Willow's skill is to step back, bow out and do as she is told. Just when life seems to be at its most boring, the story really starts. The entrance of Moreg Vaine, the most feared and revered witch in the whole of *Starfell* marks a totally new chapter in Willow's life. Although clearly powerful, influential and multi-talented, Moreg doesn't come across as

terrifying as she is supposed to be, she actually seems to be more of a mentor to Willow. This doesn't negatively affect the story in any way, but it does feel a little inconsistent.

After Moreg confides in Willow, a potentially disastrous occurrence – the disappearance of Tuesday the pair embark on an adventure together to find Lost Tuesday. Their adventure has echoes of Phillip Pulman's *Northern Lights* trilogy, combining a mission to save the universe as well as making personal discoveries and realisations that will change Willow's life. It raises philosophically questions, and will speak to the ordinary child about their unique and individual experiences ...

'She suddenly saw the incredible value and significance of one ordinary day. Not just what happens in a day, but how that day informs the next, giving it meaning and structure...'

The vast array of characters and challenges in this book make it a real page turner. There is a nice balance of goodies and baddies, and an interesting enquiry into the more complex aspects of some. Warburton provides delightful illustrations that will make its accessible to the wider 6-12 years age range.

Emily and Jennifer Hamilton

The Time Travel Diaries

Caroline Lawrence, illus. Sarah Mulvanny, pub. Piccadilly Children's Books

A time travel story with a map in the front? Santa does read the letters I send him! I'm friendly towards this book before I start reading – does it justify my positive sense of anticipation? I think yes.

Obsessive billionaire Solomon Daisy has a way of sending nerdish schoolboy Alex 1750 years into the past to solve a mystery that consumes him, a way that may or may not explode Alex or reduce him to ash. He also has the money to induce Alex to overlook that small drawback. Time travel generally comes with a rulebook, and there's a well-defined one embedded here. It's a mixture of plot devices and some really sweet ideas, and the plot devices I don't mind because they're carefully and logically played out. Only young children should time travel? Well it's natural then that the time traveller recruitment process would insinuate itself into the school system, however odd it is to see it playing out before that particular rule is given.

I'm happy with the mechanics of the travel, I find the only false note with it is referencing *Star Trek* in the exposition: the intermittent films are 12A, the Discovery series is likewise a 12, I don't think either is a touchstone for the audience, which probably kicks in from Year 3 – readers looking for something more substantial than *Beast Quest*; not quite ready for *Alex Rider*. I think there is an over-use of dated references – it's not a thing that would ordinarily bother me, but when there's already a lot of cultural and historical familiarisation to get through, it slows down the read unnecessarily, especially

as this is a book that wants to be read quickly. It has that breezy, on-a-mission style. Its natural mode is quickly immersive, not dwelling on anything but establishing spaces and people efficiently.

We don't so much observe through Alex as case the joint. It is quite reminiscent of the whole hard-boiled investigator genre, which with its science fiction trappings brings Philip K Dick to mind. It accommodates naturally the large amount of information the writer wants to brief us with. I'd prefer it if Alex was less of an underdog. This isn't a criticism of this book particularly, but the underdog on a journey is a bit overdone at the moment. I think there are other ways of providing a character arc, and Alex could usefully have been more vain in this story and dealt with that instead. I'm quibbling, though.

So Alex travels to 260AD Roman London. It's no surprise that things don't go to plan from the off. It is a surprise how they don't go right: Alex makes the journey with Dinu, bully and nemesis. I think it's too much of a surprise. There's not enough earlier in the book to suggest how and why Dinu might arrive at the moment of Alex's transportation. Arguably, setting this up is more important than some of the period detail we receive. The moment where it happens you ought to realise that of course this was where the story was leading, not stop reading from shock. Some words about Dinu. The dynamic between Alex and Dinu is interesting and unusual, which is great, but Dinu is inconsistently written which is a shame because he's a character who needs to be done carefully and precisely. It's ok that our impression of him changes as Alex's understanding of him changes, but his speech patterns should be more consistent, and he shouldn't be so much of a passive recipient of plot points.

Alex and Dinu in Roman London is everything you'd expect from an accomplished, experienced historical fiction writer. It's convincing, deep, vibrant and exciting. They progress as people in a satisfying way. The tension and jeopardy is nicely involving. When Alex and Dinu return there's an excellent twist waiting for them and an unexpected joke. Solomon Daisy gets more than he'd hoped for, and in an appropriate manner! I felt the ending was a touch rushed and overly neat as characters had their stories concluded. I can see why you'd want to end things quickly once Alex and Dinu return, but perhaps there's plot there that could've been dealt with more briefly so that there was more space for Alex to interact with fewer people.

So. On balance the book's virtues substantially outweigh its few awkward notes. Easily something you could read with a succession of children without getting bored or jaded. Excellent entry-point into hard-historical and/or cerebral sci-fi for younger readers. Happily recommended to adventure lovers at around the Year 4 and 5 mark.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

The Umbrella Mouse

Anna Fargher, illus. Sam Usher, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

The Umbrella Mouse follows the story of Pip, a little mouse who lives with her parents in an Umbrella shop in London. Whilst her parents sleep inquisitive Pip sneaks off to see the humans coming and going from the shop, and then disaster strikes and a bomb demolishes the shop and kills Pips parents, leaving her an orphan.

To give a little context, the bombs are due to the story being set in World War Two.

Making acquaintances with a search and rescue dog by the name of Dickin helps Pip to survive being completely alone in London but there are others out there waiting to take advantage of her vulnerability and after an altercation with some savoury characters Pip takes herself along the Thames in her umbrella, determined to reach France and travel on to Italy where her mothers' relatives reside in an Umbrella Museum. Luckily Pip has a companion suited to such a voyage, a rat called Hans, and together they set about being fundamental characters within an animal secret service that is determined to help us win the war.

The entire story is written from the animals' perspectives, giving animals a voice in a hugely important part of history and giving an alternative narrative that is both immersive and engaging making this a potential modern day classic that KS2 children and older will truly enjoy.

Samantha Thomas

We Won an Island

Charlotte Lo, pub. Nosy Crow

Luna and her family; mum and dad, her brother Fabien and sister Margot are about to be evicted from their home, so Luna enters a competition to win an island from Mr. Billionaire. And so the story begins.

Dad seems to have given up on his life yet despite this mum is trying her very best. Then, Luna wins the day; or does she? Will winning the island save the family? Luna is determined that it will. There is some sadness to the story, but there are also some very funny parts. There is potential tragedy, but there is also hope.

Once on the island, both Luna and Margot have their own dreams. Luna wants to start a donkey sanctuary and Margot wants to build her own plane. How can they raise the money to turn their dreams into reality? Much of the story is about their determination to organise a music festival on the island. They book some groups, sell tickets and even find an old ice cream van so that they can make and sell their own ice cream. All of this is kept a secret from mum.

This is a great and quite unusual adventure story. It is about the ups and downs of family life, with tears and laughter. There are goats, bats poo and a big storm. Luna remains determined that all will come right in the end. Will mum find out what the children are up to? Will dad come round? Will everything dramatically fail? Will this adventure end up as one big disaster? From the first page, it is a story the reader will want to finish in order to discover the answers to all these questions.

Gary Kenworthy

Wildspark

Vashti Hardy, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Wildspark follows Prue, a young girl working on her family farm, mourning the recent loss of her brother Frances, to whom she was incredibly close too. Fixing and maintaining the mechanimals that are a valuable asset to the farm, Prue has learnt much of her mechanical knowledge through her brother.

When a stranger visits the farm asking to employ the services of Frances who has a reputation with mechanics that precedes him, Prue decides to embark on her own personal quest to follow the stranger, traveling to the ghost guild, where she takes on her brothers' name with the sole intent of using the guilds technology to bring her brother back.

Wildspark transports you to a world of gigantraks and mechanical technology, with an astonishing attention to detail that enables the reader to envisage Medlock and all that happens there.

This book offers children aged from 11 up an astonishing read, with high quality detail and a great storyline that sees a strong, independent and determined female lead character follow her heart. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, especially as it portrays a female within a primarily male environment and I enjoyed the relationships between humans and mechanimals, understanding the similarities and difference as the story develops

Samantha Thomas

Young Adult Book Reviews

All We Could Have Been

T.E. Carter, pub. Simon & Schuster

Seventeen-year-old Lexi has just started at a new school. Every year, since she was twelve, she's done the same – started afresh – a new school in a different area, with a new name, hoping she can survive until people find out who she really is.

Making friends is difficult at the best of times, but particularly so when you desperately need to keep your family history quiet. Staying with her aunt she makes friends with Marcus, whose local reputation and dysfunctional family past results from his previous violent youth, and suspected drug-dealing. As two social outsiders, Lexi and Marcus find that they can confide in each other. At school Lexi tries to stay out of situations that might compromise her anonymity, aware that the slightest slip in her mask might reveal her notorious background. However Lexi can't resist auditioning for the school play, and this leads to a new friend, Ryan, who has secrets of his own to keep, but it also lays her bare to the girls in her year, who see her as a mystery but also a rival.

All the time Lexi dwells on her catastrophically changed relationship with her older brother Scott, who was always there for her – until that day twelve years ago which shattered the family's world. The trauma of that day resulted in years of counselling, self-harming when others found out who she really was, and panic attacks. As she learns about the very different reasons behind Marcus' and Ryan's situations she finds she becomes a little more confident, and when she tells them the truth about herself, their reactions and continuing friendship gradually allow her to face her tormentors at school, and, crucially, what Scott did.

In this novel readers' have two genres. Firstly there is a YA novel in which Lexi's narrative powerfully examines the uncertainties of adolescence, the difficulty of relationships, both social and sexual, and how trauma can paralyse us psychologically. Overlying this is an unfolding thriller, through which T.E. Carter gradually releases information that gives us the background to Lexi's situation, both strands offer us the possibility of resolution.

Bridget Carrington

Awake in the World

Jason Gurley, pub. Usborne

Awake in the World focuses on two main characters. Vanessa - reaching for the stars since she was a little girl, determined to get into her dream university to study astronomy and Zach - a talented artist, who's not even thinking about university because he needs to stay home and support his family.

The genre this is classified as is romance, but I would say it's a gritty romance. The book also contains philosophical debates and social commentary on poverty and how it can limit choices, such as the ability to finance attending university.

Vanessa's character is used to explore what it means to have money and all the opportunities that are available. This is in sharp contrast to Zach, who is having to work to support his family and lives in a shabby part of the town. The romance between them helps each characters grow and realise their own potential, be that moving on from the anger of abandonment or moving past grief.

I like that the story is told in a dual narrative giving readers the perspective of both main characters. I felt genuine sympathy for Zach and his bad luck. At times the book is painfully honest, especially when it comes to miscommunication and the hurt that humans can bestow upon one another.

This book is aimed at readers aged 14+ and parts of the story would work very well as a read-aloud text. The pace of the second half of the book definitely leaves some cliff- hangers. I would use this in a teenage book group, as plenty of discussions could be held around the content. The astronomical and philosophical debates are particularly interesting and would lead to further research. Carl Sagan, the American astronomer, is a key figure to research after reading the book. There is also a natural disaster and the question of what the student would do in that situation.

Sophie Castle

Beauty Sleep

Kathryn Evans, pub. Usborne

Do you ever have days when you wake up from a dream that was so real you find yourself wondering who am I, where am I and when am I? Often these thoughts disperse with great rapidity as we look around the room, see the light, see the clock and realise it was all a dream, we know who we are, what we are and where we are. For a moment suspend reality, imagine that you have just woken up and it was not a dream, you really cannot recall who you are, where you are and what you are.

Now you are ready to begin sharing Laura's story. Now you might just be able to understand Laura. Then again maybe not, maybe you will need to suspend reality and attempt to feel as Laura does.

Maybe you just need to read this book and wonder, what if ... There are some answers, but they are not easy to understand for Laura and for the reader they may take some time to unravel, but they are

there. There are equally no answers and it is only with time that Laura and the reader will be able to understand this.

Laura has no idea who she is. The rest of the world knows for in some ways Laura is famous. She is a real-life sleeping beauty. Laura was dying when she was frozen, a medical cure (of sorts) until a real-life cure could be found for her. The world has been watching, hoping, desperate for this girl who holds all their hopes (and dreams) to make them a reality. However when you wake up and discover the world you knew has moved on forty years how would you feel, could you build a new life, could you fulfil all those expectations that have been piled upon you whilst you slept, would you have the willpower and energy to solve the mystery of your old life?

Not only well written this is an intelligently conceived and gripping psychological thriller-cum-sci-fi novel that will have you rapt from page one. Maybe you will be with Laura, maybe you will choose to support those who strove to help her, and to help humanity. Wherever your loyalties lie you will be gripped and enthralled by this stunning read.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Black Enough

ed. Ibi Zoboi, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

It's important to begin this review by acknowledging that I'm coming to this book, a collection of "stories of being young and Black in America", as a middle-aged white UK resident. These stories were not written about me, and in some respects at least, they were not written for me. There'll be nuance and cultural reference I've either missed or misunderstood.

It's also important to say that while these are stories of being young and Black in America, they are not just stories about being young and Black in America, and the youth of the protagonists is absolutely as essential as their Blackness. In fact, one of the key takeaways from the collection is how disparate individual experiences of being young and Black can be; considering the self-imposed limitations of age, race and location, *Black Enough* is a remarkably diverse collection. In it we meet recent immigrants, first-generation Americans, descendants of slaves. We meet aspiring artists and competitive coders, small-time farming families and big-city school students. There's diversity of theme, too; racism, of course, but also love, death, friendship. Characters struggle not only with their cultural identities, but with their sexualities, their faiths, their families, their shyness, their reputations. One story is told across three years; another takes place almost entirely in the instant between exuberant leap and landing. There's brutal realism, there's a magical dream; stories about prejudice or sexual assault contrast with others in which teens connect over nerd culture or fantasise about the perfect sandwich.

