



Armadillo

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Books Reviewed

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Picture books

A Shelter for Sadness

Anne Booth, illus. David Litchfield, pub. Templar

A stunningly beautiful book with its wonderful illustrations and gently understanding text that goes to the very heart of what sadness is. Children need time and space to think about their own sadness, to find ways of coping so that it doesn't overwhelm them. But how do they do that? Where do they start? In a time where nothing is certain and unexpected loss can come without warning, showing sadness as a character that lives alongside the sad child, may help a better understanding of its nature.

The cover and inside pages are so quietly lovely with so much detail, colour and things to look at that even a child with other things on their mind would be interested in them.

Sadness is an ephemeral creature who, when it goes to live with the sad child, needs a shelter which the boy builds for it. Sadness can change its shape at will, become large, small, tiny, but it needs help and so when the shelter is built, the child invites it in. The shelter has a window which can be open or closed and Sadness can look out of it or not. It has light. Light from the sun, moon and stars, even from candles but if Sadness doesn't want light, it can draw the curtain and sit in the dark if that's what it wants.

There is a wonderful illustration of a house as a shelter against a storm of snow but in the garden, there is also a beautiful shelter the sad boy has built in which Sadness sits safely inside. Spring comes with its flood of golden light, flowers and the rose Sadness holds carefully in its hands. Autumn brings crackling leaves and bonfires and if Sadness wants to walk in the leaves or sit by the bonfire, he can, but not if he doesn't want to. Sadness lies on the floor of its shelter and curls up but sometimes, it just sits with the sad boy and neither of them speak.

The boy visits every day, sometimes every hour if he needs to, sometimes he misses altogether. Then, one day, Sadness comes out of the shelter and holds the sad boy's hand and together, they see how beautiful the world is.

The illustrations are so evocative, so detailed, colourful and interesting, they need time to look at, to touch, even to draw them yourself and go back to them over and over again. The story is told in short quiet sentences with nothing to alarm or confuse but which take the sad child slowly forward until, as the final illustration shows, he and Sadness are smiling at each other.

A Shelter for Sadness is a book to keep.

Gwen Grant

Alone

Barry Falls illus. Barry Falls, pub. Pavilion

Billy McGill lives alone in his house at the top of a hill and he really likes the solitude that he finds. Then one day he hears the squeak of a mouse and things go rapidly downhill from there. First, he buys a cat and then a dog, a bear and even a tiger; as well as lots of other creatures. Eventually the house is so full that Billy takes refuge on a rocky island away from everything, but will this make him happy? You will have to read this story in order to discover what happens.

What a truly lovely story, fully of delightful characters with lessons for us all to learn. The story is beautifully told in rhyme that makes the story flow along with pace and humour. In many ways it is reminiscent of other stories about accumulating characters in a house; think of Julia Donaldson and also the “Old Woman who swallowed a fly”. However, with this story it is very much about how we interact with others and whether we really want to be totally alone all of the time. The illustrations are delightful and really bring out the character of each of the animals and people. They have lots of depth and movement which adds to the vitality we see in the story. This is a great story for nursery and KS1 children and I think it would make a great starting point for some activities and acting.

Margaret Pemberton

Books Make Good Pets

John Agard, illus. Momoko Abe, pub. Orchard Books

Your everyday pets come with a few drawbacks. Take a dog - all that stick-throwing! Clearing up the droppings from your pet mouse, remembering to feed your parakeet ... not to mention all those visits to the vet. But a book – now there’s a pet without drawbacks. They’ll wag their words whenever you flick their dog-eared pages; they’ll nibble at old ideas and let in the new; they will glow and swim in the bowl of your imagination and, very importantly, they don’t need going to the vet.

John Agard wrote this poem some years ago, before turning it into a picture book. It is a wonderful extended metaphor celebrating reading and the imagination and is a gift for illustrating.

Momoko Abe’s detailed, colourful pictures are full of energy and visual humour. Books and pets mingle in a big top at the circus, on the high seas, in a creepy attic. There is so much for young readers to notice and comment on.

There is an irregular pattern to the rhyme and metre which is a little disconcerting in a children's picture book. Just beneath the surface, it is songlike with John Agard's Caribbean lilt, but I would say it needs to be read aloud thoughtfully, catching the changing the rhythms, but enjoying the phrases on their own terms, irrespective of the rhyme.

The many qualities of books and why we treasure them, are explored in this entertaining, witty and thought-provoking picture book.

Jackie Spink

The Button Book

Sally Nicholls, illus. Bethan Woollvin, pub. Andersen Press

Do you ever wonder what happens when you press a button? Does that thought run through your head – I wonder ...? I know that it does mine and more often than not I am told on no account to just try pressing it, even for fun, and isn't this what we tell children when they are curious? Don't touch we often say, do not touch unless we know it is safe? And rightly so. However, buttons are so very tempting aren't they?

Squirrel finds a red button. What do you think that he does? Of course he presses it. "Beep" is the result. But what happens if you press the orange button, blue button ... and on it goes, an exploration of colour, shape sound and silliness on every page! Each and every button is a different colour and a different shape – play games with your little readers, can they guess what will come next or, if it is a second, third, fourth reading, can they remember what comes next?

The noises emitted by these buttons are hilarious and as we turn each page we are greeted with more text, more images to explore and many more reasons to have a giggle. This book is written for and speaks to its young reader. It is pure, hilarious perfection.

This is a book to be shared, a book which, when you are reading it, makes it very difficult to separate the text from the picture, they are seamlessly and intelligently intertwined and believe me, when you have finished reading there will not be a button that you don't want to press 'just to see ...'

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Can Bears Ski?

Raymond Antrobus, illus. Polly Dunbar, pub. Walker Books

Dad bear tries really hard to wake boy bear up in the mornings, but it's a struggle. Isn't it always? Dad bear tries to talk to boy bear but it's a struggle. Again, does this sound familiar to you. Boy bear struggles to understand his teacher and friends. All boy bear can hear them saying is "Can bears ski?" And he is left wondering if he should actually be out somewhere skiing. What is really happening is that the bears around him are asking if he can hear them. When it all becomes too much dad decides to take boy bear for a hearing test.

At the hearing test dad and boy discover that he has hearing problems and so it is that the story then helps us as we follow boy bear having his hearing aids fitted, and learning the challenging task of lip reading. There are days when he doesn't want to wear his hearing aids and hides them!

I really enjoyed this book, I'd never read a book dealing with childhood hearing loss before. This is a unique, important and fun story.

The writer himself is deaf and draws on his own childhood experiences, the illustrator is partially deaf and wears hearing aids so, to them both this book is very special.

The illustrations are beautifully drawn, exuding warmth and care. Through this book children will be able to express their own feelings, and not just around disability though it is important that this is recognised, and it will give them the confidence to find their own place in the world.

Helen Byles

Captain Green and the Tree Machine

Evelyn Bookless, illus. Danny Deeptown, pub. Marshall Cavendish Children

What a timely, important and gorgeous book!

Captain Green is a superhero for the planet and here, in his second adventure (written by one of our very own Armadillo reviewers), he answers the alarm calls of forest animals who are losing their homes and food sources.

Each animal's plight – the hornbill, the pygmy elephant and the orangutan – is different, but they all stem from the same cause: man's relentless destruction of their homes. Whether for wood products or farmland to graze cattle for meat production, the pictures and text underline the fact that every minute, trees are falling, forests are becoming dustbowls and animals are losing the ecosystems they need to survive.

'It seems easier to ruin a forest, than to grow one!' says Captain Green, capturing the stark truth at the heart of this book.

However, Tom is brave, big-hearted and utterly determined to help these creatures. Unfortunately, despite his brilliant Tree Machine that fires out new trees to replant the lost ones as fast as he can, he cannot do it alone. Needing others' help, he shows the children in the book and the children who read it how they can do their bit.

Bookless' affecting prose is brilliantly complemented by Deeptown's bright, bold illustrations. I particularly loved the gorgeous orangutan! The pictures are thought provoking and create lots of discussion points for the children and adults who choose to share this book.

From the beautiful end papers, which tell a story themselves, through the clever story and the practical information at the end, this book has the ability to turn children into mini-superheroes for the planet. Endorsed by the Rainforest Trust, WeForest, One Tree Planted and Stand For Trees, this book brims with love, wisdom and humour. It is a book that deserves to be in every classroom, library and home.

Julia Wills

The Castle the King Built

Rebecca Colby, illus. Tom Froese, pub. Nosy Crow

The Castle the King Built is a combination of picture and fact book, inspired new take on the traditional story, *The House that Jack Built*. Each page features integral tradesmen, enticing merchants and singing minstrels who we see collectively work together to build a castle. It is a complete wonder to see just how many people it truly took to build a castle.

Rollicking rhymes accompanied by brilliantly retro-style illustrations both manage to introduce readers to the inner workings of a medieval castle, from the inside out. Castles, we learn, didn't just build themselves. It took years of hard work, hundreds of carpenters, blacksmiths and stone masons. It took plenty of cooks, bakers and servants to ensure the king and his family were well fed.

This book would perfectly suit a young historian or a class celebrating and learning about castles, kings and queens. The clothing, the backgrounds and the food were well researched, and they all add to the medieval flare of this book. Nosy Crow have published it in association with The National Trust, I can think of no better way to read this book than by adding in a visit to a local National Trust site. They promise to bring history to life through their properties and this book, its story, certainly transported me back in time.

Erin Hamilton

Chicken Come Home!

Polly Faber, illus. Briony May Smith, pub. Pavilion

Dolly is a particularly plucky chicken. She is a chicken who does what all chickens love to do. Dolly lays eggs. Dolly is a very lucky chicken too for she has the opportunity to roam free around her home and garden. The result? Dolly has a choice of where to lay her egg each day and she loves nothing more than choosing different spots. Why? Dolly likes to challenge her owner to see if he can find her eggs. Dolly loves the boy, and the boy loves Dolly.

Dolly's adventures are about to take a turn for the ... well for the more adventurous. Why? Well Dolly has found a wonderfully warm basket to lay her egg in, little knowing that this basket is about to take off up into the skies. For this is no ordinary basket, this is a hot air balloon basket!

Dolly doesn't want to be in the air, she wasn't to be home in time for the boy and the daily egg hunt. Will jumping out help or will more adventures unfold for our plucky heroine?

Chicken Come Home! is a lyrical story, a warm story which wraps around you with a loving hug from the moment you open it up. Read aloud or keep to yourself. Whichever way you choose to enjoy it the warmth instantly brims from the page as does the suspense that will have you turning every page with some trepidation, eager to learn what will happen and if all will be well. Reading this one left me with a very big smile and a lovely glowing feeling. This is most certainly a book that is perfect for Spring reading, a reassuring message about kindness and the joy of adventure. With visual delight after delight there is so much to enjoy you will find yourself reading this one more than once.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Courageous Lucy. The Girl Who Liked to Worry

Paul Russell, illus. Cara King, pub. EK Books

Courageous Lucy. The Girl Who Liked to Worry is a tale of a young girl who worries A LOT, often about things that no one else would even dream about - for instance - Lucy does NOT want to meet Big Foot on the day he stubs his toe! It is a story of childhood anxiety written in a lovely, gentle, and melodic way by Paul Russell. When Lucy's teacher puts up a poster about a school musical Lucy can only worry as the others begin to rehearse and prepare. Will she take part? And if she does, how will she fare?

Cara King's illustrations work beautifully with Russell's prose showing Lucy to be a young, wide-eyed girl with a vivid and magical imagination - but she is clearly unsure of what her next steps should be. I won't tell you how this book ends, but it takes Lucy to a place that is real, not something that is beyond reach. So, whilst there is magic in the story - through Lucy's imagination - there is a real

grounded hope in its outcome and what Lucy learns. No big makeover, just an important and gorgeous first step. It made me smile and brought back many memories of primary school shows.

Ideal for 4-7-year-olds - to be read too by an older child or grown-up, or alone. However, I think any primary age child would benefit and gain understanding in what the power of worry can have over some people - reading this as a class could bring about a useful discussion too.

Paul Russell's other picture books include *My Storee*, a book about childhood dyslexia and *My Grandma Forgets* which is a story about dementia from a grandchild's point of view. Based on the loveliness and the insightful way he has written *Courageous Lucy* I suspect these books would also be a great addition for a school library - or on the bookshelf at home.

Courageous Lucy. The Girl Who Liked to Worry is a picture book with an important message, told in a gentle way within an engaging story, that has touches of magic around the edges. A story that could bring hope and strength to a child that worries too much.

Anja Stobbart

The Fidgety Itch

Lucy Davey, illus. Katz Cowley, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

The Fidgety Itch is a picture book with an appealing cover showing us a very worried looking watercolour hare. The illustration when teamed with the title immediately entices you to open up, read on and find out about the itch!

The story is set in an Australian woodland and it follows the tale of a group of animal friends who live among the 'Fru Fru trees.' We follow their story as they help each other as each of them get a mysterious itch. There are charming watercolour illustrations throughout the story. The animals are beautifully painted with great expression, and there is a little creature to spot on each page, which my son enjoyed finding.

The story is written in rhyme, and is great fun to read, as it falls into a lovely rhythm throughout the book. I really enjoyed reading it aloud with my son, who is 7. There are some repetitive lines, where I could pause and my son could fill in the gaps. It is a perfect length story for bedtime and it left us both feeling satisfied that the story came to a good resolution at the end.

I would recommend this book as a great story to read aloud with children from 3-7 years old and upwards (my older children – aged 9 and 11 years enjoyed it too). It would also be an ideal choice for a teacher to read aloud to a class. It is perfect for anyone who likes animals and really is great fun to read aloud.

Sarah Thompson

The Greatest Showpenguin

Lucy Freegard, pub. Pavilion

Who doesn't love penguins? They make the sweetest characters - but put them in a circus setting, and the cuteness factor flies through the roof! This is a penguin heroine with a difference. We don't see her waddle or slide, but we do see her juggling, balancing on a penguin pyramid, being sawn in half, and fired out of a canon.

Poppy is a showpenguin and always has been, but that doesn't mean she wants to perform circus tricks forever. When the story begins, Poppy is a shy young penguin who is nervous about telling her family how she really feels, but with their love and understanding, we see her transformed into a confident and capable penguin doing what she is most passionate about. She steals the show – but not in the way anyone might expect.

This affirmative, heartwarming story gives readers plenty to think and talk about. In the gentlest possible way, it questions what it means to be successful, teaches us to follow our passions, and shows us that we can all find our own unique way to shine. Whilst the messages of this book offer a great deal, it is perhaps the illustrations that are the biggest draw. They are bold, vibrant, funny and well worth lingering over. Turn the pages to see penguins as you've never seen them before!

Lucy Hollins

How Do You Make a Rainbow?

Caroline Crowe, illus. Cally Johnson-Isaacs, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

How Do You Make A Rainbow? written in rhyme by Caroline Crowe and illustrated by Cally Johnson-Isaacs, is a bright and lively celebration of life and living. The book starts by showing us a little girl and her grandad looking through the window as the rain pours down outside. To the little girl, everything looks sad, grey and in need of brightening up. A rainbow would be just the thing... but how are they made? She thinks they might be painted on the sky but knows that she can't reach, so she asks Grandad for help. With a grin, Grandad tells the little girl that rainbows aren't painted, they are 'made from hope and kindness, with some other things thrown in...'

The following double page spreads are each brightly illustrated with colours to reflect the colours of the rainbow – red, orange, yellow etc. On each spread we see Grandad and the little girl having fun together and sharing some of things they enjoy most enjoy in life. We see them in a red tent reading a

red book, looking at photographs, giving red tulips to say 'thank you' and starting the day with strawberry jam on toast. Each spread emphasises love, kindness and the joy of friendship and delightfully concludes by finding the rainbow that's inside you.

The bright, bold, illustrations combined with the easy flowing rhyming text, make this a great book to read aloud at home or to a class. Additionally, the final two spreads offer a simple activity suggestion in which readers are encouraged to think about the things that make them and that fit with each of the colours of the rainbow.

Vicky Harvey

I'm Thinking of A Pet

Charlotte and Adam Guillian, pub. Nosy Crow

I'm Thinking of a Pet is the perfect board book: simple, stylish, and snappy. Just what every little one needs, a book they can hold on to and enjoy for themselves, fostering an early love of reading. From the moment we read the title, our imaginations are invited to get to work.

A series of fun clues leads the reader to guess which animal is behind each flap. Pulling flaps is always great fun and, in this book, they reveal not just the animal itself, but some very sweet details too. The illustrations are bright, colourful and full of life.

I'm Thinking of a Pet lends itself beautifully to being read aloud. The language is upbeat and straightforward, the rhymes work brilliantly, and there's a pleasing repetitive element. Children will love joining in, not least with the animal sounds, as each favourite pet is revealed.

This really is a wonderful and beautifully simple addition to the world of board books, which will be read and enjoyed again and again. And the good news is, this is one of a series, so there are plenty more to be enjoyed once you've finished.

Lucy Hollins

I Talk Like A River

Jordan Scott, illus. Sydney Smith, pub. Walker Books

I Talk Like A River by Jordan Scott and Sydney Smith is a powerful, heart-felt story about a young boy struggling with his stutter, a speech disorder that makes him feel self-conscious, afraid and alone.

The boy wakes each morning with the sounds of words all around him – his toy dinosaur, the crow in the tree outside his window, the moon fading in the morning sky - but the boy can't say any of these words. They stick in his mouth. At school the boy hopes he won't be asked to speak but, when he is, his classmates turn and stare. The boy feels painfully different and alone. After school, Dad takes the boy to walk by the river. As the pair walk, this wise father tells the boy that 'he talks just like a river', and these words transform the boy's thinking. Just like a river bubbles and churns and whirls around, so does the boy's speech. And just like the river can be calm and smooth, so can the boy's speech too. This metaphor brings enough comfort for the boy to find the courage to speak in front of his class, with more confidence than before.

The author's note at the end tells us that this is a personal story. Jordan Scott's dad taught him to look at speech as flowing like a river. 'As the river moves, it stutters, and I do too.' This gave Jordan 'the image and language to talk about something so private and terrifying.' By connecting his stuttering to the movements of the river, allowed Jordan to understand his stutter and have more confidence to face the world and feel less alone.

As a part-time special educational needs' teacher, this story resonated strongly. It will have a wide appeal across the education sectors for empowering children with similar language issues to feel brave and understood and, to help their peers, teachers and families to better appreciate what it is like to live with a stutter. It would equally comfort any child feeling bullied or alone. A recommended read-aloud book for children everywhere.

Evelyn Bookless

Imagine!

Patricia Forde, illus. Elina Braslina, pub. Little Island

This is the story of a young girl and her grandma who helps her cope with fears, many of them being the fears that we all have felt at some time in our lives. Whether it is ghosts, pirates, monsters or vampires, grandma has a solution to making them seem non-scary. But when the young girl's worst fear is revealed - what will she do if anything happens to grandma - then there is the support and love that will help her understand that her memories will help her overcome the sorrow.

The author has given us a wonderful story full of humour and helpful ideas. It actually covers a range of worries and concerns that children have to deal with and is particularly relevant at this time.

It will not only serve as a great and very funny read about pirates playing with dolls and grandma in a yellow polka-dot bikini (you have to be quite old to understand this joke so it is perfect for the adult reader) but it also is a splendid addition to the school collection of books dealing with empathy and well-being.

It is brightly illustrated in a quirky and funny style that makes you want to delve into the pictures. Whilst it is aimed at the KS1 pupils it can also be used further up the school as part of the discussion about how we cope with problems.

Margaret Pemberton

The Invisible

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

Inspired by his own childhood experiences of poverty, as he explains in his 'Author's Note', Percival has created a very touching and beautifully illustrated picturebook that highlights how poverty especially, but also other societal issues such as homelessness, age, immigration, disability, etc can make people feel invisible. In his 'Author's Note' he provides statistics about the state of childhood poverty and if you consider the devastating impact the last year has had you can only wonder what the most recent and future data will be. Thus, this is a very timely book and a call of action for anybody and everybody to make a difference. I am sure as well, that children reading this book who are personally affected by such issues, living a life similar to Isabel's, will feel reassured to see their concerns reflected back at them in such a format and that others recognise and want to help.

Isabel has loving and attentive parents and her dog, but they have little money - they cannot afford heating, have bare floorboards and little furniture in their house and toast bread by an open fire surrounded by unopened bills piling up around them. Eventually they move to a tower block on the other side of the city where Isabel struggles to find anything cheerful or beautiful. She feels increasingly sadder and lonelier and as if she is invisible. As these feelings grow the image of Isabel becomes fainter and transparent against the cold, dark, bleak landscapes.

This is such a clever and evocative technique used by Percival in his illustrations, employing colour in such an engaging and impactful manner. Isabel notices that others around her are also invisible and alone but each one of them are engaging with the world in some kind manner for example a homeless man is feeding the birds. Isabel gets involved, painting, planting flowers, looking after animals, tidying up her environment and as others join in a community develops and colour and beauty emerge back into her life until her environment is transformed. Percival's depiction of flowers alone are exquisite.

The way Percival uses colour reminded me of the *Wizard of Oz* or *Pleasantville* films where black and white and sepia tones are replaced by vibrant technicolour images as the world changes, in Isabel's case, into a caring, socially conscious community where everybody belongs.

This book has a strong message to it but is not twee or didactic. Central to its core are the importance of community, belonging, wealth and poverty (not just financial), and making a difference. This is Percival's touching and positive attempt at the latter. It is a wonderful starting point in exploring such issues with children, to educate them on how different people live, and to do something that books do so well, develop empathy.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

The Island

Judith Wisdom, pub. Troika Books

It's refreshing to receive a book that looks so different from most other children's books. 'Unique' is certainly how I would describe this, especially the illustrations. My first impression was that the cover was simple, the title easy to read and the strange illustrations and vague title made me want to find out more.

The illustrations are in a style that certainly isn't seen very often. It uses a mix of watercolour paints, pencil sketches and photo manipulation with a natural, earthy palette. It gives me a sense of something in tune with nature and quite homely. Rather than relying on bright colours and stand-out dynamics, they lure you in with weird and sometimes ever so slightly un-nerving depictions of big eyes, floral patterns, dis-membered photo heads on drawn patchwork bodies and other strange artefacts. I say 'strange' in the best way possible. I love things a bit weird and odd when done correctly and I think these illustrations are done to portray the mood of the book seeming to come from the characters who themselves are described as 'a little too strange'. I can imagine children being drawn to them and wanting to inspect all the details.

Moving onto the text, the font perfectly matches the story and is easy to read. I loved the names of the characters - Moon Lady and Trunky - and found the personalities of them quite fascinating. There is a certain sadness in the story, we feel for the characters right away, they are hard done by but still optimistic and friendly. The story has a clear moral theme about animals in zoos being bad. The animals in the cages are cramped and sad and want to escape. There is also an underlying sense that the islanders are mean to the characters because they look different, in particular that they are not the right colour. While this may simply be a way of explaining that being mean is bad, I feel it has racial undertones and children may subconsciously think that making fun of or treating the characters differently because of their skin colour is not acceptable.

