



# Armadillo

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## Spring 2020

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

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### Books Reviewed

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# Picture Book Reviews

## **A Hat for Mr Mountain**

Soojin Kwak, pub. Two Hoots

*A Hat for Mr Mountain* is a delightful story about Nara. Nara loves to make hats for all the animals who visit her workshop in all the different shapes and sizes necessary: no customer is too small, too tall or too big. However, one day she receives a letter from a very large customer indeed – Mr Mountain has been watching her make hats from afar, and has now asked for one of his very own. Nara rises to the challenge, but has she taken on the impossible?

This gorgeous story works on many levels. It will be great for primary STEM lessons as Nara explores using different materials to make Mr Mountain's hat and discovers why so many of them just don't work or won't last. It is also a humorous tale about never giving up, but - how often - when things get too hard we need help and support from our friends to be able to keep going. The power of friendship is a clear winner on these pages. These messages are woven into the warm fabric of the story with a subtlety that does not distract from the tale itself. The illustrations add beautifully drawn moments that aren't mentioned in the text – a sign of a wonderful picture book doing what it should: text and pictures working together in perfect symbiosis. I loved seeing the mountain peeking in through the window and the panda eating the watermelon!

*A Hat for Mr Mountain* will be ideal for sharing in schools for its humour, friendship goals and its exploration of materials, but it will also be the perfect book to read at bedtime and I suspect it can be read again and again as there will always be something new to find in the pictures, and always another question to be had about the hats for Mr Mountain and the actions of the animals. Age 3+ recommended for reading to, enjoying the illustrations and sharing ideas together.

This is Soojin Kwak's debut picture book as a writer and illustrator, however he also won second prize in the Macmillan Prize for Illustration in 2018. We're in very safe hands.

## **Anja Stobbart**

### **Born Bad**

C K Smouha, illus. Stephen Smith, pub. Cicada Books

This bold eye-catching picture book is intriguing but puzzling. It sets out to explore important themes through a clever fable but seems to get muddled in its message and ultimately left me irritated by its failure to live up to expectations. My first irritant was the premise: Wolf does not like being Wolf, he

does not like how he looks, it makes him feel bad, and when he feels badly he acts badly. This thought process is unchallenged with no other ways of looking at the issue explored. Wolf wonders if he can change his appearance and thus the way he thinks and acts so he asks other creatures their opinions beginning with Leopard and Chameleon, who I found to be judgmental and negative, especially as initial characters in vulnerable Wolf's quest. They state that just as leopards are born spotty, Wolf was born bad, and this is unchanging and that Wolf is ignorant for not understanding camouflage.

When Wolf meets Caterpillar and Salamander he proves to be open-minded as he realises he has missed so much happening around him, like life cycles, because of being so self-absorbed and he settles into Salamander's self-help group with ease. He is interested in and listens to the other animals, who all wear name badges, as they give quick introductions. This is a pleasing section which I am sure will pique reader's interests into these animals. Each creature has a specific role to play: Flounder represents somebody with an unusual appearance (having two eyes on one side of the head is embarrassing), Reed Frog was born a girl but suddenly changed into a boy, which was confusing but now cool. Seal's cute fluffy white fur has transformed into serious thick grey blubber that they are proud of. However, Mimic Octopus is another irritant. In reality they can impersonate a wide variety of animals but this character states they "can take the shape of five different sea creatures" before changing into a rock, crab, snake, and jellyfish. Is the fifth creature themselves? Is a rock a sea creature?

Wolf declares that he is not proud of himself reiterating the initial troubling premise: "I don't like what I see in the mirror. It's hard to be nice when you just want to smash things up." With the group's encouragement Wolf considers what he would like to see in the mirror and remembers something he did once that felt good so decides to do it again. For the book's big finish, Wolf returns to the group wearing a big toothy grin and a body covered in white fluffy wool – he is now a wolf in sheep's clothing. Yes, this is a good use of the saying, a visual pun, and does fit with the idea of the book if you just think of Wolf changing his physical appearance into something that is soft, gentle, pleasing: sort of like Seal but in reverse. However, the actual meaning of the idiom, biblical in origin, and an Aesop's fable, in my opinion, sharply contrasts with what I thought the book was trying to say. In this costume, Wolf is a dangerous enemy pretending to be a harmless friend and so therefore, a more sinister character than he has been previously. This ending supports Leopard's starting point that you cannot change, you can just attempt to hide who you truly are from yourself and others.

This is a visually appealing book full of contrastingly lurid colours forming vibrant colour-blocking, flat bold graphics, and simple abstract geometric forms, but, overall, it is a puzzling book that is probably best to be taken at face value, not looked at too deeply. It is a shame that what could have been a valuable, critical book about such important issues that are so prevalent in society today in the end feels like a missed opportunity and a book that itself is as confused as its lead character is.

**Natalie McChrytsal Plimmer**

## **Dinosaurs vs Humans**

Matt Robertson, pub. Orchard Books

Everyone knows that humans and dinosaurs can't play together. It's against the Ancient Scribe. All the tribes follow this teaching so there are unusual developments when Pearl and Dexter meet. They discover that, unlike their tribes, neither of them care for teasing and they both hate all the fighting. They want to laugh, joke and share their dreams. Soon they become best friends – an inseparable Human-Dino team! One day, when the pals are playing in secret, tragedy strikes. Will the two tribes be able to put aside their differences to save their loved ones?

Matt Robertson's illustrations are so chock-full of character and colour they look like they might leap off the page at any minute, and with so much to look at you'll find something new every time you read this gorgeous book as will your young listeners. The lively rhyming text is an absolute joy to read aloud too.

This is a beautiful tale of friendship against the odds. The message is clear: you can't judge a book by its cover, a dinosaur by its blue skin or a cave girl by her pink hair. It's what's on the inside that counts. If you were a fan of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's *The Smeds and the Smoos*, this is a must buy. Dinosaurs, cave people and a fantastic message – what's not to love?

**Abby Mellor**

## **The Dragon Machine**

Helen Ward, illus. Wayne Anderson, pub. Templar Books

George feels unseen, ignored and overlooked until he begins to notice the dragons. Trouble is once he's seen his first dragon, he begins to notice them everywhere, causing mischief and mayhem! All too soon the dragons start to become too troublesome, George spends all of his time cleaning up after them and taking the blame for their accidents. George quickly realizes that the dragons need to return to the place where they belong before they become too noticeable and are captured.

George invents a magnificent mechanical flying machine, and packs it with plenty of stale biscuits and smelly cheese to lead the dragons back to the wilderness where they belong. But once George has flown away everyone begins to miss him and they go searching for him to bring him home. George is no longer unseen, ignored and overlooked, but he misses his dragon friends. And then he is given a new friend—a dog. But is it really a dog?

*The Dragon Machine* features expressive typography, a muted palette, and achingly beautiful, ethereal illustrations to complement this dreamlike adventure that dances along the line between

story and metaphor. A strange and wondrous tale with plenty of entertaining moments and a wealth of little dragons waiting to be discovered on each page.

**Rebecca Rouillard**

## **The Ferocious Chocolate Wolf**

Lizzie Finlay, pub. Five Quills

When Ferocious Wolf opens his new chocolate shop, he is very excited to share his sweet creations with all of the towns-folk, however nobody will even try a free sample never mind enter his shop and buy a box. Even with the encouragement of his new friend Piggy, who has just returned from the city (and so is more enlightened than his neighbours) all the other animals are still more inclined to follow the doomsayer Mrs Chicken's panicky rumours than be open-minded. Mrs Chicken says that Ferocious is a Big Bad Wolf and is using the chocolate shop as a ruse to eat them all and so it must be true. Mrs Chicken's suspicions look to be truthful as Piggy suddenly goes missing and so a search party is set up. But when the animals find Piggy safely being looked after by Ferocious, even Mrs Chicken has to not only eat her words but also Ferocious' delicious chocolates!

This is a nice, lively, sweet, story about not making snap judgements based on prejudice, reputation, and tarnishing everybody similar with the same brush. It neatly plays on the panicky chicken established in tales such as *Chicken Licken* whilst simultaneously subverting the scary murderous wolf that is so prevalent in fairytales and the like.

Finlay's illustrations are bold, vibrant, colourful, and energetic, with lots of details to observe. For example, in one of the most interesting double page spreads, Mrs Chicken is in the foreground stoking up panic on a busy road of houses early on the morning when Piggy has gone missing. Finlay evokes a sense of hullabaloo (as the text suggests), flurry of movement and noise, and the understanding of a long road sweeping behind Mrs Chicken who is in the foreground, is delightful. Mrs Chicken wears a polkadot headscarf with a curler peeking out, blue fluffy backless slippers, and her green bead necklace is swaying with her frantic movements. Behind her the menagerie of animals are peering out of the windows, standing in doorways, and gathering in the street to join in the gossip. A goose wears a top hat and carries a briefcase, he is shouting to his wife in her pink nightcap while the post is delivered by a grey squirrel with many red and pink envelopes to deliver.

The characters are neatly drawn, especially Ferocious Wolf, aptly styled as a Willy Wonka type character wearing a purple top hat, bow tie and red flowing cape. He is a showman who takes delight in his work and creativity. The ideas of friendship, open-mindedness, forgiveness, and not being scared to sample new things are astutely developed throughout the story. There are obvious links to Easter (the chocolate theme) and Valentine's Day, with the post as described earlier and the heart-

shaped chocolates that Ferocious makes. Developing activities such as creating your own chocolate assortment and packaging also make this a fun group reading book.

## **Natalie McChrystal Plimmer**

### **Garden Jungle**

Helene Druvet, pub. Thames & Hudson Children's Books

The *Garden Jungle* introduces us to Tom, a young boy who declares that he is bored and has nothing to do. Mum tells him to open his eyes and look at the things around him, then he certainly won't be bored.

So Tom tries and after making hand shadows on the sheets that Mum has hung to dry, Tom spots a butterfly and follows it as it flutters further into the garden. We, the reader, need to follow with Tom for we will soon see that Tom's eyes and imagination are opened up by what he sees as he ventures into the Jungle Garden – the cat becomes a leopard, and birds become beautiful flamingos. What else does Tom see, what else can you see in the Jungle Garden? There is so much to spot and discover, are your eyes open too?

The simple rhyming text works well for the young reader but what really brings this book to life are the detailed laser cut pages that give tantalising views of the pages to come and an added depth to the Garden Jungle itself. Children will delight in looking at each beautiful page. This truly is a book to be treasured and revisited again and again – though much borrowed library copies may well suffer at the hands of young children!

## **Vicky Harvey**

### **Gloria's Big Problem**

Sarah Stiles Bright, illus. Mike Deas, pub. Tilbury House Publishers

*Gloria's Big Problem* is the story of a little girl who loves to sing so much, that when she is on her own Gloria pretends to be an opera singer, standing on a chair and singing as loud as she can. But when she is not on her own, Gloria cannot sing, not even 'Happy Birthday' because the big green monster follows her around and it never shuts up, never stops telling her that if she tries to do anything, like going to the movies or on a sleep-over, or riding her bike, terrible things will happen. And so worry, anxiety and fear never leave Gloria alone.

The illustration of the monster is wonderful, big and green and mean, filling Gloria so full of worry, she is sure that anything she tries to do will go wrong and people will laugh at her. So she does

nothing because even when she tries to sing, the monster drowns her small voice with its own big shouty one. Again and again, Gloria tells the monster to go away, to leave her alone but it won't go.

No-one else seems to have a monster and this makes Gloria feel alone and frightened. Her brother, Henry, laughs at her when she tells him about it. But then one day, she hears that a concert is being arranged at the community centre and any child who wants to be in it, has to go and audition. Gloria wants to sing at this concert more than anything, so getting every bit of her courage together, she goes to the audition, her tummy aching and her throat dry. The monster goes with her but this time, Gloria yells at it. 'Go Away,' and the monster does go away, melting into the shadows. Gloria sings so beautifully, she is given the part of the singing Lady Bug.

*Gloria's Big Problem* addresses the anxieties, fears and worries of children with real sympathy and understanding. With its vivid and lively illustrations full of brilliant detail, the reader will sympathise and identify with Gloria's problem, which could so easily be a problem of their own.

Both reassuring and understanding, this book will help any child defeat the big green monster.

**Gwen Grant**

## **Greta and the Giants**

Zoe Tucker, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

Here's a good game for a long car journey. Name three people who have lived in the last 100 years and who you would describe using the term 'modern day saint'. If your answer contains anyone from *Love Island*, it's probably best to stop reading now. If Greta Thunberg featured in your list, then this is the book for you.

Thunberg's story has all the hallmarks of a great myth: good against evil; small against huge; plights against dubious peroxide comb-overs. Communicating these universal themes, whilst at the same making them tangible enough to engage a very young audience, is a difficult task. It is one that Zoe Tucker has achieved admirably in her book *Greta and the Giants*: an allegorical tale that captures Thunberg's spirit, determination and beliefs.

Greta lives in a beautiful forest (brought to life by Persico's sumptuous illustrations), but realises that it is slowly being destroyed by giants. As things get worse, and the animals in the forest begin to fear for their home, Greta decides that she needs to act. One day, she makes a sign saying 'STOP' and waits for the giants to come. At first, her efforts go unnoticed - but as days pass, others join her with their own signs until at last a huge crowd stands united and determined to make their voices heard.

And then the best bit. This being a fairytale, we do get a happy ending. The giants are quick to see the error of their ways (in fact they are, rather touchingly, ‘embarrassed and a little bit sad’) and set about working hard to restore the forest to its former glories.

This book provides an introduction to modern environmental issues and activism that is both accessible and optimistic. It stands alone as a charming fairytale and works equally well as a springboard for wider discussion. Although it is targeted at a very young audience (2-4 year olds) it has a universality that make it a powerful read for all ages. Plus, 3% of the price goes to *Greenpeace*. What’s not to like?

**Laura Myatt**

## **Hey, Water!**

Antoinette Portis, pub. Scallywag Press

Picture books are beginning to come in a greater variety of formats by which I don’t mean just size and shape, they are crossing divides and breaking down boundaries, boldly going into new territory. Wordless picture books are gradually finding their place and now we see the introduction of non-fiction picture books, *Hey, Water!* being one such example. It works. A non-fiction picture book a few years ago may have seemed impossible, it isn’t, this book shows us both how and why.

Our character, the lead for this story is a nameless little girl whose adventure into her surroundings is a journey of discovery not only for her but for the reader too. With her we soon learn that water is everywhere. Water is on the front cover as she wears her goggles and swims. Water is on the title page where she is sitting in the bath. Water is on the end pages - a scape of blue waves. We know water is all around, we see water whenever we turn on a tap – in the house or in the garden, it trickles, gurgles, streams gradually building in size, strength and momentum and this book cleverly takes us on a journey of water discovery. See water in nature, in weather, in the home and even inside you. But, remember that water is not always the same – it can have a different look or feel – be as hard as rock or as soft as snow, be a tear or a drink. Water can be many things. Water is life giving.

Water has many words associated with it. This, for me, is where this book really stands out. We see the pictures, read the words of the ‘story’ but don’t forget the descriptors. See the water from the tap and read the word ‘tap’. Look at the pictures of the snow and read their associated words. Read and learn, learn and read. A book that will spark conversations, can be read as a story of an information title and is sneakily packed full of science too. Ideal for younger readers, bold artwork and a strong design lets hope this boundary-crossing book is the start of more to come.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**



## **I Am Brown**

Ashok Banker, illus. Sandhya Prabhat, pub. Lantana Publishing

“I am brown, I am beautiful. I am perfect... I am brown. I am amazing. I am YOU.”

From the first words to the last, *I Am Brown* is a celebration of and for children with brown skin. But it's not just tokenism: differences as well as similarities are highlighted. Where the children come from, what they do, what they like, what they eat, what they wear, the language they speak, the type of house they live in, where they pray (including a “nowhere” option!), the careers they will follow and what they look like are all covered, showing that the mere fact of having brown skin doesn't make them all the same. There's an overlying, and quite moving, message of equality and respect.

The illustrations are dynamic and joyful, filling the pages with well-researched detail and movement. The page about food is a true feast for the eyes, and the religion page is serene and calm. There is a genuine effort not to miss anyone out. However, it would have been interesting to see a mention of mixed-race children (for example, the book mentions brown and green eyes, but not blue, which some mixed-race children might have), more differentiation in the illustrations and also a more in-depth look at the different types of hair that brown-skinned children have, but maybe that is asking too much of a picture book!

I'd recommend this book for boys and girls of any age, especially if they are feeling unsure about their place in the world or if they have been teased or bullied about the colour of their skin. There is more multicultural representation on television and in films these days, but the literary world – and especially children's books – is still catching up, and this book will certainly help. *I Am Brown* might even help children to have the confidence to ask why they aren't represented in the other books they read – or even to write a book themselves?

**Antonia Russell**

## **The Last Tree**

Emily Haworth-Booth, pub. Pavilion Children's Books

A group of friends are looking for somewhere to live. The desert is too hot, the valley too wet, the mountain too windy. Then they see the first tree. They find a beautiful forest. All summer long they enjoy its gentle breeze and dappled light. They play among the flowers and sleep on the forest floor. Winter comes, and they cut some branches for firewood. As a result, the rain comes through, so they chop down some trees to make shelters. That makes everything colder, so they chop down more trees to make houses. With fewer trees, the sun blazes down on them, so they use more wood to make porches. Now they have the perfect village. But without trees, the strong winds of autumn are a

problem. They cut down the rest of the trees to make a high protective wall. Just one tiny tree remains, too small to be useful.

The joyful friends are no longer joyful. They no longer play. They no longer leave their homes. They become suspicious of one another. Each family decides they need to protect their home. Each secretly sends out their children to chop down the last tree. But instead, the children play. And they tend the little tree. They tell their parents about it, but the parents don't want to see it. They just want more wood. So the children bring them planks. Only when the wind rushes into the village do the adults realise what has happened. The planks came from the wall. Through the hole they can see the last tree and the children playing around it. They remember the joy the forest used to bring. They remember they all used to be friends. So they demolish the rest of the wall, and they plant seeds and tend saplings. And they sing. And as the children grow, so does a new forest.

What an important message this picture book conveys, through its powerful text and its lively and expressive illustrations. How pertinent for our times. How significant that the children find a way to solve the problems that the grown-ups have created. The climate emergency is a source of huge anxiety to children today. They need of course to understand it, but crucially they also need hope, and Emily Haworth-Booth provides it. Recommended.

**Anne Harding**

## **The Legend of the First Unicorn**

Lari Don, illus. Nataša Ilinčić, pub. Floris Books

Nataša Ilinčić's illustrations are clear and uncluttered. The use of watercolour paint gives an appealing lightness and fluidity to the pictures. The protagonists she pictures are older children, making this a picture book that children throughout the primary school age-range can relate to.

The story is an original creation by storyteller Lari Don. As a lover of folktale, I was pleased to find source notes included in the endpapers. Lari Don drew inspiration from *The Coming of the Unicorn*, a traditional travellers' tale in which a king loses the will to engage with the world, and his court magicians create the beautiful, elusive, unicorn to inspire him to return to the hunt, and thus provide food for his people. In Lari's re-imagining, the king becomes the unsmiling prince Duncan, and the turbaned magician's daughter, Hana, is the heroine who creates the unicorn to help him find his smile. In creating new protagonists Lari Don offers modern readers a more diverse picture in which to recognise themselves; both a girl and a boy, with two different heritages. Lari Don also adds an extra element to the story; the magician creates a griffin that battles the unicorn, and the children help the unicorn to escape.

Like the original, this story ends with the carving of the first ever statue of a unicorn. After reading this book, children will enjoy spotting unicorn statues in castles and towns throughout Scotland, and beyond.

One final note: the book *The Coming of the Unicorn*, which inspired Lari's imagination, is a real treasure trove of traditional tales. The author, Duncan Williamson, was a Scottish traveller and he heard the tales direct from the oral tradition of his own culture, making *The Coming of the Unicorn* a rare folktale gem.

## **Dawn Casey**

### **Like the Moon Loves the Sky**

Hena Khan, illus. Saffa Khan, pub. Abrams&Chronicle

*Like the Moon Loves the Sky* is both a story and the author's personal wish for her children as they grow up. A wish that they will flourish.

The book consists of fourteen lyrical lines, each one based upon a verse in the Qur'an and begins with the Arabic phrase Inshallah. In the introduction the author explains the meaning of Inshallah ('if God wills it') and its common usage across the Arabic-speaking world and different religions. Hena Khan asks, Inshallah, that children grow up happy, secure and confident and above all else loved. In addition, Hena Khan promotes the importance of children learning to be fair, kind and honest.

Saffa Khan illustrates each lyrical line with a large double-page picture. The warmth of Hena's words are beautifully echoed in Saffa's use of complementary colours with a predominance of oranges and reds. The pictures also develop a narrative. Each one shows precious moments in a girl's life. As a baby being pushed in a pram; a toddler planting flowers in a garden; at nursery making friends and school-aged, learning to swim.

So often the picture is perfect for the lyrical line, such as learning to ride a bicycle and "Inshallah you have faith that won't waver or bend". Moreover many of the pictures show the girl's mother close by, encouraging her daughter as well as offering reassurance. In other pictures, the girl happily plays with a diverse group of friends.

The words and the pictures in *Like the Moon Loves the Sky* evocatively capture parents' unconditional love for their children.

## **Simon Barrett**

## **The Littlest Bandit**

Ali Pye, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Littlest Bandit is part of a very large family, but whilst they are all very adventurous and sporty, Littlest loves nothing better than sitting and reading one of her books. One day she is disturbed by her grandmother flying past (at least she was trying to fly) and getting stuck in a very high tree. Littlest offers to help but is told she is too small and has to go and find the rest of the family, so that they can help. All of her strong and athletic family takes it in turns to try and rescue Grandma, but they all fail. Finally they decide to give Littlest a chance and with some help from her book and a lot of teamwork from the others, Grandma is finally rescued.

This is a delightful story about being yourself and understanding that everyone has qualities that make them outstanding at something. There is a lot of humour, not least in the family name and the fact that they are raccoons. Whilst there is a lot of family togetherness there is also a tendency to not understand those who are different and younger. This is something of a human trait and children are often ignored, as adults assume that they can't possibly understand what is needed.

This story mixes so many lovely elements, especially the importance of reading and knowledge and it is a book that will be a great favourite with younger readers.

