

Convincing novels



Team Awkward

Written by Katy Birchall
Egmont £6.99 ISBN: 978-1405278263

In this hilarious sequel, Anna, the It Girl, returns for her second term at her new school. As she tries to juggle schoolwork, friendships, attempts to not set anybody on fire and the ever increasingly ludicrous wedding plans of her celebrity stepmother-to-be, Anna

finds herself captaining one of the two rival school sports teams in a bid to prove herself. However, the slight hitch that Anna possesses absolutely no sporting talent whatsoever could mean that the Puffins lose against the Eagles yet again. Anna and Jess' friendship has such an authentic feel to it that any reader is bound to relate and laugh along with their emails and sneakily passed classroom notes. Katy Birchall has created a brilliant heroine and some excellent supporting characters. Having read the first in the series is not essential to enjoy this book, but it is highly likely that anybody who begins with *Team Awkward* will want to read as much as they can of Anna's existing adventures and eagerly await further instalments.

Rebecca Watts

The Best Medicine

Written by Christine Hamill
Little Island £6.99 ISBN: 978-1910411513

At the crux of Christine Hamill's enjoyable debut novel is the well-known saying that, "Laughter is the best medicine". Twelve-year-old Phillip Smith is the class comedian whose comic hero is Harry Hill. But telling jokes and playing the fool isn't helping Philip with his latest batch of problems - being bullied by a yeti lookalike; gagging in front of the blonde goddess, Lucy; coping with a pair of broken specs and a teacher who thinks he is interested in writing poetry. Then, his mum, who normally laughs at Philip's jokes, keeps bursting into tears. When he learns the real reason behind her behaviour, Philip's world is suddenly turned upside down. The story steers its way through the tricky subject of coping with cancer to great effect. A story that could so easily resort to pathos rises to become a tenacious tale, invested with genuinely funny moments. Facing up to the worst things life can throw at you and being able to come through with a smile on your face is a great message to take away from this book. And Harry Hill makes an appearance too.

Dave Chant



Alone

Written by D. J. Brazier
Andersen £7.99 ISBN: 978-1783444038

An enthralling read of adventure, survival and hope. Those with strong stomachs and a taste for nature in the wild will be captivated by the story of Sam, the only survivor of a plane crash that leaves him stranded and alone in a hostile jungle environment. The page-turning narrative is told in Sam's frank,

unselfconscious voice and the reader is spared none of the intimate and grosser details of his grim ordeal as he experiments with eating local small creatures and vegetation in order to keep himself alive. His lonely days are spent struggling to find food and shelter in addition to figuring out some way of signalling his location to possible rescuers. At the heart of the story, however, is the tender and life-affirming relationship between Sam and a small motherless river otter, which the boy saves from near death. The relationship is one of mutual dependence as boy and otter, each longing for maternal care, strive for survival and hope for eventual

deliverance from danger. Confident writing and vividly evocative detail ensure that this book will be hugely enjoyed. Highly recommended.

Catriona Nicholson

Bullet Catcher

Written by Joaquin Lowe
Hot Key £7.99 ISBN: 978-1471405068

Imma has a wretched existence, washing dishes in a desert town called Sand and dreaming of escape. However, wandering off into the desert in search of her brother and a better life would mean certain death and so she stays. And then a bullet catcher passes through Sand and she decides to follow him. This man has the ability to catch a bullet in mid-air and turn it back to wound or kill the gunman, and this is a skill Imma wants to acquire. The taciturn bullet catcher doesn't want a pupil but she follows him anyway. As time goes by she gradually builds a father/daughter relationship with this man of peace and he begins to teach her. Imma has courage and spirit and as the events of the book unfold she finds a life that is certainly different to her life in Sand, but is this what she really wants? Today the 'Wild West' is an unusual setting for teenage fiction, but readers will still recognise Imma's bravery and determination and will be rooting for her as she tries to take her place in a world populated by male gunslingers and outlaws.

