



Armadillo
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Picture books

A Quokka for the Queen

Huw Lewis Jones, illus. Fred Blunt, pub. Happy Yak

When the Queen has a birthday, she is inundated with presents and in this very special year, our Queen's platinum year, her 70th on the throne, it is even more true. However, the present given to the Queen in this story, the present from Australia is very different and leads to some interesting events; what after all is a Quokka?

We soon find out and the discovery makes the Queen decide to give presents to people for her birthday. Having gone through a list of all those who will get gifts we are left with the Quokka, but he just wants more of his friends. Children will love all the ideas that the author comes up with; I particularly like the Llamas for Librarians, Tarantulas for Teachers and Pigeons for the Prime Minister and what a wonderful way to show children the different ways we see alliteration.

This is also an opportunity to learn about wildlife in Australia, especially this cute little creature that lives on one small island (Rottneest), off the coast near Perth. *A Quokka for the Queen* is full of fun and exuberance and will make a great addition to classrooms and libraries.

Margaret Pemberton

A Walk in the Woods

Flora Martyn, illus. Hannah Tolson, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Published in conjunction with The Woodland Trust *A Walk in the Woods* really encourages children to go out into the woods and find out about what they see.

Oscar and Lucy take Jasper the dog for a walk every day, whatever the weather, and make a point of dressing appropriately: will they need a scarf, or sunglasses? In the spring, they might see young creatures exploring their new world: animals, birds and blossoming trees are pictured and named. At night, which animals might be sleeping? There are plenty of flowers in the summer, and we are shown a few to recognise. There are birds and insects around the pond in the park, and we learn about tadpoles becoming froglets. Summer nights bring different creatures out, and the stars are more easily seen. Autumn brings falling leaves in lots of colours, fruit, possibly rain- and puddles! There are leaf shapes to match to the trees. Some creatures disappear during winter: where do they sleep? Some trees stay green, and sometimes it snows. A small flower pokes through the snow, and the cycle begins again.

At the end, there is a double-page spread with pictures of some of the creatures, plants and items that have been illustrated, to refresh our memories. Perhaps a child could try to identify the season to which each belongs?

Oscar has brown skin and tight dark curls, and Lucy has a long plait, so they could be African and Indian, or maybe not, the intention seems to be to give every reader the opportunity to identify. This is a lovely book, with lots of detail in bright colours. Hannah Tolson is an experienced illustrator, and this seems to be Flora Martyn's first picturebook, but the pairing works well.

Diana Barnes

Be Wild Little One

Olivia Hope, illus. Daniel Egnéus, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Be Wild Little One makes a real impact with the stunningly beautiful front cover, featuring a child riding on the back of a swan in flight, soaring through the air with other birds. It sets the tone for a wonderful, nature inspired story.

Each page follows suit and is equally as stunning. Delicate illustrations of the child hiding in flowers amongst butterflies, swinging on vines with chimpanzees, dancing with fireflies and running with wolves, to name a few, accompany the short, yet poignant text by Olivia Hope. It leaves the reader, young and young at heart alike, with a deep appreciation of the wondrous world we live in and all the tiny details we can find in nature.

I enjoyed every minute of reading this with my youngest son, who loves wildlife and nature. We adored looking at the pictures by Daniel Egnéus together and talking about where we might see the different scenes depicted throughout the book. An ideal book for bedtime and to inspire wonderful dreams. The book is very well produced by Bloomsbury. The colours are vibrant and the story stays with you long after the covers are closed and the stars are out. A book that will adorn our shelves for many years to come.

Sarah Thompson

Bork

Rhys Kitson, pub. Sunbird Books

Do all dogs speak the same language, and can they understand each other? This is a delightfully humorous picture book that asks this very question, and it does so in the most obvious way possible,

with dogs talking to one another, or trying to – oh and let us not miss the token cat too! As the various dogs that Rhys Kitson portrays meet each other, they bark to one another, but they bark in their own way, so that we are presented with a range of ‘language’ that might not be understood.

This is virtually a wordless picture book, but one that allows, encourages, us to realize the importance of trying to understand others, even if the language is different. It is a lesson for us as humans and helps us to understand non-verbal methods of communication.

The humour between the dogs is delightful and the illustrations fully expand and develop the ‘text’. I love the way that we get a list of the various names given in many countries for the word ‘bark’ and this would be a wonderful addition to a school with a range of languages being spoken.

Margaret Pemberton

The Enormous Morning

Louise Greig, illus. Lizzy Stewart, pub. Farshore

Louise Greig is an award-winning poet and children’s author, and her poetic style clearly shines through in *The Enormous Morning*. It’s morning and Pia is in her bedroom with her cuddly toy, Rabbit. The morning seems small and there isn’t much else in it – until that is, Pia opens her curtains and lets in more colours, shadows, and sounds. Next, Pia opens her wardrobe doors, and more shapes and colours spill out.

The book follows Pia as she and her papa leave the house with a picnic and explore the countryside around them – all the time delighting in the sights and sounds of the world around them.

The Enormous Morning is a delightful picture book that encourages readers to see, think, and talk about what they see around them, and about the relationship between things in the world to each other, in different ways. This line is a beautiful example of the text and the way it encourages the reader to see things differently - ‘Pia knows when a mouse sits on a stone a stone is not alone.’ The book is beautifully illustrated by Lizzy Stewart in a way that compliments and highlights Louise Greig’s thoughtful text.

As well as being an interesting book to share, it also provides lots of food for thought for young children, and adults, encouraging us all to look carefully at what is around us.

Vicky Harvey

If I had a Kangaroo

Gabby Dawnay, illus. Alex Barrow, pub. Thames & Hudson

I am sure we all have great ideas about what we would do if we had a kangaroo, or any bouncy pet come to think of it. How much fun would it be to be able to jump around, to have a pet that could jump around. Well not just jump, but in the case of Kangaroo leap AND as Kangaroos have pouches if we were small enough, we may even be able to get in there and hop around with our pet. Many may be familiar with the adorable Kanga and Roo from the Winnie-The-Pooh stories but here is a brand-new picture book with a brand-new kangaroo and a fantastic imagination...

The writing and illustrating duo of Gabby Dawnay and Alex Barrow have written a previous book straight from the imagination of a child and in that one they imagined having a dinosaur. Now they are back with yet more wonderment, fantastic rhyming text and vibrant, action-packed illustrations. When we open the book, we are not greeted immediately with our narrator but with a list of all the animals that our narrator does not want to have as a pet! Snakes – too scary; platypus – too shy; koala – too clingy. Kangaroo however is just right for it is so much easier to get to places with a giant leap. It would be fun doing daily jumps with them on the trampoline, feeding them, going shoe shopping, maybe even having a game of cricket. So, it goes on. There is no end to the number of things this amazing jumpy pet and its owner could do. What better way to prompt your very own young readers' imagination than by imagining what they might do with their very own extraordinary pet.

A marvellous, hilarious, heart-warming, imaginative celebration of pets. A must-read!

Dawn Jonas

Monkey Bedtime

Alex English, illus. Pauline Gregory, pub. Faber Children's Books

When a boy spots a monkey tapping at his window as he gets ready for bed, he thinks to himself that his mum won't mind if he lets it in...surely one little monkey can't do much harm? However, chaos ensues when the monkey's friends arrive. From mandrills and tamarins to baboons and gibbons, all descend on the home and seem intent on causing as much carnage as possible. Will he ever get to bed with all this monkeying around?

A humorous tale, perfect for fans of *The Cat in the Hat* and other young readers who will delight in spotting hilarious details in the illustrations such as the dog wearing a banana skin as a hat; underpants being used as tree decorations; and a monkey trying on lipstick. The rhyming prose makes this an enjoyable and engaging read-aloud, with the added bonus that listening to it will contribute towards children's literacy skills.

Monkey Bedtime is a funny and inclusive read. I loved the important little details in this picturebook that contribute towards reflecting the diversity we see in society. For example, although nothing is specifically mentioned in the written text, the family depicted appear to be a single-parent family. The illustrations support this as all family photos included throughout the book are only of the mum and the two children featured in the story. Additionally, the mum appears to be wearing a hearing aid. Again, this is not referenced but it is wonderful to see this clear commitment to inclusivity without the plot focusing on this.

A hilarious rhyming text which is sure to be a hit with children who enjoy a little monkeying around!

Pauline Bird

Our Fort

Marie Dorleans, trans. Alyson Waters, pub. The New York Review of Books

Marie Dorleans is a celebrated French illustrator and Alyson Waters an equally successful American translator. The book offers evocative countryside themes within the role of friendship in challenging and happy times, along with shared dreams. The story is about a journey of three friends through this countryside as a storm begins to set in. Ultimately, they arrive at their secret hideout. The plot is minimal, hinging on pastoral scenes, and the characters even more so. The children do not have identities they are just three friends anticipating the arrival at their den enroute across the fields. Marie Dorlean's skill as an artist draws you through this bucolic adventure to the fort. The fort is the end goal, the story is about this journey.

The book is recommended for ages 4 - 8. Confusion could occur over just who the implied reader is. Is it the adult rather than the child perhaps? The pictures are dreamy, nostalgic, and uncomplicated. They possibly lack enough detail to captivate a child who cannot appreciate all the text and conversation without further prompting. The dialogue between the three characters lacks spontaneity and does not allow the audience to relate to the individual speaking. 8-year-olds might describe the story as lacking in interest. However the title reflects a child's imaginative play and is full of creative potential. Listeners may be a little disappointed at the sudden ending having just located their eagerly awaited fort. But then of course their imaginations can do the rest.

Elizabeth Negus

PANTemonium

Peter Bently, illus. Becka Moor, pub. Andersen Press

Peter Bently has a knack for brilliantly funny and rollicking rhyming stories. This newest one will certainly have readers, quite literally, hooked as they join in the adventure with Fred the Giant. Fred is going fishing and on his walk to the seafront, his rod has become caught on his favourite undies off the washing line which then go fishing themselves!

As he walks through the town, his knickers gather people, pets, diggers and trains! These super stretchy pants get heavier and heavier as new items get thrown in along the way. Fred notes the change in weight but doesn't stop to question why! Readers will love getting involved and giggling as they imagine each item in Fred's underpants adding to the weight he carries all the while Fred is completely unaware of the chaos caused by his walk to the seaside.

Becka Moor's amazing illustrative style captures the humour of this story perfectly and readers will be giggling and laughing out loud! Will Fred figure it all out before the end of the story? Will the items in the pants be safe? Reading this will lighten any mood and have even the grown-ups laughing.

Erin Hamilton

Rainbow Hands

Mamta Nainy, illus. Jo Loring-Fisher, pub. Lantana Books

Rainbow Hands is a story about a little boy who likes to paint his nails with his mother's nail polish. He uses the different colours to express his moods and feelings.

It is easy to visualise the boy's thoughts and feelings as *Rainbow Hands* is a book full of vibrant, bold colour. Every page depicts a different environment, including landscapes, dreams and cityscapes, all bursting with texture and in some instances look almost like a collage.

It is a story that celebrates what it means to be yourself and to do what makes you happy, even if others don't always approve. Everything experienced by the little boy is turned into something that is beautiful, pretty and magnificent. This positive story encourages the reader to consider acceptance and kindness as it subtly introduces to the young audience the challenges of gender stereotypes.