More than anything else, *Black Enough* is about identity, and like any good art, it reaches beyond the identities it explores. You don't need to be young, Black, or living in America to identify with these characters; almost without exception they are, as Ibi Zoboi says in her introduction, "whole, complete and nuanced", and their stories are compelling and entertaining, moving and absorbing, thought-provoking and life-affirming, essential reading just as much for white readers wanting to understand the world beyond their own cultural ghettos, as for Black teens finding their place in the world.

John Dougherty

John Dougherty's *Mark & Shark: Detectiving & Stuff* will be published in August by OUP Children's Books.

The Boy Who Steals Houses

C.G. Drews, pub. Orchard Books

A book which draws you in, and you then you can't let go...

Sammy Lou is fifteen, his brother Avery two years older, but it is the younger brother who has to protect the older, because Avery is autistic and Sam watches out for him every second of the day. Because others don't understand Avery's behaviour he is constantly bullied, and Sam has grown up defending him, usually over-zealously with his fists. Since the day eight years ago when his mother walked out and they were dumped by his abusive father on his unwilling aunt Sam's life has revolved around keeping his brother safe, resorting to stealing what his aunt doesn't give them. But you can't steal love, and eventually Sam and Avery run away – Avery to a squat with so-called friends who use him in their criminal activities.

Sam is wanted by the police by now, but tries to avoid crime, instead stealing houses – finding empty houses, which he breaks into, to stay, either stealing money in the street to pay for food, or, if he's lucky, using the clothes and food in houses where the occupants are absent. It's a dangerous life, but when Sam breaks into the De Lainey's house he finds the haven he's always dreamt of, and people who accept him. He should be safe, but he hasn't told them his backstory, and rescuing Avery from danger revives his violent reactions, his past catches up with him.

Drews gives us a powerfully written, deeply thought-out book which touches readers deeply for a variety of reasons. There's a little bit of Sam in all of us – getting ourselves into trouble looking out for someone else. For Sam it's the focus of his life, whatever it costs. In Avery Drews also creates an insightful portrait of an autistic boy, his behaviour, his vulnerability and his own deep wish to look after his younger brother. With the De Lainey family she also creates a believable and empathetic set of characters, with the fiery, independent teenage daughter Moxie a powerful force in Sam's life. A sad, happy, hopeful book.

Bridget Carrington

Breaking the Rules

Maxine Linnell, illus. Sophie Escabasse, pub. Bloomsbury Education

Mo's dad has lost his job and the family has been forced to move away to a new town where Mo has no friends. Starting a new school, Mo feels lonely and angry at the circumstances forced upon her and this leads her to make dangerous choices. She doesn't feel that she fits in at school and her anger makes her block the real-life people around her as they reach out to her in friendship. In her frustration she decides that it is time to live by her own rules, and she accepts the friendship of a stranger she meets over the internet.

When she agrees to meet this stranger, she finds out who her real friends are.

This book is part of a collection from Bloomsbury aimed at 11+ readers with a lower reading level. This High/Low series has gathered together books by some of the finest YA and young teen writers. The books average 80 pages in length and are published on cream paper with a typeface that is easier on the eye for dyslexic readers. It is refreshing to see another publisher putting out more interesting and age-appropriate books for readers of these specific needs.

Breaking the Rules tackles the difficult subject of cyber safety in a way that is not patronising or negative. It is an interesting enough read and will raise many discussion points in the classroom.

Dawn Finch

The Cantankerous Molly Darling

Alvy Carragher, pub. Chicken House

The Cantankerous Molly Darling tells the story of Molly, who lives with her Mum and sister Polly on a farm that is absolutely chaotic, which may explain why her Dad left, and why he explained his reasons via PowerPoint presentation!

Molly has a best friend, Tess, who is determined to go viral on the internet, which definitely adds to the complications Molly faces. She seeks sanctuary with the chickens she has grown to love but one day finds them gone. Mum has no interest in responsibilities, preferring to lock herself away in the attic creating art and sculptures from general junk so she's no help at all, and to top it all off her sister comes home barefoot and announces to Molly she is engaged to a complete nobody, but Mum has no idea! So it's left to Molly to try to turn it all around, somehow.

Finding the chickens is one thing, but getting her friend to be viral, to be the most popular one on the Internet, and persuading her sister to call off the engagement are big asks for anyone, let alone someone that lives amongst piles of books that travel up the farmhouse staircase and who has no one to turn to for advice.

There are some hilarious moments in the book which really lightened the feel of what Molly is having to endure and at the same time make the book enjoyable. The level of detail Alvy Carragher writes into the made it hugely immersive and reading it felt like living in an authentic farmhouse experience.

This book will be a huge hit with secondary school students who enjoy levels of humour in the books they read.

Samantha Thomas

The Cold is in Her Bones

Peternelle van Arsdale, pub. Simon & Schuster

A tale of demonic vengeance, pain, and solidarity amongst women and girls, this powerful and eerie second novel from Peternelle van Arsdale is driven by its heroine Milla's mission to seek a cure, through forgiveness and reunion, to the curse that has blighted two generations of villagers.

Hair, in the story, is both a place of intimate secrets and of cultural invasion. For young Hulda's father, hair is a 'woman's glory', to be braided and shown to her husband only on their wedding night, and to be combed possessively by her mother. But for Hulda, her tough locks and curls are the furtive nest for snakes, whose sibilant voices she comes to feel as she is shunned by her sister Gitta and family, and buried alive in coldest snow (to relieve the 'demonic heat', of course). Hulda's scaly rage and resentment rejects the un-wild, domesticated female whose value is that of a marriage commodity. Monstrous and hissing, she curses the village and her family; but who is the true monster? Later, having possessed more and more girls with similar resentment and anger, it will fall to Milla, her niece, hiding similar reptilian powers, to endeavour to turn the curse on its head in an attempt to set her sisters free - for good.

A heroine's quest, a personal and political legacy to grapple with, an adventure through vivid landscapes of woodland, farmland, village: van Arsdale's story harnesses and makes regular reference to the power of storytelling, with voices in the novel telling stories themselves, questioning their endings, their relevance, and what we expect from them. Linguistically, nature and wildness vividly and memorably communicate feeling: the curse of Vengeance is a dark heaving swarm of wasps; Hulda's undulating body of hissing snakes an incredible vision of anger and hate; dirty fingernails digging deep into soil express the true wildness of womanhood.

Ultimately the novel's allegorical nature speaks to the truth of oppression experienced by women and girls to this day, and the pain and anger that this begets. Rare flashes of male intimacy, care, and love are set aside masculine coldness, domination and neglect. Young contemporary readers may think of mothers and grandmothers, their 'wildness' that van Arsdale celebrates so vividly through natural, earthy verbosity, kept under the thumb of patriarchal culture and taboo in past times; they may wonder too if they themselves share the Hulda and Milla's experience of a repressive society to which they feel resentment. It seems van Arsdale is asking: how do women move through resentment? Is anger, the witch Hel's philosophy of 'not being nice', and vengeance a curse or a tool? Or will it cost a life?

Van Arsdale's compelling story of Milla rescuing the 'demon girls' and reuniting her mother Gitta with Hulda, leaves the reader with an enduring image of solidarity in sisterhood. Not to be missed...

Laurence Loz Tidy

The Girl Who Came Out of the Woods

Emily Barr, pub. Penguin Random House

Arty (short for Artemis) has lived her entire life (all sixteen years) in part of a small community now numbering 11 people (including adults and children). Home is a clearing in a remote part of India and contact with the outside world is through one member of the group who makes sporadic trips to the outside world to trade their 'herbs' for the things they cannot provide for themselves.

Arty has never left this environment but feels neither trapped nor curious about life outside their community. Then, serious illness strikes and, in desperation, Arty and Zeus (one of the other children) are sent out into a world they have never experienced to bring back help. When it becomes clear that they cannot return to their community, Arty and Zeus are separated and sent to live with relatives they have never met and must try and build new lives in a new world.

Arty is bright, brave and resourceful but has much to learn about the world. The people that she meets are mostly kind, helpful and have her best interests at heart but, with limited experience of meeting people, she is ill-equipped to make such judgements and her trust is sometimes misplaced. The paraphernalia of modern life is also new, exciting and threatening at the same time. The uses and abuses of social media are explored in depth throughout the book contrasting the betrayal of privacy with instant global communication where distance and language are no barriers. Addictions of various sorts, to social media and to drugs, are themes running throughout the book. The community survives by trading in what turns out to be cannabis whilst Arty's uncle ruined his relationships with his family because of his drug addiction. Joe, one of the first people Arty meets outside the community, try as he might, cannot resist posting pictures of Arty and sharing her story even though he knows she does not want him to.

Interspersed with the chapters of Arty's story are short interludes written in the first person by someone desperately trying to escape from the basement where they are being kept 'for their own good' and it is only towards the end of the book that the reader learns the identity of this person and the story starts to come together.

The explanations and reunions all happen rather quickly, and the ending seems rushed in comparison to the descriptions of Arty's experiences in the wider world. Nevertheless, there is much food for thought in this book and it is a rewarding read for those looking for an inspiring heroine, a mystery to solve and an insight into the complexity of addiction in all its forms.

June Hughes

The Golden Butterfly

Sharon Gosling, pub. Stripes Publishing

This is a story of puzzles, illusions, spectacles, secrets and tricks. It is set in London in 1897, and features the stage magicians of the Victorian theatres. The plot centres around a spectacular magic trick, the 'Golden Butterfly'.

The striking front cover, drawn by Pip Johnson, makes the reader want to explore inside the book. Indeed, the story doesn't disappoint. It is an exciting historical adventure, including friendship and bravery. The story features 13-year-old Luciana and starts with the death of her grandfather, the great Marko the Magician. Marko had stopped performing four years before his death and Luciana now has to solve the puzzle of the 'Golden Butterfly'.

It is interesting that the main character is a girl, at a time when the world of theatre and particularly magicians, is dominated by men and doesn't welcome women. The Grand Society of Magicians refuses to accept that women can perform magic. Luciana is determined to stand up against this. As she fights on behalf of her grandfather, Luciana finds herself in some dangerous situations and amongst equally dangerous and threatening characters. As well as this female bravery, the story is about friendship and loyalty. Luciana has fond memories of her grandfather and she is desperate to fight on his behalf. She is also very close and loyal to her best friend Charly.

The story is aimed at appealing to girls though the excitement of the magic and the dangerous situations will also appeal to boys. All readers will enjoy the friendship, the bravery and the mystery. There is an element of sadness, but enough adventure to keep readers engaged.

Gary Kenworthy

Hopewell High: Stage Fright

Jo Cotterill, illus. Maria Garcia Borrego, pub. Bloomsbury Education

Alice goes to boarding school, has lots of friends and a lead role in the school play. She knows she should be feeling happy, but her parents are having marriage troubles and she feels too far away to help.

Now the stress of the play and everything else is building up and her anxiety triggered panic attacks have returned. Can she deal with everything, remember all of her lines and cope with everything that is going on with her parents?

Jo Cotterill is one of our finest YA writers, and in this short book written for readers aged 11+ who have a lower reading level, she captures a difficult subject in a most endearing way. I found myself liking Alice very quickly and understood the difficulties of her mental health problems. Her father's depression is subtly dealt with too, and the importance of sharing problems and talking is covered with honesty and clarity.

This book is another of Bloomsbury's High/Low series and is written for lower level and dyslexic readers. The typeface is easy on the eye and the cream pages settle the text nicely. Maria Garcia Borrego's illustrations are modern and attractive and support the text well. This is part of Cotterill's Hopewell High story collection, all of which are published under the Bloomsbury High/Low collection.

There are a lot of talking points in this book, but beyond that it also makes a good and thoughtful read about a mental health condition often suffered by young people.

Dawn Finch

How to Make Friends with the Dark

Kathleen Glasgow, pub. Rock the Boat

Tiger has lived with just her mother all of her life. She has never met her father. Her mother's attention becomes stifling. They row about Tiger going to the prom but then her mother suddenly dies before they can make up. The dress that her mother had bought for her for the prom is hideous but Tiger keeps on wearing it after her mother's death.

There are now quite a few novels that deal with grief in young adults but perhaps none that bring us quite as close to the protagonist as this one does. Tiger has a variety of concerned adults looking after

her: Karen, her social worker, a one-night stand foster parent, a couple of more effective foster parents, her best friend's mum and dad and finally the half-sister she had not heard of before.

She is shown much sympathy but few can offer empathy. However, Kathleen Glasgow enables the reader to feel Tiger's pain.

Tiger eventually finds others who are suffering as she is and understand her sorrow. Glasgow has the courtesy not to magic the hurt away and though the novel ends on an optimistic note we know that Tiger will continue to suffer.

This is not a comfortable read but it is an important one.

Gill James

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

Louis Undercover

Fanny Britt, trans. Christelle Morelli & Susan Ouriou, illus. Isabelle Arsenault, pub. Walker Studio

First published in 2016, in Canada, in French, Fanny Britt and Isabelle Arsenault's graphic novel has finally reached the UK in an excellent, sensitive translation by Christelle Morelli & Susan Ouriou. Britt and Arsenault's previous collaboration, *Jane, the Fox and Me* won several awards, and *Louis Undercover* certainly deserves equal recognition.

Seen through the eyes of Louis, a clever and sensitive boy on the cusp of adolescence, who divides his time between his mum's home in the city and his dad's house in the country, we follow his coming to terms with his parents' separation. Louis' experience of family life makes him nervous about forming relationships, because he feels that 'for the most part, love ends badly'. Louis has a little brother, nicknamed Truffle, who is too young to understand fully what has gone on at home, and whose life revolves around Louis, and his love of James Brown songs. Louis can see the sadness each of his parents feels about their breakup but feels powerless to do anything about it. His father is an alcoholic, and though he tries to stop drinking because he is so sad to lose his family, he struggles time and again. We see that the boys' mum hopes beyond anything that their dad will succeed, and they can all be one family again, and Louis himself is uncertain whether the happy memories of the time before the drinking are real or imagined. Louis feels himself to be a failure, indecisive, cowardly, and unable to express his feelings, but the last pages show a glimmer of hope for him.