## **Margaret Pemberton**

### **The Longest, Strongest Thread**

Inbal Leitner, pub. Scallywag Press

Thread can conjure up different images in the mind of those that hear the word. Perhaps there is a loose thread hanging from your clothing? Is it the thread you put into a needle for sewing or a strand of wool perhaps? The thread in this delightful story could be any of these things (though the end pages are decorated with the various sewing implements suggesting where the story may lead). Above all the thread in this book is the thread of a story, the thread of life, the thread that binds us, that draws us together, that keeps us together.

As a reader it may not be immediately obvious but here is a deeply moving and touching story based on real life. The author's grandmother left her behind parents when she moved from Nazi Germany. The author herself left grandparents in Israel when she moved to the UK, she is very much writing from experience yet with a strong sense of celebration and reassurance.

The suitcase is heavy, and it is not surprising for it is packed full of everything the little girl is going to need in her new home. The new home must be far away for she will be flying there and it is a place where in the winter the lakes freeze. However there are things to be done before she goes. Important

things. Saying farewell to her grandma for her grandma is staying, in the studio where she sews, where it is warm. The little girl loves to help grandma sew and is worried about leaving her. Grandma is worried about the little girl too, so together they take some thread, some fabric and they make a coat.

Follow the story and follow the threads to be reassured that despite the anxiety of moving there will always be a connection between loved ones. Enjoy the pastel illustrations, the warm and delicate artwork and immerse yourself in a story of love and warmth.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Moonlight Zoo**

Maudie Powell-Tuck, illus. Karl James Mountford, pub. Little Tiger

*The Moonlight Zoo* addresses one of the most traumatic incidents in a child's life; the loss of a much loved pet. Eva has lost her cat, Luna, and cannot sleep for worrying about her. Was Luna safe? Was she warm, or was she all alone in the cold moonlight? And Eva missed cuddling Luna. Missed her furry tummy and the way she purred as if she had a little engine in her throat. But then, in the silence of the night, with her hearing aid full on, Eva hears a noise under her bed. Shining her torch into the dark space, Eva sees it is full of animals. She has found the Moonlight Zoo and a friendly wolf tells her this is where all lost animals and pets are safe and warm.

The wolf leads Eva to the Penguin Palace, where a huge pile of sardines is ready for a penguin supper. 'I didn't know penguins got lost,' Eva says, but they do and they also find their way to the Moonlight Zoo. Near the sardines, Eva finds Luna's velvet collar and with the wolf, she hurries on to Monkey Island, hoping Luna will be there. There are lots of trees, monkeys and owls but no Luna. Past the dogs and the wolves, past the elephants, the snakes and the dragons, the stars are fading and the Moonlight Zoo closes at dawn and still Eva has not found her cat. But in the Cat Kingdom, Eva hears Luna purring. Her cat is sitting with the tigers, the lions and the leopards. Now it is time to go home, and together, they climb onto the wolf's back.

The illustrations are fabulous with their soft and gentle colours, the animals, birds and exotic creatures in brilliant detail. The pages are oddly shaped with cut-outs so appealing, it's impossible to resist sneaking a quick look through them to get a glimpse of the next page. With so much to look at and think about, the reader is absorbed and enchanted by this lovely book. Kind, tender and reassuring, *The Moonlight Zoo* with its gorgeous cut-out cover, its blue edging shining like a bright blue flame, this book will fly into waiting hands.

**Gwen Grant**

## **My Mama**

Annemarie van Haeringen, trans. Bill Nagelkerke, pub. Gecko Press

Is there something, just a little thing, that you would really love to do? Little Elephant would really love to fly, more than anything, at least that is what he thinks. Mama tells him that he can do anything if he really wants to which of course is true. Little Elephant knows this and believes that he can be good at flying. The problem is that Mama finds it very hard to let go.

Little Elephant is good and sends out a good message to his readers – he plays with his toys and then he tidies them away (do you do this?) Little Elephant is also trying to find other ways he can be good but it they do not always prove to be successful – making Mama’s dress look prettier by using scissors may not be wise it would seem. However he does help with the shopping, after all it needs to be tidied away and what can be tidier than food which has been eaten! And so it goes on as we discover all the things that the Little Elephant really believes he is good at and does to help his Mama.

By now all those parents reading this review will be fully in sympathy with Mama and will know just how they might use this book with their own little ones! A delicate, simple and very touching story of the love between a mother and a child that will resonate with all its readers as children follow the pictures and adults follow the words – but be warned, there may be some explaining to do for the children!

## **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

### **The Old Truck**

Jerome Pumphrey, illus. Jarrett Pumphrey, pub. Norton Young Readers

*The Old Truck* is a quaint and pleasant picture book that shows how both keeping going, perseverance, and hard work are the right approach for success. We follow the little truck as the central character, whilst he learns and as we follow him he grows old. At the same time we meet a young girl who also grows as the story progresses. The two are entwined and although this is primarily a story about the Old Truck the girl becomes an integral part of his story.

It is lovely to see a female character associated with the male truck because books tend to be stereotypical and pair boys with them instead.

*The Old Truck* gives the reader a warm feeling strongly reminiscent of and reflecting family relationships and bonds, at the same time it considers, on behalf of the reader, how perseverance can prove invaluable to reaching desired goals.

The brothers who created this book have successfully drawn younger audiences in with their traditional and simplistic style illustrations and a text that is relatable and feels real. Young girls are likely to feel inspired by the young mechanic the girl in the book becomes as she grows up through the book.

**Susan Thomas**

## **One World**

Micheal Foreman, pub. Andersen Press

A stunningly illustrated picture book that is hugely relevant to today's climate. This is a book that makes its reader think about the damage humans are causing the environment and encourages them to think more deeply about pollution.

The story is about siblings who create their very own little habitat within a bucket on the beach as they play by the rock pools. The bucket has everything you could imagine accessing at the beach – wildlife, shells, oil even a tin can. Sadly the fact that the children include litter among the items they find on the beach and add to their bucket is a true reflection, a smaller version of what is unfortunately all around us on a much larger scale. Hopefully seeing this reality in a picture book will help children, encourage them to discuss the meaning of this, understand why it might be wrong and what they can do to help bring about a change. An interesting point for discussion but hopefully one that will not detract from an enjoyment of the story itself.

For not only is this a book to enjoy and fall in love with - the illustrative content in particular - it is a book that makes the reader pause and reflect as they think through aspects of our daily lives that impact the world around us.

This book would make a great learning tool for children learning about the environment in school.

**Samantha Thomas**

## **Nine Lives Newton**

Alice McKinley, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

This is a tale to tantalise about a beguiling little dog called Newton and his long suffering friend the cat; who I am guessing parodies the ever-vigilant parent. A nifty first book, Alice McKinley has good reason to be delighted.

Newton has no regard for his individual safety, he is invincible, as most children seem to think they are. However, the scorpion on the front cover, lurking at Newton's feet is a portent of things to come. Newton does the reckless exploring and the cat does the suffering in his wake, familiar? My sympathies are with the cat, who from page nine onwards has the scorpion firmly clamped to his tail.

This book is ideal for toddlers to those learning to read. The toddler will enjoy it, as the pictures tell the story in rich colour and graphic style. There is heaps to look at on each page, thus engaging the very young participant in spotting things, whilst the reader manages to reach the end of the short, forgiving text before the page is turned rather too quickly on occasions. A feat which can be difficult to synchronise!

The early stage reader will appreciate the brief text and visual clues.

*Nine Lives Newton* ticks all the boxes for a well rounded children's picture book, suitable for daytime and bedtime stories. The artistic interpretation is the nectar to attract the bee and following on from that, the moral of the tale, epitomised by the ubiquitous scorpion. This will provide food for thoughtful discussion afterwards perhaps, in a school, play school or home setting? Roll on book number two.

## **Elizabeth Negus**

### **The Pirates are Coming!**

John Codon, illus. Matt Hunt, pub. Nosy Crow

High on the hill above the sleepy fishing town, Tom is keeping watch for pirates. It's been a long time since anyone has seen them, but they know that they will be back. Several times Tom thinks he sees their ship on the horizon, racing down the hill shouting a warning as everybody hides. Each time it is a false alarm and definitely not pirates. Until one day, fed-up with nothing happening, the people don't hide, only this time it really is the pirates! What is going to happen now...?

Not only is this book ideal reading for little ones it is also perfect for pirate fans and perhaps after reading it once, twice even three times, there may be an opportunity to share with them the story which inspired it – 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf'. With all the twists and turns John Cordon and Matt Hunt's version becomes a salty and exciting tale with a sensible moral. Whilst the prose offers an opportunity for children to learn and engage with the refrains the illustration engages their eyes and imagination with its colour and tactile nature.

*The Pirates Are Coming!* is a colourful and entertaining version of the traditional tale, with a twist which should delight any young swashbucklers sharing the book.



**Jayne Gould**

## **The Problem with Problems**

Rachel Rooney, illus. Zehra Hicks, pub. Andersen Press

As adults we are well aware of the huge range of problems that we can face, but for young children this is something they have to learn about. This story looks at the kind of issues that children can face in the home, at school and just out playing. The problems are given their own images and characters, so that the audience can really 'see' what is worrying them.

Rachel Rooney is a poet and the text, although short, is beautifully written as a poem. This brings a wonderful sense of movement and of direct connection to the narrator. Although there is little text, we do get small comments from various characters and objects in the illustrations; all of which add humour to the situations. The illustrations themselves are vibrant, colourful, energetic and easily accessible to the audience. The characterization of the problems helps the children to understand that this is something they can cope with and there is the advice about telling someone else about the problem (they are shy and don't like others knowing about them!)

There have been quite a few books that seek to support the youngest of readers with various issues and this one is an extremely positive story for them. This is a welcome addition to the texts supporting empathy and mental health.

**Margaret Pemberton**

## **Rain or Shine**

Ronald Heuinck, pub. Floris Books

*Rain or Shine* is a wordless board book. Pictures lead young children through the seasons of the year. The illustrations are beautiful; their simplicity has a universal, timeless appeal. The colours have a luminous purity; glowing yellow-green spring leaves and golden-red autumn apples. The scenes are uncomplicated, with plenty of breathing space; on one page a young girl and her little brother feed ducks in the spring rain. This clarity allows very young children to enjoy pointing out familiar pictures and practising their first words 'duck!'. The book's openness also allows carers to create their own little stories, following the changing seasons; 'look, now the ducks have four little ducklings'.

The scenes chosen to represent each time of year are full of details and activities that young children will be familiar with, such as seeing winter robins and playing in autumn leaves.

I warmly recommend this book. It is a celebration of the joys of nature in every season and the simple pleasures of everyday life. Share it with little ones, over and over again.

**Dawn Casey**

## **Rhinocorn Rules**

Matt Carr, pub. Egmont Books

This picture book is bold and bright from the moment that you set eyes on it – who could manage not to fall in love with (and perhaps smile at) the front cover – well have you ever seen a rainbow coloured rhino? I haven't either and perhaps this is what drew me into the story. That, and a curiosity to find out what or who the Rhinocorn rules or perhaps what the Rhinocorn rules are.

I was to discover that the ensuing story is very clever. It is a story about being different (and Rhinocorn is most certainly that but remember rhinos really do have horns). At the same time it is a story about being yourself. Combine these two elements and you have a story about what it means to want to make others want to be your friend. At the same time the story gets across, in a delightful manner, the change that can happen when one explains that rules can be changed.

*Rhinocorn Rules* is a book to get younger children thinking about those animals in our world that are becoming rare, the plight of some breeds that are endangered, including the rhino. At the same time this is a book that would definitely help children who were worried about their appearance or whether they fit in with groups of friends or at school/nursery. An important book on more than one level and one that will most certainly engage younger readers in the same way that it engaged this adult one!

**Susan Thomas**

## **The Sorcerer's Apprentice**

Gerda Muller, pub. Floris Books

The tale of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* will already be familiar to many adults and children from Disney's *Fantasia*, but here, Gerda Muller's interpretation breathes new life into it by giving it a more traditional feel. Oliver is a poor orphan boy who works as a goatherd for a bad-tempered farmer. With a lump of dry bread for his breakfast and a bowl of thin soup for dinner he has no one to talk to and spends his lonely days looking after the goats. Deciding to run away, Oliver walks for miles in the hope that someone will offer him food and work, but it seems that no one else needs a goatherd. Not knowing where to go, Oliver follows two cats until they disappear through the flap in a large door. When Oliver plucks up his courage and knocks on the door, an old man that answers, invites Oliver in and gives him a bowl of 'delicious stew' to eat. He also tells Oliver all about himself.

Oliver learns that the man is called Alfred and that he is a sorcerer who knows 'the secrets of nature' and who makes 'potions and oils that heal and cure.' Oliver is keen to accept the Sorcerer's offer of a job and the chance to learn about the ingredients that are used to make potions. Oliver learns quickly but what he really wants is to learn magic spells. The Sorcerer eventually teaches Oliver three magic words and makes him promise not to use them unless he is with him. Needless to say, Oliver breaks his promise with disastrous consequences.

This will be a great picture book to read aloud to a class of older primary school children and also share one to one at home. Gerda Muller's artwork beautifully brings her own retelling of the tale to life.

**Vicky Harvey**

## **The Tale of a Toothbrush. A Story of Plastic in our Oceans**

M. G. Leonard, illus. Daniel Rieley, pub. Walker Books

Sofia is six years old and she loves her toothbrush so much that she draws a big S on the brush and calls it Sammy. Sammy is bright yellow and it reminds her of the sunshine. She brushes her teeth every day and night. One day mum notices that Sammy's bristles are worn out so she dumps Sammy in the bin. Poor Sofia is devastated.

Inside the bin Sammy meets other plastic containers and they talk about how they have only been used once. Sammy and the plastic containers travel for days and days in a ship. Sammy ends up in a hot country where a friendly rat puts Sammy in the sea. He starts a long journey back to Sofia. He gets washed up on a beach where he meets a lot more plastic washed up on the beach. He carries on with his journey and spends months travelling in the sea, again he comes across various plastic containers in the sea. When Sammy comes across an albatross he has to explain that he is plastic and not a fish and how if the albatross eats him he will be sick. Will Sammy make it back to Sofia? Will Sammy ever be used again?

This is a beautifully written story and it explains the world's plastic problem very well, it explains the problem quite simply so even a young child would understand the story. By using a toothbrush M G Leonard has used something that everyone can relate to. She explains what damage plastic is causing, how animals don't realize that plastic is dangerous to them and how they mistake it for food.

The illustrations are beautifully drawn and they are colourful, at the end of the book there is a double page on facts about plastic and recycling. This is a beautiful book and one that will teach you facts through story. Even the youngest of children will love this book, I have been talking to the geography

teacher at my school about this book and I've decided to donate this book to the school as they can get a lot out of it with the children.

## **Helen Byles**

### **Talking Is Not My Thing**

Rose Robbins, pub. Scallywag Press

The story focuses on a young girl and her brother. She is non-verbal autistic yet still finds ways to let everyone know how she feels and what she needs. We are taken through a day when she plays with her brother, listens to him reading, visits her grandmother and goes in search of her lost toy.

This is a very simple tale, but one that will hopefully help children to understand the issues that have been raised. The characters are anthropomorphic and I assumed that they are cats, mainly because of the way that the grandmother looks. However the naïve styling of the illustrations allows the reader to use their imagination in visualizing the characters. I particularly like the way that the story is told in speech bubbles, with the boy's words being shown in capital letters, while his sister's thoughts are shown as lower case. The reader can almost feel the frustration that the young girl feels when she wants to communicate but cannot use words and has to depend on flash cards and people understanding her gestures.

This book definitely needs to be widely read and it should be part of a school's collection relating to empathy, mental health and PSHE, as well as being helpful within a family environment.

## **Margaret Pemberton**

### **Two Bears**

Patricia Hegarty, illus. Rotem Teplow, pub. Caterpillar Books

*Two Bears* is a heart-warming picture book about a polar bear living in the arctic and a grizzly bear living in the northern forests. Told with a beautiful simplicity and warmth of tone we follow each bear on their individual journeys to survive the melting ice caps and destruction of the forests. These two bears come face-to-face and so find their new home with each other – somewhere between the two worlds they grew up in.

This is a beautifully told story by Rotem Teplow and Patricia Hegarty of accepting each other and embracing differences – the illustrations are enchanting with the beauty of nature oozing in from each page corner and the landscapes magically spreading across and behind the bears as they roam.

The environmental message is subtle but is so much a part of this tale that there are bound to be questions. My son asked if polar bears and grizzly bears were fleeing their homes in real life. The answer is thoughtfully explained in the back of the book, giving more information for curious minds under a title, 'Bears on the Brink.'

*Two Bears* is a gorgeous book about searching for a new home when your old one is lost, trekking through unknown lands until you discover another lost soul – very similar to you but not exactly the same. In the current climate this gentle story of hope and happiness is truly lovely.

Ideal for 3+ as a bedtime story (the baby bear snuggles down to sleep in the final pages happy and content) and a book to create conversation at home and at school that can link to looking after our planet, as no one is too small to make a difference.

This is such a simple story, with so much to say.

**Anja Stobbart**

## **Waiting for Wolf**

Sandra Dieckmann, pub. Hodder Children's Books

This story has been sympathetically written to introduce children to the concept of death and loss and how to deal with the emotions it can bring. It allows the opportunity to open up a conversation to talk about grief and how to carry on, whilst feeling safe and protected.

The story is about two friends; Fox and Wolf. They spent their days together, laughing, talking and creating memories. One day Fox goes to find Wolf but he is no longer there. We share in Fox's pain and grief as she searches for Wolf, before realising that she will not see him ever again. In this realisation, Fox remembers all the good times they had together and this brings light back into her life.

The illustrations are vivid, colourful and even dream-like in their style and they mimic the feelings within the story, going from light to dark and then light again. They really are stunning and compliment the story perfectly.

This book is heartfelt and thoughtful. Overall, the message in this story is a positive and uplifting one; it is ok to be sad when you lose someone but remembering all the positive experiences shared together will remain with you forever.

**Victoria Warham**

## **What's That Noise?**

Naomi Howarth, pub. Otter Barry Books

Just what is that noise? Is it the creaking of the trees? No. The whistling of the wind then? No. So it must be the cracking of the ice?

When one morning Magnus the seal is woken from his deep sleep far away in the Arctic Ocean he decides that he must ask all his friends if they know what the mysterious rumbling noise might be. Hare, Owl, Fox and Polar Bear all try to help the little seal as he investigates the possibilities and takes us on a journey across the Arctic ice. We soon learn that clever Walrus is the one likely to have the answer but what is it that can be done, even when we know what it is, we are left to briefly wonder. With a brilliant ending that will take all its readers by surprise but hopefully not make them too awake – this is after all a bedtime book about a sleepy seal and is hopefully being read to sleepy children – this is a highly recommended book.

Not only do the words of the story keep us reading, wanting to know more and wanting to make the journey with seal but the illustrations are magnificent too, just look at all those wonderful sea creatures on every spread. Of course we shouldn't forget the facts at the back of the book about the Arctic animals too.

I would recommend this book for children of preschool age and above, and it will make a great addition to any library.

**Melissa Blackburn**

## **Where Happiness Begins**

Eva Eland, pub. Andersen Press

*Where Happiness Begins* follows Eland's previous book, *When Sadness Comes to Call*. In that book, nominated for the Kate Greenaway Medal, the character of 'Sadness' is a shaped as a rounded 'ghost', in tones of blue-grey. Here, Happiness is a neon-pink wisp, and neon pink flashes of colour stand out on every page against the limited palette backgrounds. Eland's clean lines and simplified shapes have an easy-on-the-eye appeal, and a nostalgic feel.

The text addresses readers directly: 'Are you looking for Happiness?' We are offered a series of reflections on happiness. I particularly liked the page which tells us that happiness 'often goes by different names' and shows the pink character of Happiness in the role of a pet, a present, and a companion. I liked too the book's advice to 'follow' happiness, and 'see where it will take you'.

The book concludes with a final word of wisdom: ‘Just breathe... In that quiet moment you will realise you don’t have to keep looking for Happiness... It was always there. Recognise it and treasure it, because, in the end, Happiness begins with you.’

**Dawn Casey**

# Junior Book Reviews

## **Agent Zaiba Investigates: The Missing Diamonds**

Annabelle Sami, pub. Stripes

The first in a promising detective series for confident young readers to enjoy, this is the story of Zaiba and the adventures and antics she gets up to while determinedly detecting in the hotel they are staying at.

Before long there is a crime to investigate and Zaiba jumps at the chance to prove herself and save the day.

Zaiba will prove to be a great role model to children of similar heritage as she herself is British-Pakistani, and children will not only see a great young girl with an excellent eye for detail but they will get to enjoy a fun and upbeat story that has none of the content associated with older children to put off reserved types.

There are illustrations through the book that help the reader to immerse themselves in the story and envisage the story too.

**Samantha Thomas**

## **Agents of the Wild: Operation Honeyhunt**

Jennifer Bell and Alice Lickens, pub. Walker Books

*Agents of the Wild* is a new book series by Alice Lickens and *Uncommoners* author, Jennifer Bell, aimed at informing and inspiring the 7-9 age group about endangered species.

Agnes Gamble is a wildlife whiz kid whose parents died tragically in an *Unfortunate Series of Events*-style accident, and who is recruited to be a field agent by a top-secret organization called SPEARS - The Society for the Protection of Endangered and Awesomely Rare Species. Once she has completed her training Agnes is entrusted with her first assignment, Operation Honeyhunt, an expedition to the Atlantic Forest in South America to rescue a rare bee who has been separated from his hive. Naturally, the villain is a heartless collector who only wants to pin the bee to a collecting board and put him in a museum. But Agnes outwits him by teaming up with her partner, an elephant shrew called Attenborough, and by using her knowledge of animal habits and behaviour. The story is brought to life with a vibrant jungle of charming animal characters and abundant botanical illustrations.



*Operation Honeyhunt* brilliantly combines a funny, fast-paced story with a wealth of fascinating facts about animals and their habitats, and a vital message about the conservation of animal habitats. I would highly recommend it.

