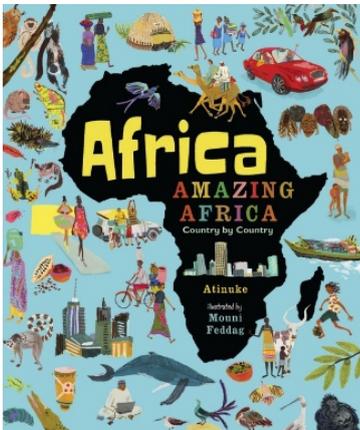


# Staff Picks 2020

CLPE staff and their children recommend their best children's books in 2020.

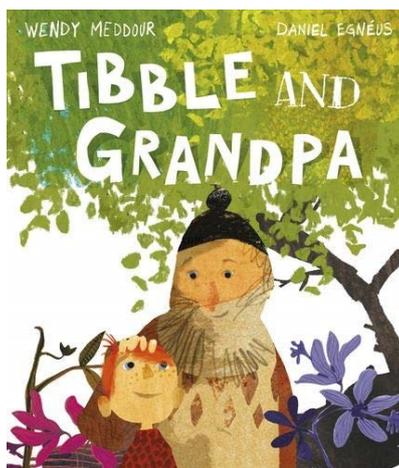


## Anjali



***Africa, Amazing Africa: Country by Country* by Atinuke illustrated by Mouni Feddag (Walker) 9781406376586**

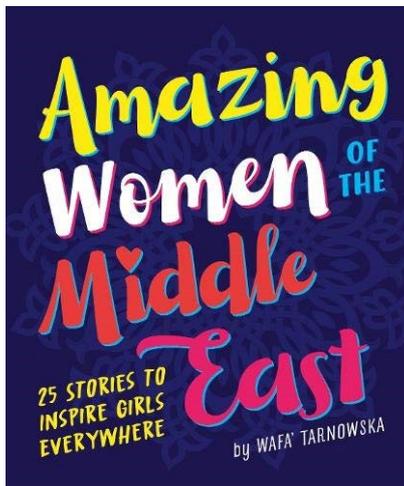
This is an incredible book and one I feel is so long overdue. It debunks myths created by colonialism and racism and celebrates Africa with rich facts and information. Written by an author that every child should have encountered through her Anna Hibiscus stories, it is a guide to 'Amazing Africa'. Her enthusiasm for this incredible continent shines through and Mouni Feddag captures this perfectly in her beautiful, bold illustrations. Each country is given its own spread in the book in which we can learn really interesting things that make it unique. Like all the best information books it is both informative and enlightening as well as inspiring us to want to find out more for ourselves. This is a must have for every primary school classroom and a book I want every child to pore over and learn something of what Amazing Africa is really about.



***Tibble and Grandpa* by Wendy Meddour illustrated by Daniel Egnéus (Oxford University Press) 9780192771964**

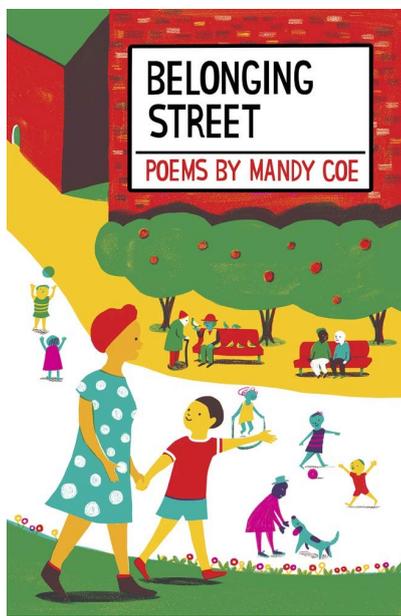
Like all the best children's books, this one manages to deal with a serious theme in a way that speaks honestly to young children as well as touching the hearts of their grown-ups. It is multi-layered and beautifully illustrated by one of my favourites, Daniel Egnéus, known by our Power of Reading members for *Moth* by Isabel Thomas and their new and glorious title, *Fox*. It is a story that celebrates the bonds between grandfather and grandson as well as a story of bereavement. Tibble can't understand why Grandpa spends so much time gardening alone rather than being with him as usual. His mum knows he needs time to grieve the loss of Grandma and this is his way. Of course, Tibble is small and he can't really grasp how grief could impact on his own relationship with Grandpa nor as it turns out, the concept of tact. And so Tibble gives him a whole six and half minutes and then sets about trying to engage him in his 'Top Threes' starting with the sandwiches he can make for Grandpa, leading to their 'top three' trips out and ending with the 'top three' memories. This picturebook is at once as amusing as it is deeply moving. It skilfully helps us understand how young children may need to make sense of the world as well as guiding them in understanding human behaviour. It is a book I have read with my own children in coming to terms with the loss of my nana and provided a stimulus to share favourite stories and memories of her.