Arsenault's graphic expertise has caught the mood of the novel beautifully, using grey and pale brown as the predominant colours for the family's story, with splashes of sunny yellow for happier episodes, and for Louis' growing feelings for a girl at school who he has seen as unobtainable. Each major

episode in the narrative shows us the passing of the year as it is preceded by a drawing of a plant, representing Louis' gradual growth in confidence.

This is an outstanding work of word and image.

Bridget Carrington

Meat Market

Juno Dawson, pub. Quercus Books

This is a fascinating and timely YA novel from Juno Dawson, who won the 2014 'Queen of Teen' award for her young adult fiction.

Meat Market follows the fortunes of Jana Novak, a 16-year-old girl who is spotted at a theme park and rapidly becomes a successful model, travelling the world and making plenty of money. She misses her friends and her hardworking, traditional, Serbian family; she makes mistakes through her sense of isolation but ultimately is accepted, forgiven and loved.

Meat Market could read like an 'ugly duckling becomes swan' fairy tale but Dawson frames the story as a filmed interview with a sense that Jana is the survivor of something and she is telling her truth in solidarity with others as a key participators in the #metoo movement.

This novel gives the reader an insight into a closed and supposedly glamorous world. There is a directness and freshness to Dawson's writing – she side-steps clichés - and immerses you in the experience so that, by the time Jana is at the mercy of an industry heavyweight, it is heart-stopping reading. The reactions of others in the industry feel disturbingly familiar from the reporting about Harvey Weinstein.

Dawson spent two years in the fashion industry with models and photographers to research this unvarnished and perceptive story. Graphic without being lurid, and ultimately uplifting, Dawson lays the industry bare, with all its contradictions and flaws, and shows there can be a better way.

Taut, gripping and intelligent, this book will engage even reluctant readers.

Saria Archer

My Secret Lies with You

Faye Bird, pub. Usborne

This is an intense novel told from the perspectives of four friends who meet one summer.

New girl Cait is on holiday with her mum and the new boyfriend. Cait lost her father about 18 months ago and can't learn to like or tolerate mum's new boyfriend Johnny. Cait and her mum spend much of their holiday arguing and Cait spends more and more time with Marko, Ifan and Hannah, her new friends. The dynamic between these three friends has Cait questioning their relationships and the events of the previous summer with Alys ...who we learn has disappeared, but under a different name.

Alys mesmerised Ifan and Marko but Hannah did not like her and felt disturbed by her presence and the activities of one day spent together. Secrets are held onto and friendships are strained as slowly the day of the events unravels and Cait learns what happened.

In the end the friends must make decisions regarding the secrets and Cait must learn to adapt to new situations without her dad. Losing a parent allows Cait to understand Alys, who had lost her mother. Cait must face these emotions and allow happiness back into her life.

Questions that the reader will want answered include: What really happened that day with Alys, Ifan, Marko and Hannah? Why does Hannah dislike Cait and hate Alys so much? Will Cait and her mother repair their strained relationship? What secrets will be revealed?

A powerful novel and utterly captivating. Excellent characters, who are relatable and complex, as most teenagers are!

I highly recommend this one.

Erin Hamilton

My So-Called Bollywood Life

Nisha Sharma, pub. Stripes Publishing

Our Hindu heroine, Winnie Metah, is obsessed with Bollywood movies. More than anything, she wants to get onto a prestigious film course at NYU so she can become a successful film critic. With her plans on track and her boyfriend, Raj, seemingly ticking all of her perfect romance boxes, it seems like Winnie's textbook Bollywood life may already be scripted.

The Metah's family pandit has a proven track record when it comes to prophecies. He successfully predicted Winnie's parents meeting, marriage and their miracle baby. So his prediction about Winnie finding her soulmate before she turns 18 must be right. Right? But what if, Raj isn't the right boy at all? Destiny is a big deal but so are Winnie's own dreams for her future.

Sharma's debut YA novel, is liberally sprinkled with Bollywood sparkles. At the start of each chapter there is a mini film review from Winnie's blog and the entire narrative is interspersed with dream sequences featuring Bollywood hero Shah Rukh Khan. I thoroughly enjoyed learning about Winnie's rich and vibrant culture. Like the story, the characters are well drawn and full of personality. Despite her obsession with romance, Winnie is independent and sassy; her grandmother is an absolute hoot; her best friend Bridget is as solid as a rock and her love interest Dev is utterly dreamy.

Like a lot of romance stories, in many ways, this novel is quite predictable; I'd worked out how it was going to end long before reaching the halfway point. So, if you're after the unexpected and enjoy plot-twists aplenty, this may not be the novel for you. If, however, you like a good rom-com trope and the knowledge that everything is going to end happily ever after, preferably after a smattering of outlandishly over the top gestures and maybe a song and dance number or two, this is just the read for you.

Now, if anyone needs me, I'm off to watch a Bollywood movie...

Abby Mellor

Only Love Can Break Your Heart

Katherine Webber, pub. Walker Books

Reiko Smith-Mori knows she's pretty cool. She's half-Japanese, half-American, lives in California and looks forward to being crowned Homecoming Queen and having her pick of the top colleges in either America or Japan. But Reiko also knows she's struggling to deal with the death of her older sister Mika. She still sees Mika, still talks to her, and sometimes she would rather hide out at home with the ghost – or possibly just the idea – of her dead sister than have to deal with the pressures of real life. At other times, she escapes into the desert in her cool red Jeep, for nocturnal adventures in the barren beautiful landscape.

That's where she meets Seth. He's a geeky trailer-dweller from her physics class, someone Reiko wouldn't normally notice. Seth loves the desert too. They become friends. And then they become more than friends. And then they become less.

Reiko is believably flawed, flitting between nascent self-awareness and childish self-obsession. The awkwardness of her early physical encounters with Seth are painfully realistic. Seth, refreshingly and unusually for this genre, is not an especially attractive character, and comes across as very immature. Definitely not a boy the reader is likely to fall for.

I liked the fact that they don't end up together – this isn't a spoiler by the way! – and that they both behave badly at times. I wasn't so convinced by the Mika storyline – maybe because dead siblings

have become tiresomely familiar in YA fiction but, overall, I did enjoy this book. Reiko's efforts to make Seth like her again are cringingly convincing, and the portraits of the Californian desert are vivid and beautiful.

Sheena Wilkinson

Opposite of Always

Justin A. Reynolds, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Opposite of Always is a warm, funny and endearing debut novel about the choices we could make to save the people we love.

When Jack King meets the beautiful, intelligent and funny Kate at a party he immediately falls for her. What's even more surprising for Jack is that Kate seems to be falling for him too. Why surprising? Because for years Jack has loyally watched as his best friend Jillian, the girl he is secretly besotted with, dates his other best friend Francisco. But when Kate dies six months after their first meeting Jack is sent back in time to relive that moment again and again.

This is a book which will appeal to so many readers for so many reasons. Firstly, it is beautifully written. Reynolds captures the voices of his young characters with both sensitivity and wit. The exchanges between the four central characters elicit both tears and laughter as the novel explores the complexities of love and loyalty. But, more importantly this book also challenges readers to engage with the ultimate question when faced with loss: What would any of us do to help save the person we love? When Kate dies, Jack is given the opportunity to try to save her. But what if saving one person you love means destroying the life of another person you love? What choice do you make? It is a dilemma that Jack faces repeatedly and it is in facing that dilemma that we see his true journey.

What is also refreshing about *Opposite of Always* is it is a book exclusively about young people of colour growing up in America but the ethnicity of the characters is not apparent until almost a third of the way into the book. Instead the book uses the universal issues of love, loss and loyalty to reinforce that the human experience is not defined by race. However, although primarily a love story, the novel does explore the impact of a range of social issues facing young people such as absentee parents, the social divide and the pressure to achieve academically.

Some readers may find being caught in the loop of Jack and Kate's relationship a little repetitive and feel frustrated that some of the weightier issues are glossed over in order to facilitate the love story. But there is pace and humour and soul in this book which has at its heart the message that sometimes you can't stop the inevitable but it's what the inevitable teaches us about life, ourselves and the people around us that matters. As Jillian so eloquently states in her graduation speech:

‘These last four years, if we’ve lived them right, are about growing up, about learning to battle, about trying our best and still failing, about picking ourselves up again and again. About friendship. The type of friendship, like the very best type of love, that never ends.’

Paulie Hurry

Patron Saints of Nothing

Randy Ribay, pub. Stripes Publishing

Jason is an American Filipino about to start college. He lives with his family and spends much of his time playing video games. He is out of touch with his extended family in the Philippines and their culture. He lives life as an American student and has little to do with his culture.

This all changes when he learns of the death of his cousin Jun. Jason’s father isn’t saying enough about the death and Jason is determined to learn the truth. He receives an anonymous text saying that Jun was murdered, wrongly and unjustly. Jason remembers Jun writing him letters that were never responded to, and he pulls these out - to learn more and to feel a connection with Jun. As Spring Break approaches, Jason convinces his parents to let him travel to the Philippines to meet his extended family and to grieve with them over Jun. He wants to see if he can find out more about the murder, but he is delving into dangerous territory. President Duterte has declared a war on drugs and it is a ruthless war, with killings happening around the city.

Respect for his culture and his determination to learn the truth must be balanced and this makes for a powerful and gripping read. Learning to grieve and say goodbye show us a heart-wrenching and heart-warming balance in the story and Randy Ribay has a wonderful style of writing which brings emotions to the forefront.

An honest book with complex characters and a brilliant journey of discovery. One to read!

I was completely engrossed in the story and felt a roller-coaster of emotions as Jason learns more about himself, his cousin and his culture.

Erin Hamilton

Perfectly Preventable Deaths

Deirdre Sullivan, pub. Hot Key Books

In Deirdre Sullivan’s newest YA novel, fifteen-year old twins Catlin and Madeline must confront their own demons and reconcile the horrible truth hidden within their isolated and secretive Irish town of

Ballyfrann. Like many twins the bonds between them are strong but Madeline's growing knowledge of witchcraft and Catlin's emerging love interest test the very fabric of their relationship.

From the outset, the reader knows this won't be a cozy story of teenage love, loss and redemption as it is far more unsettling than that. Their father 'died in flames' but 'the leaves beneath him in the forest weren't even burnt'. Madeline and Catlin are both deeply affected by his death with Catlin's altar of gathered Mary figures and Madeline's desperate need to gather ingredients like salt and herbs around her and her loved ones to ward off evil. Madeline's gatherings are deeply discouraged as if she is unhinged while Catlin's need is admired as that of an artist. The lack of empathy towards Madeline's episodes of anxiety, fear and loneliness combined with the ignorance around LGBTQ issues are a weak point in the book. However, the more disturbing parts revolve around scenes of animal torture, predatory behaviour by an older male and graphic violence. Not a novel for everyone.

The mystery of the unsolved disappearance of numerous young women through history in Ballyfrann is the underlying plot line of the story. Little is known, but much surmised about these horrible deaths, and the reader inherently understands that Madeline's role is to protect her twin sister. As the parents and other adults become involved the story turns toxic with realistic but overstretched conversations that would have benefitted from further editing as little is achieved.

While the story has its moments of suspense where the reader becomes absorbed in the gothic-like tale, overall it reads as more of a horror movie rather than a beautiful crafted tale of witchcraft and mystery.

Sheri Sticpewich

Sing Like No One's Listening

Vanessa Jones, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Nettie Delaney is talented, she knows it, she has experienced it but there is a problem. Since the death of her mother Nettie has not been able to sing. In the hope that auditioning at Duke's will be the chance she needs to get her voice, her confidence back, that it will be her opportunity to escape from her detested grandmother, Nettie stands up to sing, to perform. Nothing. Well, a little something, to start with. The first line is just about audible, but even that soon becomes "thin; reedy" and with each breath it gets worse until... nothing. This is it Nettie believes; this was her moment and she has blown it. Duke's will never let her in and there is no plan B.

In a case of 'how wrong could you be' Nettie gets a place, apparently against all odds. She may have a place, but life will not be easy, it will be hard, tough, unbearable. Determined as Nettie is the voice still won't come, unless she sings along to the unseen, unknown pianist, then it flows – why? Nettie does not know or understand and the reader, well they can guess but the answer is not all it would seem.

Nettie must live with herself, her lack of voice, her grief and her struggle in the country's biggest stage school but she is not alone. Great friends, each with issues of their own – sexuality, eating disorders, boyfriends (or lack of boyfriends) it is all here, laid bare on the pages and treated by Vanessa Jones with compassion as well as humour. This is where the book is strong, different, compelling. Vanessa Jones writes from the heart, she has seen this, experienced it all for herself and it comes across clearly. The voices are real, the characters relatable. They could be the boy or girl we walk past in the street, they are real people, we hear their voices, we feel their highs and lows, we want to read every word and we want to know where these stories are going, what comes next.

I loved this book, for its freshness, fun and unique voice. I urge you - give it a try -ask yourself can you sing as though no-one were listening?

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Surface Breaks

Louise O'Neill, Scholastic Children's Books

Muirgen is a mermaid. She is the daughter of a very powerful and chauvinistic Sea King. She and her five sisters, of whom she is the youngest, along with their grandmother must obey his every command without question. The children's mother disappeared on Muirgen's first birthday and has never been seen again. According to the girls' father, she abandoned them.

