



# Armadillo

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Spring 2018

Reviews, news and more  
from the world of children  
and young adult's books

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### Books Reviewed

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# Picture Book Reviews

## **Bear Child**

Geoff Mead, illus. Sanne Dufft, pub. Floris Books

It's well known that all bears alive today are descended from the very first bears that the Great Bear of the Northern Sky sent down to earth long ago, on threads woven from sunrays and moonbeams. So explains Daddy to his daughter Ursula.

What is less well-known is that in those days bears and people sometimes fell in love and married each other. Their children were half human, half bear, so they became known as bear folk.

Bear folk children like to play with bear cubs in the woods and walk barefoot in the long grass. Like Ursula, they love teddy bears but hate wearing shoes. Grown-ups who discover their inner bears have adventurous and extraordinary lives – they travel, read, grow things, and laugh a lot.

Ursula asks, “Do bear folk live forever?” Daddy tells her “we come here for a time and then we go back home”. There, the Great Bear of the Northern Sky gives a bear hug that lasts for a hundred years, and sends the bear folk off to play among all the other bears who have come home.

Soft pencil and warm watercolour illustrations show the loving relationship between Ursula and her Daddy-bear (I love Daddy's shaggy-bear beard!) and the wonderful worlds of the bear folk, in our own homes and gardens, in nature and all the way to the stars.

A story to encourage children and parents alike to embrace their inner wild bears, and a warm expression of how stories can vitalise life and help us to face death.

## **Dawn Casey**

## **Blue Monster Wants It All**

Jeanne Willis, illus. Jenni Desmond, pub. Little Tiger

Jeanne Willis has created countless classic picture books and she can always be relied upon to deliver something good. *Blue Monster Wants It All* is no exception.

Blue Monster loves new things and always seems to get his own way. For example, when he gets tired of his old pram he screams until he gets a new one, however, this only makes him happy for a while ... he then decides that the next new thing he wants will be something ‘new thing to cuddle’. All too soon

Blue Monster decides that he doesn't want any of his old things – including his old mum and dad – so he takes all the money that granny had given him and leaves home to start a life of his own.

Blue Monster goes on a spending spree; a sports car, a huge house, a funfair, a jumbo jet and much more. It seems that no matter what Blue Monster has he isn't happy for long. In the end he even gets fed up of the old sun shining in the sky and insists that he wants a new one, so he snatches and eats it.

Suddenly, Blue Monster feels cold, scared and alone and none of his new things can comfort him. He thinks that he can just buy a new family but realises that there are some things that money can't buy. Blue Monster is so sad that he sobs and sobs until he spits out the sun – and suddenly sees the light.

This is a fun picture book with a very strong message that children will instantly recognize and pick up on. The bright illustrations are fun and give readers plenty to look at without weakening the strong message – making it ideal to share with young children in the classroom and providing lots to talk about.

**Vicky Harvey**

## **The Chinese Emperor's New Clothes**

Ying Chang Compestine, illus. David Roberts, pub. Abrams Books for Young Readers

David Roberts is no stranger to illustration and his style is very recognizable – usually! But here is a book with a difference. A retelling of an ancient story, a folktale, not that unusual I agree, but this is not just a retelling, this is the REAL story.

It is a month before Chinese New Year. The tailors have arrived to show the emperor the design for his new clothes, the clothes he will wear on New Year's Day so that the evil spirits won't recognize him. But something is not right. The boy emperor is looking out of the window at the children who are begging on the streets. Now here be certain to start reading the pictures as well as the words for only in that way will you see the detail David Roberts has used, transforming the text to image and giving power to the image. The face of the boy emperor is compelling, the faces of the children astounding in their simplicity but power to convey emotion.

As the story unfolds the illustration moves with it, as we discover more about the new clothes the emperor must wear we also learn about all that can and does go wrong, all the people that are involved in the process and we get to gaze upon the clean lines and muted colours of the illustrations, showing us in detail and yet without being too busy, just how different to our own, European clothes, buildings, colours and designs the Chinese is.

Of course you want to know more about the story too. All I will say is that you need to read it carefully, take note of what is happening and see if you will be tricked or if you will guess the outcome

...

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Eric Makes A Splash**

Emily Mackenzie, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

This picturebook could be very helpful for the cautious or timid child. Eric (a panda) was a worrier.

He worried about noises in the night, finding spiders in his welly boots and getting lost in the park, but he was most worried about trying new things. Luckily, he had a brave and kind best friend, Fiona, (a rabbit) who loved to help him to feel brave too, and she was very clever. She got him to pretend, when he didn't want to get his boots muddy, that he was a piglet rolling in the mud, or when Mum put unfamiliar honey in his sandwiches, that he was a bear, or when he was on the climbing frame, that he was a spider on a giant sticky web. Of course, Eric enjoyed all these new things once he had tried them, but an invitation to a swimming party sent him 'into a worrying whirl'. They bought new trunks, a swimming cap with a dinosaur on it, and some goggles, but there was still too much to worry about, until an inflatable ring made him feel much happier. He finally got into the water, and even began to swim all by himself when his ring popped.

Then he saw Flora at the top of the slide looking uncharacteristically worried ... Eric thought of pretending to be penguins sliding on the ice, which Flora thought was a very good idea, and they slid down together, best friends helping each other.

Emily Mackenzie has previously written *Wanted! Ralfy Rabbit*, *Book Burglar*, which was shortlisted for various awards, *There's Broccoli in my Ice Cream!* and *Stanley the Amazing Knitting Cat*, which won the Independent Bookshop Award in 2016.

This book is fun, with various animals lovingly illustrated, and it's a good story about friendship and courage.

**Diana Barnes**

## **Frankenbunny**

Jill Esbaum, illus. Alice Bereton, pub. Sterling Books

Spencer knows that monsters don't exist but when his older brothers tell him not to play in dark places, because that's where Frankenbunny hides, he starts to think that maybe monsters do exist after all. His courage starts to desert him and although he knows that he is brave he realizes that brave is easy when it is daylight or when mum and dad are around. Brave is not so easy at night in the dark. However, when he discovers that his brothers have made up Frankenbunny as a trick to scare him, he decides to turn the tables and get his own back, discovering it works better than he thought!

Bereton's illustrations capture Esbaum's text brilliantly, bringing out the humour of the story, the scared feelings of Spencer and the naughtiness of his brothers. Clever use of shade and light, size and perspective on the page perfectly reflects the threads of the story. The book depicts the family relationships really well – the reassurances of the parents who are keen to make sure their youngest son isn't fearful of monsters and the mischievousness of siblings wanting to play a trick on a younger brother. The way the text works together on the page with the illustrations also enhances the story, adding to the book as a whole.

Written in the first person from Spencer's perspective, this is a book that children will find irresistible – funny with the frisson of fear that children will love.

## **Annie Everall**

### **Grace and Katie**

Susann Merritt, illus. Liz Anelli, pub. EK Books

The cover of *Grace and Katie*, with the two girls and the cat is so inviting, it would make any child want to immediately plunge into this book and make friends with them.

Grace and Katie are twins who absolutely love drawing. But, just as they are very different in appearance, so are they very different in their approach to the pictures they create. Grace loves straight lines and clean images whereas for Katie, no picture is complete without lots of swirly lines and colour.

Of course, approaching their lovely pictures in such a different way, they are each a little critical of the other. More colour and more swirly bits needed in Grace's pictures, thinks Katie. More order needed in Katie's pictures, thinks Grace.

It is only when they join together, each of them putting some of their own ideas into their very different drawings, that they find their pictures come alive.

A lovely story of how working together brings strength and beauty. Grace and Katie achieve the difficult with ease – making unity and co-operation exciting.

The illustrations are glorious. Not only are they gorgeous to look at either with singing colours or black and white majesty, they are also simple enough for a child to copy. The story is told in such simple, direct language, it is certain any child who reads it, looks at it, breathes it in, will also want a pen in their hand and a piece of paper in front of them.

A wonderfully creative book.

**Gwen Grant**

## **The Hundred and One Dalmatians**

Adapted by Peter Bently (originally by Dodie Smith), illus. Steven Lenton, pub. Egmont

Dodie Smith's original 1956 novel is one of my absolute all-time favourites. I have been impatient to share the story with my little granddaughter but as she is not quite three, I was thinking I'd have to be patient for a few more years before we could do the story justice. However, when I heard about Peter Bently's adapted picture-book version, I thought it worth a whirl though I was a little sceptical about how well it would capture the spirit of the book I loved. But, what a happy find! It was an instant hit with both my small reader and me.

For those yet to discover this classic, it is about two dalmatians, Pongo and Missis, and their 'pets', Mr and Mrs Dearly. Fifteen puppies are born. However, the beautiful, spotty dogs catch the eye of one of the best villains in the history of villains, Cruella de Vil, who wants to buy them and turn them into 'spotty fur coats'. When her request is rejected, she resorts to dog-napping. Pongo and Missis go on a perilous journey to rescue their pups – but the scale of Cruella's coat-making dream is far greater than originally anticipated and, consequently, the rescue operation must be scaled-up considerably too!

I was immediately won over because the main characters had the right names, Pongo and Missis. The text is skillfully distilled to stay true to the spirit of Dodie Smith's rich, textured original, and balances the proportion of words to illustration perfectly. It is huge fun to read out loud, with lots of drama and well-judged scariness. Cruella de Vil's plans to turn the pups into 'spotty fur coats' was met matter-of-factly, by my reader, as a nasty threat but thankfully, a quite unimaginable one.

Lots of love goes to Steven Lenton too, for his wonderful, atmospheric illustrations. They are rich and colourful, full of energy and detail. I'm so happy that he decided to keep it firmly in the 50s.

As you can tell from my rather gushy review, this was a great find for me! My granddaughter already knows the story by heart. The ground is now prepared for her to discover the full, unabridged story when she is old enough. I wish I could discover it all over again!

## **Jackie Spink**

### **I Say Ooh You Say Aah**

John Kane, pub. Templar Books

John Kane's book is a laugh-out-loud call and response picture book. The author entreats the readers, nursery year to Year 2, to speak or act in certain ways in response to certain key words or illustrations. The most important trigger is as follows: when you see an ant, you must say underpants. The pandemonium created by such a command among children of the target age is easy to imagine, being as they are somewhat obsessed with bodily functions and underwear.

The author's friend is a donkey named Ooh. When this donkey manages to lose his underpants, it transpires that they are adorning the head of the reader. Where else would they be?

The aim of this book is to use themes that are fascinating to readers of a certain age to improve their skills in listening, learning and recognition.

The book is sure to be a hit with its target readership.

## **Rebecca Butler**

### **Inky's Great Escape**

Casey Lyall, illus. Sebastia Serra, pub. Sterling Children's Books

Inky the octopus is the greatest escape octopus of all time. It seems that there is no trap that he can't slither out of. It also seems that the only thing he likes more than escaping from traps is telling tales of his exploits. One day, fed up of all the escaping, Inky decides to retire to the local aquarium. Whilst there, Inky plays games with his tank mate, Blotchy – hide and seek, cards and charades – whilst telling tales of his great escapes.

Blotchy gets tired of Inky's boasting and doesn't believe his tales of great escapes. Blotchy bets Inky that he can't escape from the aquarium. Inky is confident that he can and sets about drawing up his escape plans. Blotchy has never seen the outside world and still doesn't believe that Inky can do it – even rejecting Inky's offer to join him in the great escape.

All the creatures hold their breath as they watch Inky make his way out of the aquarium and back to the ocean. From that day on, Blotchy has a tale of his own to tell the new arrivals at the aquarium and justifies his staying behind with the thought that someone has to stick around to tell the tale.

I wasn't sure about this book at first – all about an octopus escaping from traps and being stuck in an aquarium, however, I warmed to it over time. I think that children will really enjoy the bright illustrations – especially the scenes where Inky is planning and making his escape. From a classroom point of view it can also lead to interesting discussions about Inky and Blotchy's reasons/motives for doing what they do.

There is more text in the book than in many picture books for very young children so I think it could be very useful for, and work well with older year groups.

**Vicky Harvey**

## **The Itchysaurus**

Rosie Wellesley, pub. Pavilion Children's

Sub-titled "The dino with an itch that can't be scratched", this picture book is dedicated to all children, but especially those with itchy skin, i.e. childhood eczema, a condition that apparently affects a fifth of UK children.

Rosie Wellesley, author/illustrator of *The very helpful Hedgehog* and *Moonlight Bear*, had studied fine art before training as a doctor. She became a paediatric practitioner at the Royal London Hospital, then a GP – and then the mother of a child with eczema. Realising the need for a book explaining the issue for her toddler, and for her child to have a character to relate to during the tedious application of cream, she obtained a grant from the Wellcome Trust, which enabled her, among other projects, to produce this book with a gelatin printing technique that portrays some of the characteristics of itchy skin. It isn't tactile, but it looks impressively scaly.

Tyrannosaurus Rex liked to roar and stamp and tear about the place, but was sometimes kind and calm, until he developed itchy skin, and itched in places that his tiny arms couldn't reach. His itching drove him wild, and he became the biggest, crossiest, most dangerous dinosaur in the jungle. Doc Bill, the platypus (naturally) liked making healing potions, and knew what was necessary, but needed all his courage to approach a very cross T Rex. However, T Rex was so miserable that he was glad to be offered help, and he called himself an Itchysaurus. Once they had established some rules e.g. no biting, Doc Bill started work on the creature now known as Itchy, showing him how to make the cream. It all took time to work, and Itchy needed distracting, so he also learnt to help the other creatures and to learn about being a vegetarian. Doc Bill worried that he might be eaten once Itchy was better, and Itchy bared his teeth.... but said "Thank you!"

It's a simple story, but effectively told and stylishly illustrated with humour, and could be enjoyed by any children, whether itchy or not.



**Diana Barnes**

## **The Last Chip**

Duncan Beedie, pub. Templar

*The Last Chip* tells the story of Percy, a very hungry little pigeon. Percy spends all day trying to find himself something to eat, but is constantly beaten to it by bigger, stronger birds like Pirate Seagulls and Posh Ducks. That is until a homeless lady offers Percy her very last chip before snuggling up together for the night.

This book is a lovely story of a very cute pigeon (they do exist) that delivers a subtle but thought-provoking lesson about homelessness, hunger and kindness. The book was inspired by the author's own young daughter who one day asked him to explain why a man had his bedroom outside.

Part of the proceeds from the book will be going to the Trussell Trust, a food bank network that runs over 425 food banks across the UK, giving emergency food and support to over 550,000 people in crisis every year. This book offers a great teaching opportunity for parents to explain homelessness and how to contribute to helping vulnerable people. Despite the serious subject matter of the book, the tone is still upbeat, hopeful and playful.

The really stand out aspects of this book are the stunning colour palettes, which are soft and warm offsetting its serious subject. It is also helpful that the book is set in Bristol, with its picturesque multi-coloured houses, signature hot air balloons, canals and more. The settings feature many recognizable Bristol locations that people from the area will recognize, but not so much that those not from around there will not enjoy it. There are also an array of locations from train stations, parks and the seaside featured in the book, so there are many locations and features to introduce children to visually, giving the book an extra interactive dimension. There's a particularly cute point where Percy falls in the water and goes all fluffy when he dries off – a giggle inducing moment to be sure.

One thing to note is that the book features a certain amount of advanced vocabulary including 'buffeted', 'scoundrel', 'bawled', 'thrashed' etc. This could potentially be too stretching for some younger readers, but also present good opportunities for vocabulary expansion. The story rounds off with a lovely relationship of sharing and support developing between Percy and a homeless lady where they bundle up for sleep together. A nice visual cue for parents to send children off to sleep, but a heart-warming final moment too.

A beautifully produced book with an educational but not too serious message.

**Rachel Kennedy**

## **Little Whale**

Jo Weaver, pub. Hodder Children's Books

In *Little Whale*, Jo Weaver has created a beautiful and atmospheric picture book that follows the long journey of a Grey Whale and her baby as they journey from the warm waters of the south to 'the cool rich waters of the north' where they will finally join their family.

Jo's blue and grey charcoal illustrations beautifully capture the majesty of the Grey Whales and the ocean world they inhabit – emphasising the darkness, lights and shades of this, at times, mysterious place - while her lyrical, gentle text compliments it perfectly.

I love the fact that Jo's whales are real rather than cartoon-like and I love the different perspectives used ...

- we see the whale's huge tail fins crashing into the water as they dive
- we have views of them from the seabed surrounded by plants and shoals of fish
- there is the potential danger of ocean going ships
- finally we see their reconciliation with the rest of the pod.

This is a great picture book to look at and to share and will be valuable for use in the classroom when looking at animals and their environment.

## **Vicky Harvey**

### **Lola Dutch is a Little Bit Much**

Kenneth & Sarah Jane Wright, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

The first book in a projected series by this team introduces us to the intrepid Lola Dutch, a girl full of ideas and energy. With a background in art and the theatre, and four children of their own, the Wrights create a larger than life character whose great ideas may not always work quite as she intended but not for want of enthusiasm, creativity and perseverance.

Accompanied by her toys/friends Crane, Pig and Croc, and her special friend Bear, who stands in loco parentis, Lola Dutch engages in cooking where she creates an enormous breakfast with them, then decides to visit the library, bringing home piles of books, taking up painting and then designing and creating an elaborate bedroom makeover. Then, overtired and overwrought, she seeks the safety and comfort of Bear.