Victoria & Oliver F (age 12)

Strong

Clara Anaganuzzi, pub. Little Tiger Group

When I first picked up this book I wasn't sure I would actually open it, so absorbed was I by the cover, its raised artwork with its vibrant colours and its beautiful white dragon are captivating. I did open it

however and what a treat it was. A book about what it feels like to be the odd one out and how to ensure that remains a positive in your life. A book about discovering there are many ways to be strong.

Let us begin with what we know about dragons – so the book begins – we know they are mighty and ferocious, powerful and they may even growl. Then we meet Maurice. Maurice adores flowers. He is small, gentle and quiet. None of the other dragons are like this, they all love ‘dragony’ things, competitions to see who is the fiercest (Maurice’s brother always wins) while all Maurice can do is puff out flowers. In fact, every time the other dragons do something that is ‘dragony’ Maurice does something the absolute opposite, something gentle. He tries to look like the other dragons too but even his horns are not real. No matter what Maurice tries it seems he is just not going to be able to fit in. When Maurice’s brother takes flight in bad weather so he can win the competition he is soon lost, and it is Maurice who forms a plan to come to the rescue.

Maurice’s plan helps the other dragons see him for who he is, they see that he is as strong as they are because he is true to himself. Not only do we see, though Clara Anganuzzi’s words but also her stunning, vibrant pictures, just how important it is to be true to ourselves and to be just that little bit (or big bit) different.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Through The Forest

Yijing Li, pub. Lantana Books

Do you ever find yourself feeling a bit lost and alone? Perhaps you’re searching for something... but you don’t know what. These are the feelings experienced by the young protagonist in *Through the Forest*.

Written in first person narrative, the reader travels through a forest with a young boy where he encounters Emptiness - a large translucent creature, who helps the child rediscover the memories he had once forgotten. This beautiful picturebook continues to utilise pathetic fallacy throughout the text which helps guide the reader along the emotional journey experienced by the main character, the colours used by the creator to represent the landscape and weather change from dark shades, through to more muted tones, before we finally see much brighter hues exploding across the pages as the character’s mood transitions to an increasingly more positive one.

A visually stunning text, the digitally enhanced artwork was originally created using watercolour and ink, giving the illustrations a whimsical feel, which complement the story perfectly. I loved the message of this book. As the boy finds various artefacts, he relates the memories he associates with

them and remembers the people who helped shape these memories. He realises that these memories, both happy and sad, are what shapes him and will always be there for him should he feel lost again.

A powerful and touching book which may help children to navigate big feelings.

Pauline Bird

Tomorrow is a Brand-New Day

Davina Bell, illus. Allison Colpoys, pub. Scribble

From its tactile cover to the rainbow swirls that make up the end pages this book was a hit from the moment we picked it up, how could we not be drawn into a story which tells us there is always hope. *Tomorrow is a Brand-New Day* is a message of hope, the story is a story of joy, of possibilities, with rhyming text and illustrations that are a masterpiece of fluorescent wonder!

What did you do today that you maybe, just maybe, by the end of the day regretted? Perhaps regret is too strong a word, maybe you just wonder why you cut your hair, or your dogs for that matter. Perhaps something happened which made you mad or did you make a mistake? There are so many things that can happen in one day that we may wonder over but the way they are portrayed by Davina Bell and Allison Colpoys doesn't make us want to regret them, they are shown with such curiosity and wonder that we know we have all done these things and that tomorrow maybe we will do them again or maybe we will do things differently.

The story doesn't only look at what we do, it also helps us to think about how we feel, what made us feel that way and how we can change these things. Our words, feelings, and actions on any given day, we are reminded, are not permanent and there are lots of things we can all do to make things better, to change things. This book has such a positive uplifting vibe, it is so full of joy and hope that we read it and knew not only would we be coming back for more but that its message would be staying with us, comforting, and encouraging.

Colin Paterson

The Vanishing Lake

Paddy Donnelly, pub. O'Brien Press

Ready for an Irish adventure? This book is set in Ireland, but it could be anywhere in the world, and it gives us plenty of rich ideas for our imaginations to take flight with too. Paddy Donnelly is a very talented author and illustrator, he finds the perfect words for this gentle story and his illustrations are

simply stunning, so very vibrant and pulsing with life, follow the story and find yourself immersed in a world of peculiar adventure.

Meara's Granddad lives by a lake, not just any lake but the mysterious lake of Loughareema. This lake is deep in the countryside and granddad lives here with his pet otter Cara. Most of the time it acts as any normal lake should. It has water in it, it is wet, bigger than a pond and they can take their boat out to the little island in the middle of it (we can even see, if we look closely, the name of the boat and Cara the otter too). When the lake is full of water it shimmers, magically but then there are other days, strange days, when the lake is completely empty, all that is left is the red mud and some stones.

Of course, grandad has plenty of stories about the vanishing lake but Meara is determined to find out for herself just what is going on – is it the mermaids? Maybe it is a narwhal or perhaps the giants? Someone or something is taking all the water and they will find out once and for all the answer.

The Vanishing Lake is a beautiful, lyrical adventure story, it brings traditional Irish myths to life and instils its reader with a sense of wonder and mystery.

May Marks

Who Jumped into the Bed?

Joe Rhatigan, illus. Julia Seal, pub. Sunbird Kids Books

This well written story follows lots of sneaky different animals and children wanting to share the bed with Mummy and Daddy. It's written in such a way, by Joe Rhatigan, that children will fall into the easy pattern of the words and the repetition of the special strain of the title, and will know when to join in on "who jumped into bed?" As you get towards the end of the book you will actually start to feel sorry for the dad who is kicked out of bed because there's no room left for him! This is very comical to children and very relatable for parents.

The children I read this with loved to pretend to be and re-enact the actions of the animals and of Dad falling out of bed. The children loved the story and were trying to guess who was coming to bed next. They were sad that the story had to end!

This short story is beautifully illustrated over double page spreads which keep the sing song story flowing from one part to the next. It is a very enjoyable book to read as an adult and to children. This simple story will be loved and enjoyed from the first time reading and the multiple times after! Who will jump into your bed?

Natalie Stanford

Junior Books

Escape to the River Sea

Emma Carroll, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Emma Carroll's compelling new novel, *Escape to the River Sea*, is inspired by Eva Ibbotson's bestselling masterpiece, *Journey to the River Sea*. Set in 1946, our story follows Rosa Sweetman, who has been living in a town called Westwood after having left her family in Vienna as a part of the Kindertransport during the Second World War.

We find Rosa living in a broken-down West Country mansion waiting to be reunited with her own family when she is visited by a mysterious family friend, Dr. Fielding, a scientist who offers Rosa the opportunity to travel to Brazil. Her post-war loneliness and desire to find out what happened to her family drives Rosa to accept her offer, and they embark on an adventure that will show them the true meaning of danger, realization, and acceptance.

Apart from these themes, Emma Carroll takes on the theme of conservation, as much of our story takes place in the Amazon. Our characters discover and learn about the many threats to the Amazon that continue to threaten the rainforest to this day, where they need to dig deep within themselves to find out how to face the danger and see where they truly belong.

Fans of the original story will be excited to recognize some old friends and many new ones in this delightful tale, giving the reader the feeling that this story is familiar and yet entirely new at the same time.

Anne Singer

The Extraordinary Adventures of Alice Tonks

Emily Kenny, illus. Flavia Sorrentino, pub. Rock the Boat

The Extraordinary Adventures of Alice Tonks is one of those rare gems that stands out above many middle grade novels. I was totally hooked by Emily Kenny's unique concept of a young autistic girl who can talk to and shapeshift into different animals.

The book is set at Pebblewood Boarding School, situated on a clifftop overlooking the beach and caves. The book opens with Alice finding it difficult to keep calm on the beach during the school's open day, with the hazards of the gritty sand and slimy seaweed threatening to overcome all her senses. Her panic attack leads her to storm off, leaving her grandmother on the beach. When a seagull

tells her he has a job for her Alice is unsure whether she has sunstroke and is hallucinating. Alice discovers she must endeavour to solve the mystery of who is stealing the animals. Her mission challenges her friendships with the other new students, Ottie and Tim. Both the animal and human characters have been well developed with distinct characteristic traits. All the main characters have difficulties fitting into their new school, each for their own reasons: Emily because she is on the edge of the autism scale, Tim because his mother is suffering from depression and Ottie because her uncle is the headmaster.

I would recommend reading this book as part of national mental health awareness week as, from a teacher's point of view who has worked in special education, as Emily's portrayal of Alice's coping mechanisms and problems negotiating new people and situations were realistic and sensitively shown, as was Tim's protectiveness of his mother and her depression. Perfect for stimulating a discussion on empathy.

The Extraordinary Adventures of Alice Tonks would be a great novel to read to a Key Stage 2 class and is the ideal addition to any child's bookshelf. There were several well-plotted twists and turns that even took me by surprise. Emily Kenny has succeeded in creating an exceptional book that left me wanting a sequel.

Anita Loughrey

Fake

Ele Fountain, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

Jess is fourteen, and about to start school for the first time - actual, physical school, that is, as opposed to the online "live-learning" lessons that constitute education for the under-14s in this skilfully imagined near-future novel. Following a Scarlet Fever epidemic two decades earlier, and the subsequent failure of almost all antibiotic medication, much of society has moved online and it is forbidden by law for underage children to mingle or even meet.

School itself is a closed community where Jess, now largely isolated from her close-knit family, must integrate with a group of strangers while heeding her dad's warning: "The other children will have led very different lives to you. Be careful what you share with them." For what Jess is slowly to realize is that when everything that matters is online, it's easy to conceal where real power resides - and as she tries to use her coding skills to challenge that power, events conspire to threaten the security of her family, and perhaps even the life of her sister.

It seems fairly likely that the initial inspiration for *Fake* came from the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Fountain tells the story deftly, with no heavy-handed parallels drawn between Jess's world and our own. The advances in technology which make Jess's world possible are never laboured

or over-explained, helping the reader to settle into the story quickly, and while this is in many ways a boarding-school story, it doesn't tread over-familiar ground.

If I have a quibble with the novel, it's a sense that one character - a classmate of Jess, who turns out to be key to unravelling the mystery with which she is presented as the plot unfolds - feels a little underdeveloped; I'd have liked to slowly find out more about her, and see her motivations explored more fully. But others may feel differently, and it's a relatively minor point. Broadly, *Fake* is an intriguing and original story about identity, conformity, and societal values, and one will no doubt find the wide and enthusiastic readership it deserves.

John Dougherty

John Dougherty's *Mark & Shark: Detecting & Stuff* is published by Oxford University Press Children's Books.

The Insiders

Cath Howe, pub. Nosy Crow

Callie, Zara, Nico and Ted are the very best of friends, and as Callie's mum is their childminder it's fair to say they are like family. In fact, Callie once called Ted her 'nearly-brother', after all they've been together since Nursery. When money gets tight for Ted's mum he volunteers to go home after school each night rather than be childminded by Callie's mum but living next door and seeing what your friends are doing whilst not being involved is difficult for Ted who misses the warmth and chaos of Callie's house. Uncertain why Ted has stopped coming, Callie can feel the distance between them growing. The quietest and smallest in their class Ted seems an obvious target for class joker, Billy Feldon, and when Billy manages to humiliate Ted in front of the whole school, Ted pretty much stops talking to the others or indeed anyone.