On their fifteenth birthday each daughter is allowed to swim to the surface for the first time, to go above the waves into the world. Muirgen, or Gaia, as her mother called her, is the most excited to do this, to break the surface and to find out what happened to her mother. On her first trip to the surface, she meets a boy called Oliver and is captivated by him. Will she ever find out what happened to her mother and what repercussions will the truth have for her and her family? And how is Oliver connected to their story?

These questions are central to O'Neill's novel, a searing indictment of our society's treatment of women is. It is a rallying cry to all young women to examine their place and their role in society. It also encourages girls to be strong role models and to not be bystanders to violence.

Reading O'Neill's retelling of *The Little Mermaid* will alter your relationship with the original tale and is, at times, very uncomfortable. It will be a good thing for all young people to experience this discomfort within the safety of a novel.

Rebecca Butler

Swimming Against the Storm

Jess Butterworth, pub. Orion Children's Books

Jess Butterworth is back with another action-packed politically attuned book for young readers, *Swimming Against the Storm*. This time focussing on climate crisis, Jess's third book sensitively but boldly (a difficult balance) explores themes such as responsibility, courage, justice, empathy, and solidarity, centering around the issue of sea levels rising in fictional fishing village Côteville, Louisiana, where she currently lives.

Louisiana is currently losing a football-field-sized amount of land into the sea every hour, and a state of emergency has now been officially declared there, as Jess states for the attention of her young readers in the author's note.

Eliza, Avery, Grace, and Huy – self-named collectively as the Canailles ('the mischievous ones') – know their home is at risk, and head out to the swamp connected by the Bayou Snake to the Gulf of Mexico in search of the legendary creature loup-garou so that there might be a reason for the government to protect its habitat with whom they share. The idea of loup-garou may conjure curious fear in the four Canailles, but there might just be more sinister forces at work in the swamp that our dear Canailles must decide how to deal with...

I started reading Jess's book sitting cross-legged on the soil-covered floor of an occupied Oxford Circus, embellished with a boat, in London on the Tuesday morning of the first week of an International Climate Rebellion. This also happened to be the morning of the launch of *Swimming Against the Storm* in Trafalgar Square, to take place later that same day. The relevance of Jess's book felt immense – to be reading about the loss of land, wildlife, and community in a small town in the US while partaking in a massive swell of peaceful protest in the capital city of the UK felt uniting. Like the hope that Jess encourages in her readers through the enthusiasm and passion of the Canailles in her book, hope was playing out on the streets.

And, as I write this review, I am on a Transport for Wales train that passes through Fairbourne, whose villagers could be the first in the UK to become climate refugees. This issue is everywhere, and it is urgent, and Jess's choice to use her voice to underline our global ecological situation will no doubt be a gift to many young people who need to feel supported in the world that they are coming into.

Jess's fourth novel is, coincidentally, going to find its setting in Welsh lands. I, and no doubt many others, can't wait to hear what you have to reflect on and show us.

Amy Grandvoinet

Toffee

Sarah Crossan, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Alison has run away from home, escaping her abusive Dad. Her plans quickly go awry though, and so it is that she finds herself sleeping in a shed at the end of a garden.

This situation rapidly changes when the house owner, Marla, a lady who suffers with dementia, discovers her and believes her to be her old friend Toffee. Marla invites Alison in and encourages her to stay. Alison then decides to play along with the idea of being Marla's friend, pretending to be Toffee, it does after all provide her with somewhere safe to stay. However as time goes on Alison battles with living a lie and deceiving someone fragile. She has to decide whether Marla deserves to know the truth irrespective of what impact that will have on her. It all leaves Alison questioning who she really is as a person too.

Written in non-rhyming verse, each page of this book feels like a depthy and detailed chapter. There is depth to what you discover and experience as the reader, Sarah Crossan rewarding the reader with the next relevant event through every turn of a page, leaving you to make the connection between them.

This is a hugely enjoyable book for secondary school students who like books written in short verse, giving an insight into the world of dementia, broken families and life as a teenage runaway.

Samantha Thomas

The True Colours of Coral Glen

Juliette Forrest, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Have you ever wondered what the world would look like if you could see it differently to everyone else? Ever thought that there might be other ways of describing what you see and how you see it? Coral Glen sees the world differently to those around her and only some of the living, in particular her beloved grandmother can understand how this works. When Coral's grandmother sadly passes away Coral is left bereft. Blaming herself for the death, spiralling into her own unusual world it is a mystery boy who both understands and can sympathise who begins to help her see that she can say a sad but happy last goodbye; that the world around her can make sense and that she, with his help, can make what could be an ordinary life in an ordinary town very much more exciting and full of adventure.

It has been many years since I read *Mondays are Red* by Nicola Morgan, a novel that introduced me to the fascinating world of synaesthesia. I have never since read another lie it until picking up *The True Colours of Coral Glen*. At no point in the story are we told that Coral has synaesthesia but from the opening line telling us that "every night, when the moon showed up and the Tinfoil clouds parted

like curtains to reveal the stars, I slept in a rainbow” I felt a connection to this story. Here I felt was another book I could read in wonder and awe, at once trying to understand this fascinating world whilst also attempting to understand Coral, who is at the same time attempting to understand herself.

Multi-layered, seamlessly beautiful, evocative and moving beyond words this is also a book of discovery, of daring adventure, of saving – not the world but a small town within it – and a story of understanding. Understanding ourselves, our relationships, the way in which we see the world, live in it, love it and make the very most of all it has to offer. Compelling, touching and a story to enjoy, to learn from, to be in awe at and above all a story that helped me see and understand the beauty of our world.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

We Are Blood and Thunder

Kesia Lupo, pub. Bloomsbury Children’s Books

A birthmark has determined Lena’s destiny and forced her to live underground after being abandoned by her family, assisting in the preparation of burials in the crypts that run underneath the city. Business is brisk, since a mysterious fog has clouded the sky of the Duke’s Forest and pestilence has killed many of its inhabitants. The city gates have been locked and the city placed under quarantine, while ‘mages’ are deemed responsible for the spell that is threatening the city and are therefore hunted.

An inexplicable event at a burial ceremony leads to Lena being accused of being a mage and accordingly sentenced to death. The girl succeeds in escaping the city and in reaching the City of Kings. Here, magic is acknowledged and regulated, in an effort to maintain a balance between Order, the physical world governed by the law of nature, and Chaos, its opposing force. Lena soon learns that she indeed holds magical powers and that there is mortal danger for her in the City of Kings too.

In her flight from Duke’s Forest, Lena’s path had crossed that of Constance, the Duke’s daughter. Herself a mage, Constance is returning to Duke’s Forest with the intention of saving it. Mystery shrouded her departure years before and secrets surround her return now. Having earned the loyalty of her surviving family and friends, Constance fights the Justice, a man who has taken advantage of his powerful position and has imposed his rule on Duke’s Forest. Yet Constance soon realizes that, in order for her plan to be successful, Lena must return to Duke’s Forest. Once the two young women are reunited, the spell is revealed in all its wickedness and the final fight begins.

The summary provided here only offers a brief overview of this complex and rather dark plot, which includes a rich cast of characters and whose setting is greatly detailed.

The two main protagonists, Lena and Constance, are initially set apart by life circumstances, but drawn together by supernatural forces. Both are strong-willed and both are determined not to be pawns in the hands of other players. In this fantastic story of magic, there is also space for romance and relationships and both Constance and Lena are called to make challenging choices and to be haunted by their consequences.

This is the first book by Kesia Lupo who has penned a highly readable story for young adult readers. While the first few chapters are relatively slower, once the scene is set the story gathers a much faster pace. As the end approaches, the twists and surprising developments of the plot make putting the book down an impossible task.

Laura Brill

Winter of the Wolves

Tony Bradman, pub. Bloomsbury Education

Oslaf has lost his home and his family and is forced to try to build a new life with an old friend of his mother's. The chieftain of this new village decides that the best hope for the future is to travel across the seas to a new land. Oslaf loves the tales of their Gods and their ancestors, but fears that he will never have the bravery he needs to fulfil his own destiny.

Bradman is a rare writer in that he has the talent to bring a huge story to life in just a hundred or so pages.

Winter of the Wolves feels like a vast and epic tale that belies its 140 pages. The 6th Century setting is vividly brought to life and tells of a tribe of Germanic Angles and their travels to find new land across the sea in Britannia. An important part of the history of Britain at the dawn of the time of the Anglo-Saxons but brought to life in a way that any reader can identify with. There are historical notes at the back of the book, and even a handy glossary.

This book is pitched for lower level readers but would make a great read for any reader. The first paragraph is one that would grab even the most reluctant reader, and the unflinching first sentence shows Bradman's gift with simple yet powerful words.

"It took Oslaf most of the afternoon to buy his mother."

A convincing hook that superbly sets the scene and adds another great book to this series of shorter historical novels Bradman has written for Bloomsbury.

Dawn Finch

Wolf Light

Yaba Badoe, pub. Zephyr Books

Zula, Adoma, and Linet were all born in *Wolf Light*. Gifted with shapeshifting and elemental powers the girls are tasked with protecting their homelands of Ghana, Mongolia and Cornwall. When their lands are threatened they must all work together to protect their homelands and their sacred sites from being destroyed.

The first thing I will say about *Wolf Light* is that the writing was simply stunning. Yaba Badoe has a way of writing in such a beautiful, poetic style that readers can't help but be drawn into the story she is telling. It really does compliment the spiritual nature of the book and at times the writing is so vivid you can just imagine you are in the story yourself.

I really liked the diverse female representation featured in *Wolf Light* and the theme of sisterhood and unbreakable bonds. The three girls rise up together to face whatever is trying to break them apart and destroy their lands. They are all so supportive of one another when things go wrong, it was a joy to read about such love and friendship between three young women. Girls everywhere who read this book will start to realise that they can make a difference and fight the wrongs in the world today.

With regards to the plot, at first, I found it rather confusing and I felt like I didn't get enough background into any of the characters. It also, at times felt rather rushed. As the book itself is rather short some situations seemed to have been brushed over and not explained as well as they could have been. In my opinion, the book could have been a lot longer just so that we could get more depth into characters and the plot as a whole.

However, the theme of the environment and how it is being destroyed really did keep my attention and I enjoyed how it was woven into the plot. The threat of environmental damage and climate change is something that is happening into today's society, so I love that this was tackled in a work of YA fiction. The next generation need to know about this and help save our planet.

Wolf Light is a beautifully written, poetic piece of fiction all about sisterhood, friendship and trying to do your best for the environment no matter what. I feel that this would certainly stand out to teens who want to explore the mythical, magical realism genres.

Amy Rush da Silva

The Words that Fly Between Us

Sarah Carroll, pub. Simon & Schuster

Sarah Carroll delivers a hugely enjoyable novel which is successful on so many levels.

Even before I read a single word from this book I was mystified and intrigued by the title. Simultaneously, I was drawn to the bright book cover which is not only cleverly designed but also uses an attractive palette of complementary colours. The focus is on a solitary figure sitting in an attic in the middle of a row of terraced houses. When considering the title and the book cover together, I immediately wondered if there would be tension between the characters and wondered what the connection was with the lonely, tiny, black silhouette perched in the attic.

I soon found out. Lucy is a young girl who lives in one of the wealthy terraced houses who spends much time exploring other people's attics. She reveals the life she is experiencing beneath the facade of a seemingly luxurious lifestyle. Her home life is extremely tense. She is a talented artist with huge potential. However, her father, Declan Fitzsimmons, doesn't appreciate his daughter's talent and frequently finds ways to belittle and humiliate her. He is a property investor who dominates the household in an unpleasant way. Lucy and her mother Alice have learnt to adjust to his bullying behaviour. The question is, are they going to continue to tolerate it?

The attic connects with the other houses in the street which Lucy secretly uses to address the concerns she has with her neighbours. It becomes her sanctuary. It is used to discover more information about her immediate neighbour, Ms Cussack, who is also an artist. Lucy and her friend Megan use the attic to retrieve Hazel's diary when Megan is experiencing online bullying. At the end of the street lives Mr. Reynolds, an investor with Lucy's father. Megan and Lucy decide that a bank statement from him could play a part in their daring plan, but crucially are they going to be able to obtain it from his house without getting caught? Eventually, Lucy and her mother Alice find the courage to stand up to her father in a spectacular way.

This is an exciting book capturing the realism and toxic atmosphere in an unhappy household and where different forms of bullying are convincingly explored. The characters are believable, as are the problems they face. Thank goodness there are talented writers like Sarah Carroll about who can skilfully manage to hold their readers' attention by providing a fascinating story using the minimum of words. The issues raised are more likely to resonate with teenagers. The story is fast paced and gripping and as you've probably guessed I thoroughly enjoyed reading single every word!

Marion Griffiths

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

Non-Fiction Book Reviews

A Brief History of Life on Earth

Clemence Dupont, pub. Prestel

This is an amazing non-fiction picture book which unfolds in a dramatic way, to reveal a spectacular timeline of life on earth. It opens up to eight metres long and takes readers from 4.6 billion years ago to the present day. It really is the most unusual and beautiful book and is a delightful way to show the history of life on earth.

Clemence Dupont is an illustrator who lives in Strasbourg, France and this is her first book. It is aimed at children aged 6 to 9, but older children and adults will also enjoy the book. It is a work of art and a reference book combined and one which can be returned to time after time. The illustrations are visually stunning, but not too bright. The text on each page is brief but informative.

This concertina picture book can be used traditionally as a book or as a wall frieze, decorating a bedroom or classroom. The journey through time starts with a very young and hot earth. Then water and the oceans start to appear. The first living organisms appear as bacteria. Large volcanoes and masses of lava then form the continents. The earth goes from hot to cold. Aquatic life spreads to the land as moss and fungi. Then come fish, plants, trees and coal. The impressive dinosaurs make their appearance. The triceratops is eight metres in length, the same as this book when it is fully opened. We end up with the birds and the smaller mammals and finally man.