The illustrations owe much to the 1950s French ambience which seems very popular with US children's book artists. Nevertheless, the pages showing us Lola's energetic artistic attempts have

several visual references to artists from Monet to Matisse, Vermeer to Klimt and that everyday item, a Lola and Bear-related version of Michelangelo's ceiling for the Sistine Chapel in Lola's bedroom. Although the authors anticipate an audience of Early Years readers it would have been helpful for parents if there had been specific written notes available as an appendix about those artists whose work was visually referenced.

Lola's swiftly changing and passionate enthusiasms will be familiar to adults and children alike but the visual setting for the story seems restricted and exclusive. In this first book, Lola's societal background is a mono-cultural, all-white, clearly affluent one, and very self-centred even when her toys/friends are helping. Again, disappointingly, we seem to be stuck in an exclusive middle-class society reminiscent of a transatlantic mid-twentieth century.

As an extension to the series there is a Lola Dutch website <https://www.loladutch.com/meet-lola/> which also offers a monthly newsletter, though it's not clear whether the additional US pre-order offer of, amongst other things, colouring pages, recipes and a parental guide are available to UK readers.

Hopefully as the series progresses so will its gender, social, racial and internet equality.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **My Sweet Orange Tree**

José Mauro de Vasconcelos, trans. Alison Entrekin, pub. Pushkin Children's Books

Is an autobiographical novel about a young child's life a book for children? This is a question I'm wondering, after reading José Mauro de Vasconcelos' beautiful heart-wrenching book.

The five-year-old protagonist, Zezé, who narrates in the first person, is drawn from Vasconcelos' own childhood, growing up in a poor neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro.

*My Sweet Orange Tree* is considered a classic in Brazil, and it's clear why. Vasconcelos' writing is tender, insightful, humorous and haunting.

'In our family, each older sibling brought up a younger one'. The tender care between Zezé and his older sister, Gloria, and little brother 'King Luis', illuminates the pages. Zezé takes Luis' little hand and leads him on adventures in the backyard, where a bat is an airplane, and the hens in the coop are transformed into "parrots, parakeets, and macaws of every colour", alongside yellow lionesses and a black panther that has eaten eighteen tamer's arms.

Zezé expresses the magic-reality of a young child's perspective vividly; he has a little bird inside him that sings. The Sweet Orange Tree of the title is his dearly beloved friend. He hears its heartbeat, its

chuckle, and its voice, “coming from I don’t know where, near my heart”. Zezé's imagination transforms his world, enriching and enlivening his days with miracles and wonders. “We played Sugarloaf Mountain cable cars. We’d take a box of buttons and put them all on a string. (Uncle Edmundo called it twine. I thought twine were pigs, but he explained that pigs were swine.)” Zezé's uncle calls him precocious; he knows how to read, and his love of words sparkles through the book. When he grows up, Zezé wants to be a poet, ‘with a bow-tie’.

Hand in hand with Zezé’s rich imaginary world is a poverty-stricken world of harsh brutality. Zezé’s escapades are regularly punished with beatings - physical abuse is part of the fabric of his life. Once, he is beaten until he is unconscious.

In a work of fiction, the author crafts the plot to create a resolution, offering, say, triumph or comfort, or hope. This semi-autobiographical novel celebrates childhood, love and imagination, and at the same time, presents unflinching realities in the raw. I found the tragedies of this story, in which all those Zezé loves are ultimately lost, utterly heart-breaking.

I suggest reading *My Sweet Orange Tree* yourself, before passing it on to an older child.

A poignant book of incredible beauty, and incredible sorrow.

**Dawn Casey**

## **N is for Nursery and What is Round**

Blossom Budney, illus. Vladimir Bobri, pub. Bodleian Children’s Books

*N is for Nursery* and *What is Round* are two very special picture books indeed. As you’d expect from Bodleian Children’s Books, they have a distinctly vintage feel that makes them utterly irresistible.

Every young book lover needs a beautiful alphabet book and *N is for Nursery* is one of the nicest I’ve seen. Each page is illustrated with a big, bold letter and children having fun doing all sorts of things, from ‘patting, pointing and sifting sand’ to sharing ‘stories and songs’. The rhyming text is a joy to read aloud and would be perfect for a child getting ready to start nursery or school.

Like *N is for Nursery*, the striking colour palette and illustrations in *What is Round* will immediately transport you back to the 1950s which is when these books were first published. As the title suggests, *What is Round* explores all things circular: a ball of ice cream, a target and a moon to name but a few. It’s a quirky take on the usual shape book format and the traditional text and stylish, retro pictures combine for a wonderfully whimsical mix.

These timeless treasures would be a beautiful addition to any child’s collection. We loved them!

**Abby Mellor**

## **Not Yet Zebra**

Lou Kuenzler, illus. Julia Woolf, pub. Faber & Faber

When you find an ABC book that is funny, rhymes, has a strong story line and a lovely twist at the end - not to mention fantastic illustrations – what do you do? Shout about it, of course!

We absolutely loved *Not Yet, Zebra* by Lou Kuenzler. It feels like a picture book that will still be on bookshelves, in book shops and found at the library for years to come; in other words, a classic.

Annie is busy painting her alphabet with the help of lots of animal friends, but there is one animal that does not want to wait his turn – and when your name starts with Z, who can blame him?

“First Aardvark and Bear, and Crocodile too.

Not yet, Zebra. I’m not ready for you.

You’re not the one I want to see.

Z comes at the end. We’ve only reached D.”

Zebra does not have the patience to wait, so he tries lots of cheeky, sneaky ways to get in ahead of his place. A pink tutu and beak mask aren’t quite good enough to fool Annie that he is Flamingo, and even in the Newt suit he is a bit on the large size to pass as his small buddy. Will Zebra succeed and jump ahead of the queue? Or will he have to learn to wait his turn? We can guarantee that Zebra does not give up easily, thank goodness!

“Panda, Quail, Rhinoceros, come along through.

Let Snake slither in and...Zebra, just SHOO!”

Lou Kuenzler’s words are partnered up with Julia Woolf’s gorgeous illustrations – that appear to have been freshly painted onto each and every page - and between the two of them the magic happens.

Annie’s colourful splats of paint travel from page to page as the animals join her to help create the ABC: Julia’s creations come alive on the page; colourful and expressive (Zebra being the most expressive, of course); happy, silly, kind, puzzled, firm and we think Octopus is probably a bit uncomfortable...

I suspect Julia had as much fun bringing Lou’s words alive as we had in reading them. *Not Yet, Zebra* is an absolutely delightful picture book to share at bedtime, read aloud in school, learn from and chuckle at – and quite simply put, to enjoy again and again.

**Anja Stobbart**

## **Read the Book, Lemmings!**

Ame Dyckman, illus. Zachariah O'Hara, pub. Andersen Press

Old behaviours often have a way of lingering - but new and exciting alternatives are not as far away as they seem... Onboard Captain PB's arctic ship (the 'S.S. Cliff'), Foxy is embroiled in a determined attempt to help a group of lemmings change their ways. Their preoccupation with leaping off any available cliff (or ship) edge, whenever anybody says "jump!", exasperates Foxy - why has no one told them that this habit is supposed to be a myth?

Showing them his current book, 'Everything About Lemmings', as evidence isn't the easy solution Foxy expects it to be: he won't be returning to his quiet reading time any time soon. Instead, as S.S. Cliff steers among the icy North, Foxy spends most of his day helping out the three smiley rodents - their smiles don't last long upon reaching the water!

Despite some amusing angry expressions along the way, Foxy is willing and focused on helping his new friends. Dialogue between them makes up most of the narrative (aside from Foxy's admirable exertions to retrieve the lemmings) and even though Captain PB seems to be a predominantly grumpy figure, uninterested in the action, the lemmings may just be able to distract him too...

After being let into the lives of this small circle of shipmates, in their excellent knitwear, you may find yourself wanting to join the crew!

The furry white faces of Foxy and Captain PB contrast well with the dark black ship and salmon coloured skies - in the landscape, blocks of colour are overlaid with only minimal detail, so that these contrasts between them make for slightly eerie but open surroundings. Bright primary colours appear onboard ship and the character's outfits, while later in the story machinery takes centre stage and the flashes of yellow grow larger. Look out for some great full page close ups of Foxy, who finally begins to smile when he finds a solution for the lemmings - one that celebrates the importance of literacy and its role in building communities. Even if the lemmings may not be sticking around...

## **Jemima Breeds**

## **Ruby Rides an Elephant**

Ruby Lovell, illus. Zara Merrick, pub. Lychee Books

*Ruby Rides an Elephant* is a vibrant new picture book rejoicing diversity and encouraging curiosity in other cultures, inspired by the author's own experience of teaching her mixed-race children about their Sri Lankan heritage.

We meet Ruby on the holiday of a lifetime with her parents on the tropical island of Sri Lanka. She goes on amazing elephant ride through forests and jungles, past beautiful lakes and up incredible mountains. On her journey she makes a new best friend.

*Ruby Rides an Elephant* is an educational picture book packed with lots of facts and information about Sri Lanka, from climbing landmarks like Sigiriya Rock, to learning to play traditional Tamil drums. The text is longer than the average picture book therefore it is aimed more at the 3+ age range. With its mix of prose, rhyme and sound effects the playful text gives readers much to enjoy. The illustrations by Zara Merrick are rich and colourful. A great book for celebrating diversity.

### **Anita Loughrey**

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

Anita Loughrey's forthcoming titles are a series of four themed books about maths problem solving in everyday life. The themes cover Food and Transport due for release in July 2018, and Space and Nature due for release in September 2018

### **Ten Fat Sausages**

Michelle Robinson, illus. Tor Freeman, pub. Andersen Press

This is a fresh and very funny look at an old rhyme in which the sausages try to escape their fate as someone's dinner. Can any of them find a way out or will they be caught out by the world around them?

The author has brought a great deal of humour to this version of the story, although at times it is rather 'black humour'. There is rhyme and repetition which makes this suitable for classroom story time but possible for year1 rather than reception; the flow of language making it easy to read and giving extra movement to the text.

It also gives the readers an opportunity to practice their number skills. The illustrator has really taken the theme and the humour, providing added depth with the detail in the pictures. The images are bright and colourful with real characterization that you would not expect from sausages. The layout is quite straightforward with either a full page or two half page spreads for most of the book. There is a single font used, which makes it easier for children to read the text and the format is simple for them to follow.

This is an excellent and very engaging story for use in KS1 but also for reading on a one to one basis at home.

### **Margaret Pemberton**

## **Tiny Little Rocket**

David Fickling, illus. Richard Collingridge, pub. David Fickling Books

This story about a little rocket going on an adventure through space contains charming rhyming text by the publisher David Fickling and glorious almost-cinematic illustrations by Richard Collingridge.

Beginning with an endpaper of a pastoral English scene: among the fields of sheep roaming, scatterings of trees, a village with a church, and a river with ducks paddling along there is a little red shiny rocket standing atop a hill with an astronaut approaching it. This scene illuminates with light, serenity, and a sense of movement and energy, all of which are extremely well captured in the rest of the book where the greens, yellows, and blues and the space of the English countryside are immediately replaced with the blacks, whites, blues, and yellows and again space of the universe, as the rocket and spaceperson go on their adventure.

The interactive and onomatopoeic text tells the story of the rocket flying past Mars and the Sun, when a lever blares out “Pull me now”, with a whoosh the rocket zooms along until it is hit by a meteor resulting in it being pushed into outer space where “like a gorgeous fish of steel in space you’re swimming free”. After diving back into the solar system the astronaut pushes a button when it turns from green to red which unfurls a banner (a long fold-out page) stating “Happy Birthday World”. On the other side there is an illustration of the solar system with its nine planets and the sun and a factual explanation of how people are aged by how many times the earth goes round the sun, how old the earth is thought to be, and how New Year’s Day is celebrated as the Earth’s birthday.

The book cleverly allows the child to put themselves into the position of the astronaut; the text is written in the second person, so constantly says things like “you quietly whisper wow” and the illustrations depict a generic person in a spacesuit so it could be adult or child, girl or boy of any race.

Every illustration bleeds off the page, and although the dominant colour is black they somehow seem to glow and emanate a sense of immense space, motion, and energy. They are dynamic panoramas of drama and adventure, risk and safety, light and scale, landscape and texture, for example, when looking at the illustration of the sun you can feel the heat and light shimmering out of it.

This is a lovely introduction to the solar system, space exploration and even the ideas of the age of the world and what New Year’s Day really means.

**Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer**

## **The Weaver**



Qian Shi, pub. Andersen Press

*The Weaver* has a magical cover with a sparkling spider's web weaving across a blue background, so delicate, it seems as if the book needs to be held firmly in the hand to stop it flying away, just as Stanley, the spider, does in this story of his life.

A whole new understanding of spiders and how they live opens up for us in *The Weaver*. Who would have thought spiders led a life of adventure? But they do and so does Stanley. The moment the wind blows them away, they wave goodbye to each other and when the wind drops them off, find a place to weave another web.

Stanley finds a lovely spot and, as he is a collector as well as a spider, seeds, twigs, leaves, even buttons and corks are all woven into a beautiful web. But the rain destroys the web and all Stanley can rescue is one leaf which the wind blows away.

It seems Stanley has lost everything but during the night, he weaves a whole new web, full of leaves and buttons, flower heads and corks. Then, he's off again, catching a ride on the wind. The illustrations are simply beautiful, with bright clean colours and so much of interest to look at. This is learning at its most subtle. Stanley, endearing and lovable, is a small black ball with a big personality. Children will love him.

**Gwen Grant**

# Junior Book Reviews

## **The 1,000 Year Old Boy**

Ross Welford, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Each of Ross Welford's books has had a different fantastical premise, from time travel to invisibility and now the power to live forever. What makes them all similar is his clever and heart-warming exploration of relationships, both with friends and within families.

Alfie is like any other nearly teenage boy - except he's a thousand years old and can remember the last Viking invasion of England.

His rather old-fashioned way of speaking does mark him out, so he and his mother try to live a solitary life. The pair are the last of the Neverdeads, those who used a remarkable elixir found within special pearls. Once rubbed into cuts in the skin, it stops the aging process; to reverse it, the process has to be repeated and the person grows older naturally. It does not confer eternal life as the user can still die from accidents.

Which is how Alfie finds himself alone in the world, when his mother is killed in a devastating fire at their home.

He has already made the acquaintance of Aidan and Roxy, who live nearby, and they determine to help this mysterious, secretive new friend. Trusting a friend is not something that Alfie has done for over fifty years, when the last time ended in betrayal, but with a suspicious social worker determined to find out the truth about her unusual charge, he knows that he must confide in them.

Told by both Alfie and Aidan, and featuring the indomitable, inventive Roxy, this is a compelling, thoughtful adventure as the friends race against time and an enemy to retrieve the last remaining pearl and give Alfie his wish to grow older naturally.

With moments of laugh out loud humour, heart-breaking grief and high-octane action, this is a touching, unforgettable story of finding friendship and acceptance.

## **Jayne Gould**

### **Brightstorm**

Vashti Hardy, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

This debut novel by Vashti Hardy is simply marvellous! The lives of Arthur and Maudie Brightstorm are thrown into upheaval when the death of their father is announced. Not only do they lose their father and become orphans; they are deceived by their housekeeper and left in the hands of a mean couple from the Slumps, the poorest part of Lontown. Whilst Arthur and Maudie slave day and night at the hands of the Beggins, they wonder how to clear their father's name from the accusations made by fellow explorer, Eudora Vane. Their father and other explorers were on an ill-fated race to reach the South Polaris when tragedy struck. Exploration in Lontown is not made by ordinary explorers on seafaring vessels but by long established explorer families on sky-ships, risking their lives to reach South Polaris on the Third Continent.

The unexpected return of their father's faithful companion, Parthena the hawk, renews the twins' hopes of finding out what happened to their father. That coupled with an advertisement for individuals to help one Miss H Culpepper on a treacherous journey to the South Polaris provide the catalyst to change their circumstances. The journey is indeed treacherous due to the unknown terrain, inhospitable climate and unfamiliar creatures that inhabit the Third Continent. Those factors and the growing tension and desperation amongst the competitors leads to some stressful encounters that test Arthur and Maudie's determination. They must learn to trust their instincts, rely on the friendship of others and learn from their mistakes. Essentially, this book has all the ingredients – courageous main characters, fantastical creatures and inventions, loyal pets, villains, a competitive and life-threatening race – of a gripping adventure story.

## **Sheri Sticpewich**

### **A Different Dog**

Paul Jennings, illus. Geoff Kelly, pub. Old Barn Books

We do not know the name of the boy, or his mother. We do know the name of the dog. The different dog and the first dog. There are a few other, minor characters who also have names but this is not what matters. Names are not so important for this story, it is the words that cannot be spoken which matter.