## Ann



***Amazing Women of the Middle East* by Wafa' Tarnowska illustrated by Margarida Esteves, Hoda Hadadi, Sahar Haghgoo, Christelle Halal and Estelí Meza (Pikku Publishing) 9781999639853**

The 'Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls' phenomenon lives on and expands with authors and publishers developing new ideas for collections of short biographies of women past and present who deserve to be more widely known and provide potential role models. Last year saw the publication of Raj Kaur Khaira's *Stories for South Asian Super Girls* (Kashi House). This year Wafa' Tarnowska has shone a spotlight on women from the Middle East from across time, their stories arranged chronologically, from Egyptian queen Nefertiti to champion ice-skater Zahra Lari from Abu Dhabi. The author is an oral storyteller as well as a writer and this is apparent in the enticing way she draws readers in by addressing them directly. All 25 women in the book led fascinating lives and among those about whom I would personally like to find out more are writer and activist May Ziadeh, feminist and translator Anbara Salam Khalidi and film-maker Nadine Labaki. By an amazing coincidence, as I was writing this, an email arrived in my inbox with a link to this online event in which Wafa' reads the story of the Queen of Sheba and talks with her editor about the creation of this book - <https://www.interlinkbooks.com/wafa-author-of-amazing-women-of-the-middle-east-digital-book-event/>



***Belonging Street* by Mandy Coe (Otter-Barry Books) 9781913074807**

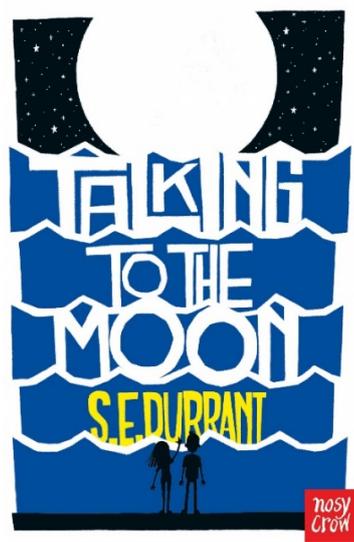
Mandy Coe's first solo poetry collection for children was Highly Commended for the CLPE Poetry Award (now known as the CLIPPA) in 2011 so this second collection is very welcome. In this year in which we have become more aware of the natural environment at the same time as becoming so reliant on technology to stay connected with other humans, these lines from 'Compatible Apple', one of 'Two Springtime Puzzles' seem especially apt: 'This tree live-streams sap/and reboots in spring./The birds and bees are browsing.' The poems are rooted in everyday life, the title poem being a moving evocation of a child's longing for a secure and safe place to call home. However, there is magic in the sense of story seen in 'Beginnings, a Million Middles and an End' complemented by a fantasy element in many of the illustrations throughout, drawn by the poet. And then there is the magic celebrated in language. I've always been fascinated by the fact that the word for butterfly is so different in almost every language, even those that are closely related. I now have some more synonyms to add to my list, thanks to 'She Belongs to the World'. 2020 has been an exceptional year for poetry from this publisher – Laura Mucha's debut children's collection *Dear Ugly Sisters* and Joseph Coelho's story told in poems *The Girl Who Became a Tree* were also published in August – I could have included any one of them in this list.

