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Talking plants, science superheroes and Macbeth mayhem by various authors — book reviews —

Visit a world where threatened wildlife gets a powerful voice, discover your inner superhero in an inspirational sciences activity book, enjoy a riotous performance of Macbeth and meet an adorable princess who adores fixing mix-ups in a springtime selection of children's books.

By Pam Norfolk

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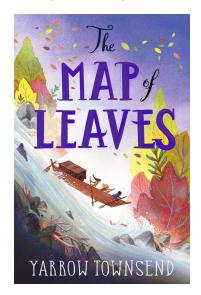








The Map of Leaves by Yarrow Townsend



Age 9 plus:

The Map of Leaves

Yarrow Townsend

After growing up surrounded by nature in its raw beauty, and currently living on a narrowboat with a garden on the roof, exciting new author Yarrow Townsend was determined to one day give our threatened wildlife a voice... and now she has done that literally!

The Map of Leaves is her extraordinary middle-grade debut novel, a rip-roaring adventure set in a beautifully atmospheric and authentic natural world where plants talk, friendship is hard won, and danger lies around the bend of every river.

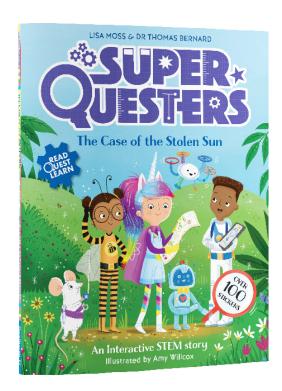
Orla Carson has lived on her own in the marshy, damp-soaked village of Thorn Creek since her Ma died from a fever that no herbs could ease. Fiercely independent Orla needs only her beloved plants and garden for company but when sickness comes and rapidly spreads across the land, nature takes the blame. Orla knows she must find a cure if she is to save the world and, armed with her mother's book of plants and remedies, she steals away on a river boat with two other stowaways, Idris and Ariana. Soon the trio must navigate the terrifying rapids of the mighty Inkwater river to a poisonous place from which they may never return...

Townsend truly pushes the boat out as the daring friends risk everything to go against the flow — in more ways than one — as they battle the roaring rapids and find inspiration and courage in the whispering words and wisdom of the plants and ancient trees.

As much a love letter to mankind's relationship with nature as a wild, heartpounding thrill ride, this breathtaking journey through foggy, plant-tangled wetlands and forgotten places brings botany and science to vivid and visceral life for a new eco-aware generation.

Action and adventure all the way!

(Chicken House, paperback, £7.99)



Age 4 plus:

SuperQuesters: The Case of the Stolen Sun

Dr Thomas Bernard, Lisa Moss and Amy Willcox

Discover your inner superhero in this unique interactive story which aims to fire up imaginations and inspire the scientists, engineers, mathematicians and technology experts of the future!

The Case of the Stolen Sun is the first book in a new SuperQuesters series from husband and wife team and STEM experts, Thomas Bernard and Lisa Moss, whose mission is to inspire and equip a new generation to pursue Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education and careers, reduce the skills shortage and close the ethnic diversity and gender gap in STEM studies.

At heart a young fiction adventure series with a fun educational twist, SuperQuesters blends exciting stories and hands-on activities, expertly designed to develop skills in creative new ways, and includes over 100 reusable stickers in each book.

The stars are Lilli and her best friends Leo and Bea, three endlessly curious children with big imaginations. When they unite to solve a challenging science problem, they turn into superheroes Lillicorn, Leo Zoom and Bea Bumble and journey to a world full of magic, adventure and quests. And they want readers to join in the mission and the fun by helping them to track down Lord Grumble and his Snapettes and return the stolen sun to Questland.

Combining brilliant storytelling with interactive hands-on learning, the book's stickers feature magical charm rewards and there is also a reward chart to mark progress and celebrate success, and a glossary and answer page.

Skills covered include coding, sequencing and algorithms and the book is carefully designed with cross-curricular learning opportunities in mind, linking with computing, maths and science in the national curriculum.

It's all brought to vivid life through the bright and colourful illustrations of Amy Willcox, so if you're a superhero enthusiast and love learning through play then this is the perfect way to Read, Quest and Learn!

