



# Early Spring **2023**

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## **Picturebooks**

## **Beware the Blue Bagoo**

Karl Newson, illus. Andrea Stegmaier, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

Readers beware! The Blue Bagoo is coming for you! The town of Rumourville is rife with rumours that a mysterious beast known as the Blue Bagoo is at large. Known for his penchant for eating people, the locals are determined to ensure everyone is aware of just how terrible this creature is. They make up chants about it, put up warning posters and march around the town with placards advising others to take heed.

But who is the Blue Bagoo? A curious detective is committed to discovering the truth. Observant readers will spot what the detective and indeed the townsfolk miss - the Blue Bagoo is not a scary individual at all, but rather a whole community of creatures who are not in the least bit frightening, living amongst them. They don't eat people, preferring cake instead! The truth is eventually revealed, and the locals realise they have made an awful mistake. The reader is reminded that we all make mistakes sometimes, but if we are friendly, caring and kind, and seek to spread love, not hate, the world will be a better place for everyone.

Fans of *The Gruffalo* will love this postmodern picturebook which highlights the folly of believing everything you hear. Its bright and colourful illustrations and engaging rhyming text makes it well suited to young readers. *Beware the Blue Bagoo*, as well as an entertaining read, could be used to encourage the important skill of critical literacy.

#### **Pauline Bird**

#### Blue

Sarah Christou, pub. Faber Children's Books

This is a wonderfully simple story of a young girl and how she has 'Blue' feelings that impact on her life. She feels scared and nervous in many situations and there is always this big blue monster lurking in the background. One day she tells a friend about 'Blue' and she then finds it makes things easier if she tells other friends and family about her worries. The little girl discovers that "blue is just a colour in the rainbow of me".

In a time where we are more concerned about mental health and wellbeing in primary schools, it is wonderful to find such a sympathetic and accessible story that children can associate with. The visual representation of the character 'Blue' is large but furry and quite cuddly in many ways; however, it is perception that is the important factor here and the little girl needs to find a way of changing how she sees these feelings.

The illustrations in this story are also quite simple, yet the author manages to convey a lot of emotion in very few pencil strokes. The text itself is very short with only two or three lines per page and the most noticeable point is that the text is made to look like handwritten text, not printed. This is a delightful book that should find a place in every school, and which will also work at home if a young child is feeling worried of stressed.

#### **Margaret Pemberton**

#### Blue Umbrella

Emily Ann Davison, illus. Momoko Abe, pub. Andersen Press

The mysterious blue umbrella which turns up unexpectedly one day outside a little girl's house offers more potential than appearances would suggest.

As the unexpected events continue, on a bright sunny day when no rain is predicted, it suddenly starts to pour with rain. Luckily the blue umbrella is there to shelter the little girl...and surprisingly her mum fits under too. Indeed, the umbrella seems to grow and grow, sheltering everyone they come across.

As the different individuals gather together they begin to form an inclusive community seeking to help others – even if that means going directly to them to support them. They share food and stories together as they wait for brighter times. Once the rain has stopped, they realise they have made an important connection which will outlast the rain. They come together to create a community café named after the catalyst which brought them together in the first place. Reflecting its origins, it will act as 'a place for everyone'.

This gorgeous picturebook reminds us of the importance of a community and how something small and unexpected can actually grow into something much bigger and more wonderful than anyone could initially imagine. It highlights how things that seem impossible, can actually work it if you use your imagination.

#### **Pauline Bird**

## Dig, Dig, Digger

Morag Hood, pub. Two Hoots

Morag Hood loves books for children that will give them a true sense of adventure and her pervious titles have won her awards so she must be doing something right! In her latest title, *Dig, Dig, Dig, Digger* she introduces us to the wonderful world of the yellow digger. How she manages to make a digger such an irresistible character is part of her brilliance as an author and illustrator. I think that it is not only the way she draws her characters to make them larger than life, popping of the pages and into wherever we are when we are reading. She also has a magical way with words making her stories witty, dynamic, and easy to follow. These are stories, books, that children want to come back to time and again because they are so much fun to read.

*Dig, Dig, Digger* is an inviting story about one little yellow digger who is fed up with her job of digging down into the mud, just look at the end pages to see how many other things there are that she could be doing! But she is cross on the day we meet her because all she ever does is dig but then she hears about a new thing called up and she wants to try it. Imagining all the things that she could do if she explores up makes Digger happy. She could reach and climb, jump and flap too. Digger finds a way to go up, but does she like it? At first yes, it's all very exciting but she soon realises these kinds of adventures are better with friends. Can you imagine how exciting she finds it to fall down and dig her way home?

An utterly charming story with a wonderful message vibrant illustrations and, this is just brilliant, a finger trail spread across the pages for young readers to follow. Silly, full of joy and simply a story that you must read and share with little ones in your life.

#### **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

#### The Emerald Forest

Catherine Ward, illus. Karin Littlewood, pub. Otter Barry Books

Whilst it could be considered that a book which hopes to show all those who would like to campaign for the endangered Orangutan is perhaps going to be a non-fiction title, Catherine Ward's *The Emerald Forest* is in fact an evocative picturebook story. In the tropics of the island of Sumatra, in the beautiful rainforests, we meet Orangutan and her family.

In the emerald-green forest orangutan lives with her family, swinging through the trees she sees a forest bursting with life, tigers prowl, elephants stroll and rhino's roam. She teaches her children how to live in the world around them, what fruits to eat, how to swing and even build themselves a sleeping nest. They grow, their mother is proud. But then one day a faint noise is followed by a crash and smoke. Orangutan and her family move away from the sound, from the smoke until one day it comes again, this time louder and the family know they have to leave but where can they go? A human hand of friendship reaches out and before long Orangutan and her family, as well as the other animals of the forest have a new home.

Karin Littlewood's atmospheric illustrations help readers to explore with almost tactile detail the beauty of the orangutans and their habitats. Both author and illustrator help us to understand the realities of the environmental crisis affecting some of the world's most endangered species. They help us to learn more about these species in an evocative picturebook story and they leave us full of hope for the future.

#### **Antoinette Ellis**

#### **Hedge Lion**

Robyn Wilson-Owens, pub. Andersen Press

Not everyone notices Hedge Lion. But Ida does. In Ida's world steps become mountains; gates become vines to swing from; and so of course she notices the lion in the hedge trying ever so hard to be still and quiet.

Ida is determined to help Hedge Lion to discover his roar. She tries many different things which all fail, but eventually a great book becomes a catalyst and unites them. Roaring with laughter, Hedge Lion struggles to control himself and worries he has scared the wildlife which he looks after away forever. Can Ida convince him it's okay to let his feelings out when he needs to?

This is an exquisite book with wonderful attention to detail. The endpapers are beautiful and flicking between the front and back, you can see how they become part of the story. Throughout the book there are lots of interesting things to notice. I loved spotting a subtle nod to breastfeeding in the image – normalising it for readers. We see so few examples of this in picturebooks, so it was refreshing to see it featured here.

A stunning book about the power of imagination; friendship; and the importance of being true to yourself and your feelings.

#### **Pauline Bird**

## **High Top**

Tom Lacey, pub. Little Tiger

High top is a sneaker that just can' stop, so the cover of this vibrant yellow and red picturebook tells us, but what is it that high top just can't stop? I know I was curious to learn more, and I am happy I was too, what a wonderful story awaits. It seems Tom Lacey's picturebook, one that Little Tiger tells

us is the first book featuring this new irrepressible new hero, is packed with laughter, fun and a shoe with character.

So who is this High Top? We have some clues from the shoe picture on the cover which, when turned over reveals a map of Show Town with its factory, repair shop, cobbler, school and hospital. How does this help? Well now we know where High Top lives and can follow his adventures but what will they be? High Top is happy, he is fresh out of his box and absolutely ready to run, but what is this, High Top has a face — have you ever seen a shoe with a face we are asked? You are about to meet quite a few here in Shoe Town but not before we find out more about High Top in a riot of picture and rhyme.

This book is bursting with enthusiasm and energy, it practically demands to be read and read again with so much to see and do on every page. It is the story of one shoe with an irrepressible energy for life and fun. Unfortunately that does mean there will be some slip ups and High Top needs to learn how to balance life and sole. This is a book for everyone to enjoy and with the promise of more shoe stories to come, after all there are plenty more shoes to meet, I for one can't wait!

#### **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## Lizzy and the Cloud

The Fan Brothers, pub. Francis Lincoln Children's Books

Brothers, Eric and Terry Fan, have collaborated to produce this well plotted and elegantly executed picture book resulting in a magnificent timeless work of art children will cherish.

In a few words the Fan Brothers have created a well-rounded character who the reader can empathise with. We feel Lizzy's joy when she buys a cloud from the cloud seller and names it Milo. In the beginning she follows all the rules that came with the cloud but in her desire to keep the cloud forever she starts to ignore the last rule. The cloud soon becomes too big for her room, and we feel her dilemma as she has an important decision to make. At the end of the book she adds her own rule to the list she received when she bought Milo.

The subtle illustrations use a limited colour palette on a mostly grey backdrop. The little details will keep young readers enthralled, such as the detail in the park, the way cloud gradually changes from a fluffy white to dark grey, the rainbow each time it rains and the different shops in the street.

In the classroom, *Lizzy and the Cloud*, could be used to discuss loss and letting things go, such as anger, frustration, bitterness and accepting change.

This is a book to explore and treasure with a beautiful message young children will be able to relate to.

#### Anita Loughrey, reviewer's website: www.anitaloughrey.com

#### Out Of the Blue

Robert Tregoning, illus. Stef Murphy, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

At the beginning of this picture book, 'By Blue Government Demand', anything that isn't blue, is banned, but one little boy, sitting in his blue pyjamas on his blue sheet in his totally blue bedroom, secretly really loves the colour yellow.

On his way to school in the blue bus, it upsets him to see workers painting the grass and the trees blue, and when he gets to school he has to join a litter pick, collecting anything not blue and putting them in rubbish bags. However, he saves one item: a little yellow rubber duck and puts it in his blue rucksack. At home, he adds it to the store of yellow things in his closet and shuts the blue doors tight. Unable to tell his dad, he creeps to his closet in the night and takes out the duck. In a sudden flurry, all his yellow things fly around the room: his sticky notes, his submarine, his yellow tights - and then he hears footsteps in the hall. There's no time to tidy up, and in comes Dad. The boy thinks he's in serious trouble, but Dad says, "Don't worry, I'm your dad and I love you. So, if you do love yellow, this is what we'll do", and they go down to his painter's van.