One evening Callie, Zara and Nico find a hole under Callie's back fence leading into the school playground and decide to explore, until a light coming on in the building gives them a fright. But when Mr Dunlop confiscates Nico's skateboard at school the three decide to be brave and hatch a plan to get it back. But things aren't all they seem – someone is sleeping in the school and as Callie, Zara and Nico investigate the secrets and lies between the friends grow. From his tree in the garden Ted is watching and suddenly it seems Callie has replaced him with Billy Feldon, whatever's going on Ted doesn't like it. It's time to get revenge on Billy for humiliating him and taking his best friend. But is Billy even all he seems?

Cath Howe, writer of *Ella on the Outside*, *Not my Fault* and *How to be Me*, has done it again in exploring those tricky to navigate waters of friendships, families, school life. This heart-warming story builds to a terrifying climax that literally has you turning the pages in a hurry! And as friendships and

families fall apart, we learn that everyone, every family, and every situation is unique and in that we are, in fact, all together.

Tracey-Anne Corner

The Lost Girl King

Catherine Doyle, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Sister and brother, Amy and Liam Bell, are out exploring in their beloved Connemara, a remote (and rainy) part of Ireland, when they follow a mysterious hawk to a waterfall and inadvertently discover the entrance to Tir na nOg, the land of eternal youth. Immediately, they are thrown into danger as the evil mage, Tarlock, searches for a human child to complete his spell confirming his place as ruler of this decaying kingdom.

In a dangerous journey through the dying lands of Tir na nOg, Amy races to get to her brother, Liam, who has been captured by a troop of headless horsemen serving Tarlock. Under a debilitating chained sun, the land of Tir na nOg burns and dies while Tarlock hunts for the final ingredient in his spell – a human child's bones. Meanwhile, Liam, who is imprisoned in Tarlock's castle awaiting his fate, discovers a young king named Gilda, who embodies a curse over the land.

From acclaimed author, Catherine Doyle, comes an action-packed, and often quite humorous, stand-alone middle grade novel, *The Lost Girl King*. This fantastical adventure is led by Amy, a headstrong (some may say, reckless) young girl who is determined to get her way. In her bold manner, Amy confronts ocean princes, fierce warriors, and imaginative creatures to rally their support in fighting Tarlock and returning to a peaceful way of life. With the Fianna and Greencloaks by her side, Amy learns the history behind the suffering people of the land and is more determined than ever to confront Tarlock and rescue Liam before it's too late. With an intriguing premise and page-turning pace, the story of the lost land of Tir na nOg centres around the warning from Amy and Liam's grandmother... "Sometimes places don't want to be found."

Stephanie Ward

Magicborn

Peter Bunzl, illus. Maxine Lee-Mackie, pub. Usborne

It is time for a story, a story of magic, a story that is full of sparkle (that could be the fairy dust), a story full of wonder, of friendship, of rollercoaster adventure rides of danger and intrigue. In summary this is a story that you will find difficult to put down for Peter Bunzl is a masterful storyteller.

There is a curse, but the curse has been altered, it is not something anyone will ever know for the truth of the curse, the truth of truths has been lost and now all that can happen is that lies will grow. The curse was one set by fairies, but they are not alone in causing mischief and mayhem for there is also a scheming royal family in this story and there is dangerous magic. This is a story about being a stranger in a strange land and, if you take time to look at the carefully drawn map before you start reading you can see for yourself where the locations described in the story are. You can see how easy it may be to end up a stranger in a strange land.

Perhaps even more intriguingly this is a story that is set in 1726 so it takes us back in time to a place, a time that none of us as readers are familiar with, we may become the strangers in the strange land, and we need to be careful of the Royal Sorcerer of England who is on the hunt for anyone who is magicborn. They capture Tempest and Thomas. Tempest is an accidental magic user; she didn't even know she had any power. Together they are about to discover not only their magic but some long-lost memories. These are good memories, but they come with a price, a battle is about to commence and there is no way of knowing who will survive.

I was absolutely gripped by this story, by the power of this storytelling and I hope that you will be too.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Olive Jones and the Memory Thief

Kate Gilby-Smith, pub. Orion Children's Books

What do you do with memories? We all have them, and we like to look back over them, bring them out for special occasions perhaps, sometimes we use them for giggles, sometimes they are simply precious and they help us to feel safe, warm, loved. Memories are special things and need to be cared for. Kate Gilby-Smith has taken the concept of the memory and turned it into a fun-filled and exciting story filled with the unexpected at every turn.

Olive Jones has inherited memories from her grandmother, the funeral has just taken place and Olive has just learnt of her inheritance as we begin the story. Olive has not just inherited these memories though she has inherited them in a special form which means she can watch them. She wants to because, well her grandmother was not the cute and cuddly type so Olive is curious – what will these memories that she has been left hold? Will they tell her more about the woman who was her grandmother? Before Olive even has a chance to find out more however the memories are stolen, right from under her nose. As far as Olive can understand there is no reason for anyone to do this, but she has to get them back and find out just what is going on.

Following the trail of the thief brings Olive into contact with her grandmother's life and what she finds there is very much unexpected, there are secrets galore and there are also clues for Olive as to who the thief may be, clues left by her grandmother! This is a book filled with the unexpected, it is an engaging read that keeps us on our toes, it is a mystery to warm the heart and there are even some futuristic twists. Kate Gilby-Smith has packed so much into Olive's story that I think I will be going back for another read!

Dawn Jonas

Please Write Soon

Michael Rosen, illus. Michael Foreman, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Please Write Soon is an extraordinary story which I read in a sitting, but which will resonate for a long time.

Inspired by the wartime experiences of Michael Rosen's father's cousin Michael Rechin, *Please Write Soon* is a short epistolary novel set during World War 2. Solly and Bernie are Jewish cousins, one living in London, the other in Poland. Their boyish worlds of football, playing marbles and playground squabbles are shattered by war. Both boys are displaced, Solly to the Herefordshire countryside as an evacuee, Bernie, more dramatically, to the east of Poland where his parents hope he might be safer from the Nazis. While Solly's life has its hardships and anxieties ('Sometimes when I'm going to sleep I don't know if I'm scared, or sad, or both.'), it is Polish Bernie who experiences the true horror of Nazi menace, forced into a Russian work camp, conscripted into the army and always fearful for his parents ('Some say that the Nazis make camps for Jews and work them till they die. I am scared so much for Mami, Tatte and the family.')

Rosen's deft, clear prose brings to life the boyish enthusiasm of young Londoner Solly going to watch Arsenal in the cup final; the halting, direct English of Polish Bernie, and, framing the letters, the sadness of Solly's 'quiet, considerate' teacher Miss Drury, who has suffered her own wartime loss, having lost her fiancé in the First World War, only twenty years before the start of the Second. Michael Foreman's lively, emotive illustrations remind us, as starkly as the story itself, of the human horror of war and displacement. His pictures of Londoners fleeing the Blitz could as easily be those of the Polish fleeing both Nazis and Russians, and they could, of course, be Ukrainians, Afghans, Syrians, or anyone else fleeing war today.

Please Write Soon is a simple enough story, but its emotional and political impact is huge, and it could not be timelier, as another generation comes of age into a world of conflict and prejudice. I will be passing on my copy to the local primary school and buying more copies for everyone I can think of. It's a book for adults and children, a book to start conversations. As Rosen observes, after Solly

finishes reading Bernie's letters to his classmates, "There were questions that people hardly dared to ask in case they heard the answers." This book helps us to ask the questions, and to answer them.

Sheena Wilkinson

Seed

Caryl Lewis, illus. George Ermos, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Award winning Welsh language writer, Caryl Lewis, has turned her hand to middle grade fiction in English, and *Seed* is the result.

This story concerns Marty who is a bit of a loner, though not through choice. His father has never been on the scene, so his family unit is himself, his mother, and his grandfather. Unfortunately, his mother suffers from mental illness in the form of excessive hoarding. She has stuffed the house with anything and everything so that it resembles a rubbish dump. Marty is fighting a rear-guard action to keep his little bit of space, his room, as the only place in the house not crammed with junk. On his young shoulders is the responsibility of making sure they both eat, looking after all his own needs, and keeping away from the authorities. Hence, he keeps a low profile at school but is still the target for bullies.

His only support is his grandfather who, though estranged from Marty's mum, maintains a close and loving relationship with Marty. They spend many an hour on Granddad's allotment, part of the little horticultural community. Grandfather is a dreamer and loves to come up with wacky plans so when he gives Marty a giant seed for his birthday, promising amazing things, Marty is sceptical and bemused. At the same time, Marty finds a kindred spirit at school, in the form of newcomer, Gracie. Gracie has problems of her own at home and is also hearing impaired. She is a gifted dancer and dreams of going to dance school. She's spikey and entertaining.

The story unfolds unpredictably into an adventure where something amazing does indeed happen (you'll need to read it to find out – no plot spoilers here!), and where Marty and Gracie learn to dream big and believe in themselves. There are some wonderful characters in this book, and, like all the best children's writing, it is brim-full of hope.

Rose Palmer

Sherlock Bones and The Case of The Crown Jewels

Tim Collins, illus. John Bigwood, pub. Buster Books

Sherlock Bones and Dr Jane Catson are world famous for their crime solving. During each case that they take on Catson will write down everything that happens which is very helpful for us, the reader, as we can follow their adventures more thoroughly.

In this particular case, *The Case of the Crown Jewels*, the Queen's jewels have been stolen from Kennel Palace, and it is up to Bones and Catson to find the culprit before the trail goes cold. From their headquarters in Barker Street (adult readers, and young Sherlock fans, will notice the links here to Sherlock Holmes and his Baker Street base) the friends must work hard to find and return the jewels to the Queen.

With a cast of great characters including Inspector Bloodhound, Molly Ruffington and the police pugs there is something for everyone. This is an action-packed fun adventure that is written at a nice pace for younger children. Of course, you will have worked out that this story, this series, is a play on Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson with of course our main characters being a dog and cat. This is a great way to introduce younger children to Holmes and Watson, and it's written in a way that helps them to understand what is happening every step of the way.

The illustrations are full of details and one of the things I like best about is there are over 30 puzzles for children to do, there are mazes, number puzzles and search-and-find puzzles. These were extremely fun to do, though I was glad that the answers were at the back as I couldn't do them all...I'm told I need my eyes testing.

Helen Byles

The Shop of Impossible Ice Creams

Shane Hegarty, illus. Jeff Crowther, pub. Hodder Children's Books

If you like ice cream, magic and a good giggle, this book might be the cherry on your ice cream sundae. I think this fun-filled and sweet sentimental book is a definite choice for your summer reading list.

Meet Limpet (birth name Liam) a self-conscious, anxious young boy. So anxious in fact that he continuously writes in his notebook of 'Things that can go badly wrong'! He is coping with a lot of changes in his life. Liam has moved to a curious, little seaside town named Splotpool. Unfortunately, Liam's evil, little sister Eve has moved with him and does not make life any easier. All Liam wishes for is a simple and safe life, as simple as his favourite ice cream flavour, Vanilla. His mum, on the other hand, has different ideas and opens up an ice cream shop full of outrageous flavours, such as Mushroom and Cheese, Garlic and Carrot? Not quite to Liam's taste.