(QuestFriendz, paperback, £7.99)

Age 9 plus:

Writes of Passage: Words To Read Before You Turn 13

Nicolette Jones

Writer, literary critic and broadcaster Nicolette Jones brings her own decades of wisdom, knowledge and experience to an inspiring, accessible and powerful collection of words that cannot but resonate loudly with a new generation of youngsters. Included in this gorgeous hardback book are over 100 pieces of writing – from poems to prose, letters to lyrics, speeches to songs, plus quotations, book extracts and lots more. Shakespeare, Stephen Hawking, Greta Thunberg, Galileo, Malala, Martin Luther King, Lin-Manuel Miranda and Lord Tennyson are just some of the names whose words of wisdom ring out from the pages. In turn powerful, funny, moving and thought-provoking, these thoughts on topics – including happiness and sadness, nature and the world, kindness and courage, equality and justice – have all been expertly selected with accessible and thoughtful commentary by Jones who has been children's book reviewer for The Sunday Times for more than twenty years. With a stunning neon and foil-stamped cover, ribbon marker, and beautifully designed pages, Writes of Passage is the perfect gift to love, keep and treasure.

(Nosy Crow, hardback, £12.99)

Age 9 plus:

The Unmorrow Curse

Jasmine Richards

Be swept away to the thrilling world of myth and magic in an epic adventure that blends the familiar tropes of Groundhog Day with classic tales of the Norse gods. The Unmorrow Curse comes from Jasmine Richards, a former children's publisher and founder of Storymix, a studio which creates children's stories with diverse casts of characters in an organic, joyful and authentic way, and works with emerging and established writers and illustrators from minority backgrounds. It's not every day that you wake to find a famous weather woman bound by magic to a tree deep in the woods... or discover that the weatherwoman is in fact Sunna, the Norse Goddess of the Sun, and one of the seven day guardians who keep time in order. But that's just what happens to new friends Buzz and Mari... and it's only the start of their adventure. Now, as humanity is forced into a lockdown called the Unmorrow Curse, and must repeat the same Saturday over and over again, Buzz and Mari head off on a dangerous journey to collect the Runes of Valhalla and awaken the other day guardians... before vengeful god Loki can get to them first. Fantasy abounds in this fabulous world of adversity and adventure as the two courageous youngsters face some fearsome foes and hidden perils. The race is on!

(UCLan Publishing, paperback, £7.99)

Age 8 plus:

Hurly Burly: Macbeth Mayhem!

Ross Montgomery and Mark Beech

Fair is foul and foul is fair in a riotous performance of Macbeth that would, for once, leave the Bard stuck for words! Award-winning author Ross Montgomery puts fun and laughter into the famous playwright's classic tale of murder and revenge in the third book of his super-inventive Shakespeare Shake-ups series. Beth has been looking forward to the Prizegiving Assembly all year. She has won best-behaved pupil two years in a row and is confident that she will triumph again for a third time. But as preparations continue for the ceremony, which includes a performance of Macbeth by the drama club, Beth finds out that she has been pipped at the post by not one but two of her classmates, leaving her in third place. Beth cannot bear to lose so she channels her inner Macbeth and will stop at nothing to tarnish the reputation of her competitors. But as she puts her dastardly plans into action, she realises that villainy comes at a high price! Perfectly pitched to inspire youngsters to learn to love Shakespeare and printed in in Barrington Stoke's trademark dyslexia-friendly format, Montgomery's riotous parody offers a brilliant introduction to Macbeth while Mark Beech's action-packed illustrations bring the cast and action to vibrant life. A laughterfilled show-stealer that will have youngsters giggling from curtain up to the final encore!