Sound cryptic? It isn't, it is just perhaps a little more difficult to explain than some stories. The premise of the story is a boy, a mother, a race to be won and a battle to be overcome. The story is deeply moving, deeply touching and deeply beautiful. Paul Jennings is sparse with his words but every single one has been purposefully chosen to convey the power and meaning behind it. Intentionally. Although we 'hear' the boy speak it is a few pages before we realise that this 'speaking' is actually an internal dialogue, there is no voice. It is much later into the book that we learn why. It is also a few pages before we begin to learn more about the race, why the boy wants to do it and what happens along the way. There is some tragedy in the story and do not be ashamed to feel tears

coming to your eyes for by the time you have reached it you will be caught up on the boy's world, in his deep emotion and feeling without even realising it that the tears will be there.

Do not despair however for this is not a book of sadness. It is a book of miracles, of perseverance, a book of power.

Written with great intelligence, power, emotion, Paul Jennings takes his reader on a journey. You will not know where you are going, you will not know how or why but slowly you will learn and by the time you realise you are at the end you will not want it to stop.

This is masterful storytelling, I was completely absorbed, you will be too.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Fabio The World's Greatest Flamingo Detective: The Case of the Missing Hippo**

Laura James, illus. Emily Fox, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Anyone with links to the retro community will know the lure of the pink flamingo. Laura James' premise for this new series is sheer brilliance. Fabio the extremely clever flamingo detective loves pink lemonade in his favourite bar at the Hotel Royale. His side-kick, Gilbert the Giraffe, is terrible at disguises but good at asking questions, sometimes even the right questions. They both embark on the case of the missing hippo.

Julia the jazz-singing hippo enters a talent contest being held at the Hotel Royale. During the auditions she mysteriously disappears from the stage. Fabio who is a reluctant judge for the talent contest, enthusiastically takes on the challenge to find out what has happened to Julia.

Emily Fox's illustrations depict the characters perfectly using a three-tone theme of green, pink and black. Dotted throughout the book are fluorescent green and fluorescent pink pages, which will appeal to children.

This book is Poirot with animals - from the lazy wart-hog, Chief Inspector Duff, who bumbles through the case and misses or misinterprets all the relevant clues, to the final line-up when the guilty animal is revealed. In true Agatha Christie style, Fabio looks into the psychology of the suspects by talking to them. It is cosy crime for younger readers.

I would recommend this book for all Key Stage Two class book corners.

**Anita Loughrey**

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

*Anita Loughrey's forthcoming titles are a series of four themed books about maths problem solving in everyday life. The themes cover Food and Transport due for release in July 2018, and Space and Nature due for release in September 2018*

## **Horace and Harriet Take on the Town**

Clare Elsom, pub. Oxford University Press

Clare Elsom is already known as the illustrator of the Flying Fergus books by Sir Chris Hoy and Jo Nadin; here, in the first of four stories about Horace and Harriet, she's also the writer.

Horace (full name Lord Commander Horatio Frederick Wallington Nincompoop Maximum Pimpleberry the Third) is a statue in Harriet's local park. Visiting with Grandad, she's astonished to see him climb down from his pillar – fed up with being pooped on by pigeons - and attempt to invade the duck house on the lake, by pedalo. Offering assistance, Harriet finds Horace an obstinate, demanding and tenacious companion. She and Grandad accompany him on a search for a new home, but on finding nothing to his liking he sets up temporary quarters in Grandad's shed, soon installing canons, a moat and a round-shot demi-culverin.

There are lively illustrations in line and green wash on every page, rich in background detail, and Horace has kindly provided a short dictionary to explain some of his specialised and colourful terms. The ending sets up the next story, with peace temporarily restored after Horace makes several attempts at invasion, and challenges his seventeenth century arch-rival, who also lives on in statue form.

I won't be alone, though, in feeling exasperated by the stereotyped portrayal – with illustration - of a frowning and shushing librarian who threatens to throw Horace out when he won't be quiet: an overworn negative image that doesn't need perpetuating. It's disappointing to see this in an otherwise thoroughly engaging story which will sweep young readers through its pages.

## **Linda Newbery**

*Linda Newbery's Girls for the Vote (originally published as Polly's March) is published by Usborne.*

## **The Ice Garden**

Guy Jones, pub. Chicken House

Guy Jones's debut novel is unusual and special.

Jess is allergic to the sun. Even a tiny exposure to it blisters her skin terribly. She can go out only if she is shrouded from head to foot, and even when she is at home the rooms have to be kept in semi-darkness when it is bright outside. Her sole daytime outings are for hospital visits, where the specialist treats her as a specimen of interest rather than a twelve-year-old with feelings. School is an impossibility. She longs for normality, and she longs for friends.

By chance Jess comes across a boy called Davy in a hospital room. He is in a coma and totally unresponsive, but on successive hospital trips she tells him her stories and meets his sorrowful mother. Her relationship with her own funny and spirited mother is deeply loving, though at times she finds her protectiveness immensely frustrating. One night, to escape her claustrophobic existence for a short while, she secretly lets herself out of the house and walks to the park. To her astonishment she discovers a beautiful, magical garden made of ice. It is irresistible, and she returns night after night, despite the dangers and her sense of guilt. She meets a boy made of ice who shows her his ice realm, and she experiences friendship for the first time. But then Owen's garden starts to melt. Is there some connection between this and Jess's sudden improvement, and what is the link between these and Davy in his coma? Jess faces conflicting loyalties and desperate choices that will profoundly affect both her and others.

*The Ice Garden* is a moving and gripping tale with an intriguing mix of fantasy and reality. The characters are compelling, and their relationships convincingly nuanced. Highly recommended.

## **Anne Harding**

### **KidGlovz**

Julie Hunt, illus. Dale Newman, pub. Allen & Unwin

KidGlovz is a musical child genius. While his teacher Lovegrove nurtures his talent, the cruel Dr Spin controls it. Half-starved and, when he is not performing, imprisoned in his room, KidGlovz can only practice the piano and dream of escaping, until a thief - Shoestring - makes his entrance. More of an opportunist than a friend, Shoestring helps KidGlovz's escape, but it all goes wrong. KidGlovz and Shoestring find themselves alone in the world, lost, but at last free.

*KidGlovz* is set in a Hans Christian Andersen-esque fairytale world. The story revolves around KidGlovz's magical gloves that are the secret to his musical talent. Not only do the gloves play music, but they also heal KidGlovz's hand, when he is accidentally shot and loses a number of fingers. These are the gloves that KidGlovz's mother made before she tragically died, cut from the material sold for a song. In this fairy tale world, KidGlovz and Shoestring escape to a land of goat-herding giants and visit a dream-seer hermit on goat mountain. They too choose to enter the dark underworld beneath the mountain where Spiltworld Sam lives and from where no-one comes back alive. Dale Newman's

pencil illustrations beautifully capture the contrast of the light of the goat-herders and the darkness of the underworld.

Throughout the story, KidGlovz and Shoestring maintain an appealing naivety and innocence. Moreover their friendship gradually develops through the book as they learn to trust one another. It is a heart-rending moment when KidGlovz and Shoestring are both prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, but neither of them are prepared to let the other go. More chilling, are the sinister characters of Dr Spin and Spiltworld Sam, bullying KidGlovz so to benefit from his music. Dr Spin's cold, calculating control of KidGlovz is motivated by the money he can gain either through the performances or the insurance he can claim. Spiltworld Sam cheats KidGlovz out of everything, a mother, a loving home and an ordinary life, in his desire for music.

There is however a haunting quality to the story and a terrible price must be paid for the musical talent in KidGlovz's gloves. In the great tradition of Hans Christian Andersen's Red Shoes the gloves cannot stop playing. The reader is warned about a town where the people lock up their pianos on the night of the full moon. Still you hear the keys playing.

**Simon Barrett**

## **The Magic Misfits**

Neil Patrick Harris, pub. Egmont

Carter is on the run. Life with his uncle, a conman, became intolerable when he realised he was expected to steal from an old woman who had shown him nothing but kindness. Hitching a ride on a train, Carter arrives in the town of Mineral Wells, alone, friendless and hungry. His only talent is his ability to do magic tricks which is immediately spotted by Bosso, leader of a band of criminal circus performers, and Mr Dante Vernon, owner of a magic shop. Can Carter stay out of the clutches of the evil Bosso and thwart his plans to steal from the residents of Mineral Wells? Will Vernon and the other 'Magic Misfits' be the ones to supply the love and support that his own family cannot?

The character of Carter is well developed. He is initially secretive and suspicious, desperately wanting to belong to the group that spends time at The Magic Shop but wary of giving away too much. Ridley, one of the group, also has her doubts about his motives and his links to Bosso's gang but their success in foiling Bosso's plans brings all of them together.

This is the first in a new series based on the adventures of Carter and his newfound friends, collectively known as the 'Magic Misfits'. The author, Neil Patrick Harris, is a well-known actor and magician and the book is a mixture of the story of Carter and interjections from the writer at various points. There is a secret message to be deciphered in the introductory chapter and instructions for

some tricks to try out on friends later in the book, so the reader is drawn in to engaging with the book on two levels.

Confident young readers will enjoy this story of magic and friendship. The tricks, codes, activities and the voice of the author popping up at various stages will all help to keep the reader enthralled as the Magic Misfits put their talents to good use.

## **June Hughes**

### **Make Me Awesome**

Ben Davis, illus. Mike Lowery, pub. Oxford Children's Books

What do archaeologists and paranormal investigators have in common? To Freddie, they are both potential targets for his pranking - but the stakes are high! A Saturday night TV show is looking for talent and Freddie urgently needs the prize money on offer – there's a chance his pranks could be just the ticket. His family have been left without a home following the bankruptcy of Dad's beloved antiques business, and as Freddie tries to help fix their situation, lots of ingenious schemes ensue. Look out for food experiments, photography and a very frightening dog...

When Uncle Barry lets Freddie's family stay with him, he only gives them a matter of weeks: time is of the essence. But Freddie is hopeful: he buys a membership for mega celebrity businessman Chuck Willard's 'Make Me Awesome' programme. He's convinced that Chuck's 'personal' advice, offered by the online service, will be just what he needs. Each chapter of Davis' book forms a section of Freddie's progress journal, tracking his attempts to achieve awesomeness while defending the programme to all its naysayers. But Chuck is a very self-inflated figure, and his advice reveals just how deceitful famous companies may be...

Despite working tirelessly to fix his family's upheaval, many of Freddie's cunning plans end in funny mishaps. Soon, he begins to gain a bad reputation and lets things slide with his best friend Niles – endangering their duo's chances at the annual gamer's tournament. Running for school president brings clashes with Malvern Pope, the school's snooty bully who tries to humiliate Freddie and his Dad. But it also brings Freddie closer to the 'losers' as he realises cliques don't always have to stay fixed.

Getting things wrong doesn't stop you being awesome. Freddie knows it's part of the ride. But when he keeps on failing, and his Dad's low mood and depression worsen, Freddie grows worried - getting desperate, he has one last plan to try. Perhaps help won't come from where Freddie suspects...

## **Jemima Breeds**



## **Max the Theatre Cat and the Disappearing Diva**

Sarah Todd Taylor, illus. Nicola Kinnear, pub. Nosy Crow

This first title in a new series is entertaining and full of adventure and drama. Maximillian was a spoilt housecat, who did nothing but sit on a red velvet cushion in the drawing room of Countess Arlington's expensive home until a rare encounter with a mouse brings out his true nature and he finds himself no longer in the Countess' favour; she gets her maid to abandon him in London. Eventually, he finds a home in the Theatre Royal, where he enjoys watching the dancers and singers rehearse for their shows and is appointed chief mouse catcher by the costume mistress who needs help protecting her designs from the armies of mice who nibble hems and eat buttons.

One day, a renowned performer, Madame Emerald, arrives at the theatre, for her starring role in the theatre's grandest show in front of their most exclusive audience; the king and queen. However, thanks to Max's curiosity and skill in observing unnoticed from hidden quarters of the theatre, like the fly gallery, he soon becomes suspicious that all is not what it seems with this grand diva.

As he puzzles to himself and friend Oscar, a fellow cat, about what is going on, the reader is able to try to solve the mystery alongside him, as he keeps asking questions and proposing suggestions, which enable the reader to consider if he is right and come up with their own solutions. As he solves one mystery, for example, why Madame Emerald gives such lumpy cuddles, it leads him to ask further questions such as why is she stuffing her costume with cotton wool and bags of oats; why does she "want to make herself look fatter than she really is?"

As Max becomes increasingly curious and angry with what he is discovering and how this affects his new friends he becomes more courageous and daring. This makes the story exciting and full of drama as well as tongue in cheek funny as he not only climbs rooftops, inhales "knock out drops", and dangles in mid-air clinging on to the velvet swags on the royal box, but he also manages to work a record player and untie knots that are holding somebody captive to a chair.

The black and white illustrations work very well with the text as they are engaging and well positioned on the page. I thought the theatre setting was interesting and it reminded me of Julia Golding's *The Diamond of Drury Lane*. I enjoyed this story and look forward to future adventures of Max, the Theatre Cat.

**Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer**

## **Night Speakers**

Ali Sparkes, pub. Oxford Children's Books

At 1.34am for several nights, Elena, Matt and Tima wake up. There is no apparent reason why this should be, and the children don't know each other. Elena is a quiet girl who lives with and looks after her depressed mother; Matt, considered by many a troublemaker, is a boy whose father's violent outburst are driving him away from his own family; younger Tima is the new kid in the local private school and loves singing and acting, but is undermined by some unkind school mates.

One night they all decide to leave their houses, rather than seeking elusive and precious sleep, and they find each other. Unable to understand the reason for their behaviour, but determined to find an explanation, the children enter an unlikely partnership. As they explore and investigate, they discover that a mysterious killer force inhabits the local industrial estate. In the course of their search, they also realise that they possess unusual powers as well as cross the path of a sinister nocturnal character.

Elena, Matt and Tima must use all their resources and test their blossoming friendship to stop an ancient power destroying them and their community.

Ali Sparkes delivers another well-constructed and fast paced thriller. The premise is intriguing and the plot has enough twists to keep readers hooked until the last page.

The children show courage not only as they face a deathly danger, but also as each of them face their own every day challenges.

While the greater threat is averted, not all is resolved in the life of the children and the final pages left open the possibility of future adventures.

The dialogues are sparkling and always engaging, but the author does not shy away from presenting the readers with some difficult topics, like that of Matt's abusive father or Elena's role as a young carer.

A well told story of good battling evil for secondary school children.

**Laura Brill**

## **The Night Zoo Keeper – The Giraffes of Whispering Wood**

Joshua Davidson and Buzz Burman, pub. Oxford University Press

Will is not by nature a rule breaker, unlike the rest of his family and Riya, the girl who lives next door, so painting a purple elephant on the wall of the local zoo as part of a school project causes him all sorts of distress when he realises that is not the kind of elephant the teacher wishes to see. After repainting the elephant grey on his teacher's instruction, Will has a change of heart and returns to the

zoo in the middle of the night to make his elephant purple again. It is at this point that things begin to get very strange for Will and he finds himself entering the magical world of the Night Zoo where he has a very particular role to play.

There follow introductions to the residents of the zoo, including Sam the Spying Giraffe and encounters with the Voids, robotic devices out to destroy the zoo. With the aid of his friend, Riya, and a strange birthday present given to him by his Gran (who clearly knew more than she was letting on), Will becomes the Night Zoo Keeper tasked with keeping the animals in the zoo safe.

This is the first in a series of adventures for the Night Zoo Keeper which will quickly establish itself as a favourite amongst newly independent readers. Chapters are short, the font is clear and the line spacing is generous. There are also a large number of black and white illustrations as well as a range of activities for children suggested at the end of the book. Teachers may be interested in the website associated with the series which aims to provide tools for teachers to engage pupils in creative writing.

## **June Hughes**

### **Rory Branagan (Detective)**

Andrew Clover, illus. Ralph Lazar, pub. Harper Collins

*Rory Branagan (Detective)* is the first in a new seven-book series featuring ten-year-old Rory Branagan, his neighbour the intrepid Cassidy Callaghan, and his best friend Wilkins Welkin the sausage dog.

Rory is driven to become a detective by a question that's been hanging over him his whole life—what happened to his Dad? Rory's Dad disappeared one day when Rory was just three years old, but no one will tell him anything about it—not his Mum, his older brother, or even Auntie Jo—the lodger. Nobody tells Rory ANYTHING.

Rory's first adventure begins when his friend Corner Boy Gilligan's Dad ('Guinea Pig' Gilligan) is poisoned. The police are on the case, but Rory thinks someone else could also be in danger, so it is up to him to put on his detective hat and take on the case.

The book is jam-packed with entertaining illustrations of Rory's friends and family and Rory's imaginative flights of fancy, which often seem to take the form of undersea scenarios: fishes, sharks, statues deep under the ocean, and even a puffer fish with hair like Donald Trump's. Andrew Clover's offbeat characters and Ralph Lazar's whimsical illustrations have a slightly Charlie and Lola-esque feel to them, but this series is obviously aimed at an older age group so there are higher stakes and plenty of dangerous situations for Rory to face.

With some help from his accomplice, Cassidy, Rory solves the mystery of the poisoned neighbour, but the mystery of what happened to Rory's Dad, I assume, will continue to be unravelled throughout the seven books of the series. Robin Stevens's success is convincing proof that kids love detective stories, and this is great series and an exciting adventure for slightly younger kids who are not quite ready for Hazel & Daisy, or Alex Rider.