Whatever the writer's intention, it is tackling important themes for children whilst still staying in the realm of fantasy so that race or colour is never outwardly mentioned. Keeping in with this theme, we see different races represented in the islanders themselves and a quote by Maya Angelou at the end. The characters remain friendly to the islanders, even going as far as to save them despite the way they

have been treated, and the story ends with a good outcome for our characters but also the islanders as they are liberated by the animals they once caged.

The illustrations are certainly a huge part of this book to me, and I think that is what would make someone pick it up and buy it alone, but the story is what would keep it a regular on my shelf. I would worry a little that it's too scary for younger kids, but I know some children enjoy illustrations that capture their imagination in this way and applaud the creators on introducing something unique to children instead of the stereotypical pictures.

Overall, I'd highly recommend this book to parents or carers looking for something different that has a nice theme of kindness and helping others without being too preachy.

Izzy Bean

Leo and the Octopus

Isabelle Marinov, illus. Chris Nixon, pub. Templar

Leo sees the world differently to you and me. For him colours are too bright, sounds are too noisy, and there are far too many people around. Leo thought he was an alien because when he explained this people didn't understand him and he definitely didn't understand them. Leo finds the world lonely, stressful and tiring.

One day Leo meets an octopus called Maya who he can identify with. He goes to the library to research octopuses and learns everything there is to know about them. He and Maya become friends and before long he is even allowed to touch her. He visits as often as he can and even make puzzles for her.

This is a beautiful story about Asperger's Syndrome. Asperger's, for those who are not familiar with it, is a type of autism. While reading the book you begin to get a feeling of what it is like to live with Asperger's Syndrome, what it's like to be the person with it. Both my children have Asperger's Syndrome and this is the first book I've read that helps the reader to truly understand what that person with the syndrome is thinking and feeling. It gives you an opportunity to see the world from their point of view, and see what life is like for them.

I wish this book had been around a few years ago. It is a book that will help a lot of parents understand their children better. The pictures are full of details and these can tell the story by themselves. This is a wonderful book and one I will always keep.

Helen Byles

The Lipstick

Laura Dockrill, illus. Maria Karipidou, pub. Walker Books

A whimsical, delightful story about a young boy who 'borrows' his Mum's lipstick and takes it on a journey around the house. A large hardback, which I love because it feels high quality and weighty enough to withstand children's rough hands!

The book's jacket is a beautiful teal blue-green, accented by the bright pink of the lipstick which pops, making the book stand out. I especially liked how the title appeared to be written in lipstick, the smiley face over the 'O' in the author's name - a good example of the humour to come. A very particular one.

My first impression is that this book wasn't just written for kids but to be entertaining to the adults reading it too, clever, cheeky and contemporary in the writing and illustration. It felt though sometimes like the child's language was too adult. The main character crisscrossed between cute, quirky child and adult telling the story of a cute child. I wished it had been one or the other. The boy's 'Oooh! Mum's posh lipstick!', is childlike but his later 'I can't actually spell right now at this point in my life' has a grown-up tone.

The professional illustrations are fun, but didn't jump out and hold my attention. Dull colours highlight the bright pink lipstick running through them, but give the overall feel a slightly miserable, washed-out look. However, the content of the illustrations make up for the lack of colour. The realistic, less than perfect details of the house and the contents are refreshing. Mum doesn't have long blonde hair, sister has a somewhat 'alternative' style - the family portrait on the dresser is a safari holiday rather than a typical beach holiday. Even the sister's name 'Bug' is unusual - Dockrill is trying to portray a real, family full of character, lacking predictability.

A highlight for me, was the main character being male despite the story being about lipstick. The young boy wears the lipstick, his mother does not chastise but tells him he looks fabulous, allowing him to keep it on. A heartwarming nod to allowing children to express their identity.

Despite its laugh-out-loud cheeky antics, the story wasn't exciting enough to hold the attention of younger readers. Not every story needs a moral or big revelation, but the books that children ask for every night and remember are the ones which touch their hearts, make them think.

Overall a professional and modern, accepting and funny book but not one I'd reach for time and time again, it just lacks that little something that makes it perfect.

Izzy Bean

Milo Imagines the World

Matt De La Pena, illus. Christian Robinson, pub. Two Hoots

Milo is on a long subway journey across New York with his sister, so interested in the things and people around him, he feels like a shook-up soda, fizzing with excitement. Luckily, he has his drawing book and pencil, he draws the people he sees and starts to imagine their lives. It's not long, however, before Milo learns people cannot be judged by appearance.

Milo's journey is so interesting, here is one reader who never wanted to get off the train, I'm certain no child will either. Why would you miss the woman dressed for a wedding with blue hair and a little dog in a handbag? Milo imagines her getting married in a big cathedral then flying in a hot-air balloon, leaving the city far behind. What about the whiskery man next to Milo frowning at a crossword puzzle? Milo imagines him living at the top of a huge block of flats with cats, rats and parakeets wanting to fly free.

There's a businessman too, with a bleak, lonely face. I kept an eye on that man. He was still there after the first stop but somewhere along the line he slipped off and disappeared. A group of break-dancers get on, dance and everyone watches. People watch them when they go into a shop, as well, but not in a friendly way. Across from Milo is a boy of his own age, wearing a suit and very white trainers. Milo imagines that boy lives in a castle and will be met off the train by a coach and horses.

To Milo's surprise, the boy and his dad join the same queue as Milo and his sister. The queue to the prison where Milo's mum is and where the boy's mum is, too. There's no tutting and judging here. This whole story is suffused with a sense of love, especially when Milo meets his mum.

The illustrations with their clear strong colours and loving details make every character interesting. There's so much to look at, when you think you've seen it all, more brilliant details draw your attention to them. The characters become the reader's friends.

Then there are Milo's drawings so exactly like a child's drawings it would not surprise me at all if some children didn't think that actually they had made this wonderful book. The final drawing is one that Milo has done, he, his sister and his Mum on the back steps eating an ice-cream, a tree and a fence and a cat in the window at the side.

A lovely, lovely book and one that any child will cherish.

Gwen Grant

Sleep, Cat, Sleep

Antje Damm, pub. Prestel

Cat just wants to have a sleep, but he is being disturbed by the person reading the book. They then they persuade the reader to have a snooze. However, Cat is something of a trickster and wakes up the reader, with a large “Boo!” Cat then suggests that having finished the book, the reader close it and go and find another book to read.

This is a delightful and charmingly simple board book for the very youngest of children. The small size of the pages makes it particularly accessible to a very young age group, as they are able to hold it for themselves. There is very little text, but the plot is easy for everyone to follow. The layout is very straightforward, with the images on the left-hand side and the very basic text on the right. The illustrations are bright and clear, although there is one image of the cat (when it says “Boo”) that might prove a bit scary for some children.

Stylistically it is naïve, almost childlike even, yet there is that classic European sense of sophistication that can be difficult to define. This is a lovely addition to the board book collection in any home or nursery and especially to those with a cat of their own.

Margaret Pemberton

The Song for Everyone

Lucy Morris, pub. Bloomsbury Children’s Books

An entirely enchanting and beautifully written song in a story.

The Song for Everyone begins one morning in a small, hard to reach window and as the townspeople of the story begin to listen, the action that comes from this window opens their hearts, eyes and minds to those around them. It gives them hope, joy and purpose.

The pages are intricately designed with a song - a stunning, flowing image of flowers, swirls and curls drifting from the window and across each page and touching on each character. This timeless tale celebrates the power of music and melody and its effects on people - how it can lift a spirit, provide hope and energy, and promote kindness on a large scale. The town blooms as the song takes hold but when it ends, the town takes on a depressed quality - lateness, tiredness, grumpiness ... the town knows it must find the source of the music.

This charming story will appeal to children and adults, the illustrations are delicate and wonderful. Music has the power to bring people together as we will see from the reactions of the townspeople when the music stops. Something so special deserves to be shared.

Erin Hamilton

Spaghetti Hunters

Morag Hood, pub. Two Hoots

Duck is concerned because he can't find his spaghetti. He does a very thorough job looking for it but to no avail. Luckily, Tiny Horse, who is a great proclaimer in the old-fashioned tradition of hammy Shakespearian actors, is on hand to save the day. Despite spaghetti being the most elusive of all pastas, she plans a detailed mission to hunt it down. 'The spaghetti will not escape us,' she declares, bounding off into the distance. Duck follows behind, lugging the kit and doing the donkey work. He's very long-suffering but even he has his limits, and he stomps off home, where he comes up with his own solution. Tiny Horse is very sceptical 'You can't just MAKE spaghetti,' she says scornfully, before eating her own words! When they decide that spaghetti on its own is a little dry, the irrepressible Tiny Horse dons her hat and gallops off to hunt down 'that most fearsome of beasts - tomato sauce.'

These two characters make such a great double act. There's stoic, practical Duck and then there's indomitable Tiny Horse, for whom life's one big dizzy adventure, in which she plays the starring role. They are very entertaining.

The bold, colourful illustrations are equally good fun. There's lots of comical visual humour to chat about. Morag Hood is brilliant at making the characters highly expressive with the lightest of touches!

There's so much pleasure to be had from sharing this book. A final lockdown-friendly touch is a recipe for making pasta - genius!

Jackie Spink

The Story Thief

Graham Carter, pub. Andersen Press

'Books are treasures, and their stories are for EVERYONE to share!' says Olive to Octopus as she admonishes him for stealing all of the books belonging to the book-loving inhabitants of her island. But bibliophile Octopus has not been able to stop stealing these beautiful but mysterious objects ever since one appeared in his lair when it fell overboard Olive's boat. He doesn't know what they do or what they are for but finds them captivating and tries lots of different things like eating them or making a bed out of them.

When Olive discovers Octopus with the books after becoming a pirate-detective-explorer, inspired by her favourite stories, she starts to read to him, and so Octopus becomes not just a bibliophile in terms of adoring the book as an object but also a book-lover keen to share his passion for reading stories.

This bright and colourful picturebook is a true celebration of reading and books not just in regard to the joy of stories, whether shared or the inspiration they stimulate but also unusually in recognising the precious beautiful object a book is. I read this to my five-year-old niece in our weekly bedtime story videocall who loved it and was very interested in the character of Octopus. This is an amusing and cheerful read, perfect to celebrate World Book Day.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Book

Lucy Rowland, illus. Ben Mantle, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

From the creators of *Little Red Reading Hood*, this take on the classic fairy raised a smile from the title itself.

We meet Ben at storytime. He is a lover of fairy tales but may not be quite prepared for which of his favourite characters is going to turn up at bedtime! A perfect read for one familiar with the *Three Little Pigs* and up for a few twists and turns.

Rhyming verse keeps the story moving quickly, and the illustrations bring to life the lives of the determined piggies and then also the wolf who may just be tiring of his stereotypical role and is prepared to make a change. But is he we wonder?

There are plenty of detailed colour illustrations to explore as you read this book independently as an early reader, with particular mention to the opening and closing spreads. Don't forget it is also ideal for sharing and for investigating the illustrations together.

After reading this book, we came up with several other endings to this story – it felt a little like those 'choose your adventure' books of old. An excellent introduction for little ones into the concept of creative storytelling.

Amy Ellis

Turning Cartwheels

Amy Adeney, illus. Amy Calautti, pub. EK Books

Do you ever find that you are trying to fit in, trying to be like the rest of the crowd and yet ending up standing out all the more despite every effort?

Children tend to follow by example, they look to others for suggestions, ideas as to how to behave, how to dress, how to look and why wouldn't they you ask? We encourage them to behave in certain ways, to look to others for examples. As adults many of us do the very same. Why? We want to be accepted and we have a tendency to think the route to this is to be just like everyone else. Yet it is individuality that really makes us who we are, each and every one of us is an individual, is unique, is special and it takes time for us to recognise this so perhaps we should start helping children to find out that they too can belong, not by being just like everyone else but by being who they want to be.

Emma wants nothing more than to join in with Carly's Cartwheel Club. Every Monday she lines up, tries out and is told she is not good enough. Emma practices, practices some more and then practices again until she is good enough. But what is this? Cartwheels are only for Mondays. Tuesdays is for twists, Wednesday is one-hander day, Thursday is Triples and Friday is flips. What is Emma going to do, how can she be good at all these skills?

With Emma we discover that being 'in the club' may not be as fun as it appears when you are on the outside. We discover that in fact there could be something even better than being in the club, there could be friends, there could be fun and there could be the opportunity to be yourself and let others be themselves too.

A story with a warm heart, with illustrations to make you giggle, with challenge, with friends and with an important message. Be yourself.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

What about the Tooth Fairy?

Elys Dolan, pub. Hodder Children's Books

As an infant school teacher, with a class full of 30 gappy, teeth-wobbling, coin-counting children, this was one tale that had to be shared at story time. After all, their opinions are ultimately what matters!

The latest release in Elys Dolan's collection, *What About the Tooth Fairy?* is a witty and captivatingly illustrated story involving all the big shots: Santa, Cupid and the Easter Bunny, aka the 'Committee' of the magical world. The tooth fairy, if you haven't had the opportunity to meet her in person before, is a black, spectacled woman with a Spanish mouse amigo named Pérez. At a time when we are actively looking to embed BAME diversity into our curriculum, Dolan's characters are a breath of fresh air being both culturally diverse and inclusive.

The illustrations were by far my favourite part of this book! Take time to explore every beautifully drawn detail, read every speech bubble and amusing label or else you will miss the best bits. The

sharp puns and hilarious scenes are the perfect addition to the narrative offering something to tickle all readers, young and old.

The message Dolan wants her audience to take away with them is about standing up for what you believe and being true to yourself, in the case of the Tooth Fairy she desperately wants there to be a 'Tooth Day' as the only character currently without one! Now this somehow passed my class by and instead sparked an intense debate about why and when we celebrate specific days in our calendar, leading the majority to refuse the Tooth Fairy her request, asserting, "We don't all lose our teeth on the same day, it makes no sense. It's not like Christmas when we all celebrate it on the 25th of December."

However, whether the Tooth Fairy is granted her day is not down to my class but lies in the hands of the 'Committee' and you will have to read the story yourself to discover their verdict!

Anna Stebbings

When Jelly Had a Wobble

Michelle Robinson, illus. Tom Knight, pub. Hachette Children's Books

Jelly has been entered for the Kitchen Hall of Fame Awards for the most loved food. But Jelly is unable to enjoy the awards ceremony. He is overwhelmed by anxiety and self-doubt and compares himself, unfavourably, with all the other contenders for the 'best in show' title. The other foods try to encourage him, but all Jelly really wants to do is run and hide.

Tom Knight's bold, bright illustrations burst with colour and are a great pull-in to the story. They are humorous, quirky and full of action; the foods come to life as the assorted characters jostle together in excited frenzy to hear the announcement of the winner. Michelle Robinson's idea to use a jelly as the lead character in a story to help young children understand what anxiety feels like is inspired, and the incorporation of the traditional *Jelly on the Plate* nursery rhyme fits well with rhythm and rhyme of the text.

While it is a little disappointing that the opportunity to make the main characters more diverse, for a multicultural society familiar with foods from across the world, I think it's fair to say that any child brought up in a fast-food, advertising-obsessed country like ours in the UK will have no difficulty recognising the top favourite children's party foods. It's a delightful, fun, picture book with a serious message: everyone has a wobble now and then, and it's OK not to feel OK.

Yvonne Coppard

Wolf Girl

Jo Loring Fisher, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

Sophy is shy and she finds it difficult to talk to other children at school. But at home she likes to become a wolf cub, be part of the pack. At home Sophy has even created her very own den.

She has a wolf costume too, it makes her feel brave and full of confidence. So, she decides to wear the costume to school one day thinking it will help her overcome her shyness and help her to make friends. Unfortunately, this idea backfires and the other children make fun of her. As soon as she returns home she goes straight to her den, where she feels safe. In the den Sophy suddenly she feels the cold air against her face, she finds herself with a wolf and her cub.

So begins a wonderful adventure in which Sophy learns how to be a pack member and finds out what it really is like to be a wolf. She also meets a bear and discovers what it's like to leave someone out. When the adventure is over will Sophy be able to take all she has learned back to school with her?

This is a beautiful book full of courage and hope exploring how to overcome your problems. It is also a book that teaches children they aren't alone, that other children feel lonely to and they need to reach out to one another.

The illustrations are beautifully drawn and full of details. The pictures are warm and could tell a story by themselves.

Helen Byles

Junior Books

Albert Johnson and the Buns of Steel

Phil Earle, illus. Steve May, pub. Barrington Stoke (Little Gems)

An attention-grabbing title! Phil Earle is an award-winning author. His books for the Barrington Stoke series Little Gems are bestsellers, with *The Unlucky Eleven* chosen as a National Literacy Trust Premier League Reading Stars title for 2020. Little Gems are chapter books for 5–8-year-olds and the series seeks to engage early readers by the format, which is physically small books, easily handled by young readers, limited written content per page, extensively illustrated, mainly with a picture a page, and in the case of texts by Phil Earle and illustrations by Steve May, hilariously funny. As the format is dyslexia friendly it encourages all young readers to keep page-turning! For added entertainment each book in the Little Gems series has activities hiding in the jacket flap.

Albert Johnson's dad is a Master Baker, and so was Albert's dad's dad, and Albert's dad's grandad, and so on for years and years and years, so of course everyone expects that Albert will be a Master Baker. Certainly, Albert's Dad expects him to, but Albert has other ideas. He loves sports of all sorts – as long as there's a ball involved – and that's what he wants to do when he grows up. But Albert's Dad is desperate for someone to help him in his business and so he designs and builds the Doughmaster 5000, a robot who can make and bake a phenomenal number of buns a day. Until, of course, something goes wrong, and Albert Johnson has to come to the rescue with all his sporting skill!

This is a really funny story, with inventive, funny illustrations, and situations to which readers can relate. Well, they may not all have Master Bakers for a dad, but some may find that they aren't really interested in following in their dad's (or mum's) footsteps, but instead have a passion for something quite different. Like Albert they may also find that their parents also used to have other interests when young and, crucially, the family as a whole benefits from being the sum of its parts. Great stuff to encourage young readers, bakers and sportspeople alike.

Bridget Carrington

Amari and the Night Brothers

B.B. Alston, pub. Egmont

12-year-old Amari Peters is the young heroine of our novel, who ends up on a fantastical adventure, searching for her brother and finding out new things about herself along the way. Amari discovers that her missing brother Quinton was more magical than he seemed - and so is she!

This clever story follows quick-witted Amari, who takes advantage of a strange opportunity to visit the same summer camp as her now-missing brother, which she hopes will help her onto bigger and better things as well as aid in the search for him.

Amari stays strong in the face of almost constant ridicule because of her socio-economic background and stereotypes about her race from her classmates, adults, and new peers. Amari's search for her brother takes her into the supernatural world where her strength and determination are tested in new - and magical - ways!

Alston's writing style is comical, but full of important messages of hope and acceptance that always land in a way that make you want to jump in the book and defend Amari - not that our strong protagonist needs it.

Readers will join Amari on a magical adventure that treads the line between Alston's creative, supernatural world, and the contemporary issues of our own current reality. The story will keep you guessing up until the end, which luckily leaves the potential for a sequel. One of many great quotes from the novel is: "People assume stuff about you based on things you can't change about yourself," and Amari shows readers over and over that what others think doesn't matter as long as you believe in yourself.

Anne Singer

The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh

Helen Rutter, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Billy Plimpton is a goalkeeper, he is a drummer, he is a grandson, a son and a brother, he is a high school pupil, and he loves telling jokes. He also has a stammer.

As Billy starts a new school, he has a fresh opportunity to be someone different. He still feels the need however to hide away who he really is due to his stammer. Avoiding speaking seems a better alternative than being laughed at, or even worse, being singled out and subjected to ridicule by bullies like William Blakemore! All is going well at first but then it is announced that the class are each to give a speech about themselves in front of all of their peers – Billy's worst nightmare.

This is an incredibly impressive debut from Helen Rutter, an author who I'm sure we will hear more from in the future! Having been inspired by her son to write this story, she captures the character of Billy Plimpton, and the struggles that he faces in his own life, perfectly and manages to do so in such a revealing way.

This book would be enjoyed by readers who love jokes. There is one at the start of every chapter plus many more throughout which are woven into the story. For me, this book is similar in many ways to *Wonder* and *A Kind of Spark*, and that is a huge compliment! With an exceptional range of characters and a variety of lovely relationships, this story is one that everyone will be able to connect with at some level.

I found myself punching the air in celebration as the book came to a finish – it is such a triumphant end to a truly heart-warming story. A fantastic read.

Tom Joy

The Boy Who Met a Whale

Nizrana Farook, pub. Nosy Crow

Nizrana Farook has quickly become a firm favourite amongst countless middle grade readers after the success of her stunning debut, *The Girl Who Stole an Elephant*, and her second enchanting escapade fully confirms this and more! *The Boy Who Met a Whale* is adventuring at its absolute best – dazzling, daring and deliciously dramatic, it's the perfect rival to the great literary classics *Treasure Island*, *The Famous Five* and *Swallows and Amazons*.

On the lush, tropical shores of Serendib, a fictional island of Sri Lanka, 12-year-old fisherboy Razi bravely rescues Zheng, a young pirate who narrowly escaped a deadly shipwreck. Full of wild tales of worldly travels, Zheng is on a mission to find the hidden location of a priceless Serendib artefact, but in hot pursuit are some dastardly villains who will stop at nothing to get their hands on the treasure first. Ravi, and his twin Shifa, suddenly find themselves involved in an exhilarating, edge-of-your-seat, high seas chase that will bring them nose to nose with the biggest sea creature that legends only dream of.

Positively bursting at the seams with thrills and peril, bravery and beauty, *The Boy Who Met a Whale* will sweep you up in a joyous, heart-racing, unforgettable ride that will capture your imagination and steal your heart. With punchy, bite-sized chapters set against a gorgeous Indian Ocean backdrop, Farook once again proves herself to be a master of storytelling as she beautifully binds her light-hearted adventure with a rich, lyrical love song to the wonders of the natural world.

From the calls and colourful chaos of a local fishing village to the quiet hatching of turtle eggs and the mesmerising migration of blue whales, Farook masterfully brings the flora, fauna and food of her home country to life on the page and leaves you hungry for more. This is 'armchair travel' heaven and I absolutely bloody loved it.

Perfect for fans of Jasbinder Bilan, Kiran Millwood Hargrave and Katherine Rundell.

Fern Tolley

Darwin's Dragons

Lindsay Galvin, illus. Gordy Wright, pub. Chicken House

Syms Covington is a young cabin boy and fiddler on HMS Beagle, and an assistant to Charles Darwin. While they are searching for specimens in the Galapagos Islands a savage storm blows up. As they make for the Beagle in a small rowing boat Darwin falls into the massive waves. Syms rescues him but fails to get back on board himself. Cast ashore on a volcanic island, he struggles against despair. Suddenly he is lifted high into the air by a huge creature with vast claws and wings bigger than the Beagle's sails.

