



**Armadillo**  
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## **Contents**

### **Book Reviews**

- |                             |         |
|-----------------------------|---------|
| 1. Picture Book Reviews     | Page 2  |
| 2. Junior Book Reviews      | Page 10 |
| 3. Young Adult Book Reviews | Page 18 |
| 4. Non-Fiction Book Reviews | Page 33 |

### **Books Reviewed**

Page 43

# Picturebooks

## **The Bee Who Loved Words**

**Helen Docherty, illus. Erica Salcedo, pub. Puffin**

While other bees are called Daisy, Lily etc, our bee is named Persephone, and she very much wants to be able to spell her name correctly; we see her in her cell, in the honeycomb, working hard with alphabet cards while the other bees are sleeping.

Her fascination with words continues into Rhinoceros, Pomegranate, Kaleidoscope (all illustrated). She loves writing her words, and the other bees are impressed, but the Queen, Hermione, is not so keen, and wants Persephone to go out and pollinate instead. Persephone knows that words have power. She uses them well to find a missing toy for a butterfly, and warn the other bees about wet paint, but the Queen insists, and warns her that there are not enough flowers; and every bee must work hard. Persephone flies up high to find flowers and is appalled to see that the Queen is right. Gardens have been paved over, and there is a world of concrete. She writes on a garden fence 'Save the bees! We need more flowers, please!' Although she is worried that she has disobeyed the Queen, her words are seen, and people start planting seeds. Soon there are more flowers; but where is Persephone? She is hiding in fear, until a butterfly brings her a letter from the Queen, thanking her, and asking her to come home. Persephone has saved the bees and proved that words have power.

This is a lovely story for the child who is delighted by words or wants to learn lots of new words. Helen Docherty is an experienced author of picturebooks and books for beginner readers, often illustrated by Thomas Docherty, but this is the second title on which she is joined by Erica Salcedo, it's fun to read and look at. Each bee has a yellow and black stripey top, coloured trousers or dungarees, and the Queen is splendid. There are insects to spot and plenty of detail to look at. This will be a lovely book to share with older infants. The last page encourages us to plant flowers, take our litter home, use less plastic, timely messages indeed.

**Diana Barnes**

## **The Best Bad Day Ever**

**Marianna Coppo, pub. Frances Lincoln**

A cross-looking bear gets out of bed knowing that it's going to be a bad day - as the story is narrated in the first person the gender remains unspecified. Bear contradicts all the positive things about the day, saying it's cloudy when the sun is shining brightly; a glass of milk is half-empty and so on, even claiming that Pepito, a smiling toy bear, is in a bad mood too.

At school nothing goes well for Bear, and a black scribbly picture emphasises the feeling that no-one understands Bear. Things pick up when Bear is able to swap the pear that has been given out, with the apple that Penguin doesn't want. Later they play together. The afternoon passes very quickly with a friend to play with, they have a lot of fun, and the bell rings all too soon. Bear reports to the parent who comes that it has been The Best Bad Day Ever, and on the next day, which is cloudy, Bear is more positive, and looks forward to a beautiful day.

This simple story shows that however we think we're feeling our attitudes can change. It doesn't take much to turn a bad day into a good day! Marianna Coppo has published several books now, most of which are with her as author/illustrator. *The Best Bad Day Ever*, with its expressive illustration throughout it's a delightful picturebook.

**Diana Barnes**

## **The Dodo Who Dreamed She Could Fly**

**Catherine Emmett, illus. Claire Powell, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books**

Have you ever felt like you wanted more from life? That you wanted to step out of your comfort zone and spread your proverbial wings and fly? Well, that's exactly what Delilah the Dodo bird did, except her wings were literal ones that she ended up making for herself.

This book really emphasizes the point that everyone can do what they wish if they really put their mind to it. Delilah the Dodo was ridiculed and made to feel silly by her peers when she shared with them her dreams of being able to fly. That upset her very much but did not put her off. Delilah spent time wishing that she could fly; she exhausted every outlet to make this happen, although at first it didn't happen, and she failed very miserably (and embarrassingly!)

Instead of giving up, after trying many efforts at trying to fly, Delilah has a bright idea. She will create her own wings which are better than any others and show everyone how wrong their initial judgement was. She will fly with her own new wings – much to her friend's surprise!

This story is a rollercoaster of emotions ranging from happy to sad, from frustrating to accomplished. It sends an inspiring message to any reader and the illustrations are so colourful and catchy, my four-year-old niece loved it!

**Izzy Bean**

## **The Duck Never Blinks**

**Alex Latimer, pub. Andersen Press**

*The Duck Never Blinks* is a brilliantly irreverent book summed up by its title. The duck just never blinks, and boy does the narrator want the duck to blink! With a delightfully illustrated duck which conveys much cheekiness and hilarity in a simple format, the pages are not overloaded making it perfect for SEN use. The premise of the book is that the narrator is irritated by the fact that, after watching the duck all day, it hasn't blinked, not once, what follows is the narrator's self-imposed blinking competition with the duck.

The beauty and comedy of this book comes through the voice of the narrator who proceeds to get increasingly frustrated with the duck not blinking as the book goes on. It is the perfect read aloud story and whilst it will delight children who are read this book at bedtime, it will also shine in a group setting. Children will love getting the duck to blink by shouting words like Armadillo and Hot Chip at it, but the text very cleverly sides the listener with the duck, pitting everyone against the narrator causing much hilarity, especially when the narrator eventually walks off and of course the duck blinks. Although my favourite part is when the narrator calls the duck childish!

Children are going to love this book. It's one of the funniest read aloud stories I've read in a while, bringing the audience together to enjoy laughing at the ridiculously silly adult narrator, and what child doesn't enjoy an adult being silly! The person reading the book can choose to read it as narrator and take on the silly role, or side with the children. Simple illustrations add a lot to the story. On one page there are over 100 ducks to assess for blinking and another where you need to look hard for duck eyelids. These alone will have children pouring over the book and clambering to get a good look. It would be very easy to share this book of few words which is so good for EAL children.

Suitable for ages two up, I shared *The Duck Never Blinks* with a year 2 class, and they loved it. Just be prepared to have Armadillo shouted at you randomly for the next two days! Whether sharing this story at bedtime or in a classroom with 30 children this book will bring joy to whoever reads it. An instant classic.

**Emma Burnside**

## **Geoffrey Gets the Jitters**

**Nadia Shireen, pub. Puffin Books**

Geoffrey, the character we are about to meet in this story, is good friends with our familiar favourite wobbler thrower, Barbara from Nadia Shireen's *Barbara Throws A Wobbler* and his story makes the perfect companion to hers!

We are introduced to Geoffrey, who knows there are plans for the next day, as the book opens. He knows that he will meet Barbara, they will have lunch... But we quickly learn that Geoffrey can't

remember what he is doing after these plans, after the lunch which causes his first 'jitter' to appear. Why? Because he has started to worry and ask himself 'what if...' questions. This first 'jitter' is not alone, a few more come along and soon Geoffrey is so overcome with these jitters that he feels sweaty and wants nothing more than to hide away until they go away.

Luckily for Geoffrey, his jitters are fairly chatty, they won't leave him alone and they find a way help him learn how to feel better. They start with teaching him to take deep breaths, next comes stretching and then encouragement to chat to a friend about his worries. As the story continues, we learn the jitters are Geoffrey's worries and anxieties, jitters that can quickly get out of control if he doesn't learn how to manage them and take control.

This series is ideal for helping children to find moments of calm, work on strategies to deal with strong emotions and anxieties. The lovely illustrations bring Geoffrey's jitters to life as brilliantly as Barbara's wobblers and children will love sharing and reading this picturebook.

**Erin Hamilton**

## **The Grand Hotel of Feelings**

**Lidia Brankovic, pub. Cicada Books**

Have you ever stayed in a hotel? Was it a nice one? Maybe you had your own room and your own bathroom, perhaps they bought breakfast to you, or they had a nice restaurant for you to eat in. Staying in a hotel can be lots of fun, it can be a grand adventure. But if you are the person who owns and runs the hotel it can be a lot of work to make sure that all your guests are happy. In Lidia Brankovic's *The Grand Hotel of Feelings* there is space enough for everyone and there is a manager who makes sure that they are there to help. The manager is going to be our guide through the hotel and the story.

For the manager, for the hotel, every day brings change, you never know, after all, who is going to be checking in and what their temperaments might be ~ after all this is the Hotel of Feelings. However, whether fun or tricky every guest is made welcome, and their needs catered for. Take for example sadness who always floods the bathroom and sometimes leaks to the room below. When sadness comes the manager must be very quiet and listen well so he is heard and doesn't stay too long. Anger is very noisy and can bring other feelings but when she is gone Peace always comes and then it is blissful. The feelings are big and small, they are great guests and sometimes they are there to help as well as be helped. This is a beautiful, imaginative book tackling the difficulties of managing our emotions with a gentle warmth and humour.

