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Picture books

Blue Badger

Huw Lewis Jones, illus. Ben Sanders, pub. Happy Yak

Badger is confused. He doesn't know if he is black and white, or if he is white and black. 'And to make matters worse, he now has a blue bottom'. So begins a marvellous adventure in a funny and heart-warming picture book written with Huw Lewis Jones' dry wit and filled with emotive illustrations from Ben Sanders this is a book to fall in love with!

In order to find out the answer to his query, Badger sets off on a journey of self-discovery and asks the opinion of every creature that he comes across. All the creatures that Badger meets are black and white (or white and black) just like him, however, they all react differently to Badger's question. Some of them are kind and friendly, others are rude or too self-absorbed to show any interest in Badger. It isn't until Badger meets Penguin that he gets answers to his questions. Penguin is kind and astute and recognises Badger and his qualities.

As well as being a fun story, *Blue Badger* will be a useful book to share with children when discussing behaviour and personal qualities. Children will also enjoy the mystery element as the reason for Badger's bottom being blue is finally solved.

Vicky Harvey

The Comet

Joe Todd-Stanton, pub. Flying Eye Books

Nyla loves her home. It's the place Dad takes her after picking her up from school. It's the place where they cook and make up stories and where they watch the sun come up in the morning. Nyla has lots of wonderful memories that are centred around her home – one night they 'even saw a comet'. But when Dad has to find a new job, they have to move to a new house in the city. This new house isn't like the home they have left behind and Nyla doesn't like it. There doesn't seem to be anything good about their new life in the city – Dad is clearly unhappy too.

One night, Nyla sees a comet and imagines that something magical grows on the spot where it lands. Nyla is inspired to paint what she imagines and does so on the living room floor and across the walls. When Dad discovers what she is doing he is cross, and Nyla feels that she has ruined everything. After bathing Nyla and washing all the paint from her face and hair, Dad switches on the living room light.

When he sees exactly what Nyla has done he instantly realises why and together, they work to turn their new house into a place that they will both be happy to call home.

Written and illustrated by Jo Todd-Stanton, *The Comet* is a beautiful picture book with a powerful message about adapting to change, the power of the imagination and the meaning of home.

Vicky Harvey

Dearest One

Arielle Dance, illus. Jenny Duke, pub. Lantana Publishing

This heart-warming picture book from Arielle Dance and illustrated in full by Jenny Duke is a series of thoughts and wishes from a grandparent to their young grandchild. It is full of short messages that they hope will help the young person in their growing up. If you can, imagine a letter written by your grandmother and you will be able to imagine the concept of this book.

Each page only has a title and typically four or five lines of text, but the wisdom that is expressed in these short lines will hopefully help young readers and their carers see the positive aspects of life. The illustrations are bright, bold and full of vibrant life. In many ways they remind me of many of Helen Oxenbury's board books and the large-scale double page layout really brings the book to life.

The text itself is concise and poetic, although it is not rhyming in the way that we often expect from picture books.

This would make a lovely gift from a grandparent to a child as well as being a lovely book to support empathy for young children in the classroom.

Margaret Pemberton

The Friendship Bench

Wendy Meddour, illus. Daniel Egnéus, pub. Oxford University Press Children's

This team of author and illustrator created the award-winning *Lubna and Pebble*, about children displaced by war and friendship, which was also enjoyed and reviewed by this reviewer in 2019. In this picture book, we also have a child who needs a friend.

Tilly, her Mum and her dog, Shadow, have recently moved to the coast. Tilly loves playing with her dog, but is anxious about starting at a new school as she can't take Shadow with her. She is unhappy at school, and alone at playtime, until her teacher suggests she try the Friendship Bench. By the time

Tilly gets there, there is already someone on it, and she returns to the teacher, who encourages her to go back and try again. This time she sits on the bench next to a boy, and, after sitting in silence, they agree that the Friendship Bench is not working, but decide to decorate it with sticks, shells and very special magic sand to make it better. As she walks home from school, Tilly tells her Mum all about Flint and his really hairy dog, so they decide that the Friendship Bench has been fixed really well.

This is a delightful story, and beautifully illustrated. Tilly and her teacher wear lovely Scandinavian-style patterned sweaters, perfectly depicted by Daniel Egnéus, and there is a lot of character in the faces and body-language of the children in particular. The picture of Tilly alone behind a lot of feet all happily playing, cleverly emphasises her isolation. This is useful book for sharing with children starting school, or a new school, showing that sometimes you have to work at making friends, but the Friendship Bench, or in some places, the Buddy Bench, is a really good idea.

Diana Barnes

The Girl Who Planted Trees

Caryl Hart, illus. Anastasia Suvarova, pub. Nosy Crow

This charming picture book opens with a scene, in this scene we see a young girl standing outside with her grandfather looking at picture books. In these books there are pictures of green trees, colourful flowers and the little girl asks her grandfather where they've all gone. He sadly tells her that they are gone because the earth has dried up so nothing grows. The little girl decides to change all that. She climbs to the top of a mountain where she digs a hole and buries some seeds. But nothing happens, so she tries again and this time she waters them, and they grow. It is looking positive.

Then one day her village suffers a bad storm and everything on her mountain top is destroyed. Or is it? The little girl sees a weed has flowered she starts again, but this time the whole village help out. Over many years they transform the village into a place where everything looks beautiful and everything grows.

2022 is The Queens Golden Jubilee and we have been asked to plant trees to mark the occasion, this is a fitting book to encourage this, I have 12 trees in my garden, and I've been told I'm not allowed anymore. But I will put another one in! This truly wonderful book highlights all the reasons why we need to be protecting the environment and what we can do to help it. Imagine how beautiful the planet would look if we all planted just one tree.

Helen Byles

The King's Ship

Valerio Vidali, pub. Farshore

This picture book is based on the true story of a 17th century Swedish warship, the Vasa, which was so overloaded with sculptures and treasures that it sank on its maiden voyage, and this is explained at the end of the book. First we have to read the story.

In this version, we have a rich and powerful king of a vast kingdom, whose palace is full of beautiful marble statues and is protected by many cannons. The king has everything he wants, except a ship. He orders one to be built, and the workers cut down the tallest trees to make one. This ship is not big enough for the king's ambition, though, so the workers cut down all the trees and built a magnificent ship, though they do wonder whether it might be too big. The king wants it to be more terrifying, and orders the cannons to be moved, though the workers wonder whether they might be too heavy. Then the king wants it to be more beautiful, and the statues are moved to the ship, with more muttering from the workers. At last the ship is big, terrifying and beautiful, and the king is happy. The people are summoned to admire the ship as it takes to the water, but a breeze makes the ship tilt - 'uh oh! Plop!' It sinks. "Oh well", says the king, "at least I've got my beautiful palace..." but he hasn't, and that's the end of the story.

The dangers of overreaching are clear, and the fact that all the trees have to be cut down is evidently bad. The illustrations are fun: lots of colourful little figures are very busy. This will be good to share with one or more children, who may like to anticipate the result.

Diana Barnes

Mina

Matthew Forsythe, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Mina is a stunningly illustrated tale of cat and mouse!

Young Mina loves her books, quiet and she loves her father, even his very strange and often loud surprises from the outside world. He has big dreams and lofty ideas as well as being endlessly positive! Mina is potentially more realistic about his surprises but loves him for them anyway. While his heart is certainly in the right place, he is rather blissfully unaware that Mina would prefer reading or drawing in a quiet space.

When he brings home his latest surprise, Mina is definitely more realistic about the danger they are in. While Mina's father believes he has brought home a squirrel, Mina is not so sure. Promised that all will be fine, Mina is pleasantly pleased when it seems he is right. The tale continues on with the arrival of more "squirrels" until they stop eating and the doctor is called, who then confirms what Mina has thought all along. These are not 'squirrels' but cats and they are keen to eat Mina, her father

and the doctor. As you read the story, your eyes are inevitably drawn to the illustrations that are so wonderfully creative and colourful, full of heart and imagination.

Ideal for any age group, there is much to discover in this tale of trust, courage and the love between a parent and their child, not to mention surprises! My favourite surprise has to be the stick insects, their love of books and “deep charismatic voice”! I found this a fascinating book to read and share.

Erin Hamilton

Mouse’s Wood

Alice Melvin, pub. Thames & Hudson

Welcome to Mouse’s wood, take care to follow the map before you open the story and then get ready to peep through the cut-out pages as you begin to explore a year in nature. Once you have peeped, read the text and then lift the flaps to see what extra details have been included, what is happening in the story.

Beginning in January with the awakening of the new year and the soft snow we find Mouse snuggled in bed under blankets, rugs and quilts too! In February it is time for a wrapped-up stroll in the wood and in March it is time for the Hedgehog to be woken. After the rains of April comes the fun of a picnic in May. June brings strawberries whilst there is fun on the river in July. Dig up the veg in August and pick the berries in September. Play with leaves in October and enjoy a warming bonfire in November. In December it is time for everyone to gather for some winter indoor fun.

This beautiful, gentle story takes us through the months of the year, through the seasons, in the company of Mouse and it ends with a guide to the year and all the things that can be spotted when you are out in the woods too. A gentle story, an educational story, a story to delight in.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Piano Fingers

Caroline Magerl, pub. Walker Books

If at first you don’t succeed try, try again, is the theme of this book. The illustrations alone will entice you to keep page turning as they tell the story.

Piano Fingers is the story of Bea who comes from a very musical family. Bea wishes to find her niche and decides to check out the instruments’ scene. She starts with percussion and quickly realises that there is more to this musical business than she thought. Her older sister Isla makes the violin sound

so misleadingly easy. Exasperated by her own ineptitude Bea aims for bigger things, found downstairs on tiny gold wheels and smelling gently of mouse, the piano. Confidently relying on her family's hidden flair she begins by dismantling the music resting on the piano and making it into a party hat. After her disturbance of Maestro Gus, the resident cat who lives in the piano. Like a cuckoo in a cuckoo clock, he pops out as an apparition through one of the tiny panels above the keyboard, to provide instruction. But when Bea becomes disheartened by her progress, he quickly finds himself dismissed to the garden. Isla hears him through her window, lets him in and returns downstairs to join her sister.

The music is unravelled to be read rather than worn this time. And Maestro Gus benignly participates. He then retires to bed through a little door low down on the side of the piano whilst Isla and Bea accompany each other. Bea beams with happiness over her newly acquired piano fingers thanks to Isla's tuition. Just going to show, practice makes perfect.

The pictures are suitable for 3+ year olds, but the text is debatable along with the role of Maestro Gus who will undoubtedly get you thinking. Adults may appreciate the verbally creative script more easily than their audience. Whilst the children will be blown away by the pictures and characters within them.

Elizabeth Negus

The River

Tom Percival, pub. Simon and Schuster Children's Books

The lovely cover on *The River* would have any child reaching for this book. There's the river, and the happy boy and the most appealing dog with such a friendly face, anyone would want to spend time with them. Rowan and Atlas love the river, whether it is gloomy and quiet, bright and playful or sometimes loud and angry. Rowan could be like the river, too, but neither he nor the river are angry for long.

Then came a terrible shock, for one year when the winter was cold and hard, Atlas took ill and died. This tragic event is told with such a kind and thoughtful delicacy the reader is able to carry on with the story, identifying with Rowan's sadness which is so deep, he cannot concentrate on what was happening around him. The winds were icy cold, snow fell and the river froze over but Rowan didn't even notice and although his Mum and Dad tried to help him, the sadness went on.