Wow! What a truly incredible journey through time. Children are sure to love this book. Younger readers will appreciate some help with its concertina pages, but will really enjoy the story it tells, even if they cannot fully grasp the time period covered by its pages.

Gary Kenworthy

Cherry Moon - Little Poems Big Ideas Mindful of Nature

Zaro Weil, illus. Junli Song, pub. ZaZaKids Books

The Flower Moon just went by and the Strawberry Moon is coming in June; in between all this I discovered a Cherry Moon as a keepsake!

This Summer we shall delve in the soothing and mindful world of nature poetry by the award-winning poetess Zaro Weil, brilliantly illustrated by Junli Song. The flora and fauna mingling with the human world in a cool night and an atmosphere of nightly festivities greets us on the hardcover of the book

with earthy shades of blue, red and white. The theme is set from the beginning and readers are urged to be “where wild things are, and be a part of, well - everything.”

And it begins - the nature trip with Dogwood flowers, snoring dog, bees, blossoms, trees and beasts in the wilderness; under the moon! The River gives its message in a Haiku -

“You'd never guess,
but it's taken forever
learning to roll
so well.”

And the Little Pebble with a grateful heart, sings-

“I celebrate ancient earth
I salute ancient wind
I congratulate ancient waters
they made me who I am today.”

This big book of summer joys with over 95 poems is a treat for all ages, with messages of growth, acceptance, environment protection and being mindful about the same.

It beckons us to discover life as it unfolds around us in space and time, twinkling like fairy lights in the dark and fragrant like blossoms. The reader and listeners will rightfully believe, like the Dragonflies -

“As though summer
will never end.”

Ishika Tiwari

Firecrackers

Zaro Weil, illus. Jo Riddell, pub. ZaZaKids Books

“Long ages ago in ancient earth time, creatures talked like us but in wacky weird rhyme” and so begins this collection of 101 poems, short rhyming plays, raps, haikus, stories and fairy tales. Illustrated with detailed and humorous black and white line drawings and pictures by Jo Riddell which both add to and expand the rich language of the text, children will delight in the cornucopia and richness of the language found within these pages. Ideal for dipping into, this book can be read together, on your own or out loud; the plays are an interesting addition.

The topics covered are wide-ranging, thoughtful and quirky so every reader is bound to find something to delight them. This is a great collection for sparking the imagination, generating questions, and enjoying the sound and intricacies of language and word play. The collection is a rich celebration of the natural world and this book would sit comfortably on the shelf alongside other poetry books on nature. There is also a QR code that can be scanned for access to an audio recording of many of the pieces.

Poetry is an under-represented area, and this would make a great addition to any collection.

Barbara Band

Hummingbird

Nicola Davies, illus. Jane Ray, pub. Walker Books

Being a huge fan of the natural world, I was very excited to be able to review this book, and what a wonderful book it is.

This is the story of the ruby-throated hummingbird and its incredible journey from south to north and back again. For a bird that is smaller than your thumb and weighing less than a penny, what it endures year after year is truly astounding. Alongside the story of a granny and her granddaughter and their shared love of the hummingbirds are additional amazing facts about these delightful birds.

On opening the package and flicking through the pages, the first thing I noticed was how beautifully this book has been illustrated by Jane Ray. Each double page spread a work of art in its own right. The level of detail is amazing, and I could spend hours just looking at them as there seems to be something new in each one every time you look at them. The vivid colours and intricate details are a winner and compliment the narration perfectly.

This book serves as both a magical story for children and adults to enjoy, but I think more importantly than that, it educates everyone who reads it and can't help but stir a curiosity for the natural world around us and that can only be a good thing.

Victoria Warham

In Focus: Forests

Libby Walden, pub. Little Tiger Press

This non-fiction picture book showcases ten talented illustrators work on forests, informing us about everything to do with these most magical places, an important part of our natural world. It includes

everything from the canopies of the magical and extensive rainforest to the habitats the more traditional forest, showing us how these places help create ecosystems as well as the animals that dwell within these domains.

Every single page is so well designed that it maximises the impact it has on its readers and ensures their interests are maintained too. What makes the pages of this book even more magical and special is that each page unfolds encouraging and allowing the reader to uncover yet more stunning facts and images. These pages will, without doubt, draw in and engage the interest of all readers. Each of the illustrations is incredibly well detailed and immersive, perfect for the reader, helping them gain an understanding and appreciation of the magnificence that is nature's forests.

I found the fold out pages to be a bonus detail in what is already a fantastic book that would benefit primary school establishments and young children looking to research forests. It is very much a clever collaboration on an exciting subject that provides the perfect balance of information and interest.

Melissa Blackburn

In the City

Dominika Lipniewska, pub. Button Books

A book in which a day in the life of a city is explored.

The city wakes slowly, with early morning people getting ready for the day, running, walking the dog and going to work but it doesn't take long before things are moving. Buildings are discovered and explored, parks and markets investigated, people are seen going about their daily business, doing various jobs and undertaking leisure activities; all the usual hustle and bustle you would expect to find in a busy city. Transport makes its way around the streets and through the harbour. Finally, night arrives and the city slows down but not everyone sleeps.

With minimal text, the bold and distinctive illustrations tell the story in this book. They fill the pages with busy scenes giving the reader lots to discover and talk about. In blocks of vibrant unflinching colours with strong graphical lines and geometric shapes, they have a modern art feel with a Mondrian look to them.

A unique and energetic book to help children discover and investigate the aspects of a bustling city; ideal for younger children to explore and learn new words whilst older children can count animals and identify activities.

Barbara Band

The Incredible Ecosystems of Planet Earth

Rachel Ignatofsky, pub. Wren & Rook

‘As you read this page, a jaguar is on the hunt in the Amazon rainforest, a coral reef teems with life and a bike messenger in New York City is riding with a bagel in hand.’ So begins *The Incredible Ecosystems of Planet Earth*, a beautifully-illustrated and infectiously enthusiastic non-fiction book from New York Times-bestselling author and illustrator Rachel Ignatofsky, which explores how the many and various parts of the natural world exist together to support life on earth.

There is an impressive depth and breadth of coverage, with double-page features on major ecosystems spanning the Earth’s seven continents, from the Antarctic Tundra to the Himalayan Andes to the Cape of Africa. The aquatic ecosystems of planet earth are not neglected either, with a particularly fascinating section on the mysterious deep ocean, where there is still so much that is unknown and undiscovered. Each spread is attractively and clearly laid-out, striking a good balance between text, full page diagrams and intricately-illustrated little curiosities which draw in the eye. The almost cover-to-cover illustration also allows Ignatofsky to explore her topics with a somewhat surprising complexity while remaining engaging and accessible for a (young) middle grade audience.

Inevitably, this all leads to thinking about where humans fit in and our species’ impact on the world’s ecosystems. It could hardly be a more topical issue, or, as the recent school strikes across the world have demonstrated, one of more interest to children. Ignatofsky tackles the subject thoughtfully, with a discussion about how human lifestyles affect the delicate balance of life our planet – and what we might yet do to protect it.

Olivia Parry

Life. The First Four Billion Years

Martin Jenkins, illus. Grahame Baker-Smith, pub. Walker Studio

How long has there been life on earth? Since the Big Bang, since the formation of the Earth as a planet is the answer. What form has this life taken? The answer to this is more involved. There have been organisms from the beginning but the various stages that the Earth has been through since that very first Big Bang have instructed the forms of life present. Learn about how that first Big Bang created living things over 4 billion years ago, or at least as many years ago as that for it is actually thought the Earth formed 4.57 billion years ago but it is not known exactly. Discover that the very first period of our history is known as the Hadean Eon and how the stages have developed owing to ice ages and cataclysmic events all of which have impacted on life on Earth.

There are apparently interesting and boring stages, in spite of or because of this they are all covered in this huge and hugely informative book. Not only are there pages of facts for the most inquisitive mind to never bore of, there are fold outs, there is a timeline running the full length of the book, there are intricate, technical and visually highly appealing illustrations in colour and monochrome, cross section and bursting with life. The world is a complex place, its organisms and ecosystems are complex, all are laid out here for us to discover. There is much here that I had no idea about and I was particularly fascinated by the division of facts into categories such as Land Giants – terrestrial living things which unlike the animals of the period were far from small! Then there are the fish out of water and the continents on the move.

I need more time to take this all in. More importantly I need to give you, my readers, time to take this all in. This is a book not for a moment, not for a day, but for years. For years of enjoyment, for years of wonder and for years of learning and reading. This is simply an outstanding book. A book of facts and exploration for slightly older readers but at the same time a book that all can share. Children and adults alike will learn so much, will be fascinated by the contents, will learn, will enjoy (particularly the fold-outs) and will quite likely be vying to be the one who can learn the most fascinating fact!

Martin Jenkins and Grahame Baker-Smith have created a masterpiece and Walker Studio have been brave enough to introduce it to the children's book world – on your behalf I would like to thank them all. For their efforts, which must have been extensive, and for bringing us so much wonder and captivating reading.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Little Fish

Emily Rand, pub. Thames & Hudson

Little Fish is an intriguing and unusual pop-up book. It works as a conventional book, but in addition the covers can be pulled back and tied together to create a free-standing carousel of five different pop-up scenes. Each of the double page-spreads is a three-dimensional artwork representing aspects of ocean life.

The book tells the story of a little goby fish. At the start we see it playing in the waves with a companion. But then 'A giant shoal swims past the friends, and sweeps one fish away.' We turn the page and our fish is alone and lost. We are asked to look for a friendly turtle in the kelp. More frightening scenarios await. Overleaf is what looks like a cosy cave. If we look carefully though we see our little fish is eye to eye with a hungry, grumpy grouper. We turn again and our fish is now in 'the vast and empty ocean, where the water's deep and dark.' Things get scarier still. 'Some white and shiny teeth appear ... Quick, little fish! A SHARK!' All ends happily, however. Our little fish makes it back home and plays again with its friend in the coral reef.

The illustrations in *Little Fish* are neon-bright and striking and the paper engineering is extremely clever. Young children will be fascinated by the hide-and-seek element of the book. There are lots of intricate details to explore on every spread. The rhyming, rhythmical text, which swirls around as though it is wafting in the waves, complements the pictures well, and the story is one that will appeal. It is pleasing that the little fish is not given a gender. (In a worryingly high proportion of picture books with animal characters, virtually all are male.) Just one caveat: as with many pop-up books, this will need to be handled with care to avoid damage.

Anne Harding

Me and Mrs Moon

Helen Bate, pub. Otter Barry Books

“Be kind to one another”, these words of Ellen Degeneres resounded in my head after reading this heart-centred graphic novel on Dementia titled *Me and Mrs Moon* by Helen Bate.

The story is about three best friends- the two youngsters Maisie and Dylan and Mrs Moon (fondly called Granny Moon). The plot beautifully captures a strong and loving bond shared by the three. As Mrs Moon develops Dementia Maisie and Dylan devise ways to make her feel good and prevent her from being sent to an old age home.

The illustrations and dialogues strikingly depict the struggles of a person facing dementia with its accompaniments of dream images, confusion, the blurring of past and present and hallucinations; juxtaposed with it are the lives of those around, as they try to understand and strive together to take care of Mrs Moon.

The strong will needed to help each other is reflected in Maisie's thoughts when the adults begin concocting plans to send Mrs Moon away-

“But I wasn’t going to stay silent. I wasn’t going to let them send Granny Moon away without trying to help them understand.”

Human emotions and thought process of adults and kids is expressed beautifully, each trying to help Mrs Moon in their own way and finally consolidating ideas and working together for her betterment. This work reminds us to be mindful of those suffering with Dementia specifically and any other ailment generally, and to help them in ways that they would feel most comfortable with.

Suitable for ages twelve and above; this is a book about friendship, care, fears, heartfelt moments, triumphs and solidarity with a plea to understand Dementia and the changes which come along with it, to manage the same with more love and understanding.

Ishika Tiwari

National Trust: Look and Say What You See at The Seaside

Sebastian Braun, pub. Nosy Crow

National Trust: Look and Say What You See at The Seaside is a look and say book that is perfect for learning about nature at the seaside.

There are twelve double page illustrations each covering a different scene and, in addition to the traditional sandy beach and water's edge where you can spot children flying kites, families making sandcastles and others undertaking various water activities, there are also pages looking at rock pools, the cliff tops, a harbour, an estuary, sand dunes and underwater scenes amongst others.

The illustrations are cartoony in style in bright colours and very detailed. Along the bottom of each page there is a strip with objects that can be found in each scene. Some of these are quite unusual; for example, at the water's edge the reader is encouraged to spot a sanderling, turnstone, razor shell and mermaid's purse.

This is a lovely book to share with young children to encourage language development as there is so much to talk about on each page and the objects to be identified help with this but it is also a book that children will pour over by themselves as there's something new to spot each time.

There are three other books in the series: *National Trust: Look and Say What You See in the Countryside*; ... *on The Farm*; and *in The Town*.

Barbara Band

Ocean: Secrets of the Deep

Sabrina Weiss, illus. Giulia De Amicis, pub. What on Earth Books

The ocean covers the majority of our world and provides many of the elements to sustain life. This vast expanse of water gives food from the fish and other animals, whilst much of the oxygen we breathe is generated by microscopic organisms which also form the base of nearly all ocean food chains. Earth's climate and weather patterns are driven by the ocean, as seawater absorbs the heat from the sun and the currents carry it across the world.

A huge variety of life is supported in an incredible range of watery habitats, from the shallowest rock pools to the vast depths of undersea mountain ranges. The creatures also range from some of the smallest to be found on Earth to the biggest, the blue whale.

This fascinating and informative book explores life above and below the waves, using a mix of diagrams, maps, illustrations and infographics. Starting with myths and legends about mysterious creatures encountered by sailors across the centuries, such as the kraken, giant squid and mermaids, the reader is then taken on a journey to the deep, through the different zones of the ocean. From there, a range of habitats are explored, introducing and describing some of the inhabitants, both animal and plant-life.