In the morning, the post lady is amazed to see that their house is now the colour of the sun. People come to see the house, and a few days later, the house next door becomes green, and other people paint their houses, wear multi-coloured clothes and grow flowers in many colours. There is evidently no response from the Blue Government, and the boy is much happier as he picks up his yellow lunch box and goes to school. At the end, the author declares that "Life is like a rainbow- we all love different things- let your colours shine, and love whatever makes you YOU!"

There are quite a lot of books around about not necessarily needing to conform, but being the individuals we are, and embracing our differences. This is a rather extreme example of a conformity that results in rebellion, but it works as a story and the illustrations are fun. The close relationship between father and son, who seem to be on their own, is delicately shown, and this is a nice book to share.

#### **Diana Barnes**

## The Swing

Britta Teckentrup, pub. Prestel

I love reviewing children's books but occasionally a book lands on the floor of my hall that defies all my attempts to capture its contents, essence, or value to the reader. I cannot just run up a quick

summary of the plot, reflect on characterisation and wax lyrical (or not) on the moral of the story. I cannot define the indefinable. In *The Swing*, Britta Teckentrup, has crafted just such a book – one that tests every reviewer.

The Swing has a single, simple idea at its heart. A sturdy frame with two swings overlooks the ocean and plays host to a myriad of experiences that most children and all adults will recognise: girls sharing secrets, boys testing the limits, the hurly-burly of community or the pain of fractured relationships. The swing is metaphor for life itself – for friendship and love, loneliness and disappointment, adventure and domesticity, decay, and renewal. In case all this sounds too heavy, Teckentrup has leavened the load with her exquisite illustrations which bring to life every dream, emotion, and memory. I marvelled at how the author has perfectly captured each variation of play – the unwinding of twisted chains, the side to side-to-side rocking or the sick-making, lying on the stomach swing (that only children can do). Her portrayal of the natural world, the weather and the cycle of life is beautifully portrayed (and unsurpassed) by her technically perfect pictures.

Is *The Swing* a book for children or a book for adults? Perhaps it is a book for the child in every one of us – no matter how old? I see it as an elegy for childhood but more importantly, I think children will get a glimpse, not only of their present but also of their future selves and all the successes, joys, and complexities, of adulthood. It is a book to treasure.

#### **Katherine Wilson**

## There's Nothing Faster Than a Cheetah

Tom Nicoll, illus. Ross Collins, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Here we have the brilliant duo of Tom Nicoll and Ross Collins, both highly talented and well established in their fields. This little story is a tour de force of children's picture book writing and illustration. The hardback cover grandly announces the visual spectacle within that will delight its audience. Inside the back and front covers we have the land speeds of twenty four different animals including humans. This is interesting stuff which will fascinate both younger and older readers. But there is nothing faster than a cheetah, or is there?

The drama begins as we meet a super confident cheetah and equally confident snail, lining up for a race. The commentator casually dismisses the snail for being too slow, 0.001 km/h to be exact, compared with the cheetah's 112km/h. As we turn the pages we meet a variety of race contestants all attempting to prove they can be faster than the cheetah. A rhino on roller skates, a hippo in a hang glider, a giraffe in a jet pack and many more until finally the rabbit in a rocket is beaten. Well, that's it, our commentator resigns himself to the prowess of the cheetah. What could possibly be faster than a cheetah he asks, the page is turned, and all is revealed?

Meanwhile back at the beginning retribution has been top of the snails list with a delicious little sub plot going on right under our noses, but you need to be observant to spot it. This will thrill the youngest members of the audience and whip up some gleeful reactions. The perfect read for the very young who can appreciate the story without understanding the dialogue and the older child who will eventually love reading it themselves. Well done Tom and Ross.

#### **Elizabeth Negus**

## The Tiny Grain of Sand

Sylvian Alzial, illus. Benoit Tardif, pub. Thames & Hudson

The Tiny Grain of Sand by Sylvian Alzial and Benoit Tardif was inspired by a Basque legend and traditional Asian folklore. The story encompasses the proverbs: 'The grass is greener on the other side', 'You can be anything you want to be' and 'Be careful what you wish for' and the fable 'How can you be happy with life when there is so much temptation'.

It is about a tiny grain of sand who is bored of life on the beach with the other tiny grains of sand and wishes to be a pebble. The grain of sand's wish comes true but soon it becomes bored of being a pebble and the wishes escalate, at one point it even becomes the sun floating around in space. I particularly liked Sylvian Alzial's use of a wide variety of onomatopoeic words each time it changed to something else. Children will love trying to make up the sounds and thinking of their own.

Benoit Tardif's digitally produced illustrations consist of bold colour on a white background. These simple, colourful images are highly effective and will keep readers turning the pages. The children could produce some incredible artwork of their own in the style of Benoit Tardif.

A great book for discussing proverbs and fables and examining what they would like to be as they grow older.

Anita Loughrey, reviewer's website: www.anitaloughrey.com

#### Two Places to Call Home

Phil Earle, illus. Jess Rose, pub. Ladybird Books

Two Places to Call Home is a brilliant book for any young children whose parents have recently separated or divorced so that they can safely explore and embrace the feelings that they are experiencing.

The book explores different aspects of parents no longer being together; Florrie's parents have separated and now she has two of everything, including two places that she calls home. Florrie shares her experience of living with her mum and with her dad separately and through her story, gives methods for how to manage when you are missing one of your parents, how to feel better about saying goodbye, and understanding that her parents also feel sad about the situation that they are now in.

Phil Earle's style of writing transfers effectively from the fictional storytelling of *When the Sky Falls* and *Why the Storm Rages* to *Two Places to Call Home*, keeping emotions and empathy at the centre of the book while keeping the story simple for young readers to follow. Florrie climbs the highest mountain with her dad and ventures to the moon with her mum to ensure that she has the bravery for what she is going through. Young children will enjoy the story while learning about how it feels to adapt to parents who have separated or divorced.

With wonderful illustrations by Jess Rose, which capture the emotions of Florrie and her parents, this book is really relatable. Jess has managed to skilfully show Florrie feeling upset, worried and delighted at different times throughout the story – my favourite illustrations are of Florrie hugging her mum and Florrie hugging her dad, the comfort, peace and satisfaction captured by those illustrations is something that every child will be able to relate to and understand.

A beautiful, powerful book.

#### **Tom Joy**

## **Junior Books**

#### **Blanksy The Street Cat**

Gavin Puckett, illus. Allen Fatimaharan, pub. Faber & Faber

*Blanksy The Street Cat* is a fun story which shows that a successful life can come in the form of friendship.

Written in rhyme, this feel-good story tracks Blanksy (a street cat) and a busker named Pete. They travel to cities and towns, trying to make ends meet while bringing joy to people who come to hear Pete sing and play his guitar. Blanksy soon realises that his creativity can help Pete entertain his crowds and comes up with a novel way to bring more people to wherever Pete is playing, by painting all sorts of murals on the buildings around. While the pair face challenges along the way, they work together to solve them and understand what really makes them happy.

Gavin Puckett has managed to bring fun and flair to a lovely story with a positive message. With the story written completely in rhyme, and certain words and sentences written in bold to emphasise them, there has been a lot of thought and creativity behind the choices made in the creation of the story.

The illustrations by Allen Fatimaharan in the book are fantastic - whether they fill the whole page, are tucked in the corner, or are used as a creative border, they always bring fun to the page!

If you are a reader that wants a fun, simple, relatively short read, then *Blanksy The Street Cat* will be perfect for you!

## **Tom Joy**

#### The Detention Detectives

Lis Jardine, pub. Penguin Random house Children's Books

A job promotion means relocating to Bristol and Jonno is not happy about leaving his school friends, friends that he has known since Reception. Within days at Hanbridge High, however, Jonno is involved in a murder investigation. His extensive knowledge of fictional detectives and their techniques comes in handy, and alongside two other Year 7 pupils, Daniel and Lydia, Jonno throws himself in the search for the murderer.

Each child has a reason to uncover the identity of the culprit. Lydia, budding journalist, is looking for a scoop; Daniel, a young carer, fears that the police's initial assessment will affect dramatically his life; Jonno hopes that this event, and his involvement in such awful dealings, will convince his family to leave Bristol.

Gathering clues, carefully observing their teachers, carrying out potentially dangerous searches and interviews, the three sleuths are fearless, turning over every possible clue that they find, and the investigation reaches an exciting conclusion, but also includes a clever twist that leaves the door wide open to sequels.

Action-packed, with lovely dialogues and a good sense of humour, this story also includes gentler moments which reflect important issues. Readers who enjoy the MG Leonard and Robyn Stevens series could find here a new favourite. The only warning note I would give is to say that, while absolutely suited to the lower to middle grade readers, in a couple of places the book includes language that some may find strong.

#### Laura Brill

#### Haarville

Justin Davies, pub. Kelpies (an inprint of Floris Books)

When the story you are about to read starts with a main character playing with a glass eye the reader knows immediately that this is going to be a very exciting and different adventure.

Haarville is an island town nobody has heard of, situated where it is very difficult to get to. The smells are very fishy, and the air is murky and misty. So, the scene is set for an unusual and quirky tale with a hidden secret. A useful map at the front of the book shows that there are going to be places in this story with names like Lumpsuckers, Bladder Wrack Quay, Crab Gulley and No-Hope Ness. These are definitely unusual and often scary names which offer the reader the promise of a dark and mysterious adventure.

On the journey to and round Haarville we meet an amazing bunch of strange and unique characters. Manx Fearty is an orphan who is in danger of losing the family perpetual device shop. We find out more about this shop as we read the book and it certainly adds to the quirky nature of the novel. Other characters are Father G, the drag queen guardian, Fantoosh, the best friend and Olu, the oystercatcher. Just like the place names, these character names are completely unique to this story.

The tale is centred round Manx as he sets out to discover the magical secret which may help him to save the town of Haarville (and the shop). The story is sometimes dark and often funny, and it is certainly very different and unique.