Spring came and flowers grew, birds sang and still Rowan was sad and the river stayed frozen but one day, walking by the river, Rowan found a small bird tangled up in brambles, trying to get free. Carefully, he freed the bird, taking it home and looking after it until it was healed. As the bird healed,

so did Rowan, and like the river's ice melting, Rowan's grief and sadness gave way to new hope and love.

The River is a powerful story of love and loss and healing, told with a gentle strength that will comfort and assure. The illustrations are beautifully detailed, the soft colours drawing the reader in to Rowan's world. A look back at dear Atlas and we start all over again. A wonderful book to keep and treasure.

Gwen Grant

The Royal Leap-Frog

Peter Bently, illus. Claire Powell, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

When I opened the parcel containing *The Royal Leap-Frog*, I immediately smiled at the front cover. The mixture of matt and glossy finish with foiling and bright colours is so striking, and the illustration by Claire Powell is full of action and expression. It made me want to dive straight into the story.

The words by Peter Bently are great fun to read aloud, my son and I enjoyed the rhyming story so much. A flea and a grasshopper are disagreeing about who can jump the highest, so decide to let the king decide. A wise frog decides to tag along on their journey to the royal palace. The characters are beautifully illustrated by Claire Powell, and each have their own Tudor inspired look or outfit, their various expressions are wonderful and add extra comedy to the story, there is so much to see in each spread, you can look at each one for ages.

The shrewd frog watches on as the flea and grasshopper cause absolute chaos in the palace, while the king and his guests try to eat their meal. Frog bides his time until his clever plan is revealed at the end, along with an unexpected twist and nod to the classic fairy tale: *The Frog Prince*.

I would highly recommend this beautiful book. The combination of the rhyme, exciting story and stunning illustration is bound to delight any little one and their grown up at story time.

Sarah Lovell

Small's Big Dream

Manjeet Mann, illus. Amanda Quartey, pub. HarperCollins

This is an inspiring story of not letting others dictate what your dreams should be and showing each of us what we can achieve in life. It is the story of a young girl called 'Small' who lives in a small house and everything in her life seems to be small. When she starts to dream about doing bigger things, she

is told to keep her feet on the ground. But every night she can look out of the window and see the BIG city, mountains, the sea and the sky. Then one night she dreams about going to the Moon and her dream shows her huge numbers of other children, all floating in space and dreaming about achieving big things. So Small decided to follow her dreams in the future.

What a truly wonderful tale of not being limited by where you start in life. We all have the potential to follow our dreams and become more than we think at first. It is a magical story for young people to understand what is possible and it is an excellent book to read with young children, especially those with low esteem. A beautiful read.

Margaret Pemberton

This Girl Can Do Anything

Stephanie Stansbie, illus. Hazel Quintanilla, pub. Little Tiger Press

Meet Ruby, a feisty little girl that is so confident that NOTHING will get in her way - She can simply do anything! This book is incredibly inspiring to girls, encouraging them, from a young age, to listen to their inner selves, to learn to do what is needed, what they desire to enable them to achieve.

New to the illustration world, Hazel Quintanilla has illustrated a very cheeky Ruby in a very retro style with lots of expression. The highlight of these illustrations is the small details around Ruby such as the parents and the dog in the background! They're so relatable they do make you chuckle. I love how there is very little text from Stephanie Stansbie but the pictures really carry the story. It's a perfect balance of whole page pictures to multiple ones to a page.

I would recommend this book to any parents who have little girls. Girls need to read and be told that yes you can do what you dream and go do it! Nothing is going to be in your way, you just need to listen to your inner self.

Natalie Golding

Wellington's Big Day Out

Steve Small, pub. Simon & Schuster

It is Saturday morning and Wellington has woken up early. Wellington likes Saturday mornings because they are always good. This particular one is going to be extra good because it is Wellington's birthday and he is going to be a whole year older than he was yesterday which of course means he is even more grown up than he was yesterday. The pancakes for breakfast are such an alluring treat that

Wellington nearly missed the present on the table next to him! Of course now that he is more grown up he opens it very carefully to find a brand new jacket – exactly like dad’s – BUT...too big.

Wellington and his dad embark on a trip into the city to the tailor where the jacket can be altered. They have a ride on the bus, they enter the big city where everything is simply...big. The tailor is closed so while they wait they enjoy a BIG strawberry sundae, try playing a BIG tuba and then visit grandpa because the tailor is still not there.

Through all this Wellington is learning but it is from grandad that comes the most important lesson of all, that wishes sometimes come true. Will Wellington learn that wishing to be big as fast as possible is a wonderful wish but that actually taking your time and growing up slowly can be just as much fun?

With wonderful, comical illustration, a tender message and an even more tender heart Steve Small has created an irresistible book about family, about growing up and about learning to be you.

Colin Paterson

When Creature Met Creature

John Agard, illus. Satoshi Kitamura, pub. Scallywag Press

When Creature Met Creature is a subtle and powerful story of the importance of emotions and relationships. The Creature-of-No-Words is perfectly happy on his own. He likes eating nice things and sitting snug and warm in front of his fire when it is cold, but he has no words to help him understand or relate how he feels. So when, one day, the Creature-of-No-Words feels very unhappy, as if he has been touched by an icy chill, he beats his chest, bangs his head and groans loudly, growing more and more sad.

When the Creature-of-Words first sees him, she knows what is wrong with him and what will make him feel better. She loves words. Splashing in the sea, she shouts ‘HAPPY HAPPY.’ When she has a fire, she shouts ‘AH FIRE’ and now, when she sees the sad Creature, she shouts ‘HUG HUG,’ moving closer to him until they are hugging, and the cold chill in the Creature-of-No-Words melts clean away. Now the Creature-of-No-Words has learnt words of his own, he and the Creature-of-Words live together in a house of words, two friends talking to each other or, when they feel like it, just lying quiet on the grass.

The dazzling, fiery illustrations are detailed and absorbing. The two creatures are entirely sympathetic, friends in the making for the reader. The gorgeous, freezing night illustration will draw small fingers sliding over rocks and snow, fire and birds, just as the fabulous sea picture will almost certainly convince that it does actually splash. Told in joyful verse, the final illustration of the two

friends hugging with the fox, the cat, the squirrel, the duck and birds all around them leaves lots of room for any child to join in.

Gwen Grant

Junior Books

The Boy in the Post

Holly Rivers, pub. Chicken House

When three siblings from a quiet English village see an advertisement for paid summer holiday work, they know it will be more exciting than spending their school holidays at home alone without their work-obsessed mum. So, Orinthia, Séafra and Taber Shaloo apply for a summer job with the eccentric Grandy Brock who is training a menagerie of animal postal workers. But when Geronimo, a homing pelican, fails to return from a delivery, Taber mails himself to New York in search of the missing bird. Adventure-seeking Orinthia and reluctant, but loyal, Séafra secretly set off to find him. They soon learn that Grandy Brock has a thorny history with the traditional postal service and become embroiled in a stamp collecting standoff with their little brother as the bartering piece.

From the wild and whacky workings of the animals to the cargo hold of a cruise ship and the dazzling energy of New York, *The Boy in the Post* is an adventure novel that will whisk young readers across the globe. As Orinthia follows in the footsteps of her idol, Ophelia Pearcart – a renowned explorer, she jumps at the chance to send herself to America via a shipping box in order to rescue her little brother. Séafra, always the voice of reason, adamantly objects to the plan, but eventually gives in and off they go on an adventure like no other. Along the way, they are chased, discovered, printed on a wanted poster, but also helped and cared for by an eclectic group of characters. From boats to balloons, taxis to trains, the children will stop at nothing to find Taber and the lost pelican.

Written during COVID lockdown, a tremendous sense of freedom and adventure is prevalent throughout the story. There's also a good dose of naughtiness – lying, stealing, trespassing, and the like – something that children can experience vicariously through the characters. The children's relationship with their nearly absent mother is disheartening at first, but pleasantly resolved in a sweet conclusion.

The Boy in the Post is an imaginative, action-filled novel that takes children on a wholly-unique adventure with family at its core.

Stephanie Ward

The Drowning Day

Anne Cassidy, pub. UCLan Publishing

Anne Cassidy is best-known for the 'gritty' realism of her young adult novels which include the award-winning *Looking for JJ*. This is very different: it's an adventure story in the 'cli-fi' genre and is a chilling portrayal of the world we could be heading for if we don't address the climate emergency as if it is an emergency.

The story is set in the mid-21st Century, when drastic flooding has struck twice, and even in the East Midlands people are fleeing from rising tides. Jade's granddaddy is one of the elders who remembers 'past-world', which, when he describes it to her, sounds like an impossible fantasy, the almost magical force of electricity powering everything from aircraft to toothbrushes. Now life is harsh, and nothing can be taken for granted. Diminishing land and resources have created new inequalities and harsh new regimes; when Jade sets off for North-Hampton to search for her missing sister, she must inveigle her way past checkpoints, and invent lies to protect new companion Samson, one of the 'Ferals' who live at a level of society below even that of the Wetlanders. Meanwhile a powerful few have colonised High-Town, where wealth and privilege protect them from the hardship's others endure.

While searching for her sister Mona, Jade forms new alliances and enlarges her circle of compassion. This is a very successful departure for Anne Cassidy, addressing issues which could hardly be more important while engrossing readers in an exciting story of survival, courage and loyalty.

Linda Newbery

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

Furthermoor

Darren Simpson, pub. Usborne

Furthermoor is a parallel worlds style adventure that is absolutely perfect for confident chapter book readers, aged 10+. The story focuses around Bren, a young boy experiencing bullying at high school who finds sanctuary in the imaginary world he created with his sister, who he lost in an accident not long ago, and who awaits his visits to the beautiful world of Furthermoor to see her too. But the harmony of his safe haven does not last when a creepy character arrives, causing destruction at every opportunity, and Bren finds both worlds he exists in feature a bully, and one he does not feel capable of standing up to. Then he makes a friend in new boy Cary, and slowly Bren starts to believe in himself, and faces up to all that he has been avoiding - including grieving for his sister.

This is a powerful read that covers some tough topics such as loss, grief, and bullying, and Darren Simpson does not hold back in detailing the most extreme of bullying experiences, which ensures readers become invested throughout the book as they will Bren to succeed in facing up to them. Simpson portrays the impact of loss and grief on each of Bren's family, which makes this an incredibly poignant read. It is easy to understand why Bren longs to escape to Furthermoor, the place is

breathtakingly beautiful, and it offers the opportunity to relax away from those at school that are making life difficult, and readers will definitely enjoy the journey Bren goes on, through both worlds, to believing in himself, and realising he is incredibly special too.

This is such a compelling read, and one I highly recommend.

Sam Thomas

The Great Fox Illusion

Justyn Edwards, illus. Flavia Sorrentino, pub. Walker Books

A unique magical mystery full of task-solving and trickery! The Great Fox has set up a competition. The winner will take over the legacy that he has left behind.

Felicity Lions (Flick) has her eyes set on winning the competition but not for the same reason as the other entrants. Flick wants to win so that she can claim back the Bell System – the greatest trick ever invented – which her father created. Upon the announcement of the Great Fox's death a television show has been set up to find his successor. Entrants from all over the country have applied to take part in the competition held at the Great Fox's uniquely designed home in Dorset. After the competition is narrowed down to the final four, Felicity Lions has to work with Charlie, another contestant, to solve the different challenges and they work their way through the levels of Great Fox's home to win the greatest prize of all – the arsenal of tricks and stunts that made the Great Fox the renowned illusionist that he was.