**Rebecca Rouillard**

## **Alice In Wonderland Graphic Novel**

Russell Punter, pub. Usborne

We all know the story of *Alice in Wonderland*. When Alice follows the white rabbit into the burrow, she enters a strange and magical world. She encounters the Mad Hatter, the invisible Cheshire Cat, the crazy caterpillar and many more weird and wonderful creatures. So why publish another version of *Alice in Wonderland*? The answer is that this is a graphic novel which is packed with wonderful and colourful illustrations. Alice herself says ‘what is a book without pictures or conversations?’ This has both in abundance. The many eccentric characters are brought to life in a brilliant way. This is a graphic novel to introduce younger children to the world of Lewis Carroll and *Alice in Wonderland*. Children should begin to make sense of some of the lovely nonsense in the story.

Seeing Alice fall down the rabbit burrow is like watching a film. Very clear pictures will make children think they are there with Alice. When Alice shrinks and grows children will also feel that they are there with her because of the way the pictures are cleverly shown on the page. There is just enough text to complement the illustrations, but not too much to put off younger readers. Children will want to look at this book on their own or it is ideal for adults to read with children.

The book includes a very useful map of Wonderland, which helps to explain where Alice travels on her adventures. There is also a short chapter of text which gives some interesting background information about Lewis Carroll and his life. Overall, this is an excellent re-telling of a very well-known story, which should help a new generation to understand the characters and adventures in a wonderful story full of mayhem and nonsense.

**Gary Kenworthy**

## **Anna Gain and the Same Sixty Seconds**

Guy Bass, illus. Steve May, pub. Barrington Stoke

This book is about one minute. It is the minute it takes Anna to walk from her front door, step over Mrs Crimp’s cat Pandora and let Late Kate cycle past, before reaching the bus stop to catch the Number 13 bus to school. The same minute that Anna experiences again, again Anna Gain. What a brilliant title and pun!

Guy Bass vividly describes the calamity that erupts when a blue butterfly surprises Anna. An unhappy cat, a cowardly dog, pigeon poo, Late Kate and a life and death rescue all mean Anna misses the bus and she relives the same minute time and time again. Every time Anna makes changes, another series of unpredictable events prevent her from catching the bus.

It seems that it couldn't happen to a better person than Anna Gain. Anna, who despairs of her brother who is late for everything and does not seem to mind, and smugly shakes her head as Late Kate cycles past, definitely needs a lesson in not keeping time. The way that Guy Bass describes Anna's determination to be on time and her complete meltdown, when it proves impossible, is absolutely hilarious. This story is, additionally, fantastically illustrated by Steve May. My favourite part, for story and illustration has to be when Anna Gain realises that she can do anything, because in less than a minute's time it won't have happened! Time keeps repeating until she learns her lesson.

*Anna Gain and the Same Sixty Seconds* is a gut-busting, side-splitting and gleeful take on Bill Murray's *Groundhog Day*.

**Simon Barrett**

## **Attack of the Smart Speakers**

Tom McLaughlin, pub. Oxford University Press

Aged 7 and over? This is a must read for you. A heartfelt thank you to Tom McLaughlin for his reality check on the subject of the internet and our children. Do we really wish them to become automatons that unwittingly respond to orders from internet devices?

This book is a timely arrival on the children's book scene as our recent news programmes inform us about the famous cloud-based voice service platform that powers a smart device ecosystem and what it is actually capable of. The well-known owners admit to retaining and analysing this information from the iCloud on the pretext of providing a better service.....wake up wake up. They can trace this information back to the owner too.....ouch!

"Are you tired of having to use your brain" the book asks, if so then place a Nova in every room. Nova is the Wi-fi device in Happyville where Ashley, Dylan and Tyler live, three geeky girls. They along with the other characters have their recognisable glitches and familiar human traits, helping to make you feel more at home with them. From here we progress to Robot Spiders, as the Nova's manage to develop legs provided by their human automatons from knitting needles and the like. They feed on information which they attempt to extract from their victims at every available opportunity, ultimately using it against them. Even the owner of the above Cloud based smart device admits to

switching it off if he has something confidential to discuss. Have you explained the internet honeytraps to your children?

Again, the book asks “would you like to disengage your brain”, as this gives you more time to think about the less important things in life such as games, fashion, gadgets etc. Conversely “Terms and Conditions” it states should be up there near the top of your important considerations. We naively accept these with gay abandon but .... read your terms and conditions, the folk in Happyville did not. The book manages to package this message up in a funky gift wrap which young folk will enjoy opening and reading,

A hilariously funny book despite the sinister message, which parents and teachers would do well to read. A family/class discussion could extend that learning curve. Everyone should read this. Humour is the antidote to the gravity of the message. It is positively educational without you noticing it.

**Elizabeth Negus**

## **Cloudburst**

Wilbur Smith and Chris Wakling, pub. Piccadilly Press

Best known for his blockbuster thriller and adventure novels, the internationally bestselling Wilbur Smith is now making his first foray into children’s publishing with a new middle grade series, co-written with travel writer and children’s author Chris Wakling. The first three titles will tell the story of British teenager Jack Courtney, the youngest member of the Courtney dynasty, who have featured in Smith’s novels since his 1964 debut.

Set in the modern day, the first instalment, *Cloudburst*, sees Jack forced into action when his parents are kidnapped during a trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Along with his siblings Xander and Amelia, he has no choice but to embark on a perilous journey to rescue them – a journey which will take them out of their cosseted comfort zones and test them to their limits.

The adventure unfolds with great pace, and the combination of clear, straightforward prose and convincingly dangerous situations is sure to hold the attention of the target middle grade audience. It is hard not to see the *Alex Rider* series as a comparable touchpoint, and *Cloudburst* is likely to appeal to fans of Horowitz’s reluctant teenage super-spy looking for another thriller in an unfamiliar land. Jack and his siblings will certainly impress younger readers with their survival skills and ability to outsmart a cast of pleasingly nefarious adults. Equally, while the setting and, to an extent the setup, may be familiar to Wilbur Smith’s many adult fans, both are likely to be new to a middle grade audience (it is certainly difficult to think of many recent Congo-set novels for readers in this age-group). *Cloudburst* does touch on geopolitical issues relevant to the region, particularly from an

ecological perspective, but the focus remains firmly on the adventure aspects of the story, perhaps avoiding too easy stereotypes for a young audience.

## **Olivia Parry**

### **Clouds Cannot Cover Us**

Jay Hulme, pub. Troika Books

It's beautiful to see more and more powerful voices from different intersections, surface and resound. So, here for spring, I have teenage poet Jay Hulme's *Clouds Cannot Cover Us*- an impactful poetry collection by a person who identifies as a transgender from a working-class background.

The book is aptly designed with a dark and bright division, signifying the struggles and hopes the poet faces in building his identity in the transitions of youth as an adolescent in a politically active world; evident in changes of the body, mind, social and political issues and an equally empowering acknowledgement of diversity and individual expressions in the world. The preconceived notion that youth is a foolish state with nothing worthwhile to offer, is dismantled by the poet through his making a case for the voice of the young to be acknowledged-

"I wrote when I was in high school. Poems about the fear, anger and burning sense of injustice that I felt, when I looked out at the world as a teenager, and saw not only this encroaching cloud of darkness, but a constant unwillingness among those who could do something about that darkness to listen to young people like me."

This book is as much about the young ones who have a voice and the power to articulate powerful messages on platforms of hope and revelation of bitter truths, as is about the development of a person existing within layers of class, gender, age group, physiology and events with empowering words like these-

"So we will keep on fighting,  
until we are equal to you.  
Because these photos  
in black and white,  
blurry and crumpled,  
are not a sign of failure;  
They are fuel for the fire  
of the anger today,  
and if we cannot be change,  
you can be sure,  
We will fuel it."

(Poem: *Picture Quality*)

I would definitely ask teenagers and adults, to give this book a read, because it will resonate hard if you've struggled, organised and articulated what you need or do not need, and formed your unique identity on the path you took which was convoluted but worth each step, because it was your truth. Keep this book and share it too, because it is centred on hope in a crumbling and reviving world, in the words of the author again-

"Yes, there's darkness, but darkness only exists in contrast to light. Without one, the other cannot exist."

**Ishika Tiwari**

## **Crater Lake**

Jennifer Killick, pub. Firefly Press

This is a book that gets better as you read it because you notice its strengths and forgive its weaknesses more as you go along. I'd persevere, it's worth it. The final third, as things are falling into place, is a sweet read. The set-up is so: Year 6 are on their outdoorsy mini-break to Crater Lake, the brand-new, never-yet-visited activity centre in the middle of nowhere. It's a disaster movie. There are flecks of horror, some science-fiction trappings, a really well-developed mystery to investigate, but essentially this book is 'it's all gone horribly wrong – how do we escape the incipient life-threatening threat before it overwhelms us?' And then it becomes 'there's no-one else to fix this – what do we do?' Stakes are escalated nicely. Responsibilities are shouldered nobly.

The plot engines are the narrator-protagonist Lance's relationships with his teacher Ms Hoche, bully Trent, and best friend Chets. The events already unfolding at Crater Lake when the kids arrive provides a ticking clock. I like the way they impact those relationships. Let's talk about Ms Hoche. She is an inexcusably evil teacher, she should not be allowed anywhere near children. She's bad even before she gets caught up in and ramped up by events, with her vendetta against Lance. It's a missed trick: a more nuanced early-chapters Hoche would've made her later actions tragic. This is the sort of thing that exposes the clumsiness in the book. All those things that satisfy in the story take a while to develop: the setting, character motives and relationships, interlocking schemes and mysteries, the escalating threat and the kids' responses to it.

All those things that annoy are there from the start: dialogue and vocabulary that don't feel right for Year 6, characters that ping off clichés too strongly (to the extent of evoking 70s/80s style writing), baffling similes, awkward pacing, and not knowing when not to describe (Killick's descriptions are good, but often unnecessary). It's not until the banter about Hoche's shoes in Chapter 3 that I feel

there's something interesting and genuine going on. Some creepiness starts coming through in the writing and Lance's front displays some brittleness.

The theme: how it's better to drop your public face and be confident in your true self, to own and be open with your personal history and not fear judgement, is a key lesson that stretches into people's early teenage years. I can't imagine this being read in Year 10, but I can imagine someone in Year 10 remembering having read this and drawing on the positive thoughts it's left behind in the back of their head.

The readership: emotionally and in tone I'd say Years 4 and 5, but with some mis-steps in terms of vocabulary.

Overall: dodgy start, but in the end very nicely crafted. Dialogue could be better. Happily recommended.

**Dmytro Bojaniwskyj**

## **The Cure for a Crime**

Roopa Farooki, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Ali and Tulip are twin sisters with an interest in all things medical and a keenness for solving a mystery. In this first *Double Detectives Medical Mystery* the girls are worried about their Mum, a surgeon at the hospital. She's tired all of the time and really isn't her usual self. Ali and Tulip are sure that Mum's new boyfriend, Brian Sturgeon is to blame as the trouble seems to have started when he moved in. When the twins discover that it's not only Mum that's ill, they decide to investigate and are determined to get to the bottom of things. Along the way they uncover more than they expect and make new friends or 'frenemies' in Zac and Jay – the other twins in their class at school.

*The Cure for a Crime* is a well written mystery that has a really modern feel from Roopa Farooki – a junior doctor herself and the award-winning author of literary novels. Readers will love the rapport that is developed between both sets of twins, as well as with the girl's electric wheelchair riding 'Nan-Nan' who may or may not have once been a spy.

I liked the clever addition of the Appendix which contains useful medical information ('Emergency Twinterventions') taken from the twins' medical blog. A welcome addition to the mystery genre for this age group that will appeal to girls and boys alike.

**Damian Harvey**

## **Evernight**

Ross McKenzie, pub. Andersen Press

Many centuries ago, a sinister force known as Evernight descended onto the Silver Kingdom, intent on destroying everything in its path. Only the courage and powerful magic of the witches could keep it at bay and protect the world and its future generations from its fearsome darkness. Years later, Larabelle Fox, a girl more at home scouring the sewers of King's Haven for lost treasure, finds herself drawn into a life-changing adventure where the burning secret of her true heritage lies waiting to be discovered. As Larabelle embarks on her quest of self-discovery she has no idea of the evil that seeks to silence her.

The sinister Mrs Hester lurks in the background, stealing souls for her White Witch army, a cohort of magical slaves whose only purpose is to serve the Silver Kingdom, she plans on using the Evernight as her weapon to keep control over everyone and everything. Mrs Hester is frail though, her powers slowly fading with age. Afraid of losing her grip on power over the King and the Silver Kingdom, she enlists the help of a mysterious man with no shadow. Finally let loose, Shadow Jack craves souls and will stop at nothing to get what he wants.

Ross Mackenzie's *Evernight* is an emotional adventure filled with heart-stopping action and magic. Woven throughout are themes of grief and loss as Larabelle and her new friends fight to find their place in the world. Thoughtfully crafted and exhilarating, *Evernight* takes the reader on an epic journey where familiar YA tropes are cleverly intertwined with lyrical prose. While the hero and villain roles are clearly defined, the characters are well-rounded and three-dimensional. Even younger readers will recognise that Larabelle and Mrs Hester share similar fears, based around their own survival in an uncertain world. A bold and thrilling story.

## **Tammy Myers**

### **The Faraway Truth**

Janae Marks, pub. Chicken House Books

Zoe Washington never met her real father as he was sent to prison before she was born. When she receives a letter from him on her 12th birthday she starts to question the stories her Mum has told her about him – is he really the monster she's been brought up to believe?

A page-turner of a mystery, *The Faraway Truth* deals with big issues – race, parental imprisonment, injustice, falling out with friends - in a sensitive and entertaining way. The plot is intertwined with Zoe's desire to be a famous baker, and the cupcakes are described so well that you can almost see them hovering in front of you: just out of reach, more's the pity. Who wouldn't want their first part-

time job to be in a popular bakery whose delicious smells almost waft out of the book? Food provides a common bond between Zoe and the other characters and a gentle relief from the tougher themes.

Zoe is portrayed as a fully rounded character – kind, curious and stubborn, and sometimes the choices she makes are frustrating for the reader, just as when Harry Potter declines to confide in Dumbledore. This makes her all the more real and relatable, as her poor friend gets the silent treatment for just a bit too long. Her stable and loving home life provides the perfect counterbalance to dealing with a parent in prison.

*The Faraway Truth* is a heart-warming read, recommended for readers age 10+. Its sweet notes leave it possibly unpalatable for a more critical YA audience, but left this (grown up) reader feeling happily satisfied.

### **Catherine Millar**

## **Ghoul Scouts: Welcome to Camp Croak!**

Taylor Dolan, pub. Guppy Books

A wrong turn on the way to summer camp delivered Lexie Wilde not to the Happy Hollow Camp for Joyful Boys and Girls, but to Camp Croak, home of the Ghoul Scouts and a three-headed Troop Leader. Quickly making friends with her roommate (a werewolf) a talking skeleton (the adopted daughter of voodoo leader Baron Samedi), a baseball-cap wearing ghost and a zombie, Lexie braves her way through a series of surprises and gains a few Ghoul Scout badges on the way, using her storytelling talents and active imagination wherever possible. A serious challenge appears for the Ghoul Scouts in the form of sleeping sickness which attacks the Troop Leader; the replacement Scoutmaster Euphemia Vile is a horrible, sickly-sweet piece of work. Lexie and her friends – in their hideous new ‘Sunday best’ uniforms – must work together to get rid of her and save their Leader.

The lively yellow-and-black, two-colour illustrations are scattered around the pages; the chapter about learning to ride a broom is entirely illustrated. With the large print and well-spaced lines, this would make a great transitional book for children moving away from picture books but not quite ready for long novels. It would also be a perfect choice for children who enjoy the ‘darker’ fairy tales and fantasy stories, like *The Worst Witch*.

The author is from Texas, and you can hear the drawl in Lexie’s voice; the mentions of voodoo, grits and gumbo (all helpfully explained in the glossary) give the book a delicious flavour of the American South. This is Taylor Dolan’s first novel, and there’s plenty of scope for a sequel – another year at camp, a school invasion, Hallowe’en or Christmas maybe? – and I could certainly read more from Lexie.



**Antonia Russell**

## **The Highland Falcon Thief**

M. G. Leonard and Sam Sedgman, illus. Elisa Paganelli, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

'Budding artist and resourceful stowaway catch Royal diamond's thief on steam train's farewell tour'. This is possibly what a newspaper would write to capture the essence of the story told in *The Highland Falcon Thief*.

Harrison Beck, also known as Hal, and his writer-uncle Nat board the Highland Falcon, an iconic steam train on its farewell tour around Great Britain. The other guests on the train are members of the aristocracy, an entrepreneur, an actress and a retired train steward, and all are travelling towards Balmoral where the Prince and Princess will join them for the rest of the journey. Hal, reluctant to leave his parents and to miss the arrival of his baby sister, is even more unimpressed when his casual wardrobe is deemed below the standard required by the event and it is replaced by some Royal hand-me-down itchy garments. Yet, all is soon forgotten when Hal is caught up in the mystery of the disappearance of a precious brooch and accused of being the perpetrator of the crime.

Helped by resourceful stowaway Leena, the daughter of the train driver, Hal sets out to investigate the theft, putting to use his observation and drawing skills. It soon becomes clear to he and Leena that the thief is planning to steal the Princess' Atlas Diamond. Their efforts cannot stop the crime being committed and, quite the opposite, lead to Leena being found out and accused of the crime. As time is running out and the journey is approaching the final destination, Hal can only rely on the support of his uncle Nat and of the train staff to help his friend and uncover the truth. Hal does so in a moment reminiscent of the best detective stories, and he and Leena bring the perpetrator to justice in a fast moving and exciting scene.

Leonard and Sedgman have created a cracking crime story, whose setting and characters bring to a young audience the appeal and entertainment of an Agatha Christie whodunnit. To this, they have added beautiful descriptions of the train and of its clever design, technical features and unexpected hidden corners, turning the steam engines and its carriages into a place of wonder and adventure. Thrown into the mix is also a group of delightful dogs, which complete the recipe for a highly entertaining story which will appeal to middle-grade readers. Independent readers will be soon drawn by the rich details of the characters and settings and by the flowing dialogues and will look out for any clue that may lead them to reveal the identity of the thief. Less confident readers will be supported by Elisa Paganelli's detailed illustrations, which enrich the story with great style. The voices of the two writers mix effortlessly and their shared passion for the setting and attention to detail enhances the storytelling.

A must for any library, this book would be a great class reader as well, with its many cliffhangers, as well as the opportunities to inspire creative writing and drama and to explore technology and history topics – the locomotive is based on the A4 Pacific model and a royal train was used since 1842. Readers will be pleased to know that this is the first in the series *Adventures of Trains* and that the release of further stories is already planned.

**Laura Brill**

## **The House of One Hundred Clocks**

A.M. Howell, illus. Saara Soderlund, pub. Usborne

From its earliest moments, Helena's tale is one of apprehension and mystery: it begins on the brink, when a hefty threat is made that leaves her and Father on edge. They quickly understand that joining the employment of Mr Westcott, as they must do for a livelihood, comes with considerable risk. But aside from the clear terms of Mr Westcott's demands, now that they are lodgers in his house of clocks nothing else about the household is transparent. Strange occurrences multiply with each new night, and there is an unusual lack of other staff...Westcott also harbours an intimidating aversion to Orbit the parrot, Helena's companion.

It is enjoyable that so much mystery and danger emerge from inside this one primary setting. Rather than slowly becoming clearer to solve, Helena's problems continue to build, and stakes grow as she tries her best to pursue answers for the sake of her father and friends. She makes a determined and emotional protagonist, her frustration and need to understand are very tangible expressions of our discomfort with being out of control.

The atmosphere of mystery firmly holds your interest, and Howell uses many short phrases of powerful imagery to communicate Helena's emotional upheaval. There is a comforting understanding of instances when words are not enough, alongside those moments when they refuse to come, or cannot be held back. The lives of Helena and the Westcotts are both shaped by experiences of loss that thread through the story.

This novel looks reassuringly at the complexities of grief, expressing different needs and approaches of family members who drift apart in coping with their losses. Howell is excellent at tracing the messiness of emotion, and how it manifests in the body. Nerves, compulsion, sadness and fear are woven in and out of the mystery, with Helena struggling to make sense of the house around her. Hopefully a book that will leave you warmed, as well as satisfied by its dose of mystery!

**Jemima Breeds**

## **The House on Hoarder Hill**

Mikki Lish and Kelly Ngai, illus. Steve Wells and Maxine Lee, pub. Chicken House

The wonders of modern communication - two friends, and now two debut authors, Mikki Lish, living in Australia, and Kelly Ngai in the USA, have co-written this spooky, funny, scary middle-grade story. Originally intending their story (at that time called *The Mysterious House on Hoarder Hill*) to be a film, and seeking sponsors, they also released a trailer for the proposed film, which can be found here: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=thW2Md9s6Ks>. Instead the story is in production as a TV series, and an audiobook will be published alongside the hard copy.

The mystery begins when young visitors Hedy and Spencer start receiving messages scrawled on dusty picture frames, and Christmas at their grandfather's spooky house turns into a mission to solve the mystery of their grandmother's disappearance. Something's not adding up - what is their magician grandfather not telling them? With the help of Stan, a (talking) mounted stag head, Doug, an (also talking) bear rug, and other (currently) disembodied spirits, and against the resistance of gargoyles and ravens, Hedy and Spencer and their cousins set out to find the truth. The children have to overcome several of their own private fears as well as those which result from the frightening happenings both within and without the House. Grandpa John is portrayed as a rather bad-tempered man, while his brother Peter, who had also been a magician, seems a far friendlier person. By the end of the book, however, both Hedy and Spencer, and readers, discover a bitter rivalry which triggered the whole mystery. We learn that those people who we know, love and trust, yes, even grandparents, might have acted badly in the past. It's an exciting storyline, often quite frightening, and probably not for readers of a nervous disposition! On occasion it also reads more like a screenplay ready for character development by the actors rather than a fully-fledged novel.

Prologue and epilogue feature a white raven, normally a statue, the children's unseen guardian, and it seems the story isn't totally finished, that the house's most evil character hasn't been successfully overcome, and that a sequel may be on its way.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **The Kid Who Came From Outer Space**

Ross Welford, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

A quiet Northumberland village is devastated by the seemingly inexplicable disappearance of twelve-year-old Tammy. People keep on searching, but clues are thin on the ground, and the village is starting to give up hope. Only her twin brother, Ethan, knows – as only a twin knows – that she is safe. He is right – but the truth, when he stumbles on it, is truly out-of-this-world. To bring her back, Ethan will have to embark on a nail-biting adventure of intergalactic proportions, with only the help of his eccentric friend Iggy, the (very) hairy Hellyann, and a pet chicken called Suzy...