As always in any great read there are heroes and villains! In this magical tale the villain is Mr Fluffy (he is far from Fluffy), he is the one big, horrid problem in Liam's life. Mr Fluffy owns a huge shiny, all singing, all dancing, ice cream emporium. But there is something not quite believable or real about this business, and it will be up to Liam and his new friends, including a crazy chicken?! To get to the smelly bottom of what is going on. Whilst fighting Mr Fluffy's nasty campaign to bring down Liam's Mum's Impossible Ice Cream Shop. There are lucky lemons, hidden gardens and even a few fairies. Surely all the ingredients needed for an exciting and heartfelt seaside adventure.

Alongside this fantastical story are the funny and inspiring illustrations, by Jeff Crowther, which add a huge extra sprinkle of craziness! With quirky tension and ludicrous plot twists running until the final pages, I was left craving for more. Recommended for reading age 7+.

Archie Sewell, age 11

Skandar and the Unicorn Thief

A.F. Steadman, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Prepare to enter a new world, a world so skilfully built and crafted by A.F. Steadman that you will start off cautiously, taking careful steps into it yet very quickly find yourself immersed in its wonder, beauty, complexity, not wanting to find a way out. *Skandar and the Unicorn Thief* is a story that once you start will not let you go.

Skandar Smith lives on the Mainland but feels, and readers may be able to relate to this, that he wants to leave, he wants to see new places. He also needs to escape for he yearns to be in not just another place but a very special other place, a secretive island, a place where the most powerful of unicorns are roaming free. Living on the Mainland has allowed him to prepare for and take his Hatchery exam, the annual test that picks out only the very best, the top few 13-year-old Mainlanders to become trainee unicorn riders. For Skandar everything hinges on the exam, however fate has other plans and on the day of the exam, when everything goes horribly wrong his hopes and dreams are shattered. A midnight knock on his door and a mysterious message could however change the course of fate.

Skandar and the Unicorn Thief is a book of adventures, of magical battles, of living in treehouse cities, of training grounds shrouded in mystery and amidst all of this, all of the new there is the hidden. Skandar is the hidden, he has secrets, he is different. Can his secrets unlock the potential within him, can he once more change the hand of fate?

This is one of the most powerful and immersive middle grade fantasy novels I have read in a long time, and it is a debut too. It is well-written, fast paced, multi-layered and fun. Highly recommended reading for anyone young at heart and willing to find themselves immersed in a new world of wonder.

Antoinette Patrick

Small!

Hannah Moffatt, pub. Everything With Words

Harvey Small lives with his mum in a house by the edge of a swamp. They move around a lot, something to do with mum's job buying kipper socks and getting big profiteroles, at least that's what Harvey thinks she said she does. Anyway, it's weird, but profiteroles are good. Sadly, profiteroles are not what Harvey receives for his 10th birthday and he certainly isn't given football boots. No, what Harvey gets is a pair of stilts, an oversized pair of dungarees and a top hat. And things are about to get a whole lot weirder because mum has had a brilliant idea...

You see Harvey is having to move school again. Unfortunate things tend to happen when Harvey's around and he's convinced he's bad news. If he had been wearing his lucky socks Smallington Rovers wouldn't have lost five-nil, and then there was the time he took the school hamster home, and it met an unfortunate end. Do not feed hamsters Bolognese. As for setting the Head's trousers on fire...it's hard making friends when people think you are cursed. So, with options dwindling mum decides to send Harvey to Madame Bogbrush's School for Gifted Giants. Hence the stilts and oversized dungarees. All Harvey has to worry about is convincing his new club wielding schoolmates that he is very much a giant and not a Small (i.e., human), because Smalls tend to get stomped on, ending up as sandwich filler. How difficult can that be? He just has to master roaring, stomping and eating live tadpole broth for his tea. Then there's Walloping Toenail whose hands are bigger than boxing gloves but whose heart is equally as large. Is he the best friend Harvey has been yearning for? Is the school inspector Ms. Sugar Plum, who's about as sweet as a bitter lemon, planning to close the giant school down? Could it end up being Harvey's fault?

What follows is a truly original adventure from author Hannah Moffatt, who has created a huge buzz with her hilarious debut book *Small!* Its motley cast of characters have been expertly brought to life by Rory Walker's superb illustrations, capturing every madcap detail of this high stakes tale of friendship and belonging. Highly recommended, Hannah has a deft comedic touch that will delight her readers and have them demanding more.

Matilde Sazio

When I See Blue

Lily Bailey, pub. Orion Children's Books

Ben is starting year 8 in a new school in a new town and he's very anxious. There's no hope he will make friends and he knows things will be difficult because they always are. Even his Tardis backpack,

in the only shade of blue that is acceptable to him, doesn't fit in, but at least the Dr Who connection is positive. The only ways he can deal with stress are constant counting and endlessly repeated movements. Everything must be divisible by four for him to feel any level of control. It's not long before he's ridiculed and bullied by his classmates. But the bullying from inside his head is harder still to cope with, the bullying that says he must keep up with his rituals or terrible things will happen to his family.

The fact is though terrible things are already happening. His mother is more and more often incapacitated through drink. His father disappears for longer and longer periods. His brother stays away as much as he can. The one light is a girl called April. A girl who defies convention and is brave. A girl who chooses to sit next to him. A girl who, astonishingly, becomes a friend. A girl who has her own problems, though Ben fails to recognise this. A girl who suggests to him that he's got OCD, and that help is available. Counselling is revelatory and Ben makes stuttering progress. Then there's a crisis.

This is an impressive and valuable novel, movingly dedicated to 'everyone who has ever lived inside a noisy head'. Lily Bailey herself suffered from severe OCD as a child. Her voice is authentic. The protagonists are highly engaging and believable. Readers will strongly empathise with Ben, both those who themselves struggle with mental health issues or have family members who do and those lucky enough not to. All will gain useful insights into OCD and other mental health problems and their impact. The book is good too on family relationships, addiction, friendship, and school dynamics. It's a shame that a few things don't ring true. Are there any secondary schools with class teachers who teach lots of different subjects? Better editing would also have eradicated several inconsistencies in the plot. However, these are minor cavils about an enjoyable and important book.

Anne Harding

Zo and the Forest of Secrets

Alake Pilgrim, pub. Knights Of

With plenty of intertwined plot lines scary, mutant creatures and dangerous experiments gone wrong, this book is utterly beguiling. As you begin this tale, you immerse yourself in Alake Pilgrim's wild descriptions of the hot, sweaty climate and tangled jungle.

Zo has plans to run away from home, where she lives with her Mum, Jake and the new baby. Zo's Dad now lives in NY and he feels far from her in rural Trinidad. Her plans will hopefully bring her dad back so she can move to NY with him. She doesn't plan to stray far, just enough to cause some worry. Samaan Bay is boring, and Zo is unhappy there. When she gets warned about local elderly women, Mrs Kofi, Zo is certain she witnessed more than a warning. Was it a trick of the light or sunstroke? Mrs K turned into a giant spider...

The premise of this book takes time to learn, and the plot becomes even more intense and at times terrifying as Zo tries to survive plenty that wants to kill her. The forest does hold many secrets and it will take huge amounts of courage and self-discovery to survive the ordeal. Zo is not alone on this journey. She has met, saved, and delved into the memories of Adri. What she has witnessed while in his mind terrifies her on many levels and she knows she can no longer touch him and to be extra cautious of dangers lurking everywhere.

This is an absolute heart pounding read for just as safety arrives from one fear or danger, something else rises out of the forest. I could not put this book down and though it has ended, I am left with plenty of questions and hopes for more to come from Zo!

Erin Hamilton

Young Adult Books

Forging Silver into Stars

Brigid Kemmerer, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Books take us into other worlds, they share their stories with us, they open our hearts and minds to new feelings, new experiences, new places. Sometimes they take us to the same place time and again, continuing stories, building familiarity with characters and places. Sometimes we visit the same places but whilst we are there, we discover new stories, new people, new events.

When I saw that Brigid Kemmerer had written a new book, I knew instantly that I had to read it, so enthralled have I been by her previous writing. The title, *Forging Silver into Stars* intrigued me. I knew it would be a fantasy but that was all. What I did not know and was thrilled to discover is that this is a fantasy which has taken me, will take you, back to a world that Kemmerer unveiled for us in a stunning trilogy but that in this book we visit from a brand-new perspective. There are hints at the earlier story, but this is an entirely new one and it is one in which I quickly became immersed, intrigued.

This is a story of love and hate, of trust and distrust, of loyalties that may be misplaced, of understandings that we can see simmering below the surface. The characters frustrate when they don't see what we do but we know that they are working things out for themselves. We see the magic that infuses Jax and Callyn's world, we are not afraid of it as they are for, we see it from both their perspective and from that of the King, Queen and Lord Tycho among others. We see the frustration of children left to fend for themselves, scraping by. We see the frustration of the royal court, misunderstood by its people and we see the lengths all will go to, to make things, in their eyes right. We will soon see how silver is forged into stars, as well as why, and we will be desperate to read on, to make sure it all works out.

Brigid Kemmerer is a powerful storyteller. Her words are as mesmerising as the silver stars the title draws us in with. Her world building is epic, and this fantasy is begging to be read by you all. I for one have fallen in love with it, I hope you will too.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Friends Like These

Meg Rosoff, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Beth moves to New York in the summer of 1983 to take up an internship at a newspaper before she starts college. She's subletting a cockroach-ridden apartment, the city is hot, smelly, and overwhelming, but she can't help feeling that her life has finally begun. There are three other interns at the newspaper: poor but ambitious Dan, wealthy and stylish Oliver, and the vivacious and charismatic Edie. Edie and Beth hit it off and are soon best friends, with that sudden intense intimacy you get when you are thrust into a new environment together. Edie, with her New York City confidence, helps Beth to navigate the office and make herself indispensable, while Beth offers Edie a listening ear and an audience for all her drama.

When Beth falls ill with a fever, Edie rescues her and moves her into her parents' fancy apartment, and she is fully assimilated into Edie's glamorous life. But of course, summer cannot last forever, and the shine soon wears off.

This is a coming-of-age story and a story of first love, but the romantic subplot is a minor thread. *Friends Like These* is a love story about friendship. Meg Rosoff wonderfully evokes the euphoria as well as the complex negotiations and compromises of friendship. Despite the grime and the anxiety of a city in the grip of the AIDS crisis, the story also has a kind of retro decadence and wit that reminded me of *The Pursuit of Love*: Nancy Mitford meets Sally Rooney, perhaps.

Friends Like These is an arresting and empowering read, suitable for older teens. I thoroughly enjoyed it!

Rebecca Rouillard

Ghosted

Emily Barr, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

A fascinating combination: teenage romance and déjà vu! Award winning author Emily Barr is well known already for her intelligent and thrilling novels for adults, and increasingly for her YA novels, which challenge the everyday life of the young characters with unusual and confusing situations. In some of her novels these situations relate to aspects of current twenty-first century concerns such as the possible outcome of climate change, but in *Ghosted*, this takes a supernatural twist. Combined with the normal, frequently experienced angst of teenage romance, the supernatural element adds a confusion which for a time exacerbates the angst but ultimately largely resolves the situations which Ariel and Joe have, until that moment, endured.

