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# Picture books

## **Colour and Me!**

Michaela Dias-Hayes, pub. Owlet Press

Michaela Dias-Hayes, the author and illustrator of *Colour and Me!* takes inspiration from her part-Jamaican heritage, and conversations with her young son about the colour brown, in this joyful celebration of colour in the world around us and the beauty of brown skin in particular. The text is written as a simple and effective rhyme which makes it a pleasure to read out loud but it's the bright, eye-catching artwork that make this book really stand out.

The little girl in the story loves painting with her fingers – as all children know, it's messy and it's fun. She wonders what will happen if she mixes three colours, yellow, red, and blue, together and experiments by doing so. She mixes red with yellow, then yellow with blue, and blue with red – using each of the resulting colours to paint something that she likes. The little girl finally mixes the three colours that she has created and makes brown – a colour that is just like her and suits her perfectly. Her wise 'Nanny says that every colour is special, just like me.' The final spread shows four children of different colour celebrating their colour together and how special each of them is.

As well as being a nice introduction to mixing colours, this is a great picture book that delivers a positive and uplifting message.

## **Vicky Harvey**

## **Frank and Bert**

Chris Naylor-Ballesteros, pub. Nosy Crow

Frank and Bert are best friends. They love to play hide-and-seek, but Bert doesn't quite have the knack, which makes him a bit glum. Because he wants to make his friend happy, Frank comes up with a kind plan. It's a plan that involves a lot of counting – all the way up to a hundred!

Frank is a capable sort of fox, and Bert is a bumbling sort of bear. Both are adorable, and they have very expressive faces. Against the quite sober, wintery pastels of the landscape, Frank's woolly hat and Bert's woolly scarf pop with cheerful colour. Numbers and counting are an integral part of the experience of reading this story; it offers fantastic opportunities to familiarise children with numbers. Visual humour is also very important, which makes it fun to share, and provides a cheeky, non-verbal twist at the end.

It is a story that might prompt conversations about putting other people's feelings first, and how rewarding small, unselfish actions can be. It is also a gentle reminder that nobody should be underestimated!

Nosy Crow's Stories Aloud feature, enables you to scan a QR code on the cover and access the audio version of the story. It is well-paced, with plenty of time to take in the pictures, before the signal is given to turn the page. Since counting to a hundred repeatedly might lose its appeal for a parent, this would seem an excellent option once you have enjoyed exploring the story together first.

Highly recommended!

## **Jackie Spink**

### **Fred and the Fantastic Tub-Tub**

Zeb Soames, illus. Anja Uhren, pub. Graffeg

An outstanding book. An unusual book. A book, a story that are going to take us on an exciting journey of enchantment. This is a book that wants us to learn all about the power of music and to be inspired by the power of nature, it unusual combines the two. Not only does it do this but it also combines story and music, for this is a story and an orchestral concert work.

This story first took shape back in 2008 when author Zeb Soames was asked to create a narrated adventure for children that would inspire them to explore sound and music regardless of their ability. The music was already in place, a story was needed. With the environment being such an important theme to the world, then as it is now, the inspiration was easy to decide on, the story then developed. The story is short, after all it has to fit half an hour of music, but there is space at the end of the book for children and their adults to continue the story for themselves. The story? Fred's green fingered grandfather has shown her a map of the mysterious island of Papa Nupi, with this they embark on a summer holiday adventure that may to save the world.

The text is dense making it not quite a picture book but not yet quite a middle grade either, readers will enjoy it with an adult reader, it would work perfectly in a school setting where it can be discussed and where music could be created to accompany it too.

## **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

### **I Am the Subway**

Kim Hyo-eun, trans. Deborah Smith, pub. Scribble Books

The storyteller in *I Am the Subway* is the subway itself so we have a book full of stories about the places and people the train sees every day. There is the lady in the white hat with blue ribbon and there is Mr. Wanju, who has to run to catch the train. Luckily, Mr. Wanju has very long legs and steps on board just before the train rumbles into the tunnel beneath the wide Han River.

Next, City Hall station and Granny has a bagful of fish. Now the train smells of the sea. Seongsu station is next with three new passengers. Mum, a little boy and a baby girl. Mum is glad to sit down. It's been a busy day with her children. Here is Guui station and Mr. Jae-sung who wears shiny shoes. Mr. Jae-sung always tries to guess where shoes have been walking. Gangnam station next and student Na-yoon, tired with all her schoolwork, soon falls asleep. Here's Mr. Gu with his cart of bright gloves to sell. Mr. Wanju won't buy any. He's getting off. Lee Do-Young gets on next, going to Seoul to try and find a job. Finally, at Sindirim station, lots of people leave the train but not the lady in the white hat with blue ribbon.

The illustrations in *I Am the Subway* are wonderful, so colourful and detailed, any child will just want to look and look at them. The soft paper makes the delicate water colours even more captivating, like the deeply blue sea Granny has swum in, the cobbler with lots of shoes to repair and the fabulous, brilliant illustration of Na-yoon's city. This is a glorious book, one to love and cherish and read over and over again.

**Gwen Grant**

## **I Love You, Blue**

Stephane Barroux, pub. Otter Barry Books

Jonas the lighthouse keeper loves blue, the blue of the ocean, along with its smell of the wind and its simple calm. Loves it until the sky turns black, the sea rages and roars, then it is scary, then it is a moment when Jonas needs help – but out there in the great wide ocean who will help? Blue. Blue will help. Blue is a whale and now also Jonas' friend. Soon it is Jonas who needs to come to the aid of Blue. Blue is looking poorly, and Jonas wants to know why, dutifully Blue opens his large mouth and what do we see – plastic bags, Blue is full of them. Jonas takes his turn, he saves Blue.

An evocative, simple tale that will delight every reader with its simple, minimal text and full-page water-colour illustrations, this is a gentle but important story. A love story, love for a friend, for the environment that teaches us we need to care for those we love and for the world we all live in. We learn, children learn though this story, the importance of saving both our oceans and our whales, of all the wildlife in them. Every reader will doubtless gain a sense of the kinship between earth and sea, between the creatures of both and a feeling for the actions that they can take to help save our oceans, our planet from plastic pollution. A moving, a beautiful, an important book.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **In You I See: A Story That Celebrates the Beauty Within**

Rachel Emily, illus. Jodie Howard, pub. Dorling Kindersley

What a truly beautiful and inspirational picture book. It is very simple, with the left-hand page showing the reader a range of characteristics, which the narrator can see in the child they are talking to. But it is the opposite pages which give depth and emotion to these names, as they are explained.

The illustrations are soft and dream-like but they encapsulate the feeling of the words, creating a warm blanket for those of us reading the book. This is one of those books that should always be available when there are young children around. It provides that wonderful positivity and joy that we all need, especially in this current world. The book also shows us that we all have qualities that are special, even if we are not always conscious of them.

This is a magical, heart-warming book that is highly recommended.

**Margaret Pemberton**

## **Love Grows Everywhere**

Barry Jimms, illus. Jisha Lee, pub. Frances Lincoln

This simplistic, plotless story explains how love can grow - comparing it to looking after a plant and making it flourish. This natural link makes it easier for children to understand and gently encourages them to find ways to show love to everyone around them in all kinds of different places and situations. The book is full of easy rhymes that allows the reader to fall into its effortless natural rhythm as you read aloud.

These beautiful illustrations are vibrant and colourful showing lots of different scenes from a family home, a park, the countryside and the city. What really stands out about these illustrations is just how diverse the characters are, which is refreshing to see! It champions and feels incredibly inclusive with characters of different races, sexes, and ages.

This book is filled with a range of different sized pictures throughout captivating its readers. Within each page, there are so many details that make it exciting to read each time finding something new when you return to read the book again and again.

This book needs to be read, to be read with young ones; to share a moment together with beautiful pictures and rhymes. This perfect mix blurs together to create a beautiful talking point about love and how to make it grow.

**Natalie Golding**

### **Mia and the Miffkins**

Margarita Surnaite, pub. Andersen Press

A beautifully illustrated book in bright colours. The characters' expressions in the illustrations really assist in telling the story and show their feelings. This is a story about siblings who do not get on. However, when an argument gets out of hand and Mia is cross with her little brother Jim, it takes some strange creatures named the Miffkins to get the two children to see sense.

A story which gives opportunities for discussion about feelings and how sometimes when you get cross with siblings, you need to find common ground to bring you back together and make up. The language used is clear and concise and is easily understood. This book would be ideal to read to young children but also to children aged up to 8 if it was enhancing a topic of 'getting along' or 'bullying' where questions could be asked.

A thoroughly enjoyable book that could be read at home or in a primary/SEN setting.

**Helen Finch**

### **The More Monster**

Hayley Wells, pub, Pavilion

Hayley Wells' debut picture book, written and illustrated by her own hand, celebrates the power of story through fairy-tale, delivering a modern fable on the theme of sharing. A stunning, timely and thought-provoking story for readers little and large.

Once upon a time (this is after all a fairy-tale) a mighty monster controlled an island. He was in charge because he was bigger, meaner and hungrier. The trouble was that being all these things meant he always wanted more. Not just more but more of the very best and to sate his greed he made the islanders work. When, one day, one of the islanders decides that enough is quite simply enough we are all taken on a journey to find out why the monster is always hungry for more. What the islander discovers, what we all discover is a surprise but is it a surprise that they, and we as reader, can learn from?

This picture book is packed with detail – words to tell the story, images to tell the story, pages that look a little like graphic novels, pages that need the reader to move the book around so they can see them in landscape. So much detail and such an important story that it will take many tellings to take it all in and it would be the perfect story for a classroom discussion at both KS1 and KS2 too.

A striking modern fable with a classic feel and twist. A must-read and thoughtful tale for us all to devour.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

### **The Museum of Marvellous Things**

Kristina Stephenson, pub. Hachette Children's Books

*The Museum of Marvellous Things* is a book full of brilliant, sweeping colours. It also has a museum full of magic and incredible characters but it is also in trouble, for the magic is fading and as it fades, so does the museum and no-one knows what to do about it.

Norbert Norris, a small and very clever boy who knew everything, lived across the road from the museum that the incredibly clever Professor T. Pott had created. Tilly Pott was sure Norbert would know how to put the magic back and save the museum. Norbert loved museums and wanted to help. He met an enormous red dragon however who wasn't very pleased to see him. Who would put a dragon in a museum, Norbert wondered. He climbed some very nice blue stairs where moons in balloons and stars in jars floated and spun. There were Doo-Dahs in cages, Noo-Nahs on stages and a Numpkin with only one hump. The museum was full of wonderful, friendly creatures.

But Norbert Norris said, I don't understand this place and I know nothing about magic, which was when Tilly Pott turned up in a wobbly grey teapot. And so did his backpack with the Muffle-Wumper! Then look for the magic, shouted the Muffle-Wumper. And Norbert did. He saw fairies at the bottom of sea, chairs with eyes and a huge ghostly animal with horns and he believed in them all.

Norbert Norris made a wish, that the Museum of Marvellous Things would never disappear. The wish flew all over the museum, filling it with light and colour. Clever Norbert knew something else now. He knew that believing in magic meant magic would never disappear either.