Through her *The Grand Hotel of Feelings* Lidia Brankovic develops for the reader an overwhelming message - allow your feelings to run their course, ensure they are heard and cared for before moving

to a different feeling. This book uses our bodies as a hotel where feelings check in and out, feelings of all shapes, sizes and needs. Moving away from just the basic sad, angry, or fearful, this hotel has gratitude, peace, contentment, and hopefulness.

As a picturebook it feels suitable for older readers who can identify with such a range of feelings and emotions and can relate to them in turn. The illustrations are calming and rather imaginative as you explore the hotel of feelings.

Beautifully written, this is a wonderful book for all ages to read.

**Erin Hamilton**

## **Henri and the Machine**

**Isabelle Marinov, illus. Olga Shtonda, pub. Templar**

What can Henri do when he goes on a school visit to an art gallery, and he really does not understand what the exhibits are trying to show?

Some of the paintings are extremely odd and don't reflect the reality that Henri understands, the one that he lives in and knows. Then he wonders what the purpose is of some of the installations. However, when he is confronted by a chair, and signs in many languages asking "is this a chair," he feels tired and decided he will sit down on said chair. What happens next is extraordinary and leads to an eye-opening experience that broadens both his imagination and appreciation of what art is.

The title, *Henri and the Machine*, really doesn't give any hints about the contents of the book. What gradually unfurls is a wonderful and imaginative look at art and how it can mean so many different things to a wide range of people. What a truly delightful book to read with younger children before they have a first visit to an art gallery. So many people tend to think galleries are serious and aimed at the adult audience; yet there are many ways of making the experience fun and exciting for young people if things are explained in the right way. Henri is an inquisitive child who sees the world in a very practical, even scientific way. Yet when he sees a painting that is just the colour blue he immediately thinks of the wonderful blue skies, seas, butterflies, and blueberries that the colour brings to mind.

This book has proved to be an absolute gem. It deserves to be in every school library.

**Margaret Pemberton**

## **Rhinos Don't Cry**

**Mark Grist, illus. Chris Jevons, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books**

It's not a well-known fact but rhinos don't cry, at least that is according to Spike-O Mcree, movie star. He's a hero and he knows that even when bad things happen rhinos don't cry. He is also Milo's hero, so Milo knows, from that moment on, that he has to fight the tears when they threaten to fall. Not when his bicycle tyre crumples or when he breaks a bottle and certainly not when mum tells him their cat Pickles is missing...

Milo is the Rhino who is the true hero of Mark Grist's *Rhinos Don't Cry* a fantastic picturebook with a humorous story that has a gentle message for the reader. Chris Jevons, illustrator, has embraced the spirit of the story and given it plenty of detail as well as bold colour, asserting what we all really know to be the truth but will have to wait for Milo to discover. Make sure that, as you read and share this book, children take notice of all the special details that tell us so much about Milo, his lovely cat Pickles and the other characters we meet. The small details, the facial expressions, they are all fantastic and along with the rhyming text make this a perfect for reading aloud at story time.

But what about Milo and his missing cat, will this be the one thing that makes him cry or will meeting his hero in real life change everything for them both? Read, enjoy and discover with the characters what it means to be brave, to be a hero and why it might actually be okay to cry. A first book in a promising series highlighting to children why it is so important to express their feelings, we loved it!

**Dawn Jonas**

## **The Thunk**

**Michelle Robinson, illus. Deborah Allwright, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books**

*The Thunk* made me smile from start to finish, Michelle Robinson, also author of *She Rex*, has created a fantastic rhyming adventure tale about a young boy called Hector who dreams of finding a magical, mythical creature. 'The Thunk has a trunk and its fur's blue-ish pink, and it's ever so slightly, completely . . . EXTINCT.'

Hector is determined to prove everyone wrong (many think the Thunk was never real in the first place) whilst he is sure it IS real and is still out there! But is Hector right? And if he is, what happens when Hector finds this Thunk?

Michelle Robinson's rhyming style is easy to read out loud making it fun to skip through the pages, stopping to hover over moments of wonder. The illustrations work perfectly alongside the story too. Deborah Allwright has created a wonderfully colourful world for Hector to travel through giving the reader enough detail to enjoy whilst discovering extra background moments yet never losing the main character. *The Thunk* is a truly magical adventure, but I think it's also a story about letting your

imagination roam and be free. It encompasses ideas of acceptance, following your dreams, and ignoring the doubters. Above all, it's a wonderful picture book that children will want to listen to again and again, most likely learning to recite and read it themselves too. Come World Book Day there are bound to be some interesting Thunks in playgrounds across the country!

Perfect for fans of *The Gruffalo*, I was also reminded of *Rosie Revere Engineer* and *Iggy Peck Architect*, all classics, which I suspect *The Thunk* will no doubt end up being. Ideal for ages 3+ and for many years beyond.

**Anja Stobbart**

## **The Truth About Yeticorns**

**Rachel Morrisroe, illus. Ella Okstad, pub. Puffin Books**

Most people will have, when they were children, tried to wriggle out of trouble by blaming a fictional friend or creature for the damage that they have done. But what are you going to do when one of these fictional creatures suddenly appears in your mirror when you are brushing your teeth?

That is the dilemma facing Bea, when she is confronted by a large green Yeticorn - a mix of Unicorn and Yeti - who just wants to be friends, but who creates all kinds of havoc whenever around. There is more trouble when Edie, Bea's sister, doesn't believe Bea's talk of this mythical creature and thinks it is her sister who causing all the trouble. What is Bea going to do and will the solution she decides on help solve the problem?

*The Truth About Yeticorns* is a fabulous book which looks at how important it can be to tell the truth so that when it really matters others will believe you. It is also a book which looks at how siblings get on and the dynamics of their relationships. Whilst there is a serious message underlying the story, it is delivered with a very light touch and using rhyme in the text. The illustrations have an energy and dynamism that really carries the reader along and the wonderfully bright and exuberant colours in Ella Okstead's illustrations are a delight. What a wonderful read for the youngest of readers and whoever reads with them.

**Margaret Pemberton**

## **Who's Afraid of the Light?**

**Anna McGregor, pub. Scribble Books**

Ordinarily we might expect books for children, young children, picturebooks, to be comforting ones, sharing with them all the reasons that they need not be scared of the dark. When I discovered Anna



McGregor's *Who's Afraid of the Light?* I was intrigued by the switch. I am so glad that (a) Anna McGregor had the idea and wrote the book; (b) Scribble published it; (c) the book came to my attention; (d) I was curious and read it. It is, I think I can say, one of my favourite picturebooks of the year so far (and will be featured in an Armadillo Blog Q&A in September too).

So, what makes this book so good, aside from the switch in concept? It's simple, funny, clever. Its narrator led, takes the reader into the deep dark depths of the ocean, combines story with non-fiction elements. The narrator of the story is talking to Fergus. He is a creature who lives in the 'midnight zone' of the ocean, the deepest, darkest part where no sunlight ever penetrates. It is Fergus who is afraid of the light and though the narrator explains to the reader and asks Fergus about the bioluminescent creatures who pass by, using their bioluminescence to show them the way, Fergus continues to hide away from the light. Every time we think we might be getting close to learning something about Fergus he is scared off by other creatures ... until that very last page.

With *Who's Afraid of the Light?* discover one of the most intelligently perceptive picturebooks of the year. Be warned, Fergus may not be what you expect, the story may leave you scared too (in a nice way), and it may well make you jump! It will most certainly make you laugh, and it will fascinate too as it introduces some of the wonders of the darkest depths. The perfect story time book!

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

# Junior Books

## **The Carnival of the Spider**

**Kieran Littlewood, illus. Sam Usher, pub. Faber & Faber Children's Books**

This is the third adventure for the friends who make up the Carnival of the Lost. I have to admit to not having read the previous books but will be rectifying this soon!

Sheba, Inji, Pyewacket, Sil and Glyph have very unusual appearances and talents, which they call the Gift. Previously exhibited as freaks in a circus sideshow, they now undertake life on their own terms. When Remy arrives on their doorstep, fleeing Paris to get their help in rescuing his mother, Sister Moon, from the Spider, they spring into action to aid one of their own. Employing a gang of mechanical villains, the Spider is seeking a map to the hiding place of an incredibly valuable diamond necklace. The Carnival learns that the map is hidden in the catacombs under Paris, which is now under siege by the Prussians. They will need to use all their powers to overcome the obstacles in their way.