Again, and again the sky beast picks Syms up and drops him. In pain and scared, he plays his fiddle to comfort himself. A small lizard with golden eyes appears. She seems intent on keeping him from danger. Syms names her Farthing and they gradually become friends, each helping the other. Inexplicably, when the volcano starts to erupt Farthing insistently pushes him towards it. He realises she is desperate for him to save the dragon's eggs from destruction. Against all odds he not only does so, but is reunited with Darwin and the Beagle. They return to England and the eggs hatch one by one. Darwin commands that Farthing and the hatchlings must live in London Zoo. Syms can see they are failing to thrive, even when they come under royal patronage. He has to do something.

This is an extremely well-written, exciting and memorable middle-grade novel – an impressive blend of history, science and fantasy. Syms Covington really existed and travelled on the Beagle. Lindsay Galvin has seamlessly woven a huge amount of meticulous researched facts, evidenced in the fascinating and valuable endnotes, into a highly imaginative tale full of suspense, told from Syms' point of view. It is a tale that also carries strong messages about the value of friendship and the importance of caring for wildlife and the planet.

The attractive fold-out cover with reproductions of contemporary documents and drawings complements the text perfectly.

Highly recommended.

Anne Harding

Dog Gone

Bob Biddulph, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

A Sainsbury's Children's Book Award Winner 2020. You will find this is a brilliantly colourful and exciting rhyming story from a dog's point of view.

What happens when a pet dog loses its human? Teddy the Pug's story is easy to read with an exceptionally colourful background. In fact, the background adds essence to the story, and this can be used to ask questions of those listening.

So why would it be so bad for a dog to lose its human? Well, as Rob Biddulph tells us, there is a terrible troll hiding in the park and you can never be sure what will happen!

This story opens up a conversation as to how a pet dog might feel about his human. We all know that dogs can give curious looks and Rob Biddulph explains in this great book, through his words we see how dogs possibly see their owners.

Edward Pugglesworth is happy with his human but one day things go badly wrong and the human is lost. Will Teddy, as he is known, be able to solve the mystery of where his human is or will he need help from the most unlikely person?

Having read this to my class who have dogs of their own, they gave this the thumbs up and found it amusing, saying they now knew what their dogs were thinking. I really enjoyed reading this aloud and it is once again the standard you expect from Rob Biddulph who adds character to with the storyline with the self-illustration.

All that's left to say is ...Where should he look? What should he do? I don't want to spoil the story for you! So, find a good place to read with a friend and find out if the adventure turns out well in the end. A brilliant read and one that should find a space on your bookshelf.

Helen Finch

The Don't Panic Gang!

Mark Sperring, illus. Sarah Warburton, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

"A sumo-stomping, ninja-kicking, kung-fu leaping all-action adventure featuring three unlikely superheroes and one surprise ending." The back cover of *The Don't Panic Gang* sums up this high-energy picture book brilliantly.

In their top-secret rooftop headquarters live a doughnut-loving cat, a sweetie-tweety bird and a window-box worm, always waiting for the next desperate cry for help. When the phone rings, they transform - with the help of snappy costumes - into Sumo Cat, Ninja Bird and Kung-Fu Worm, and race off to help, zippity quick.

They might not be the most graceful of superheroes, but the three friends are well-meaning and fierce defenders of the public who call on them, chasing away villains, and bathroom invaders.

Building up very cleverly to a fantastic twist (no spoilers, you'll have to read it), this is a fun adventure story. The illustrations are lively, colourful and brilliantly quirky - I loved their superhero costumes on the washing line on the title page, and the 'ninja bubbles' are awesome!

A fun and funny book that would stand up to repeated reading, with lots of opportunity for amusing voices and energetic actions (maybe not the ideal bedtime read). You could chat for ages about what these characters could get up to next, or why not try role-playing *Don't Panic Gang* adventures?

There's definitely scope for more *Don't Panic Gang* exploits, especially now they have a new member!

Antonia Russell

The Elephant

Peter Carnavas, pub. Pushkin Press

Whenever Olive looks at her father she sees beside him a large grey elephant. Olive's mother died when she was tiny, and her father is still too sad to play or talk with her, let alone mend her bike, which used to belong to her mother. Her maternal grandfather does the caring. He brings joy into Olive's life. Every few days, when he collects her from school, he wears his purple rucksack, signalling an exciting adventure. Olive tells her best friend, Arthur, about the elephant. He asks if anyone else can see it, and if it's like an imaginary friend. More like an imaginary enemy, she answers. He suggests getting rid of it, but that's not easy.

One day their teacher asks all the children to bring in something old that matters to them to celebrate the school's centenary. Olive longs to bring her bike but will have to choose something else. She climbs to her thinking spot in the jacaranda tree in the yard. And she falls. When she comes around she sees a large grey tortoise by her grandfather. She realises her fall has made him sad. She is desperate to cheer him up. Maybe the celebration of old things can provide a way. The plan she and Arthur hatch works beautifully. Not only does the tortoise disappear, but the elephant bows out too. And there's still one more surprise.

This novel is a sensitive, beautiful and valuable exploration of the impacts of loss, grief and depression. The metaphor of the large grey animals works extremely well, and this along with the simple language, wide text spacing and evocative illustrations by the author, who is best known for his picture books, make the book very accessible.

Despite the subject matter, this is not a gloomy read. There's lots of love and happiness here. The message of hope is powerful and important. I have a niggling concern that some children could get the impression that depression can be cured, and that they can and should try to make depressed people better, but by far the majority will not read it this way. Highly recommended.

Anne Harding

Everyday Magic: The Adventures of Alfie Blackstack

Jess Kidd, pub. Canongate Books

Jess Kidd has been winning plaudits since her debut *Himself* was shortlisted for the Irish Book Awards in 2016. She won the Costa Short Story Award the same year. Her second novel, *The Hoarder*, was shortlisted for the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year 2019 and both books were BBC Radio 2 Book Club Picks. Her third novel, a Victorian detective tale *Things in Jars*, was released to critical acclaim. But now, Jess Kidd, described as 'Gabriel García Márquez meets The Pogues,' has produced her first children's book with this fabulously witchy middle grade fantasy, *Everyday Magic: The Adventures of Alfie Blackstack*.

It's the story of nine-year-old Alfie, whose idea of adventure is more akin to his remembering to put on wellies before stepping over puddles. His parents, on the other hand, have a rather more spirited approach to life. And so, when Alfie is inevitably orphaned (his mother perishes dancing through a lion's cage wrapped in a chain of sausages, his father meets a watery grave in the middle of the ocean) he is sent to live with his two aunts at Switherbroom Hall, postcode, the back of beyond.

Dejected and friendless, at least Alfie won't have to worry about being judged for not being brave or strong or daring enough, after all, his aunts run a chemist shop in a village where nothing EVER happens...well actually no. Buckle up reader for a helter-skelter of a ride. Those aunts aren't chemists, they're WITCHES, and Alfie will soon find himself caught up in the Witch War to end all Witch Wars.

Deftly straddling genres, Jess Kidd has written a hugely entertaining book that will enchant and delight younger readers (7 to 11). A riot of ingenious magic, this has pacey storytelling and a bombastic and breathless ending with hints at a sequel. Will Alfie ever match the fearlessness of the carefree Calypso Fagan, whose family own a travelling circus? Has he finally found in Calypso his first best friend?

Everyday Magic abounds with joyously madcap characters: familiars, ghosts, imps, witches. But underlying the plentiful fun and giggles is a story that centres on the power of friendship, a subtle lesson on how the underdog is actually no underdog at all, but with a little bit of self-belief, very much good enough. This is a perfect book for your child to immerse themselves in. A mix of *The Witches* with the bonkersness of Lemony Snicket and the imagination of *Nevermoor*. Even with the richness

of the world Jess Kidd has created, *Everyday Magic* is an effortless and charming read, ideal for both reluctant or dedicated MG readers. Thoroughly recommend.

Matilde Sazio

The Forest of Moon and Sword

Amy Raphael, pub. Orion Books (Hachette Children's Group)

An 'edge of your seat' tale which will encourage the most reluctant reader to persevere.

Back to the seventeenth century, 1644-46, to be precise. When Matthew Hopkins set himself up as Witchfinder General, predominantly in East Anglia and Essex. Stretching to wherever would buy his service, to rid them of witches - Kelso for the purposes of the story on the Scottish Borders. With the Civil Wars raging folk were jumpy, fearful and easily deceived. Matthew Hopkins (an unsuccessful lawyer) fed on this and provided a scapegoat which provided him with an enormous income. Innocent women who were attempting to help their community by providing herbal healing concoctions were easy targets along with any woman who happened to have the physical attributes associated with a witch. About 300 women died without further ado.

The story begins in the attic of Art's home (a 12-year-old girl). She is about to lose her mother to the English soldiers. The story spares us the specific details but provides sufficient information for the reader to quickly grasp the dread of, number one being female, and number two living in 1644. These were times when you could not be sure of anything. A stark contrast to our lives today where we are sure enough to have expectations. A swift appreciation of the small things in life ensues.

The magic of this book is that all this grim reality is swathed in natural wonder. Nature soothes our way, making us realise how little importance we give to its restorative powers. Perhaps more so post first lockdown when the weather and comparative peace encouraged us to take more notice of what was around, even in the towns and cities. Elijah deserves a mention in all this mayhem. A strong, considerate boy with a challenging past, not much older than Art proves to be the linchpin to a successful outcome. He deserves a cheer. The balancing effect of this character is inspired.

A curiously worded and greatly debated sentence from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, sets the scene. "I took a deep breath and listened to the brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am". Redolent of past history and how this will impact the future. It thumps its rhythm throughout *The Forest of Moon and Sword* which is about self-belief, friendship and female independence.

An ideal read for a class at school or a family at home with lots to chew over. History meets natural history in this text. They complement each other. The one making the other tolerable. Lots of themes join up to ensure a first-class reading event and plenty of chat afterwards.

Now on the “edge of your seat”. Read on.

Elizabeth Negus

The Giant’s Almanac

Andre Zurcher, pub. Puffin Books

When a book has a slightly slower uptake, when it takes you a little longer than usual to get into - don’t give up. I was in this position with *The Giant’s Almanac* and I am glad I didn’t give up. Andrew Zurcher’s writing is both intricate and enthralling, he packs so much detail into this story that at times you are left breathless. This is not just because you are running through the castle at break-neck speed, from the library to your home outside the walls, after having overheard something that you really had no business to be hearing.

Fitz is convinced that he is an ordinary boy, an ordinary eleven-year-old boy, well almost ordinary, he does have rather a passion for books that could be considered unusual. The problem with a passion for books however is that it can get you into scrapes, it can get you into adventures and it can lead to races against time. Fitz is about to experience all this and more when, forced away from home, his mother and all he knows and loves, all the truths he thought he ever knew, he is drawn into a game. This is not your average game and the players (including Fritz) are not your average players. This is a battle, a fight to save lives, to save books and to claim what rightfully belongs to Fritz.

There are lovable characters, there are terrifying characters, there is action and adventure, there are pages that leave you on the edge of your seat. The writing is strong and powerful, the story intricately plotted and masterful. This is a book for all those of love high fantasy, who love to be taken on a thrilling journey, who, in short, love books.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

The Ghost Garden

Emma Carroll, illus. Kaja Kajfež, pub. Barrington Stoke

As we experience a worldwide interruption to ‘normal’ life, *The Ghost Garden* is a particularly apposite offering from Emma Carroll. Carroll specialises in slightly spooky novels for middle grade readers. But in a Carroll novel spooky is an addition to the main narrative, to spice up the setting and the plot, a bit like horseradish with beef, or salt on your chips. The author is also particularly adept at portraying the lives of young people in unglamorous, everyday situations and at times of crisis.

In the case of *The Ghost Garden* we are in the summer of 1914, at Longbarrow House, where Fran's father is the Head Gardener. The owner, Mrs Walker, has with her three grandchildren, Leo, Evan and Jessie who are back from boarding school for the summer holiday. As the child of a working-class family, Fran is either ignored by the children, or made fun of for her country accent. As a result she keeps out of their way as far as she can, and in her own school holiday she helps her father in the garden. When Leo breaks his leg, and then Fran's parents tell her that her mother is pregnant, Fran becomes troubled, as both things seem to have been foretold in some way by spooky things she has found in the garden. Asked by Mrs Walker to look after the wheelchair-confined Leo, Fran gradually discovers that he is shy, not haughty, and her summer becomes very different from that which she had feared.

If readers have encountered Frances Hodgson Burnett's engrossing 1911 novel *The Secret Garden* either in its original form or as a film, they will recognise a certain similarity in the friendship which both Burnett and Carroll describe developing between two very different children. Even before his accident Leo has been obsessive about reading in the newspapers the daily events which precede and precipitate the First World War, and readers might wonder whether he is in fact on the autistic spectrum. Fast-paced, satisfyingly spooky, informative, heart-warming and thoughtful, with the added bonus of the excellent Barrington Stoke dyslexia friendly format.

Bridget Carrington

The Hatmakers

Tamzin Merchant, illus. Paola Escobar, pub. Penguin Books

As soon as you hold this book in your hands, you can tell that the publisher rates it highly. It's a hardback for a start, which is quite rare: and the cover is a thing of beauty, richly coloured and scattered with touches of gold foil.

And this is absolutely fitting. Firstly, because it is a very, very good book. Secondly, because it deals with beauty and the language is most definitely up to the challenge of describing loveliness. Just opening at random, for example, I find this description of the contents of a hatbox belonging to the main character, Cordelia:

'...her baby blanket made from a piece of sailcloth, a shiny knot of nutmeg her father had brought back from Ceylon, the fragile orb of a Venetian glass song-bottle, a clear quartz crystal that scattered shards of rainbow light across the floor, a bowl made from a polished coconut shell... an iridescent feather from an Elysian Eagle...'

It's clear that the author delights in words, is enchanted by the idea of magic, and feels a sense of wonder at all that her world has to offer.

The world is a parallel one to ours – this is London, but not as we know it. Cordelia is the youngest of a family of Makers. There are a number of these families, each of which has a particular skill which is passed down through the generations. Cordelia’s family makes magical hats, constructed from carefully chosen ingredients which weave a magical spell – to give the wearer confidence, or to calm them down, or to give them courage.

However, the Maker families are under attack from a mysterious enemy. Not only this, her father has been lost at sea and reported to have drowned as his ship sank. But Cordelia will not accept this; she simply doesn’t believe it. She is determined to find him – but first she has to sort out the threat to the Makers. This she does, with courage, tenacity and flair – and the help of two particular friends and sundry others.

I loved this book. The story whirls you along, the characters are colourful, tough and delightful, the language is full of a joy in words and in the imagination – and the message is a sorely needed one of hope and triumph over adversity. And it’s great fun, too.

Sue Purkiss

Sue Purkiss’s latest book, *Jack Fortune and the Search for the Hidden Valley*, is an adventure story set in the Himalayas.

The House at the Edge of Magic

Amy Sparkes, pub. Walker Books

When a feisty nine-year-old orphan steals a mysterious house-shaped ornament, she enters a wonderfully whimsical world and discovers that she has only hours to save the lives of everyone who lives there.

From acclaimed children’s author, Amy Sparkes, comes a fantastical middle grade novel for children aged 8+. Full of unforgettable characters, sibling rivalry and a magnificently magical house, this is one zany, highly imaginative, action-filled story. The pace never lets up and inventive details abound on every page. There is never a dull moment in *The House at the Edge of Magic*.

Young readers will quickly empathise with the plight of Nine as she pickpockets to appease her horrible caretaker, Pockets. Though tough as the life she leads is Nine may have finally found a place to belong if only she can save the motley crew and the higgledy-piggledy house she finds herself in. It will take more than warm, fuzzy feelings (or warm, fuzzy slippers) for her to break the curse that this quirky house has been put under.

From libraries with flying books to toilets that relocate without warning and actual skeletons in the closets, the house is a conundrum – and a full-fledged character -- in itself. But there is a bigger mystery to solve if they are going to survive a curse from a vengeful witch. Between action and adventure, a relentless, ever-changing setting and a sweet but stubborn protagonist on an emotional journey, *The House at the Edge of Magic* expertly combines the wonder of imagination with a heartfelt story of belonging.

Stephanie Ward

Luna Rae is not Alone

Hayley Webster, pub. Nosy Crow

We meet Luna Rae as she adjusts to some big changes in her life. She has just moved to a new house and is also preparing to start at a new school. She faces several challenges, such as dealing with bullies and making new friends. Luna is a resilient character who is determined to stay positive but thrumming away in the background is her anxiety about her mum. Why hasn't she seen her for days?

Luna's great passions are baking and making observations about the people around her (being nosy!). Luna thinks she has found the answer to her problems when her teacher announces 'The Great Big Family Baking Competition', and she becomes fixated on winning it with her Mum.

Luna is a quirky and endearing character, and the story is told in her distinctive voice. She is funny and charming but there is also a thread of sadness and vulnerability woven throughout her narrative. The mystery surrounding Luna's mother helps to propel the reader through the book, but the real strength is in the depiction of relationships and emotions. Family life is shown in all its complexities and there is a cast of flawed but loving characters. The book deals deftly with some sensitive issues whilst maintaining a warm and engaging tone throughout.

This is an extremely readable and enjoyable book. Luna's story hooks you in and she is a character that you come to really care about, rooting for her to be okay. This book would be enjoyed by upper KS2 children who enjoy engaging, realistic stories. I look forward to reading more by this hugely talented author.

Liz Speight

Me, My Dad and the End of the Rainbow

Benjamin Dean, pub. Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Archie Albright's life has changed. His mum and dad separated and where they used to be great together, they now seem to hate each other. The worst thing is that nobody is telling Archie anything!

As Archie starts finding little clues as to why his parents are clashing so much, he starts to piece together some of the shattered puzzle pieces together. After a devastating parents' evening at school though, he overhears his mum and dad arguing and hears two words that explain everything while also causing even more confusion. Archie and his friends then have to devise a plan which may take them to the only place that can give them the answers that Archie needs to get his relationship with his Dad back to where it was before everything changed.

This is a great debut from Benjamin Dean who has tackled some sensitive issues with respect and clarity. Whilst this book tells a fantastic story, a story of love and relationships, its success lies in showing that everything can be improved by understanding, and for Archie, gaining an education in something that he had previously very little knowledge on, will enable him to rescue his relationship with his Dad.

This book would be enjoyed by readers who love exploring relevant topics. In a world where we are constantly learning and improving our understanding of each other, this book is perfect. It represents many groups of people in an accessible and safe way for children which is difficult, but important.

Tom Joy

Morgana Mage in the Robotic Age

Amy Bond, pub. Chicken House

Amy Bond's debut junior novel draws us in to a fast-moving adventure set somewhere between the magical world of witches and warlocks, and the robotic fantasy of sci-fi movies.

Initially it feels like we have landed at Miss Cackle's Academy, or indeed another very well-known school of Wizards and Muggles, but quickly we discover Morgana's new life at the city school, away from her roots in the woods with the other witches, is anything but a classic tale of magic and mystery. It's closer to a near-future where children routinely use electronic scrolls to communicate, travel to school by teleportation and strive to be the best robotic engineers in the land.

This book really takes you in, with the action spilling out of the amazing descriptions from the outset and continuing throughout. Whilst it doesn't feel particularly character driven initially, we do get to know Morgana and Jonathan as their friendship blossoms and are right there with them as the drama unfolds.

With a basis in fantasy and magic this novel in fact explores a number of wider themes – friendship, diversity and acceptance, the rise of technology – and opens up a whole world of discussion about where we are headed as society. That said, at face value it's also a fantastic dramatic thriller.

Amy Ellis

Once We Were Witches

Sarah Driver, illus. Fabi Santiago, pub. Egmont

Sisters Egg and Spel live, cut off from the rest of society, under the oppressive regime of Mistress Mouldheel's School for Wicked Girls. Here, they are taught that they must atone for the terrible crimes of their parents and work to suppress their own innate wickedness. The rebellious and free-spirited Egg is determined to escape and forge her own future. Spel, instead, tries desperately to conform so that she can achieve her longed-for soul ceremony. Realising they are in terrible danger the girls flee from Mouldheel's. Will they ever find safety and the truth about their identity?

Initially they seek refuge at a mysterious undertakers' where a pudding-loving dragon lurks in the basement. The girls move further towards the truth as they begin to discover their magical powers and learn more about their mother. Later, Spel begins an exciting adventure when she is forced to venture into a strange otherworldly realm to rescue her sister. We are taken deep into a world of dragons, ghosts, and warring magical creatures. Black and white illustrations throughout the book enhance the richly described fantasy world: the double page spreads are particularly striking.

Once We Were Witches is a gothic fantasy with strong themes of friendship, family and self-acceptance. A sense of foreboding and tension is built by seeing events from Spel's intense and serious perspective. She is an outwardly quiet character with a strong inner life and her voice is lyrical and full of potent imagery. The story moves through three atmospheric settings and the peril and revelations experienced by the characters makes for an exciting read. The book ends with a hint that there are more realms ready to be explored.

This is the start of a new series from the author of the *Huntress* trilogy. Ideal for 9+ readers looking for a new fantasy adventure series with strong female characters.

Liz Speight

Panda at the Door

Sarah Thorne, pub. Chicken House

Illustrator Sarah Thorne, whose recognizable images have complemented popular books by contemporary authors (*Fizzlebert Stump* by A.F. Harrold and *Charlie Changes into a Chicken* by Sam Copeland) has written and illustrated this charming and gently told tale about hopes, dreams, family ties and friendship.

Pudding the Panda is a major attraction at Edinburgh Zoo who, when she is not charming visitors, loves to chew bamboo and watch the DVD of her hero, Mary Poppins. The news that she is being sent to China leads Pudding to escape from the zoo, and to find refuge at the house of a boy, Callum, who has recently adopted her and who has sent her a desperate message.

A giant panda, though clearly well intentioned and fun-loving, is not really what Cal is after. His dad has left home after an argument about their tight finances with his mum, the bully next-door Mike Spiker torments him and his best friend has moved away.

Yet, Pudding's antics and her desperate desire to help Callum bring some cheer to the boy and his family at a difficult time. Things become even more complicated when the zoo offers a very generous reward for information about Pudding's whereabouts and Mike Spiker and his dad become suspicious.

Callum's dad reappears just in time to save the day and to plan a satisfying happy ending.

A nod to a much-loved classic and the inclusion of a lovable protagonist make of this book the perfect feel-good story for young independent readers. Bursting with optimism and gentleness Pudding brings chaos and laughter and instigates a positive change in Callum's family life.

Family relationships are mended; bullies are put firmly in their place; friends are reunited. Every reader will wish to have a friend like Pudding.

Laura Brill

Space Detectives

Mark Powers, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Ten-year-old humans Connor and Ethan are enjoying another cosmic day on Starville, the space station where they live, when they discover their intergalactic home is due to go smack, bang into the moon. The two space detectives are soon on the case and hurtling through an adventure featuring multiple Tufted Grotsnoblers, a host of Neptunian Bat-Rats and the most delicious ice cream this side of the Milky Way. Can they solve this out-of-this world mystery before it's too late?

The first instalment in a new series from *Spy Toys* author Mark Powers, *Space Detectives* zips along thanks to clear writing and a deadpan comic style. Characters are simply drawn, but still nicely individual, with the brainy Ethan nicely complemented by the more socially adept Connor. Short chapters make it suitable for reluctant readers.