**Gwen Grant**

### **The Pipsqueak**

Ben Manley, illus. Andrew Gardner, pub. Andersen Press

This picture book tells of a group of friends, carefully described, with nicknames, by 'Hero', who tells us she is very brave. 'Brick' is very strong, 'Ghost' is very good at hiding and is not often seen, 'Switch' does magic tricks (and there is an easy one you can do), 'Thunderbolt' can run very fast, and Pip is someone's little brother, and he tags along, but has no skills (or has he?)

They are a gang, and they have their spot, which they like, but they also have an enemy, a girl called Solo, who is so mean that she once squished little Pip and stole his new yo-yo. Solo invades their spot, and turns out to be stronger than Brick, faster than Thunderbolt, and so on. Even Hero can't stand up to her, and is expecting to be squished, when she hears a voice. Pip is telling Solo that she may be bigger than him, stronger and faster, but he's not scared of her, because he has something she doesn't have. "Oh yeah? And what's that, Pipsqueak?" He tells her that he has the gang, and this is their spot, but they can find another spot. They do find another place to be, but Solo turns up there as well. She says sorry she was mean and gives Pip back his yo-yo. Solo was lonely in their old spot, asks to join their gang, and they let her. She has great ideas for building a treehouse, and they rename her 'Sketch'. They make the best-ever spot, and they like it a lot.

It's a simple story with an underlying message, and a good way of helping children to understand that a bully may be unhappy, and that being kind is best. The distinctive illustrations by Andrew Gardner, who has plenty of picture books in his portfolio, make this a successful first for this partnership.

**Diana Barnes**

## **The Robber Raccoon**

Lou Kuenzler, illus. Julia Woolf, pub. Faber

Rosie Raccoon seems to be on a robbery spree, visiting some of the wealthiest properties around. However, when the police investigate, they find that none of the valuables in the properties have been taken. Then, when they arrest Rosie and search her swag bag, they find some very unusual items. Rosie has been taking rubbish from the bins; so, there are bottles, cans, paper and plastic that was being thrown away and our robber raccoon has been re-cycling.

This is a great story with a brilliant twist at the very end. The readers get to understand some very important lessons. Of course, the first one is, 'don't steal', but perhaps the biggest lesson is the one learnt by the investigators and owners; this tells us that we don't have to throw everything away when we have finished them. Recycling is a vital part of our daily lives, and we should be re-using and upcycling as much as we can. This delightful 'heroine' shows us how we can be creative.

**Margaret Pemberton**

## **Snowy White**

Gareth P. Jones, illus. Loretta Schauer, pub. Farshore

The first thing that struck me about *Snowy White* was the wonderful characters on the front cover. The adorable Snowy White on her skateboard, holding an apple for a nod to the original story, seven mice, each with their own outfit and character, and the menacing ginger cat paw at the bottom with claws out! It really made me want to open the book and find out more.

Each page of this picture book is bursting with colour and character. In this re-telling of the traditional tale, Snowy White is of course, a cat. Her rival is the 'purringly perfect' Kingsley, the king of the catwalk, who has a goldfish in a bowl which is his crystal ball, rather than a mirror. Kingsley tries his best to turn the other cats against Snowy White, while she is helping her mouse friends to clean up the mess Kingsley and his catwalk pals make.

An endearing story, teaching us that who you are is much more important than how you look. Young children will love the fun and colourful illustrations by Loretta Schauer, the pages are so vibrant, and there is so much to look at. Gareth P. Jones has done a brilliant job of putting a new spin on the story of *Snow White*, delivering an important message along the way.

The book is very well produced by Farshore. Look out for two more retellings of traditional tales by this duo on the back cover.

## **Sarah Thompson**

### **Wide Awake Wolf**

Georgiana Deutsch, illus. Megan Tadden, pub. Little Tiger Press

Wolf couldn't sleep. In the depths of the forest he muses on the elusive nature of sleep and sets out to find it. This is the story of his search and what it reveals. A wise little book that provides useful hints to both readers and their carers. Wolf's efforts to locate the evasive friend include taking an *al fresco* bubble bath, a tasty snack and doing what bats do so well when they go to bed, hang upside down. But no, sleep remains hidden.

Georgiana Deutsch, a skilled children's picture book writer tackles this tricky subject managing to lull us into an otherworldly state with the assistance of her illustrator Megan Tadden. Wolf's friends Badger and Hedgehog join the team and an owl manages to solve their problem, with the effortless wisdom that only owls seem to have.

Hypnotic blues, mauves, greys, purples and moonlight whites aid the arrival of this intangible necessity. They set the scene, quietly telling us that we need to become calm like them. And as owl

advises, you don't go hunting for sleep you let sleep find you. The requirements are feeling tired, and still and safe. A good lesson for all concerned to learn, from this unusual sleep manual. An ideal book for reading in small groups in play school at the end of the day when tiredness has set in. Or as an antidote to overactivity perhaps at home or in school. Or simply at bedtime.

A brilliant book that manages to convey its message perfectly "...the whispered words of a bedtime story" are magic.

**Elizabeth Negus**

## **You're Loved**

Liz Climo, pub. Welbeck

When a new baby is born yes maybe it may be very demanding of its parents' time (a good message for little ones who have a new baby in the family) but the little baby is also perfect, it is very much worth it. So, Liz Climo's words tell us. And, we are about to learn, it is not only when you are new that you are perfect – you are always perfect and more importantly you are always loved.

Babies – they make a lot of noise, they are fragile, they are determined – just look at them when they take those first wobbly steps, determined that they will walk – human and animal baby alike. Little ones are however agile, soon they will be bouncing around and exploring with their endless curiosity. Try reading them a book, you will soon be inundated with questions and demands for more! Bedtime may not always be peaceful but as the days, months, years pass, you get stronger, the baby gets stronger, is growing up and through it all they continue to be loved. This delightful book is a celebration of being of being a parent, at every step. It is uplifting, hilariously honest and completely inclusive. Its animal characters are a wonderful representation and reminder that we are all loved.

With its gently rhyming verse, making it easy to read aloud, packed with humour and bright bold illustration (words and picture both by Liz Climo) little readers will be able to relate to this is a book for the whole family to share in, appreciate the sentiment of and enjoy.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

# Junior Books

## **The Bird Singers**

Eve Wersocki Morris, pub. Hodder Children's Books

Layah and Izzie's Mum has dragged them on holiday to a remote cottage in the Lake District. Mum is distracted and something isn't right. Layah's sleep is disturbed by a mysterious whistling noise which she follows through the house. Through the darkness of the garden a pair of yellow eyes stare back at her. As more strange events follow the girls, they must unravel Lowesdale's many mysteries. But who can they trust and what is Mum hiding from them?

Ever present in the girls' thoughts is their much-missed Polish grandmother, Babcia. An expert in myths and legends, the stories and knowledge she shared with the sisters come to be crucial to their survival. *The Bird Singers* is imbued with a love of Eastern European folk tales and Wersocki Morris skilfully blends the modern and the mythical in creating the world of Lowesdale. She creates an unsettling atmosphere with many creepy and chilling moments. The plot is gripping and unpredictable.

Central to the story are family relationships and learning to truly understand and accept the people you live with. The characters grapple with the shadows of the past and questions of identity. The growing bond between the two sisters and their strength and resilience provides the emotional core of the book. Ideal for readers of 9+, this would be a great read for fans of the *Pinch of Magic* series. Wersocki Morris is an interesting new voice and I look forward to whatever she writes next.

## **Liz Speight**

### **The Boy Whose Wishes Came True**

Helen Rutter, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Helen Rutter's first book was described by the celebrated novelist Jacqueline Wilson as "[v]ery funny, very touching and very truthful - a total delight to read" and this story is equally talented. An inspiring read for whoever turns its pages. And it might just help a child with rather more outstanding personal issues, to look at them from a different perspective. "Opinions are like bums: we've all got one" Archie Crumb reminds us, the unwitting hero.

Many children will identify with Archie Crumb's dilemmas. He is a little boy living with his mother who has lost her job, her husband and not surprisingly is depressed. Archie's Dad and his new wife have a 6 year-old daughter called Scarlett or Scadge, depending on who is doing the calling. Scarlett is

the apple of his eye. “The glow in the dark stars on my ceiling stopped working years ago, so now I’m just gazing at plastic” Archie tells us.

Archie struggles to find self confidence and feels frustrated by his perceived inability to be good at anything, compounded by a seeming lack of parental love and care, owing to their own self pre-occupations. He feels as though everything he tries fails. He has a very good friend called Mouse and they are both passionate about football. The difference is that Mouse is good at it, unlike Archie who yet again struggles to be successful. He frustratedly turns his unknown skills to stickers. His warm-hearted generosity, innate ability to inspire and organise, along with empathy are initially unrecognised, but not for long. “My trousers are too small and I’m wearing a T-shirt with spaghetti hoop juice on it - that’s just the way I am” Archie adds.

Each chapter is preceded by two quotes. One from Archie’s local football hero at Valley Rovers, Lucas Bailey and another by Archie. Archie is only at the beginning of the journey that Lucas has already travelled, but by the end of the story he has caught up and they both report “I got through it and I’m doing all right now”. A personable and plausible little story suitable for any 8+ year old.

## **Elizabeth Negus**

### **Carnival of the Lost**

Kieran Larwood, illus. Sam Usher, pub. Faber

This novel is set in London in 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition. Sheba believes she is an orphan. When she is scared or angry she has the ability to transform into a wolf. As a result of this propensity Sheba lives in a freak show alongside other characters with equally unusual attributes. There is a strong man named Gigantus. There is a witch’s imp named Pyewacket. Sister Moon is a partially sighted knife thrower, whose vision is perfect only in the dark. Flossy is a two headed lamb. Mama Rat is a human who controls a circus of performing rats.

Children begin disappearing in mysterious circumstances. It seems that their disappearance is not a matter that much concerns official London society. So the members of the freak show decide to take on the job of hunting for the missing children. The novel now poses two questions: will the members of the carnival find the children and what other secrets will they disclose in the quest?

Larwood’s novel is marked by two significant attributes. First, the characters of the story do command the reader’s interest and concern. Second, Larwood manages to evoke with stunning reality the fetid and menacing atmosphere lurking below the celebratory surface of mid-nineteenth century London. Books describing the London of the Great Exhibition are commonplace. But most of their authors are content to dwell on the glossy surface of events. Not so Kieran Larwood.

## **Rebecca Butler**

### **The Cats We Meet Along the Way**

Nadia Mikail, illus. Kate Ng, pub. Guppy Books

Nadia Mikail won an open submission competition held by independent publisher Guppy Books during lockdown, and here is the result: her memorable, beautifully produced first novel, appealingly illustrated by Kate Ng. Malaysian author Nadia Mikail already has a distinctive voice, bringing humour, warmth and understanding to her tale.

And it's one that will strike chords with many young (and older) readers. Climate grief and eco-anxiety are terms widely used now, with young people, particularly, seeing their hopes for a habitable planet looking less and less likely. Here, though, it's not climate collapse that threatens, but an asteroid strike in nine months' time, drastic enough to obliterate life on Earth. This much is familiar to the characters and already accepted by the start of the novel. So, what would you do, faced with such a short time left to live?