Set in a recognisable Victorian underworld, this is an atmospheric, gripping, thrilling adventure laced with wit, humour, warmth, and a touch of steampunk. The focus is on Remy, who has been kept close by his mother as she seeks to protect him from a hostile world, and his discovery of his courage and resourcefulness. The importance of friendship and family, either the one you are born into or make yourself, is at the heart of the story. It also conveys a strong message about accepting people for who they are, not how they look.

The design, featuring smudged page edges reflecting Remy's Gift of drawing the shadows around himself to hide, with interspersed double page line illustrations gives an intriguing look to the book, drawing the reader in. Recommended for fantasy adventure fans of 9+.

**Jayne Gould**

## **Friends and Traitors**

**Helen Peters, pub. Nosy Crow**

Sidney Dashworth is being evacuated with her school, St. Olave's, which is normally located in Sussex, to Stanbrook House, a dilapidated country mansion owned by Lord Evesham and his family. Nancy, a poorer but well-educated girl, who could have gone to St. Olave's had her parents been able to afford the fees, is employed at Stanbrook as a housemaid. When the girls meet, what will they discover and

are the residents of Stanbrook House all to be trusted? This is the question the reader will pose as they begin to read *Friends and Traitors*.

This is an absolutely gripping, fast paced read. One of Helen Peters' great strengths is her depiction of Sidney's grief when tragedy strikes, and her realisation of the very different way in which adults dealt with children's grief in the 1940's. The relationship between Sidney and her beloved brother, Dordie, commonly known as George, seems deeply felt. Helen Peters also encourages the reader to question whether the glamorous nature of celebrities is all that it seems, whether celebrity status should protect a person from scrutiny. This is something that was as relevant a concern in the 1940s as it is now.

The denouement of this book, complete with its twist, is thrilling. It discusses a rarely seen facet of WW2 in middle grade literature - Fifth Columnists or British people collaborating with the Nazis are dealt with in some depth. It must have been a challenge for Helen Peters to write pro-Nazi dialogue which fits her characters authentically. If younger readers enjoy school stories, ghost stories and history, they should read this book and know that they will not be disappointed.

**Rebecca Butler**

## **My Brilliant Plan to Fix Everything**

**Ben Davies, pub. Scholastic**

I really enjoyed reading this funny and engaging book, *My Brilliant Plan to Fix Everything*.

12-year-old Alex is a fun and caring boy who is struggling with his parents' separation and comes up with a madcap scheme to get them back together. Whilst being an enjoyable read this book also deals sensitively with the serious issues of running away and domestic violence.

Alex's parents have split up and he is keen to restore the 'Natural Order of Things,' he wants his family back together. He hatches a plan. One of the reasons his parents are no longer together is because his dad is a frustrated author; but he never has the time to sit down and write his book. Alex nags him and even gives him an old laptop but it's not enough and so Alex dreams up his plan - he'll give his dad a month off and he'll work his dad's job as postman instead. It seems to be working, his dad is writing again however it's not as easy as it seems working as postman. Alex has to get up very early every day of his summer holidays, the trolley he has to use is really heavy and difficult to pull, his dad's boss is suspicious, the school bullies are hovering around and even the residents on the round are asking too many questions... With the help of his new friend Willow, and his belief that this will help his family, Alex is determined to succeed. Willow however has troubles of her own and Alex has to decide if he should try to convince Christmas Mick that it's not appropriate to celebrate Christmas every day in August.

An engaging novel full of both heart and humour, this story has depth yet manages to explore challenging themes with a light touch. Definitely a great read.

**Anna Elson**

## **Old Gods New Tricks**

**Thiago De Moraes, pub. David Fickling Books**

Readers who are interested in myths will enjoy this very entertaining book. *Old Gods New Tricks* is a story about gods from many different cultures living together. They live both in our time and alongside us. Indeed, reading this story could start an interest in folklore and legends. There is a good mix of mythical magic, adventure, and humour all of which is great for young mythology lovers. Readers can expect to discover some epic myths from cultures across the world, but there are also some unexpectedly surprising moments.

Trixie dos Santos is mad about myths and obsessed with the gods featuring in them who play tricks. Trixie is a bit of a troublemaker herself. But can the trouble she is involved in help her to save the whole world? When the world is plunged into darkness, Trixie knows just who will be able to bring back the light. She will need help from the tricksters. These are the gods who are neither good nor bad, the ones who are always full of unexpected surprises.

The fun-loving Trixie is joined by Loki, Maui, Exu, and the Monkey King on her adventures. Loki is the god of cunning, son of giants and father of beasts. From Northern Europe, he creates trouble and mischief wherever he goes. He gets himself and his fellow gods into trouble, but then gets them out of the trouble with his cleverness. Maui is a deity from The House of Trouble, fire giver, tamer of stairs he comes from across the Pacific Ocean where he is worshipped in countries including New Zealand, Hawaii and the Polynesian Islands. Exu is all about paths, crosswords, and journeys. He is worshipped in Afro-Brazilian religions, and he challenges the ways of society, of gods and humans alike.

Young readers will enjoy this fun read, with a great mix of gods from a mix of cultures. It is a very different and unusual story.

**Gary Kenworthy**

## **Ruby and the Pen**

**David Lawrence, pub. Exisle Publishing**

David Lawrence, author of *Ruby and the Pen* has a strong supporter in his mother! She is quoted as saying he is “the most gifted comedy writer in the country.” I think I agree with her. But I want to add to that thought. David Lawrence can indeed write fantastic comedy but in *Ruby and the Pen*, we find it mixed perfectly with compassion, sensitivity, and a depth of understanding that we perhaps don’t often expect to blend with comedy. It may not be a laugh-out-loud sort of story, but the gentle humour is perfect and, with the fantastic illustrations from Cherie Dignam this book is really difficult to put down once you’ve started to read it!

Ruby is not enjoying her life when we first meet her. Not only does she still miss her dad who died four years ago but her mum’s new, and dodgy, boyfriend is paying for her to be sent off to boarding school. Sneaking out to the Mall she sets herself up to draw cartoon pictures for anyone interested. Ruby loves to draw. Then she is drawn to the market, and wandering around, she stumbles across a stall that seems to have appeared from nowhere.

It is here, at Second Hand Treasures that she finds the pen and ink which are about to launch her into an exciting adventure for this is no ordinary pen. With this pen any drawings that Ruby makes come true. Can this pen help her and her new friends at boarding school overcome the bullies; prevent an environmental disaster; help Ruby and her mum? It’s a magic pen and this is just the first of its adventures.

I loved reading Ruby’s story, it’s funny, clever, accessible, and highly readable. Putting magic into the hands of a young protagonist with this special pen David Lawrence has opened a world full of potential and I for one can’t wait to read the future adventures of the pen and its temporary owners.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Spellcasters**

**Crystal Sung, illus. Wendy Tan, pub. Orchard Books**

Music, magic, friendship, and adventure are all rolled into one in this delightful new book, *Spellcasters*, the first in a series of four, by debut author Tania Tay writing as Crystal Sung.

When Jen moves to Spellcrafft Street she is delighted to make three new friends who all share her love of music. Together the four decide to form a band and call themselves The Spellcasters. However, it seems there’s something else the four have in common. When an evil spirit escapes an underground lair the girls discover they all have the ability to channel incredible magical powers from their ancestors. Ananya can read minds, Tamzin can control nature and Maya can shapeshift, but Jen must travel back in time to ancient China in order to master her own supernatural powers. If the four are going to stop the evil Graydig from destroying their much-loved Community Centre, then Jen needs to hurry! Will the friends stop Graydig in time, before he destroys their entire community?

Terrifically action-packed and fast paced this book was a joy to read from start to finish. With its magical themes wrapped tightly in girl power and sewn together with a gripping plot I found it impossible to put down! The downside? Whilst I initially felt incredibly lucky to have received a pdf copy of this wonderful new book so far ahead of its publication, I now realise it just means I have even longer to wait for book 2!

This wonderfully empowering story will easily enchant readers aged 7+ and they'll, like me, be wondering how long until the next one in the series. What a fantastic welcome to Spellcrafter Street!

## **Tracey Corner**

### **The Stupendous Sonny**

**Ellie Clements, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books**

Who doesn't want a superpower? Who wouldn't like to find they can do something that no-one else can? Well Sonny Lawson is certain he has one, the trouble is he just can't prove it.

Having had, what at first seemed like a recurring dream in which he could levitate, make things fly or find himself waking up in different rooms of his house, Sonny begins to think there's more to it than dreams. Especially when he wakes up with dirty feet after dreaming that he was in the garden. However, his best friend Elliot seems convinced there's a simpler explanation, Sonny must be sleepwalking. It's only when Sonny accidentally teleports himself to the local park to avoid school bully Milo and his gang that he truly realises he's right, he does have a superpower. In fact, he has two – telekinesis and teleportation and he cannot wait to test them out, after all they're pretty cool for dealing with enemies and impressing friends.