Space Detectives is also lucky to be illustrated by rising star Dapo Adeola, fresh from winning the Waterstones Children's Book of the Year 2020 for the picture book *Look Up!* His talent is on display again here with a series of energetic illustrations, which perfectly capture the lively tone of the story.

This edition also features a 'Could YOU be a space detective quiz?' and a sneak peek at the next book in the series, the irresistibly titled *Space Detectives: Extra Weird Creatures* (after a horde of Tufted Grotsnoblers, one wonders how much weirder these creatures could be).

Olivia Parry

Rat

Patrice Lawrence, pub. Oxford Children's Books

Rat is a story about a young boy, Al, and his friendship with his two pet rats - Venom and Vulture. After he's caught inadvertently shoplifting, and his mother arrested and sent back to prison, Al spends much of the novel seeking revenge on the passer-by and neighbour, Mr Brayker, who alerted the security guard. As Al struggles with his schoolwork, and his only friends are his pet rats, he becomes preoccupied with more elaborate and dangerous methods of revenge, which don't all go according to plan.

Al often struggles to contain his anger, with vivid imagery of it taking the form of bubbles: "It's not just small bubbles inside my head now, but a giant bubble and I'm trapped inside it." Apart from his anger, Al initially appears to be a rather emotionless character - his lack of joy due to his mother often being in prison, and also having to frequently move home due to poverty.

However, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that he links his feelings to things like food. On the topic of roast dinners, Al moans that his Gran used to make them, but: "I was always being told about my manners, so they stopped tasting good." His bittersweet memories add a poignant tone to the novel, and we begin to sympathise with his plight.

Rat feels like it's aimed at children, and is a novel about friendships, family hardships, and bottled-up emotions. It's written as a first-person narrative from Al's point of view, and deals with many emotions and morals, with a surprise ending.

At the back of the book, there is a section dedicated to the background of the novel, with a word list and a quiz. Therefore, not only is *Rat* an interesting story about coping with different emotions while growing up, but it's also a book that invites the reader to be retrospective about their own feelings, and how they would cope with life's problems.

Chris J Kenworthy

Space Oddity

Christopher Edge, illus. Ben Mantle, pub. Chicken House

Calling all geeks, this is the book for you! This tale is crammed with spaceships, aliens, interplanetary adventure, and a few Daleks thrown in for good measure.

This story tells the tale of Jake, a young boy who is unable to stop cringing at his super embarrassing dad. Let's face it, we've all been there with Jake, we can empathise.

We begin at a school show where, no surprise, Jake's Dad embarrasses him like never before. But, despite the odds against him, Jake's Dad is set on righting his wrongs. So, in an attempt to secure his place in the dad hall of fame, or at the very least win his son over just a little bit, Jake's dad drags him to 'The Getaway Experience'. The pair quickly find themselves camping, running after marshmallows and zorbing into the night. That is until Jake experiences a rather strange allergic reaction to some broccoli soup and his whole world is turned upside down. Basically, what ensues is, frankly, one of the most exciting camping trips you'll ever have been on.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and, while it's been a good few years since I was as young as Jake, I really empathised with the central character. Jake grew throughout the book, but not in such a sickly, sweet way as to make you feel like you're back at school being taught a lesson. Through spending time with his dad Jake was able to learn more about him, find out some cool things about him, yet still feel a bit embarrassed by him. Let's face it we'll always be a little embarrassed by our parents.

As the name would suggest this book isn't all space monsters and planet-hopping, it is an ode to the late, great, David Bowie. Released the day before Bowie's birthday this book centres around one of his classic hits, *Space Oddity*, a song which is more powerful than we can ever have known. Wondering how this vintage ear worm links into this story of space, aliens and adventure? Then head to your nearest bookshop and pick up a copy, you won't be disappointed.

Rosie Cammish Jones

The Spybrarian

Jon Mayhew, illus. Robin Boyden, pub. UCLan Publishing

The Spybrarian is one of those jolly romps where a child gets a superpower which he/she uses to save the world. The clever twist in this book, as you might deduce from the title, is that the superpower is to do with libraries and reading.

There is lots of word play to do with books in the story. Taking, for example, the names - the hero is called Kian Reader. One of the top librarians, the head of SLS, the Secret Library Service, is named Paige Turner. Her sidekick is called Carrel Filler. (I think carrels are those little cubicles in university libraries: perhaps a little obscure, this one!) The baddies are headed up the mysterious Carnegie, with the helpfully named Dr Badd as their chief agent. They belong to an organisation called F.A.R.T., the Fellowship Against Reading Texts.

The setup is that Kian hates reading, but accidentally imbibes a magic serum which gives him his superpower – the ability to absorb and text just by looking at or touching a book. Dr Badd is determined to use him in his battle against the SLS, but with the help of his friends, Prissy and Asif, Kian is determined to resist, and in the process, begins to see the value of books. Be assured though, this aspect of the story is handled with a very light touch – it's not remotely preachy.

I think that's enough to give you an idea as to the kind of book this is. It's funny, witty, fast-paced, and – well, fun. I'm sure lots of children will love it, and chuckle happily over the many jokes.

Sue Purkiss

Sue Purkiss's latest book, *Jack Fortune and the Search for the Hidden Valley*, is an adventure story set in the Himalayas.

Two Terrible Vikings

Francesca Simon, illus. Steve May, pub. Faber Books

Evidently Francesca Simon enjoys writing about naughty children! This book is on the same level as the *Horrid Henry* Early Reader series, and the story follows on from a picture book, also published by Faber, about Hack and her brother, Whack, as toddlers, published with illustrations by Charlotte Cotterill.

Steve May gives the children similarly anarchic expressions and grins, and also retains the anachronistic horned helmets, which we are now assured were a German idea in the mid-19th century. Still, they are recognisably Vikings, and, in the three stories here, the reader will learn about

longhouses, shields and weapons along the way, as well as the constant need for gathering food and firewood.

Hack and Whack, like most children, dislike doing chores, and dodge them whenever possible, but more chores are always a possibility because of their bad behaviour, which is well known around the village. Their chant is “Hack and Whack - on the attack”. They find that they are the only children not invited to Elsa Gold-Hair’s birthday party, (Elsa being the good child, equivalent to Perfect Peter and equally irritating to naughty children) and gate-crash it anyway, with predictable results.

In the second story, they decide to track a troll, with their wolf, Bitey-Bitey, their friend Twisty-Pants, who untruthfully claims to have lots of experience of adventuring, and Dirty Ulf, who never wants to have her hair combed. The large footprints they follow turn out to have an innocent explanation, but they scare each other and themselves in a most entertaining way.

The third story sees them attempting to raid Bad Island, with the same gang of friends and, accidentally, Elsa Gold-Hair, but they row round in a circle and are discovered attempting to raid their own longhouse.

The stories are simple, with girls and boys treated exactly the same, the illustrations are fun, and the text is very clear, in a font called Sweater School, which is designed for supporting reading. This collection of stories will certainly go down well with young readers.

Diana Barnes

Vega Jane and The Secrets of Sorcery

David Baldacci, pub. Macmillan Children’s Books

The first book of three in a new series previously published as *The Finisher*, Book of the Year in 2014. This edition has been re-edited and re-illustrated for slightly younger children from age 10 upwards. If your potential reader likes magic, fantasy, adventure and terrifying beasts they’ll like this. A reluctant reader with a penchant for the thrilling will be in their element. The compelling storyline will do the rest, and bingo, book read. Along the way the vocabulary and style are to a beneficial standard too.

Vega Jane is given a map that reveals a mysterious world of dangerous creatures on the outskirts of Wormwood, their world. This makes her question what is beyond Wormwood’s borders, why no-one wishes to leave and how they got there in the first place. Secrets and lies appear to lock them in.

This 14-year-old girl is both tenacious and enigmatic with a strong sense of duty. Qualities that her opponents can find confusing should she wish them to. Her personal code of ethics is impressive.

Moral snippets abound. Making for a refreshing read despite the intermittent violent goings on. The Wugs of Wormwood live in a challenging world intermingled with fantastical events.

A brilliant fallback as a break from home learning perhaps for both pupil and teacher! A phantasmagorical journey into a strange land that will achieve that essential break from the possible trials of post Covid life for a young person. Positive messages, well developed characters and role models in an action-packed story compel you to turn the pages right to the very end. Don't give up, battle on to the end ... echoes throughout. Leaving you waiting for Book 2. Even that reluctant reader!

Elizabeth Negus

Uma and the Answer to Absolutely Everything

Sam Copeland, illus. Sarah Horne, pub. Puffin Books

Here is the latest humorous novel by the best-selling author of *Charlie Changes into a Chicken*. While Charlie was dealing with anxiety, Uma is now dealing with bereavement.

The loss of her mother has pushed Uma's father into a silence that has been dominating their lives, and Uma strives to find ways to get her dad back. At first, I hoped that the author had picked a more original trigger to the story, as the dead parent motif is quite a common setting. But Uma's emotional world is touching and endearing, and in my opinion bears the best moments of the novel.

Sam Copeland's playful writing style can treat heavy matters with a charming lightness. He is well known for his comicality. Children reading this story will certainly laugh with the characters, and at the characters. The very attractive black and white illustrations in each chapter also add a welcome funny twist to the episodes. In fact, I believe the author's voice can be found at its best when it moves away from itself, without forcing the characters' reactions, and merges with the plot. This is when his playful style emerges as most natural.

As a result, we partake of a heartfelt relationship between Uma, her best friend Alan Alan, and Athena, an artificial intelligence device lost by the evil Stella Dawn. The author invents a convincing character even for Athena who ends up reflecting Uma's deepest desires of reconciliation with her dad, allowing for her feelings to surface and therefore to be dealt with. It is indeed a clever idea that leads the story. I thoroughly enjoyed being absorbed by such well-crafted characters, while reflecting on the role of technology in our lives. I suspect we will meet Uma again soon in another adventure.

Francesca Magnabosco

The Valley of Lost Secrets

Lesley Parr, illus. David Dean, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

I enjoy reading about the wartime period and wasn't disappointed in Lesley Parr's debut novel.

Jimmy and his brother, Ronnie are evacuated from Islington, London along with their teacher and fellow classmates to a village in the Welsh Valley's. The story is quite fast-moving and gives the reader an indication of how differently the children felt being away from their homes and families. For some it is a blessing and brings out their true personalities, for others they miss it all terribly and are very homesick.

In this story, Jimmy is finding it hard to fit in as well as keeping a close eye on Ronnie at the same time. Ronnie sees it all as an adventure. Some locals are not always convinced the evacuees are genuine and make life uncomfortable for them. However, it appears that it isn't just the evacuees that are made to feel like this. History has a funny way of blaming people and Jimmy, along with a friend he never considered, set out to unravel a mystery that has haunted someone for many years.

The book is full of emotion and the reader is drawn into the residents' lives in this small Welsh village. One can easily take sides as bullying is a theme in the story, not only involving the children. It's written in a way that is easy to read yet that doesn't detract from the storyline. It is easy to follow and understand the theme of bravery and how even the most unlikely people can form friendships with unsaid understanding. It also defines courage and family values and how important it is to look after other.

The cover illustration is attractive and engaging and immediately indicates what the story will be about, showing children carrying their gas masks. That, along with the story, transports the reader to the Welsh Valley's and into the wartime period. I really enjoyed reading this and was eager to find out what would happen in the end and whether the mystery is solved.

Definitely an author to look out for in the future.

Helen Finch

This Wonderful Thing

Adam Baron, pub. HarperCollins Children's Books

Cymbeline's world is turned upside down in the course of a few hours. His dad forgets to pick him up for a trip to Barcelona, his house gets burgled, and Stephen and his daughters move in, followed shortly by his Dad. This full house is bursting at the seams and all are reeling from the mess left behind by the burglars. It is not yet clear what they were after.

In a dual narrative, we meet sisters Jessica and Milly. Out on a family walk, the girls discover a yucky teddy bear stuck in a river and though he is dirty, they immediately fight over him and take him home. Cleaning him up, they continue to argue over him.

Cymbeline has lived with just his mum for so long that he struggles with this new family arrangement. Jess and Milly's lives are currently being thrown upside down with the knowledge of their fathers' illness and the need to sell their home.

There are links between Cymbeline and the sisters that are not entirely obvious in the beginning but as this incredible story continues the clues fall together and the children meet, things all fall into place, and just in time.

It was wonderful being back with Cymbeline and discovering more about Not Mr Fluffy. The stories are so brilliantly intertwined and I had that magical eureka moment when it all fell into place. The teddy bear bringing them all together is so heart-warming and special.

I read this in one sitting, finding the dual narrative riveting and engaging, helping me to piece together the mystery. Full of family angst and heartache, there is also a balance with hope, friendship and right coming out on top of wrong. The characters are so real, down to the sister's arguments, the realisation of what parents go through as well as learning to come together as a new family.

This is the perfect third book in this series featuring the brilliantly named Cymbeline Igloo.

Erin Hamilton

Young Adult Books

11 Paper Hearts

Kelsey Hartwell, pub. Underlined (Random House Children's Books)

What would you do if you lost 11 weeks of your life? If you woke up, and 11 weeks of your memory was missing? That's the premise of this book and Ella, the main character, is desperate to fill in those memories. 11 weeks is a long time, and she has no idea why she broke up with her boyfriend or fell out with her closest friends during that time period. She needs a way to find those memories again and that is when the paper hearts start appearing.

This is an interesting exploration of how you can change as a person and how this can subsequently change your friendships and relationships with others. Priorities can change and even the things that you consider most important. Other themes in the book include love, trauma, memory loss, family and siblings.

This is Kelsey Hartwell's debut novel and perfect for fans of Rom-Coms. (You can tell that the author loves a bit of romance). I liked the reference to different classic romantic writers, such as Jane Austen, but also the classic detective novels such as Sherlock Holmes. It makes me want to revisit the classic novels because they definitely influence modern romanticists and crime writers. I would say because of the theme it would appeal more to girls (14+) but any boys that enjoy romance novels would also enjoy this.

The mystery element introduced via the paper hearts trail keeps the reader guessing right up to the end. It wasn't predictable and the big reveal is quite a twist in the story. It reminded me of *Bridgerton*, a Netflix show based on a book series, where the viewer is trying to solve the mystery of who the writer of a scandal newsletter is. This is set against a romantic background and threads through the story.

Sophie Castle

A Phở Love Story

Loan Le, pub. Simon and Schuster Children's Books

A Phở Love Story is told by Linh and Bảo, whose sudden, accidental meeting brings with it a rush of conflicting emotions - not to mention impossible decisions. Their parents each own a phở restaurant on opposite sides of the same street and have been rivals for as long as their children can remember. Any friendship between the pair would be considered a treacherous proposition: the Mais and

Nguyễns remain staunch enemies. But despite years of honouring that divide one random moment of perfect timing reveals a strong pull between them.

With this feeling hanging in the balance, their lives continue to converge through the mutual connection of Linh's best friend Ali. Both Linh and Bảo are incredibly close to their parents but begin to see how much they both struggle with a fear of disappointing them. Having escaped by boat from Nha Trang, Linh and Bảo's parents both wish so much for the pair's security and happiness that they hold high expectations about what shape their futures will take.

Linh's parents discourage any committed pursuit of creative careers, but her joy lies with art. This difficulty of holding onto your own interests, despite doubt and guilt, is tense, as Le's book examines how the closest relationships can become unstable without honesty. As much as Linh and Bảo might be able to find more acceptance and encouragement when together, there is no easy way of supporting one another when their families remain at odds. Yet, the pair try to continue their creativity, and show how writing and illustration can help to counter the anti-Asian racism in their community, and honour both memories and family histories.

When Bảo observes that *bánh xèo*, a crispy rice pancake that is a staple of his mother's restaurant menu, is best eaten on rainy days, he describes it as tasting like a good fire - a perfect pairing to the earthy smell of rainy streets. In a similar way, *A Phở Love Story* is an ideal book for one long, rainy day of reading. It will hopefully make you cry (in a good way!) as well as laugh. It is a brilliant way to spend a day.

Jemima Breeds

Beauty and the Bin

Joanne O'Connell, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Laura Larskie is proud of her parents and ashamed of them at the same time. They are well on their way to saving the planet. They grow their own food – hydroponically because they weren't allowed an allotment. They have fruit, vegetables and herbs growing all over the house. Her parents' latest venture is raiding supermarket bins for perfectly good food that is being thrown away. Whilst Laure agrees with her parents' values, she knows her peers will find them eccentric. It is all very embarrassing. She doesn't invite her friends to the house as she is ashamed of it. She never has any money to buy anything new.

Students at her school are invited to become entrepreneurs. She teams up with sophisticated Year 9 Charley to produce a range of beauty projects that can be made from what you find in the kitchen - or in Lara's case, in the bins at the back of the supermarket.

There are moments that make you chuckle. But there are also some graver notes. Joanne O'Connell helps to increase the readers' awareness of the damage we are doing through our overuse of plastic and how the fashion industry exploits workers.

There are also some glimpses of a tender family life. Laura is particularly close to her younger sister Fern who helps her to make the products. The family members all support each other.

The ending is upbeat and there are also some delicious recipes for beauty products that you can try at home. This book is labelled as suitable for 9-11. Lower secondary students would also enjoy it.

Gill James

Gill James' *Girl in a Smart Uniform* is published by Chapeltown Books.

City of the Uncommon Thief

Lynne Bertrand, pub. Dutton Books

This book is aimed at a very specific audience of readers who will enjoy epic fantasy. It will also appeal to those who like and are familiar with Norse and Greek mythology. It is quite a difficult story to follow and can be a bit confusing at times. It does take a few chapters to get into this story. So, if you like a challenging read and a strange and intricate plot, then this is the story for you.

The city is completely isolated from the outside world. Within the city walls are mile high towers. The inhabitants live together in guilds in these tall towers with hundreds of floors or 'stratas'. In this fascinating world there are lines between the towers which allow the residents to pass between them. The resident teens live on the rooftops and serve as an apprentice for a guild. These teens are runners between the towers, and they like to play jokes on each other. One day one of them steals some needles and the adventure begins. This is a complicated and amazing adventure.

The story features some interesting characters. There are two cousins, Errol Thebes and Odd, the narrator. These are unconventional characters living in a dark and unknown world where a lot is happening. This world is a very complex place and often difficult for the reader to follow. Many things are common knowledge, but there are also dark secrets to be discovered in the city. The people survive by storing food and waiting for supplies to arrive once a year on massive ships.

Readers who are happy reading about this futuristic world and alternate reality will enjoy the intricate and complex plot and fascinating characters. The story does jump from the past to the present. I would recommend this story to fans of the high fantasy genre.

Gary Kenworthy

Dragonfly Eyes

Cai Wenxuan, trans. Helen Wang, pub. Walker Books

It's a strange law of inversion, but it's often hardest to write about the books you enjoy the most. *Dragonfly Eyes* is a complex, mature and powerful book that centres its plot around the relationship between Océane, a French woman living in 1960s Shanghai and Ah Mei, her granddaughter, who has inherited her European looks. Ah Mei's journey from childhood to adolescence is way-marked by growing unrest in Shanghai as the Cultural Revolution takes hold. As a Westerner Océane is perceived as a threat and, as the novel progresses, she suffers senseless intimidation and persecution at the hands of revolutionary gangs. Ah Mei too is systematically excluded by her peers and the eventually the city itself, as people become increasingly troubled by her looks and associations. Despite the world around them crumbling, both grandmother and granddaughter are able to hold on to the sense of strength and dignity they draw from their relationship, and the joy each brings the other.

The notes in the book state that 'historical events are mentioned only lightly' which at a superficial level is true, but the skill with which Cao Wenxuan weaves them into the lives of his characters means that their emotional resonance is far deeper than anything you might encounter in the pages of a history textbook. The acts of violence that are visited upon Océane are unpredictable and irrational – there is no wider contextual explanation provided - and the implicit message is that much of the Cultural Revolution was acts of disconnected, senseless thuggery meted out at random by gangs seeking a sense of identity. Cao Wenxuan shows us historical events through their impact on innocent characters that we have grown to love – and as such the emotional intensity is rammed home far harder than by it might be by factual accounts or sweeping statistics.

The writing in this book also has a lyricism and fluency which, given it has been translated from Chinese, is all the more astounding. The delicacy of prose remains consistent; whether describing the period of respite beneath an apricot tree enjoyed by Océane and Ah Mei, or the senseless persecution which is repeatedly visited upon them. This contrast highlights still further the wanton cruelty of the persecutors, but also the extent to which their Ah Mei and Océane's affection forms a protective shield around them which cannot be destroyed.

Cao Wenxuan is one of China's most acclaimed children's writers, and Helen Wang's stunning translation has opened the door to his world for English language readers. I urge you to read this book; and learn about history and humanity in equal measure.

Laura Myatt

First Day of My Life

Lisa Williamson, pub. David Fickling Books

Lisa Williamson has made it her goal to write about tricky issues which particularly trouble teenagers, and which affect family relationships. To date she has published four books, the best known of which is *The Art of Being Normal* published in 2015, which centred on a teenager struggling with transgender recognition, and was nominated for a raft of awards, and which won quite a few. She followed up with *All About Mia*, which examined the middle child in sibling and family relationships, and *Paper Avalanche*, looking at mental health repercussions within a family. *First Day of My Life* was intended for publication in the middle of 2020, but a world pandemic got in the way, which in itself will undoubtedly form the basis of many a YA novel in the next few years.

While friendship is an important part of all her previous novels, in *First Day of My Life* Williamson puts it centre-stage, showing how the relationship between the outgoing, outspoken Frankie and her best friend from primary school, quiet, reserved Jojo, is challenged by some extremely serious events. Frankie and Jojo are awaiting their GCSE results, but on results day Jojo is nowhere to be found. Frankie has the ability to overthink situations, and when a local baby goes missing her vivid imagination convinces her that Jojo has run away with it. Determined to find her best friend before the law catches up with her, Frankie reluctantly calls on Ram, her ex-boyfriend, to provide the transport that Frankie needs to search for Jojo. Having created this mystery, Williamson reveals the real truth by putting the reader alongside each of the three main characters as she tells their stories in three separate parts of the book, helpfully distinguished for the reader by the use of three different fonts.

What emerges is a fast-moving, exciting and deeply thoughtful novel with very believable, three-dimensional teenage characters facing some unexpected, awkward and life-changing events. As a fictional character Frankie stands out, and we are perhaps drawn into her story more deeply even than those of Jojo and Ram. Surely a sequel beckons?

Bridget Carrington

Forever Ends on Friday

Justin A. Reynolds, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

What if? What if your best friend dies before you have a chance to make amends? What if they could be brought back to life? What if you have extra time to make things right with them? Is it right to bring someone back from the dead without consent? These are all important questions tackled in *Forever Ends on Friday*.

The depiction of the main two boys, Quincy and Jamal, and their friendship is very cleverly constructed. The friendship is flawed and deeply human, it's only when Jamal knows that time is short that he learns how to put others first. It really makes you consider what it is to be human and supporting others – whether they be friends, parents or carers, partners, co-workers, etc.