Since his 2014 debut, *Time-Travelling With a Hamster* – which does exactly what it says on the tin – Ross Welford has been recognised as one of the most consistently original writers for children, taking an inventive, often absurdly comic, premise, and from there building an equal-parts madcap adventure and thoughtful journey of self-discovery. *The Kid Who Came From Space* is no exception. The style is simple and immediate, and chapters are short, but the writing is still remarkably expressive, making the book an inclusive choice for less confident readers despite its length.

The opening chapters in particular are highly successful in capturing the distress and shock of the community in a gentle, muted way which is suitable for younger readers, but nevertheless builds a realistic sense of urgency which keeps you wanting to turn the pages. The later action is well-paced, and characteristically madcap, but the friendships and thoughtfulness of the central character are also genuinely touching, creating a rich and rewarding read.

**Olivia Parry**

## **The Mask of Aribella**

Anna Houghton, pub. Chicken House Books

Aribella is the daughter of an impoverished Venetian lace-maker. Ten years ago her mother disappeared, presumed drowned on the lagoon and even now, her father's grief and sadness overwhelms their lives. Life is hard in Venice, the people are afraid, there are worrying signs and portents making them fearful that a blood moon and bad times are coming.

Aribella takes comfort from her one friend Theo and it's on the eve of her 13th birthday, when the neighbourhood bully starts attacking Theo and her mother's memory, that she discovers he has a secret power – when she is angered, deadly flames shoot from her fingertips. In fear, she runs away but through the stranger Rodolpho, who witnesses the incident, she learns that she is one of the Cannovacci, magical warriors, who live in the Halfway Hotel masked from the view of ordinary Venetian people. Each Cannovacci has an individual power, encapsulated in a personal Venetian mask, created for them at an appointed time by the Maskmaker. It's their job to protect Venice from the dark spectres and rising tide of evil threatening to engulf and destroy Venice and its people. Aribella discovers she may have the biggest part of all to play, if only she knew what it was and understood the power she has.

A fantastic middle grade fantasy adventure set in the rich and historical world of Venice. Really well written, the characters and magical creatures come alive. The sense of place is strongly drawn bringing the sights, sounds and feel of Venice to life. I loved the idea of the Venetian masks imbuing power to the wearer and the imagery of the mask hiding the person wearing it but bringing their

power to the fore. It's a story about friendships, about the power of evil to corrupt but most of all it is about love, about believing in yourself and being true to who you are.

“Rodolpho laughed again, as he had done on the lagoon, light and bright. He held up three fingers and counted them off one by one. Never judge a book by its cover. Never judge a person by their mask. And never judge a hotel by her façade. Most people are so preoccupied with how things appear on the surface that they never find out what they're really like”

This sums up the book for me, it's one of those books whose power of story is deceptive. It reels the reader in, oh so gently and slowly until you suddenly find yourself completely hooked and compulsively reading, knowing you cannot put it down until you've finished it. I loved it – it's a debut novel by an author who is definitely one to watch out for.

## **Annie Everall**

### **Max and the Midknights**

Lincoln Pierce, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

This is a medieval adventure. It is highly illustrated and is full of black and white comic-style artwork. The text is funny and fast paced. The pictures and text combine to produce some hilarious and laugh-out-loud fun.

10-year-old Max wants to be a knight. Max is travelling around the country with Uncle Budrick, who should have been a knight, like his father. However, he fled and became a troubadour, a travelling entertainer. The two start a journey which becomes an epic adventure. This fun and magical adventure features wizards, dastardly villains, a dragon and plenty of jokes. The really great thing about this story is that Max is not what you may think! To tell here may spoil the story for the reader. Young readers will love the funny names, like King Gastley and Sir Gadabout. Uncle Budrick is kidnapped by the cruel King Gastley. Max and the Midknights set out on a thrilling quest to save the realm. Can the young knights defeat King Gastley and rescue the kingdom of Byjovia?

Young readers are sure to love the combination of hilarious pictures, fun text and great adventures, as the funny characters bustle from adventure to adventure. Improving readers will be encouraged by the illustrations and the easy to read words.

If you enjoy this book, you will be pleased to learn that the second one in the series is due out later this year.

## **Gary Kenworthy**

## **Mustafa's Jumper**

Coral Rumble, illus. Charlotte Cooke, pub. Wacky Bee Books

It is Spring - the season of love, friendship, blossoms, and here I have with me a beautiful and poignant tale of a sweet camaraderie: *Mustafa's Jumper*, a children's book by poet and author Coral Rumble and illustrator Charlotte Cooke.

The narrative is centered on a few simple school days, from Milo's perspective, who is in the Oak class. The titular character Mustafa is a new kid in the Oak class, shown through Milo's emotionally intelligent narrative. Diversity is most evident in learning environments such as schools and colleges and the way it should be dealt with- with understanding, fellowship and curiosity is one thread of the message of the book. The other one being the refugee crisis which is expressed in impactful visual narration:

"That night Mustafa and his mum came to Milo's house. Milo plays with Mustafa and his mum talks to Mustafa's mum in the kitchen. Mustafa tells Milo he has to go on an aeroplane with his family back to his old country."

This tale explores understanding, acceptance and friendship on one hand and the political and particular view of the uncertain lives of refugees on the other. It also gives the valuable, resonant messages on being a little 'extra', like this one given to Milo by his mum:

"Mustafa will always be in your memories,"she says."You made that extra effort to be extra friendly and that made Mustafa proud to be your best friend."

This little book is written with a focus on the cultivation of awareness and understanding, it teaches acknowledgement and fraternity with a deep political and social message on refugees and migrants.

It is definitely recommended as a powerful book for children; written in an easy to understand English, this book can be used to make kids aware about the plight of refugees and how they can understand and cooperate lovingly. It can be read and enjoyed by all ages for its adorable and powerful tale of Mustafa and Milo's friendship as well as its precocious shedding of light on the refugee crisis.

**Ishika Tiwari**

## **Orion Lost**

Alastair Chisholm, pub. Nosy Crow

Beth is thirteen. She's on the spaceship Orion, travelling with her parents to Eos Five, a planet twenty-six light years from Earth. Despite the distance, the journey will take just nine months, because the ship can jump vast tracts of space while its passengers are put in a special sleep. It's on one of the jumps that things start to go wrong. Beth is woken from her sleep by Ship, Orion's central interface. Ship tells her that none of the adults on board can be woken, only the children, and that she must be acting captain. When she asks why, she is told she scored highest – by just .5% – in Command Training. She has no choice but to have Vihaan, son of Orion's captain, as her second-in-command, despite difficult communications between them.

These two, with four other children, find themselves coping with a major emergency. Orion is very severely damaged. Everyone's lives are at risk, and not just because of the fire that has engulfed important parts of the ship, or the memories that have been wiped, or the equipment that has been destroyed. There are terrifying space pirates not far away, and the alien Videshis too. Beth is terrified and struggles with her responsibilities. Some of her decisions have disastrous consequences, and conflict flares. Then the dangers multiply. Can there be an enemy within Orion as well as outside?

*Orion Lost* is a gripping middle-grade sci-fi adventure with a high suspense quotient and numerous twists and turns. Alastair Chisholm has created a great cast of characters. The six protagonists are very believable. All exhibit skill and bravery, but all have fears they don't want the others to see, and all have weaknesses, weaknesses that lead to technical problems and weaknesses that threaten collaboration. Beth's difficulties with her role are particularly well depicted. The book poses important questions about the nature of good leadership, without ever being remotely preachy. This is hard to put down. Recommended.

**Anne Harding**

## **Otto Tattercoat and the Forest of Lost Things**

Matilda Woods, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

*Otto Tattercoat* is a charming middle grade fantasy novel, with a strong flavour of Germanic folk tale about it. Otto and his mother – a dressmaker who makes superlative coats – arrive in the frozen city of Hodeldorf, where it is forever winter. (A nod, perhaps, to *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*?) Almost immediately, Otto's mother disappears, and Otto soon finds that the hearts of many of the people of the city are almost as cold as the weather. He manages to link up with the Tattercoats, a group of children with no parents who live as best they can on the streets. At night they sleep on roofs, huddling up against the chimney for warmth, much to the disgust of the people who live in the houses.

The children's greatest enemy, though, is Frau Ferber, who owns a boot-polish factory. She captures children and makes them work for nothing. The Tattercoats are brave and loyal, though, and they

help Otto when he decides to venture into the enchanted forest nearby in search of his mother. There they brave many dangers to find the answers to all sorts of mysteries...

Otto and the Tattercoats are delightful characters, and the story moves along at a gripping pace. Any reader who enjoys fantasy will find this a heart-warming tale, with a bewitching setting that evokes all the dangers and delights of traditional folk tales.

### **Sue Purkiss**

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

### **Snow Foal**

Susanna Bailey, pub. Egmont

Addie is eleven years old when she is taken to stay with a foster family on a remote farm in Exmoor. It is winter-time and Addie is hurt, angry and mistrustful. We come to learn later that she has been living alone with a mother increasingly unable to look after her and afflicted by addiction to alcohol. Addie is a tightly wound ball of fury and bewilderment who resists any attempts by her foster family to accept that she is unable to be at home with her mother for the time being. Also living at the farm are another two looked after children - 6 year old Jude, traumatised into silence by past events and 10 year old Sunni who has her own demons. They have been living for a while with Ruth and Sam and their adopted son, Gabe, who helps run the farm. Addie remains trapped in resentment until a tiny wild foal is rescued on the moor and brought to the farm to recuperate. Reluctantly she agrees to help look after the foal and discovers a deep connection with this motherless animal. As time passes she finds out more about little Jude and forms a real friendship with him, but relations with Sunni remain stormy. Through her experience with the foal and with those around her, Addie learns difficult lessons about human relationships and about knowing when to let go and how to trust.

I really enjoyed all the characters in this book – the adults striving to provide the best care for their troubled children, the troubled figure, Addie's Mum, who we never meet but learn so much about, Jude, the fragile elfin child who is so good at friendship, Gabe the very cool teenager and of course the foal – so beautifully evoked.

This is a wise and sensitively told story that draws you straight into the characters' lives. The beautiful, slightly sparkly, cover art belies the grit in this unflinching realistic drama, but it will draw in mature 10 + readers who enjoy Jacqueline Wilson and Sarah Lean. It would be perfect for a Year 6 Greater Depth reading group.

### **Rose Palmer**



## **Sticky Pines: The Bigwoof Conspiracy**

Dashe Roberts, pub. Nosy Crow

Spirited, purple-haired investigator Lucy Sladan is completely obsessed with all manner of bizarre phenomena, the stranger the better. She has “always wanted to be the first person to prove to the world that there’s a vast inexplicable universe outside our puny understanding of reality” and so is absolutely determined to prove there’s something weird out there in her sleepy small town home of Sticky Pines. On the same stormy night she spots a beast in the woods she meets Milo, smartly-dressed photography-obsessed son of the new Sticky Sweet Factory where her own dad works. Lucy and Milo team up to investigate and try to get photographic proof of the hairy beast. When people begin to disappear, Milo’s dad doctors their photographs and creepy clowns are employed to protect his factory, it’s clear there is something more sinister going on than Lucy could ever have anticipated.

Lucy is an outstanding protagonist. She doesn’t suffer fools gladly, is willing to bend and break the rules for what she knows is right and struggles to balance her determination to uncover the truth with protecting those she cares about. Her playful and inventive cursing gives rise to much of the humour of the novel (“crudberries”, “son of a scab licker”, “what the hangnail was that?”) Milo Fisher is the perfect foil to her eccentric quirkiness - smart, sensitive, slightly posh and very proper. His factory-owner, carnival-throwing dad is the perfect villain, outwardly respectable and magnanimous, inwardly scheming and conducting human experiments in secret.

The author has clearly had huge fun bringing *The Bigwoof Conspiracy* to life and it shows on every page. Roberts cleverly combines paranormal phenomena, conspiracy theories and mysterious creatures into a breathtakingly fast-paced, genuinely funny, madcap *Scooby-Doo* style caper which deserves to be cult reading for 9+ readers. She skilfully balances the ordinary and the extraordinary and makes both believable. The small town US setting adds extra authenticity to the darkness and danger of the Stranger Things vibe. *The Bigwoof Conspiracy* is packed full of twists right to the end: just when you think this mystery is solved a key character is gruesomely liquified and the destroyed factory is being rebuilt, more tests on the Nu Co sweetener are being run and a drone is tracking our intrepid investigator Lucy. The scene is clearly set for book two in the *Sticky Pines* series: *The Thing in Black Hole Lake*. It launches September 2020 and it can’t come quickly enough! Weird and wonderful and very more-ish. I had to read this in a sitting.

**Eileen Armstrong**

## **Talking to the Moon**

S.E. Durrant, pub. Nosy Crow

Iris loves staying with her grandmother - she has a room of her own, with no mould and no leaks, there is a seagull on the roof, dad is not pulling his hair out worrying about the mould, the twins are

no trying to pull radiators off walls or pretend that they can fly ... in fact living with grandma is the opposite of living at home for Iris and grandma can set their own rules. Sounds great doesn't it. Well it would be and of course it is, except, well except for the fact that Mimi (grandma) is really and truly all at sea. She wears her clothes inside out, puts jam on scrambled eggs and talks to the moon. Life becomes more and more muddled the longer that Iris is living with Mimi and at the same time a mystery from the past presents itself in the form of a girl called Coral. Luckily Iris makes a friend – Mason – and between them they search for the answers, whether they will find them is for you to discover when you read too.

This is a poignant and simply beautifully told story. It is sweet, funny, touching and clever. It is about Iris searching for order among the chaos and disorder that continues around her, it is about Mimi and her struggle with the onset of dementia and it is a thoughtful, poignant examination of the relationships formed in families and between friends. There are chapters but there are subchapters as Iris and Mimi's stories unfold. We are putting together the pieces of their lives as we read and as it all slots together we are encouraged to work with Iris and Mason to solve the mystery and learn at the same time how we can help those around us in times of need.

A very gentle, heart-warming and hopeful novel of family, friends, trust, hope, relationships and dealing with dementia or other forms of memory loss. An important novel and yet a fun read for younger readers too.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Threads of Magic**

Alison Crogan, pub. Walker Books

Pip lives with his sister in the city of Clarel. Magic is outlawed and the royal officials control everyone and everything. Pip makes his way on his wits and as a petty thief, but when he runs off with a silver casket that a noble drops when he's being robbed, things take a dramatic turn. Inside the casket there is a blackened and wizened heart, and it seems to be trying to tell Pip something. The nobles want their treasure back and will stop at nothing to get it. Now Pip is caught up in an ancient war between the Spectres and the Witches of Clarel and has to deal with a mysterious dried heart that seeks vengeance.

An exciting new fantasy from an established writer that has a lot to offer. Lots of exciting dashing around and well described scenes to keep the reader of fantasy intrigued. The plot twists and turns and is on the whole satisfying. The complexity of the story does mean that there are quite a few extended explanatory scenes and this can feel a bit frustrating at times. The book is listed as 9+ but linguistically I feel it would suit a young reader who is already reading with quite an extensive vocabulary. The language is quite old-fashioned, which suits the setting but some might struggle to

catch the action if they are tripping over words they are not able to tackle contextually. Personally I feel that this book would be best enjoyed as a read-aloud. This would make a great addition to a teacher's shelf to share at the end of each day for a gripping storytime!

## **Dawn Finch**

### **Too Small Tola**

Atinuke, Oninye Iwu, pub. Walker Books

This small book (95 pages) contains three short stories concerning Tola. Tola is the youngest of three siblings, aged roughly seven although her age is not specified in the text. She lives in Lagos, Nigeria, with her older brother and sister and her grandmother. Her father is working in the United Kingdom. Her mother is largely absent from the narrative. The family survives on minimal income.

In one story the power supply to Tola's home fails. As a result their supply of water also ceases. To get water they must resort to the nearest public pump. The intended readers for these stories would be aged seven or so. It is a brave step to include a story highlighting a serious domestic problem like a water shortage.

Tola is a spirited and resilient child. Girls of all nations and all cultures will respond to her courage and determination. Iwu's illustrations are slightly reminiscent in style of the work of Nick Sharratt.

## **Rebecca Butler**

### **Willow Wildthing and the Swamp Monster**

Gill Lewis, illus. Rebecca Bagley, pub. Oxford Children's Books

An intriguing map fills the first two pages of this brilliant story: it's enjoyable to study and also indicates the book's effective pairing between story and image, one that makes the slim volume satisfying to hold. Small drawings appear along the corners and edges of many pages, while the whole page illustrations are an appealing mix of fine line detail and looser scruffy strokes.

Willow is a character it is easy to warm to: she very quickly becomes a firm favourite protagonist, from very early on. There are striking moments where she acknowledges sadness and loneliness openly, and she has a touching bond with Sniff, her dog, who is himself a pretty hard character to beat. Lewis' book offers an enjoyable, fast moving story, with high stakes soon emerging and a vast unknown proving to be closer at hand than Willow could ever have thought. The Wilderness behind the row of houses where she lives is not at all as it seems, and four children soon involve her in its dangers.

It feels well-paced and develops good inter-character group dynamics, not without their problems. Their adventure proves exciting and tense, but also makes space for comforting observations about struggling to feel brave or confident. There are some pleasingly scary creatures in its pages, and its illustrations use a reduced pallet of green and grey to merge the children with their landscape. Willow's tale is an eerie but warming one, that you'll likely be glad to have found.

**Jemima Breeds**

## **Winterborne Home for Vengeance and Valor**

Ally Carter, pub. Orchard Books

April is different from the other children at the orphanage; her mother is coming back for her. Even after twelve years of waiting, she's not about to give up. The sole clue to her mother's identity is a key marked with a crest, a crest that matches with that of the Winterborne collection displayed at the museum. Having been caught up in the arson of the very same museum, April is whisked away to the Winterborne Home to join four other children, where she encounters Gabriel Winterborne, a presumed-dead billionaire, and a mystery that may well just lead back to her mother.

The first in a new series, *Winterborne Home for Vengeance and Valor* is a pacey and action-filled read that will keep readers guessing until the final line. The cast of characters are engaging and compelling in their idiosyncrasies and together form a formidable team, determined to solve the mystery at the heart of the story. The interplay between the children and the adults of the story is also an interesting element that sets this novel apart from others concerning the foster care system.

Full of dark intrigue, with an ending that leaves plenty of room for a continuation of the series, *Winterborne Home for Vengeance and Valor* is great for fans of Lemony Snicket.

**Jess Zahra**

# Young Adult Book Reviews

## **A Throne of Swans**

Katherine and Elizabeth Corr, pub. Hot Key Books

Lovers of fantasy may already be familiar with Katherine and Elizabeth Corr's earlier *The Witch's Kiss* trilogy, set in twenty-first century Surrey. In their latest collaboration they have set their YA novel in an earlier imaginary time, which they chose to resemble the political and social landscape of eighteenth-century Europe.

Inspired by the ballet *Swan Lake*, the Corrs reimagine that story in *A Throne of Swans*, extensively expanding and changing both events and characterisation. For example, if you are familiar with the ballet you may be surprised to find Siegfried a rather different prince in this book, unlike the rather naïve and loving prince who hankers after a woman transformed into a swan by an evil magician. Instead all nobility are born with the ability to transform into different birds, with the heroine, eighteen-year-old Aderyn, who since her father's recent death has become Protector of her country, able to transform into a swan and fly. However we learn that for six years she has been unable to, since she and her mother were attacked by hawks.

While her mother was killed, Aderyn was left so scarred that she is flightless, something she must keep secret. Her intention is to take revenge on her mother's killers, but she soon discovers that they are not the only cruel nobles in the kingdom, and that corruption and duplicity are rife. We follow Aderyn's journey from her own country to attend the royal wedding of Odette and Siegfried, and her parallel journey from innocent adolescence towards womanhood, after a very sheltered childhood. Her search for the truth is complicated by her conflicted feelings for Siegfried, as well as her clerk and companion on her journey, Lucien, and for Odette's brother Aron.

This is a fast-moving and engaging bildungsroman, with a sequel promised for 2021.

## **Bridget Carrington**

## **A Treason of Thorns**

Laura Weymouth, pub. Chicken House

*A Treason of Thorns* is a completely absorbing, magical read with a beautifully lyrical style which swept me into its enchantment from the start.

As a young child, Violet witnesses the incarceration of her father and best friend in her beloved home, Burleigh House, one of the six Great Houses of England all of which have a magical power which has been bound to the King. Her father, its Caretaker, commits an act of treason against the Crown in attempting to unbind his House leading to his incarceration and death.

News of his death brings seventeen-year-old Violet back to Burleigh House which is in desperate decline and in danger of losing control of its magic and unleashing it into the surrounding countryside, causing devastation. This leads her into a desperate attempt to save it from destruction, throwing herself into great danger as she risks everything to save the House, a House she loves, but at what cost to herself?

The premise of this story is utterly fascinating as Violet has an intense symbiotic bond with the House which at times is laced with an insidious darkness edging on parasitic which kept me on tenterhooks throughout. Violet's love and loyalty towards the House is all-encompassing – almost! On her return to Burleigh, she is reunited with her childhood best friend Wyn. Childhood feelings develop into much more as Violet fights to save the house and Wyn fights to protect her from the House's magic. Together with Wyn and the most unlikely but wonderful allies, Violet embarks on the continuation of her father's plan to save Burleigh, but will her fate be any different to her father's?

Violet is a truly wonderful protagonist. She is determined to save the House to which she is devoted: a House whose pain and rage she feels, whose memories she watches, whose magic she absorbs. She shows admirable strength, courage and intuitiveness in defending it against the machinations of the King who is determined to control or destroy it. However, she also struggles with her loyalty towards the House as she makes uncomfortable discoveries; as she is forced to make impossible choices; and as her heart is pulled in two different directions. This bittersweet need to reconcile her two great loves leads to divided loyalties and makes for some very poignant moments.

*A Treason of Thorns* is a wonderfully original and enchanting story which completely enthralled me as I was immersed in the magic, danger and love which seeped from its pages.