The stylised, clear pictures are accompanied by detailed captions. We still have much to discover about the watery world surrounding us, but this book conveys a great deal for young enthusiasts. It is a book I would wholeheartedly recommend, with a place on the shelf alongside *The Sea* also reviewed here.

Jayne Gould

Sea

Patricia Hegarty, illus. Britta Teckentrup, pub. Little Tiger Press

This stunning peek through non-fiction picture book truly showcases life under our seas in a way that from cover to cover invites young readers to investigate its pages. With poetic verse throughout that is aimed at the children's level it helps to make this book both fun and interesting to explore, which is something youngsters will definitely want to do.

The illustrations grab the attention of its audience instantly with a choice of colours and depiction of texture which bring the world within the ocean to life so vividly and ensure young audiences will be left enthralled. I particularly admired the cut-out shapes of the fish within the book. I certainly feel that this book is ideal for sharing with younger readers in a primary setting and that it would make a splendid addition to a primary school library. In particular for me, and hopefully for a primary school audience, are the details at the end of the book on ocean conservation. This is a highly relevant topic that needs promoting from an early age and is done so in this book subtly and in a way that maintains the young readers engagement which is equally hugely important. Detailing and describing the vast and fragile beauty of one of Earth's largest habitats has been done impeccably well by both author and illustrator to meet a young readers level of understanding within this book. Moreover the collaboration between author and illustrator is a huge success.

Susan Thomas

The Sea

Miranda Krestovnikoff, illus. Jill Calder, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

By opening the pages of this beautiful book, the reader is invited on an incredible journey of exploration above, beside and under the waves of our blue planet. We learn that more of the Earth is covered by water than land, with 96% of that water in the seas, yet only 5% of them have been explored; there is so much we don't yet know about these fascinating depths.

The sea provides a huge variety of habitats around the world from its coastlines to its seabed, kelp forests, coral reefs and the open ocean are all part of this complex ecosystem. Miranda Krestovnikoff may be familiar to many readers from her television appearances and radio broadcasts; her lively and engaging style is reflected in the informative narrative. Her passion for and expertise in the subject shine through the writing; as a diver and naturalist, she has explored many of the areas covered making it all the more immediate for readers.

The double page spreads are illustrated by Jill Calder with a mix of layout styles and in tones. From the azure blue of tropical seas, to the cool greens of polar regions and the murky darkness of the deepest areas Jill Calder captures all we know, and much of what we imagine about the appearance of the oceans. Several openings are devoted to the wealth of creatures which are found above and below the waves. The danger of plastic pollution which has recently been highlighted by marine conservationists is also covered.

This is a book which can be enjoyed by a wide audience and which deserves a place on every bookshelf.

Jayne Gould

This or That? What will YOU choose at the Museum?

Pippa Goodhart, pub. Nosy Crow

Pippa Goodhart is the author of the popular *You Choose* books and this particular title is a collaboration between her and the British Museum.

The book contains a series of double-page spreads, each featuring photographs of one of the hundreds of objects to be found in the Museum, and inviting the reader to choose - Would you like to wear a crown or a straw hat? Would you like to wear a sari or a jumpsuit?

The images range from paintings, illustrations and drawings to pottery, textiles and furniture, and the photographs are arranged in groups including headgear, footwear, animals, homes, transport, food and more. The index shows each page with the objects numbered and basic information about them. There is also a QR code that can be scanned for additional information.

This is a colourful and engaging book that could be popular with fans of the other books in the series. It is perfect for language development as each page leads to discussion about the objects, and when and how you would use them. For older children, the photographs would be an excellent springboard for further investigation and a glimpse into both history and other cultures.

Barbara Band

Tolkein. Maker of Middle-Earth

Catherine McIlwaine, pub. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

J.R.R. Tolkein first visited the Bodleian Library, Oxford in November 1913. His association with the library continued throughout his life-time, and remains today with the Library holding an extensive archival collection of Tolkein's manuscripts and artwork. *Tolkein. Maker of Middle-Earth* is the exhibition catalogue of the Bodleian Library's 2018 major exhibition on Tolkein's life and works. It is a substantial book. There are over four hundred pages and more than a hundred reproductions of material from the exhibition.

The first part of the catalogue consists of six essays and the first two are about the life of Tolkein. Catherine McIlwaine writes a short biography of Tolkein, centring on his academic and literary career in Oxford, whilst John Garth introduces Tolkein's circle of friends and the Inklings, a small informal discussion club where Tolkein would read his work and receive comments. The remaining four essays examine different aspects of Tolkein's work, exploring less frequently covered themes. Verlyn Flieger considers Tolkein's reflection on the concept of Faërie. Carl Hostetter discusses Tolkein's 'secret vice' creating the Elvish languages, Quenya and Sindarin. Tom Shippey examines the influence of the European Old North on Tolkein and the courage to face defeat and death, so evident in the Horsemen of Rohan. Finally Wayne Hammond and Christian Scull review the breadth of Tolkein's topographical and visual art. Overall it seems that Tolkein's academic and literary work are inseparable. His profession as a philologist is central to his literary creation and in turn his literary creation deepened his academic imagination of historic cultures and language.

The second part of the book is the catalogue itself. The catalogue showcases the wealth of the Bodleian Library's archival material, including personal typed and handwritten letters; family photographs; watercolours; pen, ink and pencil drawings; decorative alphabets; illustrated maps and various book designs. This material is divided into a number of chapters giving it coherency either chronologically or upon specific themes, accompanied by text providing a fully understanding of the

context and significance of individual archival material. There is some fascinating, idiosyncratic material, such as a letter penned by an elderly gentleman called Mr Sam Gamgee and other letters of appreciation in runes or Elvish script. There are a number of newspaper doodles, the latter included in his literary work, as well as the more iconic art for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It is this original artwork that appeals the most for me in this catalogue, a demonstration of Tolkein's distinctive style.

Tolkein. Maker of Middle-Earth is an emporium of delight satisfying readers with a huge variety for those interested in the life and work of J.R.R. Tolkein. Emporium was the ancient river port of Rome. Like so many trading ports, this book brings together such diverse material, but for some it may also prove to be a launchpad for finding out so much more. A selected bibliography and references to major exhibitions are also included.

Simon Barrett

Tolkien Treasures

Catherine McIlwaine, pub. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

Tolkien Treasures is a short biography of J.R.R. Tolkein illustrated using the remarkable material held in the Bodleian Library archive.

Tolkein was truly prophetic when he predicted that his literary work would overshadow his academic work as a philologist, studying Old and Middle English principally among other old European languages. Catherine McIlwaine's introduction however emphasises the unity of Tolkein's professional and literary achievements. His academic analysis of languages relied upon his cultural immersion into northern Europe of the early Middle Ages. Similarly, his creation of two complete languages – the two elven languages of Quenya and Sindarin - meant bringing them alive by creating peoples, places, myths and legends of Middle-Earth. There is another intriguing unity in Tolkein's public and private life – as a husband and father. It is well known that many of Tolkein's tales were written and first told to his children, such as *Roverandom* and famously, *The Hobbit*.

The individual chapters on Tolkein's life and works consist of a page of text accompanied by numerous illustrations. The chapters cover Tolkein's childhood and war-time experience as well as his later life as an author and a scholar. There are also individual chapters on *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The final chapter concerns Tolkein's mapping of Middle Earth, the starting point for Tolkein's writings, and perhaps an approach that many fantasy authors that used since. The text is concise and authoritative. It is however the illustrations of material found in the Bodleian Library archive that is most impressive. The illustrations include photographs, extracts of manuscripts as well as Tolkein's own coloured pencil, pen and ink, watercolour illustrations and maps, showing the enormous talent and imagination of this man. The high-quality production brings

out the richness of Tolkein's work. In addition, there are accompanying notes for each illustration. Furthermore, there are a number of double spreads of illustrations, shown in greater detail on the second page. It is however sometimes a pity that this space was not used to showcase more of Tolkein's artistic talent.

Tolkein Treasures is a useful, short biography of Tolkein and includes material not previously published. It is therefore accessible to those with a general interest in Tolkein's books and will probably be a welcome addition to any fan's collection.

Simon Barrett

The Usborne Book of Planet Earth

Megan Cullis and Matthew Oldham, illus. Stephanie Fizer Coleman, pub. Usborne

Take a tour to some of the most spectacular places on our planet through the pages of this book. Find out about the migration of wildebeest across the Serengeti, climb the dizzying heights of the Himalayas, shiver in the icy vastness of Antarctica and explore the beauty of Venice. You can also dive beneath the waves to the depths of the Pacific Ocean and marvel at the Great Barrier Reef. All these adventures, and more are here, in your hands as you hold this book and turn its pages.

From the enticing map at the beginning of the book, which also cleverly acts as the contents page, readers are encouraged to follow the red string which zigzags its way around the world and pinned labels to explore the region they would like to find out about.

Each section is prefaced with an illustrated map of the relevant continent, with boxes giving page numbers for the highlighted features. With its bright, cheerful pictures and snippets of interesting information this is a very child-friendly introduction to planet earth, perfect for dipping in and out of. It also includes a section on ways to care for our world, as well as a comprehensive index.

Recommended for both home and school, this will be pored over by children of 7+.

Jayne Gould

When the Stars Come Out

Nicola Edwards, illus. Lucy Cartwright, pub. 360 Degrees

Louise Ellis-Barrett writes: What do you know about the stars? Yes, they are up in the sky and at night (if the sky is free of clouds) they tend to twinkle and look very lovely. People can look at them with the naked eye or for more detail through a telescope, you may even know that some of them form

shapes known as constellations. But there is so much more to know and explore about the stars and here, with this fascinating book, you can delve into the magic and wonder of the universe at night and begin to learn more about just what it is that makes it quite simply extraordinary.

As you open the book you will be struck by the images on the end pages, subtly but expertly drawn by Lucy Cartwright here are some of the constellations with their star pattern and at the same time a picture of the character they are named after or said to resemble.

Get past these wonderful illustrations and begin to learn about how the night works, how, as a result of our constant orbiting of the sun it is always night somewhere in the world.

Moreover, discover how, in spite of the night time perhaps seeming to be a lonely time and place it is actually a time of huge wonder and activity – we just need to look a little deeper to learn how much is going on. Discover that you may not be alone being afraid of the night but that so much is going on there really is nothing to be afraid of, unless perhaps you are one of those taking giant leaps into the dark of the night that is the universe, to learn, to explore. You can however be prepared for night with all the facts in this amazing book. Did you know that stars are actually different colours? That they create wonders of their own such as seasonal auroras and that in space moonbows can be seen ... From history to science this book covers everything the young curious mind may want to know about the night sky and much more besides. This book is going to keep me reading and learning for quite some time and I hope it will you too...

Susan Thomas was also inspired by this title and writes the following in reaction:

This book opens the mind to probe further as it covers many aspects of the night sky in an interesting and informative way including how night and day revolve like a miracle around the world. The brilliant illustrations entice one to explore so much more, from landing on the moon to stargazing and the polar constellations, nocturnal animals and how humans react to night. These illustrations transport you from location to location in a hypnotic way that works really well with the theme, depicting night time scenes of animals in their natural habitats as well as human civilisations, adding so much depth to this inspiring read.

This interesting and informative book will inspire those who read it as they delve into all things night sky including the beautiful northern lights, learn how animals adapt to sleep whilst flying, and then leave the Earth behind and travel to the moon. This oversized book will be a smash hit in school libraries with young readers, particularly those learning about night and day and the stars in the sky.

We should all know more about the sky at night,
Stargazing is wondrous, look up a glorious sight.
Just to think in the desert only once a year,
Queen of the night, its sweet-smelling flowers does appear.

Man landing on the moon, born out of a dream,
Mars is the next step for mankind, take us to extreme.
The northern lights brighten up the sky, so magical,
Dancing waves of lights, blue, green, pink, purple, unbelievable.
To see a rainbow is special, but even greater moonbow,
Just to find out there is one, enough to know.
Little giraffe, standing asleep short naps does suffice,
How lucky we are, tucked up in bed, we don't think twice.
Ignoring Sweden fresh are needed for a nap,
Rows of prams lined up near shops, even when cold snap.
I do take moments to look at the stars at night,
They make you wonder what are we missing, to get it right.

Wilderness: Earth's Amazing Habitats

Mia Cassany, illus. Marcos Navarro, pub. Prestel Publishing

This is a stunning large format book that looks at the habitats of some of the world's rarest animals and plants. Each double-page spread features an individual landscape, many of them National Parks and Reserves. These span five of the world's seven continents, they are indicated on a world map, and each habitat contains examples of native species, carefully hidden amongst the vegetation.

The illustrations are breath-taking in both their vibrant colours and detail, using unusual colours and employing drawing techniques such as stippling. Readers will delight in trying to spot as many animals as possible amongst the foliage although, as many of them are rather rare and exotic, they may struggle!

There is only a brief description of the habitat on each page – too much text would lessen the impact of this spectacular book – but additional information can be found on the back pages where the animals on each spread are identified.

This is a unique book with a “wow” factor that would interest both animal lovers and conservationists alike as well as budding artists.

Barbara Band

The Woman who Rode a Shark and 50 more wild female adventurers

Ailsa Ross, illus. Amy Blackwell, pub. AA Publishing

This hardback book features 50 amazing women and their achievements throughout history, from 200BC in Ancient Illyria when Teuta the pirate queen stood up to Ancient Rome, to Svetlana Alexievich, the Nobel prize winning journalist in Ukraine today, who is giving a voice to the survivors of conflict and disaster.

