



Armadillo

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Books Reviewed

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Picture books

The Book No One Wants to Read

Beth Bacon, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

This one catches the moment in a young and reluctant reader's life when they're struggling to find value in books and may be about to give up on them. Readers who read books because they have to, who are perhaps intimidated by books or disengaged. It reboots a reluctant reader's relationship with books.

The book is alive and bored with sitting on the shelf. It talks to the person who picks it up, conspires with them. If the reader pretends to read, if the book pretends to be worth reading, it gets to stay off the shelf, the reader doesn't have to pick up a real book. It's cute and cheesy. Each new page gives what the book says next in carefully designed typography and simple graphics. The design is effective. Design is key. The reader must be convinced and kept interested. That part works, the book has an exaggerated, teasing persona that's aptly expressed. There's a definite through line in the book, the book is trying to make a point, but I think its Americanism makes it miss the most appropriate tone, it feels a less engaged experience than it could be. There are vocabulary connotations to watch out for. It's why, I feel, the book finishes a bit weakly. That apart, it is a professional piece of work, and it is provocative.

It's not fiction per se, it's more an intervention, to be used in a supportive way, and that's how it needs to be judged. I expect an adult to use the book with a reader and not leave them to it. For those readers who need it, it is possibly game changing. For those who don't it is an amusing diversion. Likely to be passed from family to family and be a school library cornerstone.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Frindleswylde

Natalia O'Hara, illus. Lauren O'Hara, pub. Walker Books

This is a beautifully produced book set in a magical wintry atmosphere, which children of all ages can enjoy, but those particularly between the age of five and nine. Gorgeous illustrations appear on each page to illuminate the text and to open a further enchanting dimension for the readers. The prose is enhanced by a poetic sensitivity that never lets the rhythm of narration slow down. In fact, this is a fast-paced tale written in a fresh and direct style that reminds of a morning snowfall.

The story follows Cora in the search for her grandmother's lamplight, stolen by a mysterious little boy called Frindleswylde who has 'snow-white hair and eyes like the Arctic Sea'. Frindleswylde is a memorable character with a distinct voice. His fabulous trickster nature is revealed by the numerous plot twists which hook the reader in. My absolute favourite is the moment when Frindleswylde crowns Cora 'Queen of Winter'. I do not want to spoil anyone's read but I thought that it was a very clever turning point which truly surprised me.

If I were to find a somewhat less convincing moment of the story, I would point to the solution to three impossible tasks set for Cora. I felt that the way she is portrayed to overcome the tasks was slightly rushed. However, this shows how the story is never indulgent or sentimental; it carries you from point to point with precision. I believe this is a feature from which younger readers will benefit. Despite the story being longer than a traditional picture book, once you start reading it, or listening to it, you will want to get to the very end – and this is how my children felt too!

A must buy for this winter!

Francesca Magnabosco

Look Up at The Stars

Katie Cotton, illus. Miren Asiain Lora, pub. Frances Lincoln

This charming, heart-warming and beautiful book holds wonders that the cover can only touch on. From the first look at the cute characters holding hands and looking up at the stars we can tell just what kind of story will be inside. The first words that come to mind are warm, loving, family, winter, cosy.

The perfect mood is created for snuggling into a warm bed on a winter night, reading with your loved ones. The story is cute, focused on emotions of love between parent and child main characters. The parent bear uses words like 'sweet child' and 'my darling, my love' - that could be cheesy if not executed correctly, but this simple story about how far a parent's love will go to provide wonder and love for their curious child is not cheesy at all. It is a rhythmic, easy to read story that introduces emotions very well.

I found the story, despite its wholesomeness, a little bland. The characters travel through the woods, snow and mountains to get close to the stars, but that's really all that happens. They return home empty handed to realize the glowing lights in their house were their own star all along, but the comforting conclusion isn't as climatic as I wanted. The illustrations really do carry this book. The style suits the text perfectly - soft, painterly and with beautiful mixes of colours and brush strokes. The use of space and text is well thought out and bringing all these elements together is a sure way to create a great book to look at and read.

Personally, I don't think I'll be reading it repeatedly, but as a Christmas present or a book to read while wrapped in blankets when it is snowing outside - that it is perfectly suited for.

Izzy Bean

My Mindful A to Zen: 26 Wellbeing Haiku for Happy Little Minds

Krina Patel-Sage, pub. Lantana Publishing

I thoroughly enjoyed reviewing this book. It is a beautifully designed, colourful and clearly written exploration of the A-Z of Mindfulness and Wellbeing told through a series of poems, a picture book that could fit just as well on a non-fiction shelf.

The illustrations link exceptionally well to the A-Z of words. It breaks down the understanding for children on how to make themselves better people without preaching.

It shows how important it is to take time for ourselves and would be good to read one letter a day or even try and get children to take notice of those actions that they follow at school. A great talking point for adults and children as well as being used as a tool for engaging with children who find explaining how they feel, or if they are worried and concerned about something.

It is also a great resource for children with autism who find understanding their feelings tricky. Having worked with SEN children I found that this book explains feelings brilliantly. On the other hand, it is also great a source for discussing feelings with all ages as many hold worries inside and we all hope children can express themselves better. I would say this book would be a great starting point. I enjoyed reading through it and have taken heed with some of the suggestions as well as finding I already participate in some of them.

A lovely book to have on the shelf and one where you can see the author has first-hand first enabling her to explain the topics clearly.

Helen Finch

The Planet in A Pickle Jar

Martin Stanev, pub. Flying Eye Books

The Planet in a Pickle Jar is a heart-felt story about a loving grandmother and her rather unusual way of protecting the wonders of the natural world for her two grandchildren.

The story opens with Grandma, seen through the eyes of her visiting Grandchildren as boring and dull. The children are too busy picking on each other and playing with their devices to be able to find anything fun in grandma's world.

But when Grandma tells a story about the need to preserve the planet, for once they listen. That night, everything changes for all of them. The children look outside themselves and discover a whole world of adventure that was right under their noses all along. The children cannot believe their eyes when they discover that Grandma had been secretly preserving all her favourite things, from nature, to history, to smells – in her pickle jars. Suddenly Grandma doesn't seem boring at all. When the children are called to save Grandma from danger, they begin to appreciate how dear she is to them and promise to help her preserve "the wonders of our planet, one pickle jar at a time."

The text is sparse in parts and a number of different interpretations could be made of what is to be done with the treasures in Grandma's jars. This gives young reader's the power to decide for themselves. The illustrations are bright and colourful and full of delights for children to discover. The dual messages of preserving the natural world, and cherishing those we love, endure long after the story ends. The reader can take comfort in knowing that the children will carry on Grandma's work long after she can no longer do it herself.

A recommended read for all nature lovers and those who know the true magic of grandmothers.

Evelyn Bookless

The Pooka Party

Shona Shirley Macdonald, pub. The O'Brien Press

An ethereal little story about the mystical Pooka who has neglected its friends. Pooka is content to live on its own high up in the mountains. Pooka sings, does gardening, makes soup and dances along with lots of other things, all at the same time! But like most folks there comes a time when you do need to see your friends again.

Pooka disappears into its snail shell to consider its options, as a magical shapeshifter would do, for a long time. A party is revealed to be the answer. Arrangements are made and what happens next I will leave you to find out. As a result of this party Pooka acknowledges its need to stay more regularly in contact with its friends. Even though Pooka loves its own company too. It begins planning the next party as it contentedly drifts off to sleep. Sequels to this story are endless, and I feel sure this will not be the last we hear about the captivating Pooka.

This surreal mix of fantastical goings on is accompanied by dreamy illustrations. Young children from the earliest ages will happily be transported to Pooka's land even if they don't understand the text.

The pictures tell the story. Older children will enjoy the moral of the tale. An ideal bedtime story for all. A delightful little tale.

Elizabeth Negus

The Queen on Our Corner

Lucy Christopher, illus. Nia Tudor, pub. Lantana Publishing

There is a Queen on our corner. She's been on lots of adventures. She's a warrior who has fought battles, lost battles and now she's tired. Nobody notices her, or her royal hound, except for one little girl. The young girl thinks that the Queen has probably fought dragons and journeyed to hidden spots in far flung countries. She sees that the Queen protects the street. One night, the Queen spots a danger and sounds the alarm. She saves the street, but will she ever find a palace of her own?