Flick not only has to race against her opposing team however, as others involved want her out of the competition due to her relationship to Samuel Lions, famous magician in his own right and her father. Will she be able to form a partnership with Charlie which will lead her to what she desires, or will Harry and Ruby (the other team) navigate their way to the prize?

Flick Lions is a terrific protagonist who is smart, determined and forms an unlikely team with Charlie. She represents young amputees incredibly well, and Justyn Edwards has captured the difficulties that people with limb difference face each day, managing prosthetic limbs along with discomfort when moving. This will be perfect for any budding magicians out there – especially with references to David Copperfield and Harry Houdini amongst others!

Tom Joy

Hedgewitch

Skye Mckenna, pub. Welbeck Flame

Cassie Morgan has been left no choice. She has run away. She had to. The trouble is she doesn't really know where to run away to or what she is going to do now she has run; all she knows is that she doesn't want to be in that awful boarding school any longer and that she is quite certain her mother is still alive. Cassie's life is about to get turned upside down and inside out and her new life begins in an alley with a talking cat and a handy broomstick.

With some rather unpleasant magical Goblin nabbers trying to capture her Cassie has no choice other than to trust the talking cat when he tells her to climb onto the broomstick and think at it to make it move. Cassie and the cat escape only for Cassie to learn that he was looking for her and that he is about to take her to the family she didn't know she had.

Once they reach the enchanted village of Hedgley, Cassie, who has always believed in magic and faery soon discovers that there is much more to it than she could ever have imagined. She is thrown into training and even more suddenly a very exciting magical adventure.

Skye McKenna's debut is a true magical fantasy, a book that has you intrigued from its outset, invested in the characters and believing in the world building. *Hedgewitch* is just the start of some amazing new magical fantasy adventure and I can't wait to read more.

Dawn Jonas

The Last Firefox

Lee Newbury, illus. Laura Catalan, pub. Puffin Books

Charlie hasn't got long before he starts high school, for most children this is a scary time, but for Charlie this is going to be worse, Charlie finds life scary and he is not looking forward to it. Charlie lives with his two dads, both dads have different personalities so their family works well. His dads are in the process of adopting a sibling for Charlie and Charlie is doing his best to be brave for his sibling. Charlie is also being bullied.

While out minding his own business Charlie accidentally becomes guardian to a firefox Cadino. We soon learn that Cadino is special because he's the last remaining firefox and he has a hunter chasing after him. Charlie must find some bravery to protect this newly discovered firefox. Charlie needs to find his feet and discover his inner courage.

There has been some amazing debuts in 2022 and this is another one. This has everything you need in a book. This book is fast paced, engaging true to life with a sprinkle of magic. This book will show you the power of magic, this helps you to empathise with childhood anxieties. It did leave me wanting my own firefox.

Helen Byles

Libby and the Parisian Puzzle

Jo Clarke, illus. Becka Moor, pub. Firefly

I really enjoyed this book and was hooked from the first page. It is such a great concept. *Libby and the Parisian Puzzle* is the story of a young girl being sent to join the Mousedale's Travelling School, run by her Aunt Agatha. The school is going to be in Paris that term and Libby's mum waves goodbye to her from the platform of the Eurostar in London. Libby is conflicted, excited to be going to a new school but upset she can't travel to Ecuador with her photographer mother.

Libby is a brilliant character who jumps off the page. Her love of mysteries, impulsiveness, love of photography and determination to get to the truth no matter what, are ideal traits for this young amateur detective. The concept of a travelling school is ingenious allowing for different settings, a fantastic set-up for this unique new series. At Libby's new school she meets Connie, also new, and they soon become best friends. They visit all the main attractions in Paris during which her aunt is accused of stealing a distinctive jewelled brooch. Libby and Connie embark on a quest to prove her innocence.

The age range is set flawlessly for lower middle grade readers. This book has plenty of intrigue and red herrings to keep young readers turning the pages. Well-developed, believable characters have their own distinguishing features. Vivid descriptions of Paris brought back memories of my own visits. My hankering for macarons and hot chocolate increased during reading this book! Becka Moor's illustrations, from Connie's long flowing red hair to Libby and Connie's shared bedroom, perfectly complemented the text with their superb detail.

I recommend this book to all young mystery lovers. Several mysteries to solve, as well as the case of the missing brooch, are included. The build-up to proving her aunt's innocence and exposing the guilty party is cleverly and sensitively plotted. The final conclusion was realistic, convincing and a delightful climax to this outstanding debut novel. I also enjoyed the sneak peek chapter for the next book in the series, *Libby and the Highland Heist*.

Anita Loughery

Reviewer's Website: www.anitaloughrey.com

The Ogress and the Orphans

Kelly Barnhill, pub. Piccadilly Press

Everyone agreed that Stone-in-the-Glen used to be a lovely town, the trees blossomed, the kindly townsfolk looked out for one another, all roads led to the book-filled library. The day the dragons flew over and the library burned to the ground started all manner of calamities. The school and park were lost, the town fell to ruin. It was the fault of the Ogress they said, putting their faith in the charismatic, smooth-talking Mayor, his glib promises of help. Only the fifteen clever and caring children in Orphan House saw the truth. They knew the Ogress was hardworking, kind and generous, secretly delivering gifts to the townsfolk with her flock of crows. When a child goes missing, the finger of blame points again at the Ogress. The children know they can save the town - and the Ogress, but how can they reveal the real villain of the piece to the deluded townspeople when they refuse to listen to the truth?

Barnhill has a phenomenal gift for storytelling. This is a stunningly skilful example of her talent: perfectly paced, beautifully told, character-driven and with a real fairy tale feel. The unusual, all-knowing narrator draws readers in, speaking directly to them and imploring them to “Listen” from the very first line. The cast of characters are captivating, neither all good nor all bad. The real power of this profound and thought-provoking modern classic lies in its themes and messages, brought to life through the plot and the characters without patronising or preaching: found family, importance of community, transformative power of kindness and generosity, being a good neighbour, not judging by appearances and welcoming outsiders. The many heroes highlight the power of an individual to make things better for another but also that people need to come together to create change and build a better community. “The more you give, the more you have” is a constant refrain.

The Ogress and the Orphans would make a perfect class book with its spellbinding, storyteller-style narration and timeless messages and themes. Hopeful, magical, making readers of all ages believe that a better future is possible, this is another award winner for sure!

Eileen Armstrong

One Time

Sharon Creech, illus. Sarah Horne, pub. Guppy Books

A story of self-discovery and wonderment, *One Time* is a feel-good story for any child that has ever felt like they don't belong.

This book tells the tale of Gina Filomena, a schoolgirl with an imagination that knows no bounds. She has been mocked and looked down upon by others for her flamboyant clothing and even more outrageously colourful view on the world. That is, until she meets the new boy, Antonio, someone whose mind is just as colourful as hers. Upon meeting this unique new friend Gina starts to open up again, her creativity having been quelled by people who didn't understand her. Things take a further turn for the wonderful when Miss Lightstone steps into Gina's classroom and opens her mind to the world of writing. Miss Lightstone is the teacher all writers, young and old, can only dream of. She isn't

interested in grades and conformity, her mission in life appears to be purely to spark the flame of creativity within her pupils – a mission which not everyone approves of.

But, as with most stories, the life of Gina Filomena isn't all fantasy and fun. When, one morning, Antonia doesn't turn up to class her world suddenly gets a little less vibrant. Though with a family who are obsessed with all things Italy- cue enough pasta to feed a small army- Gina is never short of writing material. A precocious little girl, who often seems to be more together than her parents, Gina is a literary lead that will inspire children to be their best, and most authentic, selves.

As a child who could often be found with her head in a dreamworld I really gelled with the character of Gina. For some reason, somewhere along the line, daydreaming seems to have gotten a bad press and I am happy to see that Creech is championing children with vivid imaginations. *One Time* is a wonderfully uplifting read and would be a perfect read for the creative youngster in your life.

Rosie Cammish Jones

Spark

Mitch Johnson, pub. Orion Children's Books

Spark, by Mitch Johnson, is a fantasy adventure novel set in a dystopian future, and its story follows Ash and his outcast companion Bronwyn as they traverse the destroyed, desolate landscape that surrounds them. Ash's village is hot, arid and suffers from a lack of water. Waking up after a ferocious storm, he discovers the water has run dry and the other villagers have all disappeared. Together with Bronwyn, he sets out in search of the 'Kingdom,' a magical place beyond 'The Wall' where life still flourishes.

For Ash and Bronwyn, venturing out of their respective villages in search of life in the 'Kingdom' is a big deal, and despite details about them being quite vague in the story, it is interesting to see how they each act and behave differently given their circumstances. Until a major plot point, their individual worlds are relatively quite small. Although the reader learns how Ash and Bronwyn's ancestors influenced their future, the two protagonists never fully learn it themselves. Stories of humanity's past are almost mythological to them, and the arid world provides plenty of twists and turns as they realise that other people can be more dangerous than storms.

While *Spark* is a fast-paced story, it also explores different belief systems, and how the ideologies of faiths can conflict with the stark realities that people face in the real world. The human characters have seemingly receded into a medieval lifestyle - instead of relying heavily on technology, like in many other novels. Interestingly, this particular fictional world and its harsh living conditions raise important questions about the future effects of climate change, and it makes Mitch Johnson's *Spark* a refreshing take on the dystopian-future theme.

It is an ideal book for young readers with an interest in the Earth's climate, or to study and encourage discussion in the classroom.

Chris J Kenworthy

Stick Boy and the Rise of the Robots

Paul Cooney, pub. Little Tiger Press Group

Imagine if you were a 2-D kid in a 3-D world, well that's Stick Boy for you. This book is the second novel in a fantastic series by Paul Cooney. The story features a young boy (a stick boy) trying to balance between being two dimensional amongst his teenage 3-D peers. Managing friendships whilst also trying to solve a mystery about a suspicious baron and some even more suspicious robots.

This book is a fantastic mystery story, ensnaring you within the first few pages. Covering a mix of emotions and detailing how it feels to forgive, fall out of friendship and suddenly fall right back into it again. A storyline that also includes neglectful parents and daring deeds all within a 248-page children's book. This book is packed with vibrant, colourful and comic book style illustrations that help to create atmosphere and intrigue. It is also filled to the brim with relatable content.

The lovely relationship between the main characters is so funny but beautiful at the same time. I recommend this book to everyone, and it would probably be suitable for all ages. But I would specifically recommend it to an age group of 8-11.

To summarise, this book is amazing, and I really think you should give it a go.

Archie Sewell, age 11

The Thief Who Sang Storms

Sophie Anderson, pub. Usborne

A fantasy adventure awaits readers in this middle grade book, which takes us to the island of Morovia, a place where division is the most apparent feature, and is something that is both present in the civilians that dwell there as well as being encouraged by those in charge too.

Morovia is home to humans on one side, and Alkonosts (people with bird like features) on the other side, and there is one rule that stands out to all that call this place home, there is to be no magic used. All of this is difficult for the youngest generation that live there to understand, perhaps none more so than Linnet, who longs for her powers to become a part of who she is, but that all takes second place

in her priorities when her dad is captured. Linnet already lost her mum at a young age, and she is determined not to lose her dad as well, so she braves awful environments as she journeys toward her dad's place of captivity, and along with some friends she makes along the way she perseveres in the face of danger to ensure she is successful in her mission.