I like that the story is told from the perspective of both boys. It brings the reader fully into the story and makes them consider things from each of the viewpoints – both the grieving friend and the boy with only a short time to live. The first-person perspective also brings other characters fully to life, with vivid descriptions, sometimes almost painfully vivid. The grief felt by Jamal at the death of his parents, then of his best friend can be difficult to read, but also very relatable for anyone who has gone through that loss. The depiction of Qunicy's mother and her journey through grief is also realistically presented and I found myself crying at several points in the book because of her raw emotion.

I would recommend this for both girls and boys aged 14 plus. Other topics include love, grief, loss, comedy, relationships, family and what it means to live a full life.

I loved the concept of this story and it would create lots of discussion points for reading groups or classroom discussions. It really makes you think about the choices we make in life and if we truly live our lives to the fullest. There are many questions about what it means to be a good friend and what our intentions are – do we do things just for ourselves (for selfish reasons) or to help others. Also procrastinating and avoiding making decisions through fear can hold us back. What is we lived life as if we were going to die tomorrow, how would we live then?

Sophie Castle

Game Changer

Neal Shusterman, pub. Walker Books

Ashley, Ash to his friends, plays quarterback in the football team along with his best friend Leo in an American high-school; his parents work hard, but are not wealthy; he has a love-hate relationship with his brother Hunter.

So far, very average. That is until during the first game of the season, Ash is hit hard. He recovers immediately, but his perception of colors now differs from everybody else's. After another rough moment on the pitch, reality shifts more significantly. Ash's family is now wealthy; his father is a powerful member of the community; his relationship with Hunter is perfect; his friends remain the same, but Ash has a new secret: he deals drugs. Katie, the girlfriend of another team's player, is the only person that seems to notice Ash's turmoil and in whom he can confide. Other hits follow and so do other shifts in reality. Ash now lives in a racially segregated society, in which his best friend Leo has lost his sister Angela; his sexuality changes; then, he morphs into a girl. The explanation of his predicament, and the significance of the shifts on his own and the whole universe's life, is offered to Ash by the mysterious 'Edward', a character which multiplies at every shift. Finally, as Ash is left one shift only to attempt a return to normality, things take a very sinister turn.

Much has been said and written about reality shifts and the existence of parallel universes, which is the idea on which this story is based. Shusterman keeps the theory to the necessary minimum and focuses instead on the effects of the changes on Ash's relationships and his understanding of himself and of his original world through the observation of the alternative realities across which he travels.

These examinations and comparisons of the versions of himself, and others, lead Ash to strive to reach for what he considers the best possible reality. The use of the first person is a good narrative device which allows the reader to get as close as possible to Ash's thoughts and feelings about his experience. Every shift and the changes they bring contribute to the sense of suspense.

The themes that Ash confronts are significant: racial issues, abusive relationship, drug dealing, family dynamics and sexuality. The ones which, in my opinion, have deeper resonance are the siblings' dynamic and the issues surrounding same-sex relationship. The others support the storytelling well, and in particular the one focusing on Ash's friendship with Leo. To explore them all consistently would have made this book far too heavy and lengthy – and it is already a long read at about four-hundred pages.

The themes and the language place this book firmly in the young adult category.

Laura Brill

The Girls I've Been

Tess Sharpe, pub. Hodder Children's Books

As the daughter of a con artist who constantly targeted criminal men and developed questionable relationships with them, 18-year-old Nora has known nothing but a life of deception, fake identities and always needing to think one step ahead. When her mum falls for one of the men, instead of trapping him, Nora escapes and goes into hiding, helped and protected by her older sister. Held up at gunpoint as a hostage in a bank heist with her ex-boyfriend and mutual friend/secret new girlfriend, Nora needs the con artistry skills acquired from all the aliases she's been until now to outwit their captors and to ensure their survival.

The pacing and plotting of this complex but compelling locked room psychological thriller are extraordinary. The story itself takes place over the few tense hours of the bank heist but Nora's own life story is revealed through an intense series of flashbacks punctuating the action, showing just what she's capable of and how she has become the survivor she needs to be. Short chapters and urgent phone transcripts add to the almost frenetic pace and the reader needs to keep their wits about them just to keep up. Death-defying escapes and life-threatening accidents ratchet up the tension of the heist to almost unbearable levels and keep the pages turning.

Nora is a convincing narrator - smart, sassy, spiky but surprisingly easy to empathise with. Her con artist past explains her superior problem-solving skills, her instinctive understanding of the people around her and her ability to talk her way out of every situation. Although all three friends have their own secrets and traumatic back-stories, they draw strength from their (admittedly complicated) relationship and are impacted but not defined by their experiences. Appropriate and intensive therapy has helped Nora deal with her trauma and the bond with her caring older sister is essential to her survival. This found family - sister, ex-boyfriend and current girlfriend - gives all of the main characters hope for a better future.

This is definitely not a book for the faint-hearted. Such a gritty read contains a lot of swearing. There are some dark themes here too and some serious trigger warnings - toxic relationships, emotional trauma, abuse and assault, drug taking, violence and murder.

Soon to be a highly anticipated Netflix adaptation, this is a stylish, suspenseful must-read for fans of character-led YA thrillers by Karen McManus, Chelsea Pitcher, Sophie McKenzie, Emily Barr and Lisa Jewell. Another skilfully-structured survival story is *The Rules* by Tracy Darnton while *Last Lesson* by James Goodhand is an equally gritty and gripping countdown thriller.

Eileen Armstrong

Here the Whole Time

Vitor Martins, pub. Hodder Children's Books

After some initial reservations this story turned out to be a thoroughly enjoyable read and one which I would thoroughly recommend to all young adult readers. It is a very sweet and heart-warming story told in a warm, loving and sometimes funny way. It is also a book which is very easy to read, with a main character and narrator who is very likeable. The reader really wishes for everything to work out well for the main character and is relieved when he eventually attempts to stand up for himself.

This is a feel-good young adult romance, told over a period of fifteen days. The main character is 17-year-old Felipe, who has a big crush on Caio, the boy next door. Although centred round the two boys, two girls also feature in the story. They are Becky and Mel. Felipe also has a very loving relationship with his very understanding mother, whom he lives with.

The author, Vitor Martins, is not afraid to tackle some very serious and important issues, like body image, anxiety, insecurities and bullying, but the book also remains a simple and enjoyable read. Many young adult boys will relate to the issues covered in this story. As the story progresses, we really do want it to have a happy ending.

Felipe is looking forward to fifteen days holiday at home and a break from the school bullies. He just wants to spend some time alone in his bedroom watching his favourite television shows. Felipe panics when his mum invites his neighbour, Caio, to come and stay. The story shows the way Felipe builds up a relationship with Caio, how he develops his own self confidence and how he tries to stand up to the bullies. The story celebrates being positive about your body and it shows that it is possible to stand up to bullies. All the characters are amazing, the boys, the girls and Felipe's mother.

Overall, this is a lovely book and a sweet, innocent and pure tale. It is an uplifting and gentle tale mainly about two young boys who are in love with each other. It is a thoroughly pleasant, enjoyable and uplifting read.

Gary Kenworthy

The Humiliations of Welton Blake

Alex Wheatle, pub. Barrington Stoke

Welton Blake's life can't get any better. When he asked Carmella McKenzie, the best-looking girl in school out on a date, she said yes! His life however can, and is about to get, a lot worse.

The Humiliations of Welton Blake is laugh-out-loud pure misery. Not only does everything possible go wrong, at least from a teenager's perspective - his mobile phone won't charge - but years of humiliation heap upon Welton Blake as he navigates school life. Moreover, his humiliations are compounded as one misfortune piles upon another. If that isn't enough, there is no sanctuary at home. His Mum and Dad have acrimoniously separated, and his Mum has a surprise announcement to make. It's classic comedy and calamity because Welton won't talk. Welton doesn't listen or talk to his Mum and in his sorry state, he is avoiding Carmella, the one person who could change everything.

Welton is the lovable underdog, coming from the wrong side of the tracks of Ashburton, where he had plenty of friends and cousins, struggling financially at home because of his parents' separation and trying to be successful at something. Anything. He even joins the school's basketball team! Welton is also a dreamer and a fixer, finding a way round problems, perhaps instead of confronting them. There are many aspects of Welton's life and characters readers will no doubt identify with.

The Humiliations of Welton Blake is every teenager's nightmare compressed into one week. A great, light-hearted, genuinely funny story.

Simon Barrett

Influence

Sara Shepard and Lilia Buckingham, pub. Atom Books

Influence, written by Sara Shepard and Lilia Buckingham, is a deep insight into the life of an 'influencer.' It focuses on Delilah - who's recently moved with her family to LA - and the friends she makes in Jasmine and Fiona (also influencers), who are frenemies of the 'perfect' Scarlet Leigh.

The Prologue flawlessly sets the tone of the book, with the quote: "in my world, we planned things very carefully. Everything we did [...] was crafted. We showed you only what we wanted you to see."

The story focuses on teen fame, sexuality, jealousy and the consequences of irresponsible drinking. The dangers of artificially crafting the 'perfect' life on social media, and the lengths to which their families and managers will go to keep their lives on track, make the characters feel trapped in their stardom.

The chapters are quite short, and they are named after the characters to focus on each of their perspectives at that time in the story. The transcripts of Scarlet's vlogs - interspersed with her actions (written like stage directions) - give the book an audio-visual element and provide a change of pace to the narrative. The comment sections at the end of these vlogs add to the realism and immerse the reader into this conceited world of stardom.

There is a twist to the story when threatening messages are sent to each of the protagonists. The DM sent to Fiona, for instance, starts with: "I know what you did." This is a similar storyline to the one used in the *Pretty Little Liars* series - also written by author Sara Shepard - and plays with the idea that somebody is always watching and waiting to take advantage of their secrets.

Influence has lots of twists to share with its reader, and is written in a very readable, colloquial tone. Although the novel feels like it's aimed mostly at teenagers, it also has a warning message for internet users in general. As Delilah's parents have "read articles [...] about online bullying," in her acknowledgements, author Sara Shepard requests the reader to "think before you post a comment. Consider that on the other end of an account, there's a living, breathing person with feelings."

Chris J Kenworthy

Last One to Die

Cynthia Murphy, pub. Scholastic Children's Books

Sixteen-year-old Niamh moves from Ireland to London to attend a summer drama school, but as soon as she arrives at her residence, tragedy strikes. A girl is murdered, and it seems mere chance that Niamh wasn't the victim. She starts her drama course, but she is an instant person of interest because

of her connection to the murdered girl. But then another girl is attacked, and it becomes clear that there is a serial killer on the loose in London, but they only seem to be attacking girls who look like Niamh.

In between her drama classes Niamh has a work placement at a sinister Victorian Museum where she plays a character called Jane Alsop, a Victorian girl who died horrifically and tragically. The best thing about her new job is the attractive Tommy, who also works at the museum and seems to like Niamh. But there is a mystery about him as well. But how does the story of a long-dead woman relate to the present-day attacker. And who can Niamh trust?

This book is super-creepy. I've never found London particularly scary, but Cynthia Murphy imbues the city with a constant menace. And there are no peaceful moments for Niamh in this story—even going to the library is fraught with peril.

Last One to Die is a thrilling, fast-paced horror with a supernatural twist—a spine-tinglingly enjoyable read.

Rebecca Rouillard

Liberté

Gita Trelease, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

Amidst a stunning reimagination of the French Revolution, Camille Durbonne uses her magic for good – if unintentionally. Now that she and her sister, Sophie, are safe from their corrupt brother, Camille lives for the rebellion. Using her father's treasured printing press, she publishes a series of inflammatory pamphlets that present a powerful exposé of life under the tyranny of the aristocracy. But as her work begins to captivate the public beyond all odds, she begins to suspect that a darker magic is behind her success. And when the Revolution names magicians as traitors to France – magic now bearing the death sentence – Camille must fight against the unknown forces that threaten those she loves.

Liberté is the second instalment in the *All That Glitters* duology, *Enchanté* being the first. Having not previously read *Enchanté*, I was surprised by how easily I fell into this one: despite being a part of a duology, *Liberté* definitely stands freely. Trelease's alternative history of the Revolution combines exquisite historical detail and magical realism to create a darkly fun and compelling mystery. The stark contrast between the dark underbelly of Paris – the poverty and the squalor – and the careless splendour and expense of the aristocracy will make your blood boil, whilst Trelease's atmospheric prose itself will drop you straight into an immersive syrup of sensation.

There are plenty of compelling subplots to keep this tome interesting, including a layered love interest, a dynamic sisterly relationship, and a string of tales of woe from Camille's 'lost girls'. Trelease also combines mediums, breaking up her prose with (very aesthetically pleasing!) revolutionary material, full of rhetoric for justice and freedom. In addition, the end of the novel presents an insightful note from the author all about the historical context, including a helpful glossary of French phrases.

Liberté is a vibrant tale of sacrifice and betrayal, reminiscent of *Les Misérables* (although without the magic, of course!). It is also a powerful and relevant call to arms against unjust government and oppression. Vive la Révolution!

Jess Zahra

Lock the Doors

Vincent Ralph, pub. Penguin Random House Children's Books

Lock the Doors is 'A brand new addictive, twisty thriller ...,' says the accompanying press release.

Tom's family have moved into their desirable new home which is working hard to conceal the bickering between Tom's mother and her bibulous partner, Jay. Almost immediately, Tom notices that something is odd - there are strange messages written on the wall and holes for locks on the outside of some of the bedroom doors. The previous owners have moved across the road and appear superficially like the perfect family. Their daughter Amy is beautiful and enigmatic, but Tom is sure she's got something to hide. He's compelled to investigate. Tom buys a hasp and lock by post and finds it fits the holes in his bedroom door and could be used to lock someone in.

The novel continues to explore the relationships between Tom and the other members of what his mum describes as a 'blended family' and friends.

From the outset, we get a sense of Tom's and Amy's limited self-worth and the consequences of this. The unsolved, historical disappearance of Amy's young brother, Logan has damaged her. The novel responsibly includes a closing list of support organisations readers may turn to.

Immediately, the direct, simple language and short chapters create a fast pace which will appeal to many YA readers. Although there is a good sense of the inner life of Tom, to which the copious brief dialogue contributes, there is little variety of intensity which can feel as unrelenting as the description of the micro-behaviours of family life.

Trevor Arrowsmith

Love is a Revolution

Renée Watson, pub. Bloomsbury Children's Books

It's always a great day when Renée Watson brings out a new book! I've loved everything she's written so far and her latest YA novel, *Love is a Revolution*, did not disappoint – it's 2021's feel-good, must read!

I'm personally not a big fan of the lovey-dovey Rom-Coms, so I did have some initial hesitations going into this, but this book is so much more than just a love story. It's a love story about growing up and taking the time to discover and embrace who you are. It's a love story that sparkles with female empowerment, body positivity and self-care. It's a love story that fills you with warmth and joy because it's so honest and authentic. And that's for sure a love story that I can get behind.

There are three things 17-year-old Nala Robertson wants to do this summer – find a new hairstyle, spend time with Imani (her cousin-sister-friend), and, most importantly, find love. When she reluctantly agrees to attend an open mic night, Nala finds her falling head-over-heels in love with committed activist Tye Brown. But there's just one tiny problem ... Nala would rather spend her summer watching movies with a tub of ice-cream than volunteering around the community. In order to impress Tye, Nala finds herself telling little white lies to find a common ground – she's vegan, she's an activist, and she's running a dedicated activity programme at her grandma's senior living residence. As her relationship with Tye deepens, so do the lies and Nala quickly finds herself in a whirlwind of doubt, disorientation and destruction. Could Tye ever like Nala for her real self, or is Nala still figuring out who she really wants to be?

Beautifully layered, funny, honest and fiercely uplifting, Watson takes us on an inspiring journey to discover just how radical and revolutionary self-love is. Nala made for a remarkably, genuine protagonist who proudly embraced and learned from her flaws and imperfections, and it's this heart and honesty that makes her such a likable and relatable character. I don't think I'll ever get over Watson's ability to write such hard-hitting and raw characters.

Love is a Revolution is irresistibly fast-paced and boldly dips into a rainbow of contemporary issues including the power of a small community and the importance of eco-awareness. But it was the unconditional, inter-generational, familial love that really tugged on my heartstrings. I loved that the power to grow and love yourself was rooted in the support, wisdom and compassion that came from within the complicated family dynamics. I want the grandma to have her own spin-off story!

This is a book to fall in love with. Perfect for YA fans of Nicola Yoon, Justin Reynolds and Alice Oseman.

Fern Tolley

Love is for Losers

Wibke Brueggemann, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

When 15-year-old Phoebe's best friend, Polly, falls in love with a boy who can't even ride a bike, she ditches Phoebe and completely loses her mind. Phoebe becomes convinced that love is for losers (she's sure the science backs her up) and decides that she will never fall in love and lose her capacity to think rationally, like Polly has. And besides, she's got enough to worry about in between studying for her GCSEs, her friendship issues at school and her Mum's dangerous job in Syria - Phoebe's Mum is a doctor with Médecins Sans Frontières and is often away for months at a time, while Phoebe stays with her godmother Kate. But when Phoebe starts volunteering at Kate's 'Cancer Charity Shop' (to make up for an unfortunate cat-impregnation incident) she meets Emma and can't stop thinking about her.

Love is For Losers is written in a diary format, which makes it a quick, engaging read. Phoebe is a delightfully naïve narrator, so cynical and yet so oblivious - a new *Adrian Mole* for the Sex Education generation. (It is also similarly frank and sensible about teenage sexuality.) The progress of Phoebe's relationship with Emma is endearingly awkward. There are also a lot of kittens in this book - always a plus.

Love is for Losers is a page-turning, poignant and genuinely funny teen romance, perfect for fans of Holly Bourne.

I thoroughly enjoyed it and my 14-year-old has already nicked it to read it next.

Rebecca Rouillard

Pop!

Mitch Johnson, pub. Orion Books

Mitch Johnson's latest book *Pop!* is an exciting new YA novel which is sure to engage all readers with its combination of adventure, humour and mystery. Johnson captures the reader with his unique plotline and relatable characters, whilst highlighting the power of young people.

When Queenie finds a bottle washed upon the beach near her house, she is thrust into a world of adventure and mystery, not knowing the change she will undergo. Queenie's determination to make a difference in the world once she returns home is inspiring especially as the reader has followed her journey to realising friendship and standing up for what is right is much more valuable than money.

Tackling social issues such as corporate greed and pollution, Johnson strikes home relevant and important messages to the readers, providing a learning opportunity set against an enjoyable and

innovative plotline. Johnson also captures his readers' attention with the gradual build of suspense as Queenie comes to close to uncovering the mystery. The friendship developed between Queenie and Todd is heart-warming, sure to entertain many readers.

Pop! is an action packed and gripping story which is guaranteed to compel many young readers, whilst also giving a refreshing perspective on the world of consumerism and the social issues of the modern world; it is definitely one to look out for this year!

Jemima Henderson

The Queen's Fool

Ally Sherrick, pub. Chicken House

When 11-year-old Cat Sparrow's older sister Meg is snatched away from their convent home by a sinister man on a black horse, Cat decides to follow them to London and get her sister back. Cat meets a young French actor, Jacques, who helps her to get to Greenwich Palace - where Queen Katherine takes Cat under her wing and employs her as her 'Fool'. But their adventure is just beginning.

Cat and Jacques travel to France for the historic meeting of Henry VIII and François I on the Field of Cloth of Gold. Cat is still desperate to find Meg, and Jacques has vowed to avenge his father's murder, but there is more at stake than either of them realise and they uncover a plot that could have far-reaching consequences for both of their countries. What is the man on the black horse planning, and can they stop him before it is too late?

Ally Sherrick has meticulously researched the Tudor era in order to create her characters and their historical context. The story is inspired by two paintings on display at Hampton Court Palace: one portraying the 'Field of Cloth of Gold' and another featuring a historical character called 'Jane the Fool' who inspired the character of Cat Sparrow. While people with learning disabilities were often reviled and feared in Tudor times, some saw them as 'innocents' - lacking worldly wisdom but valued for their capacity to see the world differently and to speak the truth to those in power when others would be afraid to.

For anyone who aspires to write children's fiction, *The Queen's Fool* is masterclass in that elusive quality - voice. Cat Sparrow's language is powerfully unique and immersive, from her emotive descriptions, "Holy Mother Sharp-Tongue's eyes go black and pointy and her mouth pulls pinchy-tight," to her charming malapropisms: The Duke of Buckingham is "Lord Bucket", Mistress Bristol is "Mistress Bristles", and my favourite - she calls Cardinal Wolsey "Candle Woolly".

The Queen's Fool is a gripping adventure, a beautifully crafted historical mystery, as well as a wonderfully empathetic character study of a girl who sees and experiences the world a little differently to those around her. Highly recommended.

Rebecca Rouillard

The Sad Ghost Club

Lize Meddings, pub. Hachette Books

I rarely read graphic novels, but I was drawn to this by the haunting black and white illustrations and the simplicity of its message. I think it will become a significant book in the current context of increasing levels of anxiety and social isolation, especially in young people. So, to do the work proper justice, I handed the review task to 15-year-old Rosie. She loved the book and here is her review.

The Sad Ghost Club is a graphic novel to help you 'find your kindred spirit'. It gives an accurate insight on the daily struggles someone with anxiety suffers. We see throughout the book the ghosts struggling to decide whether to go to a party, and it also shows how isolated anxiety can make you feel. However, as the story progresses, we see how important it is to overcome our fears in order to grow as a person (or, in this case, a ghost!)

I liked this book as it discusses topics that are often viewed as taboo. It gives a realistic representation of how scary anxiety can be and the insecurities that follow it. One of my favourite features is the storyline of multiple ghosts. I feel this is important when discussing anxiety, not only does it remind us we are never alone, but also that anxiety comes in all different forms, and affects people differently.

I found this book very engaging as not only can you read it, but you can also see beautiful illustrations. I also like it because it is inclusive and will appeal to a wide range of people. I would recommend *The Sad Ghost Club* to those who struggle with anxiety, but also to people who want to gain a better understanding of it. It shows very clearly, yet with few words, the confusion that surrounds this important topic, with issues that need to be discussed more and normalised.

Rosie Howes (and Yvonne Coppard)

The Shadow War

Lindsay Smith, pub. Penguin Random House

The Shadow War is a highly ambitious novel. On paper, an intriguing alternative history: imagine that part of the Nazi regime had access to an alternate parallel universe, whose dark matter could be harnessed, as Dr Kreutzer boasts, "to create the perfect soldier [...] Empowered with a raw, limitless

energy that can devastate and destroy far beyond what any single soldier should be capable of.” What if? How is that possible? And who’s going to stop them?

Smith’s celebratory novel of resistance to the Third Reich introduces us to the perspectives of six protagonists, embedded in the landscape of west Germany. Chapters alternate between a multinational and multi-ethnic cast - Liam, a white New Yorker; Phillip, an African American from South Carolina; the Jewish siblings Daniel and Rebeka, escaped from the Jewish ghetto in Łódź, Poland; Simone, an Algerian immigrant to Paris; and the object of her secret and dangerous love, the wealthy Parisian Evangeline. Smith weaves their past histories and their covert journey through Frankfurt, Siegen, and finally Wewelsburg Castle.