Jan Lennon



Island

Written by Nicky Singer Illustrated by Chris Riddell
Caboodle £6.99 ISBN: 978-0992938963



Urban teenager Cameron reluctantly accompanies his research-scientist mother to the Arctic. Cameron dreads the boredom of a week without the usual distractions afforded by his switched-on, plugged-in city life. But, as he explores the frozen land around the Herschel Island research station, Cameron begins

to fall under the spell of ancient myths and forces beyond the understanding of modern minds. Adapted from her own original play for the National Theatre, Nicky Singer's book retains a powerfully visual connection with its audience. This is a tale suffused with loss and yearning, as the echoes of a long-distant past resonate with the present. Cameron's encounter with the spirit world, through a young Inuit girl and her grandmother, draws readers into the parallel stories of a boy and his mother trying to reconnect after a difficult time, and a landscape facing the annihilation of its physical and spiritual history. Chris Riddell's understated and beautifully drawn illustrations accompany words from the Inuit language in a haunting story that will stay with you.

Yvonne Coppard

A Thousand Nights

Written by E. K. Johnston
Macmillan £12.99 ISBN: 978-1447284116

With familiar undercurrents of *The Arabian Nights*, this book weaves a new mystical tale from the desert about Lo-Melkhiin, a formidable king and powerful ruler, whose wives never live more than thirty days after their weddings. The day Lo-Melkhiin came to her village, our unnamed narrator fears her sister will become his next bride, so she offers herself instead. Like Scheherazade, the narrator finds power in storytelling to delay her eventual death, but there is something bigger, more magical, happening that confounds the



evil spirit controlling Lo-Melkhiin. Through stories within stories, hope is woven into the tale. Can the magic of women and power of the 'smallgods' defeat a vicious monster and bring peace back to the lands of Lo-Melkhiin? This sumptuous and beguiling story is published in a lavish hardback as beautiful as the world within.

Benjamin Scott

Swan Boy



Written by Nikki Sheehan
Rock the Boat £6.99 ISBN: 978-1780749242

Thirteen-year-old Johnny has to cope with his father's death, moving house, a new school dominated by controlling bullies, a mum with her own problems and a troubled, troublesome five-year-old brother whose grief has followed strange avenues. A complex affinity begins when a swan in the park attacks Johnny's chief tormentor and then the school dance teacher casts both bully and bullied in a particularly sensitive swan dance. When Johnny decides to face his chief tormentor and hit back, as many people would advise, he attacks him with a cold fury, beating him until the other boy is seriously wounded, and causing the reader to draw back, feeling something inhuman in the savagery. It's about grief, fitting in, bullying, finding yourself and helping others cope too. There's magic realism in the swan affinity, though you will wonder what Johnny will become even as you watch him soar. A complex and beautiful story, thought-provoking and well-written.

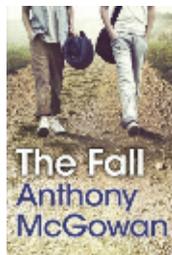
Tina Massey

No Stars to Wish on

Written by Zana Fraillon
Allen & Unwin £5.99 ISBN: 978-1743366714

This is the sad story of a child torn from his family and placed in a children's home where he suffers deprivation and hardship and a complete lack of love or affection. The story is told in the first person by Jack, a spirited young boy who is deaf. He uses a steady matter-of-fact tone to describe the terrible conditions of his institutional existence. Known to his carers simply as No. 49, he wears the clothes and sleeps in the bed of a previous resident who has died of neglect. Nevertheless, Jack is an optimist and continually tells jokes in order to get the other children smiling. The story is a fictionalised account of the past Australian policy to remove many hundreds of poor children from their homes. It is told in an uncompromising and stark style, and we are left in no doubt about the cruelty inflicted upon the children. Jack's determination to remain positive is in sharp contrast to the deprivations, which enables us to feel them even more strongly. This is a remarkable book about a painful episode in Australian history.