This is a beautifully written book that immerses readers in amongst the world of Morovia and those who live there, as you will Linnet to succeed, and long to find out whether she will unlock her magical potential within herself too. Chapter by chapter readers will find themselves captivated by the story unfolding before them. There is much to enjoy from this book, as I did whilst reading it, and Sophie Anderson has undoubtedly written another popular title with this island-based adventure book.

Sam Thomas

Wilder than Midnight

Cerrie Burnell, pub. Penguin Random House

This story is about the re-invention of some of the very familiar fairy tales. It is full of fairy tale magic with many twists. What makes this book different is that the author puts a new spin on the traditional fairy tales. The fairy tales that we know are weaved together, resulting in an enchanting tale full of wonder and magic. It is a book about girls and heroines where the traditional princesses turn out to be strong, brave and brilliant girls.

Among the characters are Saffy, a good girl who follows the rules, but is curious to take the unexpected and unexplored path; Aurelia a defiant girl, locked in a tower but planning her escape and Wild Rose who us the fierce girl raised by wolves. An exciting group of characters who together change Silverthorne forever. They are a group of strong and feisty heroines. A theme of the story is how our differences make us special. For example, Wild Rose has a disability. The excitement is maintained, as these characters are locked in a tower, lost in the woods or left to the wolves. There is everything that children love about fairy tales.

As well as featuring these characters, the story is packed with locations that we associate with fairy tales. There is a castle of locked doors. A village trapped between unknown terrors and a forest of trees and tangled thorns. The kingdom of Silverthorne is full of long kept secrets. The story contains everything we have come to expect from fairy tales to make it an exciting read with wonderful characters and fascinating places.

Gary Kenworthy

Wished

Lissa Evans, pub. David Fickling Books

Wished is a glorious novel –funny, imaginative, clever and heart-warming, with important life messages embedded with the lightest of touches.

Ed and his younger sister Roo (her given name is Lucy but Ed could not say that when he was little) face a dreadful half-term week. Holiday club has been cancelled, building work has turned their tiny house upside down and now they've been told they've got to spend every day with their boring, elderly next door neighbour Miss Filey. Roo tries suggesting their week might be interesting. Ed knows better. Only he's wrong. It is extraordinary. Beyond imagination.

Miss Filey hasn't kept up with the times. Her home has not changed in decades. She looked after her ailing parents there through her teens and into adulthood. It is full to bursting with old things, among them a beloved book she was given for her tenth birthday and ten birthday cake candles. It's not long before Ed and Roo and Willard, an annoying boy who lives in the house behind, discover that each candle grants a wish connected in some way to the book. Not long either before they realise how important it is to think before they wish. Otherwise, things can go disastrously wrong. Miss Filey, who turns out to be anything but boring, quickly gets involved in their amazing adventures. They find themselves hurtling through space, journeying underwater and facing one terrifying challenge after another. Miss Filey manages to solve a crime. Emboldened by Ed's suggestion that she should do things while she still can – he uses a wheelchair and no longer has a lot of physical strength – she makes a massive life change, one that has exciting implications for them all.

This is a truly lovely book with a great cast of characters (not least Attlee the cat, who combines Eeyore-like gloom with deepest sarcasm). Humour abounds. Imagination takes centre stage. Children will love it. They may pick up along the way some valuable thoughts about assumptions, about friendship, and about physical and emotional abilities and disabilities.

Anne Harding

The Wondrous Prune

Ellie Clements, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

A fantastic book about a young girl with an interesting name and an even more interesting superpower!

Prune, her older brother Jesse and Mum have had to move town to live in their grandmother's home. She has passed away and this is the chance for a fresh start, especially for Jesse as he seems to have fallen in with a bad crowd. Jesse and their mum argue a bit, and this causes Prune to be distressed. She just wants a happy home life. When she begins to see floating colours, she is concerned that

something is wrong with her vision. Dismissing it initially, she tries to settle into her new school but it becomes obvious that Violet has taken a bullying interest in Prune. Using her sketchbook as a way to escape, Prune loses herself in her art and can scarcely believe it when her drawing leaves the page and comes to life. Those colours were just the beginning. Prune can now make the choice whether to use her superpower to protect herself from the bullies at school, or to help Jesse who is still troubled by the so-called friends they left behind.

Sharing her power with her family and friends won't be easy and she will need support, in the same way she will need support in dealing with the bullying she is subject to every day. Both Jesse and Prune need to break the cycle they seem stuck in before it all goes too far.

This is the beginning of a new series focusing on children with unique superpowers living in the same area. *The Wondrous Prune* is just the beginning, and it will be an eager wait for book two!

Erin Hamilton

Yesterday Crumb and the Storm in a Teacup

Andy Sagar, pub. Orion Children's Books

Now, everyone loves a good cup of tea, or cup of cocoa, or cup of something hot don't they? It is comforting after all. Don't forget that with it you need to have jam sandwiches too, the perfect antidote to any situation. Of course, if you are a tea witch then you can also brew a tea which will act as an antidote to any situation too.

Yesterday Crumb is not a tea witch at least not yet but she is about to become an apprentice. Having been rescued from a circus cage where she has been kept as an oddity owing to her pointy fox-like ears marking her out as different. Yesterday has no friends and only a book of faery to keep her company, the only clue to who her parents may have been. A talking raven rescues her but, a thieving crook leaves a spike of ice in her heart. All is not lost for Miss Dumpling, the travelling café of Dwimmerly End and its quirky customers and staff are there to help Yesterday, if they can and they are quite certain that they can.

Yesterday has no idea who she is, why she has strange ears and who all these people are but she soon learns they are her people whilst we learn that the nasty crook is out to get vengeance and steal something very precious. Yesterday must battle Mr Weep and his cronies, prove to a raven that she is true of heart and intention and prove to the Royal College of Witches that she can brew tea and then there is the matter of the rose she must find. With the help of all her new friends, including the wonderful Jack, Yesterday finds her new powers, her new family and some new strengths.

Andy Sagar writes with such warmth and humour that I feel in love with this new world, the new family of characters and the story. I read it from cover to cover in one sitting, I was so very absorbed. I hope you will enjoy it too.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Young Adult Books

Beasts of Prey

Ayana Gray, pub. Penguin Random House

Koffi is a beastkeeper. Working to pay off her family debt to a harsh overlord. She works at Lkossa's infamous Night Zoo, infamous for its curious, fearsome creatures. After a difficult night she accidentally unleashes a wild and mysterious power, resulting in the Night Zoo going up in flames.

Ekon is working towards his initiation as an elite warrior, just as his father and brother before him. He proud, nervous and almost ready then, in the midst of his initiation ceremony his destiny is thrown into disarray and he is thrown out of his temple forever.

The fire at the night Zoo unleashed by powerful forces, some may say powerful supernatural forces, brings Koffi and Ekon together, throws them together and gives them only one choice. They both have to listen to the power, the draw of the supernatural, the voice which speaks to them both, that they both hear, both deny, that neither understands. They must also enter the terrifying Greater Jungle, capture a terrifying monster that has been plaguing Lkossa for a century. Is their hunt one to the death? Is all they have been led to believe true? Koffi and Ekon are embarking on a journey of understanding, of discovery, of truthful realities and this is only the beginning.

Ayana Gray refers to her story as a Pan-African fantasy because Africa has shaped much of its story, has been an influence and inspiration. Even for those who know little about Africa the myths, legends, ideas that seep through the writing are clearly influenced by Africa and give the story true depth and mystery. It is a compelling, frightening at times, compulsive read, and I can't wait for more, to see how the story will unfold and develop.

Dawn Jonas

Blade of Secrets

Tricia Levenseller, pub. Pushkin Press

"I hate feeling as though I don't fit right in my own skin [...] anxiety takes up too much space, pushing me aside."

Blade of Secrets, by Tricia Levenseller, is a fantasy novel following Ziva and her sister Temra as they run from a sinister plot of world domination. Ziva is a socially anxious teenager, working as a blacksmith to create powerful weapons with her magical gifts. She goes on the run with her sister

when she learns the true intention of her latest customer - a powerful warlord - is to use the magical sword forged by Ziva, to enslave the world under her rule.

Ziva has social anxieties, she prefers metal to people, and the dynamic between she and her sister changes throughout the novel. Initially, she is co-dependent on Temra and especially protective of her, but as she discovers that Temra has wildly different ambitions to her, therein begins a conflict between the two. It was fascinating to see them learn to respect each other's wishes, and grow into themselves - particularly Ziva, whose running from the warlord made her the reluctant heroine of the story, going in search of either a worthy wielder of the magical sword she's forged, or a way to destroy it. The sisters are joined on their adventure by a handsome mercenary, and a young scholar whose extensive knowledge of the magic of the world's humans will help their cause. This is where Levenseller skilfully combines fantasy adventure with a slow-burning romance, which is fun to read.

Normally, stories that focus on social anxieties are genre-specific, so the representation of social anxiety in a fantasy novel is refreshing. Ziva's family support her with her anxieties, even admitting fears of their own, which portrays the importance of a supportive environment to young readers.

Levenseller's *Blade of Secrets* is a masterpiece of fast-paced Young Adult fantasy adventure, and slow-burning romance. Throughout the novel, the reader will develop sympathy towards Ziva for the internal battles she has with herself, and empathy with how she learns to grow and develop as a person.

Chris J Kenworthy

Blood to Poison

Mary Watson, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Savannah is a Hella's girl, named after an enslaved ancestor, who put a terrible curse on her master and rapist and his wife who looked the other way, and whose revenge continues to burn in every generation since, causing women in Savannah's family to die young. Freda, her aunt and second mother, lost control of her car and died when she was twenty-seven years old. Seventeen-year-old Savannah might not make eighteen!

Blood to Poison poignantly interleaves several fascinating storylines, shaping Savannah's life. There is a supernatural story of four sisters born on the night of a falling star, who learnt magic and became good witches, except the Jackal began practicing unnatural magic that her followers, veilwitches, continue. The story of the Jackal is also the story of Hella, Savannah's ancestor suffering the historic injustice of slavery in South Africa as well as a story of the continued contemporary violence towards women. As a young woman, Savannah is fearful of sexual violence, but particularly repugnant is the violence towards Savannah's mother, amplified perhaps by the chilling supernatural control exercised

over her. When Savannah is angry, it affects and accelerates Hella's curse. And Savannah is very angry. It is also a romantic story as Savannah's childhood friends return to Cape Town after ten years away. Savannah finds herself attracted to Dex in a relationship that see-saws between close and distant, even downright hostile.

The book is compelling, driven by one of two seemingly inevitable outcomes. Either Savannah breaks the curse (and doesn't die) or she is caught by the Jackal, who will take her power to do evil. Savannah's chances of breaking the curse seem slim and each successive stage in breaking the curse always appears to be a false dawn. Moreover, the story is so brilliantly written that the reader is left guessing the Jackal's identity until the final reveal at the grand showdown between the good witches of the market and the shadow market of the veilwitches. It was a genuine shock for me. There is also an emotional journey of betrayal as Savannah is forced and manipulated by those around her, not knowing who she can really trust. It is deep betrayal by those she loves and considers family and friends. Furthermore, Savannah's anger always seems double-edged, destructive and damaging, hurting those around her as well as empowering.

Blood to Poison is a stormy and turbulent read as Savannah fights, tooth and nail for her life.

Simon Barrett

Brighton Funk

Nofel Nawras, pub. Hope Road Publishing

Nofel Nawras is a new name to readers, and his first novel, *Brighton Funk*, reveals a deeply thoughtful writer whose insight into teenage experience fifty years ago is astonishing.