#### **Gary Kenworthy**

#### **Hotel of the Gods**

Tom Easton, pub. Orchard Books

This hilarious, action-packed adventure is full of mythical creatures creating magical mayhem. The main character, called Atlas, is absolutely delighted when his parents take on new jobs running the amazing Hotel of the Gods. It turns out that the residents of this hotel are gods and goddesses from ancient mythology. The action and excitement increases when Atlas accidently lets loose some mythical monsters from the basement. These include, among others, a three-headed Hellhound. The Greek God Hades also lives in the basement. Can Atlas get these monsters back into the basement?

On this incredible journey, the reader will meet Venus and Mars, the Roman God of War, plus the Aztec God of the Sun. There is also Thor, the Norse God of Thunder, Pegasus and Hades, the Greek God of the Underworld. This is not all, as many other amazing creatures from ancient myths and legends, feature in the story. There is a water dragon in the swimming pool, an Egyptian cat goddess, an Aztec god and a Viking god throwing his magical hammer around the garden.

So much is crammed into this tale of adventure that children will be excited to read it. They will be intrigued by the old myths and legends, and this should encourage them all the more to want to read the book.

#### **Gary Kenworthy**

## **Jayben and The Golden Torch**

Thomas Leeds, pub. Hachette Children's Books

Do you sometimes hear of a book and know that you really need to read it? Well, I'm like that, and I know that as soon as I get my hands on that particular book, I will leave everything else, my life will evolve around that book. This was one such book and by the end of the first chapter I knew all I wanted to do was mother the main character Ben for the rest of my life.

Ben is a young lad who suffers from seizures and memory loss and it's during one such seizure that we meet Jayben. During a seizure Ben dreams of a faraway land, where he can escape his horrible aunt, he wakes up with only one clue as to who he is, a compass engraved Jayben.

Jayben discovers that many moons ago, a giant put a dark spell on the golden torch making the elves of the world he is now in forget everything that had come before. Now the elves hang their precious

memories in jars on trees so they are not forgotten. There is also however an evil villain called Null who is burning down the forests, desperate to find the magical torch so they can become the most powerful being ever to live and plunge the world into darkness. Can Jayben save the world before the lights go out forever by finding find his own magic and can he ignite the torch with its fierce violet flame and defeat Null?

There is a cliff-hanger at the end of every chapter which leaves you wanting more. The author draws on his own personal experience of memory loss and head injuries when writing this book. In the character of Ben/Jayben you will meet a really nice lad, someone who you'd like your own children to be like.

This book is full of non-stop action, truly a wonderful book, in fact my favourite book of 2023.

#### **Helen Byles**

#### The Marvellers

Dhonielle Clayton, pub. Piccadilly Press

The Marvellers is an adventure set in a global magical school in the sky, The Marvellerverse. Ella Durand is eleven and the first Conjuror to attend the universal Arcanum Training Institute for Marvellers. She lives in New Orleans. But integrating into this school proves problematical. Fortunately, she finds friendship with two other outsiders, Bridget and Jason and support from one of her teachers, Masterji Thakur. Then the notorious Ace of Anarchy escapes from prison, Ella and her family become embroiled, and Ella is the prime suspect. To make matters worse, Masterji Thakur disappears whilst on a research trip. With the help of her friends and her own new skills, Ella needs to clear her families name and find her mentor before it's too late.

Dhonielle Clayton, is a highly acclaimed author who no doubt gained inspiration for writing this book from her years as a school librarian in New York City's East Harlem neighbourhood. She noticed that the children were offered books where the hero was someone they could not identify with. Harry Potter, after all is white and living in a western culture with associated dragons and witches, not a phenomenon kids are aware of back in East Harlem.

Alternatively, Ella Durand is black and familiar with chants, elixirs, and West African protector spiders rather than dragons and witches. Within this backdrop themes of discrimination, privilege, marginalisation, stereotyping and other parallels with race relations real world history are sympathetically balanced by loyalty, friendship, and kindness.

The intricate detail Dhonielle Clayton provides us with in the scene setting is prodigious. But it slows up the rate of plot development in the first half of the book. The second half proves to be much better

as the reader adapts to this magical land vernacular. The book is suitable for a keen reader with a love of intricate fantasy worlds and words, who will not easily be informationally overwhelmed. The more perceptive the reader the more they will enjoy this magical masterpiece.

#### **Elizabeth Negus**

## **Saving Neverland**

Abi Elphinstone, illus. Geraldine Rodriguez, pub. Puffin Books

Ten-year-old Martha Pennydrop and her younger, asthmatic, brother Scruff have recently moved to an old house in London with their father. He used to play with them and tell them wonderful stories but now he works all the time. Martha too has given up play and stories and adventures. She needs to be grown up so she can keep Scruff safe, and never have a repeat of the Terrible Day. But her plans to be sensible are derailed when Peter Pan arrives through a window with Muddle the fairy.

Neverland is in desperate danger, under a curse from Captain Hook. Only Martha can save it. She doesn't want to go but Scruff gives her no choice. Soon the four of them plus Scruff's beloved teddy bear, None-the-Wiser, are soaring over London. Neverland is amazing, but the magic is disappearing from it fast. They and the Lost Children they meet have to act. There are perils everywhere, from the frozen landscape, from sharks, frost bears and snow monsters, and from the terrifying ghosts of Captain Hook and his cronies. Scruff is kidnapped. He doesn't have None-the-Wiser, nor his vital inhaler. And if they can't solve a riddle all will be lost.

This is an exciting, inclusive re-imagining of *Peter Pan*, with none of the sexism and racism of the original, and with a great cast of characters. Martha is clever, quick-witted and resilient. The weight of responsibility on her shoulders feels believable, as do her frequent clashes with Peter Pan, who is arrogant and boastful, though also fiercely loyal. Scruff, Muddle and the Lost Children all have strong, appealing personalities.

The plot and pacing are excellent, and the attractive illustrations add to the atmosphere. As in J M Barrie's tale, there's an underlying theme about what it means to move out of childhood. The importance of magic, adventure and stories sings out from the pages. The importance of family love too. Recommended.

## **Anne Harding**

## **The Sleeping Stones**

Beatrice Wallbank, pub. Firefly Press

Beatrice Wallbank's first book is a fantasy tale for 9 - 12-year-olds, inspired by Welsh mythology and morgens, gender neutral merpeople. She grew up in Wales amidst an abundance of sheep and went on to gain a PhD in medieval Wales maritime communities plus an MA in writing for young people. The Welsh language is frequently utilised in this mystery tale bestowing that extra edge in uncharted waters.

The story is set on an island off the coast of Wales, where mythological legends thrive. Unless they manage to resist the urge, the islanders know that their susceptible folk are compelled to climb over the Sleeping Stones, six large rocks which draw them into the sea, onto the imaginary seventh enabling the currents to drown them. Enter Dylan and Gofannon Welsh mythological characters, Dylan a morgen and Gofannon a blacksmith who play key roles in the Wounded Sea storms. Devastating tempests that fortunately rarely appear, wreaking havoc when they do. And, finally, the Weeping Stone, the misplaced seventh which bizarrely rests inland at the opening of the story.

The two main characters are Gruff and Mat, 11-year-olds who become friends when Mat moves into the Blacksmiths cottage next door. Mat's mother is Polish, and they have moved from Manchester. Themes of warm-hearted kinship provide a snug background. Somewhat at variance with the punishing adventure that ensues but nevertheless reassuringly available when needed for everyone. The stark practicalities of a remote rural living pitted against nature and alleged progress are striking. Mystery shrouded in secrecy makes this a compelling read.

#### **Elizabeth Negus**

#### The Swifts

Beth Lincoln, illus. Claire Powell, pub. Puffin Books

This book falls into that category of story where each character is extraordinary, but in their own unique way. Where the focus falls on an individual who despite being accommodated in their uniqueness, nonetheless, doesn't conform. There's an element of struggling with and rebelling against an imposed destiny too. Of discovering for one's self one's own true identity.

Shenanigan Swift is born into a family that names its children according to a word chosen from a dictionary, then expects them to grow up to match. You'd hope from a pitch like that for a writer with a love of language, and Beth Lincoln doesn't disappoint. She cuddles you with her prose, it hardly matters what's happening in the plot, each new paragraph is delightful, vivid and poetic. I'm going to try to avoid going on about the sinewy excellence of the language on show here. I think reviews may revel in it and end up dissuading lots of potentially happy readers. Yes, it's brilliant but, as it should, the skill Lincoln shows never gets in the way of the story. Never is it show-off noodling for its own

sake. I did properly enjoy the act of reading this book. It's like those films that you rewind constantly or dip into for a scene or two.

The story is on the surface a mystery, so I'll steer well around the plot to avoid spoilers. It's decently achieved in the classic 30's style, and the fold-out map of the family manse in the back of the hardcover edition is a hoot. I hope it's repeated for the paperback. The map brings us neatly onto Claire Powell's illustrations, which are nicely scratchy and deeply atmospheric. As occasional plates they're easily overlooked, but they do help move the story. They add hugely to the chapter titles in setting theme, mood, and direction. Repeatedly, this is a hugely well-considered book.

Ultimately, the book is about constantly evolving one's self and shrugging off preconceptions and the mystery genre and the press of familial culture and genetics are great ways of exploring that. It's a handy book to have around for a developing person (and if we live life right aren't we all, whatever our age?), but beyond all of that this book is wry, a touch spooky, utterly engrossing and complete fun.

#### **Dmytro Bojaniwskyj**

#### The Time Tider

Sinead O Hart, pub. Little Tiger

Mara and her dad have lived in their van for as long as she can remember. Whatever her father does to scrape a living has kept them constantly moving and Mara has never questioned it. That is until she uncovers a collection of notes addressed to 'The Tider', an individual responsible for harvesting lost time from people whose lives were cut short. But before Mara can question her father he is taken by a dangerous group who want to use his power for evil.

With the very fabric of time and space at stake, it's down to Mara and her new friend Jan to find him before it's too late... By the first chapter you feel like Mara, you are in her world, living her life. You are part of a family living off the grid in an unsafe world, you have a parent who really isn't a responsible parent, but he loves you more than anything. But soon there are questions to be asked and answered but you find there are no answers coming your way. You start to lose trust pretty quickly in your dad, but soon you have other worries. When Mara's dad is taken she suddenly hears shocking revelations about him and his job but you know that Mara will do anything to get him back.