The book is split into six sections: the artists; the pioneers; the scientists; the activists; the athletes and the seekers. Each section features around 7-10 amazing women from all over the world organised from the earliest to the most recent. Each double spread consists of a single page of fascinating facts with a corresponding full-page portrait in bold vibrant colours that instantly capture the reader's imagination. Each section also has a map showing where the women it features are from.

Every page of *The Woman Who Rode a Shark* contains a rich, diverse message that women all over the globe, throughout the ages have had a positive impact and legacy on society, from Jeanne Barret the first woman to sail around the world from 1740 -1803, to Sacagawea who helped chart North America in 1785-1812. The latter did everything the men did and she did it all carrying a baby on her back!

There are also snippets of information to ignite every female adventurer's imagination, such as, it is said that pirate Teuta's treasure is still buried in the hills somewhere above the Adriatic Sea, and whilst Diana Nyad swam from Cuba to Florida for 52 hours without sleeping she passed the time by dreaming of dancing foxtrot on Dancing with the Stars! These snippets are accompanied by inspirational quotes such as:

"I'd rather dream large and fail than shoot for mediocre and never discover my limits."
(Diana Nyad).

I think one of my favourite parts of the book is that at the bottom of each spread there are the names and dates of even more women who have also made achievements in similar fields for the reader to research and find out more. Proving the list of dynamic women is endless.

A must have book for all young girls who are not going to let anyone hold them back.

Anita Loughrey

Anita Loughrey, www.anitaloughrey.com, has recently published *Graphic Greats Heroes of Discovery Who Changed the World* and *Graphic Greats Heroes of Science Who Changed the World* with BES Publishing

You're Crushing It! Positivity for living your REAL life

Lex Croucher, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

You're Crushing It! is a self-help guide for young people with advice on creating a support network of family and friends, relationships, managing social media, and starting work.

Written in an accessible chatty style with personal anecdotes, this is honest and thoughtful with positive messages about self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence, good mental health, putting things into perspective and taking time out, and body image. It is fairly text heavy, but the chapters are broken up with several inspirational quotes and messages in a larger, different-style font.

This is not the sort of book that lends itself to an index with topics that can be researched, although there is a list of useful organisations; it is more of a memoir-style read that is frank and open. Author, Lex Croucher, is popular on social media with over 100,00 Twitter followers, vlogging and podcasting on topics such as feminism and animal rights so this book will appeal to teenagers, particularly as it is written in an authentic voice. The author is passionate about women's rights so this could also be a good book for giving young girls the tools for empowerment.

Barbara Band

Moon landing: 50th Anniversary

The year was 1969. People were dreaming.
People were curious. People were inventing.

The year is 2019. People are dreaming. People
are curious. People are inventing.

Despite the 50 year gap people are doing the
same things. And, of course, we are all, child
and adult, still reading ...

Whilst many of us may not remember events of
50 years ago we have the opportunity to learn
about them, to read about them, just as we do
with events that happened hundreds,
thousands and even millions of years ago –
through books. The events of 50 years ago are
special to us now, at this moment, because it
was 50 years ago, in 1969 that a human first
walked on the moon. It is time now to celebrate
the 50th anniversary of the moon landings and
what better way for children to both celebrate
and learn more about it!

How can we celebrate and learn? Through a
selection of wonderful books about the landing
and about space that I have been gathering
together to share with you.

For younger readers the *Usborne Lift-the-Flap
Very First Questions and Answers: What is the
Moon?* by Katie Daynes, with illustration by
Marta Alvarez Miguens will provide the perfect
introduction to the moon, helping them to
understand what this bright shape in the sky is,
is before playing games whilst looking at the
shapes which seem to appear on its surface –
lift a flap to see more. There is a chance to look
too at its shape, again under some wonderful

flaps, discover what it is made of, why it shines
and then of course has anyone been there and
how. With simple text, clear, bold illustration
and lots of flaps for curious fingers and minds
to explore this is the perfect introduction to the
topic.

Want to know more about the landings to begin
with? Want to read, dream and wonder as you
too take a journey to the moon? *Usborne Book
of the Moon* with facts research and written by
Laura Cowan and illustration, in fantastic
detail, by Diana Toledano will help you do just
that. Open it to discover end pages where
rockets and satellites dart through space and
then turn over to discover some myth-busting
facts, ask questions and learn the answers ...

Q: Where is it? A: A long way away, in fact it
would take more than 5 months to drive to it in
a car at top speed!

Q: What are its different names? A: New
moon, a crescent, quarter and gibbous (full).

Learn about some of the myths that grew up in
different countries as people tried to work out
what this shape in the sky was. See how
scientists created viewing glasses – telescopes
to be able to study it and last, but not least,
learn how humans first walked on the moon.

Continuing for a moment with picture books –
it does seem that the younger children are
being delighted with a feast of reading and I
know I am learning a lot from this too – Ken
Wilson-Max's *Astro Girl* (Otter-Barry Books)
introduces us to Astrid, a lover of the stars and
space, a little girl with her own little telescope

and a very curious mind. When Astrid tells her friends and family that she plans to be an astronaut her friend wants a present from space and her dad explains to her all the things she will have to do. From going round and round the earth in a spaceship to eating food from a packet, floating and even doing experiments. With bold, strong pictures this story has a surprise for its reader, is a charm to read and at the end has plenty of interesting facts for them to learn more from. A delight to read.

How to be on the Moon by Viviane Schwartz (Walker Books) is a vibrant and quirky celebration of adventure and fearlessness. This is the second adventure for the fearless duo Anna and Crocodile and it is an intrepid one for they are off to the moon! Of course such an adventure, as any good adventure, is not a simple task and there is lots of preparation to be done ... The dialogue between the pair is just wonderful, quirky and yet realistic whilst the illustrations burst off the page, a riot of imagination and colour. Having read this one children will want to create adventures of their own and maybe with their knowledge from all these titles, build their own rocket too ... what will it look like?? A burst of curiosity with a splash of imagination and a dollop of play, a wonderful book to enjoy.

Now for an interesting fact and one that I had never heard before ... the Montgolfier brothers, paper manufacturers who lived in France discovered that hot air from small fires could make small cloth or paper bags rise into the air. They took their discovery further by creating the very first hot air balloon which they launched into the air. In September 1783 they tried flying it with animals and then in October

1783 they flew in it! The history of flight goes back even further though, to Ancient Greece where myth tells us of the boy who tried to fly. Move through the ages and discover that the very idea of flight is not new and has been tried (and occasionally tested) on many occasions. *Balloon to the Moon* by Gill Arbuthnott and Chris Nielsen (Big Picture Press) taught me these and many other facts. What a fascinating book – full of wonder and quite simply the most magnificent illustrations – a true classic in style, a book packed with history and fact, a book to become immersed in child or adult for all will learn, wonder and aspire as a result.

Now I have started this adventure into space books and reading I could go on ... but I fear I will run out of space (pun intended) so I will summarise a few more excellent titles that should most definitely feature on bookshelves this year ... for reading, for pleasure, for learning ...

Did you know – another new fact about space travel for me at least – that there have been dogs in space? Belka and Strelka were two dogs at the Moscow Space centre, strays who were taken in by a kindly scientist with a plan ... he wanted to send them into space. Of course they were well looked after, cared for and Vix Southgate and Iris Deppe show us how in their fascinating *Dogs in Space* (Wren & Rook). But, they were also trained for a very special mission. Learn about the journey these two brave dogs took to become the very first dogs in space.

Want to know more about astronauts? Join best friends Monty and Sylvester as they begin their intensive training for a very, very big challenge – a trip into space! Just what will

they discover? You will have to follow their journey, turning the pages and the book, this way and that as you dive around with the intrepid duo on an amazing adventure in *Monty and Sylvester, A Tale of Everyday Astronauts*. Written, and stylishly illustrated by Carly Gledhill (Orchard Books) this book is a delight.

Now you have the facts at your fingertips from all these stunning picture books get the low-down from DK's encyclopaedic book of facts, figures and history *The Space Race: The Journey to the Moon and Beyond* by Sarah Cruddas. Learn about the people who have been and continue to study space, what they do and how, what they have to wear, where they work, the plans they have and the inventions that are ongoing. Plus discover how you might be able to have a space experience of your very own. A book packed with information that it might take 50 days (or maybe even years) to digest! A fun-fact-filled history and exploration of the history of space exploration!

How about some poems on the theme of space now? We could get *Spaced Out* with Brain Moses and James Carter (Bloomsbury Children's Books) who have gathered together a stunning and eclectic collection of poems about space and its wonders. Reach to the Stars/ Those beautiful specks of hope writes Pie Corbett, speaking evocatively of those twinkly dots in the sky in his beautiful poem.

Learn about the big bang with Robert Schechter and think about how the universe could be said to be made of nothing when it clearly started with a 'big bang'.

With poems divided into categories of 'Looking Up', 'The Moon and the Sun', 'Eight Planets a Billion Stars', 'Black Holes and Other Dark Matters', 'Alien Life' and finally 'Space and Other Travel' there is plenty to choose from and lots to learn – about poetry styles and about space, in this brilliantly curated collection of poetry and story.

Moonstruck! Poems About Our Moon edited by Roger Stevens, illustrated by Ed Boxall sums up our sense of wonder about the moon, about space, about the stars and about all those things which are seemingly out of reach and untouchable in our night sky. Again, a collection of poems bought together for young children to learn from and enjoy, creatively illustrated too. I loved *The Delicious Side of the Moon* in which we find cake and Roger's own *Moonstruck* which for me sums up this entire feature, our love and wonder for the moon ...

Moonstruck

A Brilliant Idea that arrives after
midnight

Moonsick

When you live in the city and you long to
catch moonbeams

Moonstick

A branch cut for walking across moonlit
fields

Mooonsack

A bag made of memories for storing
your dreams

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Not My Fault

Rebecca Rouillard reports from the book launch of *Not My Fault* by Cath Howe.

On a sunny evening in May, I joined a bustling crowd of supporters at Waterstones, Richmond for the launch of Cath Howe's new book, *Not My Fault*. Cath's previous novel, *Ella on the Outside*, is instantly recognisable because of its eye-catching, vibrant orange cover. Although *Not My Fault* is not quite as vivid, the turquoise cover and emoji-style thundercloud graphic are still striking, and the bespoke typography, designed by Joel Holland, is particularly stunning.

Maya and Rose are sisters, but that's about all they have in common. Rose is neat, diligent, and a star gymnast, but is also secretly eaten up with guilt about Maya's accident. Maya is charismatic, chaotic, and driven to self-destructive behaviour by physical pain and anger about her accident. Maya and Rose are not talking to each other, but a school residential trip to Wales will be the catalyst that makes or breaks their relationship. The story is told from both of their perspectives and beautifully illustrates the ways that siblings can know each other so well, but also completely misunderstand each other. I read *Not My Fault* the night before my ten-year-old set off, with some trepidation, for his week-long residential on the Isle of Wight. These trips are a rite of passage, I have clear memories of my



own school residentials, and this adventurous context serves as a perfect backdrop for the emotional drama of Rose and Maya's story.

Cath was introduced by her editor, Tom Bonnick (who described the awkward defensiveness of sending out emails with the subject line, '*Not My Fault*'), and her agent, Anne Clarke. Cath spoke a bit about her inspiration for the book—as a parent of three children and a primary school teacher, Cath has plenty of experience of relationship dynamics between children, and siblings in particular, but she says the primary inspiration for Maya was the memory of being an angry child herself. Finally, Cath read the brief but powerful opening that describes Maya's accident—the incident that triggers the breakdown of the sisters' relationship.

Sometimes it's harder to forgive your family than anyone else, but *Not My Fault* is a prescription for sibling empathy.

Highly recommended

Sallywag Press

Erin Hamilton meets Sallywag Press: an interview with Sarah Pakenham with mini reviews of published and forthcoming titles.



Sallywag Press is the new kid on the block, set up in 2018 by the lovely and experienced rights seller Sarah Pakenham. Formerly of Andersen Press, Sarah branched out and created her own publishing house. Sallywag Press is going from strength to strength with a firm list of creative picture books being published this year. I can attest to the wonder and brilliance of each book and I look forward to seeing them out in the world.

Moreover Sallywag Press is gaining beneficial press coverage with the recent publication of Jon Agee's *The Wall in the Middle of the Book*. A deserving book and one to be read and shared, it offers humour, relevance and new perspectives. It has multiple layers that can be explored and enjoyed by various aged children.

Sarah's experience in the world of children's books and publishing has given her the innate ability to trust her "gut instinct" about what she likes, wants to publish and who she wants to work with. She is striking a balance between publishing new talent, such as *We Found a Seed* by Rob Ramsden and publishing old classics that deserve to be read by a new generation. *The Happy Lion* by Roger Duvoisin is being re-published in June 2019 and will no doubt become a firm favourite with new readers.

Sarah believes that books should be a reflection of reality in that they reflect all cultures, genders and nationalities. They should be about the human condition, recognising the way people behave and encouraging kindness and empathy. As well as considerations for BAME characters, Sarah is also keen to ensure all abilities, and neurodiverse children are well represented in the books she publishes. In that vein of thought, Sallywag Press are proud to publish *Me and My Sister* by Rose Robbins. This is a subtle look at living with an autistic sibling and the ways in which life needs to be adapted and understood.

Currently working solely with picture books, Sarah looks for striking illustrations and an exciting narrative. Many of the books are endearing and send powerful messages to the reader. I particularly liked *The Longest Strongest Thread* by Inbal Leitner. This gorgeous book shares an enduring message of love between a grandma and granddaughter. No matter the miles, the thread of love links them together. Knowing this story stems from a young family saying goodbye to their older relatives during WWII makes it even more special and important.

Sallywag Press aims to publish and grow with each year and I know there is much more to come from Sarah and her team. Please read on for short introductions to the books featured in the catalogue ...

Books published in Spring 2019

Hat Tricks

Satoshi Kitamura, pub. February 2019

A bold, bright book aimed at toddlers. What will Hattie pull out of the magic hat next? Everyone eagerly awaits the next animal.