Main character Aisha and her devoted boyfriend Walter dream or despair of the future that's being stolen from them, while for Aisha's mother Esah, there's a more urgent mission: to find her elder daughter June, who abruptly left home two years earlier. They all set off from Penang on a road-trip in a campervan, accompanied by Walter's supportive parents, and a stray cat called Fleabag. In the course of the journey Aisha confronts her own grief and anger, not least with her mother who she feels has been absent since the illness and death of her husband. Aisha has lost so much: father, sister and in a way her mother too. Can there be time for reconciliation?

Although this may sound grim, it isn't - thanks to affectionate delineation of character, acute observation of Aisha's joys and hopes as well as her losses, and moments of epiphany that show her how vivid and unique life is, even in the face of approaching doom. The quietly-portrayed love between Aisha and Walter is especially touching in this warm-hearted tale of family life – offset by the knowledge, impossible to fully take in, that everything is 'going, going, gone'. It will be interesting to see how Nadia Mikail follows this impressive debut.

## **Linda Newbery**

Linda Newbery's *This Book is Cruelty Free: Animals and Us* is published by Pavilion.

## **Escape Room**

Christopher Edge, illus. David Dean, pub. Nosy Crow

*Escape Room*, by Christopher Edge, is a children's fantasy novel that follows 12 year old Ami through an escape room challenge. At the start. Ami thinks it's just a game - the ultimate escape room, with puzzles and challenges to beat before the time runs out.

Each room is themed and conjured up with great detail. From a cavernous library of dust, an ancient Mayan tomb, a deserted shopping mall stalked by extinct animals, to the command module of a spaceship headed to Mars, the perils of *The Escape* seem endless and inescapable.

Soon after meeting her teammates - Adjoa, Ibrahim, Oscar and Min - Ami learns from the Host that this is no ordinary game. As the Host locks them in the first room, she and her teammates learn that they have all been chosen to save the world and must work together to find the Answer before it's too late.

As the main protagonist, Ami is quick-witted, thoughtful and highly intelligent, which are all skills she needs on her adventures. As her personality and strengths are revealed to the reader, so too are those of the other characters.

Adjoa is the more adventurous character in the story - think Lara Croft or Indiana Jones, but with more fashion sense. Although Min is the smart one, Oscar comes across as obnoxious and annoying, whereas Ibrahim has an eye for details that others might miss. Ami, interestingly, seems to be the all-rounder: a greatest hits of the traits and strengths of her teammates.

Each character is distinct, and add to the immersion as they consistently face impending danger, with twists and turns aplenty. *Escape Room* is an exciting read, and it's more than likely that every reader will associate themselves with a different character.

Without a doubt, Christopher Edge blends a great story with topical points that encourage discussion - particularly amongst younger readers who have an interest in environmental issues. Although *Escape Room* is a fun adventure story, it also has a moralistic ending which can leave the reader feeling quite pensive and melancholy. That said, it's a lesson from which every reader, regardless of age, can benefit.

There is a hidden depth to *Escape Room*, with a very real threat hanging over the narrative. Although that means it can get quite dark, it never strays too far from the path of a fun and page-turning adventure novel for younger readers.

**Chris J Kenworthy**

### **Leonora Bolt: Secret Inventor**

Lucy Brandt, illus. Gladys Jose, pub. Puffin Books

Leonora is a talented inventor who has created numerous successful machines but who has no-one to share them with - growing up on Crabby Island is lonely, even if Leonora has her pet otter! That is until a boy called Jack turns up on Crabby Island and reveals that Leonora's inventions may be more well-known than she first thought.

Leonora has been stuck on Crabby Island for most of her life. After losing her parents, she ended up in the care of her uncle, Luther and Mildred, the questionable cook of the house. While she spends her days inventing, Luther tends to set off for the mainland. Although Leonora is desperate to visit the mainland one day, her uncle has other plans. He wants her to continue inventing all sorts of machines, but why?

This is a fantastic story in which the key details are released cleverly, at the same time as Leonora discovers the important parts of her life which have been hidden from her. Desperate to find out what happened to her parents, desperate to see her inventions used on a wider scale and desperate to visit the mainland, will Leonora find all of the answers that she is looking for?

Leonora Bolt is a superb protagonist, her creativity and naivety offer an interesting contrast throughout the book. Jack is a great addition to the story and contributes to the story developing in a fantastic way. The combination of Mildred and Captain Spang also bring comedy to the book. The glorious illustrations by Gladys Jose bring even more life to the book and document Leonora's journey through the story.

**Tom Joy**

## **The Luckiest Kid in the World**

Danny Wallace, illus. Gemma Correll, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

A heart-warming tale that really shows us that relationships really are more precious than things. When narrator Joe, aged 10, is unexpectedly named as Average Joe, he is bombarded by free merchandise to review for suited (and frankly, sinister) marketing buffs who keep insisting that 'Time is money!' At first, as his every materialistic fantasy is met and stretched to the max- think a five-minute trolley dash in a toy warehouse, a brand new gold bike, all you can eat food and ice cream bars, rides in a Ferrari and helicopter *etc.*, Joe thinks he has hit the jackpot. Everybody is listening to his opinion and he loves it.

But as this endless attack of stuff and requirements for him to complete reviews and offer feedback (yes, this definitely resonated with me!) begins to take its toll on our poor young protagonist, he starts to forget his best friend and his sister, and becomes increasingly self-centred and inconsiderate. Like us all really, he is being corrupted by shallow consumerism. And to make matters worse, the

marketing experts start infringing upon Joe's privacy by constantly monitoring everything he does. He comes to understand that his flashy new phone does have drawbacks. (Again, a very pertinent and timely observation). His growing isolation begins to cause him confusion and sadness. He realises that he must turn things around, which of course he does in an empowering and humorous way, rejecting and shedding the shackles of stuff and embracing his friends.

This book is a great read and really reflects some of the more frustrating aspects of our modern lives. The cover is eye-catching with a beautifully embossed and glossy title and lovely black and white illustrations by Gemma Correll throughout. Danny Wallace has really succeeded in creating an engaging read with deeper themes that we can certainly all learn from. We liked the short, digestible chapters and the good-sized font and wide page borders which would make it accessible for more reluctant readers. Really funny in places, a great book to be shared with a child, or read alone.

**Stephanie Robertson**

## **The Marvellous Granny Jinks and Me**

Serena Holly, illus. Selom Sunu, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Granny Jinks is a marvellous Granny. Full of colour, magic and vibrancy. Jada and Granny Jinks spend a great deal of time together, whilst Jada's Dad is busy working.

When Jada's Dad decides to put her in an extra maths class, herself and her Granny are at first apprehensive, but when Jada meets a new friend Tilda she figures out there is going to be a magic audition in the same building as her maths lessons, she is determined to get Granny Jinks into 'The Dalton Green Hall Magic Society'.

This is a wonderful book based around a true story of the first black woman to join the magic circle. It shows themes of family, diversity, friendship and of course magic. I love this book because it shows an amazing relationship between a youth and an elder as they share a fantastical interest in magic. It also shows that you're never too old to pursue your passions, as Granny Jinks finds out after finally performing instead of helping backstage. It also immerses children in the story by teaching them some magic tricks throughout the pages of the book. I would give this book an age rating of 7 to 8, although I'm 11 and I enjoyed it.

So, in conclusion, I would say this book is brilliant and definitely worth a read and if you don't trust me, I'm sure the vibrant illustrations will draw you in. I do hope it inspires you to pick up a deck of playing cards again, as it did for me. Anyway, what are you waiting for? Go read it.

**Archie Sewell, age 11**

## **Mike Falls Up**

Candy Gourlay, illus. Carles Ballesteros, pub. Little Tiger

Part of the colour illustrated series, *Mike Falls Up* is the latest addition to this popular set of books, created by award winning authors and illustrators. Perfect for young readers from aged 5, this book is in chapter format but each page is beautifully illustrated.

When we first meet Mike and his dog Bowow, they are complaining about the heat. Scanning the pages for clues, the reader will learn that Mike lives in a more tropical climate. Mum sends them out to get some fresh air and they make their way to the Chocolate Hills, a famous landmark in the Philippines. While there, an earthquake forms a zigzag line through the earth and Mike is surprised when a note floats up inviting him to “fall up” to a birthday party!

Making the bold and brave decision to jump into the hole, Mike finds himself landing in a London home belonging to Kaneisha. They both “fall up” and find a new friend.

There is so much to take from reading the text and studying the illustrations, providing plenty of opportunity for discussion. I loved the diversity of the characters, the settings for their homes and the idea of your imagination taking you to new places.

## **Erin Hamilton**

### **Nisha’s War**

Dan Smith, pub. Chicken House Books

*Nisha’s War* is a beautiful story of hope and healing! Set in the Second World War story from a different perspective than we are used to. Nisha arrives in England from Malaya by way of a ship from Singapore. She travels with her mother and will travel to meet the grandmother she has never met, in the hope that she will welcome them in.

Nisha and her mother have escaped the horrific attacks on their home by the Japanese. Nisha has been witness to terrifying events- and these will have long lasting impacts on her world. Arriving on Barrow Island is a shock- from the light and colour of her known world to the grey and cold of England. The grandmother is cold and initially unwelcoming but there is a sense of loss and sadness in the older woman.

Nisha’s mother becomes quite ill and Nisha, while worried, has time to independently explore the grounds, Barrow Island and to meet some interesting people. The Weeping Tree is a legendary figure

in the story, and one of agonising emotions. Meeting Twig here, he promises to help her ailing mother if she can bring three treasures to him. What the treasures are is down to Nisha.

Compelling and engaging, this would suit a KS2 class studying World War II and would enable readers to see other perspectives and elements to the war.

**Erin Hamilton**

## **The Secret of Haven Point**

Lisette Auton, illus. Valentina Toro, Gillian Gamble and Luke Ashford, pub. Puffin Books

*The Secret of Haven Point* is, as one might imagine, set in Haven Point, a mysterious land hidden from the view of mere mortals, a place that is home to the Wrecklings. This rag-tag bunch of children, all sporting their own unique disabilities and abilities, live in isolation from the rest of the world. Cap'n, a man whose beard has become a makeshift rescue centre for the resident kittens, rules the roost and keeps the gang safe and sound. Their days are filled with play, lessons- hey, it isn't all fun and games- chores, and spending time frolicking along the shore with the resident mermaids. Night brings even more escapades and shines a light on where the Wrecklings get their name. For, when night comes, the inhabitants of Haven Point strategically wreck ships before harvesting their cargo.

But as is so often the case in wonderful adventures, things don't always go according to plan. When Alpha Lux, the heroine in this tale, starts seeing strange light signals it becomes clear that an outsider has infiltrated their once safe sanctuary. You cannot help but empathise with Alpha, the sweetest, and bravest, of heroines. Despite being young in years, she has more street smarts than your average adult. Combine this with her vocabulary which sounds like it should belong to a northern nana, and you have a perfect central character.

I would have liked to have learnt more about the rest of the characters within the crew, found out where they all come from and what their dreams were. But there are only so many stories you can tell between the covers of one book.

It was very refreshing to hear disability discussed in such a considerate and accessible way: it's clear that Lisette Auton has done her homework and written a story that she knows is needed. I hope to see more children's books like this, pushing the boundaries, telling the stories that we haven't heard before and introducing us to characters that we can't help but fall in love with.

