



CENTRE FOR LITERACY
IN PRIMARY EDUCATION



Staff Picks 2023



Anjali Patel



Charlotte Hacking



Darren Matthews



Farrah Serroukh



Jamie Wraight



Jonny Rodgers



Phoebe Demeger



Kiri Gray

**CLPE staff and
their children
recommend
their best
children's
books in 2023.**

Anjali Patel

**Too Green! by Sumana Seeboruth,
illustrated by Maribel Castells
Barefoot Books (9781646869930)**



I love this book. It is joy. It is a board book that will entertain both children and their adults through endless re-reading together. It is beautifully observed, capturing utterly relatable moments that surround a mealtime for a toddler and his mums. As the title suggests, said toddler is both articulate and emphatic in his food refusal. There are so many other such assertions I can recall at the memory of this with my own children. Of course, the mums are not to be put off and they deftly involve him in the meal preparation and quietly leave the bowl of soup beside him, hoping that his investment will tempt him. And it does!

As well as being a – frankly – excellent parenting manual for fractious moments, it is a hilarious narrative, beautifully illustrated, with space left in both text and image to promote shared wonderings, make connections, build new experiences, and enrich vocabulary. The rhythm and rhyme structure is perfectly paced to encourage our youngest children to chime in and experience what it feels like to be a real reader. The toddler dialogue invites expressive re-enactment, developing early fluency and awareness of punctuation. And the slurpy, burpy onomatopoeic words won't fail to delight, inspiring language play as well as encouraging older children to apply their phonic knowledge in a real reading context. Perfection.



**The Final Year by Matt Goodfellow,
illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton
Otter-Barry Books (9781915659040)**

This has arguably become one of the best-loved books of 2023, and rightly so. It is an extraordinary ode to David Almond's Skellig, in which Matt Goodfellow reveals the power of a transformational book, and the power of language to breathe life into another Northern setting and give value to dialect. The narrative, told in verse novel form, is so beautifully woven through Nate's final year at Primary school – it managed to hurt my heart whilst filling it with the kind of empathy we want all readers to experience, the

kind that keeps a character like Nate with you always. For me, the most extraordinary thing about this book is the dignity and respect that is afforded Nate and his family, and the acknowledgement that Nate's mum can't be reduced to a single characteristic – she is complex, at once neglectful but utterly devoted to her boys. The always sensitive illustrations by Joe Todd-Stanton invite us further into Nate's inner world and are the perfect partnership to Matt's carefully crafted verse.

Charlotte Hacking

Bear and Bird: The Picnic and Other Stories and Bear and Bird: The Stars and Other Stories by Jarvis Walker (9781529504897 and 9781529504903)



One of the books that made my daughter, who is now 18, a reader was Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad are Friends*. These delightful stories, full of friendship, empathy and gentle humour captured her attention and were perfectly pitched for her as an early reader, working towards independence. I thought nothing could be more perfect until Jarvis' *Bear and Bird* stories came along. These are an absolute masterclass in writing for early readers. Gentle but funny stories, in which children can see their own lives through the expertly crafted characters and learn much about how to create and shape satisfying narratives.

The words and illustrations work in complete harmony to provide a deeply satisfying read, ensuring children experience the pleasure of reading from the very start. Excellent for independent readers to read alone or developing readers to read alongside an adult - there's much in there to bring joy to readers of all ages. The softness of the illustration and use of vignette throughout takes us into the special relationship and moments shared between the main characters, who despite their differences are the very best of friends. Jarvis has also thought carefully about how to present text on the page to enhance the meaning of the text, deploying italicisation, capitalisation and punctuation to great effect, as well as the inclusion of onomatopoeic sounds, which will support early readers to continue to develop their decoding skills and reading fluency as well as comprehension in highly engaging stories to support their motivation as readers. I couldn't recommend these books more highly. They should be in every collection for five to seven year-olds.