In the last year sixteen-year-old Ariel and her older sister Sasha have suffered a total change in their family, with their mother dying, their father walking out on them, and Sasha getting pregnant. Barr skilfully portrays Ariel's distress and how heart-broken she is by the loss of her mother. When she starts seeing mysterious, blue-lit, students at school she fears that she is losing her sanity. However,

her accidental meeting with a handsome stranger called Joe is completely perfect: they have a connection she has never known before. But when she messages him, the number Joe has given her is disconnected. She assumes she will never see him again, but she does, every time she seeks solace for her family loss by hiding in a room at the local shopping mall. He's not 'ghosted' her, but at first it seems as though every time they meet that he's never met her before. Joe has something he has to do before he can rest, and Ariel helps him, but in doing so reveals more about her own family's background.

This is an intensely gripping novel, which manages to combine an exciting time-slip thriller with some really deep messages about who we are, what we do, and how we reconcile some of our behaviour later in life. It's powerful stuff, exciting reading, potential murder mystery infused with truthfully depicted teenage uncertainty. Engrossing reading, and not to be missed!

Bridget Carrington

I Must Betray You

Ruta Sepetys, pub. Hachette Children's Books

Bucharest, Romania, 1989. Ceausescu, Communist ruler since 1965, continues to hold power over one of Europe's most brutal and repressive regimes. But, as the old Soviet Union collapses, Romanians begin to hope for change, for revolution.

Seventeen-year-old Cristian Florescu has only ever known Communist rule: the daily hardship of queuing to buy the most basic essentials, the long hours and poor pay of his parents, showing complete loyalty to the regime at least to all appearances as well as the constant fear of surveillance and betrayal. The Securitate, Romania's feared secret police, seemingly everywhere and coercing Romanians to spy on each other, making them inform on colleagues, friends and even family. Now it is Cristian's turn. And the Securitate know Cristian's greatest weakness, asking him to spy for them in return for medicine, for his terminally ill bunu, grandfather. Cristian has little choice, but that doesn't stop his guilt. His guilt becomes a form of control, forcing him away from those who might otherwise help him, unable to face the truth that he is now an informer.

Set in the cold, concrete apartments of the Communist-era, where everyone seems ground down by the drudgery and dreariness of the oppressive, grey urban landscape, *I Must Betray You* is a compelling read, communicating a palpable feeling of suspicion as Cristian doesn't know who he can trust, but knows that no-one can trust him. Everyone is hesitant about what they say, watching each other's reactions carefully. Yet Cristian dares to dream of freedom and critical, independent thought, putting those he loves at risk: his friends, his family and his new girlfriend, Liliana. He is however frustrated and there is also a sense of doom that he will not escape, alive. The Securitate seemingly are

always looking, and despite trying to play them at their own game, they always seem to have the upper hand.

Although we might read the book knowing the final outcome of the Romanian's bloody revolution, Cristian and his family had to live through it, risking state violence and brutal treatment of imprisonment in a country where nowhere, and no-one is safe. There are sacrifices in a world where there are few genuinely good choices to make.

I Must Betray You is an ambiguous title, questioning who will betray whom and possibly betray their own ideals and future. A great work of historical fiction, based on a true story, memorialising a time of European great political turmoil.

Simon Barrett

Love Radio

Ebony LaDelle, pub. Usborne

Love is quite literally in the air or should that be in the airwaves in Ebony LaDelle's *Love Radio*, a unique story from a strong new voice in YA. Radio is the medium for this story, radio a unique medium for the sharing of a story of the sweetest hopes and the hardest truths, you may not be able to see the radio, but its words are as powerful as any other and LaDelle shows us just how that can be in this story.

A love story, a love letter to both black literature and music. A story that transcends everything, bringing us love, wit and brilliant writing. The story of Prince Jones, the guy who has all the answers, at least it seems he does. After all, when you have your own segment on a radio show, in this case a hip-hop radio show dishing out advice to the broken-hearted and are half-way to realising your dream of being a DJ then nothing is impossible, is it? But Prince has a difficult life behind the glamour, caring for a mother with multiple sclerosis and a little brother puts his dreams on hold. This twist to the story is heart-wrenching. Dani Ford is the other half of this story. A girl who doesn't have answers, knows she must face a past problem but wants to focus on the certainty in her mind. She is not looking for anyone, for love, she has a plan. For Dani there is one year left as a senior, a year that she plans to ace. Then there will be college, a move to NY and a life as an author. She has it all planned out. Prince and Dani invariably meet. The sparks fly. Dani is determined not to have her plans derailed and gives Prince three dates. Can three dates (and lots of music) change two lives?

A beautifully written and compellingly romantic read for the summer.

Dawn Jonas

The Misunderstandings of Charity Brown

Elizabeth Laird, pub. MacMillan Children's Books

Charity Brown, formerly of Old Manor House and now living in the grand house called Gospel Fields on Badger Hill, has much to learn. She is growing up in post war Britain, convalescing from contracting polio, and sometimes disagreeing with her strict Christian upbringing in the fictional Lucasite faith.

The story in many respects is a wistful remembrance of a bygone post war era as the landed gentry, literally in this book, pass away, old properties are repurposed, and local communities seem settled and harmonised. Elizabeth Laird however does not idealise this period. The book portrays the racism of WWII and the Holocaust, the end of Empire and the colonial racism as well as the difficulties faced by unmarried mothers with children born out of romantic liaisons with American soldiers. The modern world also threatens, mainly through Charity's two sisters, Hope and Faith and her brother Ted, whose friends and a future husband go beyond the otherwise insular Lucasite community, dare we say, even extending to the Church of England! Ted particularly seems to want to embrace the thrill of the modern world, of the motor engine, although he realises the perils of alcohol. For me, however, the real hero of the story is Mr Brown, maintaining his genuine faith and integrity, whilst accepting that his world is not the world of his children.

Charity Brown herself is well-meaning, if socially awkward, a character many young people might identify with. She wants to make friends, but contracting polio means she is wary as many are fearful that she is infectious, and she wants to make her own friends, not friends encouraged by her parents. Moreover, she was horribly bullied at school and must face the bullies again when she returns to school. At the same time her brother and sisters are growing up and seemingly growing distant from her. Their interests are no longer hers, and she is replacing her childish interests with more grown-up ones, such as her love of opera. Charity Brown must steer through all these difficulties to decide what she wants to do. A perennial problem for all young people. I think readers will relate to Charity Brown, laughing with her and sharing her turbulences. By the end of the book Charity does seem to have matured.

The Misunderstandings of Charity Brown is a story of innocence in a not so innocent age. It is this tension that makes it a great story: not so much innocence lost as innocence understanding a more complex, changing world.

Simon Barrett

Our Sister Again

Sophie Cameron, pub. Little Tiger Press Group

A tale of love, loss, and humanoid robots – fear not, I will explain.

Isla, a teenage girl who is struggling to come to terms with her grief, after losing her sister, is the narrator of this science fiction tale. After years of trying to understand the death of her sister, Isla and her family, are presented with an opportunity. A revolutionary tech company have developed a way of bringing back loved ones, downloading data into a robotic body, and allowing them to pick back off where they left off. But this technology is still new, in the trial stages, and comes with a list of terms and conditions too long to read. Not wanting to miss out on an offer that seems too good to be true Isla's family sign up to the trial, and eagerly wait for the return of Flora.

This is a very grown-up book, which tackles some very big ideas. Putting aside the extraordinarily complex ideas around artificial intelligence, this story explores how a family deals with grief, and love, and divorce, and so much more. Sophie tackles these tricky subjects wonderfully, making big emotions easy to understand, and breaking difficult conversations into easy to manage chunks. I particularly enjoyed the setting of the book, which is based on a remote Scottish Island. This presents a slower, and more laid back, way of life to what I normally see represented in modern fiction. It always works to provide a delightful juxtaposition between the sleepy Scottish Isle and the space age technologies at play.

While Sophie is very delicate in the way she handles conversations around grief, this might be a bit too much for younger readers, or those that have very recently lost a loved one and are still coming to terms with this loss. This would, however, be perfect for those further along in their grief journey, or any teenage geek who is looking for a different take on science fiction.

Rosie Cammish Jones

Rebel Skies

Ann Sei Lin, pub. Walker Books

A complex fantasy tale, *Rebel Skies* sets the scene of what is presumably going to develop in further books as a saga based in the fictional kingdom of Mikoshima. Here the Crafters, able to manipulate paper into fantastic and powerful shapes, and the Sorabito, inhabitants of the sky, are plotting. Both groups' traditions hark back in time, and both are now ruled by the Emperor.

Moving between floating cities and land cities is Kurara, a Crafter girl rescued with her friend Haru from a burning village. They both serve aboard the floating city of Midori, dreaming to be free again one day. The opportunity arises when the Midori is attacked by a shikigami, an intelligent paper-made creature. Kurara and Haru flee the ship with Hiruma, a Crafter who had arrived at Midori seeking

Kurara. During their escape from the destroyed city, Haru dies and Kurara is shocked by the discovery that Haru too was a shikigami.

The only hope Kurara has for bringing Haru back to life rests in capricious Princess Tsukimi, an expert in shikigami. To meet her Kurara must follow Hiruma, who, on his part, is keen to access the secrets of the Crafters' art held in the books stored in the Princess' library. Once safe aboard a Sorabito ship, Kurara hones her skills under Hiruma's direction. After surviving an encounter with cloud-like whales and a fearsome shikigami, the ship arrives at Sol-II, where Hiruma and Kurara's paths diverge dramatically.

The storyline of the book becomes increasingly complex and includes another important subplot, that of Rei, leader of a rebel Sorabito group. The author weaves and controls the various strands well. It is not a mean feat. Many characters harbour secrets, and often act with duplicity, and all vie for the reader's attention. At the centre of all this is Kurara, whose role in the power struggle is still unclear, and whose identity is a mystery even to herself, though shards of memories haunt her. However, while Kurara and Haru emerge as the central characters, the reader will be keen to learn more about other characters too. For example, about the moral struggle Hiruma is facing, and how that will shape the tale.

The setting is reminiscent of other fantasy tales – flying ships and moving cities - but still very imaginative and brimming with well depicted details. Some action scenes, the fights in particular, are engrossing.

This quest with its constant cliff-hangers will appeal YA readers.

Laura Brill

Secrets of an Undercover Activist

Nat Amore, pub. Rock the Boat

Casey Wu is an eleven-year-old Australian girl. She and her friends Cookie and Zeke are worried about the future of our planet. They have formed a clandestine activist organisation called The Green Peas. Their mission is to draw attention to the climate crisis through the medium of harmless pranks that nevertheless attract attention. They discover that the local mayor Lupphol has some underhand plans for their town and the memorial bench commemorating Casey's mother. Can the Green Peas save their town?

This book has the appearance of a very light-hearted novel. In fact, it takes its readers very seriously, since it discusses grief for the loss of a parent, political corruption, the need to take action safely and how to cope with lifelong disability, namely otosclerosis or hereditary loss of hearing. All these

subjects, which might easily degenerate into a catalogue of woes, are treated with a lightness of touch that is quite admirable and even with humour. The book could be used by teachers in upper primary to discuss how children might make their voices heard in discussions that do after all affect them more than older people. It is also a good read for younger teens who would like a slightly more challenging read to bridge the gap between middle grade and young adult reading.