I saw a Bee

Rob Ramsden, pub. April 2019

A brilliant way of encouraging children to explore nature and to care for creatures who live in the natural world. Beautiful illustrations accompany a simple rhythmic text.

Umbrella

Elena Arevalo Melville, pub. June 2019

A magical umbrella is the key to this story where kindness, empathy and forgiveness are the focus. Stunning illustrations accompany the story and this will be a wonderful addition to any bookshelf.

The Wall in the Middle of the Book

Jon Agee, pub. February 2019

A protective wall separates the knight from unknown dangers, but he isn't watching his side close enough. There are excellent details and multiple story lines making this an enjoyable read.

Me and My Sister

Rose Robbins, pub. April 2019

A wonderful introduction to growing up with an autistic sibling, told from the perspective of the brother. This will become a useful tool for schools in helping students understand these complex relationships.

The Happy Lion

Louise Fatio and Roger Duvoisin, pub. June 2019

This classic is coming back to life 50 years after its first publication. The happy lion takes a stroll through his local town in France but why are the friendly zoo visitors fleeing from him? Wonderful, detailed illustrations set the scene for the happy lion's walk.

Publishing Summer 2019

The Rabbit Listened

Cori Doerrfeld, pub. July 2019

This is an incredibly moving story of Taylor whose blocks get knocked down. Animals come to help Taylor to deal with the myriad of emotions, but it isn't until Rabbit comes and listens that Taylor starts to feel better. A gorgeous book for children learning to deal with loss and emotions.

Life on Mars

Jon Agee, pub. August 2019

A daring astronaut travels to Mars with a gift of chocolate cupcakes but cannot find any life on the planet- the reader sees the alien following him around and it makes for some funny moments. Stunning illustrations.

The Night Before Christmas

Roger Duvoisin, pub. September 2019

A classic Christmas tale brought to life by talented Roger Duvoisin. This edition features vintage illustrations with a primary colour palette. It will be published in a tall, narrow format, ideal for stockings.

We Found a Seed

Rob Ramsden, pub. August 2019

A simple and colourful introduction to growing seeds. The boy and girl find a seed, play with it but it doesn't grow until they plant it, water it and care for it.

A Gallery of Cats

Ruth Brown, pub. September 2019

An amusing visit to the art gallery with Tom and his Granny. Tom wanders into a new exhibition and finds himself faced with 12 masterpieces from which cats jump out and follow him around. Excellent introduction to famous artists, and glorious illustrations.

Publishing in 2020

The Smile Shop

Satoshi Kitamura, pub. February 2020

A boy, with some pocket money, visits a few shops to make the right choice. This book will help children to understand that there are some things money can't buy.

Lion Lessons

Jon Agee, pub. February 2020

Becoming an honorary lion is hard but the narrator must persevere until his skills are actually needed to save a cat. A brilliant front cover promises another excellent book from Jon Agee.

Hey Water

Antoinette Portis, pub. Spring 2020

A new look at water forms, the water cycle and conservation. Gorgeous illustrations accompany simple text showing water in all its forms, from tears to icebergs and fog to snowflakes.

Talking is Not My Thing

Rose Robbins, pub. February 2020

This is the companion book to *Me and My Sister* and is told from the sister's perspective. She, who struggles to know what to say and how to say it. This looks at how the siblings use other ways to communicate.

The Longest Strongest Thread

Inbal Leitner, pub. in February 2020

This is a stunning book that deals with the relationship between a grandparent and grandchild, one that sometimes spans the miles. They must say goodbye as the granddaughter is moving away, but they have the longest, strongest thread bonding them together.

Swimming against the Storm

Amy Grandiovnet again speaks to Jess Butterworth about her passion for the environment and her latest book for junior and teen readers.



Jess Butterworth's third book, *Swimming Against the Storm*, is out! An adventure story for young readers based in Louisiana, where rising sea levels in a global scene of troubling climate change, Jess makes another stellar creation that champions hope and action. Following her book launch on Tuesday 16th April 2019, Jess answers a few questions from Armadillo, revealing a little more about her current tale, and a little too about the next one...

One sentence to sum up what the book means for you? *Swimming Against the Storm* is an adventure set in the swamps of Louisiana with themes of environmentalism, friendship, growing up, and fighting for what you believe in.

The relationship between Eliza and Avery, specifically thinking about responsibility, was very interesting – do you see this linking to other considerations on this theme that come up elsewhere in *Swimming Against the Storm*? Eliza feels a huge responsibility of looking after Avery because Avery is younger than her, and she worries that Avery doesn't realise how dangerous the swamps can be, even

though Eliza's taught Avery everything she knows. Eliza's also growing up and trying to carve out her own identity, one that's separate to Avery. I think it's in Eliza's personality to care about things deeply and feel responsible for looking after those things, like her family and friends and pet cat, her home and all the creatures that inhabit it, and the sinking land they live on. This also provides a contrast to the oil company that works in the area, who don't feel any responsibility to care about the impacts they are having on the area.

'Soileron' – what was the thinking behind the choosing of this name, Jess? Soileron is the name of the oil corporation that operates in the area. It was actually very hard to find a name that wasn't already taken by a product or company. I wanted a name that was connected to the earth in some way, and that also sounded like it could be a real, and one that didn't immediately conjure images of an oil company.

Any personal encounters with sinking mud yourself in Louisiana? Luckily I've never fallen completely into sinking mud but I have got my foot stuck before and when I

pulled my pulled my foot out, it left the shoe in the mud!

... And any personal encounters with eating worms (and therefore some mud) in Louisiana too? No, I've never eaten worms in Louisiana (and hopefully will never have to!) but I've been told some stories of children eating worms which is where I got the idea from.

Have you ever tried a King Cake? If so, can you tell us what it is like? I love King Cake. Like Christmas Cake it's only around once a year, which makes it extra special. It's always in the shape of a giant ring, and decorated in the Mardi Gras colours of green, purple and gold. There can be different fillings inside the cake, but my favourite is cinnamon and pecan.

What do you hope readers might take away from reading your book? I hope readers come away feeling like they've been on their own adventure, that they've had a peek into a place that's different to where they live, and that they feel empowered that they can

make a difference in the world in the ways they want to.

And finally, is there anything you might share with Armadillo about what's coming in your new Wales-based story (I feel I might be able to ask this, with an ounce of cheek, as I am writing to you from Welsh lands!)? It's going to be about four brothers and sisters who go on a quest to find their father who's living in remote Wales, but on the way they get lost in the Preseli mountains. Unbeknownst to them, they're also being pursued by a group of criminals because of an object they're carrying. There's going to be lots of Welsh folklore woven in too. I'm very much enjoying writing it.

And I can reveal that the title will be *Where the Wilderness Lives*.

Jess, thank you so much!

Swimming Against the Storm is published by Orion Children's books and can be found in bookshops all over the place.

Picture books

A Dog's Tale

Rob Stevens, illus. Tony Ross

A Mouse Called Julian

Joe Todd-Stanton

Big Cat

Emma Lazell

The Big Stink

Lucy Freegard

The Bookworm

Debi Gliori

Dare

Lorna Gutierrez, illus. Polly Noakes

Dog on Wheels at Sunny Sea

Gillian McClure

Don't Go There!

Jeanne Willis, illus. Hrefna Bragadottir

Duck and Penguin Are Not Friends

Julia Woolf

Five More Minutes

Marta Altes

Go, Go, Pirate Boat

Katrina Charman, illus. Nick Sharratt

Have you seen my Blankie?

Lucy Rowland, illus. Paula Metcalf

How to Light Your Dragon

Didier Lévy, illus. Fred Benaglia

I Am A Tiger

Karl Newson, illus. Ross Collins

I Don't Want To Be Small

Laura Ellen Anderson

I Have an Idea

Hervé Tullet

In the Swamp by the Light of the Moon

Frann Preston-Gannon

It's Your World Now!

Barry Falls

King Otter

Jane Porter

Little Cloud

Anne Booth, illus. Sarah Massini

Little Green Donkey

Anuska Allepuz

The Marvellous Fluffy Squishy Itty Bitty

Beatrice Alemagna

Meet the Penguins

Mike Brownlow

The Night Bear

Ana De Moraes, illus. Thiago De Moraes

Paper Planes

Jim Helmore, illus. Richard Jones

The Phoenix of Persia

Sally Pomme Clayton and Amin Hassanzadeh Sharif

The Really, Really, Really Big Dinosaur

Richard Byrne

Somebody Swallowed Stanley

Sarah Roberts, illus. Hannah Peck

Sophie Johnson Detective Genius

Morag Hool, illus. Ella Okstad

There's a Spider in my Soup!

Megan Brewis

Super Sloth

Robert Starling

The Tide

Helen Welsh, illus. Ashling Lindsay

Tony T-Rex's Family Album

Mike Benton, illus. Rob Hodgson

Wakey Birds

Maddie Frost

Junior books

A Girl Called Justice

Elly Griffiths

A Wolf Called Wander

Rosanne Parry, illus. Monica Armino

Beverly Right Here

Kate Di Camillo

Bloom

Nicola Skinner, illus. Flavia Sorrentino

Boot

Shane Hegarty, illus. Ben Mantle

Cloud Boy

Marcia Williams

Check Mates

Stewart Foster

D-Day Dog

Tom Palmer

Dancing The Charleston

Jaqueline Wilson, illus. Nick Sharratt

Evie and the Animals

Matt Haig, illus. Emily Gravett

The Fearless Five

Bannie McPartlin

The Fire Maker

Guy Jones

The Good Thieves

Katherine Rundell

Harsu & the Werestroat

Barbara Else

High Rise Mystery

Sharna Jackson

Lily and the Rockets

Rebecca Stevens, illus. Harriet Taylor Seed

Malamander

Thomas Taylor

The Maker of Monsters

Lorraine Gregory

Midnight at Moonstone

Lara Flecker, illus. Trisha Krauss

The Missing Bookshop

Katie Clapham, illus. Kirsti Beautyman

The Monster Who Wasn't

T. C. Shelley

No Ballet Shoes in Syria

Catherine Bruton

Not My Fault

Cath Howe

Pay Attention, Carter Jones

Gary D. Schmidt

Pog

Pádraig Kenny

Rumblestar

Abi Elphinstone

Runaway Robot

Frank Cottrell-Boyce, illus. Steven Lenton

Starfell: Willow Moss and the Lost Day

Dominique Valente, illus. Sarah Warburton

The Time Travel Diaries

Caroline Lawrence, illus. Sarah Mulvanny

The Umbrella Mouse

Anna Fargher, illus. Sam Usher

We Won an Island

Charlotte Lo

Wildspark

Vashti Hardy

Young Adult books

All We Could Have Been

T.E. Carter

Awake in the World

Jason Gurley

Beauty Sleep

Kathryn Evans

Black Enough

ed. Ibi Zoboi

The Boy Who Steals Houses

C.G. Drews

Breaking the Rules

Maxine Linnell, illus. Sophie Escabasse

The Cantankerous Molly Darling

Alvy Carragher

The Cold is in Her Bones

Peternelle van Arsdale

The Girl Who Came Out of the Woods

Emily Barr

The Golden Butterfly

Sharon Gosling

Hopewell High: Stage Fright

Jo Cotterill, illus. Maria Garcia Borrego

How to Make Friends with the Dark

Kathleen Glasgow

Louis Undercover

Fanny Britt, trans. Christelle Morelli & Susan Ouriou, illus. Isabelle Arsenault

Meat Market

Juno Dawson

My Secret Lies with You

Faye Bird

My So-Called Bollywood Life

Nisha Sharma

Only Love Can Break Your Heart

Katherine Webber

Opposite of Always

Justin A. Reynolds

Patron Saints of Nothing

Randy Ribay

Perfectly Preventable Deaths

Deirdre Sullivan

Sing Like No One's Listening

Vanessa Jones

The Surface Breaks

Louise O'Neill

Swimming Against the Storm

Jess Butterworth

Toffee

Sarah Crossan

The True Colours of Coral Glen

Juliette Forrest

We Are Blood and Thunder

Kesia Lupo

Winter of the Wolves

Tony Bradman

Wolf Light

Yaba Badoe

The Words that Fly Between Us

Sarah Carroll

Non-Fiction books

A Brief History of Life on Earth

Clemence Dupont

Cherry Moon - Little Poems Big Ideas Mindful of Nature

Zaro Weil, illus. Junli Song

Firecrackers

Zaro Weil, illus. Jo Riddell

Hummingbird

Nicola Davies, illus. Jane Ray

In Focus: Forests

Libby Walden

In the City

Dominika Lipniewska

The Incredible Ecosystems of Planet Earth

Rachel Ignotofsky

Life. The First Four Billion Years

Martin Jenkins, illus. Grahame Baker-Smith

Little Fish

Emily Rand

Me and Mrs Moon

Helen Bate

National Trust: Look and Say What You See at The Seaside

Sebastian Braun

Ocean: Secrets of the Deep

Sabrina Weiss, illus. Giulia De Amicis

Sea

Patricia Hegarty, illus. Britta Teckentrup

The Sea

Miranda Krestovnikoff, illus. Jill Calder

This or That? What will YOU choose at the Museum?

Pippa Goodhart

Tolkein. Maker of Middle-Earth

Catherine McIlwaine

Tolkien Treasures

Catherine McIlwaine

The Usborne Book of Planet Earth

Megan Cullis and Matthew Oldham, illus.
Stephanie Fizer Coleman

When the Stars Come Out

Nicola Edwards, illus. Lucy Cartwright

Wilderness: Earth's Amazing Habitats

Mia Cassany, illus. Marcos Navarro

The Woman who Rode a Shark and 50 more wild female adventurers

Ailsa Ross, illus. Amy Blackwell

You're Crushing It! Positivity for living your REAL life

Lex Croucher