Liz Dubber

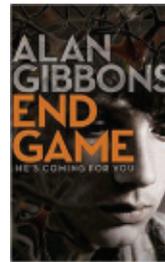


The Fall

Written by Anthony McGowan
Illustrated by Staffan Gnosspelius
Barrington Stoke £6.99 ISBN: 978-1781125175

Anthony McGowan really understands bravado, bullying and the basic need to belong. By reading this story, told in the first person, young people will know that they are understood and will themselves, better understand, and adults will understand more fully the pressures on young people and how their own behaviour affects them. Consciences will prick, possibly sadly, or even painfully, as the author focuses on much of what is part of today's reality in families, schools and social groups. Protagonist, Chris Rush, had the potential to forge a decent life, but tragically, had little to support him. Just how many lives draw a parallel? Hugely powerful and easily accessible, an opportunity to read this really should not be missed.

Gill Roberts



End Game

Written by Alan Gibbons
Orion £7.99 ISBN: 978-1780621814

For most of the book, the story unfolds from the perspective of Nicky, aged seventeen, in a coma following a serious car accident. Various members of his family visit his hospital bed along with his girlfriend, Maria. Nicky is unable to move or respond to their voices and his parents wonder if he can hear them. Very slowly, Nicky begins to remember things - the accident and the events leading up to it. Why does he feel such animosity towards his father? Why does he not trust him? What has he done? His father has always been his hero and now, as Nicky struggles to regain consciousness, he must make sense of his confused memories. This story has tension, drama, emotion, intrigue and underlying terror. It is fast and well-written with strong characters.

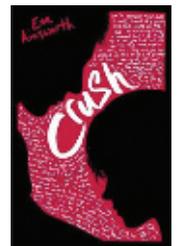
Ingrid Fox

Crush

Written by Eve Ainsworth
Scholastic £6.99 ISBN: 978-1407146904

In this, her second novel, Eve Ainsworth tells of a darker, crueller kind of love than we usually find in YA novels. Anna has a hole in her life and her heart, after the sudden departure of her mother, which has left the whole family devastated. When Will, the school heartthrob, begins to take an interest in her, Anna is flattered by the attention. However, Will has also suffered a terrible loss, which has had a damaging effect. But Anna's unconscious need for love blinds her to the subtle, sinister ways in which Will is changing her. It is refreshing to read a YA 'romance' where the relationship is dark and unsettling rather than 'rose tinted'. A very moving book, with the issue of abuse covered sensitively, rather than in a 'shock, horror' style. Although Anna is the narrator of her story, snippets of Will's thoughts are cleverly revealed allowing us to understand, but not excuse, Will's feelings and actions. We see the consequences of Will's actions long before Anna, and the slow build of tension is almost unbearable.

Jane Hall



The Hypnotist

Written by Laurence Anholt
Corgi £6.99 ISBN: 978-0552573450

Set in 1963, in Deep River, Alabama, a rural farming community. The events are played out against the segregation, racism, hatred and the historical milestones of that period of history, such as the Vietnam War, the civil unrest and the coming together of black Americans united by the words and actions of Martin Luther King. Pip, a young black boy, is bought from the orphanage by Zachary, an elderly farmer. It is because Pip can read, that Zachary wants him to read to Lilybelle, his morbidly obese wife, who is unable to get out of bed. Pip meets Hannah, a mute native American Indian girl, who cooks and helps around the house and Pip starts to fall in love. Living nearby is Jack, an Irishman with the skills of a hypnotist who is Head of Neurological Research at the local university. Jack soon recognises that both Pip and Hannah have something special and starts to look out for them and develop their education. This is storytelling at its best, drawing the reader in, building the drama and the tension so skilfully that your heart is in your mouth as it moves towards the inevitable explosive climax. It is a multi-layered novel and demonstrates clearly the awful outcomes when those with power unleash their hatred on others, simply because they are 'different'. A remarkable story and a thoroughly compelling read.

Annie Everall