Beautiful, autumnal-coloured, illustrations perfectly capture this thought-provoking story. We see the Queen through a child's eyes. 'It's easy to lose a palace...' our young narrator tells her Ma. It's hard not to be moved by a child's understanding of life's ups and downs, and her unwavering belief in the Queen's inherent worth.

This innocent and imaginative tale deals with the theme of homelessness in an entirely fresh way. In a sincere note to her readers, at the end of the book, the author shares her real-life inspiration. Her message is accessible for children of all ages; she wants everyone to look kindly at the 'kings and queens' in their town.

Abby Mellor

Scissorella: The Paper Princess

Clare Helen Welsh, illus. Laura Barrett, pub. Andersen Press

This is a truly magical re-telling of the tale of Cinderella, but with the twist in this story being that the main character is an amazing paper artist. The art is inspired by the creative work of Lottie Reiniger, a German born artist who had a great influence on the development of film animation. The story also reflects the way that Lottie's life developed as she honed her paper skills and how she was helped by her future husband, Carl Koch to extend her scope.

The story has an art deco setting, with the costumes harking back to the 1920s; in fact, it reminds me in many ways, of the marvellous version by Shirley Hughes *Ella's Big Chance*. However, we have the added beauty of the paper cutting in this book which gives a very lace like feel to many of the images. Lotte does not think life has happy endings, living with her horrible bossy sisters her only friends are

her cut-out paper puppets made by the light of the moon. What Lotte does not yet know is that her life is about to change forever with the delivery of an invitation to the Palace Spring Ball. This is a truly beautiful book, which shows a determined female character, who is determined to succeed in life and demonstrates that it is not all about fairy tale magic but also about talent.

A truly wonderful addition to the Cinderella canon of books, brilliant for a primary setting.

Margaret Pemberton

Shoo!

Susie Bower, illus. Francesca Gambatesa, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

The concept behind this book is by no means original, but it is entertainingly done by this new partnership.

Mrs Golightly doesn't like animals, and we see her shooing away cats and squirrels from her garden. She is appalled when a zoo moves in next door, and even more horrified that evening to see animals dancing about on her lawn. They ignore her shooing, and she stamps up to bed in a very bad mood. In the days following, she finds a kangaroo on the loo (with details which children may well enjoy), a giraffe in her bath, an alligator on the radiator, llamas in her pyjamas- you get the idea. To every animal she sounds "Shoo! Shoo! I don't like you! Go back to the zoo!" Finally, she shoos them all away, puts bolts and locks on every entrance and signs on the gate, and peace reigns. There is no kangaroo on the loo, and so on, but she finds that she misses them, and when she sees animals dancing on her lawn- what does she do? She joins in!

This will be terrific fun to read out loud, with multiple opportunities for children to shout "Shoo!", join in with the animal noises and the rhymes, and imagine what they think might happen next. Susie Bower has written two exciting children's novels (Pushkin), but this is her first picture book, and she has chosen some great rhymes, ("a jellyfish in her satellite dish"!). Francesca Gambatesa is an experienced illustrator, and she has a very distinctive style: her animals are charming, but her depiction of Mrs Golightly is wonderfully exuberant.

Definitely recommended.

Diana Barnes

Two Bears: An Epic Journey of Hope

Patricia Hegarty, illus. Totem Teplow, pub. Little Tiger

Two Bears is a gentle picture book with a powerful message for our times. The two bears in question appear to be polar opposites, both living many miles apart in lands that are totally different from each other. Polar Bear lives in the frozen arctic and swims beneath the icy waters in search of food. Grizzly Bear lives in the forests and hunts in the woods and the rivers. Despite their differences, it soon becomes clear that these two bears have a lot in common.

Due to changes in their habitat brought about by humans – global warming for Polar Bear and raging forest fire for Grizzly Bear - both bears leave their homelands and are forced to search for somewhere new to live. One bear heads north while the other heads south and, inevitably they meet up somewhere in the middle. The two bears quickly discover that they have a lot in common, “despite the different colour of their fur.” And it’s the things that they share and want that are more important, including a place to live ‘their lives in peace and harmony.’”

This delightful picture book, which has been beautifully illustrated by Totem Teplow, works on many levels. Children will love the story of two bears finding each other and raising a family together, but it also provides a great introduction to current environmental issues and concerns for young children - without ever being preachy or heavy handed. It will work well in a classroom to link in with environmental topics such as global warming and loss of habitat. The final informative spread in the book, entitled ‘Bears on the Brink,’ gives information on Polar Bears, Grizzly Bears (and the offspring of a mixed coupling). A few simple suggestions for what we can do to help are also offered.

Vicky Harvey

Junior Books

The Bear Who Sailed the Ocean on an Iceberg

Emily Critchley, pub. Everything With Words

What a delight this book is to read, to read to oneself and to read as a class book. Everyone can share in the magic and wonder of the story, in fact everyone should share in its wonder and magic!

Patrick finds a polar bear in his freezer, at this point, if you have not done so already, hold back reality and allow that imagination to run wild. After all this doesn't happen every day and for that very reason Patrick is, very sensibly, not sure if he should trust this bear to be his friend. First things first of course and that is to find out his name which of course is Wilbur Ambrose Cedric Reginald Montague the Third, or Monty to his friends. Monty it is then.

What Patrick next learns is that Monty the polar bear is hungry. What I know you want to know as much as I did is why was Monty even in the freezer? Well he is hungry – his stomach never NEVER stops rumbling - he is lost of course and he needs a friend to help put him back on track. Patrick could be just that friend. Why? Well as we are about to learn Monty speaks as though he has swallowed a library and has read more books than Patrick even knew existed and Patrick is a boy who once enjoyed school and now finds himself the subject of bullies, he is the boy who needs a friend more than most.

As boy and bear find one another (and some more sardines) we find ourselves on a beautiful, moving and utterly unputdownable adventure with them both.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Einstein the Penguin

Iona Rangely, illus. David Tazzyman, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

It is fifty years or so since Paddington Bear first launched himself simultaneously on the unsuspecting Brown family and the great British Public. He has remained a firm favourite ever since, but it is telling that younger children find the language of the original stories difficult to access despite their perennial warmth and charm. Paddington doesn't need a revamp but there is considerable room for another tale of an exotic creature parachuted into family life in England.

Enter Einstein, the Penguin. Einstein insinuates himself into the Stewart household of Mr. and Mrs. Stewart, Imogen (9) and Arthur (6). It is not long before we find out why. Einstein is searching for his

penguin friend, Isaac. It is up to the intrepid Imogen and her audacious sidekick, Arthur to track Isaac down before the mysterious man in the mackintosh coat does. There is some detective work, a chase up to Edinburgh, a foiled villain, and a happy ending.

I like the family dynamics. The Stewarts feel like a real family with parents vacillating between strictness and sympathy for the penguin's plight (much like Mr. and Mrs. Brown in fact!). The children in true storybook fashion, are always two steps ahead of them. I do, however, think that the characterisation of the children is a little weak. Does the author realise just how young a child of six is? They certainly wouldn't be wandering around their school unsupervised. I would also question some of the vocabulary choices; 'penchant', 'pertinent' and 'trepidatious' all make an appearance. These are ambitious words for the readership of six to nine. However, all that being said, this is an enjoyable accessible romp for younger independent readers and a good read aloud for parents. I should also mention the illustrations by David Tazzyman, which capture the anarchic antics superbly.

I hope a sequel is forthcoming.

Katherine Wilson

Following Frankenstein

Catherine Bruton, pub. Nosy Crow

A classic tale is taken to new levels with Catherine Bruton's sequel reimagining of *Frankenstein* and the potential "what-if's" after the original.

Maggie Walton's father has dedicated his life to hunting down Frankenstein and I was hooked by the fascination of her father. A fascination that has ruined his life and bankrupt the family. This gets another chance to rear its ugly head when a certain Count Florenzo offers him a fortune to find the monster. This is a man who will surprise readers.

Stowing away on a ship to the Arctic, following her father, Maggie is putting her own life and that of her pet mouse, Victor, in danger. Venturing into the Arctic circle, the last known sighting of the monster, the crew want no part of this fated journey. There is a sense of legend to this tale, especially once they arrive in the Arctic and meet the Inuit, who know of the monster and live peacefully near him. Maggie will be the one to show the most kindness along this journey, and it is her hope and belief in the good in people that kept me reading.