**Mary Rees**

## **Are You Watching?**

Vincent Ralph, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

If you were trying to design a thriller that ticked as many YA boxes as possible, then you might well come up with a list something like Vincent Ralph's *Are You Watching?* Reality television angle? Check. Social media as a major plot element? Check. First-person, present-tense narrator? Check. Serial killer with a "pattern"? Why, of course. No doubt Ralph's developed in a far more organic way than that suggests, but I'll admit that its premise – a girl who uses YouTube stardom to turn herself

into bait for the man who murdered her mother – made me worry that it would turn out to be a slightly manipulative exercise. However, this book is far more sensitive to that danger than I feared. Indeed, it makes media manipulation one of its major themes.

*Are You Watching?* Is a slickly constructed thriller. The story never strays far from well-established thriller tropes, but it executes them efficiently and at pace, and certainly succeeded in holding my interest to the end. Once or twice the plot's timbers creaked under the strain of a sudden volte-face, but the conclusion was both satisfyingly unpredictable and made retrospective sense, as a good mystery solution should.

More unexpected was the time Ralph was willing to spend exploring the inner lives of his characters; not just the protagonist but numerous others among the book's large cast of friends, frenemies, family, teachers and YouTube producers. The emotional solidity of the book was one of its strengths and pleasures, and made me wonder what Ralph could do with a less plot-driven book. In the meantime, if you have a seat-edge that you need to perch on for a few hours, *Are You Watching?* may be the book for you.

## **Catherine Butler**

### **Follow Me, Like Me**

Charlotte Seager, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

In her new cutting-edge YA thriller, Charlotte Seager brings the dark and sinister side of social media to the forefront and I devoured it in one addictive sitting.

Adopting a dual narrative, *Follow Me, Like Me* skilfully alternates between the lives of two sixteen-year-old protagonists whose online existences seamlessly blur into their real lives with terrifying consequences.

Chloe, who appears popular and confident, relies heavily on social media and the frenzy of 'likes' and 'comments' to maintain her sought-after status. But when a seemingly innocent conversation with a gorgeous stranger takes a nightmarish turn, Chloe becomes a victim of cyberstalking, sexual assault and emotional manipulation in a fight to reveal the scary truth behind the user. Amber, on the other hand, finds herself exploiting the power of social media to harbour the truth behind her online crush but by doing so exposes her own unsettling and obsessive traits.

Both individually complex yet innocently flawed, Seager has created two distinct and well fleshed out characters in the form of Chloe and Amber. Stripping back the connotations associated with each stereotype, a raw and realistic representation of young girls and their relationship with social media

has been portrayed, and it was enough for me to sit back in fear at the severity of social media and how effortlessly our private lives can be manipulated against us.

Sensitively unpicking timely discussions on cyberstalking, obsession and the male gaze, Seager's writing was weighty as it was quick and I applaud her for creating such a vital story for today's readers.

## **Fern Tolley**

### **Gloves Off**

Louisa Reid, pub. Guppy Books

Admission time. When I first saw that this book was not only in verse but also about boxing, my heart sank. My previous experience with verse novels has not been altogether happy, and I was not looking forward to wincing my way through another 12 rounds. As for boxing, while I can see that it offers a reliable, ready-made story structure (sympathetic protagonist trains hard, has a few setbacks, but finally comes through to win the big match!), any sport in which the aim is to beat your opponent unconscious, however skilfully, is not really for me.

I'm still no fan of the sport, but I am happy to say that my suspicions about Louisa Reid's *Gloves Off* were wholly unjustified. This is an excellent YA novel about body image, family dynamics, friendship, self-belief, and, yes, girls boxing – with a strongly drawn protagonist in Lily, and a memorable supporting cast of family, friends and friends-who-aren't-really-friends. It dodges clear of clichés: the 'expected' climax to the story actually happens two-thirds of the way through, and the turn the book takes then is much more interesting.

No doubt the metaphor is too obvious, but the verse really does float like a butterfly, keeping readers' attention without ever feeling self-indulgent. Reid has far fewer words to play with than most YA writers, but she makes them count, implying back stories and important scenes rather than spelling them out, and trusting the reader to take the hint. The motivation of the Lil's main tormentor, for example, is alluded to in just one line – but it is enough to stop him becoming just a stock bully.

*Gloves Off* packs a real punch: highly recommended.

## **Catherine Butler**

### **Grief Angels**

David Owen, pub. Atom Books



*Grief Angels* follows fifteen-year-old Owen Marlow, as he struggles with the death of his father, and his mother suddenly moving them to a new town. Owen is disconnected from his old friends who do not know how to cope with his grief and unwilling to risk new friendships. In this limbo, he begins to experience hallucinations with a narrative reality all their own. Drawn into a dark otherworld - the Forest - in which he must complete a mysterious quest, he embraces the chance to find resolution, whatever the risks.

The story is also seen through the eyes of Duncan, a boy in his year, struggling with his own difficulties who finds resonance with Owen's vulnerability, rather than the macho swaggering of his old gang of friends. Tensions have developed as their roles have changed but the old pecking order and rituals bind them - for now. There's a thrash metal dance act to learn to support Duncan's younger sister in the school show and late night Battlestar Galactica to be shared - but there is also now a girlfriend who may be sexting someone else.

Old and new rivalries are beginning to flare when Owen joins the school. His eyes are on the strange skeletal birds circling him in the sky which herald a slip into the Forest, but he is still caught up in the boys' fracturing world too.

This YA tale is beautifully told and utterly persuasive. David Owen slips effortlessly between frank teen banter and the language of mythic tale without jarring the readers' senses. A moving story of a boy on the cusp of manhood dealing with the complicated pool of emotions stirred up by loss is elevated to a powerful, literary allegory of grief. It alludes to familiar myths but remains original, disconcerting and ultimately uplifting.

**Saira Archer**

## **The Girl Who Stole an Elephant**

Nizrana Farook, pub. Nosy Crow

Nizrana Farook is a graduate of the Bath Spa University course in writing for young people which has guided so many promising new writers to publication. This, her first novel, is an adventure story of a traditional kind, set in Sri Lanka at an unspecified time.

*The Girl Who Stole an Elephant* has a main character in Chaya. Chaya is enterprising, bold and fearless – even reckless in her actions – the theft of the Queen's jewels – which risk penalties, the death penalty, for others. Trying to save her best friend Neelan from this fate brings her into the unwelcome company of newcomer Nour, a girl from a different, Arabian background. The three, together with the King's elephant, Ananda, take to the jungle to avoid recapture by the King's men. Although Chaya is at first impatient with the timid Nour, who's fearful of wild places, animals and

water she learns, through the dangers they face together, to be more sympathetic, especially when Nour stands up for her after a small failing of her own.

Together, after confronting fierce opposition, the three friends find that there is a kinder future for themselves and their mountain village.

This is a fast-paced action story with many twists and turns. The striking cover design by David Dean, who's also produced illustrated borders for the first page of each chapter, will help get the book into the hands of eager readers.

### **Linda Newbery**

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

### **Havenfall**

Sara Holland, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

The opening pages of *Havenfall* set the scene for a novel that transcends the everyday and crosses to a different world. Or worlds, even: we are introduced to the fantastical Kingdoms of Fiordenkill, Byrn and Solaria and Haven with flights of fancy and detail that entice even the most earthly of readers – skies that flash with 'auroras and stars', beast forms that 'bleed dark blue blood' and magic that can 'heal flesh and make plants grow'. The inn at 'Havenfall', where the novel takes place, provides a portal to these other worlds, and, once a year, travellers from each realm convene at a 'Peace Summit': to negotiate deals by day and 'dance in the ballroom by night to celebrate the diversity and unity of all the inn's guests'. If only Brussels was like this, you can't help thinking, Brexit might never have happened.

The novel centres on Maddie, whose brother was murdered in mysterious circumstances and who travels to Havenfall each summer, seeking solace from her turbulent world. However, this summer, her peaceful refuge is shattered when a murder takes place and her friend stands accused. Maddie realises that beneath the sparkles and conviviality of Havenfall, dangerous waters run still and deep.

The standout feature of this novel is the skill with which Holland paints her imaginary worlds. They sparkle and glimmer but retain a less than ethereal sense of menace. Fans of fantasy will revel in her flights of fancy and lavish detail of costumes, appearances and customs. This sense of spectacle is skilfully combined with a deep empathy for young people and the complexities of human relationships. Despite the supernatural element of the novel, it is grounded in a humanity that gives it familiarity and appeal.

Readers could race through this novel as a page turning thriller; or pause to savour its twinkling constellations of description. A powerful novel that hints at a sequel – will we be obliged?

**Laura Myatt**

## **The Infinite**

Patience Agbabi, pub. Canongate Books

If you could visit any time, where would you go?

Leaplings - children born on the 29th February – are incredibly rare. Leaplings with the ability to leap through time are rarer still. Elle Bibi-Imbelé Ifié has *The Gift*. On her 12th birthday, Elle and her best friend Big Ben embark on a school trip with a difference. Together, they travel from February 2020 to the Time Squad Centre in February 2048. It should be the trip of a lifetime but all is not as it seems. Leaplings are going missing through time and a mysterious text message is playing on Elle's mind. Can Elle save the world as she knows it before it's too late?

A mind-boggling plot and cast of vivid characters make this novel an absolute winner. Elle is such a fun, well-drawn character, she jumps, or rather runs straight off the page. It's fantastic to read a novel featuring an autistic protagonist. Neurodiverse kids are woefully underrepresented in literature so this feels like a really important leap forward. I very much hope it's a sign of things to come.

Agbabi is author of four collections of award-winning poetry collections. This terrific, time-travelling adventure is her first children's book and the first in the *Leap Cycle* series.

**Abby Mellor**

## **Infinity Son**

Adam Silvera, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Brighton and Emil are eighteen-year-old non-identical twins. They live in a fantasy world inhabited by Spellwalkers (they use magic to fight crime) and Bloodcasters (they derive powers from the lives of their victims), as well as other people with no powers. A ceaseless war has been waged between these two groups.

Brighton is the more outgoing of the twins. He has a YouTube channel and likes getting into dangerous filming opportunities. Emil is quieter. He works at a museum and has a burning ambition to care for magical creatures. The novel poses the question whether either twin will acquire powers. If so, how will those powers be mobilised in the war? Under the pressure of wartime, what other truths will the twins uncover about themselves and the world they inhabit?

The relationship between the brothers is strong and is skilfully depicted in the book. The reader feels that the affinity between the two can be felt and appreciated. The other major strength of this book is its labyrinthine narrative structure. There are countless twists and turns which no reader could possibly anticipate. The book probably has cinematic potential. Brighton and Emil love just the kind of superhero movie that Silvera's book could become.

## **Rebecca Butler**

### **Jane Eyre**

Charlotte Brontë. A retelling by Tanya Landman, pub. Barrington Stoke

Our heroine, Jane Eyre, is an orphan. Brought up by her cold-hearted, unsympathetic Aunt, she is eventually banished to a cold, harsh boarding school, poorly fed, haunted by illness and death. Jane however does well and after eight years takes a job at Thornfield Hall, teaching Adèle, a small French girl and ward of Mr Rochester. Time at Thornfield Hall will be some of her happiest, but also the most heart-breaking as Jane refuses to settle for anything less than what she deserves.

Tanya Landman's retelling masterfully distills Charlotte Brontë's classic into a number of easy to read chapters, three or four pages long. In so few words and with accessible language, Tanya Landman brilliantly narrates the main turning points of the story, making it a flowing, engaging read that builds up the tension of the dark mystery surrounding the attic at Thornfield Hall.

Moreover, Tanya Landman's retelling wonderfully captures the two goliath and seemingly irreconcilable characters of Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester. Despite the unfortunate conditions of Jane's life and society's attitudes towards women, Jane maintains her dignity and moral compass, doing what is right. Mr Rochester, a dark brooding presence, seems to delight in deliberately tormenting Jane, hiding deeper secrets and turmoil of emotions. It is however Jane who shows great strength in forgiving the unforgivable, and refusing to compromise in pursuing a loving life that resolves an impossible impasse.

*Jane Eyre* is part of the English cannon and a book I read (reluctantly) as part of my education, but a book I have subsequently enjoyed reading for pleasure. Tanya Landman's retelling does a great service to Charlotte Brontë's original story, retaining the integrity of the story and the characters in a greatly reduced text. It is a great read for those new to Charlotte Brontë's classic as well as those for whom reading can be challenging.

## **Simon Barrett**

## **Lalani of the Distant Sea**

Erin Entrada Kelly, illus. Lian Cho, pub. Piccadilly Press

A very different fantasy novel, and one justly likely to gain the author several more awards to add to her already impressive CV. Erin Entrada Kelly is mestiza – mixed race – and it is her Filipina heritage which she has drawn on to create her fifth novel and first fantasy.

Lalani is a twelve-year-old girl who lives on a small island. It has its own distinctive inhabitants, with its own way of life, heritage and beliefs, as do the other islands in the seas which surround it. Everyone on Lalani's island, Sanlagita, knows that across the Veiled Sea lies Isa, an island filled with plenty, unlike their own parched lands, where crops fail and animals are dying for lack of food. No man has ever returned from his voyage to Isa, and no woman is allowed to try. Faced with a sick mother and cruel and vindictive stepfather and stepbrother, Lalani's attempt to help her island instead results in unstoppable, torrential rain. When she is punished and shunned by the islanders she is determined to sail to Isa to find a solution.

The Philippines consists of more than seven and a half thousand islands, and its folklore is rich in tales of the mysterious, fantastic creatures which inhabit the islands and the sea. It is this which Kelly has drawn upon to create her bildungsroman, populating her novel with an abundance of moving mountains, talking trees, horned humans, terrifying land and sea life, and one or two strange but benevolent animals. Interspersed with the story itself are short tales, beautifully illustrated (as is the whole book), concerning some of these different forms of life, inviting the reader to imagine themselves as each.

Lalani is a brave, spirited and determined heroine, determined to thwart the misogynistic culture of Sanlagita, and to improve life for her community. Her endeavours reveal her own shortcomings, and those of others, and the narrative reveals that the ability to overcome these is the true path towards adulthood.

Kelly's website includes teaching suggestions, and explains the Filipina mythology, and the creatures which she has reimagined for her novel.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Loveboat Taipei**

Abigail Hing Wen, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

The story of Ever Wong, an eighteen-year-old Asian American girl, torn between rebelling against her parents and her family loyalty. When she is sent to an expensive summer school in Taiwan she seizes her opportunity to shake off the shackles of all the rules her parents have imposed on her in their

ambition for her to become a doctor and she embraces the freedom supplied by the limited supervision environment to make her own rules. This includes staying out late, wearing clothes they would not approve of, drinking alcohol, pursuing her love of dancing and choreography and maybe the greatest sin of them all - having a boyfriend.

But breaking all her parents' rules does not prove to be as freeing as she originally believed. Not only does she have to fight the guilt of knowing her mother sold her antique pearl necklace, which was a family heirloom, so they could afford for her flight to go, she also has to deal with her feelings of finally meeting the boy prodigy who her parents have been comparing her to her whole life. A boy she thought she disliked because she could never live up to the expectations.

This is a beautifully written romance coming-of-age story in Ever Wong's voice. We are swept along with her on a voyage of discovering her own identity through the tide of desire and heart-break not only from the various boys she encounters but because of fall-outs with her best friends.

Abigail Hing Wen uses her novel to explore the different Asian cultures and diverse family structures that influence a person's personality and decision making. She also highlights what it is like to be an Asian American immigrant and the unrealistic stereotypes.

Teenagers all over the globe, will be able to identify with Ever's struggle for more freedom, her disappointments, and their first Loveboat summer camp experiences of having their first kiss, breaking up, making-up and even the first real taste of love.

A novel that resonates and makes you think well after the last page has been read.

### **Anita Loughrey**

Anita Loughrey's next books due for release, are a series of four themed picture books exploring the seasons, published by QED. *Rabbit's Spring Gift* and *Frog's Summer Journey* - March 2020. *Squirrels' Autumn Puzzle* and *Fox's Winter Discovery* - September 2020 along with all four in a hardback - *Animal Stories (A Year in Nature)* September 2020. Reviewer's Website: [www.anitaloughrey.com](http://www.anitaloughrey.com)

### **Monstrous Devices**

Damien Love, pub. Rock the Boat

Night has a new terrorising sound ... the click and whirrrrr of a toy mechanical robot.

*Monstrous Devices* propels our hero, Alex into a frightening underworld where humans can animate the inanimate and command them, mainly to kill. Unfortunately, Alex has what they want, an old mechanical robot his grandfather sent him, containing the secret knowledge that will unlock great

power. His only chance is to trust his grandfather as they flee across Europe in a bid to destroy what others desire to misuse.

Nowhere is safe. Danger and treachery are never far behind as Alex and his grandfather is pursued by the Tall Man and his daughter. In Paris Alex barely escapes a daring roof-top dash and a deadly underground encounter. At Fontainebleau he is nearly duped into giving the mechanical robot to the wrong person. It is wrestled off him after a high-speed car chase across country and round hairpin bends that threaten to plunge the car off the mountain. He then flies to Prague to catch up, breaking and entering into a synagogue, ready and waiting for the final showdown.

Central to the action is the dynamic between Alex and his grandfather. His grandfather continues to ask Alex to trust him, although Alex's doubts grow as his grandfather evades questions about his past and specifically the death of Alex's father as well as the fact his grandfather seemingly possesses unnatural powers. There is some brilliant dialogue where his grandfather says so much and yet gives so little away. In addition, Alex begins to develop a dark desire for an unholy power, enjoying the control it gives him over others. It seems that Alex is on the brink of losing his very soul, questioning whether he has inherited this darker-side from his father.

*Monstrous Devices* is a high-velocity perilous mission where the fate of the world is in the balance.

**Simon Barrett**

## **Nothing Ever Happens Here**

Sarah Hagger-Holt, pub. Usborne

It's an unfortunate weakness of writers that, as a breed, they like you to notice that they're writing. They like to be conspicuous. It's regrettable because although many writers have the ability to decently tell a story, they haven't the humility to get their fancy grammar and arcane language out of the way and allow the story to be told in the best way it could be. You're thinking: this review could go one of two ways now. Happily, it's the good way. This is a book that, finding you sat at the kitchen table doing whatever it is you do... (Jigsaws. I like jigsaws) ...pulls out a chair carefully, sits a little tensely, catches your eye politely, and begins to talk. It really does talk. Like a real person. Like someone I already know, but there are these things they've never told me, that they're starting to tell me now.

I like to guess the age of the protagonist as I'm reading. 'You're a Year 8' I thought to myself. I've just started Year 8 Izzy tells me. The words and characterisation's spot-on. This is the conversation of real people overheard from the secrecy of an adjacent table in a café. I'll tell you how good this book is: when I feel any kind of impatience or dissatisfaction with it, it's because I've read and grown used to

too many high-salt, high-sugar, high-fat microwave-meal novels. This book, by contrast, is proper cooking.

Izzy is starting Year 8. She's comfortable. Life makes sense and she's totally on top of it, she rocks. She has a best friend with whom she stands against the world. An older sister gripped in high-teenagerdom. A younger brother to be a secondary mum to. Loving parents. A normal life conquered. But Dad was crying at the start of the summer holiday, and Izzy never found out the reason, and he's seemed distant since, and abruptly Izzy discovers why. Mum and Dad sit the family down and break it to them: Dad's a woman, and she's not going to pretend she's a man any more.

After that, it's all consequences and implications and reactions. There's no need to force the story because there's enough drama to be had with the natural impacts on the (emotional) setting Hagger-Holt has been so careful to prepare. The school production of *Guys and Dolls* gives structure and provides a means to a narrative climax, but it's the intersecting emotional ripples that provide the story.

I feel if I start going into it, I'll remove the fun of reading it, the effect of reading it. I felt with everyone; I was uplifted at the end. I felt every character earned their way towards not necessarily a happy ending, but an ending that is clearly a stopping-off point towards happy. It's sensitively and delicately and confidently done.

Who reads this book? The writing's good and clear enough for Year 4 to pick up without being confused; I think Year 10 could read it without feeling patronised. The way trans identity is dealt with – through a parent – means children with trans parents have a book telling them their family is going to be alright and possibly better. Children who might be transitioning, already or potentially, have the parent as a safe proxy for their experiences, and a book that tells them a more authentic and honest life will still have the love in it that they might fear losing. Generally, any reader with an interest in and love of people will have a warm, involving story to cheer them and to prompt them to cheering.

Absolutely recommended.

**Dmytro Bojaniwskyj**

## **The One That Got Away**

Jan Mark, pub. Roffo Court Press

When Jan Mark died suddenly at the age of 62, she left a hugely impressive body of work. She was one of very few people to win the Carnegie Medal twice (in 1976 for her first book, *Thunder and Lightnings*, and in 1983 for *Handles*); her more than seventy titles include science fiction and fantasy, picture books, illustrated non-fiction, plays, poetry and a travel book about Canada. Fans will all have



their favourites – mine is *Trouble Half-Way* - and for many readers and reviewers, her short stories show a brilliance matching that of the novels.

This book brings together, for the first time, thirty stories, written over a period of thirty years. Some are familiar from the collections *In Black and White* and *Nothing to Be Afraid Of*; others are new to me, with four collected here for the first time. It's a delight to re-encounter Jan Mark's trademark wit, empathy and acute observation. The title story, *The One That Got Away*, is a masterpiece of economy, while several stories include a ghostly element, usually quirky or poignant rather than frightening. Typically, we're invited into a domestic situation, siding with a viewpoint character and attempting to understand or navigate the unreasonableness of peers or adults.

In *Who's a Pretty Boy, Then?* Rachel resists her father's accusations of teaching his budgerigars to talk; but something odd is going on in that aviary. I loved *The Choice is Yours*, in which a hapless schoolgirl scuttles back and forth, caught between the incompatible demands of two imperious teachers. *Nule* has a marvellous ending in which Martin is trapped in a dilemma of his own making, arising from fear - real or imagined? - of a dressed-up newel post that seems to have taken on an unsettling personality.

In all Jan Mark's writing, you'd struggle to find a cliché. Instead there's a wealth of sharp observation and fancy: Libby in *Nule* imagines a bath with clawed feet "galloping out of the bathroom and tobogganing downstairs on its stomach, like a great white walrus plunging into the sea." In *The Choice is Yours*, we meet the teachers in whose battle of wills Brenda will soon be caught: "In the Music Room Miss Helen Francis sat at the piano, head bent over the keyboard as her fingers titupped from note to note, and swaying back and forth like a snake charming itself. At the top of the Changing Room steps Miss Marion Taylor stood, sportively poised with one hand on the doorknob and a whistle dangling on a string from the other, quivering with eagerness to be out on the field and inhaling fresh air. They could see each other. Brenda, standing in the doorway of the Music Room, could see them both."