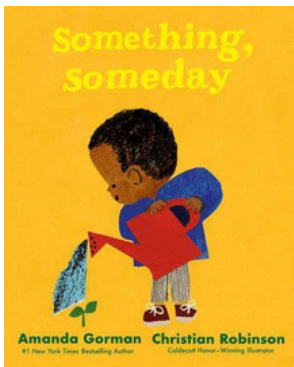
**Lenny Has Lunch by Ken Wilson-Max
Alanna Max (9781907825361)**

Too often, not enough focus is placed on books for the very youngest of readers. This is such a shame as this is where a child's relationship with reading begins. A positive experience with books and the relationships built with the adults that introduce them is vital for building both reader identity and sense of self. The complexity of writing quality books for the

very young is often underestimated. The very best of writers and illustrators in this field are exceptional because not only do they understand the craft of narrative and how to convey this in the best way through judiciously chosen words and carefully crafted illustrations, they also understand children and the state of childhood. Chris Haughton, Petr Horáček, Daisy Hirst, Anna McQuinn and illustrators Ruth Hearson and Lauren Tobia and Ken Wilson-Max are, for me, exemplary.

I've adored Ken's books for many years, as a teacher, a parent and an educationalist. He knows and understands children; their lives, their interests and their fascinations. He carefully crafts narratives that introduce children to the joys of language, reading and story as well as affirming their sense of self, the greatest gifts a young child can be given. Lenny Has Lunch is a perfect example of his craft, a quiet, simple but joyous recollection of a father and son enjoying lunch. Every single decision made is so carefully thought through, from the engaging endpapers, to the consideration of viewpoint for each spread, the balance of care and independence gifted to the main character, the role of the father and the wonderful chosen language, crafted to engage and delight. Quite simply, picturebook making for 0-5's at its very best.

Darren Matthews



**Something, Someday by Amanda Gorman,
illustrated by Christian Robinson
Penguin (9780241535875)**

A picturebook collaboration between the first US National Youth Poet Laureate and the award-winning co-creator of books like Last Stop on Market Street and Milo Imagines the World was always going to be a very special book. And that does indeed turn out to be the case...

In second-person direct address, the reader and unnamed character are reassured that their concerns are justified and that meaningful change is possible: "You are told that this cannot be fixed./ But you know that you can help./ You are told that this is too big for you. / But you've seen the tiniest things / make a huge difference."

Alongside Amanda Gorman's words, Christian Robinson's illustrations illuminate the human characters and deepen the world of the text. You can feel each brushstroke and scissor-cut in his characteristic collage style, placed here against an expansive white canvas, making the whole book feel both contemporary and timeless: tactile, handmade and perfectly human.

The book validates a whole spectrum of potential emotional responses to what is causing concern (unnamed in the text, but depicted as environmental in the illustrations) – "But you're not just sad. / You're scared. / And confused. / You're angry." And then ultimately ends in a moment of hope, celebrating change, compassion and community, and valuing determination, perseverance and partnership.

Fans of Gillian Hibbs' Errol's Garden, Nicola Davies and Laura Carlin's The Promise, and Linda Sarah and Fiona Lumbar's The Secret Sky Garden will find a lot to love in this compassionate call to action.



Old Gods, New Tricks by Thiago de Moraes
David Fickling Books (9781788452953)

Over the last few years, the adult fiction market has been flooded with retellings and re-imaginings of ancient myths and legends. You can now add this gripping fantasy adventure story to the pile: for mythology fans of all ages!

The appropriately named Trixie dos Santos is known by her teachers and parents as a bit of a prankster, so when the whole planet suddenly finds itself without electricity, she has a pretty good idea where it's gone and how to get it back. Like the very best heist movies, she starts by putting together a crew... of trickster gods.

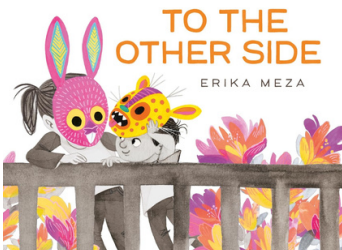
Before long she is summoning Exú, Loki, Sun Wukong, Coyote, and Maui; but will she be able to keep the upper hand while bargaining with the greatest tricksters of all time – and somehow save the world too?

By the time they set out on their quest together, author Thiago de Moraes is juggling an enormous number of characters on this epic and treacherous journey to the land of the gods, and it is to his credit that the storytelling never falters, but remains full of energy, wit, heart and great characterisation. Trixie is a phenomenal central character – who will hopefully return for more adventures soon – and she is surrounded a wonderful supporting cast. It's fun just hanging out with this gang and enjoy their interactions.

As if that wasn't enough, the author is also an illustrator and has included striking, stark black and white drawings for each chapter; and an appendix at the back of the book so that curious readers can find out a little more about the five trickster gods.