Smith’s protagonists are heroines and heroes because they fight back: less like the German Ilse, who rationalizes her position within the regime by reminding herself she is secretly ‘good’, and more like the Resistance harbourer Hélène, who opts for maximum illegality if she’s going to resist at all. The novel is replete with action, vengeance, and scenes of passion – sometimes with saccharine and cheesy tones, and often with a gore that Smith clearly revels in (‘Only total tracheal collapse would do.’)

The novel will provide readers with an exciting fictional introduction to the dimensions of Nazi resistance, of Jewish persecution, and the personnel and vocabularies of the Third Reich. Central to the Smith’s telling is the way she relays the personal motivations, traumatic histories, and structural oppressions faced by each of its heroines and heroes – a story of the common enemies and solidarity of the oppressed. As his Uncle, a former Harlem Hellfighter in the First World War, tells Phillip’s class of engineers: “Fascism is the enemy of all Black aspirations”. Moving from the personal to the macro, Smith delves into the sources of vengeance, hate and anger, which the novel posits as bound up with our pain. In the end, Liam, the novel’s central driver, must in the end learn to face his shadows without control.

My own view is that the novel suffers in execution. I feel it is too broad and too long to be really effective. Other readers may enjoy the pop-esque gloom of its characterisation and dialogue. Despite a conceivable and intriguing premise, the novel often feels superficial and without real surprises. I think Smith could have let her protagonists breathe somewhat more, who at times feel no more than means to ends for noble messages (I wonder how first-person narrative could have been put to use here). Nevertheless, one can appreciate Smith’s clearly astute historical knowledge, range of vocabularies, great ambition, and novelistic passion for articulating the voices of the oppressed.

Laurence Tidy

Smashed

Andy Robb, pub. UCLan Publishing

It's interesting how a single English word can have many different meanings. For authors that can be particularly useful, and in the case of Andy Robb's *Smashed* that's certainly true. Since 'The Night Everything Went Weird' sixteen-year-old Jamie's life has truly been smashed – broken, because his parents are in the painful process of splitting up. In this new fractured experience Jamie, whilst under it all craving love, understanding and help, cannot bear the sympathy of others. To him, his long-term girlfriend Nadia, with her sweet, understanding and totally loyal love, now seems clingy and annoying. His even longer-term best friend Adil, calm, truthful and worried by the changes in James, seems a thorn in his flesh, another part of the old life which has smashed.

Determined to support his mother and minimise the destruction for his little sister, Jamie becomes unable to concentrate on his schoolwork. He feels he must on take his father's role as adult male in charge of a household which is rapidly collapsing. The galloping chaos of his home life leads him into a reliance on alcohol to cope – smashed – and also to form some very undesirable friendships. Unfortunately, the group he chooses to belong to harms rather than helps.

An entertaining, absorbing and salutary novel for teenagers, in *Smashed* Robb has managed to achieve a book which engrosses readers in a very serious situation via an extremely readable narrative. He portrays a sixteen-year-old, an adult in legal eyes, who is drawn into a very serious situation through no fault of his own, and with only the well-being of his family at heart. Until, that is, the drink removes his inherent inhibitions, and drowns his best intentions. This is a 330-page novel, yet the short chapters, each with a heading descriptive of the core of that chapter, ensure it does not feel so. Written in the first person, the chapters also seem to tell us that although Jamie has embarked on some stupid and dangerous behaviour which he can't control, he subconsciously realises his error.

For readers who recognise Jamie's problems in their own life, helpful contacts are provided.

Bridget Carrington

The Soul Hunters

Chris Bradford, pub. Puffin Books

To achieve authenticity in his many novels, Chris Bradford practices 'method writing'. As with method acting this necessitates his experiencing directly key skills and settings described in his novels. For his award-winning *Young Samurai* series, he trained in samurai swordsmanship, and karate. His *Bodyguard* series involved him in perusing a close protection course to become a professional bodyguard.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, there is a lot of physical fight and flight action in this story of Genna and her predatory, time travelling foe, Damien who is literally after her soul. The consequences for

humanity are potentially lurid and match the cover's speeding motorbike illustration and strapline: 'Death is only the beginning'. Fortunately, the evil forces are more than equally matched by the power and tenacity of Genna's mysterious protector, Phoenix.

The speeding narrative will appeal to YA readers inclined to fantasy fiction and comic book shenanigans. Genna's first-person, present tense narration is necessarily eyes' front, with events and the thinnest of reflection conveyed in simple, direct language: "Damien's eyes glint wickedly." (p.164). The contemporary urban setting is comfortingly familiar and prevents the time-travel aspects from submitting all to the fantastical. There is a nice touch in the penultimate Chapter 45, when our heroine discusses her sessions with her post-trauma counsellor. He's been helping her to cope with "...the stress and strain of being attacked, kidnapped and almost ritually murdered." (p.284). And suddenly, in the closing pages all is neatly, explicitly resolved and we and she are back in her father's silver Volvo.

Trevor Arrowsmith

Swan Song

Gill Lewis, pub. Barrington Stoke

While getting permanently excluded from school may seem like the worst possible situation for most children to find themselves in, it could be exactly the situation that Dylan needs.

Since starting high school, things got very complicated for Dylan. His friends seemed to change, and everyone started to try to act cool rather than simply being themselves. Dylan struggled to find his place and ended up losing his way. His Mum decided that the best option was to move Dylan away from it all and stay instead with Dylan's grandad in a tiny village in Wales.

When Dylan goes out on the boat with his grandad, he sees things clearly for the first time in a long time. Out on the water, he has the opportunity to find himself again and give his life some direction once more.

This is a lovely story by Gill Lewis who manages to capture the difficulty of being a teenager through Dylan. With nature at the centre of this book, and being the catalyst for Dylan's redirection, this book has a clear message – if you find yourself in a tricky place, nature is a great healer. Anyone who loves animals (especially birds) and being out in the open air will love this particular story.

Swan Song is a quick read which lends itself to less confident readers as well as those who move through books at a pace. It also has dyslexia-friendly features, making this lovely tale more accessible to all!

Tom Joy

Vi Spy: Licence To Chill

Maz Evans, pub. Chicken House

Maz Evans is the author of the hugely successful *Who Let the Gods Out* series. *Vi Spy: Licence to Chill*, is the first in her new series of action-adventure books featuring Valentine Day.

A few things have happened that have made Valentine think that her Mum might be a spy. Seeing her abseiling from the roof of the supermarket was one thing - another was coming across Mum's birth certificate and discovering that her real name was Easter - not Susan as she claims. The birth certificate in question had been left 'lying around' in a locked box in a padlocked suitcase hidden beneath the floorboards under her mum's bed.

Whilst being questioned by Mum over some incidents at school Valentine (Vi) tries to draw attention away from herself by asking questions of her own. Questions like, is her teacher, Mr Sprout, really her Mum's boyfriend, and, is Mum a spy? When Mum admits that both of these things are true, Vi asks her to promise that she will not marry him - Vi can't stand the thought of living with her teacher and his weird son, Russell (Sprout). Here, Vi learns something about spies - they are really good at telling lies. Almost immediately after saying she will not marry Mr Sprout, Mum agrees to marry him. On the day of the wedding, another lie comes to light. Vi's father, whom she had been led to believe had died when she was a baby, is actually still alive. This means Mum will have to get divorced before she can get married. As if this isn't bad enough, Dad also happens to be a super villain who is involved in a plot to take over the world. Mum has tried to keep Valentine safe from all of this by hiding the truth about her parents (and other relatives), but she is suddenly plunged into the James Bond-like world of super villains and secret agents.

Maz Evans is a genuinely funny writer. I'd recommend this book to anyone that likes a fun and exciting, fast-paced adventure with lots of humour.

Damian Harvey

The Way Back

Gavriel Savit, pub. Penguin Random House

The tiny village of Tupik in Eastern Europe is at the very end of the road. A ferryman is employed to ferry people across the river beyond Tupik, but he never has to take anyone, because there is nothing beyond except the Far Country - the land of the dead. When the Angel of Death visits Tupik one night he meets two teenagers: a girl called Bluma, who is afraid of death, and a boy called Yehuda Leib who

is looking for his father. Bluma and Yehuda Leib, travel through the cemetery into the Far Country and embark on an epic quest through a realm of demons, angels and cats, in search of answers to the questions that drive them: Can you hide from death? Can you bring someone back from the dead? They even contemplate the possibility of overthrowing Death itself, with the help of demons like Lilith and Mammon. And, after all they've seen and done, will Bluma and Yehuda Leib ever be able to return home?

The Way Back is a dark, engrossing fantasy adventure based on Jewish folklore, in which the line between concrete reality and the world of angels and demons, becomes blurred. This dreamlike, mystical intermingling of history and fairytale, reminded me a lot of Katherine Arden's *Winternight* trilogy. I was thoroughly riveted by this haunting, captivating read and would highly recommend it for fans of Neil Gaiman, Erin Morgenstern and Katherine Arden.

Rebecca Rouillard

We Played With Fire

Catherine Barter, pub. Andersen Press

Before reading Catherine Barter's latest YA novel, *We Played With Fire*, I had absolutely no idea who the Fox Sisters were, but I'm a massive fan of Gothic fiction and this book positively radiated it. That and its intriguing tagline - 'the spirit-talking Fox Sisters await you' - was enough to lure me into finding out more about these mysterious sisters. Post-reading and I honestly have not stopping thinking about this book since.

Largely credited with kick-starting the Spiritualist Movement, the three Fox Sisters from New York, made great fortune and, even greater headlines, during the mid-nineteenth century when they revealed they could communicate with the dead. Many deemed the girl's 'gifts' as a profitable hoax and the authenticity behind their séances continue to this day to stir riveting conversations and debates. Were the teenage girls' masters of exploitation, or did their rapture for childish trickery and imagination stem from something much greater, and far sinister? It's this ambiguous tension that Barter masterfully teases with, laying bare the darker, unsettling possibilities of the unknown, all beautifully intertwined in an irresistible slice of history.

When 15-year-old Maggie Fox is incriminated in a terrible event, no one believes her when she claims it was a ghost. When the family flee the scandal to spend the winter in upstate New York in a remote, freezing farmhouse, Maggie and her younger sister Kate turn their angry boredom into supernatural tricks. But when the house starts to make menacing sounds of its own, Maggie, Kate and Leah quickly find themselves in a wild whirlwind of spirits, sightings and séances.

Deliciously arresting and hauntingly atmospheric, Barter writes with such a hypnotic, commanding voice that it had me hanging on every word. Coupled with her ability to stir up an uneasy and eerie tension that you could cut with a knife, this is a heart-pounding, page-turning feat.

And seamlessly weaved into this stirring spiritualist plot of toe cracks and theatricals is a historical landscape peppered with engaging conversations surrounding radical politics, religion, women's rights, abolition, and other progressive social movements and activism. With a background in American Cultural Studies, Barter writes with an unquestionable knowledge of the period and its events and it's this validity that makes *We Played With Fire* so much more than just a ghost story. Notable figures like the radical Quakers, Amy and Isaac Post, and the antislavery campaigner Frederick Douglass make an appearance and touch on the worldly topics of the Underground Railroad, the Suffrage Movement and the 1848 Rochester women's rights convention. And all of this is rooted in an undeniable feminist heart that silently screams empowerment and rebellion against oppression and authority.

Fraudsters or not, I honestly take my hat off to the Fox Sisters. In a society that gave women little to no voice, the sisters bravely shunned the world into silence and from it they paved a way for a new movement that rivalled the pre-existing, conformist notions. Whether it was intentional or not, they saw a power and potential behind their raps and toes cracks and made an impressive livelihood out of it. And all while they were teenagers - the youngest sister, Kate Fox, was just eleven years old when the first 'ghostly' encounter took place!

We Played With Fire is a thought-provoking, richly layered novel, saturated with the whispered undertones of the great literary classics, *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. It's fierce, it's feminist, and it's perfect for fans of Frances Hardinge and Deirdre Sullivan.

YA book clubs, I dare you not to read this!

Fern Tolley

The Wild

Owen Laukkanen, pub. Underlined (Random House Children's Books)

The Wild follows seventeen-year-old American, Dawn, as she is put in a 'Wilderness Therapy Program for Troubled Youth'. Since her father's death and her mother's remarriage, Dawn has been out of school, getting high, and living with a drug dealer. Her parents have signed her up as a last resort, effectively kidnapping her and transferring her into the truck of an 'Out of the Wild' counsellor.

Hour later, miles from civilisation, we share Dawn's incredulity when she is strip-searched and given ten minutes to pack provisions for a week's group hike from a 'pile of junk'. If she wants a tent or pack, she must earn one of them during the week's hike. Each week, group members may graduate up the ranks, from bear cub to polar bears, and eventually may be allowed to go home.

The premise seems precariously balanced and vulnerable to abuse— even before it all goes appallingly wrong. Rumour has it that one girl, veteran of three months hiking, is not allowed to leave because one of the counsellors fancies her.

Laukkanen creates tension through the slow revelation of the group dynamic. The reader works out alliances and motivations amongst the seven teens along with Dawn. The rivalries of the group are tested after a series of terrible decisions made by one of the two counsellors, Christian, an extreme character who begins to ignore his professional partner-counsellor, Amber.

When Amber's influence is lost in a dangerous setting, the group rapidly descends into a chaos of different loyalties and violence. Facing her feelings about her painful past, Dawn is forced to choose between the emerging natural leader – the lone, tough Warden and Lucas, a gentle friend, in order to survive.

Gripping, pacy and intense, this is an action-packed and adrenaline-fuelled Young Adult thriller.

Saira Archer

Non-Fiction Books

A Poem for Every Spring Day

ed. Allie Esiri, pub. Macmillan Children's Books

This book leaves me with just one more of Allie Esiri's treasures to be explored. For this Spring, I have with me Allie's latest anthology, in the series of her seasonal poems for each day of the year - *A Poem for Every Spring Day*. Last Autumn I read her *A Poem for Every Autumn Day* and it beautifully captured the essence of the season, as pictured by poets for centuries. Apart from this one, she has published *Shakespeare For Every Day of the Year*; *A Poem for Every Day of Winter*; *The Love Book*, *IF* poems, alongside many other poetry titles.

This one begins in the format of previous ones from this series, covering the three months of Spring - March, April and May - working towards Summer with two poems for each day of these months. The experience is delightful, as you open this gorgeously gilded hardcover edition in the morning, and just as you go to sleep, to read and immerse yourself into this sense of ease and comfort. The poets featured in this collection include some of the major English, American, Asian, and Irish poets - WB Yeats, GK Chesterton, Vita-Sackville West, Christina Rossetti and likewise.

From Shakespeare to Maya Angelou, you'll find some beautiful and brutally honest emotions etched into your hearts forever, in confluence with a special introductory note giving you a background to the poem or historical event which took place on that day. The season of Spring will not only make you feel love, renewal, vigour and the fragrance of new beginnings, feminine power; but here with Wordsworth, AE Housman you'll flow into nostalgia and the sense of time's flow towards the future with the past latching on to the present.

I will say that this enriching book has to be in your poetry collection, if you like collecting beautiful editions; or if you just love poetry; or want to read this diverse one as a Spring ritual of self-love.

Ishika Tiwari

A Year Full of Celebrations and Festivals

Claire Grace, illus. Christopher Corr, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

A Year Full of Celebrations and Festivals compiled by Christopher Corr and Claire Grace is a fantastic compendium of carnivals, festivals, historical commemorations, religious events and other special days, which are celebrated around the world. Each celebration has a double-page spread with text on one side and a bright, vibrant illustration opposite that often bleeds across both pages. They have

been collated into seasons with a brief introduction to each season to explain what that season has in common all over the world, however they mainly describe seasonal differences in the Northern hemisphere.

Each season is not organized in any particular order within the chapter. Spring opens with the Indian International Kite Festival, has the Japanese Cherry Blossom Festival Hanami in the middle and concludes with Martin Luther King Jr Day. Summer includes Palio de Siena the Italian horse race, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and finishes with a spread about the different Summer Solstice celebrations across the globe. Autumn starts with the Mid-Autumn Moon festival celebrated in East Asia, Diwali in the middle and climaxes with the Pearly Kings and Queens Harvest Festival in the United Kingdom. Winter features Hanukkah first, The African Festival of Dancing Masks (FESTIMA) in the middle and finally New Year's Eve Countdowns across the world.

Claire Grace's text provides a brief, concise explanation of the celebrations, which includes some of the history and pageantry involved. Scattered across each spread is an insightful information bubble or snippet that contains extra fun facts about that particular celebration to stretch and entertain readers. At the back of the book is a spread of glossary words that appear in the text.

This colourful non-fiction book would be a great reference book for teachers wanting to think of ideas for a school assembly that could be expanded, and for children who are curious about the world and other cultures. The ideal book for children to dip in and out of during reading times.

Anita Loughrey

Anita Loughrey's (www.anitaloughrey.com) next books are the last two books of *A Year in Nature* series *Squirrel's Autumn Puzzle* and *Fox's Winter Discovery* to be released 21st September 2021.

The Awesome Power of Sleep: How Sleep Supercharges your Teenage Brain

Nicola Morgan, pub. Franklin Watts

The Awesome Power of Sleep explains how sleep benefits the brain and how teenagers can get enough sleep to balance good physical and mental health with success at school.

Nicola Morgan's philosophy continues to underpin her latest book, educating teenagers about the science to encourage them to change, and hopefully using this book to adopt some of the proven strategies for a better night sleep. There is a lot of fascinating science about the brain and sleep, which in itself is interesting, without necessarily its application to typically teenagers not getting enough sleep or restless sleep caused by friendship, exam stress and addictive technology. It does however mean strategies for healthier sleeping are not introduced until chapter eight, page 127 of the book!

The advice and guidance however is very practical, offering a range of strategies for readers to trial, when preparing to go to sleep and what to do if sleep proves elusive. Hopefully teenagers will be drawn into the science and will continue reading Nicola Morgan's practical advice. An understanding of the science will encourage readers to genuinely consider her suggested strategies.

The Awesome Power of Sleep is an accessible, easy to read book. Nicola Morgan is a great communicator of science and its complexities. In addition, there are a number of quizzes, helping readers explore their own sleeping habits and attitudes about sleep, applying the science to their own lives. There are numerous 'super-charged' sleep facts questions and tips to communicate essential points. The book is also a useful introduction to parents, teachers and carers of teenagers, perhaps with the aim of promoting a healthier attitude to sleep. As the book is not exclusively about the teenager's brain, young people and adults will find it interesting and helpful ideas.

Nicola Morgan continues to present sound advice and guidance to teenagers based on the most up-to-date science, adding to her growing catalogue of books about teenage life: *Blame My Brain*, *The Teenage Guide to Stress* and *Exam Attack*. She is led by science and her honesty if the science is inconclusive or there are gaps in what science can tell us, is refreshing. There are also a number of personal stories in this book that again might engage different readers.

The Awesome Power of Sleep is going to be my Bible as a secondary school tutor, trying to encourage twenty+ fifteen-year-olds to develop better sleeping habits! At least now I know why sleep is important and what my tutees can do.

Simon Barrett

Break the Mould

Sinéad Burke, illus. Natalie Byrne, pub. Hachette Children's Books

Burke's unique book is a combination of an autobiographical essay and a self-help manual. The author herself has achondroplasia or as she herself states it dwarfism. She refers to herself as 'a little person'.

Unusually for books related to disability, Burke encourages not only general readers but also those with a physical or intellectual impairment to have ambitions and to pursue them. As in her own life, she acknowledges that there will be dark episodes, an admission that is rarely made in books about disability but that is essential for young readers to understand.

One of the illustrations provided by Byrne shows a person in a wheelchair holding a Black Lives Matter placard. Young disabled people can exhibit social awareness beyond the boundaries of their own impairment: a revolutionary notion.

Teachers, parents and other adults may find this book a useful tool in opening discussions about differences, in both ourselves and others.

Rebecca Butler

Can We Talk About Consent? A Book About Freedom, Choices and Agreement

Justin Hancock, illus. Fuschia MacAree, pub. Frances Lincoln Children's Books

I am a fifty something woman and can remember a time in the 1970s when the principle of consent was poorly understood and often jettisoned entirely. The 20th century was an era when adults said 'because I say so' too often. It was an age when children were told to kiss their great aunt's hairy cheek and women were all too familiar with their #MeToo moment. And it was, above all, an age when a powerful minority held most of the purse strings and wielded all the influence. If you were a woman, a person of colour, LGBT +, or poor then nobody really cared about whether you consented or not.

This is a book not only about consent in a sexual context but the equally important issue of giving consent in our daily lives. The author starts the discussion by talking about the power that having choices confers on us. After all, if we are forced into the only viable course of action then we have hardly 'consented' in a true sense. Hancock also distinguishes between illusory choices and real choices. He talks about 'should stories': the pressures that we are under from society to behave in a certain way. We need to offer more choices and dismantle the 'should stories' so as to increase agency (real self-determination) for everyone – especially those groups that are currently disadvantaged in our society. Only then, the author says, can we say that consent has been given freely and meaningfully.

So far, so philosophical...but this book makes the argument completely accessible by using safe and comprehensible analogies. Freedom of choice and agency are demonstrated by using a pizza menu and film listings. Once the author has discussed these first principles, he turns his attention to the elephant in the room – sexual consent – but without giving the reader the choice to read on or not. Neat! His chapter on sex is full of compassionate, sensible and realistic advice about how (or whether) to conduct a sexual relationship. He debunks the many 'should stories' that surround sex in favour of increasing agency in the participants. Communication is key and much emphasis is placed on no means no but that absence of 'no' does not imply 'yes'.

At every point the author demonstrates how to hold respectful, choice giving conversations that promote agency in ourselves and others and maximise the chances of achieving meaningful consent. I was struck by the argument that if somebody has to say 'no' to a suggestion then you have not given them enough choice. I shall try to put this theory into practice.

I would urge every parent to put this in the hands of their teenage child – but not without reading it first. It might help to reset some of those awkward conversations. I would also recommend it, as essential reading to all those who teach PHSCE to young people of age 12 and up.

Katherine Wilson

Dragon World

Tamara Macfarlane, illus. Allesandra Fusi, pub. Dorling Kindersley

Meet those fire-breathing dragons that you are so familiar with from mythology, from fairytale, from books. Here is a collection that simply brims with these scaly behemoths, collected together to provide you with a vibrant and magical journey through their history.

Would you like to know why the dragon became a story that was told, where they originally came from, if they were in fact created to explain the dinosaurs? Did you know that there are dragon stories, myths and legends form around the world? Discover answers to this, ask more questions and explore the magnificent dragon through stories from both Europe and Asia, see even more dragons from around the world and discover for yourself more about actual dragon discoveries.

Dragon World is a thoroughly well-researched book with clues to be tracked, myths to untangle and then – the opportunity to master the art of drawing your very own dragon.