**Rosie Cammish Jones**

## **The Sky Beneath the Stone**

Alex Mullarky, pub. Kelpies

As a librarian we tell the children never to judge a book by its cover, well in this case I will change my mind. It has the most beautiful cover I have ever seen. And the back cover is just as amazing. It's bright and colourful and draws you in.

Ivy is an adventurous child, who loves nothing more than the great outdoors pitching a tent and following a map. There's only a slight problem since a freak incident she's afraid to go outside. So, when her beloved brother disappears in a hole in the wall Ivy knows she is the only one who can rescue him. Oh, and he's been turned into a kestrel. But where do you start to look for a bird? With the aid of her trustee map and compass Ivy sets out to save him. Along the way she meets a boy Kit who is looking for his brother but hang on, his brother died in the war, didn't he? Will Ivy find her brother? Who exactly is Kit and why does the dog like him so much?

All these questions will be answered in the book. I loved this book, it takes you on an action-packed adventure, it makes you look at yourself and ask if you were Ivy would you be brave enough to go through the wall. Throughout the book we watch Ivy question herself, gain confidence and start to believe in herself. She grows up before our very eyes, I know if I was lost I'd want Ivy looking for me.

**Helen Byles**

### **There's a Dog in My Brain**

Caroline Green, illus. Rikin Parekh, pub. Walker Books

Danny Pond and his dog, Dudley, are inseparable - Mum says 'she doesn't know when the boy ends and the dog begins.' When Danny has to go to a family wedding he wishes Dudley could go with them, or better still, that he and Dudley could both stay at home. Instead, a neighbour, Mrs Grout, is going to be staying in their house to look after the dog while they are away. Danny knows the neighbour prefers cats and is sure that she has something horrible in store for Dudley. Looking up into the night sky, he wishes there could be a way for him to stay at home instead of Dudley. When Danny wakes in the morning he finds his wish has come true, but not in the way he had hoped. Instead, Danny and Dudley have swapped bodies. While Dudley in Danny's body goes off to cause chaos at a family wedding, Danny is left at home with Mrs Grout.

As a dog, Danny is delighted to find he has an incredibly strong sense of smell and hearing. What isn't so great is that he doesn't seem able to control all of his doggie instincts and finds himself doing things he wouldn't normally dream of doing. He sniffs things he wouldn't normally sniff and wags his tail at the very mention of a 'walk'.

Dudley on the other hand doesn't know how to behave in the body of a young boy. His 'sniff' seems to have gone and people react with horror at the things he does – drinking from the toilet bowl, sniffing bins and chasing a cat.

*There's a Dog in My Brain* is a fun and entertaining, fast paced story that will have young readers laughing out loud and wanting more. Illustrated throughout by Rikin Parekh, whose quirky style perfectly complements the story and further adds to the humour. A great fun that young readers will enjoy – and one that will be good to read aloud to a class or share at bedtime.

## **Damian Harvey**

### **What's New, Harper Drew?**

Kathy Weeks, illus. Aleksei Bitskoff, pub. Hodder Children's Books

*What's New, Harper Drew?* is the debut fiction title – I understand it's the start of a series – by Kathy Weeks, whose previous books were the best-selling non-fiction titles *You Are Awesome* (April 2018) and *Dare to be You* (September 2020) with Matthew Syed. Weeks has worked with both primary and secondary schools on confidence and resilience building programmes for young people and this interest in the agency and individuality of young people is clear in the exuberant, warm prose of this first novel.

*What's New, Harper Drew?* is told in diary format, with frequent cartoon-style illustrations by Aleksei Bitskoff. Harper is an engaging narrator, dealing with a crazy family and the usual friendship and popularity issues. The story involves a French holiday, a crazy film-producing uncle, fundraising to provide a stairlift at school – Harper's friend Edward uses a wheelchair – and culminates at the over-the-top festival-themed party of frenemy Maisie.

For me, it was all a little too self-consciously zany, exacerbated by the design, which makes frequent use of bold and capitals, the typeface a variant of Comic Sans, but then I am not a nine-year-old. On the subject of design, I thought it interesting that the story includes wheelchair-using Edward – 'best friends since we were born' – as a major character but he doesn't appear on the cover of the book.

It's all very lively and high-spirited, living up to the promise on the front cover: Me. My World. Maximum Drama!

## **Sheena Wilkinson**

### **Witchlings**

Claribel A. Ortega, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

How privileged I am to be offered an advance copy of this wonderful new book by the writer of *Ghost Squad*. The tale of *Witchlings* begins on the night of the Black Moon Ceremony when all young witchlings are sorted into their covens. Young 12-year-old witchling, Severn Salazar, wants nothing more than to be sorted into Hyacinth House alongside her best friend Poppy and is dreading the idea of being left a as a Spare – a witch with no coven.

She's done everything she possible can to make sure this doesn't happen, attended witchling social events, studied hard and even joined the toad racing team but Seven is about to face the greatest disappointment ever. Spares are the lowest of the low in the Twelve Towns, fit only for serving others and forbidden from doing higher level magic. So when the unthinkable happens, and Seven is left alongside two other girls Thorn and Valley (Severn's bully from school) she does the only thing she can think to save them. Seven invokes the Clause of the Impossible Task. A task which if they fail will see them turned into toads forever.

What follows is a twisting tale of magic and danger where three young witchlings must learn not only to trust each other but work together to solve a tangled mystery. This book is a delightful tale set in a magical world full of strange beasts, colourful characters and dangerous encounters and would certainly delight younger fans of *Harry Potter*. A wonderfully exciting read!

**Tracey Corner**

# Young Adult Books

## **All That's Left in the World**

Erik J. Brown, pub. Hachette Children's Books

A super flu has wiped out most of the world's population and Jamie has found himself completely alone in a cabin in the woods. Completely alone that is until an injured stranger crosses his path. Life in this new world, in the woods, alone, is dangerous for Jamie and so it is that, armed with a gun he cautiously approaches the stranger stumbling across his path, a gun he is prepared to use. Yet he doesn't, and so the story unfolds, for there is something about the stranger that causes Jamie to stop in his tracks.

Andrew, for this is the name of the stranger, is taken in my Jamie, cared for. As he begins to heal, as they learn more about one another, a bond and a mission form. The two know that they have to leave the cabin, to step out into the world, the strange new world that has formed around them and doing so they find their relationship starts to feel more than just a friendship. Yet this is just one aspect of the story, one thread. Trouble isn't far behind and as the pair make what is to become a perilous journey from the cabin in the woods to the South. In the South they hope to learn what's become of the world and they're going to come face-to-face with a world that has been torn apart, a society now in ruins. Who and what they find waiting for them at the end of it all is a surprise, not just to them, but to the reader too.

Erik J. Brown has crafted a remarkable story a story that is about relationships not only with one another but relationships without a world, without communities making us stop and think about what we do, how we do it and why we do it.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **All the Better to See You**

Gina Blaxhill, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Everybody knows the rumours of the Big Bad Wolf of Aramour, and everyone can remember that fatal winter five years ago when the beast attacked the villagers. So, when the wolf appears to be back, and braver than ever, distrust and accusations spread like wildfire. For Red however, the stories have never frightened her; the forest, despite being where the wolf is suspected to hide, is her safe place and the home of her beloved Granny. But as the towns fractures and suspicions run high, Red becomes drawn into the web of secrecy that surrounds the wolf. Could her whole world fall apart?

*All the Better to See You* interweaves different characters voices and masterfully embeds clues that ensures we never quite know what will happen next; building tension and a desperation to read on. It is with great skill that Blaxhill reveals each strand of the story to create a novel filled with intrigue, secrecy and drama. The sinister and foreboding atmosphere allows the reader to feel fully immersed in the story, apprehensive of everybody and unsure of who the wolf really is.

The tale is told by Red, Ellis and Sabine, three characters who have been cast out as different, but over the course of the winter learn to truly accept themselves. It is through them that Blaxhill warns of the destructive nature pressure, expectations and societal stereotypes can have on children trying to find their way through the world. In the end, *All the Better to See You*, is a lesson in staying true to oneself, of accepting every aspect of our being including the mistakes we make and for loving people for who they are not what they want to be. Blaxhill has created a beautiful retelling of a well-known classic that can be enjoyed by everybody.

## **Elinor Hurry**

### **The Blue Book of Nebo**

Manon Steffan Ros, pub. Firefly

The End came unexpectedly, amid confused news reports, then silence and then no electricity. Wylfa, the nuclear power station on Anglesey exploded, spewing a radioactive cloud into the sky, causing terrible sickness and an early death to many, leaving only a handful of survivors. Some choose to die in the aftermath, whilst others like Rowena and her son, Dylan and daughter Mona, continue living in the remote countryside, away from the towns and cities, perilously, relying on what they can grow and relishing rare meat that they are able to snare. Scavenging what they can from nearby houses, Rowena, Dylan and Mona struggle to survive in a post-apocalyptic North Wales with no medicine or medical care, fearful of the future, not knowing who else is out there.

Dylan, old enough to have some memories of life before The End, is an avid reader, but unable to make much sense of the world inhabited by the fictional characters he reads about, because his world, is silent: empty of the cacophony of busy people, children playing, chatting neighbours, car engines, shops, screens and social media. Writing, words, and language are an important theme in the book, connecting Dylan to a different world, we know, but only he can imagine. Poignantly, once, when Rowena reminisces about eating a Bounty chocolate bar, even though she wasn't hungry, Dylan is bewildered, curious as to why you would do such a thing. Rowena only answer is "[b]ecause it was there", suggesting a past vacuous life, sapped of anything meaningful.

Slowly the story unfolds as Rowena and Dylan write different entries in a blue book taken from another house. The Blue Book in the title therefore refers to Rowena's and Dylan's own words and evokes a strange stirring echo across the centuries of other famous Welsh books: *The Black Book of*

*Carmarthen* or *The Red Book of Hergest*, writing about the myths and legends of Welsh heroes. When it all ends and everyone is dead, will *The Blue Book of Nebo* be the only record that some people, somewhere, lived?

Originally written in Welsh, *Llyfr Glas Nebo* and 2018 winner of the National Eisteddfod Prose Award, the author Manon Steffan Ros translated it into English, however Manon explains that in the act of translating she also has written a nuancedly different text, begging an interesting question of how language mediates meaning.

## **Simon Barrett**

### **Echoes and Empires**

Morgan Rhodes, pub. Razorbill (an imprint of Penguin Random House)

This YA novel is the first of a new series by the New York Times bestselling author, Morgan Rhodes. Bold, pacy and dramatic, it is sure to delight old fans and new.

Josslyn Drake, the celebrated seventeen-year-old daughter of the late prime minister in the Empire of Regara, is living a superficially glamorous life in the full glare of the media. She is beloved of Queen Isadora herself and fully supports the Queen's crusade to root out and destroy magic in the Empire, especially as the terrorist attack that killed her father was magical terrorism, as was the fire that killed the Queen's son many years before. But then a chance encounter with a thief, Jericho Nox, at a Palace Gala changes everything for Joss, flinging her carefully arranged life into disarray and leading her to question everything she believes. She is thrown into a very different world with Jericho, one where she must question the motives of everyone around her, as her very survival depends upon finding the truth.