**Rebecca Rouillard**

## **Running on Empty**

S E Durrant, pub. Nosy Crow

AJ's grandfather has always been the one to keep his unusual family together, so when he dies things start to unravel at the edges. AJ is worried about his parents but they don't really seem to notice. In order to deal with his grief and to keep his anxiety at bay, AJ does what he and his grandfather did best: running. Round and round the Olympic Park, aiming for the cross-country trials, running to escape, AJ only seems to be heading ever closer to disaster.

With this description, Nosy Crow's publicity sells Durrant's novel woefully short: it's so much more, and likely to resonate with a wide variety of readers, but especially those whose life is a constant battle against the odds.

AJ's parents both have learning difficulties and have always relied on Grandad to sort out bills and make sure the household keeps running smoothly. When Grandad dies AJ becomes increasingly aware that someone needs to take over this role, but he doesn't have the knowledge, and his aunt is burdened with her own increasing family responsibilities. Where once AJ could have relied on Grandad when a new pair of trainers is needed, he now he is the carer, trying to hide his own needs and those of his parents, fearful that Social Services will split the family up. Instead he relies on subterfuge, reluctantly accepting handouts, feeling perpetually guilty, and evading his teachers' questioning.

AJ's is truly an Olympian struggle, and Durrant's underlying imagery of the running circuit which AJ and his Grandfather created in their local park powerfully mirrors the never-ending cycle of trying to cope as a disadvantaged working-class family. AJ tells his own story, in short passages each with a brief headline: 'Grey', 'Dying Insects', 'Feet are Feet', underlining his struggle from day to day to keep things together. Yet AJ rarely complains, and battles against feelings of raw grief, unfairness and frustration which occasionally surface as physical outbursts.

We are left with hope that next year will be better for AJ, but the clear knowledge that whatever happens, he will never give up.

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Stick & Fetch Investigate. Barking up the Wrong Tree**

Philip Ardagh, illus. Elissa Elwick, pub. Walker Books

Bringing back a wonderful partnership – Ardagh and Elwick – and introducing a promising new one – Sally Stick and her best friend Fetch there are three wonderful stories tucked into the covers of this delightful story.

Meet Sally Stick and her very best friend Fetch, get to know them, get inside their heads and join them for some slapstick, hilarious adventures which may not always quite go to plan!

The humour in this story will appeal on two levels – to the children who just find the adventures cheeky and funny – which they most certainly are – and the adults who will enjoy the subtle word play (until they need to explain it to their children). Take for example the first story, the first case for Detective Sally. When Sally answers the phone and to hear Mrs Plink is about to explode you can imagine her concern (well if you can't you soon will) and as they set off to solve the mystery, and save the poor Mrs Plink, Sally and Fetch get themselves into a little bit of a muddle and perhaps get their wires a little crossed! This is the first of three stories with a hint of misunderstanding, typical of children, a good fun adventure, some great vocabulary and wonderful vibrant, full colour illustration. All in all, a fantastic, appealing book for keen mystery solvers, emerging independent readers, big thinkers and those who love a big splash of humour and colour in their lives!

I can't wait to find out if this delightful duo is going to appear on our bookshelves in some more stories with more detective adventures and lots more colour – I do hope they will.

## **Louise Ellis-Barrett**

### **Teacup House: Meet the Twitches**

Hayley Scott, illus. Pippa Curnick, pub. Usborne

*Meet the Twitches* is a beautifully written first book by Hayley Scott and is full of colourful illustrations by Pippa Curnick.

The Twitches are four tiny toy rabbits given to a little girl called Stevie by her Nanny Blue. They live in a Teacup House with lots of furniture, they come to life when no-one is looking and get up to all sorts of adventures!

Stevie is moving with her mum from a flat in the city to the country and is upset as she will miss her friends and Nanny Blue although she will be nearer to her Dad.

When they arrive at their new home with the large garden Stevie takes the present into the house, but she doesn't realise that the bag is slightly open and Dad, Gabriel Twitch, falls out and gets lost. Having rearranged the rabbits in their new home, Stevie can't find Gabriel anywhere. Mum suggests that she looks for him in the garden. As soon as she leaves the room Mum Bo, Silver and Twig Fitch have to think of a way to find Gabriel. Silver soon comes up with a plan and embarks on a rescue mission.

Thankfully the book has a happy ending, opening the door for more adventures with the Twitches bringing together Mum and a much happier and contented Stevie, with their new life in the country.

A lovely book that deals with change in families; new beginnings and coping with emotions which children can find difficult, in a positive way. Easy to follow for emerging confident primary readers; broken down in to manageable chapters or enjoyable for that bedtime reading.

“These toy rabbits have a secret.” A must read to find out what the secret is....

## **Helen Finch**

### **Tin**

Pádraig Kenny, pub. Chicken House

*Tin* is Pádraig Kenny's debut novel and I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. So much so that I will be recommending it to keen readers in schools and to anyone that enjoys a good read.

I came to it without any preconceptions as I didn't read the blurb and couldn't make judgement from the cover as it was a proof copy, but I was instantly drawn in. I'd like to leave this review right here and let you read the book but, reluctantly, feel I should say a little more.

Christopher isn't like others, he's 'proper' a real boy with a soul – orphaned when he was younger and left with memories of the fire that took his family away from him. He has other memories too but struggles to recall them all clearly. The others are 'Mechanicals', built by the engineer, Mr Absalom in his workshop where Christopher lives. Christopher and the others, Jack, Gripper, Rob and Manda are friends.

Christopher oils their joints and tries to patch them up as best he can, and in turn, they look up to Christopher and hope that one day, they too might have a soul and become 'proper'.

Readers may be tempted to think of the ‘Mechanicals’ as robots, however, the term robot is never used in this book as ‘Mechanicals’ are definitely something else – created with a combination of engineering and magical runes. Not just anyone can make a ‘Mechanical’ as there are laws governing their creation. These laws are enforced by “The Agency” and it soon becomes apparent to the reader that even the first of those laws, “only licensed and registered engineers have the legal right to animate mechanicals,” is being broken by Mr Absalom who is undoubtedly not as great as he claims.

When Christopher is involved in an accident, their world – and Christopher’s in particular is turned upside down. Men, claiming to be from the Agency come and take Christopher away and order Absalom to stop making mechanicals. Christopher’s friends decide to go in search of him, so they can bring him back home, but their expedition proves more difficult than they expected and they uncover things they never dreamt of.

This is a great story, full of action and adventure, focusing on themes of friendship and what it means to be human.

**Damian Harvey**

### **The Travels of Ermine: Trouble in New York**

Jennifer Grey, illus. Elisa Paganelli, pub. Usborne

When Michael s Megabucks and his son Mike Jnr receive a request to act as hosts to a visitor to New York little do they realize what an unusual guest they are going to have. The arrival of a small white creature, going by the name of Ermine is a surprise, but added to this she can speak and is very adventurous. The story becomes more exciting with the arrival of jewel thieves and the loss of a fabulous diamond. How can Mike Jnr and Ermine foil the thieves and return the jewel to its rightful owners?

This is a charming and funny story about a totally unique heroine and her travels around the world. It mixes fantastic fantasy with a real background in the “Big Apple”, so that the reader gets a feel for the major sights of the city.

Above all this is a crime story full of adventure and intrigue and the fast pace is full of action.

Aimed at the newly confident reader this is a highly illustrated book, where the images reflect and support the storyline. The illustrator has mixed her layouts, backgrounds and even text colours so that they all reflect the story as it begins to unfold. Whilst the heroine is female the presence of young Mike makes this a great story for boys and girls. Everything about the books makes you want to continue reading and it is going to be a great hit with KS1 and early KS2.

**Margaret Pemberton**

## **The Unicorn Quest**

Kamilla Benko, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

In this very imaginative and enjoyable paperback for younger readers, two sisters, Claire and Sophie Martinson have moved to an old house left to the family by Great-Aunt Diana, who had been a traveller and a collector. There are all sorts of interesting things in the house, notably a model of a unicorn, set in front of a huge fireplace with a ladder in it, and of course the girls climb the ladder. They find themselves not on the roof, but in another world entirely, and it's even a different time of day. So far, so Narnia, but the story develops in a rather different way.

There are four magical tribes, all with a particular focus, e.g. metal, plants, and they had been working in harmony, but now no longer trust each other, and life is difficult. Claire is very good at drawing, and is less adventurous than Sophie, who collects Experiences and loves the alternate world, but when Sophie disappears, Claire knows that she has to go up the chimney and find her. She makes new friends who tell her that Sophie has stolen the magical Unicorn Harp, and are willing to help her to find both, but travelling about is dangerous. Claire discovers the story of the last unicorn and the Queen of Arden, but she also finds that it has been told wrongly and that she is, of course, an important part of the way to bring back the unicorns, and she will need a lot of courage that she didn't think she had...

The names of the characters she meets are linked to their tribe: Thorn Barley and Nettle (Nett) Green are Tillers, Sena Steele, thrown out of her Forger tribe is very tough, and Mira Fray and Kleo Weft are spinners who weave thread and are also storytellers. There are Gemmers who work with rocks, but evidently there will be more about them in Book 2...

There is a satisfactory ending to this story, but at the end, Thorn is about to do something that he thinks will help, the reader knows it's the last thing he should do- we must wait for the next exciting instalment: *The Song in the Crystal*, due in 2019.

**Diana Barnes**

## **Zenith**

Sasha Alsberg and Lindsay Cummings, pub. Harper Collins HQ

Androma Racella, aka the Bloody Baroness, is a mercenary, selling her glass ship, the Maurader, and her swords to the highest bidder, leaving a trail of blood and destruction across the Mirabel Galaxy.



Each life she takes is etched into her swords and remembered in a macabre dance at a masked ball, but Androma's past is about to catch up with her. This time there is no escape.

*Zenith* is an explosive science fiction story about Androma Racella and her all-girl crew - Androma or Andi is the captain, Lira is the pilot and there are two gunners, Gilly and Breck - all are running and escaping from their pasts and somehow finding a new family on the Maurader. Outmanoeuvred, outgunned and out of options however Andi agrees to undertake a desperate mission to break out General Cortas' son from a Xen Ptera prison that only the dead leave. Working once more with her ex-lover, Dex, Andi has to confront her past and the death of her best friend. Battling memories and her feelings towards Dex, Andi must also fight for her life to complete her mission.

In the Mirabel Galaxy, an uneasy truce exists between the Unified Systems and Xen Ptera. Defeated, Xen Ptera lay in ruins and those not dead are dying, like the planet, from the amount of radiation. Queen Nor of Xen Ptera however is close to exacting her revenge on the Unified Systems, secretly developing the ultimate weapon, Zenith, that will restore Xen Ptera's glory. The nature of this weapon however remains a mystery throughout the story, and somehow, unknowingly, Andi's mission is part of Queen Nor's master plan.

*Zenith* is great science fiction, following the crew of the Maurader as they navigate through space and the galactic turmoil of the Mirabel Galaxy. Above all its story is a question of survival.

**Simon Barrett**

# Young Adult Book Reviews

## **Dear Katie**

Katie Thistleton, pub. Orion

Katie Thistleton will be a familiar face to CBBC viewers, where she has championed the raising of 'problems' as a mental health issue which it is essential to discuss openly. In this book, she takes a large handful of questions which have been put to her by young people, and together with two clinical advisors – Dr Radha Madgil and therapist, Sally Angel – she discusses her own experiences and offers ways in which to understand and cope with concerns. From problems at school, relationships with friends, and being unhappy about your appearance to feeling sad or worried all the time, and questioning your sexuality, Thistleton takes her correspondents very seriously, but skilfully leavens her advice. The format is an inviting one: first a notebook page headed with the key point, and then the question. On the following pages, also displayed like notebook pages, Katie's answer, written as a letter, starting with 'Hey You' and ending with love and kisses from Katie. If there is a more specific health or welfare angle this is followed by boxes with the clinicians' advice. Scattered through the text are blank ruled pages for readers to use for notes, and a larger section for notes at the end of the book. There is also an appendix listing helplines, both general and problem specific.

Probably the most memorable (and valuable?) aspect of the book is Katie's own revelations of feelings and incidents from her teenage and younger years, which encourages readers to realise that they are not the only one to have had that worry. However much they might be adapted to suit the purpose, and I'm not saying they necessarily are, they will engage the reader. Each response contains a personal anecdote, often at the beginning, and it immediately diffuses the situation. To someone who is concerned about being capable but slow in Maths, Katie admits that she hated it at secondary school, and was mucking about and laughing so much in a lesson that she did a wee on her chair! The cover says it all: real advice on real life problems with expert tips.

## **Bridget Carrington**

## **Fandom**

Anna Day, pub. Chicken House

Ultimate fan-girl Violet and her friends are obsessed with 'The Gallows Dance' a super successful, dystopian book turned movie franchise. Experiencing life in the 'Gallows Dance' is something that every fan imagines. But when Violet and her friends are transported into the story, it's far from the stuff of dreams. In fact, it's brutally real. Can Violet fill her heroine's shoes and restore the plot to its rightful conclusion before it's too late?

The premise of 'The Gallows Dance' is simple: the Gems are genetically enhanced, beautiful, tall and intellectual; the Imperfects, or Imps as they are known, are humans like you and me. No longer prepared to accept a fate of abuse, slavery and death, a small group of rebel Imps revolt against their oppressors. Having this world exist within our world is such an interesting concept. By being a portal, rather than an immersive fantasy, Day can create the kind of world dystopian fans love, whilst also exploring what it really means to be a fan in a world of comic-con and fan-fiction.

If you've ever been a fan of anything, you'll identify with Violet. How many of us haven't wished we could escape into our own fandom? You've probably wondered which characters you'd hang out with and daydreamed about how you'd change the story. Unfortunately for Violet, Alice, Katie and Nate the reality of 'The Gallows Dance' is less butterbeer in Diagon Alley and more trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic war zone...

Despite utilising the usual dystopian tricks and tropes, Fandom is not your usual dystopian novel. You'd think that the genre bending, extra degree of separation (you're reading a fictitious novel about a fictitious novel after all) would make the world of 'The Gallows Dance' less believable. Not so. If anything, being able to tear apart the fabric of the world, with the fans who are inexplicably trapped in it, adds an unexpected dimension and, dare I say it, credibility to the whole thing. I was utterly absorbed throughout.

**Abby Mellor**

## **Far From the Tree**

Robin Benway, pub. Simon & Schuster

This outstanding book was winner of the US National Book Award for Young People's Literature in 2017. The Judges' Citation neatly summarises just why it won:

*'Far from the Tree* is the poignant story of three young people discovering the complicated ways that families love. Grace, Maya, and Joaquin's quest to bond as they search for their biological mother resonates across the many definitions of family. In Benway's able hands, readers feast on a big-hearted and uplifting story about growing up, daring to count on others, and most importantly, having the courage to reveal and embrace our own imperfections.'

All of that is true, but there's so much more to this gripping, and often heart-wrenching, teenage novel. It begins with sixteen-year-old Grace, by nature quiet and careful, an only child, deeply loved by her adoptive parents, whose life changes for ever when she becomes pregnant. She chooses to have her baby adopted, and chooses the adoptive parents very carefully, but constantly worries that she will no longer be able to ensure that her baby's life will be happy. She seeks out her two biological siblings,

Maya and Joachim, who share a mother but have different fathers, and who themselves have major issues to resolve. Benway organizes her narrative into three, as we see events from each sibling's perspective. We are also party to many secrets that the three teenagers aren't ready to share with others. Maya has a complicated relationship with her parents and younger sister, and is gay. Joachim is with a loving foster family but has a long history of failed placements relating to his temper, and feels his mixed race is also a problem. Initially Grace alone wants to find her biological mother, but as their relationships change so do her siblings' views. Benway perfectly captures the heightened emotions we experience as teenagers, the rash actions and decisions, the dramatic gestures that stem from our vulnerability as we grow towards adulthood. And each of these characters really does grow, with Benway's empathetic, non-judgemental writing drawing readers into the tangled tale that is adolescence. Not to be missed!

## **Bridget Carrington**

### **Goodbye, Perfect**

Sara Barnard, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Eden and Bonnie are two unlikely friends, who prove that great differences do not prevent the closest friendships. Or so it seems, until now... when shocking events test everything, rippling out way beyond the sixteen-year-olds' tight bond.

Bonnie is a classic 'high-achiever', a hallmark of any state comprehensive where 'working hard' allegedly gets you places... in Bonnie's case, from Kent to somewhere as far as she can get without crossing the ocean... and with somebody who blows her good-girl image completely out of the water. We're talking student/teacher relationships here. Bonnie has always been the 'steady' to Eden's (somewhat fuzzy) waywardness, but that changes when the pressure gets too much and complicated realities can no longer remain hidden.

Amidst the intense drama that ensues, Sara Barnard examines the more unpredictable identities behind crass stereotype-narratives largely constructed by mass-media journalism and, also, the unrelenting comment-storms of social-media. Barnard takes pains not to paint such a crude picture. Instead, she renders detail and nuances in her characters with the patience and commitment-to-honesty required, contrasting that too-familiar, all-powerful 140-character tweet. She does so astutely...