Thrilling and adventurous, this journey will have readers gripping their books at times, while cheering at others. The true value of friendship and family are sought in this extraordinary novel. With references to *Moby Dick*, slavery and the Underground Railroad, there are some difficult scenes but it is all woven so wonderfully.

Erin Hamilton

The Great Dream Robbery

Greg James and Chris Smith, illus. Amy Nguyen, pub. Puffin Books

When Maya's dad, the inventor of CHEESE – an innovative dream machine – becomes trapped in a dream at the hands of the evil CEO of Insomnia, Inc., it will take creativity and imagination to rescue him and save the world from villains with the power to control dreams.

In this wholly unique mystery adventure for middle graders, Maya and her friends Teddy and Bea battle General Pheare, his slapstick security team and a sleep-deprived CEO desperate to end dreaming forever. With a kooky cast of characters and loads of zany antics, dreams are taken to the extreme as three clever kids enter the dream world to free Professor Dexter. By channelling the power of children's imaginations, the self-named Dream Bandits bring all their outlandish ideas to life. From clown cars to dancing unicorns, bottomless milkshakes to loads of llamas, the scenes become more and more eccentric until the ultimate showdown where everyone becomes a dream controller.

In a chummy writing style, authors Greg James and Chris Smith speak directly to the reader often explaining a word choice or giving instructions about how to read (or sing) a passage, i.e., repeat sounds out loud or sing important words, readers get the feeling they are experiencing the story alongside the authors and getting a sneak peek at the writing process. There are jokes for adult readers too, including one specifically for estate agents – hilariously silly stuff!

This book is long but is interspersed with black-and-white drawings of the kooky hijinks and creative fonts that make reading the story entertaining. Non-confident readers may be intimidated by the sheer size of the book and sometimes the segues pull readers away from the storyline, but the overall tone is fun and fantastical. A rollercoaster ride of circus-like fun that stretches the imagination and prompts giggles.

Stephanie Ward

He Came with The Couch

David Slonim, pub. Chronicle Books

A charming and unusual picture book that will delight any child with a love of mischief and monsters.

Narrated by Sophie, a treehouse loving girl whose family dog Roscoe has destroyed their couch, it is definitely time for a new one! Sophie and her parents look around for a new one, and finally locate

one in a 24-hour rummage store (which in itself sounds like a book waiting to happen). There's a large blue creature sitting quietly on the couch, but they buy it anyway, thinking they can just get rid of it. But they just can't shift him; they try EVERYTHING, from playing bagpipes to taking him away on holiday. Just as they are wondering what to try next, something unexpected and incredible happens that makes the whole family rethink.

Reading this with a young child could lead to some interesting discussions about giving people a second chance, not jumping to conclusions about new things, and how first impressions can be very misleading. They are bound to be able to come up with example of their own, relating to friendships, teachers or even pets.

There's also an important message underlying the story - a new couch doesn't have to actually be 'new', and maybe it's more fun if it isn't? Second-hand, antique and recycled furniture has been loved by someone before you - and maybe the old owners left a special surprise for you? One of David Slonim's dedications at the front of the book is to "the memory of Jim Henson"; the couch creature has distinctly Muppet-like features, which is a lovely tribute.

Antonia Russell

Magical Boy

The Kao, pub. Scholastic

The character at the heart of *Magical Boy* is Max – a trans boy trying to find his way through high school and into his own identity. As if tackling the perceptions of his parents and peers wasn't hard enough Max has an even greater identity challenge to face, when he discovers that he is descended from a long line of Magical Girls – who must defend humanity from terrible destruction.

This graphic novel follows Max as he battles monsters – personal, real, and societal – as he attempts to forge his own identity, save the world and become the first Magical Boy. He is accompanied in his task by his sassy – but ultimately loyal – friends and pet cat.

The story began as a webcomic quickly developing a strong following – particularly amongst trans boys and trans men – who saw themselves represented in its messages of gender dysphoria and self-doubt. It has been brought to print as a first licensed property with a transgender protagonist. In interview, a publisher from Scholastic commented on the importance of this addition to their catalogue: “The character is so special, and the webcomic has a great positive message about acceptance, adventure, and being who you are.”

Magical Boy builds on existing conventions of graphic novels, turns them on their heads with its graphics and slick, quick-fire dialogue. The pace is fast, the tone sometimes irreverent, but beneath it is vulnerability and self-doubt that will resonate with its readers. In the words of The Kao, its creator: “I know that *Magical Boy* can't be representative of every transman's experience, but I hope that you'll find his journey of self-discovery and overcoming this fictional obstacle of his magical girl lineage to be fun, compelling, and genuine. Max is a character that I hold close to my heart, and I hope that you'll hold him close to yours too.”

Laura Myatt

The Night Train

Matilda Woods, illus. Penny Neville-Lee, pub. Little Tiger

The Night Train is on its way to Sleepy Town to deliver its passengers so that they can take up their roles in the dreams of young children. Will it arrive in time though, as it faces a problem and the characters are unsure as to what to do!

This lovely story for young readers focuses on how teamwork can solve problems. The yeti, the ballet dancer, the monster and the princess all have to arrive at Sleepy Town so that they can take their roles in the dreams of young children. On their journey, however, they meet a problem as there is a fallen tree on the tracks. The guard can't move it on his own. Each of the characters has different skills which means that they all have their own important role to carry out within the rescue of the journey, once they realise that they have something to offer! The characters, led by the friendly monster, work together to clear the tree so that they can carry on with their journey and give the children the dreams that they are hoping for.

The illustrations in this book are delightful. Penny Neville-Lee has used various colours to capture the wintry scenes that the train travels through and brings the train itself to life with subtle details include in each illustration. *The Night Train* is a great, festive read which is perfect for young readers who enjoy a quick moving, heart-warming story.

Tom Joy

Saving Celeste

Timothee de Fombelle, trans. Sarah Ardzzone, pub. Walker Books

When a lonely, nameless, 14-year-old boy briefly meets Celeste one day at his school on the 110th floor, his whole world changes. When Celeste doesn't return the next day, he knows he must find her but when he does, he learns Celeste is sick, as sick as the planet they live on. The boy, who is remotely

parented by his high-flying Mother, wants to save her and so goes to his mother for the first time for help, but in doing so he puts Celeste in grave danger.

I'm not sure what I was expecting when I opened this book, but I have to say it was far beyond any expectations. This short fast paced story takes place sometime in the future where cars are stacked vertically and everyone lives in huge tower blocks, using tunnels and walkways to get around as only vehicles ever go outside. As readers we are quickly and seamlessly swept into this polluted, smoke-filled world of industry and commercialism and sadly, we soon realise this world is simply the projection of our own world, perhaps in the not-too-distant future and this realisation is frightening.

Like the pieces of a puzzle the narrative comes together to complete both the story and a message which I have to say left me speechless. I read this in one sitting and I'm certain that some children would too, for once you begin it's almost impossible to put down. I'm positive that this book will stay with me forever and I cannot recommend it highly enough for adults and children alike.

Tracey Corner

The Sister Who Ate Her Brothers: And Other Gruesome Tales

Jen Campbell, illus. Adam de Souza, pub. Thames & Hudson

This book features fourteen fairy tales from around the world. The author has taken each story and added her own twist. There is the man who hunted children from South Africa; the souls trapped under the ocean from Ireland; the house that was filled with ghosts from Japan; the daughter who loved a skeleton and finds her way out of the kingdom of the dead from Nigeria; and a boy who outwits a troll from Norway. The book introduces a collection of gruesome tales. Stories where things hide in the dark, people eat each other and so on. The reader is ushered into a scary world and invited to sit down. Oh, the door has locked itself behind you. I am sure you will be able to leave after the stories have been told. I hope you don't make yourself too comfortable. What a great way to introduce this collection of tales. The scene is really set for some eerie and scary stories.

We are told that fairy tales have been shared orally over many hundreds of years, changing with the telling. Endings twisted. Each storyteller would alter or add. So, in this book are variations of tales from all over the world. The author attempts to push aside the stereotypes - the beautiful girl is sometimes not there and the mermaid becomes a merman. Some of the stories are scary, dark, horrible and may not be suitable for young children. A good book to read under the covers with a torch.