Trust and betrayal, love and grief, attraction and fear are recurring themes within the novel as Joss navigates its startling twists and turns, surrounded by powerful, often flawed characters. Rhodes allows for complex motives and conflicting desires in all her characters and there is a pervasive sense of empathy for those who find themselves in extreme situations, even those who commit atrocious acts. This philosophical questioning is handled with a light touch and set amidst plenty of action. Thrilling and breathless, this book offers young adult readers a gripping, immersive read and an arresting heroine. I am looking forward to reading the next one!

## **Saira Archer**

### **The Gifts That Bind Us**

Caroline O'Donoghue, pub. Walker Books

Sometimes a gift is given freely, sometimes something is expected in return. In *The Gifts That Bind Us* Caroline O'Donoghue presents us with a puzzle, a continuation of a puzzle, of a story, part two of her spellbinding mystery trilogy, a book that bewitches the reader.

All summer long Maeve and her friends have practised their gifts. Maeve has the ability to read minds, Roe is the one who can pick locks whilst Fiona's powers can heal, and Lily is able to channel electricity. They are a formidable team, they are friends, they are partners and ... more than that Roe and Maeve are officially now an item. This may seem insignificant, after all teen books almost always feature a romance, but stop there, nothing in this carefully written story, in what is unfolding to a stunning trilogy, is insignificant. Pay attention to every detail. Back at school the friends find more strange things happening, with their enemies appearing in new places, it's clear that their powers have attracted the wrong sort of attention and it's not long before Maeve's powerful gift begins to wane. Drained by someone or something hiding even from her very own second sight Maeve has a new enemy to battle, she and her friends have new dangers to overcome.

With this intermingling of magic, adult and young adult themes, Caroline O'Donoghue has woven a fascinating story. I am hooked, I hope others will be too. Book Two offers no easy solutions or conclusions, mixes fantasy and reality, becomes the book that binds us. I want to find out how the friends' story it will end yet at the same time I don't want to leave it. Highly recommended.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea**

Axie Oh, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

Mina lives in a land under a curse, beset by deadly storms and brutal conflict. Once a year a young woman is cast into the sea to appease the Sea God, in the hope that she will be chosen as his true bride and end the curse. Shim Cheong is the most beautiful girl in the village, and it has long been acknowledged that she will be the Sea God's sacrifice. In order to protect Cheong and save her brother from a broken heart, Mina casts herself into the sea in her place, even though she is not sure she will be accepted as a suitable replacement.

Mina finds herself in a Spirit Realm ruled by gods and mythical creatures but the Sea God, her only hope for her people's salvation, is in an enchanted sleep. Mina must work out how to break the curse with the help of a boy called Shin who has been tasked with protecting the Sea God. But Mina's fate is a complex and tangled string, and her heart seems to be pulling her in a different direction.

*The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea* is based on a classic Korean legend, and the author beautifully melds dreamlike prose with a cleverly plotted story—updated to reflect a more contemporary feminist

message. The Spirit Realm itself is surreal and slightly bewildering—I'm not sure I followed all of the complex mythology of the place, but the resolution was suitably satisfying. This story is also a romance, but Mina is no swooning damsel, and I loved the way that she defies fate and creates her own destiny.

*The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea* swept me away to another world—an enchanting and lyrical tale, perfect for fans of *Midnight in Everwood*.

## **Rebecca Rouillard**

### **The Guinevere Deception**

Kiersten White, pub. Penguin Random House

Sorcery is both incredible and terrifying: for all the wonder it creates, magic can be just as damaging as it is intriguing. King Arthur, at age 18, knows all too well the malignant forms magic can take, and must forbid it from his city to keep away chaos. But Arthur also knows the value of a sorcerer, and cannot truly protect Camelot without one.

Fortunately, the exiled wizard Merlin has a plan: to guard their city from within by using a sorcerer far less conspicuous than himself. A young forest witch must play the part of a princess, and move to Camelot to be Arthur's Queen. Taking the name 'Guinevere', she has a doubly hard task: to prove to the kingdom she is the royalty they expect, and to guard fiercely the secret of her magic. But she is far newer to her own skills than Merlin and must work alone to find the darker pathways of magic that threaten Camelot's walls.

This book is full of enjoyable characters, none more so than Guinevere herself. We are quickly made comfortable among her thoughts and come to share her uncertainty as she moves from a beloved forest to a castle full of strangers. Alongside determination and independence, Guinevere also carries a deep phobia that cannot be concealed or avoided. In moments where it takes hold, her reactions illustrate how a vulnerable protagonist is all the stronger for coping with their fear. In her new home, Guinevere must also meet with characters who are far from endearing, and whose actions show an abuse of power. Even seemingly familiar characters are not exempt from terrible decisions, and though others around them may try to justify their actions, readers need not agree.

It is easy to become absorbed in this fast-paced tale, with romantic subplots that twist and turn as the novel progresses. There are witches and tournaments, journeys and tragedies, new beginnings alongside endings. It may well lead you to search for more material on the legend of King Arthur, born in Cornwall and first celebrated centuries ago by Welsh storytellers. They recounted his deeds in their tales and poetry, and since then, many other records of his life have followed - just don't forget the rest of this *Camelot Rising* trilogy, with plenty more Arthurian magic, peril and intrigue to come.

**Jemima Breeds**

## **I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter**

Erika L. Sánchez, pub. Rock the Boat

Fifteen-year-old Julia's sister Olga was the perfect Mexican daughter, until she died tragically. Julia however is not. She always seems to say the wrong things and is unable to stop herself, wears the wrong clothes to the exasperation of her family and relatives and is simply unable to do anything that is expected of her, even burning the tortillas. In fact, everything Olga did perfectly Julia manages to get wrong.

This is a story of a family struggling to cope with the untimely death of a daughter and sister. Whilst Julia does what she can to help her family, she also begins to uncover a different Olga, a secret life that she kept hidden from her family. It turns out Olga isn't the perfect daughter, who chose to work as a receptionist rather than go to college and Julia slowly pieces together a more complex Olga, not the angel their mother believes and always measures Julia against. It is however a painful secret, and throughout the book, there is a palatable tension as to how much Julia should tell, even when it is affecting her own mental health. The truth might be simply too much for her Amá, mom, and Apá, dad.

Moreover, Julia is caught between cultures, a first-generation American-Mexican teenage girl growing up in a Chicago ghetto, whose hard-working parents have risked their lives to make a better life, and seemingly ungrateful, Julia rebels against her family's expectations to want to live an independent life, aspiring to be a writer. Julia is a fiery character and eventually everything boils over. There is however an uneasy resolution towards the end of the book. Julia decides what to do about Olga's secret. She begins to repair her relationship with her Amá and Apá, and there is some hope that at least her Apá may come to understand her creative obsession to write. Julia seems to accept that love is not perfect, that the future is not certain.

*I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* is an important story about migration and social mobility, specifically foregrounding the experience of many Mexicans who have illegally settled throughout America, whose status to use the words in the book, is 'undocumented'. It is significant that the story is set in Chicago and that Julia desires to go to college in New York, because these issues are not just a matter for the American south-west.

An emotionally exhausting, but thoroughly worthwhile read.

**Simon Barrett**

## **The Iron Sword**

Julie Kagawa, pub. Harper Collins

*The Iron Sword*, by Julie Kagawa, is a fantasy novel and spin-off of Kagawa's *Iron Fey* series, that follows Prince Ash as he ventures to save his son Keirran of the Forgotten.

The first book in this series was told from Puck's perspective, whereas Ash's point of view is the focus of *The Iron Sword*. Although that means this book is a sequel, Kagawa has intertwined the action with some contextual backstory, so that new readers can easily connect the dots. That means that all readers will find themselves immersed in the story, trying to solve the mystery of Keirran's disappearance.

While trying to find Keirran, the gang discovers that Faery isn't what they thought it would be - the past has a way of sneaking up and changing everything they ever knew.

Throughout the narrative, it's clear that Ash is protective of those around him. For fans of the series, it's refreshing to not only see things from his point of view, but also to get to know him better. In previous books, the mere thought of having access to his thoughts and feelings was a frightening prospect.

Author Julie Kagawa is skilled at world-building, as the plot is both compelling and engaging. Fight scenes are refreshingly non-linear and exhilarating to read - far more so than in many other young adult fiction books. Kagawa brilliantly captures the physicality of violent conflicts, rather than just the action itself.

All of that makes for a great novel, especially as each book in the series seems to be from a different character's perspective, and it ends with an epic cliff-hanger worthy of a young adult fantasy novel.

## **Chris J Kenworthy**

### **Jade Fire Gold**

June C.L. Tan, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

This epic tale is set in an Eastern Empire, whose lands have been increased through the use of dark magic. Altan and Ahn, the protagonists of the story, have both been denied their birth right. Altan, whose parents have fallen victim of a coup, is the rightful heir to the throne; Ahn nurtures a magic 'affinity' which places her in great danger.

Torn away from their families and homes, both have been rescued. Altan is aware of his ancestry and his gifts, which have been honed in preparation for his plans, but for Ahn the only clue to her real identity are a ring her real mother left her and a magic power that she cannot control. She is aware that this places her in great danger, as only the Diyeh, a cruel cast of priests, are allowed to use magic.

Altan and Ahn's paths briefly cross, as the young man's journey to the capital takes him through the village in the desert where Ahn lives with her adoptive grandmother. Soon after that, Ahn is found by the Diyeh and taken to the capital. Here, she is reunited with her father, a dignitary of the empire and is able to piece together her past, as well as discovering that she is the Life Stealer, a figure equally feared and revered and indispensable to liberate the country from the dark magic that is transforming the land and destroying its resources. This revelation makes her vulnerable, as her own father wishes to use her skills to fulfil his own plans. As the Life Stealer, she is also key to Altan's revenge plan.

As their growing feelings for each other clash with their roles, Altan and Ahn embark on a dangerous journey, searching for a mythological sword which, when found will fulfil the prophecy linked to the Life Stealer. Only when this is finally accomplished, the dramatic nature of the foretelling, and its implications for Altan and Ahn, is revealed.

Altan and Ahn are the two narrators of this fantasy story, whose voices alternate through the chapters. The first couple of chapters flesh out the background of the story and are slower than the rest. This is the case particularly for the long dialogue between Altan and his friend Tang Wei in the second chapter. It is worth bearing with them, though, as the plot soon picks up pace and delivers some well described and rather cinematographic battle scenes, as well as more gentle moments, and opportunities for beautiful descriptive writing.

There is sufficient ambiguity in the allegiances of some characters which will keep readers guessing and that contributes to the interesting twists of the plot. While the ending brings some resolution, it also leaves space for further interesting developments. Readers who have enjoyed epic tales like *The Nightingale Floor* and its sequels by Liam Hearn will appreciate this book, aimed at the teen audience.

## **Laura Brill**

### **The Revelry**

Katherine Webber, pub. Walker Books

Katherine Webber, writer of *Wing Jones* and *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, delivers a strange fantasy where the setting, a seemingly ordinary rural town, is almost a character in itself.