This is an action-packed book which is fast paced from the second you open it. It's an exhilarating page turner which will find you staying up late to finish the chapter. A book full of twists and turns. You will find yourself guessing on what will happen next then be completely wrong. This is all about family and friendship and how just because you're not blood related you can't be family. The main two characters Mara and Jan are nice likeable characters, and it was great to see that them as just normal everyday children.

This is an exciting MG thriller that will entertain both children and adults alike.

#### **Helen Byles**

## Two-Headed Chicken Tom Angleberger, pub. Walker Books

Fans of *Bunny vs Monkey* and *Dog Man*, *Cat Kid* watch out for you are going to love this story! The illustrations are 'amazing!' – very bright, glossy, and engaging for young readers, with buzzy electric hues. This is a graphic novel, fully illustrated, bold and bright book, it is an adventure across a multiverse ,and it is a book in which absolutely anything could, and does happen!

The cast of the story consists of three main characters - a chicken with two heads (which counts as two characters since each of these heads is a brother and sister chicken with different personalities), and a giant green moose called Kernel Antlers. Watch out for Kernel Antlers is a chicken-hungry moose and he is chasing the chickens through different dimensions with the repeated shout 'I want to fry you!' Be prepared for a whistle-sop adventure as you fly through bizarre universes including an ocean plant and a land covered with pizza sauce!

This is a riotous and anarchic graphic novel, with chapters humorously named such as 'Woo-Hoo!' Moon buggy time!' Light on text but big on illustrations, this would be ideal for readers (and reluctant readers) aged around 6-9 years old.

Our seven-year-old read it in one evening and said, 'I hope there is a book two!'

#### **Stephanie Robertson**

#### Wild Oak

C. C. Harrington, pub. Chicken House

Maggie Stephens's stutter makes school life especially hard, and she will do almost anything to avoid speaking in class. Dismissed by a third school in a row Maggie is threatened by her father to be sent away for so-called "treatment," at an institution known for the mistreatment of its students. Instead, Maggie reluctantly agrees to her mother's plan of a few weeks in the fresh air of Wildoak Forest, where she will visit a Grandfather that she barely knows. There, in an extraordinary twist of fate Maggie encounters an abandoned snow leopard cub, an unwanted exotic pet from Harrods department store.

Sheltered by the ancient forest, the two build an extraordinary friendship. But the cub's presence is soon discovered by others, and everything Maggie has come to believe in is threatened. Time is running out, not only for the leopard, but for Maggie and the forest too. Now Maggie must learn to overcome her own fears to protect what she loves.

This story is set in the 1960's and is told in the alternating voices of Maggie and the leopard cub. It is a story told with true with compassion, which explores the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and nature and sees the characters face some serious situations which will raise moral dilemmas for children to consider. Maggie's struggles are entirely relatable and the search to find her own inner voice is something that we all face at times in our life.

Enchantingly descriptive and beautifully evocative the story captures you from page one and makes it impossible to put down. The ancient forest, alive with wisdom and magic, is as much a character in the book as Maggie and the leopard cub and reminds Maggie, and us as readers, "Be gentle with yourself. It is hard to be human." This is a story of messages, morals, friendship and learning to trust in yourself and a pertinent reminder of the beauty and wonder which we have before us and which we need to protect. This is a must read!

#### **Tracey Corner**

#### **The Wildstorm Curse**

## Eve Wersocki Morris, pub. Hachette Children's Books

For 13-year-old Kallie Tamm winning a place at the Wildstorm Theatre Camp is a dream come true. Desperate to be a playwright, Kallie is absolutely determined not to let her dyslexia hold her back, even if her gut does twist each time she has to read out loud.

At the camp, at Hollowstar House in Merricombe, she soon makes friends with Emilia, daughter of Jackie the camp's owner, and learns of the tale of Ellsabet Graveheart who lived in in the village over 400 years ago and was believed to be a witch. Jackie tells the Wildstormers they are to perform a play in the Merricombe Theatre at the end of the week, a play written by Ellsabet Graveheart herself, a play never before performed. However, the villagers believe the theatre to be cursed and the Historical Society are determined to try and put a stop to it.

From her very first night, when Kallie dreams of a green quill atop a tree stump and is shocked to see the same green quill in a props box the next day, strange things begin to happen and Kallie has the feeling that it all has something to do with Ellsabet and the village's history. Something is definitely going on, something Kallie needs to get to the bottom of. Unbeknown to Kallie, a dark shadow is stirring in the woodland near Wildstorm and a dangerous creature has awoken from a centuries old slumber putting her, her friends, and perhaps the whole village of Merricombe, in grave danger.

A tale of bravery and friendship, Kallie proves herself to be a truly courageous protagonist and Emilia a wonderful best friend who reminds Kallie 'Who cares about spelling when you're taking someone on an adventure?' *The Wildstorm Curse* is full of secrets and suspense and this spellbinding tale will undoubtably raise the hairs on the back of your neck! Deliciously dark and utterly unputdownable it is a true lesson in the power of storytelling.

#### **Tracey Corner**

#### **Worst Week Ever: Monday**

Eva Amores, illus. Matt Cosgrove, pub. Simon and Schuster

Eva Amores and Matt Cosgrove's book, *Worst Week Ever: Monday*, is a comedy book that follows Justin Chase, a normal 12-year-old kid, through his unfortunate first day of his new school. His mum has married a vampire, he is living with his embarrassing dad who is currently driving a toilet on wheels, his cat is absolutely nowhere to be seen, and at his new school, he is being laughed at for having the same name as a popular celebrity. But the worst thing is... all of this has happened and its only Monday!

The book is illustrated with Matt's humorous pictures of the situations that Justin finds himself in. Fans of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series are likely to enjoy this book due to the similar images and style of writing. Also, this book is part of a series so that anyone who enjoyed the first one can continue to learn about Justin Chase.

This book made me laugh and smile with almost every page. It is bound to be enjoyed by most children aged between 8 and 11, particularly those who are fans of humour and comics. Justin is constantly finding himself in embarrassing situations (most of which involve either his mum or his dad) that are fun to read about and will make you laugh, but he also finds himself in more important situations that are easier to relate with, such as struggling to find people that he can make friends with and hang out with, dealing with a cruel school bully by the name of Marvin who is always teasing him and calling him names, and a strict teacher who seems to always shout.

Overall, this book is wonderful and humorous, a book that Eva Amores and Matt Cosgrave should be proud of.

#### Mya Grant (aged 10)

## **Young Adult Books**

#### A Dark Inheritance

H. F. Askwith, pub. Penguin Random House

Felix Ashe is just thirty days from his eighteenth birthday, but he is quite certain that it is very unlikely he is going to live beyond it. Why? A family curse, or so he believes.

On their eighteenth birthdays three of Felix's older brothers met their deaths, not one of them was pleasant and yet it would appear all were possible avoidable, at least from the outside eye. Felix knows better, or thinks he does. He was there when his eldest brother George died and was in the house when his twin brothers died. On seeing George's death he also saw, or at least in his stronger moments, thinks he did, a "whisp of midnight vapour." Was there something more sinister at work here and in the next thirty days can Felix summon the strength and courage to learn what it is that has cursed his family and how he can defeat it, how he can learn to live?

This is not the only sorrow settled over the Ashe family. Felix's father who left to help in the war is coming home, disfigured, dysfunctional and a stranger to his wife and two remaining sons. There are layers of mystery and secrets that Felix is about to stumble across. There is an opportunity to break the curse, a dark call which it is almost impossible to resist and there is a deadly secret society that could lead to downfall for Felix or a redemption.

A Dark Inheritance comes with a warning to the reader for this is not a light book. It is a twisted gothic horror fantasy and the author notes that there are depictions of intense anxiety throughout. It is not a story to take lightly if you are experiencing anxiety of your own but it is a book threaded with the golden light of hope. A fascinating story, an engaging story, a beautifully written story it is a book I highly recommend for our older YA audience.

#### **Colin Paterson**

## The Agency for Scandal

Laura Wood, pub. Scholastic

This is an exclusive, invitation only story. This review is your invitation into the world of scandal, of an all-female detective agency in nineteenth century London. Are you ready for a bold story which finds women righting the wrongs done against other women, dealing in the secrets and scandals of upper-class society and maybe falling in love along the way to exposing the crime of the century?

Isobel Stanhope is eighteen years old. She is holding her family together but only just. Isobel and her brother inherited from their father the Stanhope name and little else. His death left their family penniless. It left Isobel with the skill to pick locks as no other, her eight-year-old brother a Baron and her mother falling to pieces. A night out in society finds Isobel wanting quiet, it also introduces her to Sylla, Mrs Finch and the Aviary. Life for Isobel will never be the same. Whilst she now has just enough money to keep her family from poverty, her brother in school, and those secrets safe from the prying eyes of society, she also has a secret life as an investigator. As part of the Aviary, an agency run by women, for women, to dig up scandal on powerful men Izzy unwittingly finds herself drawn into a case of gaslighting, blackmail, missing jewels and Max Vane, the Duke who doesn't know she exists yet has her heart.

With secrets upon secrets this multi-layered story is a high-stakes, fast-paced detective romance which offers its reader a magnificent plot in a book that it is almost impossible not to read in one sitting – no matter that it is some 500 pages! With a perfectly describe late-Victorian London society setting, adventures into Yorkshire, scandals, robbery, street fights and opera house visits there are so many layers to this story that reading it is like unwrapping a mystery box that just keeps on giving, right up to the very last page.

The Agency for Scandal is very much one of my highly recommended reads for 2023, and yes, I did read it all in one sitting!

#### **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **City of Nightmares**

Rebecca Schaeffer, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

Newham is a city run by Nightmares—creatures that used to be human, transformed into their own worst nightmare while they slept. In Newham, crime runs rampant, politicians are corrupt, and gangs openly run the streets. Enter Ness, our protagonist who has been terrified of the world she lives in for the past 8 years, ever since her sister transformed into a giant spider and went on a killing spree through town. Instead of facing her fears, Ness would rather be alone in her room, which she stays in rent-free in exchange for joining a group that is "definitely not a cult." When Ness and a Nightmare boy named Cy are the only two survivors of a boat explosion, they're thrust into the middle of a conspiracy that threatens both their lives.