Sadly, just as Sonny plans to tell his dad about his powers his dad is involved in a serious accident putting him in a coma and suddenly Sonny's superpowers seem useless. All he wants now is for his dad to wake up. With their mum stationed at their dad's side, Sonny and his younger brother and sister find themselves being looked after by their Aunt Cleo who shows great interest in Sonny's powers. But Sonny has a funny feeling that Aunt Cleo isn't all that she seems. Is she really trying to help him, or does she have other plans?

*The Stupendous Sonny* is a follow up to *The Wonderous Prune* and is an absolute joy. From the very first page Sonny feels like a friend and it's as comfortable a read as slipping into your pyjamas. Funny and fast paced - as Sonny tackles floating sofas, an earthquake, and an explosion of Power Piglet toys - this book also has a sensitive side, exploring Sonny coming to terms with his father's accident and the absence of his mother when he needs her the most. This is a wonderful summer read, completely relatable, highly entertaining, impossible to put down.

I cannot recommend it enough.

## **Tracey Corner**

### **The Sundae Delivery Service** **Holly Rivers, pub. Chicken House**

I loved *The Boy In the Post* and I was disappointed when the book ended. I felt that the characters had a lot more adventures, so I was pleased to see them back!

*The Sundae Delivery Service* opens a few months after *The Boy In the Post's* ending. Since Orinthia's life for her and the others has settled, they are back into working for Grandy Brock and his animals at The Mailbox Menagerie. The children are delighted when a new ice cream shop opens nearby, and the children soon make friends with the owner's daughter Jemima. But it seems not everyone plays fair in the ice cream world.

Dotty has moved her family of ice cream makers to the village and is delighted to discover the post in her village is delivered by animals trained by local children. This means her family could have their entry into the prestigious Golden Udder ice cream awards delivered by cows! But training cows is going to be the easy part Dotty soon learns - rival sundae-makers will do almost anything to take the prize. There is a voyage to Norway and beyond involved and it's clear someone is determined to sabotage their efforts - and announce they're entering their ice-cream into the prestigious Golden Udder Awards in Norway.

Full of quirky originality and charm, the story is a joy to read. The children are very 'real' with their own interests and personalities, creating a cast of engaging characters. Orinthia and her new friend, are at centre stage for this adventure with the other characters still very much part of the book. The friendship between the two is lovely - an immediate, uncomplicated friendship which survives falling out, coming back the stronger for it. It's lovely that children will be able to see a positive friendship at the heart of the story. Both girls are resourceful, curious and determined to solve the mystery surrounding the competition - they make a great team.

This is an amazing read that takes you on another action-packed adventure. The new characters bring a new dimension to the book. Even though this is a second book it can easily be read as a stand-alone. The writing is great, making the reader feel part of the story. I really hope there will be more adventures for these friends.

## **Helen Byles**

## **Worrybot**

**Simon Packham, pub. UCLan**

Josh feels that he is making good progress in conquering his worries using strategies learnt in school. One of them is writing down his fears and posting them in a robot he has fashioned out of a box, the Worrybot. When his mum's new job causes the whole family to relocate to Brighton, and Josh to change school in the middle of Year 6, he reaches out for the Worrybot. Of all the fears listed, only that linked to a former schoolmate called Lottie still unsettles him deeply.

Although there are challenges in his new school, Josh finds that life is made easier by the presence of Charlie, a pupil who attends school remotely using a small device. Although Josh cannot see Charlie, the two develop an affinity and Josh finds in Charlie someone he can trust and from whom he can draw encouragement. The new friendship is beneficial for Charlie, too, who becomes more involved in class activities through Josh. Just when Josh is ready to face one of his worst fears, Charlie reveals something that threatens to cause a major setback for Josh and to destroy his new friendship.

*Worrybot* is a book that exudes warmth and shows a skilled handling of the theme, which is at the centre of the story right from the start. Josh's feelings and anxieties are addressed with sensitivity. Some lovely humorous moments are injected too. Josh is down-to-earth, gentle and a very relatable character. As narrator of the story, he reveals to the readers his thoughts and the process that helps him, in the end, to continue on his positive path: belief in the possibility of change and forgiveness, for oneself as well as others. The subplot regarding the relationship with elderly neighbour Norman adds further dimension to the story, as does the lighter, but insightful one about Josh's dad's job.

Simon Packham has created a gem of a book which will spark meaningful conversations about feelings and friendships. A great class reader and a valuable addition to both libraries and personal collections.

**Laura Brill**

## **The Wrath of the Woolington Wurm**

**Karen Foxlee, illus. Freda Chiu, pub. Pushkin's Children's Books**

Mary-Kate is the anxious, routine-loving daughter of a famous archaeologist. When her mother is asked to investigate bones found in a well in the village of Woolington, Mary-Kate is very reluctant to accompany her, but she has no choice as her grandmother is away on a trip of her own.

Mary-Kate nervously packs all her lucky things, not least the partially used chewing gum packet left behind by her father before he disappeared on an expedition. Then there is her lucky torch shaped like



Big Ben, her strawberry-scented notebook and her glitter pens. It isn't long before she needs them all. Strange, disturbing things are going on in the village. Lord Woolington is determined to turn the village into a destination shopping centre, despite the damage it will cause, and despite the wishes of the villagers, who have formed an action group in a bid to thwart his plans. Mary-Kate soon finds herself investigating. Why are there saucers of milk outside front doors? Why is the inn that Mary-Kate and her mother are staying in called the Hook and Wurm? What lies behind the legend of a monstrous creature that kills children?

To her surprise, Mary-Kate makes friends with Lady Arabella, Lord Woolington's fearless, opinionated daughter. Together they research and investigate, helped by the village librarian. Together they discover the truth about the Woolington Wurm. Together they face up to deception and danger.

The first of a new series, this is an enjoyable, humorous, stylishly illustrated fantasy adventure, with an appealing protagonist who by the end of the book has gained both courage and resilience.

**Anne Harding**

# Young Adult Books

## **Black Heat**

**Bex Hogan, pub. Hachette Children's Books**

On a narrow street overhung by leaves Elena lives in a house full of herbs. She is a midwife's apprentice, intuitive, caring, and focused on learning all she can from her mentor. The ongoing war between their country, Vallure, and the country of Naperone, has not yet affected their small town - until Elena is startled one evening by a frantic knock on the door...

For Rayn, the effects of this war are ever-present. The brutal invasion of her country, enacted on the command of the Emperor of Vallure, has led her to an unexpected place in the army's ranks. She spends each day in a makeshift blacksmith's forge, assembled and disassembled at each stopping point on her regiment's journey. She reshapes weapons, repairs armour and horses' shoes, surrounded by the mud and clamour of her regiment's camp. She is tough and skilled but must face a terrible revelation about the family she longs to return to.

Marzal is also far from the support of those she loves: she is one of the Emperor's daughters, exiled during her childhood but now called to return to her father's palace. Her mother remains far away and Marzal must navigate the new dynamic of the palace alone. But she is daring and determined, willing to risk danger as she seeks to uncover the secrets that underlie her father's rule.

Though their lives are vastly different, all three women witness the brutality of the Emperor's invasion of Naperone. As their lives begin to shift and loyalties seem uncertain, they must each hold onto their strength as they face the fraught days ahead... A gripping and compelling story.

## **Jemima Breeds**

## **Bonesmith**

**Nicki Pau Petro, pub. Hodder & Stoughton**

*Bonesmith* is a dark and intriguing Young Adult fantasy novel from Nicki Pau Petro, in which the disgraced ghost-fighting warrior Wren must journey into a haunted wasteland and rescue a kidnapped prince. The violent dead linger in the Dominions, unless a bonesmith like Wren can sever the ghosts from their earthly remains. Sabotage means Wren fails her qualifying trial to become a Valkyr (a ghost-fighting warrior), and she is banished to the Border Wall - the last line of defence against a wasteland called the Breach, where the vicious dead roam unchecked.

Although a bit slow at the start, the pacing throughout the novel is decent. As *Bonesmith* is the first in a series of novels there is a lot of world-building and a lot of information to absorb. One such detail is that different kinds of magic are tied to materials like copper, gold, bones, and iron. But as the story develops, so too does the pacing; patient readers will be rewarded. For some seasoned readers, the twists and turns will be predictable, but more entertaining is Wren's development as a character which allows the reader to empathise with her. Initially reckless and careless, for much of the novel Wren has to learn how to become more selfless, in order to do the right thing. She is forced into an uneasy alliance with Julian - a fierce ironsmith, and one of the Prince's kidnappers - and the relationship between them develops from sworn enemies to potential lovers. The tension between them means they fight each other more than the 'undead,' but the banter and jokes are fun, if sometimes a little more suited to an older readership. The most satisfying part of their "will-they-won't-they" relationship is how they learn to overcome their differences and work together, to combat the dark alliance that is brewing between the living and the undead.