Rebecca Butler

Such a Good Liar

Sue Wallman, pub Scholastic Children's Books

This is a fast-paced teen thriller. There is a lot to grab the attention of the reader from the first pages and then plenty going on through to the end of the story. We are never quite sure what will happen next or how the story will end. The story is dark in places and the secrets do keep the reader guessing right until the end.

The main character, Lydia, arrives on an exclusive island populated only by the super-rich and their staff. She is there for a specific reason, and she has a definite plan in mind. Lydia doesn't fit in with these people, so she must constantly work extremely hard to be accepted by them. There are moments when she is caught off guard and her secret plan is revealed. Lydia is particularly interested in the Harrington sisters because of something very awful and very personal. This is a story about love and about hate and revenge. It is about the different backgrounds and identities of the characters. It is pure escapism in a very exotic and luxurious setting. It is full of characters the reader will really love or love to hate. Readers will particularly love to hate the super-rich families featured in the story.

The story will particularly appeal to teenage girls, who will identify with the seventeen-year-old Lydia. There is reference to fashion throughout the story, which young readers will enjoy. Readers will also enjoy the escapism and the insight into the lives and attitudes of the very rich families on the island.

Gary Kenworthy

The Thief

Megan Whalen Turner, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

First published in 1996 as part of *The Queen's Thief* series this title is now back on our shelves with a new-look and it is a welcome return for a classic, vivid, and immersive fantasy. Drawing inspiration from the world of ancient Greek myths it is. A novel of intrigue, suspense, adventure, and plenty of surprise.

Eugenides, Gen for short, boasts that he can steal anything, and he believes in his own words, words that very quickly find him arrested and thrown into the king's prison. He also brags that he can steal himself out of the prison...he seems to be failing in this latter brag when he is pulled out of his cell by the king's magus and set a challenge, one that is not truly revealed to him, but he is not one to turn down an opportunity to prove himself.

The quest that the King's scholar, known as the Magus, takes Gen on is a trial for all involved from the start. The Magus believes that he knows the location of an ancient treasure and he thinks that Gen has the abilities he needs to locate it. The trouble starts as soon as Gen is taken out of the dungeon, being given only the sparsest of details about the challenge he Gen soon learns that he must ride a horse for the first time. Then he learns that his travelling companions want him to take baths, they don't like his cocky attitude and that finding friends among them is going to be a challenge. The Magus has promised Gen his freedom in return for this audacious potential theft. With this challenge he has unspoken plans for his king and country but Gen is working to his own agenda and plans, if he can pull it off.

Engrossing and fascinating, a beautiful read and with another four books in the series now published the start of a fantastic adventure.

Colin Paterson

Things I Know

Helena Close, pub. Little Island Books

Saoirse can't wait to leave school and more importantly get away from home, a parochial small seaside town, and go to university. Her family moved here from Dublin after her mother died. Now, weeks away from her final school exams, her ex-boyfriend commits suicide.

Things I Know is a claustrophobic read. Saoirse seems smothered by small town mentalities that oppose change: the recently opened vegetarian restaurant where Saorise works shifts serves few customers, except for the town drunk. Friendship groups are incestuous, closing ranks when Saorise ends her relationship with Finn, after cheating on him with another friend. Jade is an important breath of fresh air for Saoirse, with her hedonistic life, even if she is caught up in a damaging drug-fuelled relationship. Saoirse's home doesn't offer any solace. Uprooted after her mother's death, away from her nan and her memories, her father, young brother and sister, live on a small holding, growing vegetables that one day will make a profit. Saoirse seems estranged, unable to talk about her feelings. Even her own mind is a prison. Preoccupied with studying psychology and struggling with her own mental health, she cannot escape her negative thoughts, causing her anxiety to get worse. In the maelstrom of everything and everyone around her, she risks losing her mind.

Helena Close's story is strongly driven by the characters. There are no demons in this book, only complex, fallible humans, making mistakes. Saoirse herself cannot claim a moral high ground after cheating on her ex-boyfriend. But the person she cheated with, is also wrestling with his feelings, competing set of loyalties, expectations, and guilt. Cleverly his identify is only confirmed towards the end of the book. Saoirse's father's decision to leave Dublin is understandable, although it also seems selfish given the effect on his children, but he genuinely loves and cares for them. Saorise's nan is a great voice of conscience on this matter.

Helena Close also writes sympathetically, exploring Saoirse's deteriorating mental health with a clear message about how others affect you, but their decisions and actions not being your responsibility. At least the story ends with hope of a restoration. Helena Close brings to the page the realities for Irish teenagers today.

Simon Barrett

Three Girls

Katie Clapham, pub. UCLan Publishing

Three Girls is a genuinely feel-good story about friendships, love, life as seen through the eyes of three teens. Its author, Katie Clapham knows something about books and their readers, being the owner of a bookshop. Her three-voice, heart-warming and uplifting story feels true to life, real and brilliant. It feels as though she has poured all her imagination and experiences into telling this story. It feels real, it is full of fun.

Minnie, Lena and Alice may not be friends, at least not at the start of the story, but when they are asked to pose for a brochure and to make it look as though friendships at their school are the real thing, that they are friendships which are built to last, things might change. Not only are the three girls not friends but each is certain they have other, far more important worries. Minnie is the athlete whose whole life has been centred around sport but who is now questioning if that is where she sees her future. What is she wants to change her future, where does she start? Big questions to navigate. Lena is the princess and resents being in Minnie's shadow. She wants to take her place as Queen Bee in the school and when an opportunity presents itself, following a freak accident which has changed her rival's plans she has to ask if getting what you want is really all it is hyped up to be? Alice is the really tall one of the trio. She already has friends, has her eye on a potential crush but has a secret that is about to change the lives of all three girls.

Powerful writing for teens that explores some difficult issues and questions with a tough edge but a lot of heart and understanding. A fascinating insight into the minds of teens and one that may help them understand not only themselves but those around them more clearly. It may also help them understand and think about those things that are truly important in life. Compelling.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

When Shadows Fall

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

When Shadows Fall, by Sita Brahmachari, is a coming-of-age story that follows Kai and his friends and family through a tale of friendship, grief, and mental illness.

Friends Kai, Orla and Zak grow up together and spend their days on a small green patch of wilderness between their homes in a sprawling grey city. Music, laughter, and friendship binds them together, but when Kai's family suffers a huge loss, all their dreams for the future are thrown into disarray. *When Shadows Fall* is a beautifully written novel that is part narrative, part free verse, which explores the events leading up to, during and after Kai's emotional breakdown through the eyes of Kai, Orla, Zak and classmate Om. Innocent, poetic prose at the start of the novel foreshadows the unapologetic rawness of grief that overcomes Kai later in the story. Happy youth turns into helplessness as grief also tears his family apart, which leads Kai on a different path as he's excluded from school and retreats from his friends and family.

In this novel, Brahmachari portrays how the exuberance of youth can quickly and violently snowball into feelings of darkness, loneliness and emptiness. It is rare for a Young Adult novel to deal with the subject matter of grief, death, and mental illness in such a sensitive but rounded manner, but her words are complimented by Natalie Sirett's significantly poignant illustrations - some in the corners of pages, and some over double-page spreads - which accurately depict the mood and feelings of the characters.

When Shadows Fall holds back no sorrow and is a strong read not just for young adult readers but possibly also for older readers as well. It is a love song to growing up on a council estate, and the friendships formed through adversity and bonds of music and art, but it is also a heart-breaking and poignant novel with words that pack a hefty emotional punch on every page. Brahmachari carefully shows how unconditional love can help someone through their emotional turmoil. Kai's friends prove that through darkness, there's hope - an important moralistic lesson for the readers of this novel.

Chris J Kenworthy

When Women Were Dragons

Kelly Barnhill, pub. Hot Key Books

New York Times bestselling author, Kelly Barnhill gives us this soaring feminist YA novel, set in 1950s America.

Alex is four when she sees a dragon sitting in next door's garden, in the kind old lady's usual seat. She quickly learns that she must never speak of this - but she remembers the dragon's astonished, delighted face, her conspiratorial 'shh' gesture to Alex, and then her joyous leap skywards. Alex's life is ruled by what must not be spoken of. The silencing of women and silence on any issues that affect only women is complete, and sadly recognisable today. No one speaks of her mother's week-long absence, returning with huge burns and scars on her body, no one speaks of her beloved, unconventional Auntie Marla going missing. Even when Marla's baby daughter is left with Alex's family, the girls are both expected to believe that they are sisters.

Told through letters, research notes, and Alex's restricted view of events, the premise can be summed up in this: 'This is what we know: On April 25th, 1955, between the hours of 11:35am and 2/:30pm central time, 64,.987 American women – wives and mothers all – became dragons. All at once. A mass dragoning. The largest in history.' This spontaneous 'dragoning' of women is never covered in the media, never spoken of in public or private. Deaths, damage and even returning dragons are just ignored or explained away.

The teenage Alex comes of age, struggling to care for her sister-cousin alone. She must piece together the truth of her mother's and auntie's stories and weigh up the consequences of ignoring or answering the desperate siren call they heard. Original, fierce, and utterly compelling, this novel is a must read.

Saira Archer

Non-Fiction Books

A World for Me and You: Where Everyone is Welcome

Uju Asika, illus. Jennie Poh, pub. Wren and Rook

Just imagine! Close your eyes and imagine, open them what do you see?

This engaging and charming book is created with such optimistic and enthusiastic good intentions that its positivity and cheerfulness shine out from the colourful and vibrant pages. Asika is an award-winning blogger about race, childhood, and family and through her first book for children she invites young readers to use their imaginations to think about the world in different ways and empowers them in being kind to themselves and to others and how to learn about other people through listening to their stories.

Asika's amusing thought-provoking examples of a different world and gratefulness for how it actually is make this book life-affirming and inspiring, fun to read and imaginative. It encourages continued use of the senses as inspiration for the four hypothetical worlds they explore. Maybe the whole world is just one colour or even no colour at all. What if everybody has the same face or everything is made of chocolate? Perhaps there are no flavours at all, or everybody speaks in the same robotic voice?

But our world is not like that, and the creators are keen for readers to recognise this, celebrate how things really are, continually reinforcing positive messages within each scenario. The book ends stating that the world is a library where "a kind and curious child" can read all about the wonders of the world because "behind every type of face there is a story of another human just like you and me."

Poh's lovely light-hearted humorous illustrations and Asika's inventive lyrical descriptions celebrate inclusivity and diversity alongside kindness and imagination. Encouragement of looking at the world differently, whilst also celebrating it as it is, make this a powerful optimistic read, one definitely to enjoy at times such as Earth Day or World Kindness Day, but also at any time at all.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

Animal Sidekicks: Amazing Stories of Symbiosis in Animals and Plants

Macken Murphy, illus. Dragan Kordić, pub. Neon Squid

With such a variety of species on this planet, it is no surprise that several of them live to survive in very close proximity to each other. Usually however, species keep pretty much to themselves. Monkeys stay with monkeys, for example, dolphins stick with dolphins. There are a number of

interesting cases where species of animals, or plants, have developed close relationships with each other which normally benefits both of them in some way – hippos and terrapins to name just one! This book explores these relationships.

Macken Murphy is a science educator who has collected information about these relationships and shares them through the podcast 'Species'. In this book, Macken shares the knowledge he has gained on his favourite examples of symbiosis.