Ness is not the protagonist you'd expect when you pick up a book to read about a Gotham-like city full of monstrous creatures – she is a self-professed coward, and openly confesses that she's struggling with her own fears. It is refreshing to read about a character who so openly addresses her own trauma, and actively works through it with a diverse group of friends. Throughout the novel, Rebecca

Schaeffer approaches real-life themes through a lens of the bizarre; readers will enjoy addressing these topics in ways they've never expected before.

City of Nightmares is full of both terrifying imagery and chaotic comedy, plus a hodge-podge of villains and good guys who will keep you guessing about their true intentions until the very end. Rebecca Schaeffer manages to combine dark comedy with a familiar coming-of-age feeling that has you rooting for Ness to develop a backbone until the very last page.

#### **Anne Singer**

#### **Cruel Illusions**

Margie Fuston, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

*Cruel Illusions* is a dark fantasy. It is a vampire story. It is the story of magic and illusion. It is the story of a girl who is very lost and set on revenge finding herself. It is an absolutely compelling dark, gothic, magical thriller. It may not be a story to read too late into the night and it may not be for the faint hearted but once it gets its fangs into you there is a very high chance that it will not let you go. It is still with me, weeks after I first read it!

Ava found her mother murdered by a vampire, she knew immediately from the marks in her mother's neck, but society has convinced itself the so-called vampires are just a thing of myth and urban legend. Along with her younger brother Ava has spent the last ten years being moved from one foster home to another and all this time she has set her sights on revenge. Revenge for her mother's death is all she wants, that and a loving family if she is honest with herself. She would also like to follow in her mother and father's footsteps, to become the magician that she can feel in her very blood.

Stumbling across a hidden magic show Ava witnesses what she can only believe to be impossible illusions, not the vampire bloodsuckers she is hunting Ava knows that these people are somehow supernatural, and they see something in her too, something that convinces her to run away with them, to try and become one of them, to ignite the powers running in her own blood. The catch – for of course there is one – she must prove worthy but as illusion and reality begin to blur she soon realises the only way out will be to win or die.

How much is Ava truly willing to sacrifice for her revenge, for her dreams, for her family, for herself? A gripping story like no other Margie Fuston's *Cruel Illusions* is a magnificently unique twist, blending vampires, magic, elements of the gothic and a touch of romance.

#### **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

#### Game Over Girl

Naomi Gibson, pub. Chicken House Books

Game Over Girl is a mind-bending story about Lola, a teenage girl who hallucinates most of the things she enjoys, and who has been invited to test a virtual reality game called Better Than Life at her new boarding school. It is explained that the game is actually an experiment by Dr Zats, to see how teenagers "use VR to process their anxiety [and] work through their issues in a virtual setting." There is only one rule that applies to the game, which each of the participants proceed to break: never recreate real places and people in Better Than Life.

Lola uses the game to re-create her house, with a perfect self and a real dad that loves her. However, something is hiding in the basement, and it threatens her entire existence - both virtual, and real. Coupled with her hallucinations, the novel therefore becomes a story within a story, as the reader tries to figure out what is real and what is imagined. Author Naomi Gibson uses subtle themes and motifs to bind ideas together in her latest creation. Doors, for instance, are used as an exit to other virtual places, whereas the ticking of the metronome in Lola's virtual world is symbolic of the violent reality that lurks in her basement.

As five of the six classmates use the game outside of lesson time, Lola later notices that only Wai seems unaffected by the game, as he "was the only one who seemed his usual self [...] He didn't put in any extra game time. He stuck to the schedule and [...] wasn't addicted like the rest of us were." The novel could therefore be interpreted as a metaphor for social media, how it is used to create a perfect online self, and how it makes people feel about their realities.

With a lot of essential but mind-bending world building, *Game Over Girl* is slow to get started, but it is a page-turning thrill ride that will grip you to its pages. As a Young Adult novel, some scenes of graphic violence mean it may not be suitable for all readers, but ultimately it is a raw and powerful story about the pitfalls of creating a perfect virtual self.

#### **Chris J Kenworthy**

#### The Girl Who Broke the Sea

A. Connors, pub. Scholastic

I would recommend this book to a young adult reader who is particularly drawn to computer sciences, as the author often disseminate quite technical vocabulary and precise references to machinery components throughout the story. 'Computers are my thing. Specifically, computer interfaces,' says Lily, protagonist, and narrator, in chapter two. This may explain why at times I felt some emotional detachment from the novel; perhaps it was meant to be in line with Lily's character, a girl with

'emotional problems', as people had defined her in the past - a label difficult to lift which follows her until the depth of the sea.

The story at times sounds as it is narrated from an adult point of view, rather than that of a sixteen-year-old. I was surprised by Lily's coldness in describing the deep-sea mining rig where she had just arrived together with her scientist mum, and where the story unfolds. I would have expected the mind of a teenager buzzing with more personal insights, whereas in the first part of the book we are mostly presented with mechanical observations leading to a claustrophobic perception of their new home - a section which, in my opinion, lays uneventful for too long.

The story comes alive when Lily's story is linked to her past, her family and friends, her relationships, past and present. I enjoyed the second part of the book when she explores the darkness of the ocean, finds out about its emotional components, and opens to new, strange, friendships. I found Lily's mind fascinating in her ability to communicate through interfaces, but not quite developed by its author, rather hidden behind too many schematics, controls, rotors, thrusters, and telemetry grids.

#### Francesca Magnabosco

#### **Influential**

Anara Sage, pub. Faber & Faber

"Popularity comes at a price." A raw, refreshingly honest behind-the-scenes look at social media, this book is recommended reading for anyone who has ever said they'd like to be an influencer 'when they grow up'.

Since she was a toddler, Almond Brown's every move has been chronicled by her mother, a social media influencer, blogger, and vlogger; Almond has had her own account, managers, sponsors and thousands of followers since her early teens. She and her mum often post together and are working towards securing a deal with a huge beauty company. It all sounds idyllic, but when we first meet Almond, she's on the verge of deleting her Instagram account. We find out exactly why over the course of the book - the happy, healthy image Almond puts out online is starkly different from the young girl dealing with her parents' recent separation, self-image and mental health issues, friendship problems, management pressure and vicious internet trolls.

A genuinely gripping read, *Influential* deals with the big issues that only children who grew up with social media will have experienced first-hand. We see Almond navigate 'friendships' with other influencers, never knowing when or if they'll turn on her for clicks and likes. Can her real-life friends even be trusted when everyone has a camera to hand and unfettered internet access?

*Influential* tracks – along with Almond's follower numbers – the very real consequences of 'putting yourself out there'. It's a rollercoaster of a read, a cautionary tale of cancel culture, deep fakes and twisted reality, but there are also moments of joy when Almond gets to enjoy being a real teenager. A searing look at a life lived online, written in short, sharp chapters with hashtags and text chains throughout, it's a modern, educational and entertaining read, and a brilliant debut YA novel from Amara Sage.

Content warnings: underage drinking, racism, discussions of mental health issues (depression, self-harm), swearing, sexualisation of minors, blackmail, mention of pornography and drugs. I would recommend this only for older teens.

#### **Antonia Russell**

#### The Last Tale of the Flower Bride

Roshani Chokshi, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

In her earlier novels Roshani Chokshi has already treated readers to a wonderful (in the proper meaning of the word) blend of twenty-first-century gothic, tragedy, and horror with the original style of fairy tale, when it was filled with luxury, penury, cruelty, transformations, and violence! If we have read classic tales, from Persephone to Cinderella, in the original versions rather than the watered-down stories we are now offered as 'fairy tales', we will be well aware that there is nothing new in the later twenty/twenty-first century takes on other-worldly horror, incest and family violence.

Chokshi has already written a number of novels designated as YA, and a myth-based series intended for middle grade readers, but *The Last Tale of the Flower Bride* is described as Chokshi's first adult novel. There really is very little in the text which would move the novel from young adult to adult material. Instead, I would place it very clearly amongst the best YA fantasy novels, which, like the original myths, are timeless and terrifying.

Chokshi's main characters are Indigo and Azure, one living in the lap of luxury in the House of Dreams, the other in a poor, unloving and abusive household. Azure appears a third of the way through the book, and the entire novel revolves around by the unnamed 'Bridegroom', who marries Indigo but is told never to question his new world. Gradually we learn snippets of the characters' back stories, but the book's final pages astonishingly transform all we think have understood! Chokshi writes beautifully, very carefully setting the scenes and engrossing readers in the luxury and otherworldliness of Indigo's existence. Indeed 'the Otherworld' is a major location in the novel, with an unflinching influence on events, and we, as readers, are drawn into its weird, beautiful and terrifying existence.

Chokshi is an accomplished, exciting and knowledgeable writer whose work certainly deserves the plaudits her books are receiving. I do so hope her young adults will be tempted to read her work however the publicists describe it. If they don't they're missing out on some excellent, exciting and scary writing!

#### **Bridget Carrington**

## The Midnight Game

Cynthia Murphy, pub. Scholastic

Cynthia Murphy's third blood-soaked horror/murder novel for older middle grade/YA lives up to the goriness of her previous books, and involves readers in a mystery which grips, or more accurately terrifies us from page one! Murphy admits that her young life was filled with Buffy's adventures, and her favourite reading from an early age was Point Horror's output, so readers can see just what her influences were when she began to write her own works. Readers will also note that the subsequent addition of Stephen King to her reading list has had a not insignificant effect as well!

Murphy's book is not to be confused with a 2013 US horror film of the same name with a similar game and setting. Given this background, it is not surprising that there is a warning before would-be readers enter the world of the novel: 'please be aware that some of the material in this story contains themes or events of death/dying, body horror, violence, murder and mentions of suicide'. Also, at the beginning of the novel we are given a plan of the building in which the events occur. This is extremely useful, as most of the action takes place in the dark, and the plan serves to place actions and events in the reader's mind, and therefore we are able to understand the all-important movements from room to room as the gore and terror grip our imagination.

The prologue (really creepy!) leads into three parts and an epilogue. Each part alternates social media conversations with immediately subsequent events as the Midnight Game itself is set up and played. This offers readers both a variety of text and language, and the thoughts of the would-be gamers as they contemplate playing. There is certainly plenty of gore and horror in Murphy's story, but beneath this there also emerges a serious reflection amongst the gamers about previous behaviour, and about friendship, bullying and violence. While on the surface we have a traditional horror tale, Murphy has been skilfully manipulated her novel into an extremely thoughtful and relevant consideration of adolescent mental health issues.