In Ember Grove, an air of quiet menace hangs like an invisible mist, young people die or disappear suddenly, yet nobody speaks of them. The townsfolk are close-knit, suspicious of strangers. Every year the Revelry is held in the local woods, a sort of prom for the high school graduates of that particular year. But its location is a closely guarded secret, disclosed at the last minute exclusively to the invitees. The Revelry is known to be a life-changing event but nobody talks about what happens there. Sixteen-year-old Bitsy has grown up accepting the eccentricities of life in Ember Grove without question – until her best friend and newcomer Amy finds an invitation to the mysterious Revelry. She persuades Bitsy to gate-crash the party with her: a decision they will regret.

Bitsy and Amy are changed by their experiences of the Revelry, though neither remembers exactly what happened. Amy and Bitsy are caught in a whirlwind they don't understand. Bitsy's bewilderment as their friendship unravels, and her despair and isolation as she grapples the unknown force that is driving them apart, is vividly portrayed. The breakdown of trust, the painful struggle to hold on, is one that will really resonate.

This is a dark story with pace and suspense and no certainty about how it will end: a satisfying and unusual read.

**Yvonne Coppard**

## **Serendipity: A Glorious Collection of Stories of All Kinds of Falling In Love**

Marissa Meyer, pub. Faber

Serendipity indeed... a collection of ten short stories about High School/YA/teenage love edited by Marissa Meyer, an established writer of romance. All bar one is set in the US, and feature a variety of backgrounds, relationships and outcomes, but all with the over-riding High School environment, with the exception of *In a Blink of an Eye* which is set in London.

Rather curiously, after each title in the contents list is appended a very short clue to the theme of each of the stories. As the paperback cover indicates through its rainbow colours, these are stories which feature a variety of young people, whose romances encompass a variety of different backgrounds and, in particular, a variety of different outlooks and desires. Nine of these qualify as regular short stories, but one, *Keagan's Heaven on Earth*, by Sarah Winifred Searle, is a tiny graphic novel. The Editor's dedication states that this anthology is '[f]or all the incorrigible romantics', and a selection of stories like these should indeed satisfy teenage readers who are addicted to romantic stories, yet somehow, as a collection it falls short.

Yes, there is a welcome variety of romance, and yes, there are a variety of styles of writing, but, overall, there are insufficient sparks of exciting writing by the authors, or deep feeling among the characters. Despite the very welcome variety of relationships included, it's somehow lacking in depth

and any real examination of the meaning of those varied relationships. While teenage romances are rarely long lived, in real life they do tend to be intense, but in the writing, with one or two exceptions, there is a lack of anything other than very run of the mill writing. Marissa Meyer's *Shooting Stars* is clearly the work of someone adept at producing YA romance.

All in all, a book which promises much, particularly in the welcome variety of relationships and romance offered, substantially falls short in the depth of writing and the ability to engage with the subject in anything in other than a superficial way. An excellent idea which failed to live up to its promise.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **The Stolen Slippers**

Melissa De La Cruz, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

We're all familiar with the land of fairy-tale, we've all grown up with it, some of us wish we were in the land of fairy-tale. Philomena gets her wish, but hers is the not so familiar fairy-tale world of Never After where she is in search of a glass slipper, Cinderella's glass slipper, or more exactly glass slippers. Yes, that last was plural. Philomena and her friends are in search of a pair of glass slippers.

In Melissa De La Cruz's very amusing, very clever version of a fairy-tale we find ourselves drawn back to tales of childhood - *Hansel and Gretel*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Cinderella* - stories that we think ourselves so familiar with, but which Melissa De La Cruz has turned on their head. Meet fairy-tales as never before in a fairy-tale land that could be anywhere. Hold your breath open the book and follow as we endeavour to learn who Cinderella really is, what she is willing to do to be princess of Eastphalia, why she will do anything at the expense of her twin sisters, and whether they really are the wicked sisters we've been led to believe.

With a text that makes you laugh out loud as it talks directly to its reader this is going to be a book for you. This is going to be a book that will be difficult to put down, a hilarious and gripping adventure, the type of book that finds you shouting at the characters ... Why? Oh why, when they know they are in a fairy-tale land are they drawn to eat the candy cottage? This is just one of many mishaps the friends will have to overcome if they are to overcome the wickedness threatening to overwhelm them and restore the glass slippers to their rightful owner. Brilliantly funny storytelling!

## **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

### **This Woven Kingdom**

Tahereh Mafi, pub. Electric Monkey

Alizeh is to all the world a servant, and a disposable one too, for servants are there to serve their lives in this world and are worth little, even if the law bans their masters from hitting them. Alizeh however is different, she is Jinn, (this is not a spoiler), she is educated, clever and struggles to hide her skills, not only the academic but also the physical ones. On the day that she makes a mistake, the day that she retaliates against a thief, nearly killing him, she is seen, seen by Crown Prince Kamran.

The Jinn and the humans have long been enemies, at one time the Jinn ruled the world, they fell and the humans rose. With this change came legends, among them the legend of a Jinn with ice in her veins, the lost Queen of an ancient kingdom. Kamran's grandfather believes Alizeh is this lost Queen, a threat to his empire, to the kingdom. He wants her dead. Kamran however feels differently, he does not know why but he feels there is something different about Alizeh, he is determined to learn what his feelings are trying to tell him, who she truly is and if there can ever be a peace between Jinn and human.

Tahreh Mafi has woven a magnificent tale, a tale of clashing empires, of forbidden romance of long forgotten queens and people that is simply captivating. Her world building is utterly convincing transporting us, as reader, into the world she has created. Her writing is lyrical and richly embroidered, full of elements of Persian mythology. As this is a stand-alone novel I for one shall be searching for more Tahreh Mafi books to indulge in!

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Win Lose Kill Die**

Cynthia Murphy, pub. Scholastic

*Win Lose Kill Die*, by Cynthia Murphy, is a murder mystery novel set in Morton Academy - an elite school for high-achievers - where everyone wants to be Head Girl until a series of sinister murders begin.

Attached to the title of Head Girl is prestige and success, securing the futures of those lucky enough to have the title bestowed unto them. But, someone is determined to take the crown for themselves, and that's when the bodies start piling up!

School friends Liv, Taylor, Kat, Marcus and Cole are determined to solve the mystery. It could be the secret society who is responsible - the one to which they've sworn allegiance. Or, it could be the history of a cult that plagues Morton Academy; or, even creepy Billy, with his love of unusual plants.

*Win Lose Kill Die* is a fast-paced thriller with 1990's slasher horror movie vibes. It's a neo-postmodern take on the genre, and setting it within the claustrophobic walls of the fictional Morton Academy in particular adds to the atmosphere of this novel.

Children getting picked off one-by-one, in an isolated boarding school, is such a tense premise. As a reader, it is both new and yet similar, but in a refreshing sense, particularly when the students and characters of the novel have access to state-of-the-art facilities and a myriad of potential weapons and knowledge. This leads to a variety of deaths and accidents, due in part to their inventiveness, which adds to the tension of the story. It keeps the reader guessing, not only as to who is next, but also what's next as well.

*Win Lose Kill Die* is like an Agatha Christie novel for a new and younger audience, but with all the gore and violence one has come to expect from young adult fiction. Author Cynthia Murphy has crafted a gripping, unpredictable murder mystery with well-formed and loveable protagonists. As opposed to setting the story in the open world, the *mise-en-scène* of a dark academia makes everything feel isolated and claustrophobic - two main traits of all successful horror books and movies. And it's a feat which *Win Lose Kill Die* pulls off perfectly.

**Chris J Kenworthy**

# Non-Fiction Books

## **A Walk Through Nature: A Clover Robin Peek-Through Book**

Libby Walden, illus. Clover Robin, pub. Little Tiger

The natural world is a beautiful place, full of wonders waiting for us to discover and explore. Books are a beautiful place, full of wonder, with pages to be turned as we explore their contents. Books can lead us into nature and nature can lead us to books, with *A Walk Through Nature* we are guided to see the glory of the natural world and drawn to the books for answers to the questions we are certain to have as a result.

As the world around us transforms, daily, monthly, yearly, we need to look at it before its wonders disappear – it would be a shame to miss the first flowers of spring, the summer butterflies, the autumn leaves and the winter robin. Explore it all, from the tiny seeds nestled in the soil waiting the sun and the rain so that they can become the flowers which bloom. See them in the eyes of the wriggling worm hiding deep underground and helping make the soil fertile. There is so much to see and explore, be certain to spend time pouring over Clover Robins stunning illustrations accompanying Libby Walden’s words, the perfect symmetry between the two is wonderful.

Aimed at a younger reader the text is gently rhyming, helping them to read, to follow the explanations and to become wildlife enthusiasts as they drink in all the facts! Not only will this book capture the imagination it poignantly reminds us all, young reader, older reader, that there is a beautiful world full of wonder, wonder which we must also remember to look at using the clever peep-through pages – put your eyes to the book and see what you too can spot when you peek through its pages.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **A World Full of Journeys and Migrations: Over 50 stories of Human Migration That Changed Our World**

Martin Howard, illus. Christopher Corr, pub. Frances Lincoln Children’s Books

*Journeys and Migrations* reminds us that for much of humanity’s history, and for some cultures still today, it is a history of movement. As a species, we began making a journey out of Africa about 70,000 years ago, and despite our differences in appearance, language, and culture (including stories, food, music and dance, and ideas), the human family has spread across the whole globe. This book shares over 50 of these journeys and migrations across time and space.

There is a short introduction exploring the reasons why peoples migrate. We have journeyed to explore, discover and seek adventure, to trade, sometimes to exploit, as well as invade, causing others to flee from war and conflict, and given the timespan of the human species, for survival as the Earth's climate changes. The book then broadly separates into five chapters on each of the continents: Africa, Asia, Oceania, Europe and the Americas, including the ancient Asian route of the Silk Road, European colonisation in many parts of the world and routes to freedom including the Black American slaves' Underground Railroad and the Kindertransport, bringing Jewish children safely to Britain before World War II. There is an interesting last chapter called The World and Beyond, considering journeys from the animal world and mass extinctions because of humans, disease and finally space. It is not a book that glosses over the human tragedy and dislocation arising from forced migrations.

Each double-spread examines a different journey or migration, blending Martin Howard's informative text with Christopher Corr's colourful and vibrant illustrations. There are many fascinating stories from first arrivals, for example the first Americans and Aborigines in Australia, to the formation of great Empires, including Ancient Egypt, Alexander the Great's, the Buddhist kingdom ruled by Ashoka, traders and economic migrants including the Phoenicians and the Windrush generation, and finally individual travellers, notably Marco Polo. Of course, there are the nomadic peoples from North Africa and the Roma in Europe too. One of my favourite spreads is on Brick Lane, London, home to many Huguenots escaping 18th century France, then a place for Jewish people escaping from Eastern Europe (including my wife's own family), Bengalis from the 1970s onwards and today, a destination for the *avant garde*, all of whom contribute to the material and social history of the place.

*Journeys and Migrations* shows how we are all travellers. Although we have much to learn from our past and present journeys, we can still be optimistic about future, new possibilities.