... because reading *Goodbye, Perfect* left me satisfyingly unsatisfied about what to make of the events at Kett Academy. Conclusions are left undrawn; what's left are endless questions, multiple possibilities.

If this is a story about love, Barnard un-blindfolds us to the tired paths of traditionally 'romantic love' that now seem messy and undignified. Instead, we are encouraged to ruminate more on the importance of family (whatever that may look like) love, and the loving relationship we have with ourselves. When the former can seem so all-important at GCSE age, I think readers will appreciate Barnard's alternative considerations.

A book that grounds. Highly recommended!

**Amy Grandvoinet**

## **The Hazel Wood**

Melissa Albert, pub. Penguin

'My mother was raised on fairy tales, but I was raised on highways.' Bad luck stalks seventeen-year-old Alice and Ella, her mother, keeping them moving from place to place; the only constant they have is each other. When, Ella receives a letter telling her that her estranged mother, the elusive and reclusive author of a collection of chilling fairy tales, has died, Alice hopes their luck will change and inheriting her grandmother's estate, the Hazel Wood, will bring an end to their drifting. Ella is mysteriously adamant that the news brings a different message; everything to do with her mother is out of bounds. However, when Ella is kidnapped, Alice knows that the Hazel Wood is where her search must begin.

This novel had me from this line on the opening page, 'Then she came back, and achieved an odd kind of fame, glittering from some angles but dark from others.' It's a book full of that glancing, light-touch wisdom. Melissa Albert writes beautifully, making language work in fresh, unpredictable ways. I'm aware that some people find that a barrier but I love it. It is a book of two halves. I really liked the magic realism of the first half and preferred it to the full-blown fantasy of the second. However, as a rule I wouldn't choose to read fantasy and I'm sure it will not disappoint lovers of dark, chilling other worlds - and the Hinterland is grotesque. Sony Pictures have bought the film rights and *The Hazel Wood* does have all the ingredients for an impressive visual re-telling.

The author weaves an elusive, thought-provoking story, playing with and twisting our expectations of fairy tales. Alice's 'happily ever after', for instance, is getting out of the Hinterland to the imperfect world of bad coffee and dark dreams where her mother combs henna through her hair and she can walk until she feels her life is back under her control again. Alice and the male protagonist, Finch, generate a highly contemporary energy: their presence is very real, very solid and very cool.

This is a compelling, memorable story which would repay repeated reading and will provide endless food for conversation.

**Jackie Spink**

## **I Am Thunder**

Muhammad Khan, pub. Pan Macmillan

There are similarities here to another debut novel I reviewed in the last issue, Samira Ahmed's *Love, Hate and Other Filters*. In both, a young Muslim girl must navigate the space between the expectations of strict parents (both are urged by their parents to study medicine) and her own ambitions.

Muzna's story concerns itself with prejudice, assumptions and conflicting loyalties, and with different ways of being Muslim. Her parents affiliate themselves strongly with Pakistani values but are not practising Muslims; they disapprove of hijab-wearing, not wanting to draw unwanted attention. Nevertheless, they are strict with Muzna, forbidding friendships with boys and threatening to send her to Pakistan to be married if she breaks their rules. (Her mother informs her: "This world is cruel and you are not beautiful ... Your only chance for a husband, beyta, is if you become a doctor.") Finding ways round this, Muzna secretly meets 'Guy Candy' Arif and, through him, his extremist brother Jameel, who urges her to defy her parents, condemning them as non-Muslim. Muzna goes along with this, taking a while to realise that Arif has been radicalised by his brother, that she too is being drawn in, and that Jameel is part of a network planning something terrible. How can she alert the authorities without betraying Arif?

We follow Muzna through a search for cultural and personal identity, on the way meeting possible role models: the politically-aware Latifah and medical student Khadijah, who introduces her to charity work. By the end, Muzna contemplates the "versions of Islam I'd tried on for size ... For me, faith was my way of being a better person. It had helped me find a way to fight Jameel's warped version of Islam." She evolves from a shy girl, easily manipulated by predatory males, to a confident teenager ready to choose her own path and stand up to her parents. Part of this comes through her determination to become a writer of fiction. She receives extravagant praise and encouragement from her English teacher and from friends. Her first-person narrative, however, draws too often on teen-magazine clichés, especially when describing Arif. "He bounded over, pecs bouncing beneath his black T-shirt like slabs of beef." When they kiss, "I felt the earth move, and I held on to him for dear life."

Muhammad Khan, a London teacher and, like Muzna, a British-born Pakistani, wrote this timely novel after reading about the British girls who travelled to Syria to join ISIS. *I Am Thunder* is a packed and pacy read, with much to consider and discuss for both Muslim and non-Muslim readers.

## **Linda Newbery**

Linda Newbery's *Quarter Past Two On A Wednesday Afternoon* is published by Doubleday.

## **Kick**

Mitch Johnson, pub. Usborne Publishing Ltd

I thought from the title that this book was going to be about football, and it is – but only a little bit.

Budi (11) lives in a poor area of Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, with his parents and his story-telling grandmother. He works in a factory making football boots, because his parents can't afford to send him to school. His best friend is Rocky, who is a few years older than him. In addition to being poor, he has an inherited condition which means that his blood doesn't easily clot, so it's dangerous for him if he begins to bleed.

Despite this, he dreams of being a footballer, preferably with Real Madrid. He's a very likeable character, naïve but kind and generous, and you want him to win through. But he has so much to fight against: the cruel foreman in his factory; the Dragon, a local and very nasty gang leader; the justice system, which has locked up his uncle and thrown away the key – as well as his family's poverty and his condition. Yet still he has a touching faith that one day he really will play for Real Madrid.

Bad as things are for him at the beginning, they get worse. Much, much worse. It's a very good story, and it has the encouraging message that any obstacle can be overcome. But it's also a very disturbing one, and if I gave it to anyone to read, I'd feel the need to be prepared to answer some difficult questions.

It's very good and very exciting. But my all-time favourite book about football still has to be Mal Peet's extraordinary Keeper.

## **Sue Purkiss**

*Sue Purkiss's Jack Fortune and the Search for the Hidden Valley is published by Alma Books.*

## **Moxie**

Jennifer Mathieu, pub. Hodder Children's Books

In the current discussions surrounding gender equality, Moxie strikes a pertinent chord.

Set in an American school in a provincial Texan town, Moxie is the war cry of a teenager who feels the injustice of a backward-thinking and unbalanced view of society. Nothing has changed in East Rockport Middle School since the time Vivian's mum attended the school. Life revolves around the football team's fixtures, in school as well as in town, and the school community is ruled with a sexist bias.

In her time, Vivian's mum rebelled by breaking with the conventions and moving away, returning to East Rockport after Vivian's father's death. Vivian is inspired by her mum's action and creates Moxie, a 'zine' which she surreptitiously circulates in school. Calling to like-minded pupils to shake off the antiquated and unbalanced attitudes in the school, Moxie finds unlikely supporters and, not without difficulties, creates momentum and a strong push for change.

Amid all this, Vivian grapples with friendship issues and her first boyfriend.

Author Jennifer Mathieu was inspired by her readings about feminism and the book certainly argues for the rights of women, regardless of age, colour and orientation. Vivian's reluctance rings true, as she is at the same time willing to be proactive, but fearful of raising her head above the parapet. Providing the spark to light the fire, she will eventually find, in the mutual support of her friends, the courage to truly stand out for her beliefs.

It is a positive message for girls and offers the opportunity to introduce a wealth of characters among the school community. My only doubt is that a stereotype still finds space in these pages. If the main point of the book is female empowerment, I wonder whether the choice to describe Viv's new boyfriend as the über cool, wealthy and understanding new boy on the block - and that of her mother, who is a nurse, as a doctor - sounds a bit like the perpetuation of 'handsome prince' fairy tale material, validating the main female characters through the status of their partner.

Still, this is a highly enjoyable read for teenage girls, offering opportunities to talk about views on gender and equality in our society.

## **Laura Brill**

### **No Shame**

Anne Cassidy, pub. Hot Key Books

The provoking sequel to *No Virgin*, *No Shame* sees Stacy on a mission for justice. It's nine months after she was raped, Marty Connaught is on trial and Stacy is determined to see him behind bars.

Although *No Shame* is the second in a series, don't be put off if you haven't read *No Virgin* (although, I do recommend you read it too); *No Shame* gives you just enough back story to work as a stand-alone novel.

As well as the complexities of the legal trial, and the difficulties associated with cases such as these, Stacy is trying to deal with her complicated feelings towards Harry, Marty's charming, handsome and manipulative younger brother. On top of this, she still has all the usual problems that come with being



a teenager trying to navigate friendships, love and life. Can Stacy stop the tragedy in her past from robbing her of her promising future?

Nothing is black and white. In writing these books, Anne Cassidy wanted to explore the grey area around sex and consent. It's uncomfortable but it is real life. It's so real, in fact, there were times I could have thrown the book at the floor in frustration. Cassidy doesn't sugar coat and she has an unbelievable ability to create characters that get inside your skin. I was gripped throughout.

## **Abby Mellor**

### **Satellite**

Nick Lake, pub. Hodder and Stoughton

Most teenagers won't have met another teenager who has lived in a space station orbiting Earth all his life. *Satellite* is a sci-fi, poetic-epic adventure that is foremostly Leo's, whose story you must read.

It is sometime in the future of human history - perhaps nearer than one would like to think. In Lake's vision, the Earth has succumbed to the worst effects of global warming. Water is scarce, populations critically dense. Meanwhile Leo, 15, torpedoes through the perpendicular corridors of the Moon 2 space station, diving through zero gravity like a fish, the aurora flickering on earth outside the cupola window. He lives with twins, Orion and Libra, and Virginia, a qualified pilot and the trio's almost surrogate mother. Leo's biological mother, a successful astronaut, yet cold and inexpressive to her son, rarely visits. Vid screens - a kind of celestial Skype - are Leo's portal to Earth, to speak to his warm, also astronomical, grandfather, on a planet and a home he has never known.

Pulling the reader into Leo's world is the sense of conspiracy he begins to feel concerning the purpose of Moon 2 and his origins: why has he grown up there? Meticulous and mesmeric second-by-second descriptions of floating existence in zero gravity are combined with a detective-like thread in Leo's voice - an assured narrator whose mature self-reflections and heightened visual descriptions are highly enjoyable. As Leo anticipates his 16th birthday and the first flight to earth, words such as 'home' are pored over, their resonances plumbed. The whole narrative is laden with introverted meditations on language and experience, making for challenging reading.

At heart *Satellite* could perhaps be called a coming-of-age story, and in this regard the hero's contemplations on his absent mother, his unpronounceable love, and his quest for belonging will appeal strongly to a young adult (and any other reader). Journeying with Leo is sometimes slow, but it is always rich, poetic and thrilling, taking place in a post-space race, political landscape that intersects dangerously with Leo's voyage to earth. Personally, the love of language and experience that *Satellite* exudes will stay with me the most.

**Laurence Tidy**

## **The Serpent King**

Jeff Zentner, pub. Andersen Press

Set in Tennessee, the 372 finely crafted pages transport the YA reader to the final high-school year of the three main characters. Dillard Wayne Early Junior ('Dill') is from the wrong side of the tracks, financially and emotionally. His abrasive, fundamentalist Christian father – pastor Dillard Early Senior - is in prison for indulging in child pornography; and his evangelical Christian mother, entirely unreasonably, blames Dill. His life under the shadow of his perverted father's reputation is effectively drawn; we are never sure when someone will make a reference to this at Dill's emotional expense.

Travis is Dill's friend, known for his fanatical interest in fantasy gaming and his tendency to carry a wooden staff. His father runs the local lumber yard. Like Dill, Travis endures a gloomy home life, which in his case stems from the death of his brother when fighting in Afghanistan. However, things are looking up as his online gaming friend, 'autumnlads', aka Amelia, is showing an interest in him.

The main love-interest concerns Dill and his cultural opposite, Lydia Blankenship, who benefits from a liberal, financially stable and caring family, led by Dr Blankenship. She drives her parents cast-off Prius and runs a popular blog, Dollywould, which includes famous rock star subscribers. Lydia is intellectually acute and has a sharp line in repartee which effectively keeps the high-school thugs at a distance. Her growing awareness of her feelings for Dill is realistically handled as is her support for his musical talent.

The experiences of this trio form the narrative of the novel. The main strand concerns Dill's chances of escaping his repressive, narrow home life for the sunlit uplands of university. The slightly misleading title, refers to the habit of Dill's father, grandfather and other members of his church, of using poisonous snakes in their worship. If things look a bit flat, they also drink poison in the belief God will save them. In addition to these principal movers, the minor characters are also convincingly drawn. The local, kindly bookstore owner, Mr Burson; the antagonistic fellow students, Tyson Reed and Maddison Lucas; the respective parents. A measured, emotionally engaging and thought-provoking read.

**Trevor Arrowsmith**

## **The Smoke Thieves**

Sally Green, pub. Penguin

‘A princess, a soldier, a hunter, a traitor, a thief.’ *The Smoke Thieves* tells the story of five very different characters whose stories become entwined, both through mystical twists of fate and strategic ploys of monarchical politics. Each of these protagonists – Catherine, Ambrose, Tash, March, and Edyon – begin their stories scattered across the continent. However, all end up playing vital roles in each other’s stories as they are pulled to the country of Pitoria, where their combined knowledge might just save the known world.

Green’s depth of character in *The Smoke Thieves* truly shines. Each protagonist, while fulfilling their respective role or occupation in society, is hardly stereotypical. Catherine, the ‘princess’, is smart, thoughtful, and courageous; a far cry from the reign of the fawning, one-dimensional royals we see so often in popular fairy tales. Each character the reader encounters is easily relatable, due to the sheer depth that Green gifts all her creations.

*The Smoke Thieves* builds an intricate world, without overloading the reader with endless descriptions and histories. Instead, you are welcomed into a world that you learn about through experience. By living through the characters, seeing the story through their eyes and how they see the prejudices, races, relationships and hardships of this continent, you can understand the histories that Green has meticulously invented without wasting pages on extended explanation.

A true fantasy novel, *The Smoke Thieves* is most definitely a page-turner. It enthrals the reader with romance, action, and even death - without being over-indulgent with these themes. Yes, there is romance, but it is not the sole raison d’être for Catherine and Ambrose. Yes, there is action, but chapter upon chapter is not dedicated to detailed descriptions of gory battles. Yes, there is death, but Green balances it well throughout the storyline, keeping it from overwhelming the writing.

All in all, *The Smoke Thieves* is an excellent start to what will, most likely, become a brilliantly original series of young adult novels.

## **Rosanna Hartley**

### **Someone to Love**

Melissa de la Cruz, pub. Harlequin Teen

Liv Blakeman is an American teenager with the usual insecurities about relationships, appearances and her future. But Liv’s struggles carry extra complications: her father is a high-profile politician running for high office. Everything she does and says is up for public scrutiny, framed by the need to project the perfect family image. For Liv, a talented and sensitive artist, the pressure is intolerable. She fights an increasingly desperate battle with an eating disorder, self-harm and sexual assault. The attempts by family and friends to stop Liv spoiling her own and her father’s chances just make matters worse.

Liv's disintegrating mind is shared with the reader step by step, in Liv's own words. The themes are dark but there are regular flashes of hope and humour to lighten the load and keep the pace. This is a very convincing portrayal of how eating disorders unfold and take root in the mind; Liv's life is steadily derailed by a destructive, self-hating inner voice that she cannot silence. There will be many readers, male and female, who recognise and identify with Liv's despair and isolation. I hope they will learn, as she does, that they are not condemned to suffer alone.

### **Yvonne Coppard**

Yvonne Coppard's *Amelie's Secret* is now available for Kindle.

### **Sunflowers in February**

Phyllida Shrimpton, pub. Hot Key Books

*Sunflowers in February* contains many of the elements we are used to seeing in young adult fiction: boy/girl relationships, peer pressure, concern about sexuality, an attitude towards alcohol, tension between young adults and parents. However, Phyllida Shrimpton brings in some other themes that lift this text out of the everyday by also showing us the life of twins and dealing with forgiveness.

The text might be described as a paranormal story. This isn't a spoiler – the blurb already makes it clear that the story starts as Lily realises she has died. Shrimpton offers us a version of the afterlife that is palatable to the young adult reader.

The story is told mainly from Lily's point of view, in a first person, present tense narrative. This type of narrative helps to create an effective voice in young adult literature and indeed works well here. We're left with the impression that we are Lily's best friend, she is telling us exactly how it is and she hasn't yet quite rationalised what is happening. Occasionally we have the point of view of other characters in a close third person narrative.

Shrimpton's prose is very effective yet does not detract from Lily's voice. The story arc is firm yet we cannot guess what the outcome will be. She provides plenty of tension and pace to keep us reading.

The ending is left open, leaving the reader to decide what happens next. This too is very suitable for the target reader.

### **Gill James**

Gill James' *The House on Schellberg Street* is published by Chapelton Books.

### **Sweetfreak**

Sophie McKenzie, pub. Simon and Schuster

Carey is surrounded by miserable, love-lorn girls: her sister, Poppy, has lost George because of a careless video sent by Carey which ‘shows’ her cheating on him whilst on holiday. George’s sister is Amelia and she is Carey’s best friend. Having seen Taylor for a couple of dates, Amelia is inconsolable because he has ‘unfriended’ her on everything. Carey tries hard to be sympathetic. In the midst of all this heartbreak, Amelia gets a message on ‘Nattersnap’: Can’t wait til you’re dead, Princess. Can’t wait til I kill you. It is accompanied by a hideously graphic film. And the police trace the IP address back to Carey’s computer.