#### **Bridget Carrington**

#### The Ones We Burn

Rebecca Mix, pub. Hodder and Stoughton

Ranka is a blood-witch. They are reasonably rare and are often used as a weapon. Blood-witches have a type of super-power. They can turn into killing machines. The Skra, the coven to which she belongs, has another use for Ranka. She is to become the Bloodwinn, the treaty bride of the human prince. These treaty brides are supposed to guarantee peace between the witches and the human communities. However, this time she is being sent to kill.

This is an ideal text for the young adults because there are so many shades of grey. The world may be a puzzle to the young adult and so is Ranka's world to her. Nothing is clear cut. The prince and his twin sister are supposed to be human but in fact the prince can change the weather. His human companion Percy can conjure up fire. Ranka is constantly let down by those she loves and who she thinks love her.

Add into the mix a human-made plague that gets out of control and that kills witches after making them more dangerous and the stakes become very high indeed. Unexpectedly it is a human who tries to set this right. Thus, we have a good quantity of tension. There is some violence in this text. It is fast paced throughout. There are plenty of emotional highs and lows as well. Short chapters add to the pace and make this large volume of some 460 pages very readable.

As readers we are drawn to Ranka, despite her faults, and the other main characters are also richly drawn.

Gill James, reviewer's Face to Face with the Führer is published by Chapeltown Books.

#### The Shadows Between Us

Tricia Levenseller, pub. Puskin Press

There are shadows in this book, places where dark deeds hide, can be hidden. The King is surrounded by shadow, it stops him from being touched, from anyone getting close but no-one knows why. The shadows appear dark and menacing to all outsiders, as dark and menacing as their King, his reputation says the same. But why. What is it about this King that is at once frightening and alluring, particularly to a girl such as Alessandra, a girl who is utterly fearless, who will stop, apparently, at nothing to achieve her aim. Which is – assassinate the Shadow King, to take the kingdom for herself, to become the last royal left, to be their queen.

So, opens Tricia Levenseller's *The Shadows Between us*. With this premise, with one murder already having taken place at the hands of the beautiful but ruthless Alessandra and with a plan. The plan is quite clear to Alessandra. She will infiltrate the court, that part at least will be easy, there is a constant stream of women attempting to woo the King, but she will play her games too. She will entice the King, he will fall in love, let down his guard and she will be victorious. Unfortunately for Alessandra

she does, quickly, catch the King's attention, she also attracts the attention of others at court, some more willing than others to oust her at her game, to turn the tables on her. Alessandra is conniving but so it seems is the mysterious Shadow King and there is more at play here than she has realised. Soon she is working alongside him, helping him dodge assassination attempts that are not hers, finding herself asking for his help and all the while trying not to lose her heart. How long until she realises, until they both realise, that there could be no better match for a Shadow King than a ruthless and cunning villainous queen?

This is a dark, wickedly mesmerizing tale that had me gripped from the opening line. I admit I quickly became addicted and did not want to put it down. Whilst I think it is a standalone, I would love to come back to this world and its shadows for more, in the meantime I will be reading this one more than once and searching out some more Tricia Levenseller novels!

#### Louise Ellis-Barrett

## **Spice Road**

Maiya Ibrahim, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

Imani has long been familiar with the lives -and deaths- of monsters: ghouls, serpents and djinn abound in the sands around Qalia. The city requires continual protection, but such work is intuitive for Imani. She is a Shield in the Order of Sorcerers, highly skilled with a dagger and rigorously trained to guard her nation and its magic - the very magic that surges through Imani when she fights.

This magic is found in misra, also known as the Spice: a gold-veined bark from the misra tree that has grown in Qalia for a thousand years. When misra is used to make tea, it emboldens the drinker's affinity - be it for iron, beasts or storms. The Council of Qalia seeks to protect this magic from outsiders, but it seems that a threat may just as easily come from within the city's walls.

Imani's brother, Atheer, has disappeared from home after stealing misra from the city's supply. He is presumed dead, thought to have fled the city through dangerous sands, and living with this uncertainty creates distance between Imani and her sister Amira. But when a journey beyond the city walls leads to further questions about Atheer's disappearance, Imani is determined to follow what little information surfaces. The council doubts her abilities for such an undertaking, but Imani must hold fast and carry herself into the dangers ahead.

This story and its characters are absorbing from the beginning, with Imani's emotions traced in visceral imagery. There are fraught fight scenes, wondrous magic and a beastseer whose path seems tightly wound to Imani's...

#### Jemima Breeds

#### This Book Kills

Ravena Guron, pub. Usborne Books

Jess Choudhary is clear that she did not kill Hugh Henry Van Boren. Then, who did?

Heybuckle is a boarding school for wealthy children and Jess is a scholarship student, a precarious position. She never wants to draw attention to herself and must achieve better grades than the rest, always under threat that the school board could withdraw her scholarship, returning her back to a poor area of London. So, when Hugh Henry Van Boren is murdered and Jess is thanked by the murderer in an anonymous text for having helped inspire them, Jess is the centre of a lot of unwanted attention from the other students, Mrs Greythorne, the headmistress, and the Police. This murder needs to be solved quickly. Mrs Greythorne can only protect Jess from the school board for so long. And if another anonymous text is to be believed, Jess is next.

A boarding school is always a great setting for a murder. Detached from the real world figuratively and physically, there is nowhere to hide or run, especially a boarding school, where there are no locks on any of the shared rooms. Moreover, there is an abundance of pettiness, school rivalries and personalities for a growing list of suspects with a motive for murder, and centre stage in the novel, is Hugh's cheated manipulative girlfriend, Millie. In addition, there is the *Regia Club*, a secret society of students, whose parents are rich patrons of the school, and therefore holds a lot of influence. Their previous harmless pranks are now more egregious after a recent change of leadership. Suffice to say there are plenty of leads as Jess and her friends investigate. Whilst in the beginning Jess is very much a loner as the investigation progresses, she draws together a group of friends with increasingly redeeming characteristics, breaking down some of their prejudices and privileges as well as more revealing unhappy backstories. Cleverly Hugh continues to be a presence in the story through the memories of the people who knew him and his own pre-recorded confession.

For me, there is a spoiler towards the end of the book, reducing the jeopardy and consequently the tension in the novel, although I understand how it fits within the whole premise and the overall narrative arch of the book. It means solving the murder is more of an intellectual curiosity, but there is a very satisfying confession, revealing all: the motive and the means.

This Book Kills is an immersive read into a deadly world of a nearly perfect murder. Don't get any ideas!

#### **Simon Barrett**

#### You Think You Know Me

Ayaan Mohamud, pub. Usborne Books

This YA fiction book is a hard hitting and relatable story of Hanan and her experiences in school. There is the full range of emotions to be discovered from rage, injustice, heartache and uncertainty.

In this hard-hitting tale, we meet Hanan who deals with daily racism and prejudices at school. She deals with it but seems to have the weight of the world on her shoulders. She has left her home and war-torn country, witnessed her father's death and now has to deal with words and actions that are out of her control. Hanan, we learn, does follow her mother's advice and guidance in the hopes of bettering herself for the future. What we learn as the story unfolds, is whether this will be enough.

When the school caretaker is killed, racial tensions rise and begin to tear the community apart. Hanan and her family are holding tight to each other within this storm. Hanan is a superb character, one filled with ambition and determination, a light in the darkness of her situation.

Utterly compelling and so familiar in terms of Islamophobia being rife in society, when compassion and empathy are needed for those displaced from their homes and families.

#### **Erin Hamilton**

## **Non-Fiction Books**

## A Day in the Life of an Astronaut, Mars and the Distant Stars Mike Barfield, illus. Jess Bradley, pub. Michael O'Mara Books

Barfield and Bradley are the team that brought you *A Day in the Life a Cavemen, Queen and Everything in Between* and before that *A Day in the Life of a Poo, Gnu and You*. I cannot comment on the latter title (because I have not read it) but I thoroughly enjoyed Barfield's gallop through the history of the world in a 1001 graphics.

As a science girl at heart, I jumped at the chance to cast my eyes over the latest offering from team Barfield and Bradley and *A Day in the Life of an Astronaut, Mars and the Distant Stars* did not disappoint. The book is divided, like Gaul, into three parts: the Solar System, Outer Space and Space Travel. It takes just 120 pages of humorous text and idiosyncratic cartoons to deliver a decent summary of our knowledge about space and the technology we use to investigate it. The science is comprehensive, sound and I learnt something new on every page.

Barfield does not skip the difficult subjects (dark matter, speed of light) but gives us plenty of light-hearted detail as well: burps in space are quite the problem apparently!

If I have one criticism, I would like to find out a bit more about what the scientists don't understand and the steps we are taking to reduce that knowledge gap. I am, however, being a bit fussy. This book is a one- stop shop for children who want to know a lot more about space and be amused at the same time. For readers of eight and over.

#### **Katherine Wilson**

## An Anthology of Aquatic Life Sam Hume, illus. Angela Rizza and Daniel Long, pub. Dorling Kindersley

This compendium of aquatic life is captivating. It is organised into ecosystems rather than alphabetically so the reader can discover the animals and plants that live in the deep ocean, the shallow seas, wetlands, and rivers, lakes and ponds – all very different environments despite having the common factor of water.

Each animal or plant features on a double-page spread; on one side is a photograph with a couple of paragraphs of accompanying text and additional drawings on the opposite page. There are also pages with basic information about the unique characteristics of different habitats, for example, the bathyal zone, polar seas and marshlands. As we have come to expect from DK, the photographs are stunning.

They are close up images showing fascinating details; long sharp teeth, a myriad of suckers, large staring eyes – exactly the type of thing that draws young children into wanting to know more.

The aquatic life highlighted ranges from the familiar, such as the great white shark and dugong, to the more unusual. Readers can expect to meet blue sea dragons, fishing cats and the Dumbo octopus, so named due to its large ears.

The matt finished pages are sturdy and there is a visual guide in place of an index that depicts all the wildlife featured although, as a librarian, I would have liked an alphabetical index; if you were looking for a particular animal you would need to know the habitat it was found in first. Nevertheless, this is an ideal book for nurturing curiosity and dipping into. Aimed at 5 - 9 year olds, it would be a useful addition to the school library as well as a great gift for any child.