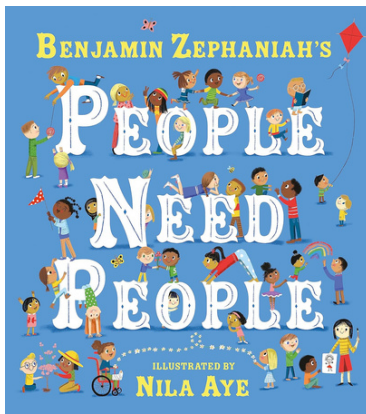
A great recommendation for fans of Maz Evans' Who Let The Gods Out? adventures, Louie Stowell's Loki books and Joe Todd-Stanton's Brownstone Mythical Collection series.

Farrah Serroukh



To the Other Side by Erika Meza
Hodder (9781444971781)

This is a haunting and evocative picturebook that leaves you breathless. What begins as a seemingly innocent childhood game very quickly descends into the dark journey of survival that so many people around the world have no choice but to undertake. The illustrations powerfully and heartbreakingly convey the juxtaposition of childhood innocence with the necessary maturity and resilience required to navigate such turmoil and tribulation. A book that will stay with readers for a long time after.



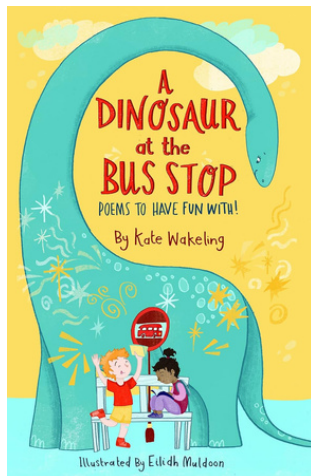
**People Need People by Benjamin Zephaniah,
illustrated by Nila Aye
Hodder (9781408368169)**

We were all deeply heartbroken to hear of Benjamin Zephaniah's passing, may he rest in peace and power. His contribution to language, literature and life goes beyond more than can be distilled in a short passage. His honesty, integrity and humanity flowed through everything he did. I think it's tremendously fitting that

his last picturebook spoke so directly to what we as a world so desperately need to hear right now. People do indeed need people! We need to see, hear, respect and care for one another. Much like Benjamin, this is a warm hug of a book, with a playful and galvanising spirit. The world really has lost a phenomenal human being and I am so grateful that we have the gift of his works to keep inspiring and reminding us to do better for ourselves and each other.

Jamie Wraight

**A Dinosaur at the Bus Stop: Poems to Have Fun With by
Kate Wakeling, illustrated by Eilidh Muldoon
Otter-Barry Books (9781913074203)**

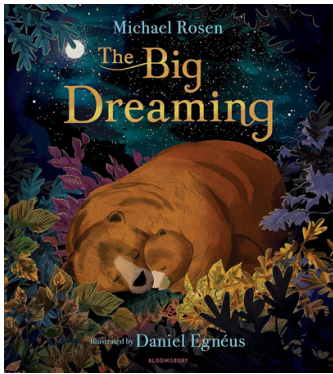


Kate Wakeling has done it again, this time with a collection of funny poems aimed at younger children. In this collection of poems, we are treated to beautifully crafted poetry that incorporates rhyme, rhythm and humour. What I particularly enjoy about this collection is the way that we are invited to interact with the poems or to read them in certain ways. For example, we should pinch our nose when reading 'My Cold' or gradually read more quickly as we read aloud 'Ready Steady Steam Train'.

As I read the collection aloud to my own children, we find ourselves laughing out loud at poems like 'This is a Sensible Fart Poem' and 'The Names I Give My Toes' and yet within moments we are reflecting on the relatability of themes such as feeling sad and being afraid of the dark in 'Sad Song' and 'Me and the Dark and the Wardrobe Door'. The poems enable us to explore everyday situations with thought, candour and humour and each one is complimented with fabulous illustrations by Eilidh Muldoon.

My personal favourite in the collection has to be 'Probably the Fastest Poem in the World'. I love a challenge, and trying to get to the end of this poem as quickly as possible has certainly provided me with hours of joy!

This collection is refreshingly enjoyable and one which children and adults alike will find themselves returning to time and again.