## Charlotte



***Felix After the Rain* by Dunja Jogan, translated by Olivia Hellewell (Tiny Owl) 9781910328453**

As primary teachers, we're always aware that one of the things that will help children to succeed with learning and in life is learning how to recognise and manage their emotions. It's as important for children in the transition to secondary as it is for those just starting school. This skilfully illustrated picturebook allows children to engage with a character feeling overwhelmed by his emotions. Alongside richly poetic text, Jogan uses colour and line expertly, to craft rich and powerful illustrations that allow young readers a visceral insight into Felix's experience, heightening their understanding of the character's situation and allowing opportunities for empathetic reflection. You can sense that an awful lot of care was put into the translation from the original Slovenian by Olivia Hellewell, as not a beat is lost in the rich rhythms of the text. It takes real skill to do this so effectively and is so often taken for granted. This is a picturebook that could be used with children of all ages. Younger children will be able to use the text to recognise, name and talk about emotions, older children will be able to have rich discussions about how Felix's emotional journey has been portrayed in words and pictures, drawing on their extended life experience. Tiny Owl is a much needed publisher, bringing diverse books to the market that just aren't available in the mainstream offering. As a small publisher, this year's pandemic has badly affected them and they are currently running a crowdfunding campaign: <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/af50917d1ff6fa1f8f5df005d5df290e> Please do look into the texts they publish and bring these to your classrooms and libraries; they offer something special for your readers.



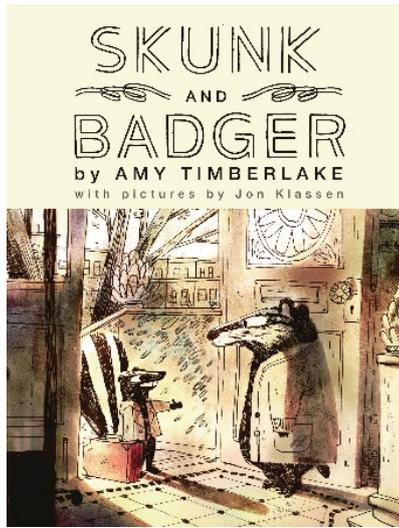
***Talking to the Moon* by S.E. Durrant (Nosy Crow) 9781788004701**

S.E. Durrant is a writer whose books I'll always pick up. Her voice is so clear and true, her characters expertly developed and her storylines are carefully crafted to engage the reader deeply with the narrative. *Running on Empty* is one of my all-time favourite novels for children, so I had high hopes for *Talking to the Moon*. And I wasn't disappointed. I started reading it on a Sunday morning and couldn't put it down till I'd read the whole thing.

This is the poignant story of Iris, who has moved in with her grandmother, Mimi, while her dad fixes the damp in her bedroom at home. Whilst there, she witnesses for the first time dementia taking hold of her grandmother. Having witnessed the same in my own Nana at the same age as Iris, I was so powerfully affected by how true this portrayal was. So many of the things Iris witnesses were as if they'd come from my own childhood. The book has obviously been so well researched and really lovingly crafted to share an accurate picture of what a family like this would really be going through, in amongst everything else they already have going on. Iris's voice is wonderfully authentic; the true sign of an author who deeply knows the children they write for and about. The themes covered - family, friendships, defining your identity and coping with change - are ones that all Upper Key Stage 2 readers, who this book is perfect for, will relate to and be able to empathise with.