With *Bonesmith* author Nicki Pau Petro merges Gideon the Ninth with *The Others* (aka, the white walkers) from *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but for a younger set of readers. Family secrets and ghosts mean that fans of the dark fantasy genre will be right at home with this novel, and will no doubt look forward to the sequel.

**Chris J Kenworthy**

## **Finding Phoebe**

**Gavin Extence, pub. Andersen Press**

This book is a story about growth both as an individual and as friends, wrapped in a witty plotline and filled with touching moments.

Do you ever feel like you don't quite fit in with the normal? Or like your friends see you as a burden? Phoebe sometimes feels the same. In *Finding Phoebe* Gavin Extence carefully creates a heart-warming character through Phoebe. She is autistic, preferring to live a life filled with routines and comfort with little change to her day-to-day life. But as Phoebe's best friend Bethany becomes more rebellious and adventurous Phoebe at times also finds her life changing. Both their lives start to fill with new experiences, Phoebe's becoming filled with more and more lies and deception as she covers for Bethany and her secret boyfriend, Will.

*Finding Phoebe* beautifully captures Phoebe's thoughts and feelings, allowing the reader to truly connect and relate to her character, laugh with her at the humorous challenges she faces and sympathise with her when her life becomes more unpredictable and unreliable.

Overall, this book is amazing and filled with many twists in the plotline that I was not anticipating or expecting. Although I found it hard to get into at first the storyline unravelled perfectly and left me wanting to read more with every chapter until the very end.

*Finding Phoebe* is cleverly written in the style of a letter from Phoebe which embodies her character and spirit, causing the reader to experience Phoebe's growth throughout the book with her.

**Gemma Walford**

## **Girl, Goddess, Queen**

**Bea Fitzgerald, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books**

This is a debut. I mention this because when I read it, I struggled to believe it, so strong is the writing, the story, the characterisation. I was, and still am in awe of Bea Fitzgerald and her ability to create an outstanding new myth, new story for Persephone and Hades. And I may just be a little bit in love with this version too!

Persephone, as Kore, her name before she enters the Underworld and takes matters into her own hands, is hidden away on an island with only her mother and the nymphs for company. On the outside she tries to show that she is a good and dutiful daughter whilst on the inside she yearns for more, she yearns to escape. This yearning becomes stronger when her father, Hades, and mother, Demeter, tell her a marriage is going to be arranged for her. What happens next is a shift in the power dynamic and mythology that we have always considered to be the truth. Apparently for thousands of years the gods have been lying. They said that Hades kidnapped Persephone, that she was a pawn in the politics of the gods and that her mother's grief caused the Earth to start dying. She was a pawn but even that part has been skewed. Now it is time to hear the real story.

Persephone was not kidnapped. She jumped. She voluntarily went to Hades. She wanted and needed an escape. What she wasn't expecting was an annoyingly sexy, incredibly arrogant, and very smug ruler. She makes tormenting Hades her mission, hoping it will encourage him to give in, then she makes it her mission to bring Olympus to its knees. Falling in love is not part of her plan but apparently it is going to sneak up on them both. There is more, much more to this story than their romance but it does add the most wonderful dose of humour to their growing relationship! Hades is not the only one that Persephone befriends, there is Styx, the lost souls and even Hades subjects. Hermes makes an appearance from time to time too. The twists and turns the story follows are fabulous, how Bea Fitzgerald kept it all running smoothly I don't know but it reads seamlessly. I may have read it a little obsessively, but it was too good to put down!

For anyone who wants to know more about the true story of Persephone and Hades, who loves Greek mythology, who loves a good funny, fierce and romantsy story this is the one I suggest you choose.

Just be prepared to start reading and not be able to stop. To maybe swoon over Hades and to laugh at the snarky wit filling the pages. The story comes to a suitably clever close, but I am secretly hoping we might get another!

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **I Kick and I Fly**

**Ruchira Gupta, pub. Rock the Boat**

This unputdownable novel for young adults should be compulsory reading in every British secondary school. I cannot think of an area of the curriculum in which this amazing story would not contribute, nor a novel which so accurately introduces us to a grim, violent, and largely unrecognized underworld of teenage culture which exists in a country that the British dominated and latterly ruled for just on two hundred years. Ruchira Gupta writes with great simplicity, great passion and with an unchallengeable knowledge of the grim world she describes.

We follow the journey made by Heera, a fourteen-year-old member of an erstwhile nomadic tribe, which the Indian government forced instead to settle in some of the worst areas of different cities. Heera lives in appalling slum living conditions where the only work teenage girls like her will find is in the sex trade, which is owned by vicious men who routinely beat the girls, or worse. With Heera, Gupta shows us a typical family in the redlight district - Heera's alcoholic father relies on being able to sell his daughters for sex when they are old enough, to pay off the family debts, while her mother scrapes a living for her family by scavenging the rubbish tips. Heera is terrified by the thought of her future but after being expelled from school she happens to see some girls practising kung fu and is determined to learn this skill to protect herself and others. Allowed back into school with the help of activist Rini Di, we see Heera learn to control her body and mind through the mental and physical discipline required to practise kung fu. When her best friend vanishes Heera suspects the worst, and determines to find her, involving her not only in detection, but also in using her kung fu skill in life and death situations.

Ruchira Gupta is a journalist who made an Emmy-award-winning documentary, *The Selling of Innocents*, and founder of the anti sex trafficking NGO, Apne Aap, that helps women and girls exit systems of prostitution. This novel is closely based on real people and events.

**Bridget Carrington**

## **The Lovely Dark**

**Matthew Fox, pub. Hodder & Stoughton**

*The Lovely Dark* by Matthew Fox is a magical, dark, and serious story. The story revolves around Ellie, a young girl who journeys to the Underworld after drowning in a flood. She finds herself in a boarding school called Eventide House where children have no lessons but stay until they are ready to move on. Here nothing is as it seems... Why is the chapel out of bounds because of renovations that never take place? What is the river that flows at the bottom of the well and whose are the voices that whisper? Ellie embarks on a quest to unravel the secrets surrounding Eventide and her friend Justin's disappearance. Will she ever see him again? Will she get a second chance and be able to return to the land of the living to see her family and her new-born baby brother?

Matthew Fox creates an atmosphere that is both enchanting and eerie. Eventide is brought to life with lush descriptions, painting a vivid picture of a place where magic and danger coexist. The author's vivid imagery transports the reader, allowing them to experience the sights, sounds and even the smells of this ethereal setting. Ellie is a relatable and resilient protagonist. Her determination, courage and vulnerability make her a compelling character and readers will find themselves emotionally invested in her story. The supporting cast of characters including the strange girl Ash and the wise, yet enigmatic, Miss Cauke add depth and intrigue to the narrative.

The pacing of the novel is well-balanced, keeping readers engaged from start to finish. Matthew Fox skilfully weaves together elements of mystery and fantasy, maintaining a sense of tension and anticipation throughout. Each chapter reveals new layers of the story, gradually building towards a climactic and satisfying conclusion.

*The Lovely Dark* is a mesmerizing novel that showcases Matthew Fox's talent for storytelling. With its evocative prose, compelling characters and thought-provoking themes, this book is a must read. It will transport readers to a world that is both alluring and unsettling, leaving a lasting impression long after the final page is turned.

**Anne Korge**

## **Murder On A School Night**

**Kate Weston, pub. Electric Monkey**

For shy and anxious sixth former Kerry, the perfect Friday night involves curling up on the sofa watching 90's rom-coms with her best friend Annie. Her only problem: Annie is desperate to throw herself into the perfect sixth form experience of parties, boys and becoming members of Les Populaires. However, being popular is not all it's cracked up to be, particularly when it involves a string of bizarre murders. As bodies begin to appear around the quiet town, the two girls become determined to solve the case and bring the Menstrual Murderer to justice - but who is friend and who is foe?

Loud and proud, the novel tackles the persistent sexism that still survives in modern society, particularly focusing on the stigma surrounding period products to underscore the light-hearted tone with a more serious theme. Kerry and Annie serve as a reminder to all young women reading the novel that speaking up against injustice should not be considered bossy or brash. Instead, it heralds a world where calling out casual sexism is recognised and celebrated.

Furthermore, Kate Weston, by dismantling the popular clique, not only reminds us that everybody is unique and whole in their own way, but that often those who we deem to be ‘cool’ are in fact just the same as us; human and flawed. An important lesson for teenagers who are frequently faced with perfect standards perpetuated through social media and are often quick to judge themselves against those around them. As such, while the writing style may feel simplistic at times, it is the themes explored within the novel that renders Kate Weston’s work a must read for the summer.