**The Big Dreaming by Michael Rosen,
illustrated by Daniel Egnéus
Bloomsbury (9781408883297)**

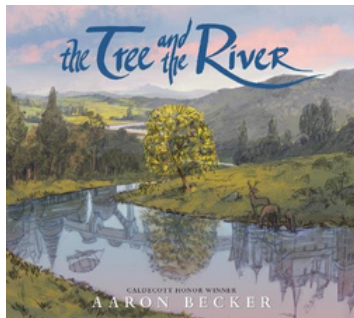
This uplifting story of hope and perseverance by the legend that is Michael Rosen is a tale of two bears getting ready for the long winter's sleep. But Little Bear is worried that he might not have enough dreams during his hibernation, charmingly named 'The Big Sleep'.

So Little Bear sets off in search of dreams so that he won't run out. He meets fellow woodland creatures who tell him tales of their own dreams of happiness, homecoming and hope. And when he thinks he might have lost his way home, he remembers these dreams which give him the comfort he needs to find his way back. The story has a repetitive refrain "do you have any spare dreams, for when we sleep, deep, deep?" which makes for a wonderful opportunity to chime in and leaves the reader with a reassuring sense of familiarity and expectation.

Each spread is breathtakingly illustrated by Daniel Egnéus who captures the essence of the warmth for Little Bear, of the changing seasons and the beauty of the natural world. This is most definitely a book that children will want to have read again and again and would make a perfect Christmas present for little ones and older ones alike.

Jonny Rodgers

**The Tree and the River by Aaron Becker
Walker (9781529512946)**



I'm a huge fan of wordless picture books, and I've never encountered a fan of wordless picturebooks who wasn't also an admirer of the incredible work of Aaron Becker. He came to deserved prominence through his mind-blowing imaginative Journey Trilogy (Journey — Quest — Return) and I chose his exquisite A Stone for Sascha as a previous Staff Pick. A Stone for Sascha blends the touchingly domestic and the genuinely universal in a narrative arc that sweeps from

the dinosaurs to the present day. In The Tree and the River the sweep is similarly epic and reminded me of the foresters' proverb that great oaks take 300 years to grow, 300 years to stay, and 300 years to die. The timescale of this monumental time-lapse is even greater, and more ambitious, Becker's gorgeous illustrations guiding the reader through civilisations and eras, as seen from the perspective of a lone tree and a meandering river that weaves through the narrative, silent witness to human intervention from the laying of the first foundations of settlement through millennia of change towards dystopia — and beyond, in what is perhaps a hopeful nod to the future.

Every spread is an invitation to explore and inhabit his 'wordless worlds', to savour the details, immerse yourself in the passage of time and lose yourself in reflection. I loved the multiple cultures and architectural styles depicted, and the opportunity to reflect on the arc of human civilization and its impact on the Earth.



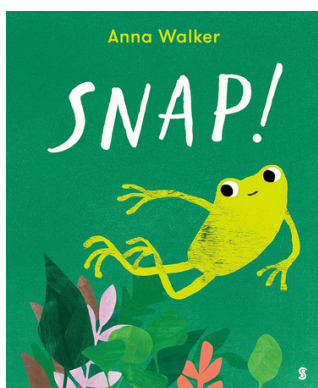
**Leeva at Last by Sara Pennypacker,
illustrated by Matthew Cordell
HarperCollins (9780008606190)**

Leeva at Last is just the book we need right now, adults and children alike. Pax — a stalwart of the Power of Reading canon — was my first encounter with an author who has become one of my favourites, the publication of a new Sara Pennypacker something to get excited about. Pax: Journey Home so satisfyingly continued Pax; then in Here in the Real World she introduced us to introvert Ware who loves being 'off in his own world', but finds himself unwillingly thrust into

a world of 'Meaningful Social Interaction' when his parents sign him up for summer camp; the evolution of his friendship with the more worldly Jolene (whom he meets when bunking off) is a delight. These three novels are illustrated by Jon Klassen, whose work I adore, but I was excited to read Leeva at Last would be illustrated by the wonderful Matthew Cordell, whose picturebooks are so clever and sensitive and beautiful, e.g., Bear Island.