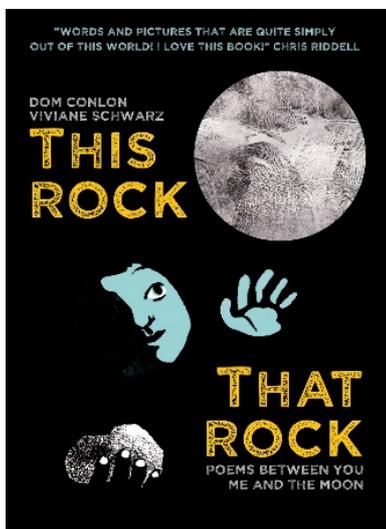
You'll be able to have rich discussions with your readers about so many of the themes shared and situations explored, related to experiences they'll have had in their own lives. This book, like all the books S.E. Durrant writes, gives a carefully painted picture of family life, with all its joys and hardships. If you haven't read anything by her yet, I absolutely implore you to do so. Your life will be richer for it.

## Darren



***Skunk and Badger* by Amy Timberlake and Jon Klassen (Scholastic)**  
9781407199399

*Skunk and Badger* is a glorious, witty, warm and wise story – written with great panache and energy by Amy Timberlake and complemented by a combination of black and white atmospheric drawings in pen and ink wash by Jon Klassen – as well as the most beautiful front cover painting, engrossing endpapers and a few precious full-colour plates (when was the last time I bought a book with separate colour plates?). The story concerns the very serious Badger, living in a brownstone belonging to his Aunt Lula and, in his self-imposed solitude, happily devoted to his *very important* rock work. Suddenly, crashing into his life, like the beginning of so many great sitcoms, comes Skunk – freewheeling, chicken-loving, thoughtful and considerate, slightly oblivious and incredibly sociable Skunk. And so, the next great odd couple pairing is born. With shades of *Winnie the Pooh*, *Frog and Toad*, and *The Wind in the Willows*, or more recently, *Rabbit and Bear* by Julian Gough and Jim Field, children and adults alike will laugh out loud while falling in love with these two characters. However, what makes it special for me is that, like so much wonderful writing for children, it's both funny and so much more. There's so much to reflect upon and to talk about: the give and take, trust and understanding involved in a new friendship or pairing; the fear of the unfamiliar sowing unfounded distrust; and the awful power of a word spoken in anger: 'vermin!' Amy Timberlake's careful balance between humour and compassion; hilarity and empathy is perfect. The dust jacket promises that this is the first of a series of adventures... I'll be keeping my fingers crossed that we're not waiting too long for Book 2.

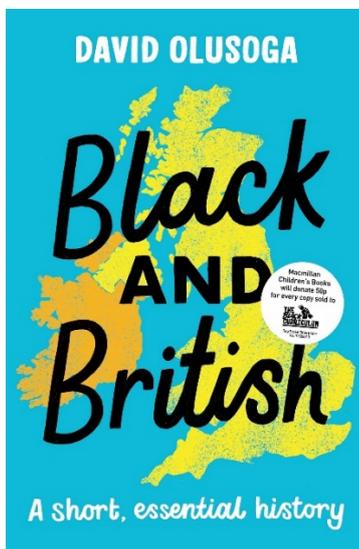


***This Rock, That Rock: Poems Between You, Me and the Moon* by Dom Conlon and Viviane Schwarz (Troika)** 9781909991927

This astounding collection of poetry firmly earns its place on any bookshelf and is certain to be an instant hit with readers – child and adult alike. One of its significant strengths is the breathtaking amount of sheer enthusiasm and joy for the subject that it holds between its covers. The introduction alone – before we even get to the poetry – manages to communicate the author's passion for the subject in such a way as to engage the reader right from the start - and is underscored with a series of powerful visual analogies that helps to both celebrate and put in perspective the significance of the subject and why it is worth the investment of time to read, discuss, ponder, imagine, draw and write about. Dom Conlon's writing for this collection manages to miraculously make room for everything from mythology and folklore to history and science; from everyday lived experience to worlds of pure