#### **Barbara Band**

## Cash is Queen: A Girl's Guide to Securing, Spending and Stashing Cash Davinia Tomlinson, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

The current economic climate proves the utmost need for a book that teaches young girls and women about managing their money and building a positive relationship with their finances. Single, independent earners will take a lot out of reading this book.

Written with a chatty, relatable voice, you can dip in and out as wanted, also finding key points summarised at the end of each chapter. Called the "Crown Jewels", these tidbits of advice are brilliant and allow you to quickly pick up some tips before reading deeper into the chapter.

The pages are vivid, colourful, engaging and feature diverse girls-it really appeals to all. Informative with activities to guide the reader to make financial decisions that work best for them, this book sets young women and girls up to have a lifelong positive relationship with money.

#### **Erin Hamilton**

## Egyptian Myths Loop Monzies, illus, Katia Bondon pub

Jean Menzies, illus., Katie Ponder, pub. Dorling Kindersley

Some of the characters that inhabit Ancient Egyptian mythology are introduced and their stories retold in this highly colourful and informative guide which, as expected from a Dorling Kindersley book is very well produced, full of rich detail and visually attractive.

Menzies and Ponder cover five main areas: the Beginning; the Gods; Pharaohs and Royalty; Mortals; and About the Myths through intertwining biographical pages of individual characters and very readable retellings of their stories, which by their very nature are often convoluted and quite gruesome. Menzies captures just the right level to the goriness of this world, and she doesn't focus on it but doesn't gloss over it either. As such I think it is pitched perfectly to the intended audience of seven-to-nine-year-olds it also has a considerable appeal to an older audience who are interested in this era of history.

There is a good mix of different myths such as the creation story, Ra's reign, the rivalry between Osiris and Set, how Osiris became the first mummy, and the Gods' relationship with humans. After the Gods have passed the ruling of Earth onto Humans the stories of some of the Pharaohs and Mortals are told, however these two sections are much briefer only consisting of three or four fable-type stories. The biographical pages help to keep track of who is who and how they are connected, and the stories are engaging and enjoyable especially because of the wealth of vivid, colourful, intriguing illustrations produced by Ponder in a style resembling the Egyptian hieroglyph.

The final section is more of a reference guide explaining how we know so much about this world focusing on things like the Rosetta Stone, the Valley of the Kings, the Journey of the Dead, sacred animals, and the process of mummification. This title sits alongside DK's other mythological guides about the Norse and Greek worlds and with the added features of a pronunciation guide, glossary, and index this is a very readable and engaging combination of reference information, storytelling and rich illustration.

#### **Natalie McChrystal Plimmer**

## Failosophy For Teens Elizabeth Day, pub. Red Shed

Failure is a fact of life according to Elizabeth Day's new book. How we rethink and respond to our failures however is important. *Failosophy*, asks fundamental questions about why we feel we fail, but as a philosophy teacher this is only part of philosophy, the other part is to work out and practice a better way of living.

Elizabeth Day sets out seven guiding principles, principles that she too has practiced. These principles structure the chapters: failure is a fact, we can change how we think, everyone feels like they have failed, we can survive rejection, we can learn from failure, we should affirm who we are now, and acknowledge some things are out of our control. Readers might choose to read the book completely or simply dip into relevant chapters.

The chapters are pithy and an easy read, breaking up the text into mostly short paragraphs, so encouraging maybe more reluctant readers to engage with her messages. Elizabeth Day adroitly communicates in a direct, warm and honest way and with plenty of autobiographic vignettes and reflections, which many readers will find helpful and empowering. The formatting is also brilliant, cleverly using illustration and design to maintain interest, despite being published in monochrome. There are some graphics consistently used for central messages, key thoughts and quotes that bring cohesion to the text. In addition, there are a number of exercises for readers to reflect upon, helping develop some strategies to dealing with failure.

Failosophy draws upon Elizabeth Day's own life and her experience from her award-winning podcast series, How to Fail with Elizabeth Day. Many of the people in the book were guests on her podcast series and they are going to be people teenagers will know notably, Fearne Cotton, Steven Bartlett, Meera Syal and Matt Haig. This is important for teenagers, exposed to so many stories of success and perfect lives, to appreciate that success can often be an artificial construct and successful people can hide difficulties and feelings of failure. The quotes present some sound bites, but this is substantiated with a more detailed discussion about episodes in someone's life. There is a standalone chapter or appendix of four people at the end of the book.

We all fail AND this is what makes us human according to Elizabeth Day's *Failosophy*. The point seems not to avoid failure, but to be positively transformed by it, perhaps metamorphized.

#### **Simon Barrett**

## Full of Life. Exploring Earth's Biodiversity Isabel Thomas, illus. Sara Gillingham, pub. Phaidon

This is a visually stunning, eye-catching, and fascinating read. It is a guide to the Earth's Tree of Life, the reference tool that scientists use to organise all living things, and that helps readers understand how every living creature is connected and part of one big family.

There are six chapters that explore biodiversity; true bacteria; archaea – tiny microbes; eukaryotes – divided into plants, animals and protozoans; and infectious particles; with the final chapter exploring more about the Tree of Life via related resources such as biomes and fossil timelines. The book is designed in an interesting square format with clean graphics and contains a mix of familiar and more unusual life forms with the famous, weird and wonderful highlighted in each group.

Each page spread focuses on one clade, a group of living things that share a common ancestor, and details key facts and features, a short explanation, its group and scientific names, the largest and smallest species within the clade, and typical habitat. There is also a diagram indicating where it is placed on the Tree of Life, and the benefits or detriments to humankind.

This is an extremely in-depth yet accessible guide with information presented in short paragraphs and a comprehensive index that is aimed at 10 - 16-year-olds. It would make a perfect gift for budding scientists and a useful addition to the school library.

#### **Barbara Band**

## How to Make a Story Naomi Jones, illus. Ana Gomez, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Milo wants to read a story. He doesn't want to read a story from a book. But he doesn't know how to start making up a story. Milo is encouraged and guided by his parents and nana, but we can read *How to Make a Story*, which is a clever book telling a story about how to make up your own story.

The book shows children how to structure a story with a beginning, middle and end as well as guidance on what might be included in each section, including a main character, who for Milo is about a boy called Wolf. Wolf then wants to do something – find treasure – before a trickier, more exciting middle section once he has found the treasure, involving dribbling monsters and bears, and a final ending that changes the way we think and resolves the tension so everyone is happy. In addition, the story models Wolf facing a number of dangers and use of language to make a story interesting and exciting.

Imagination is however one of the most important ingredients in storytelling that Naomi Jones and Ana Gomez explore. Here words and pictures beautifully syncretise. Wolf is based on Milo and the family pet dog. The jungle, the garden, and the Lego brick treasure is guarded by a family pet cat transformed into a ferocious tiger. His two playing younger siblings, become the dribbling monsters causing mayhem, when Milo is rescued by two (teddy) bears. The stairs are mountains. His room a den. Ana Gomez's illustrations brilliant captures what Milo sees in the garden and around his home and overlays it with what Milo then imagines, encouraging children to draw inspiration from their everyday lives and making story-telling accessible to everyone.

The grand finale is Milo writing his story so he can share it with his family. He creates a two-page graphic story. By retelling Milo's whole story, simplifying the words and illustrations into a series of graphic frames, including showing some simple design elements of differentiating text, different sized boxes and action literally leaping from one frame to another, author and illustrator present a model that children could produce for themselves.

The narrative arch of the whole book ends exceedingly gratifying, when we realise what true treasure is. *How to Make a Story* is a springboard, inspiring children to dive into their imagination and create their own stories.

#### **Simon Barrett**

## Maths Words for Little People: Counting Maths Words for Little People: Sorting.

Helen Mortimer, illus. Cristina Trapanese, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Maths Words for Little People: Counting and Maths Words for Little People: Sorting are part of a new series from Oxford Children's Books, the other books currently being Shapes and Sums with Money and Time expected later in the year.

The books aim to introduce early maths concepts, building good foundation skills and confidence with maths vocabulary. *Sorting* features a group of children as they organise dressing up clothes, putting them into groups, matching and comparing them, pairing the same items, and looking at patterns that occur.

Counting has the same five children thus creating a sense of familiarity and recognition for the reader. In this book, the children are in the kitchen and are introduced to concepts such as more than/fewer than and zero. They learn to count, look at counting in twos and fives, and consider estimating.

Both books are in a hardback format and a perfect size for smaller hands. They feature relatable settings with engaging illustrations and are ideal for adults to share and discuss. There are also ten ideas listed for "getting the most from this book" and a small glossary.

Maths is an integral and important part of people's lives, so it is never too early to introduce the subject; these books are perfect for doing just that.

#### **Barbara Band**

#### **Prehistoric Beasts**

Dean Lomax, illus. Mike Love, pub. Templar Books

*Prehistoric Beasts* introduces the typically mega-sized prehistoric ancestors or relatives of animals that exist today. Dr Dean Lomax traces seven animals - the elephant, the shark, the sloth, the dragonfly, the alligator, the penguin, and the whale – back nearly 400 million years ago.

The book design is brilliant. Each double spread introduces one of the seven animals, describing the animal and their habitat with a full colour illustration on one page. On the other page is a fuller

explanation of the different species within the animal's family, conveying the extent of and variety of these creatures and how they survive. There are some surprising facts, such as the elephants' closet living relatives being sirenians or 'sea cows' and sloths only climb down from trees once a week to poo. The second page is also a fold out, finishing with a clue and a question. Can the reader guess the prehistoric ancestor or relative under the flap? When you open the flap ...

... out pops the prehistoric beast. Centre of the fold is Mike Love's fantastically engineered pop-up of the animal, sized, so that the reader literally comes face to face with these prehistoric animals in a variety of action poses – for example the ancient alligator with its teeth around the throat of its prey or the megalodon breaking the surface of the water, scattering dolphins - adding an incredible dynamic to the book. The text presents a further description of each animal and their habitat as well as evidence shown in the fossil record or in the case of the elephant's relatives, remains found in the permafrost. The book is a gold mine of unbelievable facts, including giant penguins taller than humans and giant ants the size of hummingbirds.

Sadly, there are only seven animals, and whilst Dr Dean Lomax and Mike Love have chosen the ones that will appeal and fascinate children as well as broaden their interest in natural history, hopefully there will be further books. For me pop-out engineering brings a phenomenal WOW factor to any book but is especially suited to the subject of natural history.