(Barrington Stoke, paperback, £6.99)

Age 5 plus:

Princess Minna: The Enchanted Forest and The Unicorn Mix-Up

Kirsty Applebaum and Sahar Haghgoo

Meet an enchanting little princess who adores fixing mix-ups and mishaps... even if that means travelling to the farthest reaches of her kingdom and getting back in time for tea! There's nothing like a bright and lively colour fiction series to catch the eye and win the hearts of young readers ready to say goodbye to picture books and discover the joy of chapter books. And children's author Kirsty Applebaum — whose middle-grade novel The Middler was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize — and Iranian-born illustrator Sahar Haghgoo have the perfect answer with this new full-colour, illustrated chapter book series starring daring and delightful Princess Minna who lives in Castle

Tall-Towers with the King and Queen, Raymond the Wizard and her best dragon friend, Lorenzo. There are often mix-ups and mishaps in the kingdom and Princess Minna loves to sort them out. She can tame unicorns, kiss frogs and fight dragons (apart from Lorenzo) and she is very good at fixing things before it's time for bed. In The Enchanted Forest, Princess Minna has to wake a sleeping prince before nightfall. But along the way, she finds a swan, an old lady and a very fluffy sheep... all of them in a fix! Can she help them and still reach the prince before sundown? And in The Unicorn Mix-Up, we join Minna on another adventure, this time to tame a unicorn! Princess Minna is so tired she gets a bit muddled and fights a unicorn, kisses a dragon and tries to tame a frog, which won't do at all! Can she sort it all out and make a new friend along the way? Featuring funny, exciting adventures and a whole new take on what is expected of a princess, this picture perfect series (with the added bonus of a page of fabulous colour stickers to enjoy!) is ideal for new readers.

(Nosy Crow, paperback, £6.99 each)

Age 5 plus:

Supernan's Day Out

Phil Earle and Steve May

Spending the day at the seaside with his nan sounded like the worst news ever for secret caped crusader Stanley (aka Super Stan) so how did it turn into the best day out... ever! Award-winning author Phil Earle and his partner in mischief, super-talented illustrator Steve May, zoom in again with Supernan's Day Out, a hilarious and heartwarming celebration of family relationships. Following on from the duo's colourful and comic Superdad's Day Off, this laughout-loud adventure is the latest super-readable Little Gem from innovative publisher Barrington Stoke. Plane crashes, robberies and fires were not what Stanley was expecting on a day out at the seaside with his nan and the other residents of her care home. Nan doesn't know about his superpowers, so Super Stan can't step in to help as it would blow his cover. Luckily, though, another

mysterious superhero seems to be on hand, saving the day. But who could it possibly be? Earle casts the spell of his magical mirth and wicked wit over an action-packed story which puts the special bond between grandparents and grandchildren at centre stage. Add on the joy of May's anarchic illustrations, a chunky, chapter book format ideal for little hands, and a spot-the-difference fun hiding inside the jacket, and youngsters are guaranteed slapstick giggles and guffaws all the way to Blackpool!

(Barrington Stoke, paperback, £6.99)

Age 5 plus:

The Boy Who Grew a Tree

Polly Ho-Yen and Sojung Kim-McCarthy

Meet a little boy who reaches dizzy new heights in his fight to save nature... and his local library. Inspired by her passion for nature and her love of libraries, author Polly Ho-Yen — critically acclaimed author of The Boy in the Tower takes youngsters on a heartwarming journey filled with hope, community, caring and courage. Nature-loving Timi notices things that pass most people by... snails on the ground and tiny leaves at the bus stop. He sees nature everywhere, even in the tiny spaces in the middle of the city. But Timi is unsettled by the arrival of a new baby sister and turns to tending a tree that he has grown from a seed which he found between the dusty floorboards while attending an after-school club at his local library. There is something magical about the tree and it's growing fast into a huge tree. Then Timi and his friends learn that the library is going to be demolished. Can Timi save the library, which has become his refuge, and his tree, and maybe bring his community closer together along the way? The power of nature and the joy of libraries shines through in this enchanting early reader chapter book which is filled with the emotive, black and white illustrations of artist Sojung Kim-McCarthy. A gentle yet resonant reminder of the importance of protecting community libraries and the nature that flourishes in inner-city areas.

(Knights Of, paperback, £5.99)

Age 3 plus:

Eye Spy

Ruth Brown

Eye Spy with my little eye... a book that children will love!