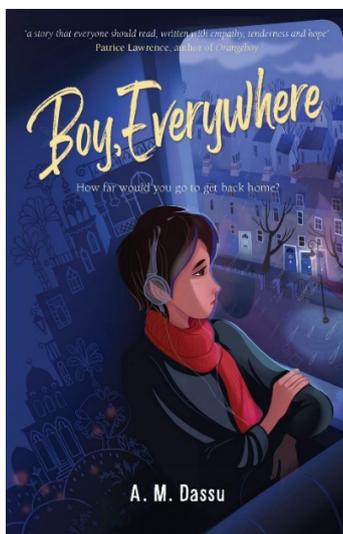
imagination. And he does this through such a wide variety of forms, free verse sitting comfortably alongside more structured forms – acrostics, kennings, sonnets, haiku, concrete poetry and song all abound, communicating equal enthusiasm for playful nonsense as they do for thoughtful wisdom. The illustration by Viviane Schwarz provides the perfect accompaniment to the words on the page and an equal variety in feeling, form, texture, and medium. It offers another window into the worlds conjured by the words and another opportunity for response and reflection. A collection of poems and drawings about the moon, yes, but also about so much more, it's about being human and being humane; it's about being kind and ambitious and wise. A joy to read and re-read; a collection to treasure.

## Farrah



***Black and British: A short, essential history* by David Olusoga**  
(Macmillan) 9781529063394

There has been much debate for some time about the lack of opportunity to study historical figures, movements and moments from across Black British communities as part of the History Programmes of Study. This absence may lead young learners to infer a lack of Black British presence resulting in a negation of fundamental contributions to British society. Such erasure is misleading and distorts our knowledge and understanding of the range of threads that make up the fabric of our national identity. David Olusoga's *Black and British: A short, essential history* is a non-fiction title that is both timely and necessary in plugging gaps in knowledge and providing children with a comprehensive and accessible insight into the richness of Black British history. It should be compulsory reading for pupils and teachers alike and form the foundation for reviving and refining our programmes of study across the academic year and across key stages. This important title has the scope to elevate the quality of history teaching which makes it a very invaluable and exciting new addition to our bookshelves.



***Boy, Everywhere* by A.M Dassau illustrated by Zainab 'Daby' Faidhi**  
(Old Barn Books) 9781910646649

For a number of years, we have seen the publication of a large volume and range of picturebooks, novels and graphic novels aimed at the children and YA market focusing on the refugee crisis; each of these titles seeking to articulate, make sense of and shine a light on the plight of refugees from around the world. To attempt to depict such raw, violent and traumatic experiences in artistic form requires exceptional skill, sophistication and sensitivity. Failure to apply this skill set can be damaging and do a great disservice to the subject by misrepresenting whole communities of people and exacerbate prejudice. A.M. Dassau's debut novel, *Boy Everywhere*, is an important contribution to books focusing on themes of war, upheaval and displacement. Dassau's deliberate choice to paint a vivid picture of life before the rupture of civil war is both significant and rare. Refugees are all too often defined by the label, the

struggle, the violence and the aftermath. Individuals and whole communities of people become wholly defined by the trauma with very little attention paid to the people they were and the lives they lived before. Dassau sees who young Sami and his family were before the war in Syria. She paints the life they lived by carefully weaving a narrative that honours this life and in doing so she honours the many real lives of those who have heartbreakingly experienced this first hand. The book also serves as a humbling insight into the resilience and fortitude of refugee communities thereby counteracting some of the harmful and toxic prejudice targeted at these communities. It powerfully strikes the balance between heartbreak and hope, staying with you well after you've finished reading.

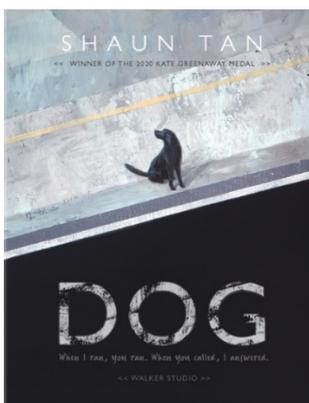
## Jonny



### **When Life Gives You Mangoes by Kereen Getten**

(Pushkin Children's) 9781782692645

Pushkin Press — especially their children's division — constantly delights with the titles it brings to market, and has a terrific track record when it comes to identifying new and/or previously unrecognised talent. For its setting, Kereen Getten's debut novel draws on her Jamaican childhood: she places at its centre a mystery that hooks you from the start, believable characters you take to your heart, a gripping plot line and a revelation that pulled me up short. Fundamentally, this is just brilliant storytelling, incredibly assured for a first published work, and means I'll be on the look-out for more from this author!