*Prehistoric Beasts* can only be described as a three-dimensional experience, bringing to life ancient ancestors and relics of relatives from a distant past.

#### **Simon Barrett**

## The Secret World of Plants Ben Hoare, illus. Kaley McKean, pub. Dorling Kindersley

*The Secret World of Plants* is, as you have likely come to expect from DK, a stunning publication. Not only is it rich in its breadth and depth of coverage but it is absolutely brimming with facts, provided by Ben Hoare, all of which are simply, evocatively, and intelligently illustrated by Kaley McKean.

Ben Hoare, the books author, takes us on an exploration of the vast world of the plant kingdom where we meet plants from every continent of the earth, learn how they work, what they do and how they relate to the animal world – this is a book about nature in a whole new way with fascinating and unusual comparisons and insights. Plants, we know, are all around us, they fill our earth with oxygen, they put water into our skies, and they help to maintain a control over the climate. They are also useful in our daily lives, as food, fuel, medicine and even finding themselves used in clothing. Did you realize that the world of plants was such a versatile one? I have to say I didn't though now I do!

For such simple (in some ways) organisms, plants do an awful lot for us which we take for granted, they are a vital part of the ecosystem that we call life, but they are in danger and this book not only sets out to tell us more about them but also to help us think about what we can do to help and protect them. Breaking down the story of plants into their constituent parts we begin with a detailed overview of the leaves of no less than 15 different varieties. This is followed by detailed insights into 'Stems and Trunks'; 'Roots and Bulbs'; 'Fruits and Cones' and finally 'Seeds and Nuts.' With so much detail covered this book is a veritable treasure trove of facts, figures and fascination.

I don't think I will ever look at a plant in the same way again as I will now always have an innate curiosity about the way in which it works within our ecosystems, and I will be returning to this book over and over again to keep learning.

#### **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

#### **Super Poopers**

## Alex Woolf, illus. Isobel Lundie, pub. Little Tiger

Super Poopers will unashamedly appeal to children aged 5-7 years old. As you would expect, Alex Woolf and Isobel Lundie fully exploit the humour and the comedy of this topic through alliterations, rhymes, puns and play on words and illustrations that will make children giggle. Children will also learn a lot. Super Poopers is a superb hook for learning. There are unbelievable facts about animals and poo that are simply amazing. Particularly when the facts are translated into human terms, such as the Skipper Caterpillar whose poo called frass travels up to 40 times their body length away, equivalent to human poo travelling the width of a football pitch.

The book explains how poo plays an important role in the life of animals from scent markings, a form of disguise and defence as well as being a habitat for many animals, such as dung beetles, and a source of nutrients, that is food. Of course, there had to be a 'Feasting on Faeces' double spread on animals that eat poo for the undigested food, especially herbivores, such as rabbits who eat their semi-digested poo. Poo is also essential for planetary cycles, circulating nutrients through our oceans, forming coral reefs and perhaps more commonly known by birds dispersing seeds. This particularly changed my understanding of how poo might be more important than I had previously thought. A bizarre fact in this section is that sea cucumbers breath and poo through the same opening. As do jellyfish, begging the question on how on earth does it do that!

Finally, the book considers how poo is used by humans from building materials, making explosives, fertilizer, added to beauty products and food, and even for making a cup of tea. The science of poo is also helpful to finding out more about wild animals and even looking at the historical past. There is a fantastic double-spread of paintings and trophies, showcasing poo used in art and cow-chip throwing, the throwing of dried discs of cow dung. How did this ever become a popular sport?

My favourite grossest fact is the demodex mite that lives on our eyelids never poos! I'm not quite sure what is worse, finding out that there is a mite with no anus that feeds off my eyelids or that there could have been a mite with an anus that then poohed on my eyelids. I'll leave you to find your own grossest fact.

Super Poopers is a compendium of fantastic facts that will delight and inform children in equal measure, a brilliant tonic of fun and learning.

#### **Simon Barrett**

## Usborne Lift-the-flap Questions and Answers about Money Katie Daynes, pub. Usborne Books

This new addition to the extensive *Usborne Lift the Flaps Questions and Answers* series focuses on money and financial education. Across twelve pages there are sixty flaps to open, each asking a different economically related question covering a whole range of topics. Subjects range from practical knowledge for example what are credit cards, mortgages, bar codes or interest rates to consumer advice such as explaining what 3 for 2, free trials, and free gift offers are.

Preliminary information such as what was used before money was invented and what you can do with money are discussed and many ethical matters are explored including what the difference between want and need is, what fair pay and minimum wage are, and why are some jobs paid more than others, with a footballer, pilot, and firefighter giving their responses culminating in the statement that pay isn't always a measure of how important a job is.

Sometimes I felt the information in the answer was too brief or simplistic, lacking in what could have been useful detail such as "bartering didn't always work so people invented money" concluding the answer to what did people do before money. I also felt some of the questions weren't really relevant to the intended audience of children aged approximately six such as the principles of who pays a restaurant bill or what to do if everybody in a group can't afford a meal out. Some of these older concepts jarred with the lift the flap device and the cartoonish illustrations.

The flaps themselves make the book interactive and engaging especially as they open in various directions with different shapes and colours depending on the illustration - they are a part of such as a wallet, chocolate bar, toy car, plate or lottery ticket. The answers and images underneath are on both sides of the flap so there is a lot of visual and textual information provided but the pages don't feel busy or hard to follow.

With expert advice given by the broadcaster, maths literacy campaigner, and teacher Bobby Seagull, the addition of Usborne's Quicklinks to relevant websites, activities, videos, additional fun facts about the world's oldest coin, the Earthshot Prize, and how a badger uncovered a stash of Roman coins this is a diverse, colourful, interactive introduction to the world of money.

#### Natalie M

## The Wild Life of Animals: the Secret Live of Astounding Animals Mike Barfield, illus. Paula Bossio, pub. Buster Books

Following the successful *A Day in the Life of a Poo*, award-winning author, Mike Barfield, has written another fantastic book *The Wild Life of Animals* this time collaborating with illustrator, Paula Bossio.

The contents are divided into habitats including (but not limited to) - woods and forests; grasslands; mountains and high places; deserts; polar regions; and oceans, rivers and swamps. There are also sections that cover nocturnal animals as well as those living in urban environments and "Wild Style" guides. The latter takes a look at a range of animals from across the world who have adapted to live in similar conditions such as the night sight wild style guide featuring Greenland sharks who use glowing parasites to attract food in the deep ocean, kiwis who have super-sensitive nostrils which help them hunt by smell at night and pit viper snakes that use heat sensing organs in the dark.

This book is super fun and educational, filled with fascinating facts about weird and wonderful creatures, all told from the animal's perspective. As with previous books by the author, it is in a graphic novel style format which appeals to a wide range of readers and is aimed at 7 - 12 years of age. My only minor criticism is that an index would have been useful.

#### **Barbara Band**

## Picture books

## **Beware the Blue Bagoo**

Karl Newson, illus. Andrea Stegmaier

#### Blue

Sarah Christou

#### Blue Umbrella

Emily Ann Davison, illus. Momoko Abe

## Dig, Dig, Digger

Morag Hood

#### The Emerald Forest

Catherine Ward, illus. Karin Littlewood

#### **Hedge Lion**

Robyn Wilson-Owens

## **High Top**

Tom Lacey

#### Lizzy and the Cloud

The Fan Brothers

#### Out Of the Blue

Robert Tregoning, illus. Stef Murphy

#### The Swing

Britta Teckentrup

#### There's Nothing Faster Than a Cheetah

Tom Nicoll, illus. Ross Collins

#### The Tiny Grain of Sand

Sylvian Alzial, illus. Benoit Tardif

#### **Two Places to Call Home**

Phil Earle, illus. Jess Rose

## **Junior books**

#### **Blanksy The Street Cat**

Gavin Puckett, illus. Allen Fatimaharan

## **Worst Week Ever: Monday** Eva Amores, illus. Matt Cosgrove

#### **The Detention Detectives**

Lis Jardine

#### Haarville

**Justin Davies** 

#### **Hotel of the Gods**

Tom Easton

#### Jayben and The Golden Torch

Thomas Leeds

#### The Marvellers

**Dhonielle Clayton** 

#### **Saving Neverland**

Abi Elphinstone, illus. Geraldine Rodriguez

### **The Sleeping Stones**

Beatrice Wallbank

#### The Swifts

Beth Lincoln, illus. Claire Powell

#### The Time Tider

Sinead O Hart

#### **Two-Headed Chicken**

Tom Angleberger

#### Wild Oak

C. C. Harrington

#### **The Wildstorm Curse**

Eve Wersocki Morris

## **Young Adult books**

#### **A Dark Inheritance**

H. F. Askwith

#### You Think You Know Me

Ayaan Mohamud

## The Agency for Scandal

Laura Wood

### **City of Nightmares**

Rebecca Schaeffer

#### **Cruel Illusions**

Margie Fuston

#### **Game Over Girl**

Naomi Gibson

#### The Girl Who Broke the Sea

A. Connors

#### **Influential**

Anara Sage

#### The Last Tale of the Flower Bride

Roshani Chokshi

#### The Midnight Game

Cynthia Murphy

#### The Ones We Burn

Rebecca Mix, pub. Hodder and Stoughton

#### The Shadows Between Us

Tricia Levenseller

#### **Spice Road**

Maiya Ibrahim

#### **This Book Kills**

Ravena Guron

#### **Non-Fiction books**

## A Day in the Life of an Astronaut, Mars and the Distant Stars

Mike Barfield, illus. Jess Bradley

#### An Anthology of Aquatic Life

Sam Hume, illus. Angela Rizza and Daniel Long

## Cash is Queen: A Girl's Guide to Securing, Spending and Stashing Cash

Davinia Tomlinson

#### **Egyptian Myths**

Jean Menzies, illus., Katie Ponder

#### **Failosophy For Teens**

Elizabeth Day

## Full of Life. Exploring Earth's Biodiversity

Isabel Thomas, illus. Sara Gillingham

#### **How to Make a Story**

Naomi Jones, illus. Ana Gomez

## **Maths Words for Little People: Counting**

Helen Mortimer, illus. Cristina Trapanese

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