**Simon Barrett**

## **Adventures in Architecture for Kids: 30 Design Projects for STEAM Discovery and Learning**

Vicky Chan, pub. Quarto

Following on from the *Adventures in Engineering for Kids*, this second title in the *Design Genius Jr* series is intriguing, informative, instructive, interactive, ideal for people with a talent and interest in the STEAM area such as my brother, an Architectural Technician, who said he would have enjoyed this book when he was a child. For me, never adept in these areas, I got lost in the instructions of the various projects.

The topics covered are vast – urban planning, landscape architecture, indigenous buildings, the effect of climate change, pandemics, disasters on designing and producing buildings and environments,

sensitivity to elements such as noise, space, light, sun when designing, and even how to create a zoo that reflects the animals' natural habitats and people visiting.

The thirty design projects, each covering four pages with numbered instructions, corresponding diagrams and images, are equally diverse and creative. The activity of making an urban area using different objects for different buildings, e.g., tins for shops, boxes for houses, could be used to explore issues such as HS2/3 or impact on the environment. Others are messier such as sand building, using marshmallows as a glue to fix toothpicks together to make a floating or buoyant city, or ice and salt to make igloos. The materials required are mostly household items with emphasis placed on using waste products like cardboard or re-using materials such as eating the dried pasta or vegetables used in various activities.

There is a brief glossary, index, templates of some symbols and images, brief profiles of the contributors, but strangely, no examples of real buildings or environments that fit with the activities. I think featuring real examples in the chapters would have made a big difference to understanding the concepts better and their relation to the real world.

Despite my not getting the most out of this book I can see it being of great for STEAM-based classes, providing brilliant ideas for hands-on challenges and activities, nurturing creative problem-solving and encouraging the idea of think, try, experiment, succeed, fail, make changes, and try again. It actively encourages children and their adults to work together, to be curious, to question their environments on domestic, local, and global scales.

**Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer**

## **Aliens and other Worlds: True Tales from Our Solar System and Beyond**

Lisa Harvey-Smith, illus. Tracie Grimwood, pub. Thames & Hudson

Are we alone in this world? It's a question that humans have been asking ourselves ever since we first gained knowledge that our planet isn't alone in the universe. This engaging and informative book explores the possibility that there are other life forms in this universe and breaks down the likelihood of what they may be and where they may be existing.

The book is broken down into sections which means that the reader can follow the information in a structured way, beginning with how life on Earth began before moving on through exploring different planets and what we already know about the possibility of there being life on each one. There's also information about extremophiles (species that live in the most difficult places to survive) and what life on Earth may look like in the future.

Children interested in space and extra-terrestrial life will adore this book; Lisa uses her experience as an astrophysicist to ensure that this book is crammed with information but manages to present it in a way that is accessible to children. Lisa's passion and interest in alien life is clear to see in every part of the book and you would never know that she found the idea of UFOs and aliens scary when she was a child!

The illustrations by Tracie Grimwood are a lot of fun as well, extremely creative, and full of colour – there are even some aliens with facemasks on, how topical!

**Tom Joy**

## **The Brainiac's Book of the Climate and Weather**

Rosie Cooper, illus. Harriet Russell, pub. Thames & Hudson

This book covers a wide range of topics from different types of weather to climate change. Readers will be able to explore the difference between weather and climate, how to identify different clouds and how weather forecasting works. There's information about seasons, wind, rain and snow, and the water cycle as well as weather myths from around the world – did you know in China they say “dog poo is falling” rather than “it's raining cats and dogs”!

It is fun and interesting with bright engaging cartoon-style illustrations, diagrams and photographs. The text is accessible, being presented in small bite-sized chunks with good use made of bullet points and varying fonts for emphasis, and the bizarre facts – such as adding seaweed to cow's food could cut the methane emitted by 80% (I suspect the deadly farts page will prove very popular) - are sure to keep children engaged.

For those brave souls, there are experiments to try at home such as making an exploding fizz bomb or creating a solar oven out of a cardboard box. Perfect for inquisitive 8 – 12 year olds.

**Barbara Band**

## **Dinosaurs Rocks!**

Dougie Poynter, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

The ultimate guide for dinosaur enthusiasts! Written by conservationist, musician and songwriter, Dougie Poynter, this brilliant book, aimed at 8 – 12-year-olds, is packed with facts and information accompanied by black and white illustrations.

Starting with natural history that encompasses how life on earth was formed and early life forms that emerged, the book then continues to explain the Earth's geological time scales and related dinosaurs. There are profiles of all your favourite dinosaurs covering their key features, their favourite food, when they were around and where they were found. Readers can find out about the lives of experts who work with dinosaurs such as palaeontologists, fossil hunters and a trustee of a dinosaur protection charity. There are tips about fossil hunting as well as instructions on how to make a fossil and all of this is interspersed with jokes, true or false questions and wonderful quotable facts; did you know that a T Rex needed around 40,000 calories a day which is equivalent to 80 hamburgers or a whole ten-year-old child?

The pages are quite busy but this is an ideal book to dip into as you'll find something new every time.

## **Barbara Band**

### **Epic Adventures: Explore the World in 12 Amazing Train Journeys**

Sam Sedgman, illus. Sam Brewster, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

*Epic Adventures* by Sam Sedgman - and illustrated by Sam Brewster - is a beautifully presented picture book dedicated to the world of trains.

The book encapsulates the excitement and wonder of adventure and travel - all seen through 12 of the world's most picturesque train journeys, like the Orient Express, the first Transcontinental Railroad in North America, and the Rejuvenation Express from Beijing to Hong Kong.

The histories and stories that follow these trains - via numerous cities across 6 continents - are fascinating, and Sedgman's informative annotations are accompanied by Brewster's wonderfully illustrated maps.

Each locomotive adventure reveals some of the rich landscapes of the countries they traverse. Sam Brewster has drawn detailed, colourful illustrations of trains, sometimes even of the interiors of the trains. Interestingly, the way the trains traverse the pages draws the reader's eyes in that direction, actively encouraging them to read all the accompanying information as they, too, are taken on a journey through the book.

The maps are detailed but legible, and the annotations have a halo effect around them to increase readability. The text in *Epic Adventures* is simple to understand for readers of all ages, and offers a fascinating insight into the vast societies that have been built around the world's railways.

The orientation of the maps changes throughout the book - some are drawn in portrait, and some are landscape, but all are set across a two-page spread. This variation keeps the book interesting to read, and the colours add to the immersion to portray each country's climate and environment.

It's not just maps though - for the Tokaido Shinkansen Line, a detailed sketch depicts the typical look and feel of a Japanese railway station, portraying the hustle and bustle of the city life which is so reliant on the railway.

Throughout *Epic Adventures*, and particularly on the final page, it's acknowledged that many of the world's railways often have dark pasts. But the reader is encouraged to enjoy what these railways offer us today, including - in the modern world - rail offering a potentially more eco-friendly method of travel than cars or planes.

**Chris J Kenworthy**

## **First Questions and Answers: Why should I share?**

Katie Daynes, illus. Christine Pym, pub. Usborne

This book is instantly charming. It's colourful, accessible and engaging; a pleasure to hold, solid and velvety. I felt I'd stumbled on a treat, a macaron maybe, and couldn't wait to get started. There are forty flaps to lift on the theme of sharing. The flap asks a question; lift it and you get some thoughts on what your answer could be. (I like that they're not prescriptive.) Some flaps are straightforwardly pragmatic (don't share your used tissues guys), but mostly they're a really useful collection of ethical posers which you'd want to discuss with three to seven-year-olds: fairness, inequality, mutuality, self-care, empathy and relationships. Some deal with sustainability and how sharing helps us co-exist with others and nature in a finite world. Others explain the power of sharing to achieve good. It's all about being a proper person.

I can't think of a missed opportunity. The book's impressively thorough and most of all kind; I do love its strong voice, calm and encouraging. All of which is fine, but pointless unless the book hooks its readers. I think it will, it's attractive and busy, friendly, the language is positive and well-pitched for tone and vocabulary. The illustrations help. Mostly of bug characters and flower settings, they're detailed and expressive, matching the mood of the words faultlessly. There's lots of variety and detail, and I'm reminded of botanical illustration. It's lovely narrative composition.

Overall, the book leaves me with a warm, happy feeling. It explores key issues thoughtfully and well. It's a pleasant object and a good read. One of the top twenty books I think for any library or bookshop serving early primary years, and a book each family should aim to read together at least once.

**Dmytro Bojaniwskyj**

## **Kaleidoscope of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life: Their Colours and Patterns Explained**

Greer Strothers, pub. Wide Eyed Editions

Dinosaurs have most often been portrayed in various shades of grey or green. But with the recent theory that prehistoric creatures may have had feathers, the idea of a colourful array of life in the Mesozoic Era seems more probable. But how can we know something as specific as the colour of the eyes of an Allosaurus or the pattern in the scales of a Centrosaurus? Using clues from an extensive array of fossils combined with scientific theories about modern animals, *Kaleidoscope of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life* provides readers with an illustrated collection of the rainbow of beasts lurking in our prehistoric past.

From the red-and-white, ringed-tailed Sinosauropteryx to the ‘winking’ eyespots on the Kalligrammatid Lacewing, prehistoric life has never looked so good. Modern technology has advanced research in dinosaurs faster than ever before as new fossils have been discovered and information is shared more quickly. Together with evidence about known animals, birds and reptiles, palaeontologists are piecing together what the prehistoric world most-likely looked like.

*Kaleidoscope of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life* is a colourful, non-fiction catalogue of various primeval plants and animals – many that will surprise even the most studied dinosaur fan. The illustrations are created using risography, described as digital screen printing. The colours are soft and textured, similar to coloured pencils, and can be incredibly detailed depicting iridescent or glossy traits. Each spread covers a particular topic – from regions (desert, sea, forest, arctic) to eyes or size (Hues of the Huge and Tiny Tints) – and includes facts and theories about how things could have looked and why. Readers are taken through to modern times covering such topics as details discovered through different cultures (Aboriginal, French, African, Americans and Victorians) to species that have gone extinct and how we can prevent extinction of modern flora and fauna. A helpful glossary defines scientific words in plain language so young readers can keep up with technical terminology.

When the young dinosaur expert in your life has covered the basics, *Kaleidoscope of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life* will offer a welcome collection of unique and detailed facts and theories about the intriguing life of our prehistoric world.

**Stephanie Ward**

**Leonardo da Vinci’s Life of Invention**

Jake Williams, pub. Pavilion

Meet Leonardo, inventor extraordinaire. It is sometimes hard to believe that Leonardo was born in 1452, almost 600 years ago, as some of his inventions seem to be so modern, or seem to be so integral to our world that we forget they were dreamt of so very many years ago, before, even the printing press let alone the industrial revolution and modern science and technology. Leonardo was a polymath, a person with a wide-ranging interest in learning, wanting to learn as much as possible. He was an inventor, painter and scholar, an incredibly talented man with an amazing imagination. Sadly, he considered himself a failure because so much of his work remained unfinished in his own lifetime. We know differently, we know that to not finish does not mean to fail.