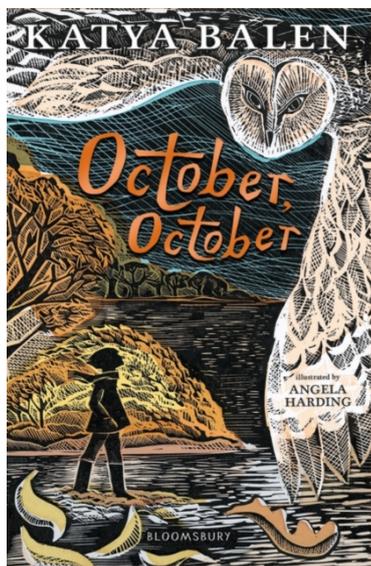


### **Dog by Shaun Tan**

(Walker Studio) 9781406397147

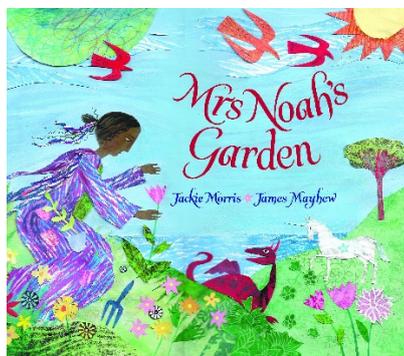
Walker have extracted *Dog* from the Greenaway Medal-winning *Tales from the Inner City*, yet *Dog* stands alone on its own four paws, blending limpid, evocative prose with sublime illustration. Yet it also distils the strangeness, mystery and strength of the relationships between mankind and the creatures we share this planet with that its parent text so powerfully explores. I love everything about this book, from its front cover (the size, the texture, the sgraffito-like indentation of the title...), its witty endpapers, the path running through (sometimes shared, sometimes dividing), the moving text and exquisite illustrations, to Shaun Tan's thought-provoking afterword.

## Katie



***October, October* by Katya Balen illustrated by Angela Harding**  
(Bloomsbury) 9781526601902

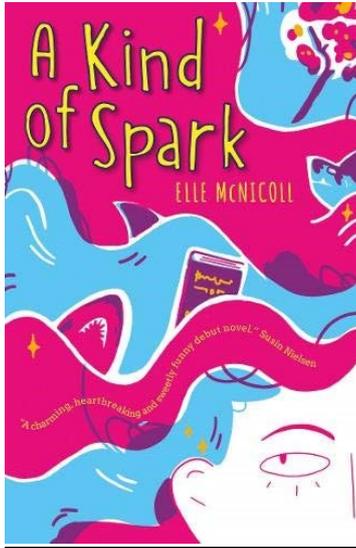
*October, October* is one of those books which, as soon as I had finished it, I wanted to go right back to the beginning and read it all over again. The book begins with the central character, October living an isolated life in the woods with only her father; they are self-sufficient and close to nature. This was an idea that felt very appealing while reading this book through a pandemic that has made many of us re-evaluate our relationship with nature and the wild, in a way in which we may not have done otherwise. Due to an accident her father has, October is forced to live in London with her estranged mother and she inevitably struggles to adapt to the scale, noise and landscape of the city. As a born and bred Londoner I didn't always recognise the descriptions of the city I love from her point of view, but it made me think about how much of the city can feel hostile, especially to someone used to feeling wild and free. October finds solace on the riverbanks of the Thames and most importantly in her new found relationship with her mother, her new friends and her community, again themes that resonated in the current circumstances as we hold those we love close - in reality, or more often than not these days – virtually.