The writing is simple and direct, creepy, scary, sometimes funny. The text is complemented by illustrations varying from black and white to full colour. Fans of a good fairy tale will love this

collection. They will have fun reading each tale, be scared and prompted to think about our strange world.

Gary Kenworthy

Sisters of the Lost Marsh

Lucy Strange, pub. Chicken House

Six sisters live on a farm. Their mother is dead and their father an unjust tyrant. They are worked to the bone, but at least they have each other, and their wonderful grandmother, and the love of stories and books and reading that she and their mother have passed on to them. They must keep that a secret though because reading is an illicit activity. The remote society of which they are a part in is rife with superstition, something shared by their father, who lives in fear of the Curse of Six Daughters. He has promised the oldest girl, Grace, to a cruel neighbour in marriage in exchange for a horse.

Horrified by the prospect of the match, Grace disappears just as the mysterious Full Moon Fayre leaves their village. Her sister Willa is determined to find her. She follows in the Fayre's trail through terrifying marshlands where dangers abound and legend has it that a will-o'-the-wisp lures lost souls to their doom. Can she ever track Grace down? Can she even survive? And if she does, what will become of the family?

This is a terrific and extremely atmospheric novel, with elements of folklore, fairy tale and gothic fiction as well as gripping adventure. Although in many ways it has the feel of a timeless legend, there are aspects that are all too pertinent today, in particular people's propensity to accept misinformation and malign rumours as truth, and the theme of injustice. Lucy Strange is a fabulous storyteller. Readers will be held spellbound by the compelling plot, the brilliantly evoked setting and the strong female characters. Willa especially is immensely brave and resolute in the face of horrifying odds and her own fears, qualities we see too in Granny.

Anne Harding

Wishyouwas: The Tiny Guardian of Lost Letters

Alexandra Page, illus. Penny Neville-Lee, pub. Bloomsbury

Wishyouwas is full of charm, a classic-feeling story that begins in a smoggy, 1950s London and ends in the magical world of the Sorters- magical creatures who sort undelivered mail. Though unexpected, Page turns the potentially mundane idea of a mail delivery service into an exciting underground secret that you feel you've happened upon as you turn each page.

Christmas is upcoming and we meet Penny Black, whose mother is away and has left her with her postmaster uncle Frank. Frank is bust with the post office and Penny feels lonelier than ever then she comes across a small creature called Wishyouwas while she is snooping around in the mail room. Wishyouwas introduces her to a secret mail service run by small fluffy and funny magical creatures whose sole purpose is to make sure that undeliverable mail gets sent to the correct place.

With Christmas approaching ever faster, Penny and Wishyouwas are pressed for time getting letters sent, especially with rat catchers and other sinister beings lurking around every corner. Written from Penny's point of view, you feel sympathetic towards her and root for her not only to win but to enjoy her wins too. As she gains confidence, the readers witness her growth first-hand.

Throughout the story, you enjoy the voices of 1952 London peppered with real historical facts of the time. Lovely illustrations help you envision the story as you explore the magical, secret, underground world of the mail system that Page has created.

Anne Singer

Young Adult Books

Gilded

Merissa Meyer, pub. Faber Children's Books

Serilda was born blessed by the god of stories, with untrustworthy eyes, pitch black irises, each overlaid with a golden wheel, each with eight tiny golden spokes. Untrustworthy eyes or magical eyes? You will have to decide that, along with unravelling one or two more mysteries in this most magical of books. This is the story of Rumpelstiltskin as you have never read it before, never known it and it will leave you breathless.

Serilda loves to tell the stories, the children of the village love her stories, it seems that the Erlking may like her stories too, so much so that when she tells him she can spin straw into gold he takes her away to his castle to do just that. This castle of course is in a realm of magic, magic can happen, magic does happen but there are always prices to be paid for magic, for tricks and maybe even for love. The Erlking's kingdom is enchanted and Serilda can leave but when she does she finds herself irresistibly drawn back. This may be a world where ghouls prowl the earth and ravens track her every move but when her father is taken from her she is ever-more convinced she may be able to rescue him and her long-lost mother. Love was not meant to be a part of the bargain she makes with the strange boy she summons but that wants to find its way in too...

Marissa Meyer weaves a magical tale from one of the oldest of fairy tales, she makes it her own, ensuring that each and every reader falls in love with it and believes it too.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The False Rose

Jakob Wegelius, trans. Peter Graves, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

Excellent translated by Peter Graves, *The False Rose* is the second novel in the sequence of highly unusual middle-grade adventure stories by Swedish author Jakob Wegelius. There are three novels in the series, with a short prequel, *The Legend of Sally Jones*.

Wegelius has adopted an unusual and intriguing set of characters, and an equally unusual narrative format. The narrator is the Murderer's Ape herself, Sally Jones, who though a highly skilled and extremely intelligent gorilla, has no verbal communication with humans. As a result, while the book has conversations between all the other characters, and with Sally Jones herself, she cannot respond except by gesture. Set in an unspecified time not too far from the early 1990s, Sally Jones' account is

in the first person, her descriptions of people and events are quite lengthy and detailed, with elements of a narrative style more commonly found in books written for young, fluent readers a century or more ago. This is a great advantage for the reader, who can immerse themselves in the detail of the adventure, while still been taken through a swift and exciting adventure.

The multi-talented author supplies portraits of the characters which greatly enhance the quirky brilliance of the narrative. In Sally Jones' portrait she is carefully oiling the typewriter on which she records her adventures, and we discover the extent of her varied talents as we follow her through the adventure. Read more deeply this superb adventure story also addresses issues of gender (Sally Jones is obviously a female ape, and we meet some extremely clever women, as well as some very unpleasant ones). Attitudes to ethnicity are also examined. We meet people from all over the world, and, by strangers, as an ape, Sally Jones is routinely assumed to be unintelligent and uncouth.

This outstanding adventure story, like its predecessors, is surely worthy of yet more awards.

Bridget Carrington

Fireborn: Twelve and the Frozen Forest

Aisling Fowler, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Twelve has been trained in the art of fighting monsters and keeping the peace. She has also taken the Pledge. When the Lodge's walls are breached, a little girl is taken and Twelve goes after her. Twelve teams up with Dog, the Stone Guardian of the Lodge. This is the start of an exciting, epic adventure. There is adventure, action and wonder all mixed together. Twelve is the heroine of the story and she is surrounded by a group of extraordinary characters, including Seven, Victory, Widge and Phoenix. Widge is Twelve's pet squirrel, who brings some light relief to the story.

Fireborn is quite an intense fantasy read and a brilliant story, gripping from start to finish. Readers will love being whisked away to another world, full of delights and magical creatures. The story is set in the snowy northern forests of an imaginary prehistoric world. There is a fascinating landscape of ice and peril. The story is exciting, magical, thrilling and imaginative. The epic journey to battle mythical monsters features giant stone dogs, mysterious frozen forests and fire spirits.

This whirlwind adventure with a ferocious heroine and spine-tingling monsters is also about friendship, heartbreak and hope. There is a plot with lots of twists and surprises and the adventure is exciting, funny and sad. Readers who enjoy this will be pleased to know that this is the first of a trilogy.

Gary Kenworthy

Lionheart Girl

Yaba Badoe, pub. Zephyr Books

Yaba Badoe's latest novel is set in an unnamed African village that provides sanctuary for runaways and outcasts and is completely hidden from the outside world. Sheba grows up in this community and we watch her grow up, discover her own powers and come to terms with her family. Her mother is very powerful but seems to be using her powers for darker purposes and she has little information about her absent father, though she dreams of having a relationship with him. Surrounded by female power, the women of this community guide Sheba to realise her own potential and to forge her own path, though there will be conflict.

The characters are brilliantly imagined and readers will find themselves completely engrossed in this magical tale of family and self-discovery. Interconnectedness between history and heritage, conflict and change, love and power all merge in this incredible story. Its pages breathe African myth and magic and the dark heart of this fable beats strongly as though its inherent witchcraft theme has created a superstition in the reader. After all magic runs through the veins, the blood of the characters, maybe it is now running through us as reader. So compelling is the storytelling that this is entirely conceivable.