Leonardo left a great legacy, a legacy of plans and ideas that have shaped the world and in this meticulously thought through book we learn more about the man, about each of his inventions, and see them as they could have looked. Jake Williams brings it all to life with his words and images. We learn about da Vinci's plans for flying machines, for a self-propelled cart that would take us around in circles, we even meet a robot knight! Leonardo was not only interested in ideas on and above ground but also in those that would take him under the ocean for which Leonardo imagined a diving suit.

This stunning book reveals to children the wonders of the fascinating life of Leonardo da Vinci and I think more than a few adults will be fascinated too.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Not Your Average Maths Book**

Anna Weltman, illus. Paul Boston, pub. Wide Eyed Editions

Have you ever had questions about maths that it seems no-one knows how to answer? I know I have and after reading this book I discovered that I was not alone, author Anna Weltman seems to have had all my questions and more that she wanted to find answers too!

Where to start? Well, the book itself begins with an exploration of what maths is, helping us to understand that it is more than just numbers added together, subtracted from one another, it is in fact the wonders of geometry, algebra, calculus and even topology. (I had to look this last up – it is the study of stretchy, bendy, twisty and wiggly shapes!) We can then move on to learn how maths fits itself into our everyday lives, from the shops on the high street to the building site, this is the maths we can see. There is also the maths we can't see, the maths of flight, of space travel and more besides.

As you progress through the book, learning more about maths, finding some fascinating answers to intriguing questions we not only further our understanding of the subject, finding (for me at least) how fascinating it is, we also learn that it is still evolving, there are in fact still some unanswered

questions. For example did you know that the greatest unsolved question is how many primes there are that are only 2 apart? Questions you never thought you would ask are also answered – how to comb the hair on a coconut for example!

A brilliant concept, Anna Weltman presents a mind-boggling selection of answers and brings maths to life as never before, with detailed illustrations by Paul Boston this book is a feat for the mind and the eyes and a must read for all curious minds.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

### **Peep Inside a Bird's Nest**

Anna Milbourne, illus. Stephanie Fizer Coleman, pub. Usborne

This series of board books allows little fingers the chance to peep inside items they maybe haven't explored properly in real life. With over 20 titles in this series, our youngest readers can explore nests, fire engines, castles and coral reefs, to name but a few.

This particular book allows readers to peek in a bird's nest to see the eggs and to then lift various flaps to see the eggs hatch and to see the fledging being fed and cared for by their parents. Showing a variety of birds' nests, from ones perfect for the smallest bird, the hummingbird to larger ones ideal for weaver birds and flamingos.

This book has a QR code on the back which can be scanned to see inside a real bird's nest. Linking to the natural world, this book encourages children to look around them and to explore nature, to make links to the book and to understand how baby birds grow up, and how they are cared for. These books are so popular with young families. They are strong and sturdy for even the most destructive of hands. Full of simple and easy to read facts, the pages are beautifully illustrated and allow readers a visual peek into the life of a bird.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

### **Razzmatazz!: The Poetry World of Roger Stevens**

Roger Stevens, illus. Mike Smith, pub. Otter Barry Books

Be it any season or place- an unassuming and exciting children's story can cheer one up and silence the mental chaos in a jiffy! Here for the Spring season, I have a lovely collection of poems by the well known poet and educator Roger Stevens, whose poetic expressions given to our some essential human moments spent with family, children and pets at school, on vacations and at home. Coupled with

award-winning illustrator Mike Smith these poems can make children and adults alike, a volley of emotions which are thought provoking and relatable.

Another interesting part of the book is Roger's notes on how he went through the process of writing a poem; such as for these lines-

"I am the click of the catch, The heavy clunk  
Of the closing door..."

Here he comments that, "A great way to write a poem about emotions is to imagine the emotion itself is telling the poem..."

With such insights, readers not only get to experience the poem first; they also learn to write one and express themselves. It's themes will appeal to any school-goer or parents of one as they emerge from the human space of thoughts, feelings like joy, sadness, anger, loneliness and excitement; and also experiences of events which life brings to most of us- a girl misses her cousin, a boy feels low at school and how he motivates himself, year six boys boast about themselves, a dad dances his heart out and many more such reflections expressed through poetry.

It's a good read beckoning all to learn, empathise, motivate, enjoy and express themselves through poetry as well.

**Ishika Tiwari**

## **There Are Birds Everywhere**

Camilla De La Bedoyere, illus. Brita Teckentrup, pub. Big Picture Press

From its tactile cover, run your hand over it and feel the embossed birds, almost imagining they are flying under your fingers, to the stunning internal illustration, this book had me captivated from the moment I picked it up. The author illustrator team were also a big draw, Camilla De La Bedoyere is an outstanding author of non-fiction titles, always informative and able to pitch her text to exactly the level required for the audience., Brita Teckentrup's illustrations never fail to astound me with their intricate details they are clearly well-researched which sums up this book perfectly.

We all know it we will hear them every day there truly are birds everywhere. Birds in our gardens birds in our towns, birds in our cities, birds by the seaside and importantly birds in our countryside. In other countries there may be birds in deserts birds in savannas too.

For young readers for older readers, for any reader interested in wildlife, and particularly bird life, this is likely to be the perfect book. Sumptuously illustrated we are taken to a world where all sorts of birds can be found and all weird and wonderful things about them that we never even knew were true

can be learnt. We learn not only about the species of bird, but also about how they fly, what they eat, where they sleep. Add to this research and find element allowing readers to learn more about each bird this is a book that not only teaches us but engages us makes us think more about the world around us and about those beautiful birds we see and hear almost every day but sometimes know very little about. Vibrantly surprising, a stunning book.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **The Universal Zoo: The Conservation Place at the Far End of Space**

Neal Zetter, illus. Will Hughes, pub. Otter-Barry Books

This collection of poetry is a celebration of words, sounds and language. Bursting with alliteration, rhyme and a rich variety of verse styles, this book is anarchic, unique and lots of fun.

Based around the theme of conservation and with many poems about animals/pets/creatures, some of the poems, such as *The Last Grizzard*, are particularly poignant.

The illustrations by Will Hughes of the imaginary creatures are lively and entertaining, and really bring the poems to life. The cover is eye-catching and captures the tone of the poems brilliantly.

Full of tongue-twisting energy, this collection would be great fun for families to read out aloud together, as well as being a fantastic introduction to those new to poetry. This would also be wonderful and inspiring classroom material - teachers would undoubtedly find it useful for inspiring interesting conversations about the diversity of life, and for teaching alliteration, simile and rhyme. In fact, there is even a helpful section at the back, encouraging young readers to become poets.

We would certainly recommend this lively collection!

**Stephanie Robertson**

## **Picture books**

### **Colour and Me!**

Michaela Dias-Hayes

### **Frank and Bert**

Chris Naylor-Ballesteros

### **Fred and the Fantastic Tub-Tub**

Zeb Soames, illus. Anja Uhren

### **I Am the Subway**

Kim Hyo-eun, trans. Deborah Smith

### **I Love You, Blue**

Stephane Barroux

### **In You I See: A Story That Celebrates the Beauty Within**

Rachel Emily, illus. Jodie Howard

### **Love Grows Everywhere**

Barry Jimms, illus. Jisha Lee

### **Mia and the Miffkins**

Margarita Surnaite

### **The More Monster**

Hayley Wells

### **The Museum of Marvellous Things**

Kristina Stephenson

### **The Pipsqueak**

Ben Manley, illus. Andrew Gardner

### **The Robber Raccoon**

Lou Kuenzler, illus. Julia Woolf

### **Snowy White**

Gareth P. Jones, illus. Loretta Schauer

### **Wide Awake Wolf**

Georgiana Deutsch, illus. Megan Tadden

### **You're Loved**

Liz Climo

## **Junior books**

### **The Bird Singers**

Eve Wersocki Morris

### **The Boy Whose Wishes Came True**

Helen Rutter

### **Carnival of the Lost**

Kieran Larwood, illus. Sam Usher

### **The Cats We Meet Along the Way**

Nadia Mikail, illus. Kate Ng

### **Escape Room**

Christopher Edge, illus. David Dean

### **Leonora Bolt: Secret Inventor**

Lucy Brandt, illus. Gladys Jose

### **The Luckiest Kid in the World**

Danny Wallace, illus. Gemma Correll

### **The Marvellous Granny Jinks and Me**

Serena Holly, illus. Selom Sunu

### **Mike Falls Up**

Candy Gourlay, illus. Carles Ballesteros

### **Nisha's War**

Dan Smith

### **The Secret of Haven Point**

Lisette Auton, illus. Valentina Toro, Gillian Gamble and Luke Ashford

### **The Sky Beneath the Stone**

Alex Mullarky

### **There's a Dog in My Brain**

Caroline Green, illus. Rikin Parekh

### **What's New, Harper Drew?**

Kathy Weeks, illus. Aleksei Bitskoff

### **Witchlings**

Claribel A. Ortega

## **Young Adult books**

### **All That's Left in the World**

Erik J. Brown

### **All the Better to See You**

Gina Blaxhill

### **The Blue Book of Nebo**

Manon Steffan Ros

### **Echoes and Empires**

Morgan Rhodes

### **The Gifts That Bind Us**

Caroline O'Donoghue

### **The Girl Who Fell Beneath the Sea**

Axie Oh

### **The Guinevere Deception**

Kiersten White

### **I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican**

#### **Daughter**

Erika L. Sánchez

### **The Iron Sword**

Julie Kagawa

### **Jade Fire Gold**

June C.L. Tan

### **The Revelry**

Katherine Webber

### **Serendipity: A Glorious Collection of Stories of All Kinds of Falling In Love**

Marissa Meyer

### **The Stolen Slippers**

Melissa De La Cruz

### **This Woven Kingdom**

Tahereh Mafi

### **Win Lose Kill Die**

Cynthia Murphy

## **Non-Fiction books**

### **A Walk Through Nature: A Clover Robin Peek-Through Book**

Libby Walden, illus. Clover Robin

### **A World Full of Journeys and Migrations: Over 50 stories of Human Migration That Changed Our World**

Martin Howard, illus. Christopher Corr

### **Adventures in Architecture for Kids: 30 Design Projects for STEAM Discovery and Learning**

Vicky Chan

### **Aliens and other Worlds: True Tales from Our Solar System and Beyond**

Lisa Harvey-Smith, illus. Tracie Grimwood

### **The Brainiac's Book of the Climate and Weather**

Rosie Cooper, illus. Harriet Russell

### **Dinosaurs Rocks!**

Dougie Poynter

### **Epic Adventures: Explore the World in 12 Amazing Train Journeys**

Sam Sedgman, illus. Sam Brewster

### **First Questions and Answers: Why should I share?**

Katie Daynes, illus. Christine Pym

### **Kaleidoscope of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life: Their Colours and Patterns Explained**

Greer Strothers

### **Leonardo da Vinci's Life of Invention**

Jake Williams

### **Not Your Average Maths Book**

Anna Weltman, illus. Paul Boston

### **Peep Inside a Bird's Nest**

Anna Milbourne, illus. Stephanie Fizer Coleman

### **Razzmatazz!: The Poetry World of Roger Stevens**

Roger Stevens, illus. Mike Smith

### **There Are Birds Everywhere**

Camilla De La Bedoyere, illus. Brita Teckentrup

### **The Universal Zoo: The Conservation Place at the Far End of Space**

Neal Zetter, illus. Will Hughes