***Mrs Noah's Garden* by Jackie Morris illustrated by James Mayhew**  
(Otter-Barry Books) 9781910959466

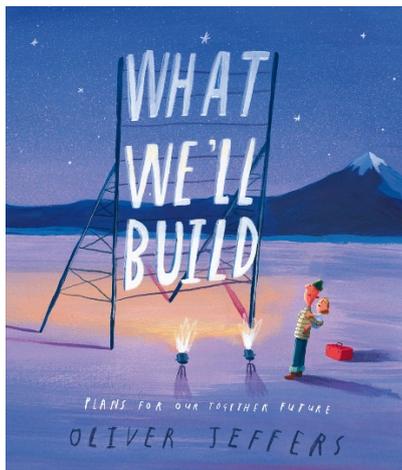
Anyone who knows me well, or who has read our staff picks previously will know what a huge Jackie Morris fan I am and I was delighted when I found out the stunning *Mrs Noah's Pockets* was going to have a sequel, *Mrs Noah's Garden*. I fell in love with the quietly subversive central character in the first book as I used it for a teaching sequence on a language course I wrote and I spent days reading and re-reading the book, pouring over Jackie's beautiful language and James Mayhew's gorgeous illustrations. Something I have found myself doing again purely for the pleasure of it with this new book. The story picks up where the previous one left off, Mrs Noah has arrived on dry land following the flood and sets about creating a garden. Again, I found the theme of the book really resonated during a time in which I was extremely grateful to have my own garden to tend and lucky enough to have the time to dedicate to it. Gardening is an act of hope for the future, and this shines through the book, especially as it is her children who help Mrs Noah plant the seeds and tend the plants. It also highlights the importance of caring for nature, again something that feels even more pertinent now than ever before.

## Louise



***A Kind Of Spark* by Elle McNicoll**  
 (Knights Of) 9781913311056

I've chosen this book because it has really stayed with me this year. It's inclusive, it's authentic and it gently makes really complex points about bullying and discrimination. But none of those are the reasons I chose it for my pick of the year. For me a really good middle grade book has to have drama, excitement and an interesting plot that takes you beyond the mundane – it has to do that with ease and humour and I rarely come across one that does all of those things so apparently effortlessly. I loved the way Addie tells the story and the way in which she explains her thoughts and describes the world around her. I love the sharks, the thesaurus and confiding in cows and I also liked the way in which the carefully drawn and interesting characters were complex and multi-dimensional supporting the interweaving stories of the past and the present to take the plot forward. *A Kind of Spark* is the best middle-grade book I've read this year and I have recommended it all over the place. I'm looking forward to seeing more from Elle McNicoll.



***What We'll Build* by Oliver Jeffers**  
 (Harper Collins) 9780008382209

I think this is the book that will remind me of 2020. Its message summarises all we need to rebuild our fractured world after this extraordinary and surreal year - "plans for our together future". Oliver Jeffers' ability to marry beautiful words and pictures as he talks to his young daughter and they create a world of their own together make a wonderful picturebook just perfect for sharing and talking about. Of course, it has been central to our work at CLPE this year and in a year of unexpected happenings, this book reminds me of the positive and amazing work schools and teachers have done throughout the pandemic. Launching this book with Oliver at a socially distanced school assembly and hearing the excitement of the children as Oliver took off his mask and read to them before going to view their work on an 80ft hoarding where it was displayed alongside that of some of our most important and famous children's authors and illustrators, has got to be one of the strangest and most wonderful things that I have done. This is a book for our times, it reminds me of this time but it is also timeless and enduring.