Jan Mark is quoted on the back cover: "I write about children, but I don't mind who reads the books." I hope this new publication will bring renewed pleasure to her admirers, while bringing her work to a fresh generation. Although names like Brenda, Gordon and Anthea and numerous domestic details inevitably date the stories, the vigour of the writing is as fresh and appealing as ever.

### **Linda Newbery**

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

### **Queen of Coin and Whispers**

Helen Corcoran, pub. O'Brien Press

Helen Corcoran has herself written perhaps the best overview of her YA fantasy:

‘Queen of Coin and Whispers is about Lia, a newly crowned, idealistic queen, and Xania, her (female) spymaster, who takes the job to uncover her father’s murderer. When they fall for each other, their feelings collide with their expected paths in life: duty and vengeance. It might be your cup of tea if you like: f/f (both are lesbians; Xania is also demi); a queen who’s grown up wanting to rule; a girl who likes numbers (and revenge); flirting through books; kind step-parents, strong family and sibling relationships; politics; queer friendships; predominately female cast. It may also be your cup of tea if you enjoyed the queer relationships in *The Priory of the Orange Tree* and *Of Fire and Stars*, and liked the political intrigue aspect of *The Winner’s Curse* trilogy... I want to add general content warnings—as this book revolves around political intrigue, there is: an offscreen suicide; murder; emotional torture’.

For once this is a stand-alone YA novel, not a duo/trilogy, although Corcoran admits she would continue Lia and Xania’s story if publishers asked. It’s nearly 450 pages long, and involves a substantial amount of political, and particularly, financial detail, as Xania’s job is in the kingdom’s Treasury (headed by Coin), while her undercover work is as the Master of the spy network - Whispers.

Lia and Xania are engaging characters, and their feelings for each other, and eventual romance ring true. They both rely heavily on Matthias, Lia’s secretary and closest confidant, and Xania’s trusted ally throughout. Corcoran sets her stage in great detail, and creates several kingdoms whose policies, societal conventions and expectations reflect many facets of twenty-first-century cultures. Edara, the country of which Lia becomes Queen, has a rigid class system but within that promotes men and women equally to high office. Here same-sex marriage is common and entirely approved, while other countries discriminate by misogyny, racism and homophobia. All however seem to operate via torture and assassination.

In her debut novel Corcoran engages readers and celebrates women, equality and love.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Run, Rebel**

Manjeet Mann, pub. Penguin Random House Children’s Books

*Run, Rebel* is a lengthy – 478-page - YA novel written entirely in free verse. It is based partly on autobiographical material and is Manjeet Mann’s first novel. The themes are race-related, but also universal particularly to adolescents.

Amber Rai has a crush on David, who is seeing too much of Tara, Amber’s friend and Year 7 classmate. As the story progresses, we see Amber’s home life in all its oppressive Asian complexity.

Not only is her autocratic, illiterate father a bully to his wife and daughter, but he is an alcoholic. Home life is conducted on eggshells. Initially, Amber conceals this burden from her teachers and friends, but as her passion and success as a runner develop, it is inevitable that her father's traditional expectations of Amber will clash with her developing sense of entitlement and simple joy at running.

Amber teaches her mother to read, practising each evening in secret while her father is out getting drunk. Her mother's modest literary success coincides with Amber's growing confidence. But Amber is not without fault. She bullies another girl in school and has to learn what led her to behave in a way she finds so abhorrent in her father.

A free verse novel raises questions of accessibility beyond those of a prose narrative. The verse is very free, occasionally concrete and varied in patterning which may attract or repel YA readers. Each page has a short heading. As Manjeet Mann notes about her choice of free verse, in the author's Q and A included at the end of the book, "It was easier to ... [get] ...straight to the heart of the issue and saying more with very little." Some pages are a few words, but others repeat a key emotional outburst in text of increasing size. Certainly, Amber's inner life of reflection, reactions and emotions are made tangible and involving.

Structurally, there is some clever linking of Amber's predicament and options with the five-phase process which her history teacher explains is common to most revolutions.

If I have one regret, it is that one or two male protagonists are not more rounded and positive. We sympathise with Amber's predicament, but I suspect not only female teens run Amber's rocky road.

## **Trevor Arrowsmith**

### **Sofa Surfer**

Malcom Duffy, pub. Zephyr

If in doubt, turn to the canine world: Tyler and his dog Dexter spend many long, amusing walks together, which offer a chance for Tyler to think over and untangle the many problems multiplying in his life. Tyler's voice is witty and direct, giving an unfiltered and humorous internal dialogue full of sarcasm and sensitivity. He needs a way to spend his summer, with parents working, no holiday planned and a struggle to find friends and cope with feeling alone in a new town. When he meets a girl, Spider, at the lido, it is a connection that will bring more unexpected developments than he can anticipate. Her own family life was traumatic, and it takes time for Tyler to begin to understand her present situation when she chooses to tell him she no longer has a home.

Duffy's story is valuable for the space it gives to Spider's determination and personality, and for the way emphasises the effect of Spider's experiences on her mental health. A focus on panic attacks and

their causes and forms is crucial for beginning to chip away at stigma and is particularly effective paired with a very stigmatising antagonist. Duffy also considers Tyler's helplessness, unsure how to support Spider. This extends to consideration of the generational gap that shapes how prejudiced individuals are towards those living in poverty as a result of poorly functioning support systems. So too does Duffy note the snares of constant consumerism, where families are under pressure to be continually bettering themselves and their homes.

The novel observes the tension underlying family dynamics in a satisfying way, examining when parents prompt anger and frustration and refuse to support your individual choices. With Tyler's voice the story becomes a quick read, staying humorous in places even as events escalate. They are characters easy to care for, and you'll be keen to see how their paths continue to cross and uncross...

## **Jemima Breeds**

### **Thorn**

Intisar Khanani, pub. Hot Key Books

As is the fate of so many princesses and noble born women, Alyrra is about to be betrothed to a man she has never met, to secure an alliance with the more powerful neighbour to her family's smaller, vulnerable kingdom. In many ways, she views this as an escape, from a critical mother and an abusive brother, although she will miss her friends among the servants. The king, but not the prince she is to marry, visit to discuss the terms and arrangement and indeed to observe Alyrra herself. Becoming aware of her brother's attacks, the king suggests she travels early to her new home, leaving a bodyguard to ensure her safety when he leaves.

Alyrra, although young, has a well-developed sense of justice and had exposed the theft of jewellery, blamed on a servant, by Valka, daughter of a lord, who had hoped to marry her brother. The resulting scandal destroyed any chance of this and Valka's reputation. To make amends, she is to accompany Alyrra to her new home in Menai, where the new princess can perhaps arrange a suitable marriage for her. But the ruling family has a ruthless enemy, seeking revenge for past tragedy, and Alyrra is forced into an impossible situation, which will lead to the death of the prince. An act of betrayal by Valka results in the girls switching bodies, with everyone in their retinue unaware. Whilst Valka glories in her new found power at court, planning a sumptuous wedding, Alyrra accepts a position as a goose girl and a life of hard work, giving her the opportunity to try and work out how she can overcome the magic spell and prevent harm coming to the prince or herself.

This spellbinding fantasy is a richly imagined version of the Grimm fairy tale, *The Goose Girl*. In a world full of intrigue, deception and danger, Alyrra's honesty and courage is at the heart of the story, as she discovers that power comes from within, if she can learn to trust herself. This is no vapid, stereotypical princess but one who can be a true role model for her teenage readers.

## **Jayne Gould**

### **Unpregnant**

Jenni Hendricks and Ted Caplan, pub. Chicken House

Veronica (or Ronnie) has the perfect life – great girl friends, the most desired boyfriend, offer to Brown University for the autumn and likely choice for class valedictorian. What could possibly go wrong?

Poor Ronnie has been duped by her perfect boyfriend and suddenly finds herself pregnant. Ronnie seems so certain about her choices but cannot imagine confiding in her best friends or family and shattering the image that they all have of her as the perfect student that never ever makes mistakes. The truth would destroy their reality and quite probably all of her hard work to date. Faced with the need to do something immediately, Ronnie embarks upon an incredible journey of self-discovery, encounters with crazed religious fundamentalists and renewal of an old friendship. Ronnie uses the excuse of an exam cram weekend to travel over nine hundred miles to the nearest abortion clinic with the last person she ever thought to share such an experience with – her ex-best friend Bailey, the goth that everyone steers clear of at high school.

The personalities of Ronnie and Bailey couldn't be more different and life experiences in the intervening time have shaped their paths but this shared journey makes them both realise what is important in life.

The story is told in a very humorous and captivating way. Ronnie and Bailey definitely feel empowered to make their own decisions and shape their destiny. Heartfelt story about growing up that every young woman should read.

## **Sheri Sticpewich**

### **What Kind of Girl**

Alyssa Sheinmel, pub. Atom Books

Before I started reading *What Kind of Girl*, I was intrigued by the blurb. Was this a mystery book? Problem solving tale? A coming of age story? Well it turns out that it is so much more than that. *What Kind of Girl* explores the relationships between romantic partners and assumptions that can be made (by both those in the relationship and from an outside perspective).

When the main character, Maya, comes to school with a black eye and reports to the head teacher that her boyfriend has hit her, the repercussions effect everyone. The characters feel so real and the reader is drawn into their world – all of the painful, messy, overthinking and heart-breaking parts of life. Maya's best friend is fighting a secret battle, her shame, and the shame felt by others resonates through the book. This includes the shaming of other characters. Identity is also a big part of the characters' journey. Learning to have courage and admit to their faults, which is often tough.

The book is structured by dates and the label given to that character at the time (i.e. 'The Popular Girl', 'The Girlfriend', 'The Burnout'. I enjoyed the 2 points of view, especially events on the same day but from 2 perspectives. This would be a good class exercise, looking at an event from 2 differing points of view, how would each character perceive what had happened.

I would recommend this book for 14+ and for both sexes. It deals with domestic violence and abuse in a way that Young Adults would identify and understand (i.e. by depicting unhealthy relationships and controlling behaviour). *What Kind of Girl* could be used to debate the wider issue of a healthy and loving relationship alongside what is and is not acceptable. Other issues dealt with are: self-harm, sexuality, friendship, self-esteem, school life, judgement of others and of the self.

## **Sophie Castle**

### **What Momma Left Me**

Renée Watson, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

An excellent, unusual, deeply thoughtful bildungsroman. Thirteen-year-old Serenity is heartbroken – her adored mother is dead, her father has disappeared, and she and her brother are starting over by moving in with her grandparents.

At first things seem good: a friend who makes her feel connected, and a boy who makes her feel seen. But when her brother seems to be going down the wrong path, the old fears set in. Can she come to terms with the past she has been keeping secret, and find the serenity she is named for?

First published in the US ten years ago, and three years after that in the UK, Bloomsbury decided to reprint Renee Watson's middle-grade/YA novel again in 2020, recognising both the quality of the writing, and the important subject matter Watson offers.

Watson is the recipient of the Newbery Honor Award, and also the Coretta King Author Award. She is deeply committed to improving the status of the underrepresented, and her novels are focussed on the experience of young people in the US, young people with ethnic minority backgrounds, young people of colour. The wider issues she raises around adolescence and families are reflected amongst young people throughout western cultures.

Serenity's family is African-American, and her maternal grandparents are deeply religious, and involved with the church, her Grandfather being a pastor. Serenity knows the Bible inside out and has taken its messages as guides to her own life, but as the reality of her mother's murder dawns it increasingly causes her to doubt herself. She cannot forgive her own inaction when her violent father bullied his wife and Serenity's younger brother, and her faith and integrity founder. Watson creates a very believable thirteen-year-old girl coming to terms with an appalling past, but one for whom a strict but deeply loving extended family provide constant support, even when Serenity is rebelling against it. Serenity's poetry homework assignment prefaces each chapter, expressing in a very few words how she feels her life, and her relationship to God is going, and these short pieces sum up her changing mental health powerfully.

Unmissable...

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Wink**

Rob Harrell, pub. Hot Key Books

*Wink* unashamedly reflects Rob Harrell's publishing past and his personal experience of beating cancer. Living in Texas, he created and drew the internationally syndicated comic strip *Big Top*, as well as the acclaimed graphic novel *Monster on the Hill*. He also writes and draws the long-running daily comic strip *Adam@Home*. So, it is not surprising to find several of the 315 pages devoted to a comic strip conveying the adventures of superhero, Batpig, which picks up themes and thoughts from the life of the main junior high school protagonist, Ross. Add to this mix many incidental pen drawings, a relatively large type face, short sentence dialogue-rich prose and humour, lots of humour and this story should have wide appeal to teens and pre-teens.

It's not all laughs and pranks and wild fantasy, as Ross has cancer of a very public kind. His fantasy world of Batpig and his quips are a defence against self-consciousness and peer unpleasantness. Despite family, friends and teacher support, his repeated visits to the clinic and misdiagnosis take their toll on Ross' self-esteem. His friend Abbey, laconic fellow patient old guy, Jerry and guitar teacher Frank work hard to keep Ross on track. He reluctantly takes up the guitar and makes faltering progress which reflects his general recovery, before transferring more successfully to bass guitar.

The book ends with a rock concert competition which sees our man successfully taking centre stage to school approval. This is a heart-warming, insightful and accessible read built around economically drawn, but always human themes and characters.

## **Trevor Arrowsmith**

## **The Year We Fell From Space**

Amy Sarig King, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

On one level, this American middle grade import by established YA writer Amy Sarig King, is a straightforward story – twelve-year-old Liberty muddles through the year after her parents' divorce while grappling with a change of school, friendship/bullying issues and fears about her own mental health – but its crisp lyricism and psychological depth make it a hugely satisfying read. Liberty's obsession with the stars and constellations provide a rich vein of metaphor. Drawing star maps has always been her way of making sense of the world – her ambition is to 'change the way human beings look at the night sky' – but since the divorce she hasn't been able to do it, any more than she can make sense of what is happening in her own life. When she finds a fallen meteorite, the rock becomes a repository for her secrets and fears.

Liberty is an endearing narrator: articulate and bright, she nonetheless struggles both socially and within her family, where she feels the weight of her father's depression, her mother's sadness and her little sister's constant tears. She is terrified that her own sadness and anger – at one point she throws a toaster out of the window – mean she has inherited her father's clinical depression. The novel is fresh and frank in how it deals with mental health: by the end of the book, Liberty feels better – I don't think that's a massive spoiler – but there are no facile solutions: she understands depression better but there are no guarantees that she won't struggle in the future.

One of the things I most enjoyed – apart from the prose style which impressed me with its clarity and elegance – was the nuanced and convincing characterisation. The separated parents are as interesting as the younger characters; I especially loved Liberty's outdoors-loving mother, who knows what to do with a bowie knife and has raised her girls as good feminists, but who can't protect them – or herself – from the damage caused by a weaker father. But he, too, is subtly and humanely drawn, as is his girlfriend, who Liberty wants to hate but can't.

I wish there had been novels like this back when I was nine and my parents split up. It's honest, thoughtful and really well-written. And lest I've made it sound terribly worthy, I should add that it's also very smart and funny.

### **Sheena Wilkinson**

Sheena Wilkinson's novel *Hope Against Hope* published by Little Island is available now.

## **Yes, No, Maybe So**

Becky Albertalli and Aisha Saeed, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Jamie is a volunteer for his local state candidate and he's fine with that as long as he's not out front and can work behind the scenes. He has an absolute horror of things like knocking on doors or



canvassing so that's out of the question and he just wants to stay out of the limelight, but the campaign manager has other plans.

Maya's Ramadan has become a personal nightmare. The summer trip she was looking forward to has been ditched thanks to the separation of her parents and now everyone is trying to fix her, apart from her best friend who is working three jobs and is too busy to hang out. Now Maya's mum has decided that what she really needs to do is keep busy, and political canvassing is just the thing. Apparently with this awkward boy she hardly knows.

Maya and Jamie are thrown together in the midst of a political campaign and, once they get over the awkwardness, maybe it's not the most terrible thing that's happened to either of them. Both of them are unhappy going door to door, but as a first step into local activism it certainly makes them challenge their personal perceptions and expectations. Canvassing in the blistering heat of an Atlanta summer is not exactly the best way to get to know someone who you haven't seen properly since you were both little kids, but it turns out that there are worse ways to spend a summer.

Then national and local politics start to feel deeply personal when a proposed bill demands a "partial ban on head and facial coverings" for anyone doing public duties. Maya and Jamie are now placed right at the heart of a world seething with micro aggressions, direct racism and intolerance, and local activism comes sharply into focus.

Albertalli and Saeed teamed up to write this story after their own experiences with local activism while campaigning for a U.S House seat in the wake of Trump's election. The campaign and activism details are elegantly handled and never feel preachy or heavy handed. They provide a solid and realistic backdrop to what is a gentle romance built on a foundation of resistance and activism. This is a very current book, but it doesn't feel as if writing this is a mercenary move, rather that it simply feels current and fresh. It is a book trying to heal the wounds of the 21st century, but not in a way that feels like that's all it has to say. It is ultimately a book with a very positive and uplifting feeling, and I was left with a smile and hope for the next generation.

A very enjoyable read telling Maya and Jamie's stories in alternating chapters, all of which are punchy and lively. A great read for all YA readers and one that will generate lots of discussion and will be subtly inspiring to many readers. This would make a great movie or play, and I hope Albertalli and Saeed are already writing the screenplay.

**Dawn Finch**

# Non-fiction Book Reviews

## **1 to 20 Animals Aplenty**

Kate Viggers, pub. Laurence King Publishing

Kate Viggers has a very special skill. Not only is she able to write sparsely in words that rhyme and stay in the mind after they have been read but she is lucky enough to be able to illustrate her words with pictures which have made my readers and I smile almost as much, if not more, than we did at the words!

This is a counting book encouraging children to go beyond the traditional 1 to 10 and get all the way to 20 ... can your little ones do it? It's certainly a challenge but it is a very good one and will stretch children in the best possible way. The text is simple and very easy to remember with its gentle rhymes and the illustrations deserving more than one look. We needed more than one look, one to see the animal and then another to double check what we thought we might have seen on first view – some little, very quirky addition. What do I mean? Well we begin with 1 fox in a pair of socks, now when we looked at the picture there was most certainly a fox. But look again and you will quickly see the socks – what a silly fox!

We also loved the way in which the colours used for the important words in the text – perhaps the words we want our young readers to learn – are reflected in the colours of the illustration. Therefore, whilst learning to count children can also learn, and be helped to learn, about colours. Aside from the number 1 fox children can also meet snakes and cakes, ants and pants, frogs, dogs, kangaroos, pigs, cats and more besides – certainly Animals Aplenty!

A charming, clever, funny and educational book that comes highly recommended.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **A is for Avocado**

illus. Carolyn Suzuki, pub. Ladybird Books

With a fruit or vegetable for almost every letter of the alphabet [v is for vegetarian or vegan], this bright and breezy small format hardback provides an introduction to plant power for young children.

The choice of words has been taken from around the world, helping to make familiar some words, fruits and vegetables that the reader may not be aware of and giving an understanding of what people

in other countries and cultures eat. At the same time familiar fruit and vegetables will encourage children to want to know more and maybe even to try!

A simple definition with each letter, fruit or vegetable, gives sometimes quirky facts, which should provoke some discussion and further research. Did you know, for example, that there are over sixty species of mushroom which glow in the dark?

No recipes or preparation guidelines are given but this could provoke a shopping expedition and culinary explorations.

An alternative, vibrant alphabet book to inspire healthy eating.

## **Jayne Gould**

### **The Bat Book**

Charlotte Milner, pub. DK Children's Books

This is the third book in the series by award-winning author and illustrator, Charlotte Milner, which highlights some of the important ecological issues facing our planet; the other two books being *The Bee Book* and *The Sea Book*.

Bats are the only mammals that can fly and are part of several ecosystems including rainforests, deserts and savannas; this book will delight anyone interested in bats as it contains a plethora of facts on every page. Readers can discover what is a bat, where they live, the various types of bats, their anatomy, what they eat and how they find food.

They will also learn about the secret world of bats and the important role they play in keeping the world healthy by pollinating plants, dispersing seeds and eating insects that damage crops. We also find out about why they are in decline from various threats, how to help them and what to do to create a bat friendly garden.

The book is in a landscape format with playful drawings and annotated illustrations. Text is presented in small sections with facts broken down into bullet points for easy understanding, all featured on coloured backgrounds. An unusual topic and an excellent addition to the series.

## **Barbara Band**

### **Big Green Crocodile**

Jane Newberry, illus. Carolina Rabei, pub. Otter-Barry Books

Action rhymes are a great way to bond with and entertain babies and toddlers and are a vital part of childhood, aiding development and language skills. This delightful book ticks all the above boxes. Many new parents may not know some of the more traditional rhymes told to children, it is now understood that these need to be revived if they are to be remembered however there is no harm in introducing new ones for a new generation and that is just what *Big Green Crocodile* does and does well.

Written by experienced playgroup leader Jane Newberry, the book features sixteen new, fresh and exciting rhymes. There are jungle creatures, farm animals, buzzy bees, big green crocodiles and more to encourage interaction and lots of giggles.

The rhymes are intended to reflect a toddler's day from morning, playtime to being out and about, then on to bath and bedtime. Clear instructions for parents or carers are given for each rhyme. The accompanying illustrations are cheerful, friendly and full of detail to give an added dimension to the book.

The perfect present for a new baby (and maybe the parents too).

**Jayne Gould**

## **Darwin's Rival. Alfred Russell Wallace and the Search for Evolution**

Christine Dorion, illus. Harry Tennant, pub. Walker Studio

January 1823. Alfred Russell Wallace was born in an English village that is now a part of Wales, born into a time of great change amidst the industrial revolution, discovery and invention. Maybe fate played a part in what he was to become but his early life was one that was sheltered from the enormous change taking place around him instead his was a childhood spent exploring the countryside. His family were fortunate – they had books to read and they were able to attend school but at the age of 14 he had to leave and get work to help the family survive. By 1837 Alfred was working with his brother to learn a trade as a surveyor and this work saw them travelling the country. During this time he developed his interests in nature. And so his story develops and as we read we learn more about William, his inspirations and his travels.