The colour hues chosen by illustrator Allesandra Fusi are perfect – their red-orange tones punctuate the pages and appeal to our traditional ideas of the dragon whilst also challenging our assumptions with greens, blues and purples too. Quotes, stories, maps all add to our experience and will leave you bursting with ideas about these most magnificent of creatures.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Earth's Incredible Oceans

Jess French, illus. Claire McElfatrick, pub. Dorling Kindersley

We are all aware of how much of the earth is covered by oceans, those giant areas of blue with their incredible tumult of life. No matter how much exploration is done of the ocean there are always more questions that raise themselves and demand answers. We still want to know ‘What is coral?’ or ‘Can icicles form underwater?’ we may even want to know ‘What does a octopus use a coconut shell for?’ I will be kind and tell you the answer to this one – they use them as helmets, shields and shelters.

Fascinating? This is just one of so many facts that are packed into this glorious technicolor book that it is difficult to know where to start in telling you about it!

Taking us from an exploration of what makes an ocean – from the sea to the seabed and all that lies in between to the animals we find in the ocean, how they live in these vast waters, the varying habitats they make use of and that grown, develop, decline with and around them to how we can make a difference to the ocean – for the better, how we can protect it. This book covers every aspect of which a child (and an adult) may conceivably wish to know more in a uniquely accessible and highly illustrated style. With both illustration and photography used to draw us into this world we are given true alongside artists impressions of life on, in and under these magnificent waters, encouraged to get deep and learn more and also to understand how and why we have oceans, the part they play in nature and the part we can play in protecting them for the future.

A magnificent celebration of a unique world that will fill you full of facts, enthrall and delight.

Louise Ellis-Barrett

Eugene the Architect

Thibaut Rassat, pub. Prestel

This is a charmingly illustrated storybook, mainly for Years 2 and 3 I think, that has an unusual setting, will hold attention, and can be read a number of ways.

It's a lovely object to hold. I think books need to be now, to feel exciting in your hands, and the production on Eugene is admirable. The cover is solid and important feeling; it and the pages swing open beautifully. The greens and blues that dominate the illustrations lift against grey-browns, and the spot yellows are vivid. The typeface is friendly and easily read.

Rassat's illustrations are busy with engrossing detail, yet never fail to tell the story clearly and move it on. Flicking through the book is a joyful experience, you want to read it straight away. Once you do start reading, you're drawn in. The words are efficient, but never hurried. It's conversational, with the rhythms of an eloquent talker. There's some choice vocabulary, but it's not obtrusive and is explained by its context. Basically, Eugene can't cope with disorder and seeks to eliminate it, whether compulsively sorting his possessions at home or designing geometrically perfect buildings for the city outside.

A tree topples over into his latest development, yet this delights Eugene, its sudden disruption of his meticulous planning opens him to new ways of thinking. He learns his role should not be to impose upon people and nature, but to design for their benefit so that they can express themselves. The process of Eugene changing is very sweet, and his change process invites and inspires the people

around him to reassess their own world views. It's about dealing with change, confidence, surprises and compromises, which is why I think a lot of its potential readers will find it a valuable read. It'll be a comfort and an encouragement to people growing up.

And Rassat draws great dogs!

Dmytro Bojaniwskyj

Explore the World: Discoveries that Shaped our World

Anton Hallmann, trans. Ryan Eyers, illus. Anton Hallmann, pub. Little Gestalten, Berlin

This well-designed book starts in a promising fashion with the Contents page laid out as a timeline. We meet in cartoon form our guides: Emma, who has round bunches and is probably of African origin, and Louis. The brief introduction does point out the fact that some places 'discovered' by explorers were already known to the people who lived there, and that the famous names were helped by teams of other people, often including local guides.

Then we plunge straight in at the birthplace of mankind and are taken through to modern space travel today and, finally, a glimpse of the future. Each double page spread is laid out with short sections of facts, fully illustrated, and with comments from Emma and Louis. A particularly good feature of this book is the inclusion of female travellers and explorers. For example, a Spanish Christian woman called Etheria who was travelling around the Middle East in the 4th Century, using the Bible as a travel guide, and writing home to her sisters: these writings are the oldest surviving travelogues. One of the most widely travelled women, and the first European to give birth in the Americas, in Newfoundland, was Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir, around 1000. She was assisted by Erik the Red and his son, Leif Eriksson, who discovered Newfoundland, and she later travelled to Rome. So, we learn that the Vikings had discovered America well before Columbus, and indeed other peoples may have found it, too.

Other little-known women were great travellers: Jeanne Baret was the first woman to circumnavigate the globe, though she had to do that disguised as a man, as women were not allowed on ships! Women were not expected to travel alone, or to become archaeologists, but Mary Kingsley and Harriet Boyd persisted, and became pioneers, paving the way for women like Freya Stark and Gertrude Bell. Some indigenous travellers are named here: Bungaree was the first Aboriginal to circumnavigate Australia, and he made a useful map of his journey; James Cook could not have made all his discoveries without the Tahitian navigator, Tupaia; and a Lemhi Shoshone woman, Sacagawea, guided and translated for Lewis and Clark as they explored the West of the USA. There is at least one woman named in every topic, which is encouraging indeed, and many local people, which was fascinating for this reviewer.

The devastating impact of the European diseases which infected local tribes is made absolutely clear, and so are the often-misguided attempts to civilize or convert native peoples: some 'achievements' must be put in context. The exploration of the North and South Poles, space, and the ocean, are very much work in progress - there is still 90% of the ocean left unexplored, so on the last page, Louis and Emma tell readers that "Adventure awaits!"

Anton Hallmann as author, illustrator and designer has produced a stylish book in an autumnal colour palette which will be fun to pore over and browse through. There is no index, unfortunately, but topics can be found in the timeline at the front. This will be a useful addition to the school library for top juniors or lower secondary pupils, or a generous gift for a curious child.

Diana Barnes

Great Rivers of the World

Volker Mehnert, illus. Martin Haake, pub. Prestel Books

The Colorado river is very important. Millions of people rely on the Colorado river, people living Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Phoenix and Denver all get their water supply and their electric energy from the Colorado river. The river supplies two artificial lakes in north America, which in turns irrigates the fields and suppliers the community. But do the people care?

The Murray river in Australia is 1554 miles long, the mouth of the river has strange natural features, before the Murray reaches the sea it stretches out wide to become a natural lake called Lake Alexandriana.

It's interesting isn't it? Well, I think so.

This book is wonderful, full of interesting information, telling the story of 18 legendary rivers from each of the 5 continents. Every time to you pick this book up you will discover another fascinating fact. We learn how to look after the rivers, why they are important for human beings and animals and what we can do to protect the rivers. We also learn about their history. The illustrations accompanying the text are beautifully drawn with evident attention to detail.

There are fold out pages, which I always like. In fact, this has already become my favourite non-fiction book of the year.

Helen Byles

I Used to Be A Fish: The Story of Evolution

Tom Sullivan, pub. Hachette Children's Books

I Used to be A Fish is a simple and accessible introduction to evolution, for young children aged eight and under. The minimal text takes the reader through the stages of evolution from a fish, bored with swimming, who decides to explore the land through to modern man building across the planet.

There is a chart detailing a brief history of life on Earth with additional text at the end delving deeper into the science and explaining that evolution is slightly more complicated than depicted in the story. The bright, almost minimalistic, illustrations employ only three colours – bright red, cerulean blue and white - and are reminiscent of Dr Seuss with the same quirkiness and humour; I particularly loved the naked modern man with a big bushy red beard, coyly covering his bits!

This is a perfect book to tempt a child's curiosity about evolution. Although the text and illustrations could be understood by a confident reader, the book really needs an adult to help the young reader explore it further, to answer any questions and prompt the likely discussions that will follow.

Author, Tom Sullivan, has been blind from birth. This is his debut children's book. His other books consist of part memoirs, adult novels and, excitingly, coming later this year, a new graphic novel non-fiction series aimed at 8-12 year old's about real FBI cases.

Barbara Band

Kaleidoscope of Creatures

Cath Ard, illus. Greer Stothers, pub. Wide-Eyed Editions

Not only did I judge this book by its cover, but I had pretty much judged it before I had opened up the packaging it arrived in. I'm a big fan of the Wide-Eyed books and eagerly anticipated reading this one, I'm pleased to report this is another triumph.

The mirror-imaged illustrations and the embossing on the front offer a wonderfully tactile introduction, a real feast for the eyes. A feast of beasts for the eyes, if you will. We have lots of animal-based non-fiction books but this one sits beautifully alongside them, rather than instead of.

The book delves into the beauty and function of the colours in these creatures. This focus on appearance looks into why they look the way they do, the purpose this serves, how males/females differ and how appearance can change through the seasons or as an animal develops. To really go into this in depth is not something I've come across before, I felt it brought a new perspective to an established subject matter. It also squeezes in a helpful glossary and a page encouraging readers to think about how they can be kinder to wildlife. The bold backgrounds of each page add drama to the

lovely and well thought out illustrations. As in all good nature books it offers familiarity in its choices of some of the animals depicted but also includes plenty of new ones – cue introductions to the Tomato Frog, Naked Mole Rat, Peacock Mantis Shrimp and Potoo.

This book is accessible and filled with snippets of information so wouldn't scare off early/reluctant readers. I felt this would be suitable for pre-school aged nature lovers who would enjoy looking through the illustrations just as much as an older child would enjoy reading the text. This is a book you can pick up and put down time and again and it would look just as at home on your coffee table as it would on a child's bookshelf.

Hannah Cooper

Making A Baby: An Inclusive guide to How Every Family Begins

Rachel Greener, illus. Clare Owen, pub. Nosy Crow

If you are looking for a book that addresses more than just how babies are conceived and born into a traditional family environment, then this one is going to be of interest to you.

Yes, the natural mechanics of making a baby are addressed, but the layout and illustrations are in sync with any current day non-fiction book which reflects the main theme of the book – how babies are made, with all modern-day approaches, family set-ups and outcomes of the birth suitably addressed.

It starts with the mythical stories that many children will have heard of, but then proceeds into the anatomy of the sexes, in familiar environments – the swimming pool, the bedroom. However, the majority of the book explains other ways that a baby can be conceived, and although the 2.4 family is well represented, so are same-sex parents, parents from ethnic back grounds, adoption and surrogacy. The book then teaches children about how babies grow, how twins are made and how they are born, which again, is not always spontaneous or successful and this is also explained; it also addresses how people may change their biological sex as they grow up.

One of the strengths of this book is the simple and straightforward writing which does not shy away from the subject-specific vocabulary; it contains short and well-placed paragraphs, captions and questions that are enhanced by simple and colourful illustrations by Clare Owen.

By the time you have finished reading the book, you will have forgotten about the giggles that you may get at the start, because making a baby is not actually that simple or straightforward. This book will give children and adults plenty to talk about together. It could have been just a scientific look at how to make a baby, but it isn't – it is a warm and sympathetic read about the amazing process of creating life.

Anna Sterling

Marvellous Machines

Jane Wilsher, illus. Andres Lozano, pub. What on Earth Books

Have you ever wondered what is inside some of the world's most incredible and fascinating machines and inventions? Have you ever thought about the machines in your house, beneath your street and up in space? These machines are often hidden but are at work day and night. They make, move, build and even think for us. This book features bicycles to microwaves, printing presses to space stations. It really is a fun and fact packed wealth of information and is full of answers to tricky questions.

The book comes with an incredible and fun invention of its own. There is a magic lens to enable children to see inside the machines. Whenever you see the lens icon and red speckled or crisscross patterns you can wave the lens over the pattern to magically see what is hidden inside the machine. The lens is cleverly stored inside the front cover of the book. In addition to this, most chapters feature a numbered list of machines, gizmos and gadgets. The idea is to find all these throughout the chapter.

Marvellous Machines really is marvellous. It is a very eye-catching book with clear, simple and bright illustrations as well as a precise and easy to read text. It is informative reading, full of questions and answers for young inquisitive minds. Children will learn about maths, science and engineering. Some quite complex questions are answered and explained in a way that young people will understand. The book makes excellent use of relevant scientific vocabulary and includes a useful contents page, index and source notes at the end. There is also an additional guide to important key words.

Marvellous Machines starts with a chapter called 'How Things Work: What is a machine?' Immediately wheels, pulleys, levers, gears, screws and forces are explained. There are chapters on kitchens, the telephone and transport. Further chapters cover machines underground, at the doctor's and at the building site. Printing presses, robots, telescopes, rockets and space stations are all explored. Every chapter is amazing and features a mass of questions. Right at the end of the book there are some thought-provoking questions to conclude. Why do we invent new machines? Who built the first machines? What will machines be able to do in the future? What machine would you like to invent?

This really is the most brilliant and exciting read for children who have inquisitive minds, who generally love to ask questions and who love to visit museums. The magic lens is a fantastic addition to the book and the whole layout is so simple and easy to read and follow.

Gary Kenworthy

Mona Lisa in New York

Yevgenia Nayberg, pub. Prestel

Mona Lisa is finally having a new experience, after spending “a very long time” in the Louvre where she “knows everything and everyone knows [her]”. She is packaged in bubble-wrap, placed into a crate and travels to New York where it is “business as usual” throughout her stay as people queue up to stare and admire her. On her last night Mona Lisa decides to leave her frame and the Museum to walk around New York, but she gets lost. To her surprise she is just one of the crowd until Tag, a graffiti man from Brooklyn, offers to show her around. As she experiences various aspects of New York’s nightlife she is surprised by not just the reawakening of her curiosity – she doesn’t know it all – but also how much she enjoys Tag’s company. She is sad to leave him, as he is her but when Tag returns to his home near Brooklyn Bridge he finds Mona Lisa waiting for him in a nice romantic happy ending!

Nayberg’s newest book is fanciful, romantic, intriguing, and captivating. There are echoes of the *Night at the Museum* films, *Harry Potter*, and *Mary Poppins* (to name just a few) through its inspired concept of characters within artwork coming ‘alive’ and moving unnoticed among human society. Nayberg instills this magical idea further in two intriguing ways. Tag initially questions which Mona Lisa is she – one from the bakery or one from a street, which makes you wonder just how many Mona Lisa’s, a much copied, parodied, and inspirational character, there are wandering around this world. Nayberg even shows somebody drawing their own version of her in the crowd looking at her. She depicts various characters from other works of art as cameos within her illustrations and includes a helpful guide to them at the end of the book. Characters created by artists such as Botticelli, Van Eyck, Lippi etc. move around the world, in the audience themselves looking at Mona Lisa or holding a hot drink on the street or carrying pots in the pizzeria where she and Tag eat.

I think this is such a clever intriguing way of moving this idea of artwork to come alive further and could inspire many creative projects linking English and Art together. Nayberg’s illustrative style itself is reminiscent of Marc Chagall’s work with its dreamlike nature, floaty, loose-limbed, body-twisting figures, and distorted dimensions and perspectives. She uses the muted sepia tones of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* painting within the wider illustrations but instead of being dull and dark the pages are full of colour, texture, detail, and a compelling population of figures. The final image of Mona Lisa with her crackled appearance and enigmatic expression embellished with spray-painted graffiti marks and decoration is a wonderful mixing of classic and contemporary art and a visual representation of what Nayberg celebrates throughout this story - making even the most famous classical art accessible and relevant to new audiences in a fun and engaging way.

Natalie J. McChrystal Plimmer

Move Like A Lion

Radzi Chinyanganya, illus. Francesca Rosa, pub. Dorling Kindersley

The tag line of this book is “mimic the moves of your favourite animals” and the front cover illustration is of Blue Peter presenter, Radzi, surrounded by various cartoon animals which gives the reader a clue regarding its contents.

The aim of the book is all about getting up off the sofa and moving, perfect for encouraging children to take more exercise by making it fun and as Radzi was announced, in 2017, as an ambassador for Super Movers, the campaign to encourage kids to learn as they move, he is the perfect person to promote these activities. There’s a wakeup routine to get you stretching before you are encouraged to stalk like a crocodile, wiggle like a worm, hop like a rabbit or roll like a panda. In fact, thirty-five different animals are featured so here is plenty to keep even the most energetic child occupied. The exercises can be done inside or out of doors and are certain to have children, of all ages, giggling in no time. Add in some ad-hoc animal noises and they’re likely to carry on all day!

Each movement is accompanied by black and white illustrations showing a diverse range of children demonstrating the actions, together with a simple explanation to help you perfect the move. There are “did you know” facts about each animal as well as a “challenge yourself” extension activity for the more adventurous. The book finishes with some two-minute meditations – one for each day of the week – to encourage you to relax and mentally wind down.

Although aimed at 5 – 7 year old’s, older children – as well as adults – will get a lot of entertainment from this book.

Barbara Band

My Intense Emotions Handbook

Sue Knowles, Bridie Gallagher and Hannah Bromley, illus. Kim S. Golding, pub. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

When I picked up *My Intense Emotions Handbook*, I was expecting to find a psychological lecture to teenagers, packed with scientific vocabulary and little thought on emotional regulation. However, what I discovered was a sensitive, friendly approach to helping teenagers understand: themselves; their feelings; relationships and how this relates to the world around them.

This book is a map of self-exploration, leading you through not only the scientific aspect of ‘why’ but also the psychological nature of ‘who’ and ‘what’. *My Intense Emotions Handbook* doesn’t shy away from giving the real information behind emotions, from the psychological impact of nature vs nurture, childhood trauma and disorders that can affect mental wellbeing, to the science behind what

is happening in your body. The friendly narrator voice throughout the book helps it feel like you're having a comfortable conversation with your best friend, rather than being lectured by an adult. Furthermore, the authors combine scientific and subject-specific vocabulary with reader friendly definitions, helping it feel accessibly and unpatronizing. *My Intense Emotions Handbook* weaves information alongside real life experiences, case studies and stories, to help you relate to what you are reading, adding a personal touch to the information on the page.

This guidebook also provides coping strategies, relayed in a well thought out and clear style. This encourages the reader to identify their own emotional, sensory and psychological needs in order to pinpoint the support they can access. Additional advice and websites are provided, to guide the reader to seek extra support beyond the pages and a self-care plan is embedded within the book, to allow you to begin your journey, right from the get-go.

Whilst I found the book an easy read, the layout occasionally hindered the fluency in which I could read the book. Some chapters used a varied layout to enhance interest and broke up text using boxes and bullet points. However, other chapters included large chunks of text, which appeared quite daunting on the page. Nevertheless, throughout the book, clear signposting with sub-headings allowed me to pause when the text became overbearing, and I could immediately find my page in the book and where I had finished.

For young adults, aged 14+, this book provides an in-depth, friendly and encompassing approach to emotions and emotional regulation. A must-have for a secondary school library, for teenagers who want to understand more or for parents who want to support their teen through the emotional rollercoaster that is growing up, this book provides for all.

Katie Piper

My Sneezes Are Perfect

Rakhshan Rizwan and Yusuf Samee, illus. Benjamin Philips, pub. The Emma Press

Spring is here and with it comes a fresh bout of blossoms, ideas, and adventures out of home; sometimes with a bit of a tickle in the nose; but sneezes are a release, a relaxation and this time they are perfect as little Yusuf Samee sings of in this anthology about his inner and outer 6-year-old child's life. Written in collaboration with Yusuf's mother Rakhshan Rizwan, herself a poet, writer, scholar and author of the *Kashmiri Life Narratives*, a research work published by Routledge.

This one though, is an adorable collection with cute illustrations by Benjamin Philips. You can expect to dive deeply into the mind of a young child growing up and learning from his surroundings, with big adventures of his own including climbing the tree, sharing likes with the hatchetfish, sibling tiffs, moving to America and coexisting with the culture, discovering auto-driving car, and types of poops!

But this is strewn with intricacy, the mundane events and experiences of the boy reflect the current scenarios in America such as intruder drills at schools, California wildfires, the pandemic situation, zoom meetings and all the convergence of a young one's world with an adult's.

The words used are easy to understand and reflect the state of mind of a young boy settling, observing and exploring his body, mind, family, technology, school, friends and natural spaces. The book will help children relate to the world they experience through the short poems and the art like this one with a kid staring at the computer screen packed with faces in a zoom meeting-

On the first day of the first grade I felt scared,
because it was my first day,
but then I didn't feel nervous after that.

First grade is too easy!
I have to do easy peasy
lemon squeezy mathematics!
Like $1+1=2$ and $2+2=4$,
which is so simple!

Definitely recommended for children aged 6-10, conversing with the world and developing extremely rich inner monologues which help in developing the emotional quotient a lot! And there are poetry prompts at the end of the book to help the little ones sing their own experiences to the page!

Ishika Tiwari

The Rainforest Book

Charlotte Milner, pub. Dorling Kindersley

The Rainforest Book is jam-packed full of facts and interesting snippets about the rainforest from which they are found, from why they are important to how climate change affects them and what children can do to protect them. It provides a very comprehensive look at the environment the plants and animals that can be found there and how they survive through pollination, seed dispersal, the use of camouflage, colourful warnings and mimicking, living in a pack and the predator/prey relationship.

This book provides opportunities for children to discover and explore their own love of nature. The information also supports the statutory requirements for KS1 plants as well as animals, including humans in that as well as the above information there is also double page spreads about life cycles, mating rituals, looking after their young and deforestation.

The author and illustrator, Charlotte Milner, encourages the children to protect the places that are precious to us by finding out more, looking before they buy, supporting conservation groups, recycling, reducing their carbon footprint, eating less meat, avoiding palm oil and planting trees. A great addition is the step-by-step instructions to inspire the children to plant their own mini rainforest in a jar.

The vibrant, modern feel using bright colours, photographs and infographics will appeal to children of all ages. I particularly liked the way the use of colour within the illustrations to give you a feel and impression of the rainforest. At the back of the book there is a wildlife index to encourage the children to find look up the different creatures featured in the book.

This is the ideal book for anyone who is interested in the environment and are intrigued to discover more about learning the ways they can help. It is guaranteed to help children to develop a deep passion for conservation. The perfect addition for all school libraries.

Anita Loughrey

Anita Loughrey's (www.anitaloughrey.com) next books are the last two books of *A Year in Nature* series *Squirrel's Autumn Puzzle* and *Fox's Winter Discovery* to be released Sept 21st 2021.

Stars With Flaming Tails

Valerie Bloom, illus. Ken Wilson-Max, pub. Otter-Barry Books

Here's some joy; a lyrical breeze; a nostalgic offering fragrant with experiences of a child of colour, inked by UK's beloved children's poet Valerie Bloom in her new book - *Stars with Flaming Tails!* This thin little book begins with the beginning, the arrival of baby Chinelo, and we see her first-person verses describing her experiences of family, school and the daily tussle and joy of hide and seek, combing hair, and observations on eyes, nose, flowers, wall and words.

This collection is as joyful and poetic as it is profound with poems like *You Are* -

You are the silver in the moonlight
The waves kissing the beach
The nectar in the mango
The sweetness in the peach.

Or, *We Don't Laugh When Grandad Sings*

When grandad sings he shuts his eyes,
Screws up his face, points to the skies

Grandad's feelings would be hurt If we should greet his songs with mirth, He'd go quiet, he'd look dejected...

Or this lovely verse-

My heart is a volcano, A cyclone, a shooting star
My heart is a captive lovebird That's suddenly been set free.
My heart is a sleeping baby, My dad is home again.