Every picture hides a colourful riddle in a cleverly imagined and beautifully created picture book from inventive author and illustrator Ruth Brown. A member of the Chelsea Arts Club, Brown employs her artistic talents, rhyming skills and sense of fun to intrigue, challenge and entertain youngsters as they study elaborately detailed nature drawings to discover hidden wildlife. This playful journey through the day, from dawn to dusk, comes from Scallywag Press which is three years old this year and aims to publish books featuring distinctive, amusing and quirky art, and the work of talented newcomers, established authors and illustrators, and classics. The gentle, rhyming text is set against a gorgeous backdrop of countryside landscape, and the reader must solve a riddle to guess which animal is hiding, and then search for it in the wonderfully detailed illustrations. With red herrings in the artwork to make the objects harder to find, each page turn confirming the answers, and an endearing bedtime ending to enjoy, Brown's twist on the favourite childhood game ensures hours of fun and discovery for all the family!

(Scallywag Press, hardback, £12.99)

Age 3 plus:

This is NOT a Dinosaur

Barry Timms and Ged Adamson

Is it a sign-osaur, a shine-osaur, a leap-saur, or maybe a sleep-osaur? Author Barry Timms and illustrator Ged Adamson have lots of over-sized fun with a dinosaur that's not always a dinosaur in a picture book that will have tiny tots wanting their own green and grinning pet! But don't run away with the idea that this funny and heartwarming story is about a dinosaur. Well... it's not any old dinosaur. This dinosaur can become the most amazing things... a footballer, pirate, deep-sea diver, knight, magician and even a hairdresser! Having a dinosaur for a friend is one big adventure as Timms works his wordplay magic on a story that celebrates the fun of playing and the joys of friendship while Adamson puts heart and humour into his gallery of gorgeous illustrations. With a ton weight of appeal for both girls and boys, a free 'Stories Aloud' audio recording when you scan the QR code, and some spooky houses, prehistoric creatures, silly fish and sparkling teeth to enjoy, this is destined to be a more-osaur favourite!

(Nosy Crow, hardback, £12.99)

Age 3 plus:

Fantastic Frankie

Jess Rose

A fashion-conscious fox — with an eye for outlandish clothes — steals the show in this delightful debut picture book from Jess Rose, an illustrator, author and designer who lives and works in rural Yorkshire. Written to encourage children to shine their own light and be confident in who they are, Fantastic Frankie is a fabulous whirl of colour, words and inspirational messages. Frankie is a fox with plenty of style... fabulous in a rainbow cape, amazing in pirate boots and ready to take on the world in a gold crown! But not everyone likes what Frankie wears and the more Frankie tries to change, the more his (and everyone else's!) world turns grey and the more unhappy he feels. But what happens when friends start to miss their old Frankie, can they help him to put colour back into their lives? Youngsters will love joining Frankie on his rollercoaster journey where he discovers that staying true to yourself is the best way to find happiness. Using a palette of colours that moves from grey uniformity to bright bursts of vivid

shades, Rose cleverly conveys the feelings and messages in the story. Fashion, fun and friendship prove a winning combination!

(New Frontier Publishing, paperback, £7.99)

Age 3 plus:

Great Big Softie

Kaye Baillie and Shane McG

Get ready for some monstrous trouble — and some monstrous laughs! — as Aussie author and illustrator duo, Kaye Baillie and Shane McG, very KINDLY dish up a rip-roaring romp starring a soft-hearted monster. Elliot the green monster is a great big softie. But to fit in with the other monsters who like to dribble, trample and burp their way into trouble, he decides to perform some of his own monstrous deeds. But after scaring a little girl on her bike, and winning the Monster of the Week Cup, Elliot has to decide whether to continue being monstrous or follow his kind heart. Baillie tugs at our heartstrings with this wonderfully soft-centred story which gently explores themes of wanting to fit in, staying true to yourself, being kind and reaping the rewards of forgiveness. Shane McG adds his own colour, verve and heart to the cautionary tale with a gallery of eye-catching, emotive illustrations. A story to enjoy and the perfect starting point for discussions about integrity, inclusivity and differences.

(New Frontier Publishing, paperback, £7.99)











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