With a relatively full text this is most certainly a book for the teenage reader who can cope with the amount of material yet at the same time text boxes, annotated pictures and other added elements allow access to younger, interested readers. The facts are numerous, the story biographical and informative, the illustration stylish and grown-up, almost water colour painting in its style.

This is a book that teaches, fascinates and draws in the reader. It is likely that few will know that Darwin's rival was so significant, many may not even know who he was. For naturalists, scientists, historians this book paints a vivid picture and is simply fascinating. We see pictures of the discoveries Alfred Wallace Russell made. We see the places he travelled to. We understand the discoveries he made. Hopefully this book will help more of us to understand how significant Wallace is and was. Hopefully this book will inspire further study, research and even some budding naturalists.

Truly stunning.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Discovering Energy**

Johannes Hirn and Veronica Sanz, illus. Eduard Altarriba, pub. Button Books

A rather delightful book that introduces the different ways of creating, measuring, harnessing and transforming energy. Authors, Hirn and Sanz, are well-qualified in the arenas of physics and engineering, and the graphic-design background of award-winning illustrator, Altarriba, is obvious in the layout and format of the pages.

The book looks at the historical aspects of energy through to current means of generating and using it. A clear contents page allows easy identification of topics which range from what is energy and different types of energy as well as covering environmental aspects such as pollution. There are sections on fossil fuels, electricity, water and wind power, thermal energy, solar energy and nuclear fusion. It also explores the practical use of energy via windmills, steam engines, water wheels, batteries, dams, engines and grids covering both past methods as well as more contemporary applications and future possibilities.

Descriptions and explanations are simple and concise. Small blocks of text using different fonts for interest are broken up with annotated pictures, dynamic illustrations and cut-away diagrams in a muted colour palette.

This is an excellent book for both introducing the subject as well as allowing those interested to explore it further. An index would have been useful, but the comprehensive contents page makes the information easily accessible.

**Barbara Band**

## **Empire's End – A Roman Story**

Leila Rasheed, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Camilla, a young North African girl, travels with her mother and father from Leptis Magna in Libya to Rome. She is excited about this move away from home. She is moving from Rome, the centre of the Empire to a town further away, still significant but not as important. Things are about to change again when the family are then sent on a danger-filled journey to Britannia. The move is now to the outer edges of the Empire, so that her father, a doctor, can be an aide to Septimus Severus, originally from Libya, and his powerful, influential, Syrian wife, Julia Domna.

Tragedy strikes on the way and Camilla finds herself separated from her family, having to navigate life in Roman Britain in a world full of secrets and intrigue. Set in 207AD, this is a gripping and fast-paced adventure story with a theme of slavery and woven with historical facts.

*Empire's End* is book 4 in the *Voices* series, a series of fictional non-fiction books which are based on real life stories about authentic unsung heroes and showcase the range of people that have populated the UK throughout time.

The characters are diverse and the author's childhood, spent growing up in Libya, brings a realistic feel to the details.

## **Barbara Band**

### **Everybody has a Body**

Jon Burgerman, pub. Oxford Children's Books

My daughter would like to magic away some of her 5' 11" inches, I (still) occasionally yearn for longer legs. Why do we inflict this anxiety on ourselves? We are not alone. And yet, the message should be so simple. We are all made differently and if our bodies work we should be thankful, enjoy them and treat them well.

*Everybody has a Body* is a valuable introduction to the topic of body positivity for young children. (Ages 2-6) Young children do notice the differences between individuals but are not generally judgemental. This age of innocent acceptance does not last for long; by age eight many children will believe that their bodies are inadequate in some way and for a few this will lead to tragic consequences.

I read this book aloud to children in Reception and Year 1 classes and it went down a storm. Wisely, the author uses non-human, genderless 'monsters' to teach us that we are all different and these differences make us individual and beautiful. The children loved the humour provided by this 'Mr Men' approach and exploring the logical endpoints of the author's caricatures. Some of the vocabulary was new to Reception children: 'weak' 'narrow' 'tough'. This was a useful reminder that many basic

words are best introduced through the simple rhyming text the author uses. Covert messages that girls can be muscular, and that being in a wheelchair doesn't preclude arm strength were seized upon by Year 1s. Other lively discussions were prompted by the illustrations - we decided that sport is available to everybody no matter what their size or shape.

I was very impressed with how readily the children accepted the author's message until one little girl wished sadly that she had a tail. She wanted to be a mermaid. You can't win 'em all!

**Katherine Wilson**

## **Fearless: How to be Your True, Confident Self**

Liam Hackett, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

*Fearless* is a practical handbook aimed at helping young people gain the confidence to be themselves. The book is written by Liam Hackett founder and Chief Executive Officer of the global youth charity Ditch the Label. This is a digital charity, widely respected for its work on anti-bullying and support of young people aged 12-25 years old across the UK, USA and Mexico.

*Fearless* addresses seven fears affecting young people today, which are the titles for each chapter. The seven fears and chapters are: 'Fear of being yourself', 'Fear of being judged', 'Fear of not fitting in', 'Fear of your emotions', 'Fear of expressing yourself', 'Fear of being a failure' and 'Fear of not being good enough'.

Each chapter begins with exercises encouraging the reader to reflect upon who they are and what society expects. These social prejudices and stereotypes, that Liam Hackett refers to as 'labels' and 'invisible boxes' can be helpful, but he also notes can be harmful if they constrain us from being who we want to be and stop us from doing what we want to do. Such labels and invisible boxes are significantly gendered, something he examines throughout the book. Chapters continue with an informed explanation of each fear, drawing upon insights from psychology, biological understanding of how our bodies react as well as historical social change. Finally, there is plenty of good advice and practical strategies to tackle this fear, such as a succinct 'Top Ten Tips' section.

The strength of *Fearless* however is its inclusion of real people's real-life experiences of these fears. There is an 'Ask Liam' section in which Liam addresses the concern of a young person. In the introduction and throughout the book, Liam Hackett refers to his experience of being bullied and which eventually inspired him to found Ditch the Label. There are also life stories from Sam Renke (actress and disability activist), Adam Pearson (disability rights campaigner, actor and presenter), Genny Tura (head of support at Ditch the Label), Jacob Blyth (professional footballer), Jake Graf (transgender writer, actor and director), Vicki Shotbolt (founder of website, Parent Zone), and

Michelle Elman (body confidence coach) as well as a host of others. Perhaps, most importantly, they have all survived and are successful!

*Fearless* presents in a lively, engaging format three key messages for me.

- (1) Don't be boxed in by society.
- (2) You are not alone: there are many like-minded people.
- (3) You and society can change.

In the language of this book, young people's fears are 'smashed' to live a 'fearless' life.

## **Simon Barrett**

### **Flower Power: The Magic of Nature's Healers**

illus. Olaf Hajek, text by Christine Paxmann, pub. Prestel

Olaf Hajek is an acclaimed artist whose illustrations have featured in such publications as, *The Financial Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *Rolling Stone*. *Flower Power: The Magic of Nature's Healers* is his first venture into children's books, a collaboration with writer Christine Paxmann who provides the accompanying text.

It is a sumptuous book. The colours are vibrant; the imagery so vivid, whimsical, and layered you feel you are being transported into a fantastical adventure set within a magical world. There are a total of seventeen botanical illustrations of flowers and plants. Each one is accompanied by its own unique story, revealing cultural and medicinal facts in an engaging and enthusiastic voice. Did you know that if you see a red poppy nestling in a field of crops, it's a good indication that the farmer has limited their use of insecticides? Or that the artichoke is used in the treatment of heart disease, high cholesterol and digestive problems? And the dandelion's nickname of wet-a-bed came from its use to treat urinary problems? But there are also interesting tales on how these plants were woven into mythology.

The book is large in format (27cm by 35.5cm), set in double-page spreads. It gives the illustrations a grandeur, perfectly showcasing their lively flamboyance. Hajek's style is very much inspired by his love of the Renaissance, fairy tales and folk art, and these motifs feature heavily. His decision to paint the plants as if on wooden panels (as explained in the endnotes) is to deliberately give each page the feeling of an old painting. It does more than that, it lends the book the mystery of an old treasure.

This is a beautiful gift, perfect for browsing and returning to time and time again. Suitable for ages 7 to 12.

## **Matilde Sazio**



## **Get Ahead in Physics**

Tom Whipple, illus. James Davies, pub. Walker Books

'Ughhhhh! Physics!' is an all too frequent moan in my house as my daughter builds up to her GCSE exam. This book is aimed at all those children who share my daughter's grudge; it aims to delight and educate in roughly equal measure. Sensibly, the author does not pretend that this book is a substitute for the hard work of learning equations or getting to grips with speed/time graphs. (It isn't). Instead he hopes that his breezy overview will demystify and consolidate the basics and just possibly inspire a greater interest in the subject. (It might.)

There is just one problem: few disenchanted 15/16-year-olds would make the effort to read it. It's a shame because this book is well written, accessible and illustrated with mostly funny cartoons. I particularly liked the chapters on the 'Theory of Matter' and 'Energy'. The historical stories do indeed entertain and lighten the learning load but the diagrams, however, are sometimes inadequate - too old school textbook. I would have sent the reader off to a YouTube animation to learn the differences between transverse and longitudinal waves and how an electric motor works.

There is a mistake/misprint too on page 69 where gamma radiation is referred to as an 'electromagnetic proton'. Surely the author means 'photon'? In any case, I would have preferred the term 'gamma ray/ wave'. It ties in with the terminology used for other topics in the book.

I would give this book to a bright, curious younger child (11-13) to whet their appetite for the subject. A fourteen-year-old exhibiting early signs of physics phobia could be bribed to read it. Lastly, any parent who needs to nurse a reluctant teenager through the GCSE process, would find it invaluable - an excellent refresher course. GCSE physics - bring it on!

**Katherine Wilson**

## **Hoot and Howl Across the Desert**

Vassilili Tzomaka, pub. Thames & Hudson

*Hoot and Howl* investigates fifteen deserts across the world exploring a range of animals and plants, looking at how they adapt and survive in the harshest of environments. Many assume that deserts are hot dry places with lots of sand but the definition of a desert is that it has less than 250mm of rain a year, and I was surprised to learn that they cover almost a third of the Earth's surface!

Readers are taken from the freezing lands of the Arctic and Antarctic, through the Sonoran and Mojave deserts of North America, the Atacama and Patagonian deserts of South America, visit the Gobi in Asia, the Arabian and Thar deserts, not forgetting the Sahara, Namib and Kalahari in Africa

plus numerous deserts in Australia. All these are identified on a world map and each desert features on a double-page spread.

Information is delivered in bite-sized chunks and there are also pages devoted to particular aspects of desert life such as nocturnal animals, an oasis, the creation of sand dunes and venomous animals. The highlight of this book, though, is the stunning illustrations. The front cover gives a hint of what's inside with its vibrant vivid colours and these are continued inside with illustrations created using patterns from indigenous cultures around the world giving the whole thing a Naïve folk-art feel.

Absolutely gorgeous – and stunning end papers too!

**Barbara Band**

### **Lift-The-Flap Questions and Answers About Plastic**

Katie Daynes, illus. Marie-Eve Tremblay, pub. Usborne

An extremely topical book from Usborne that provides a simple introduction to the world of plastic – the nine chapters cover what it is, who invented it, how it is made, why and where we use plastic, why it is a problem, various recycling methods, and how we can reduce our use of the material.

This sturdy book is in the familiar lift-the-flap format with over sixty flaps; pages feature bright and interesting illustrations with information presented in the form of quirky questions on flaps with the answers underneath. The illustrations are diverse and inclusive, with female scientists and men shopping.

This is an excellent approach as it entices curiosity and enables readers to attempt answers based on their existing knowledge before checking to see if they are correct. The amount of information the book contains is deceptive – there's a lot! - any reader would gain useful facts and figures about the topic from this book which could be used for general browsing and dipping into or to support individual as well as classroom projects. I discovered that more and more packaging is being made from mushrooms, that there are seven types of plastic, and that most plastic can only be recycled once. Also, unsurprisingly, the world's big drinks and snacks companies produce the most plastic litter.

A great book for young eco-warriors.

**Barbara Band**

## **The Miracle of Hanukkah**

Malachy Doyle, illus. Christopher Corr, pub. Bloomsbury Education

*The Miracle of Hanukkah* is a picture book that explains the origins of the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah.

The story explains that after King Antiochus went to war with the people of Judea and Samaria, he destroyed their temple and insisted the people worship him. The people of Judea bravely fought back and drove the invaders away. However, when they went to relight the altar flame in the Temple they discovered they only had enough oil to keep it burning for a single night. Deciding that one night was better than none, they light it and are amazed when the oil lasts for eight whole days and nights; long enough for them to make more oil.

Since this time and this series of events the Jewish people have celebrated Hanukkah in memory of this. During the festival of Hanukkah, which falls in November or December every year, they light a Menorah candle, share food and music, and exchange gifts.

*The Miracle of Hanukkah* is a simple retelling that introduces young children to Hanukkah. The pictures are bold, vibrant and unpretentious, perfectly illustrating both historical and modern Judaism. They seamlessly accompany the text which highlights many of the traditions associated with the celebration. An excellent book to share with children and one that will add diversity to any school library.

## **Barbara Band**

### **The Missing**

Michael Rosen, pub. Walker Books

Michael Rosen, Children's Laureate from 2007 to 2009, is probably best known for his poetry for children (but just as relevant to adults), and his stories for young readers. Both are usually comic, but frequently have a serious point to put. One or two of his books are factual, and describe real events, and how those events made him feel. *The Sad Book* is an example of that, written after the sudden death of one of his sons. *The Missing* is another, published in January to coincide with remembrance of the Holocaust.

At just over a hundred pages, this small hardback outlines Rosen's lengthy search for information about relatives from his extended family in Europe who went 'missing' during the Second World War. Born in 1946, the year after that war ended, Rosen had grown up on the outskirts of London, regularly visiting his maternal grandparents who lived in Hackney, part of a thriving Jewish community, and his paternal grandmother in east London. From them he discovered that various uncles, aunts and

cousins had been living in Poland and France in the early years of the war but had disappeared by 1945.

Growing up, Rosen heard these tales, and he gradually began to understand what happened to European Jews, and other groups deemed non-Aryan by the Nazis. He became determined to 'find' his missing European family. Aimed at upper KS2 and KS3 readers (for the latter, study of the Holocaust is compulsory in school), Rosen writes in a simple style, clearly explaining the ideology behind Nazism, the processes which led to the removal of Jewishness, and the ultimate fate of millions of 'non-Aryans'.

Rosen draws powerful parallels with, and warns against, current prejudice and discrimination against many. There are photos and poems interspersed, the poetry, in Rosen's typically sparse, carefully constructed style - every word counts for more than at first is apparent. Suggestions for further reading, and a family tree are included in the appendix - well placed there, not as a preface, so as not to distract from the important part of the book - the story of real people.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Respect Consent, Boundaries and Being in Charge of You**

Rachel Brian, pub. Wren & Rook

Wow, what can I say about this little gem! From the first page of the book all the way through to the last it is packed with important information for all ages of children and it is also accessible, easy for them to understand and relate to.

I have four children aged 10, 8, 6 and 2. Sharing this book with them helped me see that it would be a fantastic addition to school classrooms and libraries for ages from reception levels onwards. How would it be used? It would be ideal for teaching children how to understand the difference between right and wrong, how to know when they are doing the right thing, when they need to stop and think and how they interact with others. The flow of the book works extremely well, beginning with the concept of consent and explaining the meaning behind the words we so often hear. It also covers the principle of boundaries, giving and getting consent and respecting other people.

Not only does the text guide its reader so do the animations. They are simply fantastic, easy to follow and making use of the facts to create funny stories that children will relate to. They help to make the book and its message easy to follow with the drawings being relevant to all ages of reader.

I would definitely recommend the book to schools and teachers as well as parents because I think when there is a PSHE lesson or even a story time it presents a great way to bring these important life choices to the children's attention.

**Melissa Blackburn**

## **The Seedling That Didn't Want to Grow**

Britta Teckentrup, pub. Prestel

With the coming of spring the seeds in the ground are ready to sprout, growing tall and straight as they are supposed to. All except for one.

Ladybird and Ant decide to keep watch as the seed waits for the right time. When it does start to grow, all the other plants are blocking out the sunlight, so the seedling starts on a journey, accompanied by its insect friends. Weaving and winding through the undergrowth, the seedling becomes a little plant, with bigger leaves and stronger roots, accompanied by animals and insects. And when she finally reaches the perfect place, a magnificent transformation takes place, until the seasons turn and seeds are scattered far and wide.

This gently lyrical exploration of the life cycle of plants can also be read as a story about growing up and having the courage to find your own path. Paper collage illustrations in naturalistic shades, predominantly greens and browns, glow from the pages, depicting the tangled undergrowth, the luxuriant growth as the seedling finds space and the seasonal changes. An absolutely delightful and heart-warming story of the natural world around us.

**Jayne Gould**

## **Sometimes I Feel**

Sarah Maycock, pub. Big Picture Press

In a world dominated by the destruction of wildlife habitat; where we humans perhaps feel a disconnection between ourselves and the fellow creatures of the Earth, it is so refreshing to find Sarah Maycock's book *Sometimes I feel...*, doing just that. This book relates our human existence and feelings with those of the natural world in a way that can only make us think how close we are to the creatures that we share this earth with.

Each alternate turn of the page introduces us to a human feeling that is linked, via simple similes, to an animal. A rainbow coloured page of birds suggests that you might feel "as happy as a lark" only to find, on the next page, that not all days can be this joyous and that sometimes it might take a while to be able to "join in with the chorus".

It is a book of knowing your limitations, accepting and embracing them and knowing that they are okay to have. It is a book that makes it alright to have a wealth of feelings and emotions that weave us into the people that we are.

The reader can indulge in the magnificent illustrations of Sarah Maycock, whose ink and watercolour pictures capture the mood of each feeling brilliantly and you are completely immersed in the light and shade that our emotions throw upon our lives. And although this is ultimately a picture book, it really is one to live by and the sentiments within the pages are as poignant as those of Pooh and Piglet.

Sarah Maycock said that with each animal she painted she saw a feeling that, at face value, seemed simple, but that there was another side. And in looking closer, she saw empathy and in relating to that feeling, there was self-awareness.

This is a book that can be enjoyed by young and old alike - the pictures are just stunning but these, and the words that compliment them, are sure to make this book a modern classic.

**Claire Webb**

## **Turn and Learn: Weather / Our World**

Isabel Otter, illus. Hannah Tolson, pub. 360 Degrees

This pair of large format sturdy books, with pages made from strong cardboard that will withstand use by younger children, provide simple introductions to the topics of *Our World* and *Weather*.

Both are slightly text heavy making them perhaps more suitable for older children or more-able readers within the recommended age group (ages 2-5) but the concepts are simply explained and the information is presented in bitesize chunks using different sizes of font for added interest so that even the younger children will be able to access the material and have a reasonably good understanding of the information.

Each page has a sliding feature linked to a turning wheel that changes a window within the section. This is a great interactive element encouraging further learning as children experiment with the wheel to see what the changes will be as they turn it. The illustrations are bright, stimulating and cheerful. These are perfect books for dipping into to discover fascinating facts.

*Our World* explores five different habitats: deserts; rainforests; polar regions; savannahs; and the sea. There is a summary of the animals and plants found within each area, and how they have adapted for survival in extreme and harsh conditions.

*Weather* explores five different weather systems and looks at how they work: sun; rain; wind; snow and ice; and thunder and lightning.

**Barbara Band**

## **Tyrannosaurus Rex: A Pop-Up Guide to Anatomy**

Douglas Dixon, illus. Rachel Caldwell, pub. Templar

Douglas Dixon is a Scottish palaeontologist, geologist, educator and author, and an internationally renowned authority on dinosaurs. Of the 200 plus books he has written, most are on the subject of dinosaurs, with many aimed at children. Indeed, his passionate interest in geology and zoology has been credited with attracting many to the study of these prehistoric animals.

Bringing life to Douglas' passion for dinosaurs, are the stunning pen and ink drawings by Rachel Caldwell, a Philadelphia-based painter and illustrator, except in this case, Rachel is the Image Records officer, for we are actually delving into an official report prepared by a team of scientists, who have recently discovered the perfectly preserved body of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. It's a fantastically engaging premise. In the discovery of a lifetime, the reader is invited to attend the autopsy of this mysteriously preserved creature.

Fingers serve as scalpels as they peel back the layers (that is, lift the flaps, which are also added to the multi-layered pop-ups) and interrogate every part of the inner workings of this dinosaur. From the skin, to the musculature, to the digestive tract, to examining its senses and how it reproduced. What do we discover along the way as we take part in this anatomical investigation? That by sawing through the bones of the T-Rex, the cross-section observed under a microscope reveals growth rings, and just like the trunk of a tree, counting the rings reveals its age. That it had binocular vision, 13 times the field of a human. That it was more than just a predator. It tended its young and communicated with others by rubbing noses that were covered in a mass of nerves, making it as sensitive as fingertips.

The story of this remarkable beast is vividly brought to life as the reader is led through the dissection. Pithy observations by Reporting Officer Douglas Dixon, are scribbled next to the Victorian-inspired illustrations. It's a majestic book. Packed with fascinating details, the pop-ups are a feat of skilful engineering: they examine inside the T-Rex's skull and reveal the detailed workings of its digestive system, as first its skin is peeled back, and then its rib cage.

*Tyrannosaurus Rex: A Pop-Up Guide to Anatomy* is an absolute delight to explore. I've taught Year 3s so I know they would find it as compelling as older children. The interactive element in particular gives it a playfulness that makes the learning so captivating.

Highly recommended.

**Matilde Sazio**

## **Warriors, Witches, Women**

Kate Hodges, illus. Harriet Lee-Merrion, pub. White Lion Publishing

Fifty of mythology's fiercest females are featured in this collection which encompasses a wide range of cultures, from Ancient Greece to Asia and Hawaii. The author, fascinated by these stories of powerful, mysterious and exciting women, since childhood, has sought to go back to the original tales, to give the background and show how they changed over time, whilst also explaining why they have been retold again and again. These are characters that resonate through the centuries, embedded in literature, the inspiration for writers of plays, music, comics and films.