Each double-page spread in the book explores a different symbiotic relationship between two species. The layout is fantastic, with a paragraph to introduce the relationship before some steps or smaller paragraphs of information which give more details. Brilliant illustrations and diagrams fill the pages and captions draw the reader's eye to specific details that are being shown in the illustrations.

Children interested in animals and what relationships they can form with each other will love this book. It will also be a great addition for any school library or classroom where science lessons are taught. The illustrations by Dragan are terrific! They are full of colour, include intricate details and often integrate some 'zoom in' close-ups to give readers an idea of the scale between some of the creatures.

Tom Joy

Behind the Scenes at the Space Station: Experience Life in Space

pub. Dorling Kindersley

This book is a fascinating behind the scenes look at life aboard the space station. There are six chapters, covering at home in space, building a space station, preparing for launch, life on board, astronauts at work and future missions. There is a very useful glossary and a comprehensive index. It is bursting with interesting facts and many questions are answered. What is a space station? Who lives inside the space station? How did they get there? What are they doing and why?

The book is an absolute treasure trove of information and is a brilliant insight for children who are enthusiastic about space, astronomy, aeronautics, and space exploration. Readers can expect an awesome journey through the space station. The journey reveals how a space station works. It is all about the brave astronauts, men, and women, who risk their lives in space. The team supporting them from Earth is not forgotten. It really is a fantastic, incredible tour of life aboard a space station for all involved. What do the astronauts actually do on board the space station? What do they eat? How do they go to the toilet? All these questions and others are answered. The reader learns about the experiments and repairs completed by the astronauts. There are job profiles of all the people involved on the space station, including the scientists, engineers, space walkers, cooks and botanists.

The book is crammed full of fascinating photographs, covering every aspect of life on board the space station. There are also many diagrams to illustrate different features of the space station.

Gary Kenworthy

Bella Loves Bugs

Billy Loves Birds

Jess French, illus. Duncan Beedie, pub. Happy Yak

These two books, *Bella Loves Bugs* and *Billy Loves Birds*, are the first in the Nature Heroes series; the others being *Ava Loves Animals* and *Pedro Loves The Planet!* Although each fact-filled adventure story features a main character, the other children also appear in each book giving a sense of continuity and recognition. The books are a good size for smaller hands being not too large and are aimed at age 4 – 7 years (KS1).

Bella is always digging in the dirt and goes on a bug-hunting adventure, finding ants, bees, grasshoppers, butterflies, and beetles, explaining about their homes, food, and life cycles to her friends. There are also some ideas on how to go about becoming a bug hunter.

Billy heads off to forest school for the day where he has a wonderful time spotting lots of birds and telling his friends, Bella, Ava and Pedro, all about them thus we learn about nests, beaks, eggs, feathers and more! There's lots of information on each page to accompany the delightfully relatable illustrations and some tips on birdwatching.

Both books are an entertaining glimpse into the natural world, encouraging children to appreciate the wildlife that can be found on their doorstep - an extremely accessible series.

Barbara Band

Ben Rothery's Deadly and Dangerous Animals

Ben Rothery, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

When I was waiting for this book to arrive, I thought I knew exactly what I'd be getting. But I was very wrong. Yes, there are fierce beasts with sharp jaws and huge claws but there are also dragonflies, frogs, and buffalo – not at all what I was expecting! This wonderful book explores how different species use their skills to find food and defend both themselves and their territories. Categorising skills such as speed, teamwork, mimicry, poison, and stealth Ben Rothery breaks down the animal kingdom to show us just which animals are the deadliest and why. For example, did you know that the Black Footed Cat from South Africa, one of the world's smallest cats weighing in at no more than 2kg, is actually the deadliest, with a 60 percent hunting success rate!

Beautifully presented with glorious illustrations by Rothery himself, and just enough text to give us the facts without overwhelming, this book is an absolute delight from beginning to end! I can honestly say I was hooked and read it almost entirely in one sitting though it would work perfectly as a resource book to dip in and out from as well.

The final page featuring the deadliest of all creatures has an important message for the readers and one which cannot be emphasised enough. I feel honoured to have received this book and it will be well used and cherished.

Tracey-Anne Corner

The Book of Sisters : Biographies of Incredible Siblings Through History

Katie Nelson and Olivia Meikle, pub. Neon Squid Books

Let me open my blue book adorned with warriors, queens, sports stars, writers and dancers...no ordinary history book, this is *The Book of Sisters*. A vibrant and informative book that casts light onto the sisters who were historically overlooked, until now. Authors Katie Nelson and Olivia Meikle are professors and host a popular history podcast titled 'What's Her Name' and they are sisters. Diving deep into the struggles, victories, and adventures of these historical sisters, with a team of more than 30 illustrators, readers begin a journey as intriguing and wonderful as could be.

This 66-page book has mini biographies of powerful sisters making their way into the future from times as far back as that of the myth of the three Moirai Sisters spinning the web of life, to Innana and Ereshkigal whose story was discovered written on a clay tile from ancient Mesopotamia. From ancient civilizations to the contemporary world, the book represents different cultures and experiences in communities flourishing within each of the cultures. Fatima and Mariam Al-Fihri were sisters who survived suppression as Muslim minority in Tunisia, but this didn't stop them, and they proceeded to build the world's oldest university.

This powerful page-turner has such vibrant and beautiful illustrations accompanying the prose, with the unique flavour of individual illustrators and the mode of art they choose to represent a story in. This powerful combination of art and history takes you from one country to another in a smooth and exciting flow exploring not only biographies but also the context of the times as well, such as the Mughal Era, the Age of Revolutions, or the Gilded Age.

A must read as a coffee table book, or a travel companion, or a simply if you want to express solidarity with the power of femme in all its magnificence and vulnerability throughout history. You could gift this to any reader aged 8 and above. It's not a book, it's an experience, a gaze through the power of perspective, of sisterhood from times far and now.

Ishika Tiwari

Building a Home

Polly Faber, illus. Klas Fahlén, pub. Nosy Crow

This is a rather lovely narrative non-fiction book that looks at what is involved in turning an old crumbling factory building on the edge of town into a beautiful building full of homes for families. Although the building is demolished, a lot of it is reused and recycled so there's an important environmental message too.

The reader is introduced to the team of people needed for this work from Amy, the architect, and Norman, the builder's foreman, through to Jane, the tower crane operator, and Sanjit, the lorry driver. There are not just a couple of token female characters but real diversity and inclusion throughout the whole book which is great to see. We are taken through each step in an easy-to-understand way – the site is cleared, foundations laid, a framework erected, a roof and windows fitted, and, finally, plumbing, electrical work, and painting to finish the job – with illustrations full of activity that depict passing seasons and different weather. An added bonus is the small cat to find on each double-spread page and a QR code that links to an audio reading of the book. The glossary covers people, machines and tools.

Aimed at under 5-year-olds, this book would delight any child who is fascinated by diggers, cranes and building sites, introducing them to the many roles involved in construction.

Barbara Band

Follow that Word

John Agard, illus. Momoko Abe, pub. Hachette Children's Books

Are you well versed with words? Are you a logophile or lover of words too? Then *Follow that Word* is for you, this is what we're doing in the hyperreal age of social media, isn't it- follow, unfollow, stalk, block... The yellow book I have in my hands is cute, full of poems by John Agard, winner of the Book Trust Lifetime Achievement Award and it shows in the poems woven beautifully with Momoko Abe's enriching illustrations.

Follow That Word teaches origins, associations, legends, myths and feelings from the first occurrence of a word, phrase or sound-word. Intuition took me to a poem adjunct to an illustration of mice flowing on a wave of words. The poem, Jumbo explains the feelings of the "first African elephant to

arrive at London Zoo...It weighed over a massive six tons," and explains that 'Jumbo' is now synonymous with huge in size.

"Jumbo hotdogs. Jumbo hamburgers. Jumbo jets.
And still Jumbo the elephant isn't impressed.
No, Jumbo's ghost just wants to forget all those caged zoo days and circus bands.
Just wants to roam with blazing trumpet across open spaces once called homelands."

Then comes the Politically Correct Platypus reminding humans to talk mindfully about the Platypus's electro-receptor. There is everything from animals to mythical heroes, Hercules Senior and Hercules Junior, we are in a village of realisations understanding the right to live. From myth to history and its stars, and the creation of the 'Melba Toast' named after Helen Porter Mitchell, who was a Victorian era Soprano from Melbourne also known as Nellie Melba the world of words is here.

This book is full of intriguing meanings and poems crafted around words and phrases which have carried the essence of the words at times, and on others have metamorphosed into something completely different. There are poems on Noise, Decibels, Silence, Goddess Ceres, Ottoman, Bleating of a sheep, Thor's Day, Poinsettia, Don Quixote and even If and But! A book for everyone over the age of 7 who will hopefully fall in love with words for their nuances.

Ishika Tiwari

How Not to Get Eaten: More than 75 Incredible Animal Defenses

Josette Reeves, illus. Asia Orlando, pub. Dorling Kindersley

"Life can be a dangerous business for many animals" and the awe-inspiring *How Not to Get Eaten* explains over 75 clever and cunning, strange and surprising survival tactics which animals in the wild have developed to avoid ending up on a predator's menu. These astonishing anti-predator strategies are divided into ten themed categories covering everything from clever camouflage, colour-changing, defensive dancing, playing dead and detachable body parts to natural armour, sneaky tricks, fighting, protective parents and the great escape. Even plants are included - proving that they're anything but helpless against herbivores! This focus on prey rather than predator is unusual and inspired, making this quite brilliant book stand out from the crowd.

How Not to Get Eaten is an attractive and eminently pick-up-able production, combining beautiful close-up photos and stylish illustrations to stunning effect. Even the intriguing title tempts the reader in. Text is divided into bite-size chunks, highlighted in carefully positioned text boxes, and the science behind each survival tactic is clearly and simply explained. Josette Reeves is an exceptional science communicator, adopting an engaging, chatty, and often humorous style which has real child appeal. She includes just the right degree of crazy, disgusting, and gruesome to keep kids reading but never

enough to put them off. Nor does she shy away from the harsh reality - that some plants and animals need to be guzzled to maintain the balance of our eco-systems. This is Reeves' first non-fiction book but hopefully not her last! Her partnership with illustrator and digital artist Asia Orlando (founder of the #ourplanetweek movement communicating environmental awareness through art) is inspired.

With its comprehensive index, *How Not to Get Eaten* is an invaluable classroom resource, useful for topic work and research both at KS2 and lower KS3. Every school library needs several copies just for browsing. It's far too good to confine to school though. Any nature loving child would love to receive this as a gift and would spend hours dipping in and out, finding a new fascinating fact every time. Adults too will find much to learn. I can't recommend this gorgeous book highly enough.

Eileen Armstrong

How to Teach Grown-Ups about Pluto: The Cutting-Edge Space Science of the Solar System

Dean Regas, illus. Aaron Blecha, pub. Britannica Books

Dean Regas cleverly uses Pluto's downgrade, from planet to a dwarf planet, to explore the fascinating story of our solar system, and the scientific discoveries and debates in an accessible and entertaining book.