Vividly written and imagined this African village is brought to life through wonderful descriptions. Thrilling and compelling this would suit a mature reader in high school.

Erin Hamilton

Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth

Jessie Burton, illus. Olivia Lomenech Gill, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

'If I told you that I'd killed a man with a glance, would you want to hear the rest?' The opening line of Jessie Burton's captivating new novel challenges the reader to consider that there is always a story behind the story. Burton takes the classic myth of Medusa, the gorgon monster feared for her ability to turn men to stone and re-tells it from her perspective.

When Medusa angers the goddess Athena, she and her sisters are transformed into gorgons and exiled to a barren, isolated island. But, whilst her sisters have been given wings and can roam the island more freely, Medusa's once beautiful hair has been replaced by a nest of snakes. She spends her days hiding amongst the rocks with just her vipers and her faithful dog, Argentus, for company. Her life changes however when Perseus, the charmed son of Zeus arrives on the island.

Burton's novel is incredible on so many levels. It is a powerful Feminist re-imagining of the classic Greek story where consent and power are abused by Gods who manipulate, exploit and discard mortals as if they were nothing more than playthings. It is a story which challenges a world where women are valued only for their beauty, or their domicility or their perfection. Most significantly, this is a beautifully told story about a young girl's journey to self-belief and acceptance. A story about one young woman who, in rebelling against those expectations, regains her voice, redefines her place in the world and re-claims *her* story.

Despite being rooted in the world of mythology, the messages embedded within Burton's elegiac narrative will resonate with 21st century readers. The parallels are, sadly, all too clear. However, in *Medusa* Burton has created a truly mesmerising story. The prose is eloquent, the narrative voice engaging and the illustrations by award-winning illustrator Olivia Lomenech Gill, are captivating.

An absolute must-read for the New Year!

Paulie Hurry

Skin of the Sea

Natasha Bowen, pub. Penguin Random House

Skin of the Sea is a powerful and thought-provoking YA novel that reimagines terrible times. Set during the slave trade, it follows the story of Simidele, one of the Mama Wata mermaids, whose sole task is to collect the souls of the dead slaves who are cast into the sea, blessing them as they return to the Creator.

Simi remembers precious glimpses of her human life before she was made into a Mama Wata. She relishes her brief forays onto the peaceful sunny island where she blesses the returning souls. Conscious of her privilege in 'seeing' the lives of those who sink beneath the waves and blessing them, she is also reluctant to completely lose her memories, as she does when she re-enters the sea.

Against this tension, Simi must make a terrible choice when a boy is thrown into the sea whilst he is still alive. Following her feelings, Simi saves him, threatening the very existence of the Mama Wata. She must return the boy to his home and travel to the Creator to make amends. Their journey is dogged by a vengeful god and they encounter legendary creatures and people. The author, Natasha Bowen is of both Nigerian and Welsh descent, and she has created a beautiful epic love story, filled with West African gods and mythology. It is, by turns, lush and dream-like and darkly terrifying but it is always gripping.

Simi is a powerful, complex female protagonist who is led by her heart and bound by her nature and oaths in this cinematic story of forbidden love and a desperate quest. I look forward to reading the sequel!

Saira Archer

Terciel & Elinor

Garth Nix, pub. Hot Key Books

It is twenty-five years since we read of the end of Elinor's story: dying and giving birth to Sabriel, daughter of Terciel. Now read the story from the very beginning!

Terciel & Elinor returns to the Old Kingdom and many of the descriptions of places will be familiar to Garth Nix fans, as our heroes travel from Waverley College north to the Abhorsen's house and head to a final confrontation with Kerrigor, the most powerful of the Greater Dead, but they face many dangers. Terciel is training to be an Abhorsen, and although Elinor is charter-marked, she grew up in the South and was never educated about the North. There is much that they both don't know and they risk the deadly taint of free magic and necromancy. Yet Kerrigor's plans appear subtle and clever, inexorably luring the Abhorsen and Abhorsen-In-Waiting into a trap and death.

Despite the title, as ever in the Old Kingdom series, there are plenty of strong female characters. This is really Elinor's story, boldly journeying into the unknown and fiercely fighting for a cause she makes her own. Tizanael, the Abhorsen, is sadly having to make difficult choices and extending her services to the Old Kingdom, perhaps for too long. We are also introduced to Mirelle, now simply a ranger.

Success however is not a foregone conclusion. There are many perils that threaten Elinor and Terciel, particularly Elinor, who seems more vulnerable with little magical knowledge or weapons against the dead. Even the weapon that could exile Kerrigor lies mostly forgotten, more legend than known history, and seemingly as lethal to wield as Kerrigor itself! As ever, there is precious little time, even less hope and even less chance all will survive. Even those of us who have read *Sabriel*, do not know when the book *Terciel & Elinor* ends...

Terciel & Elinor is a great stand-alone story and a great addition to the Old Kingdom saga.

Simon Barrett

Vespertine

Margaret Rogerson, pub. Simon & Schuster

'For a strange moment I felt as though I were watching myself from afar, a lone cloaked figure cleaving through an ocean of the Dead. The chant of "Vespertine!" shook the ground like a drumbeat. I could feel it in my bones.'

Set in a medieval realm, Loraille, where people with the Sight are taken for training, Artemisia is one, training as a Grey Sister cleansing the souls of the Dead. Socially avoidant Artemisia prefers the company of the dead to the living, but her quiet, simple life begins to unravel when her convent is attacked and she reluctantly unseals an ancient spirit, binding herself to it. Untrained and desperate to save her home she bargains as a last resort, struggling with the newfound all-consuming power and constant threat of possession, Meanwhile Death is heading to Loraille and the only chance of stopping it is the help of a Vespertine - a priestess trained to wield a high relic. With no one left to ask for help, Artemisia begrudgingly turns to the revenant itself as they discover that there is more to the story...a plot involving dark magic, saints, relics and secrets and this may not be the whole story...

This is a well-developed medieval world with lots religious references and vocabulary which may be unfamiliar to the reader but the storyline and characters are beautifully created with such depth it becomes its own little universe. It is refreshing to read a book where our heroine does not have a love interest and has a deeper focus on the value of friendships that are built throughout the book.

Whilst this book took longer to read than others, this story was unpredictable and had you guessing what would happen next with friendships in the book that made me want to shout, to laugh and question their actions and reasons. I would recommend this book to read and I am looking forward to the next book in the series.

Natalie Golding

The Wanderer

Josie Williams, pub. Firefly Press

Ryder is a wanderer, caught between life and death, trapped in the world of the living but unable to reach out and communicate with those he loves. His is a lonely existence, days spent aimlessly trudging the streets, his solitude only broken by evenings spent with his fellow wanderer Jade. This is an afterlife that is mundane and repetitive. Ryder is filled with regret that he turned away from the light that called him at his death.

A split-second decision to push himself into the body of a living person to prevent a tragic accident happening changes everything for Ryder. He becomes able to talk to Maggie, whom he has long loved from a distance. Maggie is also all alone in the world. These two lost souls are drawn to each other in a love affair that crosses the boundary of life and death.

Seeing the experience of first love through the eyes of someone who has been shut off from human touch and affection for years adds a poignant intensity to every interaction. Fingers brushing against each other and lingering gazes have a fierce emotional power. The book is very readable and you will be swept along by Maggie and Ryder's love story. Although how much you enjoy the book may depend on whether you find the thought of being unknowingly shadowed by a lovelorn ghost romantic or slightly unnerving.

A great choice for fans of YA romances with a supernatural twist.

Liz Speight

We Can Be Heroes

Kyrie McCauley, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Beginning to read this book, this reviewer felt she might be embarking on a simple ghost story. As the story unfolds however the reader becomes aware that the book is far more than that.

The scene is the USA. Beck Jones, Vivian Hughes and Cassandra Queen have been friends for most of their lives. Cassie Queen then begins dating Nico Bell, who is heir to the Bell Firearms business, but their relationship ends. Using his family's lethal products, Nico then embarks on a shooting spree in which he kills Cassie and injures Vivian. Because she has unfinished business in the land of the living, Cassie returns to haunt her friends. The survivors of the attack decide to collaborate with the ghost of their dead friend to exact vengeance on the firearms company. The rest of the story concerns the struggle of the young women – two living and one dead – to exact justice despite the obstruction of the powerful US gun lobby. The two living women will also use their struggle for a just outcome as a means of overcoming their grief.