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

Lana (*Anjali's daughter, aged 11*)

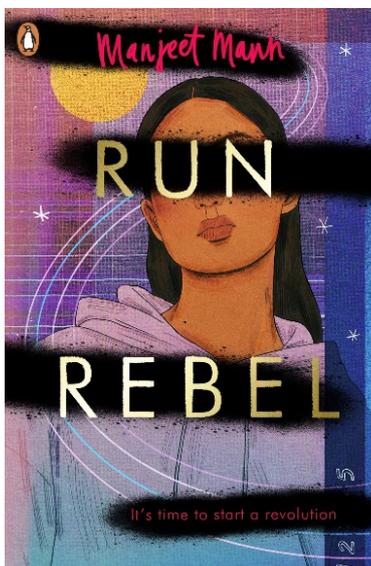


### **One** by Sarah Crossan

(Bloomsbury) 9781408827215

This is my favourite book of all time, even though it might be a bit too old for me, I stole it from my mum when I was in year six during lockdown. When I read even just the blurb I was already drawn into the world of *One*. Tippi and Grace are joined at the hip, but this has never bothered them - they're happy in each other's company. But people at their new school don't believe this, they either avoid them completely, or worse - just pity them. And when Tippi wants to drink and smoke with Jon and Yasmeen - their only friends - Grace finds herself longing to have complete control of her own body and not have to share it with her sister. Grace realises she has fallen in love with Jon, and vice-versa, although Grace knows that her and Tippi can never fall in love with *anyone*. Grace and Tippi's parents are both redundant - their mum losing her job half way through the book and their dad having no job from the very beginning, and becoming an alcoholic. I don't think this book is about trying to get the reader to pity Grace and Tippi, but about how conjoined twins are two different people and don't mind most of the time being attached to their twins which is kind of shown because the book is in just Grace's point of view and not a mixture of both minds. Be careful, though, reading this book because when you start I guarantee you'll be up all night with Tippi and Grace.

Lily (*Charlotte's daughter, aged 15*)



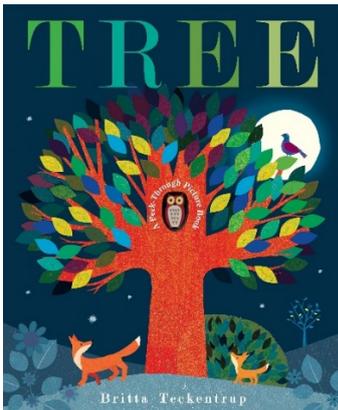
### **Run, Rebel** by Manjeet Mann

(Penguin) 9780241411421

This year, I've been really into reading verse novels. They're incredibly engaging and make you feel much more deeply inside the story. Some of the ones I've enjoyed most are *We Come Apart* by Sarah Crossan and Brian Conaghan, *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds and this book, *Run, Rebel* by Manjeet Mann. Manjeet Mann creates an amazing sense of empathy for the main character Amber, who lives under the constraints of her father's rules and expectations. The punchy verse takes you right inside moments of anger, fear, despair and hope. One of the other things I liked is how empowered Amber becomes throughout the story after she is inspired by her history topic on revolutions and gains the confidence to rebel against her father's rule, freeing her mother and sister in the process. But her journey is not an easy one and the good thing is that Manjeet Mann writes this from a really realistic perspective; it's difficult to read at times but it gives you a real insight into how hard life can be for people trapped in similar situations. Sections of the

story are also written in the voice of Amber's mother and her older sister, Ruby, so you gain a really deep understanding of why the characters feel and behave the way they do and how hard it's been for them for so long. I'd really recommend this book for anyone of my age, especially if you don't usually enjoy longer novels. It's such a powerful story and really well paced, so you can't help wanting to follow Amber's journey right to the end.

## Remi (*Kiri's son, aged nearly 3*)



***Tree: A Peek-Through Picture Book* by Britta Teckentrup**  
(Little Tiger Press) 9781848699656

*Remi isn't quite ready to write his own reviews yet so his mum has described his response to his favourite book!*

This book is beautifully illustrated, and the rhyme throughout helps Remi repeat the words with me along through the changing seasons. He loves pointing out all of the animals hiding and playing around the tree, and always wants to read it again and again!