Nawras' narrator is Naseem, fifteen and a half years old in 1972, of mixed Arab inheritance, with a step-father who hates him, a mother who is afraid of her husband, and has two small children to care for. Nas is an introvert and proud bunker-off at a boys Secondary Modern School. Except that is for English lessons, taken by Mr Easton, who is approaching retirement but who nevertheless manages to keep the class under control by making Monday afternoon English Literature unusual and interesting. Nas is enthralled by literature, and in line for taking a single O Level, quite an achievement for a council house child who has been judged as useless at eleven, and therefore consigned to the lowest level of secondary education with no expectation of academic understanding or achievement.

It's very hard to maintain the input required to achieve this though when your best mate, and Nas's great friend, hovers on the edge of delinquency. Johnny's ambition is to become someone, rich and important, but he and Nas are slowly drifting further into the edge of crime to achieve this. Nas's view of the world changes when he meets Abigail, a girl from a background that couldn't be further from his. Nawras draws us into the different worlds which then make up Nas's life, the dysfunctional home

life, the possibilities offered by Mr Easton's recognition of Nas's deep empathy and ability with literature, Johnny's gradual slide into crime, and the life and love which the relationship with Abi promises. Nawras treats the teenagers' relationship with great understanding, engrossing readers with the complexity, uncertainty and excitement of something which is passionate, physical and at times problematic. We feel it is all overwhelmingly true to life as Nas copes with the difficulties, the triumphs and the sorrows of adolescence.

This is an outstanding book, poetic, terrifying at times, but with great depths which surely come from the author's heart.

Bridget Carrington

Castles in Their Bones

Laura Sebastian, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

Three princesses come of age. Engaged to three very different princes, they are duly dispatched to three very different kingdoms, but all with the same goal: to betray their future husbands. Seduction, deceit and conquest is the order of the day. The princesses must sow the seeds for conflict in each respective kingdom, clearing the way for their mother, an ambitious empress, to swoop in and take control of the entire continent of Vesteria. But the triplets are more than the biddable daughters they appear to be.

This court intrigue fantasy – the first in a brand new trilogy – brings another level of meaning to the old phrase, divide and conquer! If you enjoy a rompy and twisty novel counterbalanced with plenty of gossip and politics, then *Castles in Their Bones* may well be the next pick for you.

Laura Sebastian crafts a story seething with rebels, assassins and second agendas operating under the guise of a diplomatic mission. The world-building is so fun, drawing on astrology, starlore and magic. Each of the three kingdoms are worlds that enjoy a unique life – possibly analogues of real locations? – and are riddled with their own issues. This, combined with the multiple perspectives, lends the novel the sweeping feel of a true epic!

The three sisters are distinct personalities: Beatriz (beautiful and rebellious), Daphne (aloof and charming) and Sophronia (sweet and kind). Can they survive apart? Will they even want to? As each sister lives out her own story, each strays further and further from what she set out to do. As unexpected circumstances – and, inevitably, unexpected feelings – arise, their motives and loyalties are put to the test.

A rewarding slow-burner, *Castles in Their Bones* sets out as a wonderful echo of *Game of Thrones*. Beware: this one ends on a cliff-hanger!

Jess Zahra

Coming Up For Air

Lou Abercrombie, pub. Little Tiger Press Group

This highly readable young adult novel follows the story of Coco, whose life is changed when her mercurial mother, Min, decides to leave London to return to Piscary Bay, the south-western seaside town where she grew up. Though she will miss her old life, Coco is a positive, sensible girl – often portrayed as the more evolved of the two – and approaches the change with alacrity. Her mother has always been secretive about her family background, and Coco is eager to find out more about her past. She is also a keen swimmer and diver – the first time we meet her she is practicing holding her breath in the bath – and looks forward to exploring the waters around Piscary Bay. What she hasn't bargained for are suspicious locals, long-held grudges which threaten her new friendships, and the devastating power of the sea.

Coco is an aspiring film maker, and the prose is often framed as if she is making a film: Looks to camera; Cut to black; Cue to shot of... a technique which allows her – and the reader—a kind of objective, curated response to events. I found this unusual approach very effective and very appropriate for a media-savvy readership.

At times the prose is – well, prosaic: 'Wow,' I gasp. 'This is amazing.' And sentences like 'I know you are,' I hiss made this reader itch for the editorial blue pencil. Young readers may not notice, but I did think that sharper editing would have given this likeable, thoughtful and engaging read the opportunity to be, at least stylistically, even better.

Sheena Wilkinson

Dread Wood

Jennifer Killick, pub. Farshore

Angelo, Gustav, Naira and Hallie are not friends, but attend the same school, Dread Wood, which they are required to attend on a Saturday, the disciplinary sanction for misbehaviour in the canteen earlier in the week. They are met by Mr Canton, the teacher leading the session, begrudgingly handing in phones before setting off on their designated tasks. The surprise as they discover the disappearance of one of the school's pigs is soon dwarfed by the shock of the abduction of Mr Canton in extraordinary circumstances. The four children, led by Angelo, whose passion for natural science proves to be an asset, overcome initial diffidence to work as a team to investigate the mystery.

Angelo's initial intuition is confirmed: huge and aggressive spiders are prowling the site, using underground tunnels. They soon also deduct the involvement of the sinister Mr Latchitt, the caretaker, and his wife. Trapped in the school and hunted, the children's bond tightens, and they feel able to share with each other the reasons that led them to their punishment. The fact that these all involve the same pupil appears to them more than just a coincidence. The situation worsens when Hallie is captured by the creatures, but his friends rally to the rescue and, having finally understood the significance of a particular clue, can confront the spiders in an explosive showdown.

This is a fast-paced action with cracking dialogues, humorous touches that release the tension, and a cast of characters that complement each other well. The antagonist is menacing, and one that draws on primeval fears. The four children show great resilience, resourcefulness and the power of teamwork, especially in the scene set in the wood and in the final confrontation. There are hints to backstories as well, and particularly in the case of Angelo, the reader is allowed a glimpse into a difficult family situation. Though not elaborated fully, these clues lend the characters further dimension. Beyond the actual survival adventure, the experience allows each child to learn about themselves, recognise and face their fears and preconceptions. Most importantly, it shows them how unkind and thoughtless behaviour impacts others and how to deal with it positively. Action-packed adventure with a message, *Dread Wood* is a perfect book for older reluctant readers.

Laura Brill

Ellie Pillai is Brown

Christine Pillainayagam, pub. Faber Children's Books

Ellie Pillai is Brown is the coming-of-age YA romantic debut by Christine Pillainayagam. The book follows fifteen-year-old Ellie Pillai as she tries to navigate her way through high school and her GCSEs. From the new boy who makes her brain explode into rainbows who is going out with her best friend to the new drama teacher who notices her, Ellie feels different.

I really enjoyed this story of friendship, first love, identity, family and secrets as we follow Ellie in a musical journey throughout the book as she shares elements of songs she has written - songs that are listed in the back of the book and are actually sung by Pillainayagam on a playlist which I thought was a nice touch.

We are taken on a journey as well through pop culture through Ellie's love of old music and vintage films. From Stormzy, Cardi B and Blackpink to the Beatles, we are introduced to a whole array of familiar artists.

I also love the development of friendship into love that Ellie takes us on, with elements of surprises and twists throughout the book. I loved how Pillainayagam celebrates identity and that there are so

many elements from different characters for readers to relate to. This is a debut worth reading and I would definitely recommend it, especially if you are a music lover like Ellie!

Avi

Hotel Magnifique

Emily J. Taylor, pub. Pushkin Press

The central plot and setting of this debut YA fantasy are among the most intriguing and imaginative in the genre. The magical Hotel Magnifique appears for just 24 hours in seemingly random locations around the world. Those guests who are lucky – or wealthy – enough to be allowed inside enjoy a holiday of unimaginable luxury and adventure. They witness powerful, exhilarating magic, before being returned home, with their memories wiped of everything they have experienced in the hotel.

When Jani manages to land jobs there for herself and her younger sister, she is overjoyed to escape the insecurity of poverty and fears for the future – until she begins to realize the true cost exacted by the maître'd of the hotel who has all the staff under his power.

The story is richly peopled with fascinating characters in a world where magic has no bounds and can turn any experience, any living creature or inanimate object, from a thing of beauty to a weapon of terror. It's a thrilling, disturbing and powerful tale of ordinary people imprisoned in an extraordinary world which is both a dream come true and a nightmare. The situation brings out the best and the worst of human interaction. There are dark, violent scenes but there are also more subtle, nuanced encounters and an undercurrent of hope and resilience in dark times.

Yvonne Coppard

The Light in Everything

Katya Balen, illus. Sydney Smith, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Zofia and Tom are opposites: Zofia is bold, brave and loud while Tom is quiet and fearful. Zofia is training herself to withstand the cold seawater and swim to a rocky outcrop the locals call 'Fiji' while Tom makes paper cranes and sleeps with the lights on to drive out the dark. But when Zofia's dad and Tom's mum move in together, they must learn to get along, especially because their parents are also expecting a baby together.

Zofia is furiously angry that Tom and his mum have pushed their way into her life, she can't understand why Tom is so timid and afraid, and she's worried that her anger will drive her dad away and she will be left out of his cosy new family. Tom just wants his mum to be happy, after the difficult

times that they've had, but he can't quite trust that the new man in her life won't be aggressive and violent like his dad. But as Zofia and Tom begin to understand one another they realize that perhaps they have more in common than they know, and perhaps they can find a way to be a family.

The story is told from both Tom and Zofia's perspectives in alternating mini-chapters that make it impossible to put the book down and I finished it within an afternoon. Like *October, October*, the book cover is a stunning work of art in its own right—created by illustrator, Sydney Smith. (I have the cover art of *October, October* on a tote bag—perhaps I'll have to expand my collection.)

The Light in Everything is a quiet story, but it is exquisitely written, full of big emotions, vivid descriptions and authentic, heartrending moments. The protagonists are only 11, but I would highly recommend this book for KS3 as well as KS2 readers.

Rebecca Rouillard

My Heart & Other Breakables: How I Lost My Mum, Found My Dad, and Made Friends with Catastrophe

Alex Barclay, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Looking down at an empty notebook page, or new document stretched across a laptop screen, blank space can be more frustrating than welcoming. When Ellery Brown is given a diary by her Auntie Elaine, putting pen to paper doesn't seem like an inviting prospect. It has been two months since the death of Ellery's mum, author Laurie Brown, and Ellery finds she would rather give the diary to her best friend Meg than try and write about her feelings. After some persuasion from Meg, Ellery agrees to begin recording her day-to-day life, without pressure to write in a particular way.

Her diary entries soon become immersive, with readers quickly drawn into her life and mind. Ellery's writing is witty and fast paced, as she records conversations, questions and dilemmas. Not to mention making room for some of her favourite things: clothes, Netflix and pancakes. We soon feel at home among her family and friends, particularly in moments between Ellery and Meg. Throughout the diary, Ellery often returns to her relationship with her mum, alongside sharing stories that resurface in unexpected moments, she is honest about the way their closeness sometimes merged with arguments and loneliness. Living with her auntie's grief alongside her own, Ellery writes about alternately reaching for distractions and rejecting them, sometimes averse to her sadness, at other times overwhelmed by it.