In *Murder On A School Night* Kate Weston has created a world which is both escapist in its absurdity and realistic in its exploration of being a teenager, combining mystery, friendship and romance to create a delightful and darkly humorous novel.

**Elinor Hurry**

## **Rhubarb Lemonade**

**Oskar Kroon, trans. A. A. Prime, pub. Hot Key Books**

Vinga is a teenage girl (and “nerdy, quiet loner” in her own words) spending the summer on the quiet island where her grandfather lives, escaping the heatwave and wildfires choking the city where she lives with her mother.

Jumping around on a timeline over the course of up to year, we slowly discover Vinga’s back story, why her mother is so sad and exactly what her father has been up to. Her ever-changing life in the city makes her love the slow, reliable, timeless pace of life on the island even more. Restoring a boat, drinking rhubarb lemonade, and playing chess with her grandfather is all she needs. Just as it seems that not much happens in the story, everything happens. A new friend, a new love, a new baby, a huge storm. Opposites and contrasts are cleverly woven throughout the story, giving it a depth and reality. The only thing that jarred, for me, was the relationship between Vinga’s parents (no spoilers!) but that’s a subject each reader will react to differently.

Originally written in Swedish and set in Sweden, this book has been brilliantly translated and the reader could easily imagine a setting in more familiar territory. Gentle hints at neurodivergence and LGBTQ relationships make this a sensitive, empathetic coming-of-age YA novel for introverts, nature lovers and anyone in between. A perfect beach read - don’t forget the egg sandwiches and rhubarb lemonade.

Content warnings: major character death, divorce, vomiting. All handled sensitively, this story is suitable for all teen readers.

**Antonia Russell**

## **Sh!t Bag**

**Xena Knox, pub. Hodder Children's Books**

Well - the title alone will get you noticed reading this one! But be warned that on a train journey you may get some strange and amused looks from other passengers!

Behind the eye-catching title is a thought-provoking and engaging read, based on personal and lived experiences. The story follows Freya, a teenager with ulcerative colitis which, during her GCSE's, results in her having emergency surgery and a temporary ileostomy bag fitted to her stomach. Her perfect summer with friends, boyfriends and her sports team are thrown into disarray, and we follow Freya as she battles with her loss of identity and struggles to find her way back to a new normal life.

Whilst easy to read and engaging to connect to, this is not a flippant story. The start of the book is dramatic and unfocused which accurately reflects the real sense of trauma that a young person (or any person!) would feel when something so intensely personal and private becomes the subject of school gossip and cruel memes. The emotion is a key theme that runs throughout the book and partly what makes it so engaging. Freya is a strong narrator; she sees her own faults (often after the event!) and her commentary on her own behaviour is believable and easy to identify with. The story accurately captures the behaviour of those around Freya too, highlighting the ignorance and misinformation that exists around inflammatory bowel conditions especially in and with teenagers when arguably the embarrassment factor is at its highest. There is humour in the story but also sadness. I did cry. Against the backdrop of Freya's condition, which naturally takes centre stage, there are the 'regular' concerns of a young person: school, home life, friendships and their future.

This book is important in that it reliably shows the anger, hurt, and bewilderment of a young person going through a life changing situation. It does not promise happy endings and that is its strength. It raises awareness of the issues and is hopeful for a future without being dismissive or trite. The fact that it is based on the authors own experiences gives it an anchor so that the result is a feisty, funny, heart-breaking but hopeful tale that addresses such an overlooked topic.

**Marianne Degiovanni**

## **Sing If You Can't Dance**



## **Alexia Casale, pub. Faber & Faber Children's Books**

After Ven collapses on stage, in front of her dance group and a TV crew, she is desperate to prove that her life isn't over. However, learning to live with her disability proves to be both frustrating and painful when not only does she have to give up her dream of dancing but even walking becomes difficult. Yet, Ven is determined to have the best life possible, even if sometimes this means pushing her body to its limits. *Sing If You Can't Dance* is a beautiful coming-of-age novel which not only explores the complicated emotions surrounding first loves and friendship but also one's identity.

Alexia Casale creates a bold and endearing figure in Ven. She is unapologetically herself at all times; even when society suggests that she is an inconvenience. Therefore, while the novel may start with Ven declaring that she does not care if we, as readers, like her, it is impossible to not fall in love with her determined and sometimes abrasive character. As she struggles to ask for help, believing it to be a sign of weakness, we see her fear of acknowledging her vulnerability. But as the novel progresses Ven's protective walls are slowly dismantled whilst her circle of friends expands. Through Ven's story, and the exploration of disability, Alexia Casale creates a powerful reminder that nobody is ever alone, particularly in our hardest moments; whatever they may be.

*Sing If You Can't Dance* presents an honest and realistic exploration of chronic illness which is successful at never undermining the difficulties it creates for Ven - particularly the failings of medical professionals - while also highlighting that chronic illness does not define a person. Although Ven's life changes after her diagnosis, the novel serves as a reminder that her life CAN be just as fulfilling as she had previously dreamed; it just may not quite be the life she had imagined.

## **Elinor Hurry**

### **The Unstoppable Bridget Bloom**

**Alison L. Bitz, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books**

I don't know what a jury is, or a sharp, scales, inversions, chords or even staves but Bridget Bloom does, and they are part of her soul.

When 16-year-old Bridget Bloom is accepted to the prestigious Richard James Academy she thinks all her dreams of performing on stage will come true. However, her problems deciphering music theory mean that despite her beautiful singing voice and acclaimed acting skills, she's not accepted to the renowned Music Focus Programme. This means that she isn't allowed to perform whilst studying at the school. But if she cannot perform how will sponsors realise how marvellous she is and how will she get the sponsorship she needs to be able to afford to stay at school?

What I loved about Bridget is that she's unashamedly herself, big boned, red headed, the centre of attention at every party and very, very loud! Sometimes however she is a bit too much herself and misses what's going on with her new friends even though the action is taking place right in front of her. Octavia Lawless the Dean of students at the Academy challenges Bridget to be more humble and to prove some sort of point. Bridget decides that, because she cannot sing at any Academy performance, she won't sing at all. With no one at the Academy knowing about her amazing voice she has to look around her to see what else she's good at. Will this self-inflicted punishment actually make her a better friend too? When she starts asking her friends about themselves, she's amazed by what she discovers and finds a new way to shine.

This is a great book about growing up, friendship and what's really important in life.

**Anna Elson**

## **You Could Be So Pretty** **Holly Bourne, pub. Usborne**

Is there ever a day where you feel like you need to wear certain clothes or style your hair in a way you don't like to fit in? Perhaps there are days when you act like a different person to be 'popular'? In this book, that is normal, and the people are not happy about it.

In this dystopian novel, the Doctrine control everyone's actions. They teach that Girls should be a Pretty and wear Masks, or they are considered Objectionable and Invisible, their voices unheard and actions unnoticed. Belle Gentle is a Pretty, she is popular and aims to be a Chosen One admired for her beauty. But Belle is also unhappy and terrified after she is attacked by a man and the Doctrine fail to protect her, instead blaming her due to the clothes she wore. Joni is an Objectionable, she doesn't wear a Mask, her mother fights for women's rights and she is ignored all the time. When Joni and Belle start to talk to each other more often and lean on each other secretly despite their rivalry and opposite lifestyles, they both realise there is more to the other person's lifestyle. They come to see that they are both struggling with their lives under the Doctrine. They help each other whilst still maintaining a rivalry over the scholarship they are trying to earn to escape their lives.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed this book, the characters were likeable and relatable, and the plot line was interesting. The topics this book covers are important and not too different to our society today but before reading, I would recommend looking at the trigger warnings as some readers may struggle with the content covered.

**Gemma Walford**

# Non-Fiction Books

## **100 Things to Know About the Unknown**

**Jerome Martin, Alice James, Lan Cook, Tom Mumbray, Micalca Tapsell and Alex Frith, illus. Fredico Mariani, Shaw Nielsen, Dominique Byron and Geraldine Sy, pub. Usborne**

Usborne's *100 Things to Know About the Unknown* joins the increasing availability of multidisciplinary and visually attractive resources which are very popular with children of all ages. The language and style of this work, contributed to by several writers and illustrators each with unique knowledge bases and skills (hence naming them all), makes it perfect for primary school pupils.

But its appeal goes beyond that, with information and curiosities ranging across a diverse number of topics - from ancient history to biology, astronomy to art, some already familiar but others rather obscure. The focus is on unanswered questions, therefore while sharing very interesting facts, each page titillates the curiosity of the reader encouraging further exploration and reflection on areas of that topic either remaining unexplored or still baffling experts.