Things go from bad to worse for Amelia. However, for Carey it is a nightmare of unbelievable proportions. Nobody believes she is innocent, not even her family. She is let down at every turn. She does make some truly dreadful decisions – if there’s a bad choice to make, she makes it – but that keeps the tension high. She does grow wiser and has some flashes of wisdom. I liked this one: all three of us gave stupid boys we couldn’t trust far too much control over our feelings. With the exception of Blue, a lovely boy, she also encounters a rather relentless succession of blinkered, spiteful or downright rotten people – again, it keeps the pages turning, even if the nuts and bolts of the story are close to the surface.

This is ostensibly a novel about cyberbullying. It is certainly the catalyst but, honestly, despite the positive ending, it is more about how mean people can be anywhere and everywhere and not just online. Nevertheless, once the story is finished, there is also an informative section about staying safe online.

This is a whodunnit, which will hold the interest of readers who just want to get lost in a straightforward page-turner.

## **Jackie Spink**

### **Teacher’s Dead**

Benjamin Zephaniah, pub. Bloomsbury

Many authors have written whodunnits, but *Teacher’s Dead* is a murder mystery with a difference. We know from the first page who the murderer is, because the narrator – schoolboy Jackson Jones – is present, along with dozens of other witnesses, when fellow pupil Lionel Ferrier stabs their teacher, Mr Joseph. There’s no question who was holding the knife, but *Teacher’s Dead* is a whydunnit. Jackson, disturbed by the violence he has witnessed, decides that the best therapy is to discover the story behind this seemingly senseless event.

Accordingly, he questions all kinds of people who might be able to help explain Mr Joseph's death, including other pupils, teachers, the victim's widow and even the murderer's mother. Jackson's quiet persistence and honesty are enough to overcome the suspicion and hostility of most people, and he becomes the catalyst for some unlikely friendships, too.

Jackson is a careful and methodical narrator, and the language of *Teacher's Dead* reflects this. His rather affectless style is at times lacking in vividness and tension, but it makes up for it in clarity and ease of reading. He is a likeable protagonist, and this rather unusual detective story takes an interesting and thoughtful approach to a subject more typically used as the basis of melodrama.

## **Catherine Butler**

### **Tender**

Eve Ainsworth, pub. Scholastic

Since his dad died, Marty's mum has spiralled into depression, self-harm and mania, and it's getting too much for Marty to cope with. He's failing at school – when he can make himself go, that is – and Mum's boyfriend J is no help at all. And now social services are on their case. Marty desperately tries to pretend everything's OK, but how long can he keep up the lie? Meanwhile, Daisy is watching her parents run themselves ragged looking after her little brother, who has a life-limiting illness. She tries to pretend everything's fine too, but keeping a lid on things is hard, especially when her best friend is too busy with her own dramas to listen. What will happen when the pretending has to stop?

*Tender* is, in my opinion, Eve Ainsworth's best novel yet (and I don't say that lightly!). Marty and Daisy are very real and relatable protagonists, and the story is beautifully written and tightly plotted, making *Tender* the sort of compelling, read-in-one-sitting kind of book I love. Ainsworth has a remarkable insight into the issues that affect modern teenagers – issues that are too often glossed over or hidden away – and presents them in a way which is neither judgmental or heavy-handed. Despite the desperate struggles *Tender* addresses, the characters and story have room to breathe, and the overall message is one of hope. Perfect for fans of Catherine Barter and Joanna Nadin – and don't forget to check out Eve's other books, *7 Days*, *Crush* and *Damage*, too!

## **Emma Pass**

Emma Pass's *ACID* and *The Fearless* are published by Corgi/Random House Children's Books.

### **Things I'm Seeing Without You**

Peter Bognanni, pub. Chicken House Limited

Tess's boyfriend has died. Except he's not really her boyfriend – they did meet once in real life but since then, all their contact was online. Tess struggles to understand how Jonah, who seemed so funny and lively, could have taken his own life. There seemed to be no clues in his frequent messages to her. But how well can you know someone online?

Tess drops out of high school and reconnects with her feckless but rather likeable father, whose latest venture is an alternative funeral business. Unexpectedly, Tess discovers that she has a knack for arranging such funerals. You can probably guess some of what's coming next, given that Jonah never got the meaningful send-off that might have expressed something of the person he was.

But things become more complicated when she gets a message from Jonah...

This smart, thoughtful book was a very satisfying read. Tess's voice is engaging and honest, and the book asks some important questions about how well you can know someone through their words and online presence. The sadness surrounding Jonah's suicide and the depression that made him withdraw from his friends and mother are very well handled. I very much liked the convincing way in which Tess's relationship with another character, Daniel, is developed, with a sense of hope but no easy answers.

I was, however, slightly uncomfortable with the teen-suicide-makes-for-lovely-meaningful-send-off-in-exotic-location narrative: it felt familiar, and slightly romanticised. I think the trouble with writing about suicide is the desire for those left behind to make sense of it – which isn't always possible. Having said that, the book is ultimately about the importance of life and relationships, and the power of communication.

### **Sheena Wilkinson**

Sheena Wilkinson's *Star By Star* is published by Little Island.

### **The Truth and Lies of Ella Black**

Emily Barr, pub. Penguin Random House

Sixth-former, Ella, has a secret: "I'm not a normal girl." We meet her in a state of turmoil. Think Jekyll, when Hyde has well and truly got used to having the upper-hand. She is full of love for her close friends and full of fear of a force that inhabits her. Ella's Hyde is Bella. Despite having strong, independent views, Ella is bullied or ignored at school. When angered or stressed, she keeps her feelings bottled up because she is afraid of the damage Bella could wreak were she allowed to surface in public. 'Bella would jump out and smash the nearest simpering handmaiden with the nearest fire extinguisher.' The reader is aware that Ella is battling to manage some kind of dissociative disorder. In one early scene, Ella morphs into Bella and it is pure nightmare. When it is over, she says, 'It's too

difficult to come back to myself. It's harder every time. One day I won't make it. One day I will be stuck as Bella." You don't have to have read Jekyll and Hyde to know where this is going.

As if this impending psychological disaster isn't compelling enough, the tension is ramped up a serious number of notches not many pages later, when Ella is unexpectedly collected from school by her parents. In an atmosphere fraught with tension, she is hustled off to the airport. Destination: Rio.

Ella loves Rio; this fresh, exciting city is a catalyst for self-discovery. There, she feels like 'the real Ella Black'. She takes risks; she falls in love - however, she still doesn't know what her parents are keeping from her. And then, one day, she finds out. Nothing will ever be the same again. Now, in days fraught with danger, she uses Bella's strength for survival, ultimately knitting herself together.

Ella's voice is true and fresh. Foreshadowing is richly woven into the plot and the alert reader is constantly calculating and recalculating predictions. Older readers will appreciate exploring the concept of identity and how we make ourselves. There's also a thought-provoking twist at the end of this thoroughly enjoyable novel.

## **Jackie Spink**

### **Truly Devious**

Maureen Johnson, pub. HarperCollins

Ellingham Academy is an educational establishment for teenage prodigies. It's also the scene of a decades-old unsolved kidnapping and murder. So, it's the perfect school for aspiring detective Stevie Bell, who comes to Ellingham hoping to achieve what the law enforcement agencies of the 1930s failed to do: uncover the identity of the criminal who left no clue save for a mocking note signed, "Truly, Devious". As the term goes on, though, Stevie finds herself embroiled in a more modern mystery - but one which seems to have links to the original crime. Is Stevie imagining things, or has Truly Devious somehow returned?

I'm a big fan of Maureen Johnson's Twitter persona, so I was delighted to be asked to review this book and see if her long-form writing is as sparky as her 280-characters-or-less prose. I'm very happy to say that it doesn't disappoint. Truly Devious is a terrific read, bursting with engaging and believable characters: Stevie herself, confident in her own deductive abilities and yet painfully socially anxious; Janelle, the engineering genius she befriends; Nate, the withdrawn novelist with writing issues; the perhaps deliberately eccentric Element; handsome, self-absorbed, manipulative Hayes; and David, who Stevie finds herself both infuriated by and drawn to. The school's staff and other supporting characters are equally well-drawn, and the plot twists and turns very pleasingly - or, rather, the plots, for in the early sections the story moves between 1936 and the present day, and it's a mark of the



book's quality that whichever strand you're on, you'll find yourself feeling slightly irritated when the other interrupts it.

I have one caveat: *Truly Devious* is the first part of a trilogy, so the dovetailing mysteries aren't neatly wrapped up by the final chapter. You may not want to read this book if you're not prepared to commit to the series. But if the next two are anywhere near as clever and well-told as this one, it's a commitment you won't regret.

### **John Dougherty**

*John Dougherty's There's a Pig Up My Nose is published by Egmont.*

### **Witchborn**

Nicholas Bowling, pub. Chicken House

When her mother is burnt at the stake for witchcraft, Alyce finds herself thrust into a hostile world. She must flee to London, with a letter addressed to an unknown Doctor Dee. But London is a dangerous place in 1577, with factions at war to keep or put their own queen on the throne.

Confined in the terrible conditions of Bedlam, the hospital for the insane, Alyce knows that she must escape again. Rescued from the gutter by a young actor, Solomon, she at last has a safe place to stay. She must use all her wits to evade the witchfinders who are trying to track her down, as Alyce is bound more closely to their purposes than she yet realises. A very tangled web of secrets, lies and dark magic is closing around her, with Alyce coming to understand that she has inherited her mother's powers, particularly the ability to communicate with the dead.

Vividly conjuring up the sights, sounds and smells of Elizabethan London, Nicholas Bowling has woven a complex, gripping and intriguing tale around the plots to put Mary, Queen of Scots on the throne of England. Alyce's story is interleaved with that of Hopkins, the witchfinder determined to capture her, as the plans to use her abilities are gradually revealed.

### **Jayne Gould**

# Non-fiction Book Reviews

## **100 Things to Know About History**

Laura Cowan, Alex Frith, Minna Lacey and Jerome Martin, illus. Federico Mariani and Parko Polo, pub. Usborne

This book will have the reader ‘oooohing’ and ‘ahhhhing’ from the off. My 10-year-old daughter carried it around with her for a week after reading it and the book even became the main prop in a short film she shot with her friend on iMovie. This book was her inspiration: she devoured it; it gave her the idea for a story; she created a short film. This is what books are meant to do! Ignite that imagination.

Within its pages there are 100 historical facts amidst bright, vivid illustrations and info-graphic type images. It is a fact book that adults and children can enjoy together, and in equal measure – maybe when snuggled up together at bedtime – and it will no doubt raise many a discussion filled with Why? How? And What?

Did you know that an ancient Greek travel writer called Herodotus invented ‘History’? He gathered information about the places he travelled over 2,400 years ago and called his works ‘Histories’ from the Greek word *Historiē*, which means ‘inquiry.’

I had no idea that woolly mammoths still roamed the earth at the same time that the Great Pyramid of Giza was being built. If only they were still hidden in an icy, remote part of the world.

The illustrations by Federico Mariani and Parko Polo are clear and bright, leading the reader through the many facts and bringing each page alive with colour and characters, often using speech bubbles too. The narrative is informative and written in an easy to understand way by the writing team; Laura Cowan, Alex Frith, Minna Lacey and Jerome Martin, some of whom have collaborated on these fabulous information books together before (see *Politics for Beginners* too). And, as usual with these Usborne fact books, there is an expert involved, in this case we have to thank Dr. Anne Millard.

This is definitely a book for a family, a school, or a library. It is a resource that is useful for a wide age group and will – from my experience – engage a child enough for them to be creative beyond the page. Thank goodness it no longer takes two years to make a book (the words being written out by hand with a quill) or our books shops, and quite possibly our imaginations, would look thread bare indeed!

**Anja Stobbart**

## **Animalkind**

Pablo Salvaje, pub. Prestel

*Animalkind* by Pablo Salvaje is an incredibly beautiful book that captures compassion for the natural world between its illustrated pages, of which there are many, all distinct and striking.

There is a message: not only do we share an ecosystem with other living things, but we can also learn so much from the behaviour and instincts of our animal neighbours.

I think we all need reminding of the bigger picture sometimes and Pablo Salvaje does this in a very gentle, and incredibly artistic way. Each of the images within *Animalkind* is produced by hand using unique linocuts and handmade ink and stamps and each print is part of a chapter, of which there are seven: Love; Rhythm; Survival; Transformation; Habitat; Water; and Treasures. In turn, at the top of every chapter, there is a written section explaining the meaning of the title - the individual word - and the relevance to nature.

In the chapter on Love, Salvaje explains, 'Giraffes, flamingos, sea unicorns, tortoises, rhinoceroses, you and me: every single one of us feels love. Depending on the type of animal, the sense of love can be brief, deep, life-long or as variable as the seasons.'

These are short, succinct explanations written in a lyrical, and touching tone. The Soul is mentioned many times, and how we are all connected through the meaning of each chapter with all animals across the earth.

*Animalkind* seeks to show its reader that human virtues such as love, trust, care and protection can be seen within the animal world too, and how in the animal world there is a harmony between living things and the earth we live on. It is only man that has upset this: we read about the poor Dodo at the end of the book – just one extinct animal in a sea of many.

Children will enjoy incredible images of animals from polar bears and jellyfish to buffalo and peacocks; beetles and whales, to seahorses and woodpeckers. A truly beautiful book on so many levels and very, very gentle – but clear – in its message: *Animalkind* is waving a flag for harmony.

**Anja Stobbart**

## **Charlie's Magic Carnival**

Marit Törnqvist, pub. Floris Books

Whilst Charlie's mother searches his bedroom for his party hat, so that they can visit the carnival, Charlie wonders "What if..."

Charlie's imaginings parade over the pages – elephants instead of cars, people living in trees... With the carnival in town, there might be lollipop trees, marshmallow bunting, cupcake hats...

At first, the carnival is "like any other carnival" - a sea of colourful costumed people, Charlie spot-able amongst them with his party hat and red balloon.

On the following pages, fold-out flaps show the carnival in all its glory, including elephant rides, tree-top dancing, lollipop trees and rowboats on a river of pink lemonade. The festival culminates with a cake as big as the town square.

Children can pore over the minutiae of this detailed wonder-world; there are musicians, clowns, dancers, puppeteers, a fox drinking from a straw, dogs in gold-trimmed waistcoats, a baby riding on a swan's back.

Charlie goes to bed that evening dreaming of candy ladders and gingerbread jackets, elephant-rides and acrobat dogs.

A cavalcade of riotous illustrations revel in the excitement of the carnival.

## **Dawn Casey**

### **Diddy Disciples Book 2: Worship and Storytelling Resources for Babies, Toddlers and Young Children**

Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, pub. SPCK Publishing

This book covers the period from January to August, with Book 1 covering September to December, detailing the major events in the Christian calendar including: Epiphany; John the Baptist; Lent; Pentecost plus "green time/ordinary time" between July and November.

Each chapter is divided into three sections:

- 1) Building blocks for your own sessions which give an introduction to the unit, a choice of starter activities and songs with musical scores
- 2) Bible storytellings including more songs with actions
- 3) Creative starter ideas.

The book is a resource for Sunday school leaders, parents and schools enabling them to follow the pattern of their local Church's Sunday worship using creativity and participation, involving activities,

games, lessons, storytelling and art. It covers several weeks' worth of activities, is completely flexible and can be tailored to the needs of your group.

## **Barbara Band**

### **Hello Birds, What Do You Say?**

Loes Botman, pub. Floris Books

A board book to introduce the youngest children to birds and the sounds they make.

Many board books introduce young children to the sounds of the farmyard ('moo, quack, baa!' are common cries in books for toddlers!). It's refreshing to see a new perspective on this winning format. Birds are introduced alongside the sounds they make; including both the very familiar ('Quack quack says the duck') and the less well-known ('Whee whee says the starling'). Like a kindly grandparent, gently pointing out the wonders of nature to a curious child, the book opens readers' eyes (and ears) to the range of birds in our localities. Even grown-ups may discover here birds which they have never noticed or recognised before.

Loes Botman's illustrations combine accurate details, so that each bird is clearly identifiable, with glowing coloured backgrounds. The effect is atmospheric and appealing, as well as being a useful first guide to common birds.

*Hello Birds* is a beautiful first step into nature connection.

## **Dawn Casey**

### **How to be a Fashion Designer**

Lesley Ware, illus. Tiki Papier, pub. Dorling Kindersley

This is a revealing and practical book for anyone who is interested in fashion design. It outlines the difference between a designer and a fashion stylist and gives hints and tips on how to be both. This book encourages the reader to hone their constructive criticism skills in a fun way.

The author is fashion designer and sewing teacher, Lesley Ware. She outlines how to produce your own mood board, how to make your own colour palette and how to create a design that suits your own personality. There are lots of hints and tips about materials, colours and where you can get inspiration. At the back of the book she has set challenges to design different items of clothing and accessories such as tee-shirts, hats, bags and shoes.