The book is divided into four sections, each dealing with a particular attribute. Wise women, healers and soothsayers are covered in Witches, often the most feared and seen as evil, including Hecate, Morgan Le Fay and Baba Yaga. Warriors who are fighters, strategists and bringers of justice feature in tales such as Norse Freyja, African Yennenga and Malayan Pontianak. Women at one with the natural world and creation are covered in Elemental Spirits, from Mari a Basque goddess to Scottish Selkies. The last section details Munificent Spirits, bountiful and generous deities who include Ame-No-Uzume, a Japanese goddess, Brigid, a Celtic goddess and saint and Ma'at, an Egyptian goddess.

Kate Hodges' illustrations are contemporary and stylized, capturing the essence of each woman. With a glossary and suggested further reading list, this elegant book is ideal for dipping into, igniting curiosity and giving teenage girls and adult readers alike a powerful introduction to the females of mythology, role models for today.

**Jayne Gould**

## **Yayoi Kusama Covered Everything in Dots and Wasn't Sorry**

Fausto Gilberti, pub. Phaidon Children's Books

Yayoi Kusama is recognized as one of the great artists of the 20th century, but I am ashamed to say that I knew virtually nothing about her work or life. This book helps to put all of this in perspective.

She was born in 1929 and has thus reached the grand age of 90 years. Although she has lived most of her life in Japan, she did move to New York in 1957 and lived there until 1972; becoming very involved with the pop art scene and hippy lifestyle. Perhaps the most noticeable thing about her work is her use of polka dots on almost everything that she produces. She is still working today and in 2020 is due to complete a permanent installation at the new Crossrail station at Liverpool Street in London.



This book is intended to introduce the very young reader to the artist and there is very limited text. However, what the text we do have is used extremely well, so that we get a real feel for the person. The illustrator has used thick black lines to create the images and the only colour is splashes of bright orange to reflect the bright wigs for which she is famous. Almost every page also reflects on her use of dots and I think this is going to really enthuse young people with the desire to experiment with design and colour.

It is aimed at the lower end of primary years and is quite inspirational in a host of ways.

**Margaret Pemberton**

# Do more with a book

The interactive puzzle book is not new. There are plenty of examples of ‘search-and-find’ or ‘spot-the’ books on the shelves, these have traditionally been aimed at individual readers or small groups of children who will enjoy trying to find a person or object on the pages of the book. Whilst these books are fun and encourage children to learn and discover not only books but facts what I have learnt and discovered is that publishers are creating ever-more exciting ways to engage children in reading and learning. These are not, necessarily, in the traditional style of a book either.

Laurence King Publishing are publishers of books and gifts on the creative arts. Since 1991 they have been appealing to that one thing which we all love, have, but don’t use properly – IMAGINATION. To help us use our imaginations to better effect we may need prompting and this is where the Laurence King offering fits so well. Their creative ideas, their inspiration, is evident in abundance when one searches their website and their catalogue. Look at the names of illustrators, designers, artists and photographers they work with then look at how inventive, beautiful and instructive their publications are.

Pavilion Books is another independent publisher, established in 2014 it now produces an annual list of around 150 books for children a year. These range from activity and sticker books to colouring books, non-fiction and fiction titles, within the 0-8+ range. All are written, illustrated and produced by some of the top names in children’s books and they also work with brands such as the National Trust to reach children in multiple arenas. They have branched out now to begin producing interactive learning materials for children and I was lucky enough to be the recipient of Paul Farrell’s *Build A Castle* box set.

If you need further convincing then the following samples of their work will, I hope, prove just how good they are and how wide their appeal is. The web editor and I have been testing them out on our nieces, nephews and their parents, every game has been a huge success. The games have found their way to my parents’ house where they have been fought over – all the children wanting to take them home! - BUT they have stayed with my parents where they still are, where we add to the collection and where we regularly gather for more gaming fun. So, how do the games hold up physically? Well no one tires of playing as one never knows if they may be the winner; there is constant questioning about the elements of the different games and they remain complete as everyone wants to take care of them so they can play again, and again and again!

## **Alice in Wonderland Story Box**

*Alice in Wonderland Story Box* by Anne Laval provides children and adults alike with the opportunity to use their imaginations, tell and retell a classic story. The box is filled with 20 storytelling puzzle pieces, printed on both sides for interchanging or flipping over, allowing for a variety of plots and endings. If you were to use them all they would stretch to an enormous 8 feet - do make sure you have

enough room! Add to the mix the witty illustrations including White Rabbit in Converse, the Queen of Hearts in a pink limo and much more besides. Words accompany the pictures but above all else these cards prompt discussion, engagement and interactive fun for the whole family.

### **The Bauhaus Ballet**

Next comes a trip to the ballet, the Bauhaus Ballet to be exact. Drawing their inspiration from *The Bauhaus Triadic Ballet* both author and illustrator invite their readers in to explore colour, shape, pattern and movement in ways that will enthral. Wondering what this ballet is? It's a 1922 costume ballet by Oskar Schlemmer, in three acts with three dancers and three colours. Now this ground-breaking ballet has been transformed into a masterful pop-up work of art with words by Gabby Dawnay and illustrations by Lesley Barnes. Remember to interact with as well as enjoy reading this book – you can make the figures move and perhaps you might be inspired to develop your own ideas using these figures to create performances from your own imagination.

### **Match a Mummy**

My current favourite, though I am biased as an Egyptologist myself, is *Match a Mummy*. The Ancient Egypt Memory Game. All children discover the ancient Egyptians as part of their history learning at KS2. This game would work as well in a school setting as a home for it is educational and fun. Make sure to keep hold of the enclosed booklet which explains which cards pair up (this is not as obvious as the title may suggest) and provides historical and cultural background information. With suitably vibrant illustration by Léa Maupetit, text by Anna Claybourne and research in partnership with the British Museum this box is a treasure trove of fun and history.

### **Build a Castle**

If like me you are a history lover and have grown up exploring castles and other ruins, perhaps you are taking your children to enjoy such historical fun(?). If so then you, like me, will be drawn to the 64 slot-together cards for creative fun that end in a castle. Paul Farrell's *Build A Castle* is a sturdy box of bright, solid cards which easily slot together to allow little hands to create their very own castle-like structures. Not only can children learn the ins and outs of slotting the cards together and the logic of building, but they can look at and learn about the colours too. Add to this the opportunity to ask questions about detail printed on each card, I encourage you to read the enclosed leaflet, you can learn more about castles. Each card is packed full of bright bold detail and information and because there are 64 of them there are a variety of castles to be built, each time.

# Explore Board Books

Over the last couple of months my stash of board books, pop-up books, touchy-feely books has grown exponentially. Now it is time to look at them, moreover, to share them with our readership.

When I got them all out and started looking at them for this feature I was captivated, and I am a grown-up! Imagine how the children in your life will feel. Take time to think about the importance of these books, to think about which of the many you would like to start with, about which you and your children may enjoy. These are important choices, however a note of caution - once you learn more about these books the decision will not be as easy to make!

The board book along with the pop-up book and other interactive story books for children are too often considered to be 'novelty' items or books that are 'just for fun'. Board and interactive books are far from this, they are among the most important books that children can be introduced to as part of their journey of discovery into the world of books, of stories, and visual literacy. Children learn from these books not only the very basic concept of story-telling – many are too simple for full stories of course - but also how to interact with the world around them. These books allow children to safely test their senses of sound and touch and at the same time begin to understand the importance of pictures. For these reasons, and despite the fact that many of these books may be eaten, mauled and eventually fall apart (children are very good at making this happen) these books are very much worth acquiring and building a large collection.

It may come as a surprise to know that an awful lot of effort goes into the simplest of these books. Many will realise that a book with pop-ups does of course involve many hours of hard work (and experimental fun: how else will their authors know if they work) but so too do the simplest ABC or touchy-feely books. The number of words, of spreads, the detail in the art-work – all this must be carefully considered, tried, tested and refined. It is not easy to develop a simple and effective board book that works on all these levels.

Older readers have chapter books and then novels to read, they are presented with stories that develop in complexity, are usually multi-layered and with many characters. They understand how a book is structured and how to read it. The board book, the interactive book for babies, needs to encourage them to find a way to follow the pages, to learn why they need to turn them -they need to be able to chase, follow, see shaped pages form a whole – they need to be able to piece together the parts of the book just like a jigsaw puzzle to see the whole and then want to try it all over again. Does the book encourage them to remember: remember the way they felt when they used it, held it, followed it? Do they want to do it all over again? These are among the many questions authors and editors will be asking as they develop their stories.

There are a number of publishers of children's books. Many produce board books of varying formats. Some transform picture books into board books so that little ones can experience the beginnings of a story world early on in their reading career. Others produce board books in series or as stand-alone titles. My collection, the collection I am sharing with you here, covers titles from Gecko Press, Little Tiger, and Usborne.

I have one current title from Gecko Press, *The Wolf and the Fly* by Antje Damm. This is simply delightful and delightfully simple. A story book and a guessing game that both the child and their reader can engage with – changing the story if they wish – every time they share it. Children will love the refrain and repeated text as well as learning about all the different objects that Wolf may or may not eat! Use this book for memory games, for identifying objects and for lots of laughter too...

The Little Tiger selection includes board, pop-up and cut out titles. *What Can You See on the Farm?* Maria Petera, Kate Ware; *Where's My Llama? / Unicorn?* Kate McLelland, Becky Davies are both the first titles in new series – *Spot & Count* and *Search & Find* respectively. Using animals to encourage children to learn, associate – particularly the farm animals book, and to ask questions these are fantastic books to begin the journey of little ones into understanding more about the natural world. *Baby 101 Touch & Trace: Build A House / Plant and Grow* Patricia Hegarty and Thomas Elliott add to the well-established series of titles that encourage little hands to interact with the book and begin to explore their senses. *Let's Find the Dinosaur / Mermaid*, Alex Wilmore encourage children to develop curious minds and learn about creatures extinct or perhaps imaginary. There are silly books about fruit and veg – *You Complete Me*, Thomas Elliott, animal sounds books *Who Said Moo? / Woof?* Yi-Hsuan Wu. Whilst these encourage children to recognise animals and food books about being grown up *When I Grow Up: I want to Drive / I want to Be*, Rosamund Lloyd, Richard Merritt help them think about what the jobs that their grown-ups might do. With a title for those who are growing in independence – *I Can Do it: A Book of Fastenings*, Patricia Hegarty, Hilli Kushnir the books then venture into the world of non-fiction too with *Curious Kids: Bugs and Minibeasts*, Jonny Marx, Christiane Engel. Something for all little ones at different stages of their learning.

Now to the Usborne collection of touchy-feely books, the *That's Not My* series, of which I have *Bat*, *Flamingo*, *Kangaroo*, *Lion*, *Mermaid*, *Sloth*, *Polar Bear* and *Zebra* as well as the partner series *Touchy-Feely Sounds: Dinosaur* and *Hippo*. These are just a small selection from the 61 board books that make up the ever-popular series, all written by Usborne editor Fiona Watt, illustrated by Rachel Wells in a partnership of 21 years! With their bold and bright pictures and patches of varying textures appealing to and stimulating the senses of young readers. Each of these books not only introduces the child to sensory and language awareness but also to a range of creatures and animals from the world around them. Add to this their chunky nature, coloured page edging and simple text and here is a winning formula certain to appeal to readers of all ages. I never tire of reading them, reaching out to their tactile nature and doing it all over again. Additionally, as they mostly feature animals it is always

fun to learn why this may not be the animal of the title and they offer a fantastic opportunity to imagine what touching some of these otherwise 'off limits' wild and exotic animals may feel like. They always spark a note of curiosity in my mind and bring a smile to my face!

What brings all these books together is not just their 'boardness' but the way that they all encourage children to peep through pages, follow trails, use their fingers to spot, count and find, learn new words and above all learn to enjoy and want to read again and again a book.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

# Thomas, Topsy and Tim

Every year, or so it seems, we have some astounding anniversaries to celebrate for children's books – their longevity testament to their quality and popularity. For this Spring edition we are celebrating 75 years of **Thomas the Tank Engine** and 60 years of **Topsy and Tim**.

Thomas and his friends are being treated to a new logo – a gold train to celebrate this momentous birthday. The stories came to life in 1943 originally written to entertain the author's son, Christopher. The first title was published in 1945. The last original title was published in 1972. Now all twenty-six of the Rev W. Awdry's original titles have been published in one beautiful slipcase edition. Each story is clearly set out as an individual and unique tale, although they do nicely follow on from one another of course!

Each story has its own title and series number which makes it rather like reading a chapter or even short story book. It is possible to dive in where you left off or just to pick a story: maybe you have a favourite? What I also love about this special edition is the illustration. Egmont have carefully taken all the original illustrations and used every one of them sympathetically in the text of each story. With two or three illustrations per page the stories feel as fresh today as I remember from my own childhood.

Thomas and his friends have entertained children for the 75 years since their inception, in spite of having ceased publication over 40 years ago! I think that this book and other anniversary editions will ensure this love continues and that new fans are found too. After all, Christopher so loved the stories that he took up the pen from his father and wrote yet more stories of this cheeky engine and his friend.

Children love Thomas and his friends because they have great adventures and lots of fun – in this age of technological advances their simplicity is a delight. In addition, Thomas and his friends have demonstrated the importance of friendship, teaching some valuable lessons and encouraging children to interact with one another, with the world around them and with books. The franchise now includes books to read, spotting books, sticker books and much more.

Thomas, the blue engine, and all his friends are now a part of our literary heritage. He is certainly a firm favourite on my bookshelf, including treasured early signed copies of books by Christopher Awdry.

**Topsy and Tim** are celebrating their 60th year with a gold badge on their latest Ladybird book. This story is one of the very first featuring these iconic twins. *Topsy and Tim on the Farm*, containing original artwork from the husband and wife team of Jean and Gareth Adamson who created these lovable characters. From starting school to learning how to swim and of course sharing their experiences on the farm as well as other exciting days out the twins are a go-to pair of characters for helping little ones to tackle their own very real adventures in the real world.

There are now 140 titles and sales of over 21 million copies. Plus you can find Topsy and Tim on

Cbeebies, extending the adventurous fun for little ones. Unlike Thomas who was immediately adopted by Rev Awdry's publishers, Topsy and Tim were initially considered unusual for their illustrations and it took longer for them to be accepted. Now the scenes that were intended to reassure young children when they were having their first experiences of the world are considered to be the norm for children's books! We have a lot to thank Topsy and Tim and their creators for, plus Ladybird books for believing in them. In this, their anniversary edition, we join Topsy and Tim on the farm as they collect eggs from the hens, bring the cows in for milking and feed a calf – perhaps surprisingly this could actually still help a lot of children today but for different reasons – to help them understand what can and does happen daily on a farm.

The inspiration for this title came from the authors' own experience and they knew they were breaking new ground with their subjects, their illustration style and the idea that children might relate to the story. As with Thomas, Topsy and Tim feature on your editor's bookshelf and on the day of writing this feature an original copy of *Topsy and Tim Go Safely* was found and duly added!

I hope this feature and these books will also help you to expand those probably already bulging bookcases!

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**



## Picture books

### **A Hat for Mr Mountain**

Soojin Kwak

### **Born Bad**

C K Smouha, illus. Stephen Smith

### **Dinosaurs vs Humans**

Matt Robertson

### **The Dragon Machine**

Helen Ward, illus. Wayne Anderson

### **The Ferocious Chocolate Wolf**

Lizzie Finlay

### **Garden Jungle**

Helene Druvet

### **Gloria's Big Problem**

Sarah Stiles Bright, illus. Mike Deas

### **Greta and the Giants**

Zoe Tucker

### **Hey, Water!**

Antoinette Portis

### **I Am Brown**

Ashok Banker, illus. Sandhya Prabhat

### **The Last Tree**

Emily Haworth-Booth

### **The Legend of the First Unicorn**

Lari Don, illus. Nataša Ilinčić

### **Like the Moon Loves the Sky**

Hena Khan, illus. Saffa Khan

### **The Littlest Bandit**

Ali Pye

### **The Longest, Strongest Thread**

Inbal Leitner

### **The Moonlight Zoo**

Maudie Powell-Tuck, illus. Karl James Mountford

### **My Mama**

Annemarie van Haeringen, trans. Bill Nagelkerke

### **The Old Truck**

Jerome Pumphrey, illus. Jarrett Pumphrey

### **One World**

Micheal Foreman

### **Nine Lives Newton**

Alice McKinley

### **The Pirates are Coming!**

John Codon, illus. Matt Hunt

### **The Problem with Problems**

Rachel Rooney, illus. Zehra Hicks

### **Rain or Shine**

Ronald Heuinck

### **Rhinocorn Rules**

Matt Carr

### **The Sorcerer's Apprentice**

Gerda Muller

**The Tale of a Toothbrush. A Story of  
Plastic in our Oceans**

M. G. Leonard, illus. Daniel Rieley

**Talking Is Not My Thing**

Rose Robbins

**Two Bears**

Patricia Hegarty, illus. Rotem Teplow

**Waiting for Wolf**

Sandra Dieckmann

**What's That Noise?**

Naomi Howarth

**Where Happiness Begins**

Eva Eland

## Junior books

**Agent Zaiba Investigates: The Missing Diamonds**

Annabelle Sami

**Agents of the Wild: Operation Honeyhunt**

Jennifer Bell and Alice Lickens

**Alice In Wonderland Graphic Novel**

Russell Punter

**Anna Gain and the Same Sixty Seconds**

Guy Bass, illus. Steve May

**Attack of the Smart Speakers**

Tom McLaughlin

**Cloudburst**

Wilbur Smith and Chris Wakling

**Clouds Cannot Cover Us**

Jay Hulme

**Crater Lake**

Jennifer Killick

**The Cure for a Crime**

Roopa Farooki

**Evernight**

Ross McKenzie

**The Faraway Truth**

Janae Marks

**Ghoul Scouts: Welcome to Camp Croak!**

Taylor Dolan

**The Highland Falcon Thief**

M. G. Leonard and Sam Sedgman, illus. Elisa Paganelli

**The House of One Hundred Clocks**

A.M. Howell, illus. Saara Soderlund

**The House on Hoarder Hill**

Mikki Lish and Kelly Ngai, illus. Steve Wells and Maxine Lee

**The Kid Who Came From Outer Space**

Ross Welford

**The Mask of Aribella**

Anna Houghton

**Max and the Midnights**

Lincoln Pierce

**Mustafa's Jumper**

Coral Rumble, illus. Charlotte Cooke

**Orion Lost**

Alastair Chisholm

**Otto Tattercoat and the Forest of Lost Things**

Matilda Woods

**Snow Foal**

Susanna Bailey

**Sticky Pines: The Bigwoof Conspiracy**

Dashe Roberts

**Talking to the Moon**

S.E. Durrant

**Threads of Magic**

Alison Croggan

**Too Small Tola**

Atinuke, Oninye Iwu

**Willow Wildthing and the Swamp**

**Monster**

Gill Lewis, illus. Rebecca Bagley

**Winterborne Home for Vengeance and  
Valor**

Ally Carter

## **Young Adult books**

### **A Throne of Swans**

Katherine and Elizabeth Corr

### **A Treason of Thorns**

Laura Weymouth

### **Are You Watching?**

Vincent Ralph

### **Follow Me, Like Me**

Charlotte Seager

### **Gloves Off**

Louisa Reid

### **Grief Angels**

David Owen

### **The Girl Who Stole an Elephant**

Nizrana Farook

### **Havenfall**

Sara Holland

### **The Infinite**

Patience Agbabi

### **Infinity Son**

Adam Silvera

### **Jane Eyre**

Charlotte Brontë. A retelling by Tanya Landman

### **Lalani of the Distant Sea**

Erin Entrada Kelly, illus. Lian Cho

### **Loveboat Taipei**

Abigail Hing Wen

### **Monstrous Devices**

Damien Love

### **Nothing Ever Happens Here**

Sarah Hagger-Holt

### **The One That Got Away**

Jan Mark

### **Queen of Coin and Whispers**

Helen Corcoran

### **Run, Rebel**

Manjeet Mann

### **Sofa Surfer**

Malcom Duffy

### **Thorn**

Intisar Khanani

### **Unpregnant**

Jenni Hendricks and Ted Caplan

### **What Kind of Girl**

Alyssa Sheinmel

### **What Momma Left Me**

Renée Watson

### **Wink**

Rob Harrell

### **The Year We Fell From Space**

Amy Sarig King

### **Yes, No, Maybe So**

Becky Albertalli and Aisha Saeed

## **Non-Fiction books**

### **1 to 20 Animals Aplenty**

Kate Viggers

### **A is for Avocado**

illus. Carolyn Suzuki

### **The Bat Book**

Charlotte Milner

### **Big Green Crocodile**

Jane Newberry, illus. Carolina Rabei

### **Darwin's Rival. Alfred Russell Wallace and the Search for Evolution**

Christine Dorion, illus. Harry Tennant

### **Discovering Energy**

Johannes Hirn and Veronica Sanz, illus.  
Eduard Altarriba

### **Empire's End – A Roman Story**

Leila Rasheed

### **Everybody has a Body**

Jon Burgerman

### **Fearless: How to be Your True, Confident Self**

Liam Hackett

### **Flower Power: The Magic of Nature's Healers**

illus. Olaf Hajek, text by Christine Paxmann

### **Get Ahead in Physics**

Tom Whipple, illus. James Davies

### **Hoot and Howl Across the Desert**

Vassilili Tzomaka

### **Lift-The-Flap Questions and Answers About Plastic**

Katie Daynes, illus. Marie-Eve Tremblay

### **The Miracle of Hanukkah**

Malachy Doyle, illus. Christopher Corr

### **The Missing**

Michael Rosen

### **Respect Consent, Boundaries and Being in Charge of You**

Rachel Brian

### **The Seedling That Didn't Want to Grow**

Britta Teckentrup

### **Sometimes I Feel**

Sarah Maycock

### **Turn and Learn: Weather / Our World**

Isabel Otter, illus. Hannah Tolson

### **Tyrannosaurus Rex: A Pop-Up Guide to Anatomy**

Douglas Dixon, illus. Rachel Caldwell

### **Warriors, Witches, Women**

Kate Hodges, illus. Harriet Lee-Merrion

### **Yayoi Kusama Covered Everything in Dots and Wasn't Sorry**

Fausto Gilberti