When Ellery's grandma Lola gives her an envelope of old photos, Ellery finds a clue to the one mystery that her mum insisted on keeping: the identity of Ellery's father. She is eager to learn who her father could be, despite the risks and seemingly endless questions that accompany such a question. This

decision to pursue the mystery is one that leads to many mini adventures, a mix of chaos, creativity and chance - as well as several new personas.

While reading, we are drawn further into Ellery's mind by the visual details of this book. Its pages are made to look like Ellery's handwritten diary, with underlinings, doodles, lists and scribbles, serving as a reminder of the possibilities that exist alongside the frustrations of a blank page. As Ellery's diary grows more and more indispensable to her, she begins to feel some of the comfort that writing, and storytelling, can bring.

Jemima Breeds

Read Between the Lines

Malcolm Duffy, pub. Zephyr Books

Two boys from two different families' lives collide as their parents move in with one another. Tommy just got out of prison after getting into trouble with the police. Ryan has moved away from everything he knows to be with his dad. This is their story.

Tommy ends up going to the same school as Ryan when his old school won't accept him anymore. He's trying to stay on the good side, for him and his mum. Tommy has dyslexia and it is something he has hidden and not dealt with until one day when the parents decide to get married and ask Tommy to do a reading. Tommy asks Ryan to help him learn how to read. He asks Ryan as Ryan also has dyslexia but it's something that he has learned to cope with over the years thanks to his teachers and schooling. Throughout the book, the boys find they are more similar than different as they get into all sorts of trouble together. Ryan breaks his arm when Tommy teaches him how to skateboard and Ryan also caused a car accident when Tommy was teaching him how to drive.

With lies, secrets and trouble following the two boys throughout the book, Duffy writes an engaging book for young readers. I liked the way that the chapter titles were misspelt to reflect how someone with dyslexia may see and perceive the words. The writing takes into account regional accents and language too, which I also thought, was considerate. Overall *Read Between the Lines* is a very pleasant read with lies, secrets, and dyslexia at the heart of the story.

Avi

The Sky Over Rebecca

Matthew Fox, pub. Hachette Children's Books

What a treat for middle-grade readers Matthew Fox's debut novel is! *The Sky Over Rebecca* is a time-slip story that competes successfully with the very best of the genre. It provides the well-researched historical detail which offered the thoughtful, exciting, scary, spell-binding reader experience in which the classic twentieth-century time slip novel excelled.

The well-known classic writers: Philippa Pearce, Penelope Farmer, Madeleine L'Engle, Diana Wynne Jones, Alison Uttley, Helen Cresswell, E. Nesbit, Penelope Lively – are women writers, who far outnumber men, so it is particularly exciting to see a new writer who is also a man and can join the likes of time-slip novelists Alan Garner, William Mayne and John Rowe Townsend, and writers of fantasy/historically based novels such as David Almond!

Fox's Bath Children's Novel-winning story introduces us to Kara, a lonely ten-year-old girl living with her mother in modern Stockholm. Kara is an only child, with a kind and loving mother, but a mother who is rarely at home because of her need to work all hours to support herself and Kara. When Kara finds a 'snow angel', the traditional Swedish children's winter sculpture/game, but without the footprints of whoever made it, Kara is determined to find out who it made it and how. When she eventually finds out who it is she realizes that the mysterious person is thirteen-year-old Rebecca, and her disabled younger brother Samuel. It emerges that they are refugees and have been living rough in the woodland by the lake near Kara's home. But Kara cannot always find Rebecca and Samuel, and eventually it emerges that they are Jewish refugees, and not part of the twenty-first century, but from the past, nearly a hundred years ago, from World War II, trying to find their way home, and evade the Nazi troops who still invade their time. Kara is determined to help them but has twenty-first century problems of her own to resolve as well, from bullying boys at school to her elderly grandfather, who carefully hides his increasing frailty.

Exciting, poignant, moving and magical, this is a novel not to be missed.

Bridget Carrington

This Golden Flame

Emily Victoria, pub. Hodder & Stoughton

Karis is an orphan who has been forced into servitude for her country, well that is what she is told, and it is what she believes. Karis is a prisoner to all intents and purposes, the band around her wrist means that escape from the Scriptorium is impossible but she wants to do nothing more than escape. She wants to find her brother, her only remaining family, torn away from her seven years before. She has one friend in the Scriptorium, Dane, who has been by her side, protecting her, since they were children. Dane doesn't want to leave.

Alix and her fellow acolytes living in the Scriptorium are being trained to understand, to unlock the secrets of the ancient runes that will in turn unlock an army of automatons. A practical, outdoors lesson sees Karis badly injured when falling from one of the automatons, but it also gives her hope. When Karis falls she finds a cave and an automaton, a hidden automaton. Sneaking back after dark she finds the key to unlocking the automaton and slowly a new friendship bond forms, one that will help her to escape, help her to find her brother. It is also one that makes her rethink all she has been led to believe.

Long held secrets are suddenly revealed but truths are revealed. Long term friendships are tested, new ones are formed. *This Golden Flame* is a captivating, page-turning, original fantasy that will keep you guessing and of course reading. Emily Victoria uses a dual narrative to tell the story and it works incredibly well, giving us the story from differing perspectives, allowing us to see and understand the whole, sometimes before the characters. Expert writing and storytelling make this a story not to be missed.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Twin Crowns

Catherine Doyle and Katherine Webber, pub. Electric Monkey

Thoroughly enjoyed reading this fantastical tale by two talented authors. Quite frankly, couldn't put it down and found myself thinking of the characters long after I finished reading it. The story pulsates with energy and drama from the beginning as Wren, one of the twin princesses, breaks into the palace and has her twin stolen away into the night. The story gathers pace quickly as Wren desperately tries to pass herself off as her sister Rose, the sister she had never met, and steal the crown of Eana. Wren is determined to right the injustices wrought by the Kingsbreath and bring the witches out of hiding. Wren, having been raised by her grandmother Banba has to remain focused on her task but finds herself increasingly distracted by Tor, the guard of her sister's fiancé. Her reckless behaviour brings a smile to your face but equally fills you with fear that her plot will be uncovered, and no amount of magic will save her from hanging. Meanwhile pampered Rose is facing her own challenges living among the witches at Ortha, having to face their anger and the growing realisation that her life until now has been a series of lies. Can these two draw upon their separate strengths to disrupt the Kingsbreath's vile plans and face the growing threat of Gevran's mighty army and beasts, who are intent upon destroying the witches or worse?

The two authors are adept at building a magical world and the reader can easily imagine the different environments in the land of Eana. The imagery is masterful and beautifully described, particularly during Rose's journey from the palace to the cliffs, facing the eerie forest and Ortha Tree of Life. Sometimes the authors are actually overly descriptive and would have been better to leave the reader to imagine the scene and still retain some element of mystery. The rom-com elements provide some

light relief and a slightly comic element during some of the heavier, more tense moments when events are building and the main characters have to make some difficult decisions.

The authors craft some interesting twists that throw the reader off balance and lend some spontaneity to the overall story. The real skill of the authors, however, are creating wonderful characters that one can easily relate to and grow fond of during the story. None more so than Wren, with her brave, rash and determined air, yet you feel her uncertainty and desire to not carry the burden alone. Equally so, Rose's fierce certainty of her right to govern Eana as queen is tempered with her growing awareness of other truths and injustices that must be remedied. The subtlety of the magic is also refreshing and gives the reader the impression that this world could almost exist. *Twin Crowns* is a fast-paced tale that contains so many wonderful elements from strong young women, magical feats, romantic tension, usurping baddies to a well constructed fantasy kingdom. Certainly hope the next book will follow shortly!

Sheri Sticpewich

Non-Fiction Books

Amazing Activists Who Are Challenging Our World

Rebecca Schiller, illus. Sophie Beer, pub. Walker Books

This is a rather lovely book about activists aimed at 5 – 9-year-olds. Each person is represented on a double-paged spread with basic biographical information about them, some facts about their beliefs, why they acted the way they did, and some reasons why this is still important. The pages also feature a quote from the person being discussed and an activity to do; the activities range from practical, such as how to save water, to hands-on, such as how to make a bug hotel.

The book begins by explaining what activism is about and the sorts of things people care about which is rather wide-ranging encompassing racism, women's rights, environmental issues, female empowerment, disability rights, LGBT+ rights, slavery, wildlife, freedom of speech and human rights. The pages are visually appealing with text broken up by boxes and different fonts. There is diverse representation with many familiar characters such as Nelson Mandela and Emmeline Pankhurst but it is nice to meet some more unusual and little known people such as Boyan Slat, who invented a machine to collect plastic from the ocean, and Aditya Mukarji, whose activism in Dehli, India, has prevented over 26 million plastic straws from being added to environmental waste.

With a range of positive and uplifting role models, this book provides a lot of ideas and points of discussion on important topics; my favourite feature is the three words describing the person's activist powers and there is a table at the end of the book inviting readers to identify their own powers.

Barbara Band

Breaking News

Nick Sheridan, illus. David O'Connell, pub. Simon and Schuster

Nick Sheridan is a news journalist who has worked for the BBC as a Consumer Affairs Correspondent and now works as a TV and radio presenter in Glasgow - so he knows what he's talking about.

Breaking News: How To Tell What's Real From What's Rubbish is his first book.

Aimed at 8-to-12-year-olds, this book is perfect for any children that have an interest in news and journalism. It will help children understand what 'news' is and how to tell the difference between real news and fake news, an important topic at KS2 and an important life skill. It will be very useful for children that worry or feel overwhelmed about the things they see reported on the television or hear

on the radio as it puts news in context, explaining why some things might be considered newsworthy and others not. As well as helping children understand the concept of news and reporting, the book is full of ideas and activities that help bring the subject to life, making it a very useful classroom resource.

Nick Sheridan's writing is both informative and humorous, and coupled with David O'Connell's cartoon style illustrations it allows a potentially difficult and complicated subject to be delivered in a way that will help maintain young readers interest.

Damian Harvey

Earth, Sea and Stars

Isabel Otter, illus. Ana Sender, pub. Little Tiger Press Group

As I go through these pages filled with tales full of wisdom, soft happy illustrations enrich my vision and delight my senses in conjunction with the folktales from around the world! Retold and compiled by writer and editor Isabel Otter and decorated with illustrations by Ana Sender who has previously decorated *The Lost Fairytales*, *See Inside Evolution*, and *The Golden Age* amongst others. The 108 stories contained in this one, and their places of origin, are etched on a map as we begin our journey.

Opening the book we dive into the story of the Dragon King of China in which Li Ching the hero learns a worthy lesson about his good intentions:

"Perhaps you meant well, but remember that goodwill alone is not always enough. You allowed a taste of power to overthrow your sense and ignored the advice of a friend. We must think carefully about the impact of our actions, even if our intentions are honest."

From China, readers move into the tropical landscapes of Swahili speaking communities, where a farmer, python and baboon get into an interesting conversation about the circle of life. After this we get to read interesting tales full of wisdom and knowledge essential for one to reflect on one's social and individual existence and take in the essence of different cultures. From animals and humans we enter the magical world of gods and find out how goddess Hina went to reside on the moon and sent figs back to her brother God Ru on earth!

If you love folktales, nature; stories with human, animal, mystical worlds merging into a beautiful blossom fragrant with wisdom worth keeping, then definitely pick this one up! It can also be gifted to kids 8 and above or can be kept as a keepsake as well. There's so much to learn, ruminate upon, or just imbibe from this collection until sleep takes over at night. Happy reading!