The illustrations are fun and exciting. They work well in conjunction with the text and keep you turning the pages. You can read small bites of information with a visually stimulating illustration, which will keep even the most reluctant reader interested in true Dorling Kindersley style.

The book is aimed at 7+ but I think it would make an ideal gift for someone who enjoys drawing at any age, or someone interested in doing textiles at secondary school. It would make a good addition to your school resource books and contains lots of ideas you could use within the classroom if you are a teacher at secondary and primary level.

### **Anita Loughrey**

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

Anita Loughrey's forthcoming titles are a series of four themed books about maths problem solving in everyday life. The themes cover Food and Transport due for release in July 2018, and Space and Nature due for release in September 2018

### **The Island and the Bear**

Louise Greig, illus. Vanya Nastanlieva, pub. Floris Books

Inspired by a true story, this rhyming tale tells how a bear once appeared on an island in the Scottish Hebrides.

The bear roared and danced "in the blink of the sun", dived and splashed in the blue loch. Some people hid. Some people fled. But one small girl, "with the wind in her hair", whose eyes held "the silver light of the sea", understood. The bear was lost, lonely.

The author, Louise Greig, is a poet, and flashes of lilting language and perceptive phrasing lift the text. "The bear tilted his ears to the drum of the wind..."

The universal themes of the story are easy for young readers to relate to and celebrating 'bear-ness' never loses its appeal!

Vanya Nastanlieva's illustrations use muted, earthy colours - browns, greys, greens and blues - and plenty of space, evoking the sense of quiet and expansiveness of the Hebridan landscape.

When, in the end, the bear is reunited with those who have been searching for him, "The island felt huge with goodbye.

Until something appeared in the sky."

A star-bear in the night sky accompanies the closing words, perfect for bedtime: "Goodnight all bears, wherever you are sleeping."

A special, soulful book.

**Dawn Casey**

## **Joseph and the Fearful Family**

Fiona Veitch Smith, illus. Andy Catling, pub. SPCK Publishing

This is the fifth book in a series of six published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in which Biblical stories about Joseph as a boy are recounted. In this episode Joseph has already been sold into slavery by his jealous brother. Against the odds he has achieved freedom and has become the second most important person in Egypt after the Pharaoh. His family meanwhile are poor farmers in the land of Canaan. They believe that Joseph is dead.

The Pharaoh knows that there is soon to be a famine. He puts Joseph, his most reliable assistant, in charge of food supplies. Back home in Canaan however nobody has the expertise to foresee the famine and prepare for it, so its impact is disastrous. In desperation Joseph's father sends Joseph's brothers to Egypt to try to acquire food. Joseph recognised his brothers but pretended not to. He accuses them of being spies and imprisons one brother. To free the prisoner, Joseph tells the remaining brothers they must go home and come back with Benjamin, their youngest sibling whom Joseph has never met. Unfortunately the father refuses to allow Benjamin to travel, for fear he may not return. This episode ends in stalemate.

This book is designed to appeal to readers between Nursery and Year 2. Catling's illustrations are more like children's drawings than adult drawings for young readers, which may be an advantage accompanying a fairly complex narrative. There is an amusing sideshow when Joseph describes the variously sized cows on his parents' farm.

**Rebecca Butler**

## **Joseph and the Hidden Cup**

Fiona Veitch Smith, illus. Andy Catling, pub. SPCK Publishing

This is the sixth book in a series of six. In this episode Joseph has become the Egyptian official in charge of food during a famine. His brothers have come buying food but they have no idea that this powerful official is their brother. After their first visit they return to Egypt accompanied by their youngest brother Benjamin.

On their first visit Joseph ensured his brothers got back the money they handed over for food. When they found the money, they feared they would be suspected of stealing it. As the brothers were about to

leave, Joseph planted a silver cup in Benjamin's luggage and accuse him of theft. He still wanted to punish his brothers for selling him into slavery. The brothers protest their innocence and state that if anyone has been a thief he will become a slave to Joseph. When the guards search Benjamin they find the cup. The brothers plead with Joseph to spare Benjamin but Joseph orders him to be put in chains. When the brothers explain that their father has already lost one son to slavery, Joseph announces that he is that lost brother. The family are reconciled.

Like its predecessor this book is designed to appeal to readers between Nursery and Year Two. Catling's simple illustrations do a worthwhile job accompanying a fairly complex narrative. Reference is made again to Joseph's love for the cows on his father's farm. Each of these books can be read individually. But the cumulative effect would be best served by reading the series of six.

**Rebecca Butler**

### **Politics for Beginners**

Alex Frith, Rosie Hore and Louie Stowel, illus. Kellan Stover, experts Dr Hugo Drochon and Dr Daniel Viehoff, pub. Usborne

My daughter devoured this book and wanted to write a short review, here it is:

'Politics for Beginners gives a lot of information in a very easy-to-understand way. I really enjoyed reading it and now understand politics a lot better than I did before. The pictures and speech bubbles make it much more fun than teachers could have done it at school.'

As a parent, and having seen my daughter's reaction, I think this book would be an invaluable addition to most households and schools. It is actually aimed at both children and adults and explores questions such as, 'Is there such a thing as human rights?' and 'What is terrorism?' to 'Is freedom of speech always a good thing?' and 'Am I a feminist?'

The section on 'How to argue,' is particularly topical at the present time: Don't make it personal; Back up your opinions with facts; Look out for arguments built on lies; Don't lose your temper; Be prepared to change your mind.

These chapters can often be related to life in general, not just politics.

The illustrations and speech bubbles – as my daughter said – make it 'more fun', it is an entertaining book with brilliantly laid out, colourful pages that seek to explain something valuable in a fun and engaging way. The history of politics is discussed, as are systems, ideologies, elections and how to influence change.



The piece of information my daughter takes glee in reciting? The history of the word, Idiot: Idiot comes from the Greek word 'idiotes,' which means 'private citizen.' It was an insult for someone who wasn't interested in politics.

Maybe it is time to be more like the ancient Greeks (well, with regards to their interest and knowledge of politics at least): the more people that understand politics from a young age, in theory, the more informed their political decisions and callings of the future. A gorgeous book, on an important topic, we love it.

**Jaana** aged 10 (**with** an insert from **Mum**)

### **Story Worlds: A Moment in Time: A Perpetual Picture Atlas**

Thomas Hegbrook, pub. 360 Degrees

*A Moment in Time* answers that curious question of what is happening elsewhere in the world at this exact time. The author and illustrator turn the clock around the world, painting pictures of the people, fauna and flora at one moment in time across 24 hours.

The book is subtitled *A Perpetual Picture Atlas* and is therefore never-ending. The tri-part division of the book design means once the first two sections have been read like a traditional book, a reader can turn the book over and read the third section, before turning the book once again to start re-reading again sections one and two. Each double-spread of a page shows what is happening at different places at the same time. So at 2pm a leopard reposes in the Brazilian Rainforest, a farmer herds sheep in Bolivia, whilst a window cleaner works in New York and a trumpet players entertains in Cuba. Alternatively the three sections of the book fold out to compare and contrast people and places from different parts of the world at the same moment, but different times. For example, as a woman hangs out her washing at 11am in Mexico, it is 3pm in South America, where people tango in Uruguay and children play football in Argentina or it is 10pm when turtles hatch in Oman. The design is ingenious.

The concept of the book is also intriguing and best illustrated by turning to the instructions on how to use the book. The book begins at 6am, 12 hours before the time standard of Coordinated Universal Time. At one end of the globe, in the outlying islands of Baker Island the sun is rising. The reader then travels across 32 time zones -- through the Americas (it's lunch time in Jamaica), Europe (London commuters are returning home from work) and Africa, Asia (people are asleep at Everest Base Camp) and Oceania, finishing in the early morning in Republic of Kiribati. This journey is illustrated with a map, colour coded to correspond to the Coordinated Universal Time and hourly time, shown at the top and bottom of the page. The colour coding could have continued throughout the book, making it easier to look up different times and places.

Moreover the map probably works best for simplicity, but there are some oddities with the colour coding, because of the curvature of the world. However it does highlight the enormity of some of the continents and individual countries with multiple time zones, such as Russia for example crossing 10 time zones alone. In westernmost Russia at Kaliningrad, it is 8pm and people are travelling on a train, but at the eastern point of Petropavlovsk-Kamtchatski it is 6am and the city, in the foreground of the mountains, is quiet.

Finally, the content of the book consists of over 100 paintings with titles and no further words. There is an index of the paintings at the end of section three including further information about the detail in the picture, and because the third section of the book is in French, readers might need to use a French-English dictionary to read it. Sadly there is no information about the paintings or the context of how Thomas Hegbrook came to paint them. The paintings are however reproduced in full colour, giving a vibrancy to the whole book and allowing a fascinating exploration of the changing palette of colours according to the time and place of each painting. Typically each painting captures some human activity or is a painting of the natural world in an impressionistic style that captures the moment beautifully, but of course loses some of the richness of the detail and the specificity of the time and place.

*A Moment in Time* is a fascinating concept, brilliantly designed, communicating an incredible message of simultaneous global diversity.

**Simon Barrett**

## **Through the Seasons**

Sarah Laidlaw, pub. Floris Books

A wordless board book for little ones. Sarah Laidlaw's soft, smudgy-edged style creates a warm, dreamy feel.

Each double page spread shows families and friends enjoying the pleasures of the season. A mother leads the way through the trees on a blustery early spring walk, followed by her daughter, skipping, and little boy, with stick. Baby rides in the sling on Daddy's back.

Later in the spring, a girl pets a white lamb, whilst older children plant vegetables in the garden. There is summer fun at the beach, leaf-chasing in autumn, a lantern-walk through the twilight, and decorating the Christmas tree in wintertime.

Such familiar scenes are easy for young children to relate to, and the book offers a simple way to affirm and celebrate the changing seasons together.

**Dawn Casey**

## **Voices from The Second World War**

First News (UK) Ltd, pub. Walker Books Ltd

*Voices from the Second World War* is a selection of first-hand accounts whereby witnesses from the Second World War share their stories with the children of today. The book is arranged as a timeline from the outbreak of the war to the fall of Japan, and covers the major events and stages in between those two occasions. Each section has a short introduction placing the event in history followed by a selection of true stories from both men and women. These include individuals from the UK, Europe and the US, as well as from across all Armed Forces, civilians, evacuees, refugees and resistance fighters – a good cross-section of people and places.

The text is easy to read, each true story is between one and two pages long and is interspersed with photographs. This book is insightful, fascinating and compelling. It would be useful for students undertaking research on this period, but the individual accounts would also be excellent for reading out loud and being the starting point for further discussion. There are also reactions from various children who heard the stories giving the book an authentic voice.

**Barbara Band**

## **What Do Animals Do All Day?**

Wendy Hunt, illus. Marijke Buurlage, pub. Wide Eyed Editions

This is a large format book that features eight selected animals found in fourteen different biomes from around the world.

A double-page illustration introduces each biome alongside a brief description; these illustrations are followed by two pages of animals. As well as their correct name, they are also given an alternative name that describes what they do; for example, in the desert the Addax Screw-horn Antelope is given the name "Weatherman" because "I can detect rain from far away and then go to find water."

The illustrations are retro in style and are in slightly muted colours. Some of the animals selected are quite unusual and there is an index listing all of them.

The eight animals in the book are featured on the relevant double-page illustration so it is likely that a child reading this will then want to go back to look at the animal within its habitat.

*What Do Animals Do All Day?* is an excellent resource for introducing children to the regions of the world and the unusual animals selected, together with their alternative names, are a great starting point to encourage a child's curiosity.

## **Barbara Band**

### **What's Worrying You?**

Molly Potter, illus. Sarah Jennings, pub. Featherstone

Worrying is something we all do but children may need a little extra help in understanding their feelings and finding a way of coping. Everyday life, at home and school, can throw up all kinds of situations which can cause anxiety, distress, anger or jealousy.

In this book, Molly Potter takes twelve common scenarios such as getting told off, meeting a new teacher, parents arguing and being ill. On each double page spread she offers gentle, helpful reassurance, explanations and things to think about, often inviting the child to think about the problem from another's viewpoint and how to deal with the situation.

Bright and colourful with a friendly tone, plus a mischievous dog to spot on every page, this is ideal for children to dip into, if they have a particular problem. It would also make a good conversation starter for PSHE discussions about feelings or for use one to one if a parent, carer or teacher recognizes that a child might need to talk about their worries.

Also included is a feelings glossary, with a description of the emotion and examples of when it might be felt. I thought this was very useful in helping children to understand and identify their feelings, particularly the more negative ones which can be perplexing and frustrating. There is also a brief guide for adults to helping children talk about their worries. A book I would recommend for the school library and the PSHE collection.

## **Jayne Gould**

### **What Would She Do? Real-life Stories of 25 Rebel Women Who Changed the World.**

Kay Woodward, illus. Andrew Archer, Susan Burghart, Sofia Bonati, et al, pub. Carlton Books

The contents page reveals to the reader the list of the 25 women whose stories are contained in the book and whilst a quick glance will reveal the most famous of women - Cleopatra, Florence Nightingale, Amelia Earhart, Michelle Obama – from ancient Egypt to present day America, there are

also a number of women whose names, I certainly was not familiar with – Elena Piscopia, Harriet Tubman, Judit Polgar – being among them.

So what does this book offer? A mini biography of some of the world's most inspiring women. Each has her name, a title – Frida Kahlo is Rebel Artist for example. Those women I did not know? Elena Piscopia 'Super Student' a lady who studied and became a philosopher; Harriet Tubman 'Fabulous Feminist' a slave who campaigned not only for freedom but for rights for women and black Americans; Judit Polgar 'Grandmaster' a chess player who proved that women can play too!

Each of these women, and their companions in this fascinating book are introduced in the same way, with a bold and determined illustration and then a page of biography including the basic facts of who they were, where they were from and their profession. This is followed with a What Might X Do ...? A question posing a difficult position the reader may find themselves in and an answer based on what we know about these women followed by an inspirational quote.

Inspirational sums up this book, this is what it is and what it aims to be and not just for women, for all of us. Who will inspire you?

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

## **Wild World**

Angela McAllister, illus. Hvass & Hannibal, pub. Wide Eyed

We live in a wild world full of wonders and whilst there are ways in which we enjoy it and celebrate it this book presents it to us in a whole new manner – through poetry.

The astounding beauty of nature is not always easy to grasp. Sometimes we have to go to the wildest reaches in order to see it. In Wild World the skills of Hvass and Hannibal bring it to us in all its beauty, reminding us not only that it is there, all around us, but also how we are connected to it. We are prompted to bring to mind that nature is ours to protect whilst we are here and thus this book not only prompts us to think not only of the beauty of nature but that we need to look after it too.

With 13 wildernesses featured – from the Mountain to the Mangrove, Desert to Moorland we are drawn into our own world and given a thought-provoking poem to accompany the images. The poems are simple yet evocative, descriptive yet leaving much to the imagination, the careful reader will notice the highlights drawn out in italics urging them to look more closely at the illustration and perhaps also the world around them.

This is not only a stunning book of masterful illustration, it is a lovely introduction to poetry and a reminder to care for the world that cares for us and gives us so much.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**

# Great Race: Christopher Corr, illustrator

**Christopher Corr** is first and foremost an illustrator. His most recent story is inspired by a lifelong love of China – drawn from a three month visit some 30 years ago – and the British Museum galleries. Amardillo's Editor, **Louise** meet him in the Great Court at the **British Museum**.



Christopher Corr and Veronica Needa at Southbank Centre's *Imagine Festival*.

Christopher Corr paints a dog to celebrate the Year of the Dog.

Christopher Corr at work in his studio space.

When we met in the British Museum one cold and sunny February morning the Great Court was awash with people, by the time we had walked to the Chinese galleries at the other end of the Museum there were people and in particular children everywhere but this did not deter Chris from finding peace and beauty in the gallery and of course dragons!

Prior to our meeting (about a week earlier) it had been Chinese New Year – the Year of the Dog - to help celebrate and launch his book Chris was invited to participate in the Southbank Centre's Imagine

Festival where his *The Great Race, The Story of the Chinese Zodiac* (Frances Lincoln Children's Books), was used for two family events. At the event, whilst story-teller Veronica Needa talked about how the Chinese community celebrates Chinese New Year, got children enacting the rituals and performed the story of *The Great Race*, Chris painted her performing and was equally able to capture in his artwork the audience's reaction. This first event was a wonderful celebration of an important tradition and a great way to engage children with a lovely

new and exciting book – one for all year not just New Year!

I asked Chris what had inspired him, apart from the beautiful gallery, to write the story, and he told me it was the animals. The Chinese he explained, have an animal to signify almost everything in nature and of them all the dragon is for him the predominant one. When I asked him why he was able to find the image of a dragon in almost everything we looked at, explaining that the Chinese dragon was not the fire breathing monster of Western myth and fable but a more subtle creature bringing power

and luck. With this first explanation and insight we began to look more closely at the objects in the British Museum which had also inspired Chris and very quickly he was able to give me an entirely new perspective on Chinese art!