The outstanding feature of McCauley's novel is the authenticity with which she handles the powerful emotions of her protagonists, their grief, their anger, their resolution. The author also describes with conviction the emotions provoked by a senseless attack with firearms, a phenomenon which has come regularly to disfigure American society. In an authorial note McCauley volunteers the information that she herself is a survivor of just such an assault. This otherwise appalling experience seems to have had one positive outcome. It has qualified the author to mount a powerful challenge to those who rely for their indefensible actions on the Second Amendment.

Rebecca Butler

When Shadows Fall

Sita Brahmachari, illus. Natalie Sirett, pub. Little Tiger

Kai is completely lost. After a sequence of traumatic events, he pushes his whole support system away until he is left alone and gets in with a bad crowd. Will he ever be able to find his way again?

Kai starts recounting his story from when he was young, playing in the wilderness near his home with his dad. Dad and Kai make the Greenlands their own, vowing to always protect the land as Greenlands Guardians. Growing up with Zak and Orla, the three seem inseparable, even creating their own little Greenlands nest – their ‘low heaven.’ Then the children start high school together and things become more complicated. The arrival of Kai’s little sister, Sula, should be the happy change that brings Kai and his parents closer together, but things don’t turn out the way that they should.

Kai starts spiralling down and he relies on Zak, Orla and new arrival Omid to fill in the gaps of his story. His friends are desperate to help but Kai starts pushing them away - will he be able to get his life back on track, with or without the support of his friends?

This book is hard hitting and isn’t always an easy read! With an array of heavy topics explored, mainly mental health, there are some parts of the book where the tension is almost unbearable and the events heart-breaking. The story is poignant though and allows the reader to reflect on key themes, friendship, community, responsibility, decision-making and mental health.

The way that Sita combines Kai’s story with his fascination, and connection, with two crows is very symbolic. The use of Rain and Bow - particularly when things aren’t going too well for Kai - shows that however lonely you feel, there is always something to connect to, something that can bring hope.

Tom Joy

Year of the Reaper

Makiia Lucier, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

Year of the Reaper is a fantasy featuring Cas, an engineer's apprentice on a mission entrusted by the King. Following a war, a plague has left countless dead and devastated the kingdom, the story concentrates on the aftermath of a war, plague, and death - and answers the question of 'what next?'

Ambushed by a band of enemy soldiers while on his mission, Cas spends three years in a prison cell, after which he wants to return home and forget the past. "The past never forgets" - couldn't be truer. Cas is a multi-dimensional character, though he suffers from PTSD, he appears level-headed and extremely mature for his age. His emotional journey is captivating, as he reconnects with the past whilst acquainting himself with his current world. Recovering from the effects of the plague it becomes clear that he can talk to the ghosts of the dead. Subtle elements of the paranormal help the

world-building in an easy to read and well-structured plot. The diverse ensemble of characters, their intertwined relationships make this book a page-turner - as does a major plot twist.

This is a standalone novel, a lost art in the world of Young Adult fantasy novels, and as a benefit it means it serves up a beginning, middle and ending in one book. That said, the book's form also feels like it's weakness. Some of the plot points are not thoroughly explored as they serve only to help with world-building, and the ending feels a bit rushed. An epilogue would be very welcome, although it might have been better to split the book into two shorter novels.

Makiia Lucier seems to have struck the right balance between detail and readability, and the fast-paced narrative means this book is a page-turner that should be on everyone's reading list this winter.

Chris J Kenworthy

Non-Fiction Books

Atlas of Amazing Migrations

Megan Lee, illus. Matt Sewell, pub. Pavilion Books

Migration is a hot topic these days. People migrate, animals migrate. But by reading this beautiful atlas, children will be pleasantly surprised to learn that also plants migrate! Violets, dandelions, wild cherries, and coconut trees appear in this book as part of ‘amazing migrations’ side by side to fish, mammals, invertebrates, insect and birds. It is nice to see such a variety. The book highlights the relationships between inhabitants of this earth, displaying how we all migrate in search for our own good, whether this is sun, water, or food. All wanting to live, to thrive. An important reminder.

The book is lavishly illustrated by Matt Sewell. Each page is a delight of colours, presenting the animals, or plants, in their own habitat but focussing really on the protagonist of the migration. Useful maps also appear throughout to show selected routes of migration. While the illustrations suit perfectly young readers, I would not say the same for the texts. The writing style is engaging and elegant, but not always child friendly. Or, at least, it would suit older readers (9+) but not younger ones. But then, I wonder whether older readers interested in the topic would be hungry for more details in each section. Nonetheless, the choice of keeping the information streamlined benefits the sense of wholeness offered by this *Atlas*, the main aim of which, in my opinion, is to draw attention to the beauty and the amazing resilience of creatures of the earth, and their being inhabitants of the wide world, not just a portion of it. Aren't we all?

Francesca Magnabosco

The Book of Labyrinths and Mazes

Silke Vry, illus. Finn Dean, pub. Prestel

This is a beautifully presented, very inviting book. Who wouldn't be intrigued by this introduction?

Do you want to learn more about getting lost? About the millennia-old fascination with wandering around? Do you fancy a confusing, charming journey through the world of labyrinths and mazes?...

The book fulfils this promise. It begins by exploring the difference between labyrinths and mazes (though to be honest, I'm still not entirely clear about this: we're told you can't get lost in a maze, but is that really true...?) It shows us that mazes/labyrinths are deeply embedded, not just in the human psyche, but in nature itself – the fingerprint, the ‘labyrinth’ of passages inside the ear it also delves into the spiral.

As you would expect the book explores the history of mazes and more. The Minotaur's labyrinth, the maze of passages in the pyramids, the labyrinths which pilgrims would follow, often on their knees, in cathedrals. But it also takes a philosophical look at them, relating the process of finding your way through a maze to that of finding your way through life. Finally, there is a section with maze-related activities.

It's an unusual and absorbing book. Difficult to estimate age range for, I have a teenage grandson who would love it, but it would also appeal to younger readers. Let me leave you with this Irish blessing, which is quoted in the book.

“Let only those into your labyrinth who carry hope in their hands and tenderness in their eyes, do not measure the day by hours and open up their hearts to magic behind the apparitions - and completely forget to look for the exit.”

Sue Purkiss

Earth is Big: A Book of Comparisons

Steve Tomecek, illus. Marcos Marina, pub. What On Earth Books

Earth is Big, is a big book packed with factual comparisons that will engross readers with a thirst for information and knowledge. As the introduction tells us, the book is about getting a better understanding of the Earth and the things upon it by comparing them with the rest of the universe.

The book is divided into 18 double spread 'Earth is...' chapters - 'Big, Small, Cold, Hot, Old,' and so on, it and finishes with a useful glossary and index. Each chapter subject follows on logically from the one before which gives the book a coherent flow and makes it feel like more than just a book of facts. Earth is Old, gives a timeline that stretches from 4.54 billion years ago, with the formation of the Earth, through key geological and ecological changes to the present day. In comparison the billions of years that Earth has existed, the following chapter, Earth's Inhabitants are Young, gives examples of just how short a life individual lifeforms have - trees, whales, giant tortoise *etc.*

The book itself is larger than most which will make it stand out on any bookshelf. Its 48 pages are filled with brightly coloured illustrations from Marcos Farina that perfectly complement the many facts that author has crammed in. Stephen M. Tomacek, began his career as a geologist and is now a writer and science consultant for the National Geographic Society so we can be assured certainly knows his subject.

This is a book that will be picked up time and time again and is one that I would be tempted to leave in easy reach for older primary school children.

Damian Harvey

A Field Guide to Leafings

Owen Churcher and Niamh Sharkey, pub. Templar Books

This adorable book is a lovely introduction to trees from around the world. Consider this your in-depth guide for young readers, as shared by the Leafings - Guardians of the Trees. These small creatures who live in the and among the branches and roots of the trees also resemble the trees they work within and have special jobs to do, just as bees in a hive. Remember, as you read that the Leafings are living in and among some of the world's most important inhabitants, protecting their interactions, their cycles and telling their stories.