Ishika Tiwari

The Extraordinary World of Birds

David Lindo, illus. Claire McElfatrick, pub. Dorling Kindersley

The Extraordinary World of Birds is an exceptional book. Stunningly produced, expertly written and beautifully illustrated, it takes children on a fascinating journey of discovery through the world of birds; showing how amazing and endlessly surprising they are, what they do for our planet and how we can help them to survive and thrive.

Divided into five parts, the book is carefully planned to start with the basics: What Is A Bird? Then explores bird families, bird behaviour, bird habitats, and birds and me. We learn about flight, nesting, eating habits and the special abilities and adaptations that help each species survive in their unique habitat as well as camouflage, migration, navigation and singing. We travel across countries and continents, through skies, treetops and even underground. Importantly, each section is packed with the kind of incredible detail and fascinating facts kids love, remember and share with each other.

The text is simply written but completely engaging and conveys the passion of the author, Urban Birder David Lindo, as well as his encyclopaedic knowledge. The illustrations from Claire McElfatrick are colourful, detailed, quirky and cleverly integrated with close-up photographs of birds, all presented in the eye-catching double page spreads DK are renowned for.

The Extraordinary World of Birds would make an ideal gift book for 7+. It's perfect for dipping in and out of, poring over and sharing, with something new to discover on each re-read. With its glossary of bird terminology, list of national birds around the world and comprehensive index, this is also an invaluable classroom resource, useful for project work and research. Determined birders would benefit from a spotter's identification guide alongside but this superb book is guaranteed to spark curiosity about, and a passion for, the extraordinary bird world as well as a determination to conserve it for the future.

Eileen Armstrong

Famous Robberies: The World's Most Spectacular Heists

Soledad Romero Marino, illus. Julio Antonio Blasco, pub. Little Gestalten

I need to get something off my chest: theft (aka burglary, piracy, fraud, swindle, shoplifting, tax evasion) is not something to be celebrated. There is always a victim(s). BUT I enjoy an episode of *Hustle* as much as the next person and there is something fascinating and thrilling about the extraordinary human ingenuity that is required to achieve 'impossible' heists.

Famous Robberies examines nine audacious and sophisticated robberies from the last 150 years carried out in Europe and the Americas. (I would be curious to find out whether such heists have ever occurred in Asia.) Each crime is introduced by a mock front page spread of a relevant national newspaper: *Le Grand Parisien*, *The Glasgow Times*, *El Pais*, *The Boston Globe* and so on. This format adds a feeling of authenticity and immediacy to the account of the robbery. The mastermind behind the crime and the modus operandi are examined in detail before moving on to the police investigation and the consequences for the criminals. We learn about robbers who ‘walked in’ and ‘walked out’ with the loot, the gang that constructed a tunnel 260 feet long with ventilation and lighting. Two criminals jumped to freedom (one from a plane), never seen again and ‘new wave’ cyber theft. I like the way the authors use a narrative to tell the story rather than a collection of information boxes, sustaining the suspense and the excitement. In doing this, the authors don’t fall into the trap of glorifying the perpetrators. They might say that their criminal masterminds became folk heroes, but they do not necessarily share that view. The copious illustrations are a wonderful combination of ‘realistic’ graphic images and cartoons redolent of the *Pink Panther* movies. The whole book exploits the graphic tradition so strong on the continent of Europe.

Famous Robberies is a fascinating and informative read and I would recommend this book to anyone 10-years old and up. There is some tricky crime related vocabulary: clandestine, modus operandi, compromising, contraband that warranted a glossary.

I must return to my first point. It is obvious that these nine heists were chosen for their supposed lack of violence. I do take issue, however, with the author’s treatment of some of the crimes, crime is never victimless.

Katherine Wilson

Gaia: Goddess of Earth

Imogen Greenberg, illus. Isabel Greenberg, pub. Bloomsbury Children’s Books

One way of looking at myths is as the afterlife of science: ideas about the working of the world that are no longer believed true. Flip this and we understand that what we now think fanciful was once thought fact. And here’s the thing this book does that the innumerable Wonder Woman style stories typically fail to: they have little sense of or involvement in epic narrative, that the earliest stories are still happening today, are yet to be concluded. Which brings me to the curious strength of this take on the entirety of Greek myth, that it’s not really about Greek myth at all.

Gaia is a progressive story about learning that one cannot take a passive, reactive role in life hoping that things will work out for the best, but must take an active and principled stand, and strive for the best possible future. The benign creator goddess begins enchanted with her own creation and full of good intentions, but successive generations of her own increasingly corrupt godly offspring render her

depressed, dismayed, grief-stricken and murderously angry until she realises that you don't fight evil with evil, but by strengthening good.

So: Greek myths retold from the start as a single narrative about Gaia stretching into the present day. Told as a graphic novel with page complexity accessible to quite young readers. Bearing that in mind, the material is toned down from its sources to come in with a PG rating. Simple, heavily stylised, richly coloured, beautifully composed art. Accessible, modern writing with frequent nice flourishes. Both writing and art connect well with the present day – myths, when believed, are always set in the present day because they tell the truth of now. And the truth this story is telling is that there's a better, kinder, greener, more just world that needs fighting for.

I enjoyed this immensely. There's a huge emotional journey for Gaia that the reader needs to be happy to join in with, so despite the wodge of action and gods and monsters I'd say you need an emotionally literate reader aged six and above, but that apart it's a cracking book recommended to all.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Goddess: 50 Goddesses, Spirits, Saints

Dr. Janina Ramirez, illus. Sarah Walsh, pub. Nosy Crow

Who doesn't love powerful, feminine, loving, intelligent, warrior female figures? I certainly do with the feminine rising since time immemorial to reclaim its power. The mystical world is enticing and magical, goddesses, spirits and powerful human beings have been a part of it.

Cultural Historian Dr. Janina Ramirez's compilation of the tales, symbols and how they shaped the culture they originated from presents 50 wonderful female figures from times beyond this one, written in collaboration with the British Museum and illustrated beautifully by Sarah Walsh. The book begins on a bright pink page inked with empowering words and the reader gets pulled into the world of these powerful energies of Ruling and Guiding where representations of the same namely Durga, Juno, Innana, Nut and the rest have been reflected upon. Then come the Goddesses of New Life from different cultures like the Roman goddess Venus, Celtic goddess Brigid, Sri Lankan goddess Pattini, along with the first woman created by God - none other than Eve! Goddesses have been chosen from the spheres of War and Death, Love and Wisdom, and Animals and Nature. But, they are not all goddesses - saints and spirits; witches and ogresses get featured in this collection as well like the Burmese ogress Popa Medaw, Hel and Medusa.

Each page presents the story of the genesis, or brief description, of the goddess, followed by her traits and 'shaping beliefs' associated with the female figure - here a beautiful Venus full of soft pink hues shares the space with a cupid, roses, a golden apple and mini-image of Venus de Milo. There on that

page is the Inuit goddess Sedna with her tragic tale and magical rising as the mother of the sea and all it contains.

Goddess is a book rich with the powerful divine and humane feminine presented in her various forms and emotions. It can be enjoyed by children 12 and above and by all who want to know about the vision of the feminine in different cultures.

Ishika Tiwari

How To Make A Book

Becky Davies, illus. Patricia Hu, pub. Little Tiger Press Group

Every book has a starting point and that is one brilliant idea, just the one but it soon becomes a story and that story becomes a book. Have you ever wanted to know more about this process? You can learn, as I did how a book, in fact this very book, the one that I had in my hands and that hopefully will find its way to your hands too, how a book becomes a book. From the acquisition of the story to the artwork, the publicity celebrating the book once it is ready and the printing which gets it into our hands every step of the process is presented in this inspiring and informative guide.

Budding readers, budding writers, artists, all who love books, have an interest in books and maybe see a future career in books will love learning about how a book is made. There is lots of detail presented to us, but it is clearly presented, in small chunks of detail that can be followed across the page, step-by-step as we meet each of the people, follow each of the processes involved in the making of a book. Fully illustrated at every step the characters are realistic and relatable and the wonderful grey dog, a mascot to the process is a great character to spot page after page!

Discover that there is magic in a book, in the making of a book and learn how many people it takes to bring us all books. I loved this one, unique, clever and fun.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Iconic People of Colour

Elizabeth Ajao, illus. Phil Shaw, pub. Summersdale Publishers

This is a little book that packs a powerful punch! Containing details of thirty-eight men and women - all of whom are iconic role models chosen to empower and inspire readers. The wide selection of activists, athletes, scientists and superstars are from a global range of ethnicities and cultures. The contents page lists all the people featured in the book in alphabetical order of their surname so it is easy to scan to see who has been included and there really is someone for everybody.

We find a great mix of icons – ground breakers, risk takers and game changers - both dead and alive, and, importantly, it showcases lesser known characters rather than the more famous ones that appear in many other books. Each person has a short biopic of their life story with some amazing facts and achievements listed as well as a quote, these are accompanied by black and white sketch style illustrations too. This is a great book to dip in to, it is easy to read, undaunting, interesting and informative. As it says on the blurb: “be prepared to be introduced to your new superheroes”.

Barbara Band

The Magic of Seasons

Vicky Woodgate, pub. DK Books

On the front cover of this book, under the title, it says “a fascinating guide to seasons around the world”, and this is truly saturated with a wealth of information about so many topics that its double-page glossary and index do not do it justice. Over 31 chapters, Woodgate explores subjects as diverse as how the Earth was formed, astronomy, and meteorology to folklore, human health, and animal and plant behaviour. Magnetic fields, seasonal food, climate change, fungi, Seasonal Affective Disorder, the solar system, and the different types of seasons experienced around the world are all discussed along the way.

Woodgate uses small paragraphs scattered across the highly illustrated spreads to communicate a lot of complex information and ideas in a way that keeps the reader engrossed and involved. She uses lots of puns, exclamations, (yippee, amazing!) and questions to the reader in her relaxed chatty breezy writing style. She continues this fun, interactive approach by displaying information in many formats including quizzes, statistics, practical tips, ideas for activities, timelines and in one amusing section a gallery of portraits of weather pioneers in the form of cats. Under Celsius is depicted as a white and black cat dressed in a powdered wig and cravat. This cat is Mimi who appears a lot within the book, with one activity being to count the number of times she appears, as she guides us through the “seasonal adventure across our planet” because “cats are very good at predicting changes in the weather”. In one section, explaining a theory of how the earth was created by a proto-Earth crashing into the planet Theia, Mimi is shown in an astronaut’s helmet saying how this is the most widely accepted explanation as we cannot know for sure.

Mimi is also the guide to Woodgate’s other non-fiction book *The Magic of Sleep*. Having her as an interactive character involved in not just explaining ideas and topics but also engaged in activities and speaking directly to the reader makes this an unusual non-fiction book that is bursting with information in a very fun, enjoyable, and warm manner.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

Number Shocker

Clive Gifford, illus. Guilherme Karsten, pub. Red Shed

Did you know ‘an Arctic tern can fly 1,200,000 km during its lifetime – a distance further than flying to the Moon three times’?

This is a jolly torrent of science and engineering facts (I counted 70 in 10 pages, and there are 26 fact-filled pages in all), heavily steered towards quantities of things, rooted in a variety of themes: cargo ships, rain forests, lightning, the microbes in your mouth, and so on. The fact I opened with was my favourite, but I like birds and I like space, and that’s a good point about this book: whatever it is that you like, there’ll be facts here for you that’ll be fresh, surprising, and thought-provoking. And there’s its use: it’s knowledge and mind expanding. Forget the presentation and there’s content here you can slip into conversation with a four-year-old (lightning bolts are only an inch wide) or use as the seed of an A-level essay (the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is three times bigger than France). This book has universal appeal that you can keep turning to for years.