Vibrant colours, captivating illustrations and short captions make this an attractive book as well as a thought-provoking one for independent readers. Any of its pages could easily be used as a starter for an enriching conversation. In fact, it could be a great tool in a classroom, providing stimulus for a lesson or an extension activity, such as independent research or creative writing or reading, in many different disciplines. For example, the page explaining the Matilda Effect made me think of a lovely book with the same title based on the same topic, reviewed in this magazine few years ago. The section on Emperor Hadrian's earlobe sent me on a search for images of statues and medical websites. The possibilities are endless!

An index lists not only the topics but also the areas of the world which are linked to them, and a glossary completes this great book.

**Laura Brill**

## **Against the Odds: The Incredible Struggles of 20 Great Adventurers**

**Alastair Humphreys, illus. Pola Mai, pub. Templar**

This book presents the biographies of twenty little-known adventurers (or pairs of adventurers), many from recent decades, told over four pages each. They're adventurers who have inspired the author,

and the biographies explain why: they're geared towards demonstrating why all these people are so very remarkable. Refreshingly and brilliantly not the hackneyed selection of privileged white men out for personal advantage, *Against the Odds* highlights those people who have overcome challenges due to gender, age, race, status, and disability. It shows great ingenuity, bravery, and a determination to overcome some of the most unusual or perilous situations people have ever faced.

Personally, I've learned so much about history and geography on a human level by reading this book. These are engrossing stories compellingly told, and in Pola Mai, Alastair Humphreys has the perfect visual partner: Rosie Swale-Pope's adventures are depicted as a game of Snakes & Ladders, Joe Simpson is menaced chillingly by ice, Juanita Harrison's life is a scrapbook, Beth French swims across a flowing map, Junko Tabei scales a ladder of summits. The artwork is simply delightful, intensely informative, and inventive, a perfect dynamic complement to the curious and excited writing.

This book is one of the useful ones, hitting many relevant learning points and presenting much immersive detail. It has value from Year 1 (daring tall tales to be read to class) to Year 8 (insights on how societies react to nonconformity), though I feel its core readership will probably be Years 4 to 5, older readers treating the book as a jumping off point, younger ones not completely able to take everything in. I had fun with this book: it's a kaleidoscope of prose and artistic techniques with detail that brings amazing stories to life without ever outstaying any one story's welcome. This feels like an important book. I read it and felt the uniqueness and value we each possess. Again, and again, the book demonstrates the awesomeness available to every one of us should we look for it and reassures that within us all dwells an adventurer. This is the first book I've read so far this year that has made me feel most positive about humanity.

**Dmytro Bojaniwskyj**

## **The Book of Mysteries, Magic and the Unexplained**

**Tamara MacFarlane, illus. Kristina Kister, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books**

Do you believe in magic? I certainly do! Because it exists within and appears when you need it the most. Books are part of the universe's magic as well because they follow the same magical trail, supporting our learning and growth...and when magic is what you believe in, it appears in different ways. This monsoon season, it has come to enlighten me through this wonderful book!

*The Book of Mysteries, Magic and the Unexplained* is written by award winning author and founder of Tales On Moon Lane Children's Books, Tamara MacFarlane (she is also fond of the futuristic writer Arthur C. Clarke!) It is strikingly illustrated by children's book artist Kristina Kister. This vibrantly designed, big book, summons one's imagination, encouraging it to explore the 'unknown' through curious tools, myths, legends, creatures, tales, phenomena and much more.

As we dive into the swirl of colours a healer approaches, a shaman appears and an oracle predicts, all the while a witch is brewing a potion in her cauldron. The reader discovers different tools of divination and learns how mystical cats, bats, crows are as well as how different plants were used as healing potions! With each colourful page, the reader gets to know the revelations of the Book of Shadows or who were apothecaries in the past. Questions such as: What is psychometry? How vast and immense are the brain's capacities? How were illusions used to trick people in the past? Were science and magic merged? Can spirits really communicate? And so much more! It is possible your own questions about the mystical might be answered here and if not, this book provides food for thought! It has Big Foot, Fairies, Phantom Bus and more, from earth to the layers above, from ocean to space. You name it, your imagination goes for a ride with this book!

*The Book of Mysteries, Magic and the Unexplained* encourages teens and adults to step away from mind-boggling realism into a refreshing garden of the awe-inspiring. Include this as a dose of the esoteric, mysterious, occult, enchanting, in your life. Use it to expand your thoughts or simply keep it as a fun read. Happy reading!

**Ishika Tiwari**

## **Goddess and Heroines: Meet More Than 80 Legendary Women from Around the World**

**Jean Menzies, illus. Katie Ponder, pub. DK**

*Goddesses and Heroines: Meet More than 80 Legendary Women from Around the World* is a carefully crafted, hard-back illustrated non-fiction in the style of AA Publishing's *The Woman Who Rode a Shark* and *50 More Wild Female Adventurers* by Ailsa Ross and Amy Blackwell and *A Galaxy of Her Own Amazing Stories of Women in Space* by Libby Jackson, published by Century. I found this to be a slight diversion from Dorling Kindersley usual familiar encyclopaedic format.

Jean Menzies has divided the book into four chapters: Goddesses, Magical Beings, Mortals, and a final, shorter chapter, About the Myths, which discusses how the stories have been shared over the eras through storytelling and artwork, and how they have been recorded in scrolls and famous books like *The Mabinogion*, often in the form of poetry. It also briefly mentions some of the temples, monuments, and festivals for worshipping the goddesses.

The first three chapters have been divided into sections, for example there are sections on creator goddesses; goddesses of the stars moon and sky; goddesses of animals to name a few. Each section has an introduction and then a couple of the women mentioned in each introduction are elaborated upon with a significant story about the heroine or goddess to explain why they were worshipped. Katie

Ponder's pastel-coloured illustrations compliment the stories and highlight the main parts bringing them to life. There is also a useful pronunciation guide, glossary, and index to help readers.

Unlike other books of this calibre the women included have not been confined to a double page spread of facts, which makes it stand out as unique. Jean Menzies has been given the freedom to explore why these females were revered and often feared just as much as their male counterparts, throughout the ages. It contributes to filling the gap of equality in the world of myths and legends, highlighting their diverse nature by showing how each culture worshipped similar goddesses or idealised strong female heroines, each one with their own story and achievements.

*Goddesses and Heroines* would be a fantastic resource in the classroom and is ideal for any young reader interested in myths and legends. The sections can be read in any order and it's great for dipping into, for exploring the stories. Individual stories could be read aloud during story time, in assemblies or even at the end of the day before bedtime. A beautiful celebration of the contribution women have made to their heritage.

**Anita Loughery**

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

## **How To Spaghetlify Your Dog**

**Hiba Noor Khan, illus. Harry Woodgate, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books**

*How To Spaghetlify Your Dog* is one of the most fun books that I have read for a long time! Full of fascinating facts, but presented in such an engaging and enjoyable way, readers will learn all about the different parts that make up outer space as well as having a good chuckle along the way!

The book explores space to a reasonably complex level but builds extremely nicely; by starting with the basics of atoms, states of matter and friction. From this, readers can pick up the early building blocks, which they may have learnt about at school already, before applying this knowledge to the more difficult topics such as time in space and inertia.

This superb book is well thought out. Hiba Noor Khan has done a fantastic job ensuring that the reader will be able to take in the information, even down to changing the size of the font of certain sections of information and highlighting key words in bold. She uses all her knowledge and skills as a teacher to present the information in a way that is relatable and easy to understand, no matter what your current knowledge of physics is. A wonderful touch, that I really enjoyed while reading, is the inclusion of simple science investigations that can be done at home. These can be easily carried out with little equipment and will allow you to see the science happening first-hand!

Harry Woodgate is a very talented illustrator, the front cover itself is a work of art with fun and colour on display everywhere you look. Throughout the book, Harry continues to capture the fun of the subject with brilliant illustrations, whether they are of an elephant in high heels or a baby on a rocket in space. He uses colour effectively, bringing each page to life and matching the information with images that support the learning.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable read. It's the best space-based non-fiction book that I have read in recent times.

**Tom Joy**

### **I Can Do That! 1000 Ways to Become Independent photos. Alain Laboile, illus. Hifumiyo, pub. DK**

There is so much packed into this book, it's hard to know where to start. The basic premise is to encourage young children to be independent in various aspects of their lives so the book is divided into seven sections: in the bathroom; in my bedroom; at my desk; in the kitchen; at home; outdoors; and at school.

Each section contains skills that it is useful for children to master; there are no age suggestions given although the book notes that children develop differently so parents/carers need to determine which activities are appropriate. There is also a red triangle against some pages denoting that there may be an element of danger and children may need supervision, for example, when learning how to chop vegetables with a knife. Some of the activities such as washing your hands or holding a pencil are quite basic and you would expect a young child to be able to do them by the time they go to school. Others, such as washing your hair or wrapping a present, require more dexterity and proficiency.