As you read through the book, you will find that you travel from the ancient Holly tree in Ireland to the Cherry Blossom in Japan, the giant Redwood in California down to the Amazon before then going all the way to Australia. Certain trees are synonymous with these places and there are plenty of facts to read and enjoy for each location. This book, though non-fiction has an almost mythical narrative to it, as each Leafing shares the story of their tree, explain to you how they breathe, make food, support forms of life and mean to people the world over.

With stunning and wonderfully artistic illustrations, readers of all ages will appreciate turning the pages. With lift the flaps, and fold out stories, little hands will find much to open and read. Completely charming and one to have at home and in classrooms.

Erin Hamilton

The History of Everywhere. All the Stuff That You Never Knew Happened at the Same Time

Philip Parker, illus. Liz Kay, pub. Walker Books

From the first civilisations (4000 – 1000BC) through to the Modern World (1990 – 2001), this book uses double-page world maps to highlight events that occurred and people that lived at the same time.

For example, 'A Time of Change, 1450 – 1550,' shows that Henry VIII lived during the same period that Da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa, Babur united northern India as the first Mughal Emperor and Ivan the Terrible became the first Tsar of Russia. It is sometimes only through books such as this that these links become apparent. There is an overview for each period as well as key event and 'did you

know' fact boxes. The pages are well laid out, the text is accessible with good use made of sub-headings and multicultural illustrations.

Each time period has a specific focus as well as an overview: Ancient Greece and famous philosophers; Ancient Rome and emperors; China and the Silk Road; Aztecs and their gods; Japan and famous Samurai and Shoguns; the art and buildings of Mughal India; the United States independence and founding fathers; 1st World War trench warfare; and 2nd World War air raids. The final pages consider how history happens in the 21st century with the speed of information travelling across the world. Linking with several curriculum areas, the book provides a historical overview of events that are often viewed in isolation and a different way of looking at history.

Barbara Band

It's Up to Us: A Children's Terra Carta for Nature, People and Planet

Christopher Lloyd, illus. 33 artists, pub. What on Earth Books

Before you read a single word what you notice, immediately, is how beautifully illustrated this book is – each artist adding their own unique style to give the already impactful words. From Poonam Mistry's illustration which has an aboriginal feel about it – giving a sense of being grounded in nature - to Sally Deng's picture of refugees, with muted colours and long shadows, evoking a sense of sorrow. Nick Jarrett's picture helps illustrate the idea of fossil fuels in a bright and simplistic manner aiding understanding of this concept. *It's Up to Us* is a book so relevant for the time that we live in, when climate change and our impact on this wonderful planet is current news.

With a forward from HRH the Prince of Wales, the text is subdivided into sections starting with 'Nature', explaining what nature is, how we are an integral part of it and that life on Earth "makes our world a truly wondrous place and Nature an infinitely precious thing." From the enormous and greatness of the oceans' whales to the infinitesimal smallness of the microbes between your toes! Then we read that 'People', although part of nature themselves have learnt how to use it, although we are a beautiful part of nature, we are a very dangerous part of it – here the book starts its warning by explaining how we are damaging our world.

'Planet' explains the consequences of our actions but the final chapter, 'Terra Carta' is the hope we need reminding us, it is up to us. There are some amazing facts about carbon footprint and the Fibonacci spiral – all really easy to comprehend. But it is right from the beginning, the front cover, that you become enticed into the pages within.

Who wouldn't want to open this book and discover more!

Claire Webb

My Skin Your Skin: Let's Talk about Race, Racism and Empowerment

Laura Henry-Allain, illus. Onyinye Iwu, pub. Penguin Random House

This is a book about race, racism and empowerment, encouraging children and adults to talk. Messages include 'I am great', 'My skin is beautiful,' 'I am unique.' Racism is the main theme of the book and questions about racism are asked, including why is racism wrong.

The book is fully illustrated throughout, it includes explanations of key words and important concepts all written in a very child friendly way. There is a glossary, lots of questions and a note for adults. Also included is a list of what adults can do to help support young people. Racism is addressed clearly and simply, a very child friendly book dealing with a tricky subject in a clear way, a good starting point for discussions on race and racism. The message is very clear. Racism is wrong. It is never O.K. to be racist. The book will make children think and encourage them to ask questions.

The book goes on to explain simply and clearly what racist behaviour is. Racism is bullying. Racism makes others invisible, racism is like hitting someone. Sadly, racism is a problem all over the world, a big and difficult problem which has been around for a long time. Children are encouraged to make friends with people from different races.

Other messages include that we are all different, have different skin colour, or eyes, be small or big, tall or short, be Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish or Hindu but we should all be proud of what makes us different. This book tells the truth and helps to teach a valuable lesson. There is so much to celebrate in our beautiful and wonderful world. This is a good book to introduce children to the concepts of racism and anti-racism.

Gary Kenworthy

Nature's Treasures: Tales of More Than 100 Extraordinary Objects from Nature

Ben Hoare, pub. Dorling Kindersley

Dorling Kindersley knows how to present stunning books and this one about nature and science is no exception. This is a beautifully presented book with foiled cover and attractive gold edges, amazing photographs and colourful illustrations throughout, all accompanied by a clearly written text packed with facts and detail.

The book covers more than one hundred objects arranged in four chapters under the heading of Animals; Plants, Fungi and Algae; Minerals and Rocks; Made by Nature. There is an introduction and a glossary and detailed index at the end. Objects include feathers, fruit, eggs, teeth, skeletons, fossils, seeds and webs. There are explanations covering where to find things, how they work and how we use them. The book is about nature at the beach, in the park, the forest and the meadow. It tells children where and when to look and encourages responsible nature spotting. There are animals from all over the world, from the gentle butterfly to the giant elephant, plants from dry deserts to the oceans, with details about leaves, flowers, stems, fruits and seeds. It explains that minerals and rocks provide us with construction materials, fuel and gemstones. It is a complete tour of our planet and it really is for children who love to explore the natural world.

The everyday, common objects and things that surround us give fascinating detail that we probably didn't know. For example, a page about eggs covers their different sizes, shapes and variety of colours. The mermaids purse is explained on another page and we learn how sea urchins see and breathe.

This is an amazing and high quality book, full of treasures, each shown in detail. The book will tempt children to explore further. Its delight is that it is about the simple things that surround us every day.

Gary Kenworthy

Oceanarium: Welcome to the Museum

Loveday Trinick, illus. Teagan White, pub. Big Picture Press

Welcome once more to the Museum. This Museum is always open to explorers, walk over to the bookcase, pick up the book of your choice (there are now 7 books in the series taking us though the natural world and into history). *Oceanarium* is the latest addition to the growing series. This title explores, in a way that no other book can, through its oversize fact and illustration-filled pages, the world's most important, largest and diverse habitat – the Ocean.

Step inside and step underwater. Start out on the sandy shoreline and travel into the deepest depths from the comfort of your own home knowing that as yet no human can physically travel so far, that the wonders we see here are the wonders captured by special diving cameras. As the cover promises with its stunning images of creatures galore, you will come up close to (though hopefully not too close) giant whale sharks with their enormous teeth and at the other extreme tiny tropical fishes. There are the majestic mantoes to follow, the ever-curious jellyfish and so much more. Travel the ocean from the frozen Arctic to the warmest of the coral reefs, discover what life lives in each location, how it survives and what it is so important that we protect all of these habitats.

As we draw ourselves up for a comfortable and awe-inspiring immersion into the deepest, widest, bluest oceans of the world we are drawn in by the fascinating text which appeals to readers of all ages

and the stunning, complementary illustration whose intricacy at times belies belief. A simply stunning exploration of the world of the ocean, from its smallest to largest inhabitants, from its deepest depths to its lowest shallows. I was wowed. I will be visiting this Museum time and again, I am quite sure I will be taking many of you with me.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Plasticus Maritimus: An Invasive Species

Ana Pêgo and Isabel Minhós Martins, illus. Bernardo P. Carvalho, trans. Jane Springer, pub. Greystone Books

From a publisher whose mission includes publishing thought-provoking books for children and adults, from a range of international authors whilst being as environmentally friendly as possible, using chlorine-free, 100% post-consumer paper for all its books comes a visually appealing, fact-filled, fascinating non-fiction title for middle grade readers and school libraries the world over.