... here was the big cauldron – swarming with dragons ... and there the beautiful blue and gold dragon – but look more closely Chris urged, surely there is more than just one dragon. Then there were the landscape paintings, the sparse mountains with their delicate trees, the abundance of colour and the variety of animals. In our brief hour together Chris taught me how to see the simplicity and beauty in the sometimes sparse drawings of Chinese artists and understand more about the artwork in his own book for, Chris explained, whenever he is in this, or any other Museum gallery he always has a pencil and paper, he will be looking, sketching and taking

inspiration from his surroundings.

Walking among the exhibits it became clear that Chris not only knew what he was talking about – after all he has just written a book about the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac - but that he has more than an artists' eye for detail. In every object he found awe, wonder and fascination. He had questions which may go unanswered or may lead to further research – it did not matter, what was important was the impression that the objects left on his imagination (and his paper).

When I asked Chris if there was any other inspiration for his book he generously shared with me his Chinese sketch and scrap books – works of art in themselves. Here again were the dragons but here also was the 'real' China. These books were full of scraps he had collected on his travels, quite literally, along with beautiful art work – colour painted or just sketched in black and white –

capturing the wonder and beauty of a fascinating country and culture. A scrap of advertising paper from a wall or a tea packet found in the street these were pasted in and sat snugly alongside Chris' own sketches of the people he saw going about their daily work, the sights – the Great Wall – the transport – trains in glorious watercolour. Chinese history was brought to life around us in the gallery and through Chris' fantastic scrapbooks – his two sources of imagination and story.

Visiting the gallery with Chris, seeing his sketches and scrapbooks and reading *The Great Race* has opened my eyes to the possibilities the everyday objects and people who surround us offer us for storytelling. When I asked Chris about his next plans for a book he told me he will look around him for some inspiration, the artist again looking for his next muse.

**Louise Ellis-Barrett**



# Duncan Beedie's *The Last Chip*

**Rachel Kennedy interviews author and illustrator Duncan Beedie, author of the *The Bear Who Stared*, shortlisted for the 2017 Waterstones Children's Book Prize and his latest book is *The Last Chip*, published by Templar.**

Welcome Duncan! First tell us a bit about yourself.

**Hi, so my name is Duncan and I'm a writer and illustrator from Bristol. Before I became an illustrator, I worked as an animator at Aardman Studios (*Wallace & Gromit*, *Chicken Run*, *Early Man* etc). I made the jump from animation to illustration after the birth of my daughter – I was so inspired by all the picture books I would read with her and had to try making one for myself. I was very much inspired by artists like Jon Klassen, Shaun Tan, Elaine Smith and Lucy Cozens.**

Tell us what inspired *The Last Chip*?

***The Last Chip* is the story of a little hungry pigeon called Percy. Percy is struggling to find any food and constantly loses out to bigger, tougher birds. That**

**is until he meets a very generous homeless lady who shares her last chip with him. The book was actually inspired by my daughter. In Bristol there's a high rate of homelessness and rough sleepers, and one day my daughter turned to me and asked 'why does that man have his bedroom outside?' I tried to explain homelessness to her, and failed miserably to do it in a way that wasn't too bleak or too insensitive. That's where the story of Percy can from, as a way to explain this to my daughter. Part of the proceeds of the book are also going to the Trussell Trust, a food bank network that runs over 425 food banks across the UK, giving emergency food and support to over 550,000 people in crisis every year.**

It's a big subject. What were the challenges in communicating that?

**This book is far more serious in themes than my previous books. The main thing I wanted to achieve was to get the tone right and make sure there was a balance between the fun parts and the serious parts. Children always know when they're being preached at, so I wanted to ensure this story was still something entertaining but also not too intense. The story is uplifting and hopeful.**

What have you got coming up?

***The Last Chip* is my third picture book, following on from *The Bear Who Stared* and *The Lumberjack's Beard*. I'm currently working on some other picture book projects, including a new book called *The Moth Who Went to the Moon* which is coming out next year to coincide with the**

**50th anniversary of the moon landing in 1969.**

Book Review Preview:

*The Last Chip* tells the story of Percy, a very hungry little pigeon. Percy spends all day trying to find himself something to eat, but is constantly beaten

to it by bigger, stronger birds like Pirate Seagulls and Posh Ducks. That is until a homeless lady offers Percy her very last chip before snuggling up together for the night.

This book is a lovely story of a very cute pigeon (they do exist) that delivers a subtle but

thought-provoking lesson about homelessness, hunger and kindness. The book was inspired by the author's own young daughter who one day asked him to explain why a man had his bedroom outside.

See Rachel's full review in this edition's Picture Books.

# Zenith by Sasha Alberg and Lindsay Cummings

Simon Barrett interviews Sasha and Lindsay about their collaboration on the brilliant, high octane science-fiction story, *Zenith*.

*Zenith is science-fiction at its finest, dystopic and heroic in equal measures. Why did you decide to collaborate in the first place? What did you enjoy most about your collaboration?*



**Sasha -** Collaborating on something is always an interesting journey, for Lindsay and I we were

friends before we became co-authors which made the collaboration so natural and fun. We decided to collaborate in the first place because we always joked around about writing a book together and then finally, we did it! I think travelling together on tour was one of the most fun parts of working together. Writing the book was a blast but we did it from separate states so getting to travel together really brought us even closer.



**Lindsay -** What she said. I think it's so fun to have such a natural difference in our energy and what we both bring to

the table for this project. It's been fun to learn from each other along the way.

*Why did you write a science-fiction story? Did the genre of science-fiction allow you write a story that is not possible or is easier to do so compared to other genres?*

**Sasha -** Lindsay and I both grew up surrounded by science fiction stories in movies, tv shows and books. We just really loved the idea of writing our own sci-fi story! I like to say that when you write science fiction, it doesn't always have to be factually correct, adding scientific theories and

fantastical aspects are always fun to incorporate as well!  
**Lindsay -** Sci-fi has always been a huge part of my life, so it's been really fun to be able to make a modern, girl-power sci-fi story together. We both really bonded over our love of the show *FIREFLY*.

*Who, if any, are the science-fiction writers that you admire and why?*

**Sasha -** Beth Revis wrote a book series called *Across the Universe* and it was the very first sci-fi novel I read and made me fall in love with the genre.

**Lindsay -** I admire a lot of the greats, but my first "scifi" was actually *Frankenstein*. I loved that such a young, brilliant woman wrote it, and later, when I fell into the YA genre, I loved *AVALON* by Mindee Arnett.

*Zenith is also a genre-busting book as Androma Racella and*

*the female crew of the glass ship Maurader dare to do the impossible. Why did you write such strong and complex female main characters?*

**Sasha** - It was so natural to write a strong character like Androma, girls are kick-butt and awesome!

**Lindsay** - I think that's something young girls need to see in today's world. Strong women that kick butt and are friends while doing it!  
*We also find out the backstory of characters such as Androma Racella and Queen Nor. Strangely, there seems to be some symmetry between the two characters: both have public personas that hide their vulnerability. What do you find intriguing about these two characters?*

**Sasha** - Both Andi and Nor hide behind a façade of a ruthlessness. It was very interesting getting to construct their stories because it shows that you don't always need to be strong. It's okay to open yourself up and become vulnerable. When creating characters like Andi and Nor, they need to be relatable or else they aren't believable. I find that aspect most intriguing.

**Lindsay** - I love that aspect of both characters. I think it's so common to see that emotions = weakness, and I think a lot of times Nor and Andi both think that's true...but over the course of the story they begin to unfold so many truths about themselves, and learn that not being afraid of feeling things, and learning how to understanding why they feel these things, then working through them, is where real strength lies.

*It is not all-dominated by women however. At times the female characters are literally disarmed by the male characters and there is of course the central past relationship between Androma and Dextro. Why did you include these shifting power relations in the story?*

**Sasha** - I think showing a shift in power relations is vital in order for the story to be believable. Everybody has their weaknesses, just like we see between Andi and Dex. They have such a complicated history.

**Lindsay** - Because no one is perfect and without error! And things don't always go

according to plan. So often, in real life, we see things shift, so it's only natural to mirror that in fiction.

*There are also some interesting minor or supporting characters, thinking about Soyina and a particular favourite of mine, Alfie the Artificial Intelligence. Which was your favourite minor or supporting character and why?*

**Sasha** - I LOVE Alfie. He was so much fun to write since he is oblivious to social cues since he is an AI and is a great comic relief in the novel as well.

**Lindsay** - We had a ton of fun with Alfie. He definitely lightens up the story. I also loved Havoc, the alien cat of sorts, who creates a whole different level of drama that's just fun and hilarious at times.

*The book does not disappoint with the amount of fire power and hand-to-hand combat. How did you so successfully choreograph the action scenes?*

**Sasha** - Fight scenes used to be difficult for me but then someone gave me great advice. They told me to watch a fight scene from a movie and as I watch it, describe what's

happening and write it down. It helps a lot!

**Lindsay** - My debut series was basically one giant fight scene from beginning to end :o. I love getting to dive into what happens in a character's mind VS what's happening outwardly during these fight scenes. It's far more complex than just writing a punch or a kick! I actually took a year of martial arts, just to learn about how fighting works, and how to explain things correctly.

*We also follow Androma and her crew around the galaxy and learn about three very different planets: Arcadius, Adhira and Xen Ptera. Were you inspired by any particular*

*sources when writing about these planets?*

**Sasha** - I am a huge nerd when it comes to planetary science so it was a blast getting to create my own planets for this novel! Lindsay and I used Pinterest a lot as well for visual inspiration.

**Lindsay** - Pinterest for sure, to dive into some incredible concept artwork and get inspired. Again, I've always loved scifi, and one of my absolute favorite things about Star Wars is the diversity of the worlds. It's really neat getting to plan out so many different settings, and I hope ZENITH has some of that "Star Wars" ish

feel to how unique each place in the galaxy really is.

*Finally, Zenith finishes in calamity. What have readers got to look forward to?*

**Sasha** - Oh gosh, how do I say anything without giving too much away? Let's go with this: Death, lots of death. Romance, steamy romance and plot twists galore!

**Lindsay** - In book one, tons of action and blood! In book two, it's going to be a wild ride. A lot of mind tricks, a lot of diving deeper into characters that readers didn't get a chance to connect with in book one...and more super cool settings

*Zenith* is an explosive science fiction story about Androma Racella and her all-girl crew - Androma or Andi is the captain, Lira is the pilot and there are two gunners, Gilly and Breck - all are running and escaping from their pasts and somehow finding a new family on the Maurader. Outmanoeuvred, outgunned and out of options however Andi agrees to undertake a desperate mission to break out General Cortas' son from a Xen Ptera prison that only the dead leave. Working once more with her ex-lover, Dex, Andi has to confront her past and the death of her best friend. Battling memories and her feelings towards Dex, Andi must also fight for her life to complete her mission.

In the Mirabel Galaxy, an uneasy truce exists between the Unified Systems and Xen Ptera. Defeated, Xen Ptera lay in ruins and those not dead are dying, like the planet, from the amount of radiation. Queen Nor of Xen Ptera however is close to exacting her revenge on the Unified Systems, secretly developing the ultimate weapon, Zenith, that will restore Xen Ptera's glory. The nature of this weapon however remains a mystery throughout the story, and somehow, unknowingly, Andi's mission is part of Queen Nor's master plan.

*Zenith* is great science fiction, following the crew of the Maurader as they navigate through space and the galactic turmoil of the Mirabel Galaxy. Above all its story is a question of survival.

**Review by Simon Barrett**

## Picture books

### **Bear Child**

Geoff Mead, illus. Sanne Dufft

### **Blue Monster Wants It All**

Jeanne Willis, illus. Jenni Desmond

### **The Chinese Emperor's New Clothes**

Ying Chang Compestine, illus. David Roberts

### **Eric Makes A Splash**

Emily Mackenzie

### **Frankenbunny**

Jill Esbaum, illus. Alice Bereton

### **Grace and Katie**

Susann Merritt, illus. Liz Anelli

### **The Hundred and One Dalmatians**

Adapted by Peter Bently (originally by Dodie Smith), illus. Steven Lenton

### **I Say Ooh You Say Aah**

John Kane

### **Inky's Great Escape**

Casey Lyall, illus. Sebastia Serra

### **The Itchysaurus**

Rosie Wellesley

### **The Last Chip**

Duncan Beedie

### **Little Whale**

Jo Weaver

### **Lola Dutch is a Little Bit Much**

Kenneth & Sarah Jane Wright

### **My Sweet Orange Tree**

José Mauro de Vasconcelos, trans. Alison Entrekin

### **N is for Nursery**

Blossom Budney, illus. Vladimir Bobri

### **Not Yet Zebra**

Lou Kuenzler, illus. Julia Woolf

### **Read the Book, Lemmings!**

Ame Dyckman, illus. Zachariah OHora

### **Ruby Rides an Elephant**

Ruby Lovell, illus. Zara Merrick

### **Ten Fat Sausages**

Michelle Robinson, illus. Tor Freeman

### **Tiny Little Rocket**

David Fickling, illus. Richard Collingridge

### **The Weaver**

Qian Shi, pub. Andersen Press

### **What is Round**

Blossom Budney, illus. Vladimir Bobri

## **Junior books**

### **The 1,000 Year Old Boy**

Ross Welford

### **Brightstorm**

Vashti Hardy

### **A Different Dog**

Paul Jennings, illus. Geoff Kelly

### **Fabio The World's Greatest Flamingo Detective: The Case of the Missing Hippo**

Laura James, illus. Emily Fox

### **Horace and Harriet Take on the Town**

Clare Elsom

### **The Ice Garden**

Guy Jones

### **KidGlovz**

Julie Hunt, illus. Dale Newman

### **The Magic Misfits**

Neil Patrick Harris

### **Make Me Awesome**

Ben Davis, illus. Mike Lowery

### **Max the Theatre Cat and the Disappearing Diva**

Sarah Todd Taylor, illus. Nicola Kinnear

### **Night Speakers**

Ali Sparkes

### **The Night Zoo Keeper – The Giraffes of Whispering Wood**

Joshua Davidson and Buzz Burman

### **Rory Branagan (Detective)**

Andrew Clover, illus. Ralph Lazar

### **Running on Empty**

S E Durrant

### **Stick & Fetch Investigate. Barking up the Wrong Tree**

Philip Ardagh, illus. Elissa Elwick

### **Teacup House: Meet the Twitches**

Hayley Scott, illus. Pippa Curnick

### **Tin**

Pádraig Kenny

### **The Travels of Ermine: Trouble in New York**

Jennifer Grey, illus. Elisa Paganelli

### **The Unicorn Quest**

Kamilla Benko

### **Zenith**

Sasha Alsberg and Lindsay Cummings



## **Young Adult books**

### **Dear Katie**

Katie Thistleton

### **Fandom**

Anna Day

### **Far From the Tree**

Robin Benway

### **Goodbye, Perfect**

Sara Barnard

### **The Hazel Wood**

Melissa Albert

### **I Am Thunder**

Muhammad Khan

### **Kick**

Mitch Johnson

### **Moxie**

Jennifer Mathieu

### **No Shame**

Anne Cassidy

### **Satellite**

Nick Lake

### **The Serpent King**

Jeff Zentner

### **The Smoke Thieves**

Sally Green

### **Someone to Love**

Melissa de la Cruz

### **Sunflowers in February**

Phyllida Shrimpton

### **Sweetfreak**

Sophie

### **Teacher's Dead**

Benjamin Zephaniah

### **Tender**

Eve Ainsworth

### **Things I'm Seeing Without You**

Peter Bognanni

### **The Truth and Lies of Ella Black**

Emily Barr

### **Truly Devious**

Maureen Johnson

### **Witchborn**

Nicholas Bowling

## **Non-Fiction books**

### **100 Things to Know About History**

Laura Cowan, Alex Frith, Minna Lacey and Jerome Martin, illus. Federico Mariani and Parko Polo

### **Animalkind**

Pablo Salvaje

### **Charlie's Magic Carnival**

Marit Törnqvist

### **Diddy Disciples Book 2: Worship and Storytelling Resources for Babies, Toddlers and Young Children**

Sharon Moughtin-Mumby

### **Hello Birds, What Do You Say?**

Loes Botman

### **How to be a Fashion Designer**

Lesley Ware, illus. Tiki Papier

### **The Island and the Bear**

Louise Greig, illus. Vanya Nastanlieva

### **Joseph and the Fearful Family**

Fiona Veitch Smith, illus. Andy Catling

### **Joseph and the Hidden Cup**

Fiona Veitch Smith, illus. Andy Catling

### **Politics for Beginners**

Alex Frith, Rosie Hore and Louie Stowel, illus. Kellan Stover, experts Dr Hugo Drochon and Dr Daniel Viehoff

### **Story Worlds: A Moment in Time: A Perpetual Picture Atlas**

Thomas Hegbrook

### **Through the Seasons**

Sarah Laidlaw

Voices from The Second World War  
First News (UK) Ltd

### **What Do Animals Do All Day?**

Wendy Hunt, illus. Marijke Buurlage

### **What's Worrying You?**

Molly Potter, illus. Sarah Jennings

### **What Would She Do? Real-life Stories of 25 Rebel Women Who Changed the World.**

Kay Woodward, illus. Andrew Archer, Susan Burghart, Sofia Bonati, et al

### **Wild World**

Angela McAllister, illus. Hvass & Hannibal