The publisher's suggested age range for the book is 5-7 years but there are quite a few skills that are more suitable for older children to attempt, for example, slicing bread and taking the bus. As expected for DK, the book is extremely visual with each activity spread across two pages; there are step-by-step instructions and either clear drawings or photographs (featuring images of quite young children) demonstrating what to do. The 'how to go to bed' page made me smile as I'm not sure there are many children who tuck themselves in and switch out the light on their own!

**Barbara Band**

### **Out and About Sky Explorer: A Children's Guide to Clouds, Constellations and Other Amazing Things to Spot In the Sky**

**Elizabeth Jenner, illus. Anja Susanj, pub. Nosy Crow**

This National Trust and Nosy Crow collaboration, *Out and About Sky Explorer* will delight children and parents alike. Full of bright illustrations and accessible science facts, it takes the reader on a journey from the troposphere, through the stratosphere, mesosphere and thermosphere, all the way up to the exosphere (all these terms are explained in the book).

A selection of other things that readers will learn about through the book include: different cloud formations; rainbows; eclipses; constellations and the wonder that is the Northern Lights. The authors explain why the sky is blue, the different phases of the moon and what sundogs are. They have pitched the tone of the text perfectly, it's informative and engaging, drawing the reader in, and keeping their attention. *Out and About Sky Explorer* is full of scientific explanations that are clearly articulated. We loved the way it delivers so many facts and yet also manages to simply encourage readers to get outside, look up, be curious, ask questions, observe.

Complete with a full index, which we always appreciate in non-fiction book, this one is hardback and a bit larger than pocket-sized. It has an eye-catching blue cover. It would make a lovely present for a child who is interested in the world around them. Part of a larger series of books which includes *Minibeast Explorer*, *Night Explorer* and *Bird Spotter* it's an excellent addition to the collection. They would make a lovely set to include on any child's bookshelf. If you have a child who likes to ask, 'Why?' then we would definitely recommend this book!

**Stephanie Robertson**

## **The Spectacular Science of Space**

**Rob Colson, illus. Moreno Chiacchiera, pub. Kingfisher**

As an interest that stretches back thousands of years, exploring the night sky and learning about space is a science that has developed through the years, and will continue to progress. Ancient Greek astronomers made predictions, and models, about what the universe may have looked like, even working out that the planets seemed to move around each other in rotations (then called epicycles). Obviously, our knowledge has deepened since then, with our discovery that the sun is at the centre of the solar system, and the fact that we can travel to different areas of space with rockets and other spacecraft.

This brilliant book moves through different discoveries relating to parts of space: the planets, space rocks and rockets, to name a few. It also gives information about key figures who have helped to advance space exploration. The breakdown of what a star is and what the difference is between a meteor and an asteroid is particularly interesting. Whatever your area of interest is, you will find it in this book!



*The Spectacular Science of Space* has double-page spreads on each different topic that it explores, with paragraphs of writing mixed in with labelled diagrams and photographs which help the reader connect the information given with images to support their understanding. Presented to look like a workbook with the pages made up of squares and images stuck on with tape or pinned to the page, it really gives the impression that our knowledge of space is still being worked on and is not the finished product. The book includes some reasonably in-depth science knowledge which makes it perfect for young minds who want to deepen their understanding.

The illustrations by Moreno Chiacchiera suit this book perfectly – the front cover alone brings the book to life! Each double-page is well thought out and brings the learning to life.

Children interested in space will adore this book; it is interesting, informative, and so well laid out – each double-page is different but equally as engaging as the previous one. A super read!

**Tom Joy**

## **What Do Scientists Do?**

**Tom Mumbray, illus. Can Tuğrul and Geraldine Sy, pub. Usborne**

This is a stunning book, with attractive and interesting pages that make good use of colour, illustrations, diagrams, and strip cartoons. The text is clear, and the layout is designed to engage the reader.

It explores jobs within various areas of science including those connected with living things; careers for people who are curious about big questions regarding the universe; different jobs that involve investigating the Earth; jobs for people fascinated by the idea of living in space; careers that focus on the treatment of diseases; occupations that deal with protecting the planet; and professions that require being creative with technology. Each section has between four and seven jobs listed and looks at the environments people might find themselves working in; what they might be doing; how they undertake research and being part of a team. The jobs listed are wide-ranging giving some excellent, and unusual, examples of how an interest in a STEM subject could lead to a career. There is a flow chart designed to help the reader decide what sort of job in science might suit them, a glossary of jobs in science and an index for ease of access.

The first book in an excellent new series about jobs for 8-13-year-olds to explore; I can't wait to see what the future books cover.

**Barbara Band**

**Wise About My Body: An Introduction to the Amazing Human Body**  
**Libby Walden, illus. Ekaterina Trukhan, pub. Ladybird Books**

*Wise About My Body* is an introduction to what your body can do, how it works and how to look after it. It is aimed at readers aged 4 to 7 years (Key Stage 1) and the language and illustrations are all age appropriate.

Although the book is packed with facts, these are presented in small sections which make it easy for young readers to engage with the clear explanations. Each page, each section, features engaging drawings that are diverse and inclusive. A range of conditions such as visual and hearing impairments are included. Disabilities, differences, and consent are topics now discussed in schools and with younger age groups. The message that the book conveys is that we all look different and that is what makes us special.

The book is also printed on sturdy paper so will stand up to being handled by young children. There are a wide variety of topics covered including what's inside the body – blood; the different parts of the body and how they work – the muscles and bones; the major organs and their functions; the senses. The importance of food and water is also discussed as is keeping clean and staying healthy through washing and sleeping. The final spread deals with staying safe via personal space and being happy with different levels of contact such as hugs or holding hands.

With its conversational style, dip-in, dip-out pages of bitesize facts *Wise About My Body* is a fantastic book for younger children curious about their bodies.

**Barbara Band**

## **Picture books**

### **The Bee Who Loved Words**

Helen Docherty, illus. Erica Salcedo

### **The Best Bad Day Ever**

Marianna Coppo

### **The Dodo Who Dreamed She Could Fly**

Catherine Emmett, illus. Claire Powell

### **The Duck Never Blinks**

Alex Latimer

### **Geoffrey Gets the Jitters**

Nadia Shireen

### **The Grand Hotel of Feelings**

Lidia Brankovic

### **Henri and the Machine**

Isabelle Marinov, illus. Olga Shtonda

### **Rhinos Don't Cry**

Mark Grist, illus. Chris Jevons

### **The Thunk**

Michelle Robinson, illus. Deborah Allwright

### **The Truth About Yeticorns**

Rachel Morrisroe, illus. Ella Okstad

### **Who's Afraid of the Light?**

Anna McGregor

## **Junior books**

### **The Carnival of the Spider**

Kieran Littlewood, illus. Sam Usher

### **Friends and Traitors**

Helen Peters

### **My Brilliant Plan to Fix Everything**

Ben Davies

### **Old Gods New Tricks**

Thiago De Moraes

### **Ruby and the Pen**

David Lawrence

### **Spellcasters**

Crystal Sung, illus. Wendy Tan

### **The Stupendous Sonny**

Ellie Clements

### **The Sundae Delivery Service**

Holly Rivers

### **Worrybot**

Simon Packham

### **The Wrath of the Woolington Wurm**

Karen Foxlee, illus. Freda Chiu

## **Young Adult books**

### **Black Heat**

Bex Hogan

### **Bonesmith**

Nicki Pau Petro

### **Finding Phoebe**

Gavin Extence

### **Girl, Goddess, Queen**

Bea Fitzgerald

### **I Kick and I Fly**

Ruchira Gupta

### **The Lovely Dark**

Matthew Fox

### **Murder On A School Night**

Kate Weston

### **Rhubarb Lemonade**

Oskar Kroon, trans. A. A. Prime

### **Sh!t Bag**

Xena Knox

### **Sing If You Can't Dance**

Alexia Casale

### **The Unstoppable Bridget Bloom**

Alison L. Bitz

### **You Could Be So Pretty**

Holly Bourne

## **Non-Fiction books**

### **100 Things to Know About the Unknown**

Jerome Martin, Alice James, Lan Cook, Tom Mumbray, Micala Tapsell and Alex Frith, illus. Fredico Mariani, Shaw Nielsen, Dominique Byron and Geraldine Sy

### **Wise About My Body: An Introduction to the Amazing Human Body**

Libby Walden, illus. Ekaterina Trukhan

### **Against the Odds: The Incredible Struggles of 20 Great Adventurers**

Alastair Humphreys, illus. Pola Mai

### **The Book of Mysteries, Magic and the Unexplained**

Tamara MacFarlane, illus. Kristina Kister

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