Plasticus Maritimus is a new species that is invading our oceans, a dangerous species threatening not only maritime life but the life systems of the world and there is something that you, I, that all of us can do about it. The name of this species was coined by the child biologist Ana Pêgo who now, as an adult, works to warn us all of its danger to our planet and guide is in ways to halt the damage. This book does not set out to cause fear but to inspire change. It is sympathetically written to appeal to children, it is simply and elegantly illustrated to demonstrate in image what the text tells us in words. It does not seek to bamboozle us with science or to distress.

Having explained to us how these plastics first emerged in our waterways, streams, rivers and oceans, their physical and chemical make-up (this book is ideal for STEM lessons in schools) we are presented with a field guide for identifying the species, for seeing its spread around the world. From here we are given suggestions for dealing with the problems it presents before being encouraged to revolutionize. A serious but child friendly approach to eradicating a pollutant this book is fact filled but does not overwhelm. Illustrated with drawings done in colourful crayon and photographs this book appeals and galvanizes us all to action.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Swan: The Life and Dance of Anna Pavlova

Laurel Snyder, illus. Julie Morstad, pub. Chronicle Books

A glimpse of the front cover of *Swan*, with its sparkling wings, prepares readers for a special story. Laurel Snyder's short account of Anna Pavlova's life, from small Russian girl from a poor family,

taken to see the ballet for the first time at the Mariinsky Theatre, until her tragic and untimely death. We are offered just a glimpse of her life, leaving us hungry to pursue in much greater detail.

Snyder briefly tells us how, having been enraptured by watching the ballet, determined to become a dancer, Anna had to wait impatiently until she was old enough to audition to join the Imperial Ballet School, becoming one of the *corps de ballet* dancers, finally a soloist. She became incredibly famous, travelling the world, not to show off, but to offer the same exciting experience that she had had as a small girl. Snyder's text is sparse but filled with poetry – not the rhyming sort, but the essence of Anna's story, snippets of her life.

Julie Morstad's illustrations are magical – there is no other word for them. Each carefully coloured, sparsely covered, page throbs with movement, as Anna becomes a dancer and enraptures countries all over the world. Morstad uses a restricted pallet of soft colours, and backgrounds drawing us into the magic of Anna dancing, she and her talent shine out of the darkness. The sad final pages seem to reflect Anna as though she is the Sleeping Beauty, giving even the youngest readers a magical promise of something rather than the tragedy which took such a great dancer from the world. For the illustrations of Anna in her home country there are constantly snowflakes falling making it harder to read the white text.

The story is followed by a short account of Pavlova's life, and a bibliography, which includes sources of quotations used. Truly an unmissable book.

Bridget Carrington

Unleash your Creative Monster: A Children's Guide to Writing

Andy Jones, illus. Olaf Falafel, pub. Walker Books.

“A great story is like a good cake. We learn from failure not success.” That must be encouraging news for any child who wishes to be a potential writer. Even the most diffident, want to be a writer. Created by two established talents in the world of authorship, illustration and comedy, Andy Jones and Olaf Falafel manage to convince you of your ability to write a story by de-constructing the process. A bit like writing by numbers! Taking apart or breaking down a complex process, makes re-construction clearer, more friendly and thence achievable. Bingo.

Andy and Olaf provide bags of inspiration and practical ways to get started, which is so often difficult. FSP's [Fantastic Story Plots] and Story Prompts such as “The day Mum went bonkers” abound. Several quotes are provided by celebrated authors including JK Rowling, assist you in being able to see the wood for the trees. John Le Carre is quoted as advising conflict to provide that tantalising mystery. The cat sat on the mat does not cut it, but the cat sat on the dog's mat has potential he says.

Famous British author David Almond, who has written many novels for children and young adults, describes this book as “intelligent, inspiring and lots of fun.” That’s it in a nutshell. An excellent addition to any school library. Logically arranged making navigation around it easy at home or at school. It can be read from cover to cover or dipped into as a reference book. Recommended for 9+ year olds, possibly emphasis on the plus? Smart and chucklesome this book will awaken hidden writing potential.

Elizabeth Negus

The World Book: Explore the Facts, Stats and Flags of Every Country

Joe Fullman and Rosa Blake, pub. Wellbeck

The World Book is perfect for children interested in travel, flags, countries of the world, language, or even curious children looking for something to be curious about!

The World Book asks you where you would like to visit next for with it you can take a tour of every single country on its pages. It is most suited to children aged 7-12 and is a unique encyclopaedia-style book containing facts about each country of the world. Each country of the world has nearly a page of information about it, from facts ranging from historical to geographical to funny.

Accompanied by beautiful yet simple illustrations that tell a mini-story on each page, *The World Book* is anything but stereotypical. It is full of unique information about each country of the world that may even surprise adults who read along. I particularly liked that the book has been divided into chunks by continent; while many similar books are only alphabetical, I think this organization is easiest to understand and visualize, especially for a child who is encountering some of these places for the very first time. The world statistics at the end make for great trivia questions that even many adults wouldn’t get the answers to!

So, if you would like to learn how to say ‘Hello’ in Maltese, what the most popular dishes in Columbia are or where you can seek out over 60 species of hummingbird then this is the book for you because you will also find the tallest mountain, longest river and everything in between.

Anne Singer

Picture books

The Book No One Wants to Read

Beth Bacon

Frindleswylde

Natalia O'Hara, illus. Lauren O'Hara

Look Up at The Stars

Katie Cotton, illus. Miren Asiain Lora

My Mindful A to Zen: 26 Wellbeing Haiku for Happy Little Minds

Krina Patel-Sage

The Planet in A Pickle Jar

Martin Stanev

The Pooka Party

Shona Shirley Macdonald

The Queen on Our Corner

Lucy Christopher, illus. Nia Tudor

Scissorella: The Paper Princess

Clare Helen Welsh, illus. Laura Barrett

Shoo!

Susie Bower, illus. Francesca Gambatesa

Two Bears: An Epic Journey of Hope

Patricia Hegarty, illus. Totem Teplow

Junior books

The Bear Who Sailed the Ocean on an Iceberg

Emily Critchley

Einstein the Penguin

Iona Rangely, illus. David Tazzyman

Following Frankenstein

Catherine Bruton

The Great Dream Robbery

Greg James and Chris Smith, illus. Amy Nguyen

He Came with The Couch

David Slonim

Magical Boy

The Kao

The Night Train

Matilda Woods, illus. Penny Neville-Lee

Saving Celeste

Timothee de Fombelle, trans. Sarah Ardzzzone

The Sister Who Ate Her Brothers: And Other Gruesome Tales

Jen Campbell, illus. Adam de Souza

Sisters of the Lost Marsh

Lucy Strange

Wishyouwas: The Tiny Guardian of Lost Letters

Alexandra Page, illus. Penny Neville-Lee

Young Adult books

Gilded

Merissa Meyer

The False Rose

Jakob Wegelius, trans. Peter Graves

Fireborn: Twelve and the Frozen Forest

Aisling Fowler

Lionheart Girl

Yaba Badoe

Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth

Jessie Burton, illus. Olivia Lomenech Gill

Skin of the Sea

Natasha Bowen

Terciel & Elinor

Garth Nix

Vespertine

Margaret Rogerson

The Wanderer

Josie Williams

We Can Be Heroes

Kyrie McCauley

When Shadows Fall

Sita Brahmachari, illus. Natalie Sirett

Year of the Reaper

Makiia Lucier

Non-Fiction books

Atlas of Amazing Migrations

Megan Lee, illus. Matt Sewell

The Book of Labyrinths and Mazes

Silke Vry, illus. Finn Dean

Earth is Big: A Book of Comparisons

Steve Tomecek, illus. Marcos Marina

A Field Guide to Leafings

Owen Churcher and Niamh Sharkey

The History of Everywhere. All the Stuff That You Never Knew Happened at the Same Time

Philip Parker, illus. Liz Kay

It's Up to Us: A Children's Terra Carta for Nature, People and Planet

Christopher Lloyd, illus. 33 artists

My Skin Your Skin: Let's Talk about Race, Racism and Empowerment

Laura Henry-Allain, illus. Onyinye Iwu

Nature's Treasures: Tales of More Than 100 Extraordinary Objects from Nature

Ben Hoare

Oceanarium: Welcome to the Museum

Loveday Trinick, illus. Teagan White

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