Leeva Spayce Thornblossom is a delightful hero, part Flora Belle Buckman (from Kate DiCamillo's Flora and Ulysses), part Matilda Wormwood (compared with Leeva's appallingly selfish parents, the town's mayor and tax collector, Matilda's are loving kindness personified!); her friendships with the town's librarian and her son, with the obsessively cautious Osmund, with shy but talented Fern lead to a brilliant resolution involving homeless badgers and a transformed community. A feel-good story so powerfully complemented and reinforced by Matthew Cordell's deft illustrations.

Phoebe Demeger



**Snap! by Anna Walker
Scribble (9781914484346)**

Scribble, an independent children's imprint based in Melbourne, has produced some truly beautiful and inventive picturebooks over the past few years, including Off to the Market, The Spectacular Suit and I Am the Subway. In 2023 came Snap!, a deceptively simple and utterly delightful book about a little frog's adventures in the forest, told entirely through onomatopoeia.

As an early reading experience Snap! is spot-on: from the engaging patterned narrative in which our loveable hero

Frog encounters and escapes fresh perils; to the playful and dynamic formatting of the text; and of course the lively onomatopoeic language, packed with rhymes and alliteration to support engagement and predictions from young readers – the reader may use the emerging textual patterns to guess what might happen to Frog next. Frog "tap tap tap"s on a crocodile's snout, which on the next spread erupts with a "SNAP!". Frog attempts to "Sneak sneak sneak" past a wading bird; it rounds on Frog, the text proclaiming "SNACK!". It's more than a story; it's a whole soundscape.

Snap! is a joy to read aloud and share with the youngest of readers, with bright, expressive illustrations in both natural and vibrant tones which evoke the sensory atmosphere of a day in the forest; you can practically smell the rain. Even the endpapers are suffused with meaning and delight: in the beginning, Frog's nervous little face peers out amidst a jungle of leaves; by the end, Frog is surrounded by friends, all happily peeping out from the undergrowth.



**The Skull by Jon Klassen
Walker (9781529509571)**

A new Jon Klassen book is always cause for celebration, and this gothic chapterbook is no exception. *The Skull* is adapted from a Tyrolean folktale, and tells the story of a young girl named Otilia who one night runs away into the forest to find a grand old house, and the disembodied skull who 'lives' there. The relationship between girl and skull is wonderfully understated, which matches with the muted and wintry tones of Klassen's illustrations. It's deliciously spooky, with one moment of proper heart-stopping terror – the perfect book to read curled up on a cold winter's evening.

Even in a longer-form book, Klassen excels at deft and sparse use of language, with so much contained in what is shown or not shown, whether in text or in image. There is generosity in the credit given to the reader's imagination; this story is yours too, you may fill in the gaps how you wish. A closing Author's Note expands on this same theme: Klassen recounts how he first read a folktale called 'The Skull' by chance in an Alaskan library, then reading it again a year later having asked the librarian to track it down ("Librarians are really good at that"), he found that his memory had backfilled the story with an entirely different ending, which is the one we read in *The Skull*. I love this idea, that a tale can become anything the teller or reader needs it to be, and I'm very happy to have welcomed *The Skull* into my reading world.

The children of CLPE staff have also been enjoying some good books this year!

Jacob (Jamie's son, aged 9)

**Dragon Force: Infinity's Secret by Katie & Kevin Tsang
Simon & Schuster (9781398520127)**

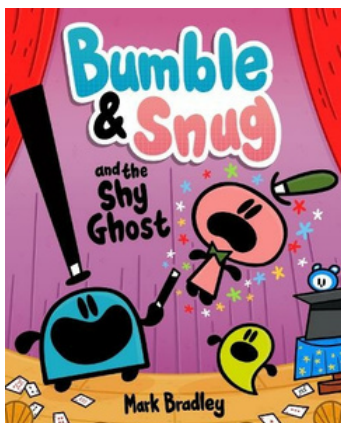


Dragon Force: Infinity's Secret is the first in a series of books based on the Dragon Realm books by Kevin & Katie Tsang. It is a fantasy adventure book with lots of action and some great cliff hanger chapters.

I really like this book because in it, we see characters return from the other books in the series like Dragon Mountain and Dragon Destiny, which I really enjoyed reading. I am a big fan of the authors and like the way they have a core cast of characters who bond with the dragons and that we learn more about them in each story and this one is no exception!

This time, we meet a new set of characters supported by the original cast and what I particularly love about this one is that each human has their own unique ability. For example, Zoe has the power of replicating herself. We meet new dragons who also have abilities such as camouflage and the ability to heal.