There are five sections, namely - Family and Friends; Fun with Forms; Our World; Animals and Unbelievable. The poems are related to each of these, full of wisdom and a knowingness found in the interaction between a kid to its environment. Definitely a book that I would recommend children aged 8-11 read, for the sense of exploration and curiosity it can instil in readers, it's take on wordplay and poems targeting the emotional quotient of kids and of those with messages for the environment. Also, this is Valerie's first new solo collection!

Ishika Tiwari

Weird, Wild and Wonderful. The Poetry World of James Carter

illus. Neal Layton, pub. Otter Barry Books

This book by award winning children's poet and musician James Carter, is a wonderful ride of sounds, shapes, and word play. Divided into three sections, titled Weird, Wild and Wonderful. The poetry in conjunction with cute and creative illustrations by Neal Layton brings in this enjoyable experience of reading and learning. These poems are performative and makes one jump in joy and targeted for a wide age range, this anthology holds the very best of James Carter's works, which he has been writing and performing for a period of 20 years. Here is a play of dark and light, with star-eyed wolves bewitching the poet, an Elephant's Ode to the Dung Beetle, an average day at school, and conversations with a fly!

Children and adults can come together in performing them and it offers help for children in understanding the meaning of emotions, environmental issues, the silence of the night and the sweetness of lying in a meadow with much ease, such as in this verse, talking of the harm done to the environment:

Who cares if
we poison
the land, the seas?
We fell all the forests,
we topple

the trees? There's plenty more galaxies, planets like these - with water, with air, with warmth, with light: homes like ours just right for life.

And this empathetic one on a Gorilla inside his glass world-

He sits and he stares
with them old brown eyes
beyond the glass
beyond my gaze
to a time
and a place
he's never known
yet somehow
seems to remember

Where the wind shakes the trees where the rain wets the leaves where there are no walls at all.

Children will be able read these poems out loud and silently; they can identify shapes in the structure of the concrete poems, and learn about popular poetry genres like Haiku, Acrostics and Shape Poems. This collection is a must for growing kids learning pronunciation, who love to perform poems or just enjoy the witty illustrations with the flow of poetry!

Ishika Tiwari

Writing your own story

Tiger Skin Rug is a brilliant new magical realism story by Joan Haig. Bridget Carrington interviews the author about the inspiration for her latest book.

Bridget: First of all, can you tell us why you chose the tiger skin rug as the central ‘character’ in the book?

Joan: The character was given to me. My Auntie Lilian was a master storyteller. She intended to write a novel for my sister, cousins and me. It was about four children who moved from the Highlands to the Scottish Borders in the Second World War or thereabouts and went on a magical adventure. It was called ‘Tiger Skin Rug’. That’s about as much as we knew: she never wrote it and sadly wasn’t able to recall it after developing dementia.

When it came to typing up something for my own children, I started with my auntie’s idea – it was such a good one and I didn’t want it to be lost. But, at a writing retreat in the Highlands, I struggled immensely trying to depict Scottish children in wartime. One of the retreat mentors, Melvin Burgess, advised me not to try. He said, “You can’t write someone else’s story. Start again. Take your aunt’s idea and use it to write your own story.” So that’s what I did.

Lal and Dilip and their parents, and especially their grandmother, Naniji, are powerful portraits of Hindus from India. Can you tell us how you were able to write such true-to-life characters?

I’m pleased you find them authentic. Part of the joy of being a writer is imagining and creating characters. Writing across cultures, I constantly reflected on how I was representing not only the individual characters but wider Hindu ethnicity. It wasn’t a random choice; I have connections to Hindu families and culture. I grew up in Zambia where my parents had many Indian friends and encouraged us to celebrate cultural difference. From my mid-teens onwards I read a lot of books by Indian authors and in my late teens – partly influenced by a Vikram Seth novel – volunteered for several months for an organisation supporting street children in the Indian city of Hyderabad. Later on, I wrote a PhD thesis on the Hindu minority of Lusaka in Zambia, researching history, customs, culture and perceptions of home and belonging. I didn’t know it at the time, but this all made rich material for my fiction.

Lal in particular is very homesick, and Naniji is very critical of their new life in Scotland. Does this reflect any of your own experience?

Absolutely. I moved house and continent several times as a child, teenager and adult in my twenties. For a long time my primary feeling was one of homesickness and/or missing, and it remains a strong

part of my day-to-day life. I enjoyed writing exchanges between the children and the older characters of Naniji and Granny. Older relatives were strong forces in helping my sister Marian (who illustrated the book) and me feel settled in Scotland.

***Tiger Skin Rug* seemed to me to belong to a tradition of magic realism which was very popular around the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries. As a child were you a reader of any of these books?**

I'm bowled over that *Tiger Skin Rug* seems to anyone to belong to a literary 'tradition'! I suppose all things I've read have pulled on my writing in one way or another. I'm not a huge fan of high fantasy, but I love magical elements in real-world settings. I grew up with African and South Pacific folklore, and with several French surrealist picture books of my mother's from the 1960s and 1970s. In my twenties I went through a phase of reading African literature, some of which is straight magical realism – and William Blake, Diana Wynne Jones, Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie and Toni Morrison definitely appear on my list of best-loved writers.

In the book you empathetically address some very serious issues of our time: identity, migration and conservation. Was this choice a result of your own experience?

These are issues I care about immensely. Growing up as part of an expatriate minority in 1980s Zambia, I was aware of racially defined differences and racism from an early age. I also found it hard sometimes as a child to move country, never being part of majority culture or a member of settled minorities, and always confronting the 'identity' question. It's not easy, particularly as a child, to learn how to handle privilege, stand up to prejudice, and understand (mis)perceptions about place and belonging. It fascinates and saddens me that humans continue to label and exclude each other.

I think it would be difficult to write a contemporary story about a tiger without involving conservation. We need to act holistically in protecting tigers' habitats and saving their chances of survival. I had my primary audience in mind here, too: I wrote *Tiger Skin Rug* for my two boys and nephews who care passionately about the planet and its animals.

Have you been actively involved in conservation at any point in your travels around the globe?

The first organisation I ever joined was a group called Elefriends. I was eleven. After reading a book called *Among the Elephants* by Iain and Orta Douglas-Hamilton, I pledged to save the elephant and sold lots of traybakes and buns to that end. I've got my hands muddy and painted banners for many local initiatives and campaigns but never actively worked in conservation. That said, being a wildlife ranger remains on my list of things I want to be when I grow up.

What was the particular reason that you chose Dilip as the one who was able to communicate with the tiger?

I wanted Lal to have some distance from the tiger so that young readers would sense its wildness. I didn't want the tiger to be domesticated or tamed. The story is written in first person from Lal's perspective, so giving him the power to talk to the tiger felt too cosy. I am fascinated by sibling dynamics and thought it would help younger siblings relate to the story more if Dilip, who is the younger brother, was pivotal to the plot, too, rather than tagging along.

Jenny is a very strong character. Is she based on any young Scot that you know?

Ah, Jenny was the most difficult to write. Perhaps because she isn't based on a particular person, I kept falling into Scottish stereotypes – she started off with wild, ginger hair and her accent kept dancing around the country in my imagination. I couldn't decide whether she should be affectionate or feisty, but in the end reconciled that she could be both.

What are you writing at the moment?

I am cowriting, with Joan Lennon, a children's nonfiction titled *Talking History*. It comes out in July 2021 with Templar/Bonnier – I can't wait! I am also working on a second novel for children that involves more animal magic.

What would you like to write in the future?

More nonfiction titles with Joan Lennon would be fun. I have a chapter book idea on the back-burner. I want to confront and write across differences, rather than reinforcing labels and boundaries – and I want to write more adventure with magic and animals.

Thank you so much for telling us more about yourself and your writing!

Thank you for hosting me and asking such thoughtful questions. What a treat!

The Awesome Power of Sleep

FIVE QUESTIONS ADULTS SHOULD ASK NICOLA MORGAN ABOUT SLEEP

By Nicola Morgan

1. Why did a long night-time sleep evolve? After all, that must have been dangerous for people living in caves or out in the open?

Exactly. So, there must be an enormous benefit. And it turns out that sleep benefits every cell and process in our body and brain: repair, growth, mental health, memory, learning, immune system, energy, appetite, hormones, cardio-vascular health and brain function. All animals sleep and all have evolved types and times and cycles of sleep that work for their physiology and environment. We have evolved to have our main sleep at night. And anyone who works nights or shifts knows how lousy you feel when you don't.

2. How can we manage on less sleep?

The most shocking question I was ever asked was at a parent event in Indonesia. I'd just spent an hour explaining that brains work best when we look after our health and a mother asked, "How can I get my daughter to manage on less sleep so she can do more work?" Such an aim is horrendously misguided.

Scientists have tried to find a way to allow us to function well on less sleep, without negative consequences. The benefits would be huge for the armed forces, people working in emergency medicine and parents of babies. And, of course, there are pills but all these do is keep people alert for a time, after which inevitable loss of function and health occurs.

Sleep is about far, far more than alertness. We can't bypass it. It's not a waste of time. And you will not do better work on less of it!

3. But didn't Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan only sleep 4-5 hours a night?

So they said. We have no proof of this. Perhaps they were among the tiny (estimated at closer to 0% than 0.5%) number of people with a mutation in the gene DEC2, who are the only people known to be able to function optimally after a routine 4-6 hours.

But I don't believe they were. In any case, both developed Alzheimer's, known to be more common amongst people who sleep very little.

Routinely having very little sleep is not a goal: it's something to avoid.

4. So, Nicola, you must sleep brilliantly?

Not always! You can do everything right and still have a bad night. Anxiety is the most common and powerful sleep-wrecker and I am no stranger to anxiety. This year, 2020, many people have reported more trouble sleeping than usual and this year most of us have had a lot to be anxious about.

But I've learnt to do two things when sleeplessness strikes: a) Don't panic because I will be fine the next day. And b) continue directing my mind onto topics that are boring, useful or nice.)

The most important and practical thing you can do to build good sleep is develop a strong routine leading up to your light going off. Choose some of the things I call "sleep positives" and build them into a routine which will become a brain habit. And avoid all the sleep negatives, of course. See *The Awesome Power of Sleep* for the lists of both or rummage around on my website and you'll find the information.

5. Hang on, you write for teenagers so how come you're lecturing me?

Because sleep is sleep is sleep. When I go to schools, before I've even got to the teenage audience I've usually been asked for advice by the librarian. Many a time (naming no names!) I've had school librarians or teachers reveal that they go to sleep fully clothed on the sofa when they get home from work and then get up and eat and watch TV before going to bed again at 11.30 after two glasses of wine. Naughty adults!

Yes, so, teenagers need more sleep and have different patterns but everyone needs exactly the same advice about a healthy sleep behaviour. And it's as important for you as it is for them.

You need this book. If you don't read it quickly, you'll find your teenagers will start lecturing you. I have given them permission!

Sleep well. And may 2021 not be quite such a challenge to our anxiety levels!

Nicola Morgan, *The Teenage Brain Woman*, is a multi-award-winning author and speaker whose work on young brains, psychology and mental health is loved by teenagers, schools and families around the world. For someone whose last school science report said, 'Nicola has no aptitude for science subjects', she's written a lot of science-based books and gained the respect of real scientists. She has been a YA novelist, English teacher and dyslexia specialist and the mother of two teenage (now grown-up) daughters. Now, when not writing and dreaming in a garden office over a valley, she keeps herself physically and mentally healthy as a passionate vegetable gardener, decent cook and determined runner.

Nicola also does talks, online or in-person, for conferences, schools, parents and public audiences. She has created unique teaching materials, including videos: terrific value for schools, with all the benefits of repeated visits from Nicola at a fraction of the cost of one!

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Click [here](#) for a review of *The Awesome Power of Sleep*.

What if ...

Bridget Carrington speaks with Lisa Williamson, author of *First Day of My Life*, published in January by David Fickling Books. Read Bridget's review of the book in the Spring Young Adult reviews.

Bridget: You've written about specific teenage dilemmas in your earlier books. What in particular drew you to write about Jojo's situation?

Lisa: It was a simple 'what if?'. I was actually chatting with a friend about *Paper Avalanche* (the novel I was working on at the time) when the conversation took a slightly surreal turn and we found ourselves mulling over why someone might steal a baby. Weeks later I was still thinking about it. Of course, the story (and Jojo's situation in particular) ended up being about so much more than just a stolen baby, but it served as a brilliant starting point.

The book is very much about real friendship, and to what extent it can overcome serious disagreements. Had you experienced something yourself which allowed you to write Frankie's side of the story so powerfully?

I don't tend to write from direct experience, but I like to think I'm pretty good at putting myself in other people's shoes. In terms of Frankie's story, I was very attracted to the idea of the more confident, gregarious friend losing out to her quieter, more unassuming counterpart, and the impact this might have on their established dynamic. Frankie is frequently referred to as a drama queen, and yet it is Jojo's actions that create the majority of the drama here. In many ways, I found Frankie the easiest character to write because she is so upfront with her emotions. Her complete lack of filter was really refreshing.

The book is divided into three, so that each major character has the space to tell their own story. Did you start writing with a clear idea of the characterisation of Ram, Frankie and Jojo?

From the beginning, I had a pretty good idea of the dynamic between Frankie and Jojo. Initially Ram was Jojo's ex, not Frankie's, and was far cockier and combative than he appears in the finished book. In the very early stages of writing, it was a dual narrative, with Frankie and Jojo taking it in turns to tell the story, but the more I wrote, the more it became clear that Ram's side of the story was also begging to be told. Dividing the book into the three clear parts (plus the fourth and final part in which all three characters narrate chapters) really helped me nail down the story and time the various reveals.

Which was the easiest character to create?

Definitely Frankie. She wears her heart on her sleeve at all times and frequently acts on impulse. Being in her head was never boring! She's probably the character who bears the least resemblance to me, and I suspect that's why I found her easier to write. I tend to be attracted to characters and situations that are quite different to my own.

And the most difficult was...? Can you explain why?

Probably Jojo. She's much more reserved than Frankie and less outwardly emotional. On top of this, she's grappling with something so painful and complex and multi-layered, it was sometimes hard for me to compute the enormity of her situation and put it into words. Once I did though, I absolutely loved being inside her head.

There is the ongoing mystery until quite late in the novel. There are other books set around situations similar to Jojo's, but none (as far as I know) with a mystery like this threaded through the narrative. What was your inspiration for this?

I didn't realise I was writing a mystery until quite late on. Indeed, I think I would have found the writing process a lot more daunting if I had! I don't tend to plan a great deal. On the one hand, this is quite a scary way to write, but I find it helps keep things surprising for both me and the reader. Every time I sit down to write, my focus is on keeping things as entertaining as possible and leaving the reader wanting more, mystery or no mystery.

Swindon! Why did you choose Swindon as the location for the denouement?

I wanted to pick somewhere incredibly ordinary where Jojo could disappear and Swindon was the first place I've visited that came to mind. It could easily be any large British town though. The club Frankie visits (Aphrodite's) is entirely fictional and I've been pretty creative with the town's geography. I really hope the citizens of Swindon don't mind!

It looks as though *First Day of My Life* was originally due for publication in the summer of 2020, before Covid 19 stepped in to delay things. Did you make any changes to when you found you had another six months before publication?

I didn't. The book had already gone out in proof form and I was pretty happy with it. I'm quite good at knowing when a project is finished and am always itching to move on to something new. It's a shame it was pushed from its original slot, but I'm hoping a story set during a heatwave is actually what we all need right now!

There's quite a complicated ethical dilemma in the situation which arises with Jojo's family's reactions. How sympathetic do you think readers will be to Jojo's Mum, step-mum Stacey and to Jojo's own changing decisions?

No one is infallible and I like to challenge the misbelief that adults (especially parents) always know what's best. It's my hope that readers will be able to see that everyone is doing the best they can in a series of very difficult circumstances. This is not to excuse some of the decisions made, of course, but it's a very complex situation for all involved.

In many ways the final pages leave us with a powerful desire to know what happened next. Have you considered writing a sequel?

I haven't. I love writing standalone stories and letting readers make up their own minds about what happens next. Having said that, I do find endings quite difficult and I certainly found it quite hard to say goodbye to Frankie, Jojo and Ram (I'd really enjoyed being in their heads). I like to leave readers satisfied, but tend to avoid wrapping things up too neatly, which often takes quite a bit of time to get right. The book ends with an epilogue. For a while we went back and forth as to whether it was needed, but in the end, we felt the characters (and readers) deserved it. However, I think the book works perfectly well without it too.

Thank you so much for telling us more about yourself and your writing! *First Day of My Life* by Lisa Williamson is out now, published by David Fickling Books.

Picture books

A Shelter for Sadness

Anne Booth, illus. David Litchfield

Alone

Barry Falls illus. Barry Falls

Books Make Good Pets

John Agard, illus. Momoko Abe

The Button Book

Sally Nicholls, illus. Bethan Woollvin

Can Bears Ski?

Raymond Antrobus, illus. Polly Dunbar

Captain Green and the Tree Machine

Evelyn Bookless, illus. Danny Deeptown

The Castle the King Built

Rebecca Colby, illus. Tom Froese

Chicken Come Home!

Polly Faber, illus. Briony May Smith

Courageous Lucy. The Girl Who Liked to Worry

Paul Russell, illus. Cara King

The Fidgety Itch

Lucy Davey, illus. Katz Cowley

The Greatest Showpenguin

Lucy Freegard

How Do You Make a Rainbow?

Caroline Crowe, illus. Cally Johnson-Isaacs

I'm Thinking of A Pet

Charlotte and Adam Guillian

I Talk Like A River

Jordan Scott, illus. Sydney Smith

Imagine!

Patricia Forde, illus. Elina Braslina

The Invisible

Tom Percival

The Island

Judith Wisdom

Leo and the Octopus

Isabelle Marinov, illus. Chris Nixon

The Lipstick

Laura Dockrill, illus. Maria Karipidou

Milo Imagines the World

Matt De La Pena, illus. Christian Robinson

Sleep, Cat, Sleep

Antje Damm

The Song for Everyone

Lucy Morris

Spaghetti Hunters

Morag Hood

The Story Thief

Graham Carter

The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Book

Lucy Rowland, illus. Ben Mantle

Turning Cartwheels

Amy Adeney, illus. Amy Calautti

What about the Tooth Fairy?

Elys Dolan

When Jelly Had a Wobble

Michelle Robinson, illus. Tom Knight

Wolf Girl

Jo Loring Fisher

Junior books

Albert Johnson and the Buns of Steel

Phil Earle, illus. Steve May

Amari and the Night Brothers

B.B. Alston

The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh

Helen Rutter

The Boy Who Met a Whale

Nizrana Farook

Darwin's Dragons

Lindsay Galvin, illus. Gordy Wright

Dog Gone

Bob Biddulph

The Don't Panic Gang!

Mark Sperring, illus. Sarah Warburton

The Elephant

Peter Carnavas

Everyday Magic: The Adventures of Alfie Blackstack

Jess Kidd

The Forest of Moon and Sword

Amy Raphael

The Giant's Almanac

Andre Zurcher

The Ghost Garden

Emma Carroll, illus. Kaja Kajfež

The Hatmakers

Tamzin Merchant, illus. Paola Escobar

The House at the Edge of Magic

Amy Sparkes

Luna Rae is not Alone

Hayley Webster

Me, My Dad and the End of the Rainbow

Benjamin Dean

Morgana Mage in the Robotic Age

Amy Bond

Once We Were Witches

Sarah Driver, illus. Fabi Santiago

Panda at the Door

Sarah Thorne

Rat

Patrice Lawrence

Space Detectives

Mark Powers

Space Oddity

Christopher Edge, illus. Ben Mantle

The Spybrarian

Jon Mayhew, illus. Robin Boyden

Two Terrible Vikings

Francesca Simon, illus. Steve May

Vega Jane and The Secrets of Sorcery

David Baldacci

Uma and the Answer to Absolutely Everything

Sam Copeland, illus. Sarah Horne

The Valley of Lost Secrets

Lesley Parr, illus. David Dean

This Wonderful Thing

Adam Baron

Young Adult books

11 Paper Hearts

Kelsey Hartwell

A Phở Love Story

Loan Le

Beauty and the Bin

Joanne O'Connell

City of the Uncommon Thief

Lynne Bertrand

Dragonfly Eyes

Cai Wenxuan, trans. Helen Wang

First Day of My Life

Lisa Williamson

Forever Ends on Friday

Justin A. Reynolds

Game Changer

Neal Shusterman

The Girls I've Been

Tess Sharpe

Here the Whole Time

Vitor Martins

The Humiliations of Welton Blake

Alex Wheatle

Influence

Sara Shepard and Lilia Buckingham

Last One to Die

Cynthia Murphy

Liberté

Gita Trelease

Lock the Doors

Vincent Ralph

Love is a Revolution

Renée Watson

Love is for Losers

Wibke Brueggemann

Pop!

Mitch Johnson

The Queen's Fool

Ally Sherrick

The Sad Ghost Club

Lize Meddings

The Shadow War

Lindsay Smith

Smashed

Andy Robb

The Soul Hunters

Chris Bradford

Swan Song

Gill Lewis

Vi Spy: Licence To Chill

Maz Evans

The Way Back

Gavriel Savit

We Played With Fire
Catherine Barter

The Wild
Owen Laukkanen

Non-Fiction books

A Poem for Every Spring Day

ed. Allie Esiri

A Year Full of Celebrations and Festivals

Claire Grace, illus. Christopher Corr

The Awesome Power of Sleep: How Sleep Supercharges your Teenage Brain

Nicola Morgan

Break the Mould

Sinéad Burke, illus. Natalie Byrne

Can We Talk About Consent? A Book About Freedom, Choices and Agreement

Justin Hancock, illus. Fuschia MacAree

Dragon World

Tamara Macfarlane, illus. Allesandra Fusi

Earth's Incredible Oceans

Jess French, illus. Claire McElpatrick

Eugene the Architect

Thibaut Rassat

Explore the World: Discoveries that Shaped our World

Anton Hallmann, trans. Ryan Eyers, illus.

Anton Hallmann

Great Rivers of the World

Volker Mehnert, illus. Martin Haake

I Used to Be A Fish: The Story of Evolution

Tom Sullivan

Kaleidoscope of Creatures

Cath Ard, illus. Greer Stothers

Making A Baby: An Inclusive guide to How Every Family Begins

Rachel Greener, illus. Clare Owen

Marvellous Machines

Jane Wilsher, illus. Andres Lozano

Mona Lisa in New York

Yevgenia Nayberg

Move Like A Lion

Radzi Chinyanganya, illus. Francesca Rosa

My Intense Emotions Handbook

Sue Knowles, Bridie Gallagher and Hannah Bromley, illus. Kim S. Golding

My Sneezes Are Perfect

Rakhshan Rizwan and Yusuf Samee, illus. Benjamin Philips

The Rainforest Book

Charlotte Milner

Stars With Flaming Tails

Valerie Bloom, illus. Ken Wilson-Max

Weird, Wild and Wonderful. The Poetry World of James Carter

illus. Neal Layton