Dean Regas, American astronomer and skilled communicator about astronomy, regularly writes on the subject and speaks publicly across different media, he is currently the Outreach Astronomer for the Cincinnati Observatory. He animates the human understanding of our solar system, showing that scientists don't always get it right, need to question and revise their ideas, even when defining the seemingly obvious question: what is a planet? Remarkably, it was only in 2006 with the Pluto controversy, that the International Astronomical Union meeting finally agreed that a planet is a big, nearly round shape, dominating everything around it, going round the sun. Pluto is not a planet because it is one of several similar and lesser objects in its part of the solar system. Despite this, Regas presents some great facts about Pluto and other planets. It is the magnitude of the solar system however that is staggering. Jupiter is 1,000 times bigger than Earth, yet the diameter of Pluto is the same distance from London, UK to Athens, Greece. You can fit 170 Pluto's in the space of the Earth. Moreover, takes Pluto 248 Earth years to orbit the Sun in an eclipse that means Pluto is closer to Sun than Neptune and then twice as far out!

Aaron Blecha's illustrations are also fantastic and great fun, illustrating the scientists and the facts in a humourous way. Many of the illustrations are very informative, for example, comparing a Geocentric and Heliocentric view of the solar system as well as the orbits of the different planets; it is easier to see this than to read about it. There are fast facts and infographic-style illustrations in

addition to the content of the text. For instance a great timeline of the number of planets throughout history - 7 planets before 1543, up to 18 planets in 1849, down to 8 planets as defined in 2006.

An authoritative, accessible short history of the solar system.

Simon Barrett

Professor Wooford McPaw's History of Astronomy

Elliot Kruszynski, pub. Cicada Books

Astronomy is one of the oldest natural sciences, and the *History of Astronomy* introduces readers to the subject from the early observers of ancient civilizations in 5BC through to considering what the future may hold as humankind explores the mysteries of the universe.

We are taken on this journey by Professor McPaw, a cartoon dog who makes comments and observations on each page, adding a gentle touch of humour. We meet Galileo, Newton, Einstein and Hawking; discover what the Space Race was all about; learn about the solar system, galaxies and stars; and even explore black holes and dark matter. The robust and sturdy pages are fun and interesting with a good balance of text and bright cartoon-style illustrations; much of the text is contained within white boxes making it easier to read.

The book is packed with facts – I had no idea that Slough is home to the biggest telescope in the world! - and there is a glossary at the end as well as a game to play. Aimed at 6 – 10 years (KS2) this is a fantastic introduction to astronomy that supports science and technology. As the topic of space is covered within the curriculum, this book would make a useful addition to both the school library and classroom but is also likely to engage the curiosity of children as they explore its pages.

Barbara Band

Silence is Not an Option: You can Impact the World for Change

Stuart Lawrence, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

As a teenager back in the swinging sixties, I travelled on the bus every day backwards and forwards to school. Thirty years later I was appalled when the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence took place at one of the bus-stops I passed every day in term-time. Since then this type of crime has become a far more common, but Stephen Lawrence remains in the public conscience, largely because of the determination of his family to champion activities and achievements which can empower young people to experience a sense of success.

Recognising the importance of a determined and positive mind-set, this down-to-earth, easily accessible book by Stephen's brother is now published in paperback, close to the anniversary of his eighteen-year-old, older, brother's murder almost thirty years ago. This is Stuart Lawrence's first book, subtitled 'Find your voice and be your best self'. Physically it is a book which beckons readers in, with large print, plenty of different styles in the narrative, short paragraphs, and filled with encouragement for readers to recognise the positive in even the worst mistakes they may make.

In ten short chapters Stuart Lawrence looks at even the smallest of changes readers can make which will empower them to feel they are achieving their 'best self'. Every so often there is a black page with large white capital letters on it, expressing a positive thought or suggestion such as 'It's so important to be grateful for the simple and small things.' The overall message is that no experience is wasted. Although Lawrence is encouraging the positive ways in which readers can be their best self, he constantly reminds them that they must learn to see the best side of things, what he calls 'the hidden curriculum', which in contrast to the school curriculum, is all the little things that help you feel happier with yourself. Feeling happier in turn makes you more confident to try something new, to contribute rather than take from the world around you. An index is provided, and suggestions of inspirational novels and websites.

Food for thought, every school should have one...

Bridget Carrington

Tales of Ancient Worlds: Adventures in Archaeology

Stefan Milosavljevich, illus. Sam Caldwell, pub. Neon Squid

Oh now, this is beautiful. I don't really like to talk about the look of a book before its words, but wow. This is a 70s continental humanities knowledge book upgraded to modern narrative and content expectations, and it is exceptional. Its production values make it feel important even with your eyes shut, and when you open them, the art is intriguing, engaging, enticing, with so much accuracy and detail it does much of the heavy lifting of telling. The book isn't shy of a map or two – [Armadillo's very own editor] Louise knows what I like.

The art holds together the great density of information without it becoming a slog to read. There are all the facts you want, from the first humans to the 16th century, with proper even-handedness shown to off-curriculum parts of the world and peoples, such that the book feels a complete overview of the past. Well thought through as a reference resource with a useful index, a well-written glossary, and contents pages reflect the satisfying, immediate, energetic and engaging voice of the writing, I feel thoroughly engaged with. This is the conversational and inviting manner in which you'd talk with kids in a successful classroom. It tells me stories not just facts; the facts are embedded in stories of

discovery that are so good at bringing to life both ancient events, but also their uncovering and interpretation.

There's a prevalent, tangible sense of mystery and archaeology as mystery-solving. I come away with as much of an understanding of the process of investigation as with distantly old events. Its great job of explaining the past relatably, relating us to it, underlining how we constantly lose what seem to us at the time to be universal and common practices and knowledge, how much humanity lives in the changing moment and the past quickly becomes alien. By making our efforts to connect with the past heroic, with all eras of the past in all parts of the world, it unashamedly values everyone equally, and speaks to us about the people we share the planet with now. Everyone everywhere everywhen is awesome.

The youngest readers will be drawn in by the art; young teens will still find value in the book's voice and factual depth. Pretty much essential for a large part of the readership in-between. So very recommended.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Writes of Passage: Words to Read Before You Turn 13

Nicolette Jones, illus. Mary Kate McDevitt, pub. Nosy Crow

Over 100 extracts from words written for many purposes by many people over the centuries. The compiler, Nicolette Jones' introduction suggests that this may be a gift book that's wandered into the wrong place. It suggests it's a repository of wisdom gathered from material sometimes written for and occasionally by young people, but for the benefit of an adult readership. It's an impression that continues through the many footnotes that accompany the extracts that contextualise them and explain why the compiler believes they're important to pass on.

There is some of the tone of a wise elder, but I feel very strongly a barrier between this book and a younger audience, so really whether it works depends on how easy it is to zero in on content that speaks to younger people. Do I flick it? Yes, it's a satisfying object. Do I stop? There's enough in the typographical design for me to stop and look. The designer really only has white space to work with and gets the most value out of it. Do I see words I absolutely need to have read? Not often. No extract overstays its welcome, but not many jump off the page in the evocative way they need to, in the way song lyrics might.

The extracts are more prompts for reflection, which is good, and explains the guiding footnotes, but at the same time means that the book is less successful than it could be. Do the extracts relate to younger life? Sadly, I think it's more a case of being chosen because the compiler thinks they'll be good for them and reflects judgement calls over the sources. I can think of younger readers who would

appreciate this book. I can't think of many. I can think of parents who would dearly love to introduce younger readers to more thoughtful reading matter. I think lots of these would appreciate this.

So, a book for parents and allies to guide them into being better introducers of the written word to younger folk. On those terms, successful and interesting.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Picture books

A Quokka for the Queen

Huw Lewis Jones, illus. Fred Blunt

A Walk in the Woods

Flora Martyn, illus. Hannah Tolson

Be Wild Little One

Olivia Hope, illus. Daniel Egnéus

Bork

Rhys Kitson

The Enormous Morning

Louise Greig, illus. Lizzy Stewart

If I had a Kangaroo

Gabby Dawnay, illus. Alex Barrow

Monkey Bedtime

Alex English, illus. Pauline Gregory

Our Fort

Marie Dorleans, trans. Alyson Waters

PANTemonium

Peter Bently, illus. Becka Moor

Rainbow Hands

Mamta Nainy, illus. Jo Loring-Fisher

Strong

Clara Anaganuzzi

Through The Forest

Yijing Li

Tomorrow is a Brand-New Day

Davina Bell, illus. Allison Colpoys

The Vanishing Lake

Paddy Donnelly

Who Jumped into the Bed?

Joe Rhatigan, illus. Julia Seal

Junior books

Escape to the River Sea

Emma Carroll

The Extraordinary Adventures of Alice Tonks

Emily Kenny, illus. Flavia Sorrentino

Fake

Ele Fountain

The Insiders

Cath Howe

The Lost Girl King

Catherine Doyle

Magicborn

Peter Bunzl, illus. Maxine Lee-Mackie

Olive Jones and the Memory Thief

Kate Gilby-Smith

Please Write Soon

Michael Rosen, illus. Michael Foreman

Seed

Caryl Lewis, illus. George Ermos

Sherlock Bones and The Case of The Crown Jewels

Tim Collins, illus. John Bigwood

The Shop of Impossible Ice Creams

Shane Hegarty, illus. Jeff Crowther

Skandar and the Unicorn Thief

A.F. Steadman

Small!

Hannah Moffatt

When I See Blue

Lily Bailey

Zo and the Forest of Secrets

Alake Pilgrim

Young Adult books

Forging Silver into Stars

Brigid Kemmerer

Friends Like These

Meg Rosoff

Ghosted

Emily Barr

I Must Betray You

Ruta Sepetys

Love Radio

Ebony LaDelle

The Misunderstandings of Charity Brown

Elizabeth Laird

Our Sister Again

Sophie Cameron, pub. Little Tiger Press Group

Rebel Skies

Ann Sei Lin

Secrets of an Undercover Activist

Nat Amore

Such a Good Liar

Sue Wallman

The Thief

Megan Whalen Turner

Things I Know

Helena Close

Three Girls

Katie Clapham

When Shadows Fall

Sita Brahmachari, illus. Natalie Sirett

When Women Were Dragons

Kelly Barnhill

Non-Fiction books

A World for Me and You: Where Everyone is Welcome

Uju Asika, illus. Jennie Poh

Animal Sidekicks: Amazing Stories of Symbiosis in Animals and Plants

Macken Murphy, illus. Dragan Kordić

Behind the Scenes at the Space Station: Experience Life in Space

Bella Loves Bugs

Jess French, illus. Duncan Beedie

Ben Rothery's Deadly and Dangerous Animals

Ben Rothery

Billy Loves Birds

Jess French, illus. Duncan Beedie

The Book of Sisters : Biographies of Incredible Siblings Through History

Katie Nelson and Olivia Meikle

Building a Home

Polly Faber, illus. Klas Fahlén

Follow that Word

John Agard, illus. Momoko Abe

How Not to Get Eaten: More than 75 Incredible Animal Defenses

Josette Reeves, illus. Asia Orlando

How to Teach Grown-Ups about Pluto: The Cutting-Edge Space Science of the Solar System

Dean Regas, illus. Aaron Blecha

Professor Wooford McPaw's History of Astronomy

Elliot Kruszynski

Silence is Not an Option: You can Impact the World for Change

Stuart Lawrence

Tales of Ancient Worlds: Adventures in Archaeology

Stefan Milosavljevich, illus. Sam Caldwell

Writes of Passage: Words to Read Before You Turn 13

Nicolette Jones, illus. Mary Kate McDevitt