I would recommend this book and all those in the series so far to anyone who likes fantasy adventure books.



Isaac (Jamie's son, aged 7)
**Bumble & Snug and the Shy Ghost by Mark
Bradley
Hodder (9781444958072)**

This is the third book I have of this series of books and in this one Bumble and Snug go on an adventure to a big city and see a ghost who turns out to be shy. They help him not to be shy anymore and when they get home they have a big rest from their big adventure.

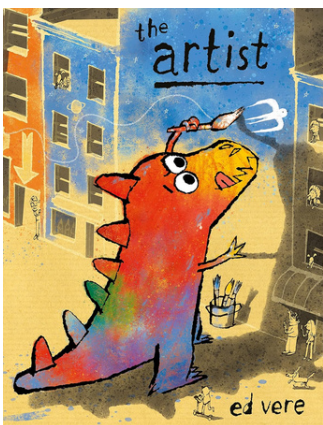
I like these types of books because they have funny characters that make me laugh and it has fun drawings a bit like a comic. If you like comics and books that make you laugh out loud you should definitely read this book!

Martha (Jamie's daughter, aged 4)
Get Real, Mallory! by Daisy Hirst
Walker (9781529510706)



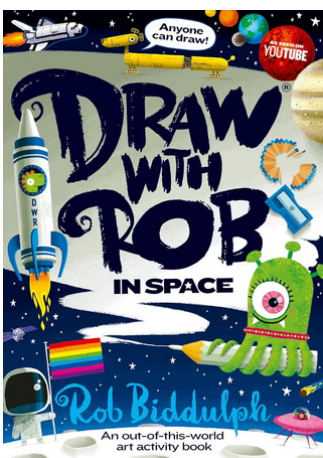
Get Real, Mallory! is another wonder by the amazing Daisy Hirst. The heartwarming picture book explores the creativity of a young child and the power of imaginative play, reminding children that if they put their mind to it they can achieve and be whatever they want to be. It really resonated with my daughter Martha, who has an incredible imagination and who loved to see the adventures that Nomi and Mallory went on together.

"I like this book because Nomi's drawing of a dog Mallory comes to life and they go on exciting adventures together in the park. I have a toy dog who I take to bed with me and this story reminded me about that. I wish I could go on adventures just like Nomi with my cuddly dog."



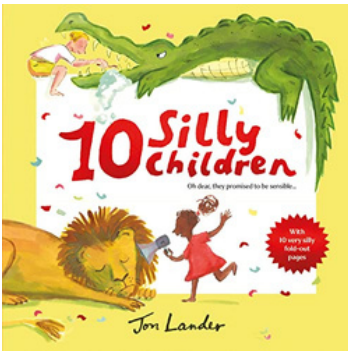
Remi (Kiri's son, Turning 6 this week!)
The Artist by Ed Vere
Puffin (9780141376387)

The story of a brave artist who learns that colouring outside the lines doesn't matter, this beautiful picturebook is a great way to show that creativity doesn't hold boundaries. Remi's favourite lesson at school is art, and he can sometimes get upset when he doesn't 'do it right'. Reading The Artist and its sympathetic and encouraging message has helped him in becoming more confident in his own art, and has facilitated open talks about art and expression.



Draw with Rob: In Space by Rob Biddulph
HarperCollins (9780008627591)

Although not a storybook, Draw with Rob: In Space deserved to be highlighted as it is undoubtedly Remi's current favourite, and offers so much to keep him entertained. He has absolutely loved reading about space and learning to draw new things in this well thought out activity book, which has helped nurture his enthusiasm for art. Filled with numerous guided and free drawing opportunities, Remi's imagination is sparked on every page, and he has eagerly asked me if he can have more books from this series. It has also initiated a new interest in watching 'how to draw' videos.



Kai (Kiri's son, aged 3)
10 Silly Children by Jon Lander
HarperCollins (9781843654957)

10 Silly Children is a fun open-flap book for reading aloud and learning to count to ten, with guaranteed giggles. There is lots of silliness on every page, within both the text and the playful illustration to engage Kai's little imagination, including a lion with pants on his head, "snot smoothies and toe-nail sandwiches!". Perfect for encouraging a love of books in the early years, the ideas and illustration opens up plenty of opportunities to encourage his stimulating little chats!