Of course, it has a visual and tonal style that suggest its core audience. I’d say CBBC pop science in the manner of Dick and Dom’s wonderful *Absolute Genius*. The art is competent, colourful and loose. It’s a pity that the most memorable thing about it is that the characters are almost all white. It makes for a 70s feel. The tone is a bit breathless and teacherly, and the delivery disjointed even allowing for the nature of the book, but forgivably so and it does the job, the elegance of the language isn’t the point, the facts are well-chosen and grouped. This is about what you’re reading, not how it’s being told.

For me, it’s an agreeable, necessary, and praise-worthy selection of topical information on loaded issues. We need books that will explain the impact of deforestation, pollution, globalisation and the rest without preaching. This book leaves a gap for its readers to make their own minds up on the meaning in the facts, which is proper.

Excellent fact-book, thoughtfully conceived, professionally done, core audience 7 to 11.

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Once Upon A Big Idea

James Carter, illus. Margaux Carpentier, pub. Little Tiger Group Press

This book is a visually stunning journey of civilisation, charting our development from ancient history to the modern day. Each double page spread has beautiful illustrations and describes, for example,

the different uses of wood, the creation of the wheel and the uses of modern materials. This book demonstrates humanity's ingenuity, how we transform and adapt materials.

It is a fascinating journey into the world of invention, the big ideas features are all ideas that have come straight from the human brain, well the brains of many humans. They are all ideas that have shaped the world we live in, from bridges to boats and medicines to mobile phones, these are the big ideas that have shaped our world and that we now, could not live without.

Margaux Carpentier's illustrations are gorgeous and the colour palette bright and brilliant. Snappy rhyme and plenty of onomatopoeia from James Carter engage the young reader. This book also conveys the message of the importance of recycling and reusing what we have. Accessible to all, this would be a lovely addition to any home or classroom.

Stephanie Robertson

One World: 24 Hours on Planet Earth

Nicola Davies, illus. Jenni Desmond, pub. Walker Books

Two small curious children are awake, looking through their window. They ask the reader "where on Earth are you right now?" They wonder what is happening at this precise moment around the world, beginning an adventure around the world starting off in Greenwich, London at one minute to midnight.

This adventure takes in twelve different creatures and landscapes across eleven countries at that specific moment in time. It's 1am in the Arctic Circle, the polar bears are hunting seals but the ice is melting making life very hard for them. At 2am in Zambia a baby elephant is taking her first steps but there is danger from poachers. At 6:30 am in a Chinese nature reserve gibbons are chattering away but are suffering from deforestation. At 2pm in Hawaii humpback whales are splashing in the sea, making a comeback following near extinction.

Desmond has created a vivid, evocative, vibrant depiction of a particular habitat immersing the reader into the scene. Each image seems even more striking when juxtaposed with its neighbour. The warm sandy colours of the kangaroos in Australia (10am) seem even hotter when followed by the cold icy world of the emperor penguins in Antarctica (12noon). The variety showcases how diverse the planet is.

The game of find the children, Where's Wally style, on each illustration is a fun interactive element, as they engage with their environment and its inhabitants. The cheerfulness of this feature is echoed in the beginning of the spread's single short paragraph where Davies writes in her casual conversational style.

The fun, innocent, magical nature of the adventure is brought into stark conflict with the realities of the world, the problems people have caused, especially in the final pages where they are flying above a heavily polluted populated cityscape. Despite this message is overall a positive one, final pages optimistically focusing on the children celebrating what they have seen, thinking about what else is out there to still see, and the fact that as the clock finally leaves the stroke of midnight the wider world are celebrating 22nd April, Earth Day with a call of action for everybody to join in.

Natalie McCrystal-Plimmer

Shy and Mighty

Nadia Finer, illus. Sara Thielker, pub. DK Books

I wish I'd had this book when I was little! As a shy person I felt very self-conscious. Nadia introduces herself as one of the world's shy people explaining that it's okay; we shouldn't feel ashamed because there is a way we can fit in.

Shy and Mighty is split into two parts: covering the idea of shyness with topics such as 'Levels of shyness', 'Are you born shy?' and 'What does shyness do to your body?' followed by the mighty section, where you learn to face challenges, dream big, have mighty powers. I resonated with the concept that shyness is like a bully; we might want to be brave and bold, but a little voice inside us tells us otherwise, therefore we feel afraid to use our own voices. There are some really good tips to help you with your shyness - thinking of it as a secret doorway rather than a barrier or a prison, opening it really gently until you emerge when you're ready to show who you truly are - it's a book full of really useful strategies. As well as this, it is crammed with amazing analogies such as explaining that shy people are a little bit like orchids - they need just the right environment in order to thrive.

Laid out in such a way that each double page spread tackles a different topic, enhanced with the fabulous illustrations by Sara Thielker, uses wonderful, bright colours and expressive characters to help us understand each part of shyness. Nadia writes in a colloquial style as if talking to you, as a friend making it relatable. She also includes 'Mighty Missions' an aid to overcoming the shyness that can stop you from becoming the person you are capable of being. These are easy to follow and very, very achievable.

Every character is different: old, young, disabled, abled, male, female, dark-skinned, light-skinned – you will easily find yourself in this book, which helps us understand that shyness affects everybody. It's jam-packed with information and tips for those who are shy or who knows somebody who is shy. It's a refreshing, never seen before book!

Claire Webb

This Is Me! A Self Discovery Journal for Girls

Anna Prudente-Poulton, pub. Summersdale Publishers

Journals are part of many young people's lives, they have been for many years. For me it was a diary, written in daily with notes about my day, thoughts, and feelings, they have evolved and now the diary is a journal, one that often comes with ready printed activities, thoughts, and ideas.

This Is Me! does not disappoint, it is a fun, empowering and interactive journal for girls aged 9-12. It is a journal that gives you time to discover and celebrate all the things that make you uniquely you. This is a journal that aims to help its user appreciate their essence, what it is that makes them who they are. Growing up is not easy, it is a period of transformation, a time when life can feel as though it is in fast forward and with this journal you have the opportunity to take some time to better understand yourself. Using it will help you to become a superhero, your very own superhero.

Inspirational quotes are dotted throughout to give the journal user time to pause for thought, that are placed alongside quizzes and tick boxes to do alone or with friends, there are tips for sleepover parties, what shoes to wear when, a place to create your family tree and so much more. Divided into chapters so that it feels a little like a book but packed with all the elements that make up a journal this is an important book for young girls navigating their growing up journey. Grab a copy, turn it into your very own awesome book and transform you too.

Colin Paterson

Young Oracle Tarot: An Invitation Into Tarot's Mystic Wisdom

Suki Ferguson, illus. Ana Novaes, pub. Wide Eyed Editions

Teen me was fascinated by astrology and tarot cards and, as a school librarian, I was constantly being asked for books on this topic; I wish I had had this beautiful book back then.

From the gold foil cover to the gorgeous illustrations, this is a wonderful overview, an introduction to what tarot is and how it works. With three sections, 'What is Tarot', 'About the Cards' and finally 'Reading the Cards', this book covers all the main points, is well organised and appropriate for the teen age group it is aimed at. There is a history of tarot explaining how the cards have developed through the ages, descriptions of the symbols and meanings, and a glossary of mystical terms.

It is important to remember that tarot is a tool to use in trusting your intuition, and recognising your strengths and talents, and the book emphasises to the reader that the cards are designed to be used as a means for introspection. The bulk of the book is printed on high quality cream paper with

monochrome illustrations with the section about the cards containing detailed coloured illustrations on black paper. A perfect introduction to the topic of tarot cards.

Barbara Band

Picture books

Blue Badger

Huw Lewis Jones, illus. Ben Sanders

The Comet

Joe Todd-Stanton

Dearest One

Arielle Dance, illus. Jenny Duke

The Friendship Bench

Wendy Meddour, illus. Daniel Egnéus

The Girl Who Planted Trees

Caryl Hart, illus. Anastasia Suvarova

The King's Ship

Valerio Vidali

Mina

Matthew Forsythe

Mouse's Wood

Alice Melvin

Piano Fingers

Caroline Magerl

The River

Tom Percival

The Royal Leap-Frog

Peter Bently, illus. Claire Powell

Small's Big Dream

Manjeet Mann, illus. Amanda Quartey

This Girl Can Do Anything

Stephanie Stansbie, illus. Hazel Quintanilla

Wellington's Big Day Out

Steve Small

When Creature Met Creature

John Agard, illus. Satoshi Kitamura

Junior books

The Boy in the Post

Holly Rivers

The Drowning Day

Anne Cassidy

Furthermoor

Darren Simpson

The Great Fox Illusion

Justyn Edwards, illus. Flavia Sorrentino

Hedgewitch

Skye Mckenna

The Last Firefox

Lee Newbury, illus. Laura Catalan

Libby and the Parisian Puzzle

Jo Clarke, illus. Becka Moor

The Ogress and the Orphans

Kelly Barnhill

One Time

Sharon Creech, illus. Sarah Horne

Spark

Mitch Johnson

Stick Boy and the Rise of the Robots

Paul Cooney

The Thief Who Sang Storms

Sophie Anderson

Wilder than Midnight

Cerrie Burnell

Wished

Lissa Evans

The Wondrous Prune

Ellie Clements

Yesterday Crumb and the Storm in a Teacup

Andy Sagar

Young Adult books

Beasts of Prey

Ayana Gray

Blade of Secrets

Tricia Levenseller

Blood to Poison

Mary Watson

Brighton Funk

Nofel Nawras

Castles in Their Bones

Laura Sebastian

Coming Up For Air

Lou Abercrombie

Dread Wood

Jennifer Killick

Ellie Pillai is Brown

Chrstine Pillainayagam

Hotel Magnifique

Emily J. Taylor

The Light in Everything

Katya Balen, illus. Sydney Smith

My Heart & Other Breakables: How I Lost My Mum, Found My Dad, and Made Friends with Catastrophe

Alex Barclay

Read Between the Lines

Malcolm Duffy

The Sky Over Rebecca

Matthew Fox

This Golden Flame

Emily Victoria

Twin Crowns

Catherine Doyle and Katherine Webber

Non-Fiction books

Amazing Activists Who Are Challenging Our World

Rebecca Schiller, illus. Sophie Beer

Breaking News

Nick Sheridan, illus. David O'Connell

Earth, Sea and Stars

Isabel Otter, illus. Ana Sender

The Extraordinary World of Birds

David Lindo, illus. Claire McElfratrick

Famous Robberies: The World's Most Spectacular Heists

Soledad Romero Marino, illus. Julio Antonio Blasco

Gaia: Goddess of Earth

Imogen Greenberg, illus. Isabel Greenberg

Goddess: 50 Goddesses, Spirits, Saints

Dr. Janina Ramirez, illus. Sarah Walsh

How To Make A Book

Becky Davies, illus. Patricia Hu

Iconic People of Colour

Elizabeth Ajao, illus. Phil Shaw

The Magic of Seasons

Vicky Woodgate

Number Shocker

Clive Gifford, illus. Guilherme Karsten

Once Upon A Big Idea

James Carter, illus. Margaux Carpentier

One World: 24 Hours on Planet Earth

Nicola Davies, illus. Jenni Desmond

Shy and Mighty

Nadia Finer, illus. Sara Thielker

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