

September to November Children's REVIEWS

JUNIOR BOOKSELLER+PUBLISHER's star rating system gives readers an indication of the quality of the publication being reviewed in its context. Our reviewers have been asked to use the following guidelines to rate the book:

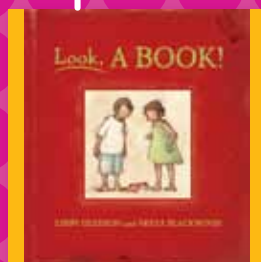
- ★★★★★ an exceptional book of the very highest quality, regardless of genre
- ★★★★☆ an excellent book
- ★★★☆☆ good book, within its genre
- ★★☆☆☆ a passable example of the genre
- ★☆☆☆☆ caution advised

Each issue, JUNIOR asks booksellers, teachers, librarians and others in the publishing industry to review books in advance of their publication. All books reviewed are Australian.

ebooks (simultaneous release unless otherwise specified)

audio

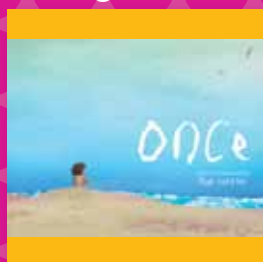
Top Picks Among our reviewers' top picks this issue are:



Look, A Book!

★★★★★

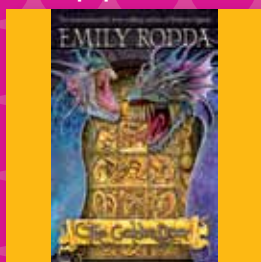
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Once There Was a Boy

★★★★★

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The Golden Door

★★★★★

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Goliath: Leviathan Book 3

★★★★★

Page 18



When We Were Two

★★★★★

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'This is a ripping yarn—highly recommended'—Heath Graham on *Goliath*
Scott Westerfeld's finale scores five stars, while several picture books also come highly recommended in this issue.

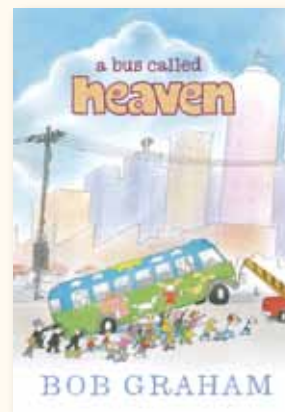
Picture books ▶

A Bus Called Heaven (Bob Graham, Walker Books, \$27.95 hb, ISBN 9781406334197, October) ★★★★★

One day a clapped-out, abandoned old bus appears outside Stella's house with a hand-painted sign on it saying 'Heaven'. As forlorn as a beached whale, the bus attracts the curiosity of many bystanders but it is pale little Stella, 'the colour of moonlight', who decides to claim it with the help of her neighbours. The resourceful group push the bus into Stella's front yard and clean, buff and paint it until Heaven is as good as new. It becomes a communal space for everyone to enjoy (to share stories, play games, just to meet up)—that is, until a tow truck arrives, threatening to take it away to the wreckers because it is 'against regulations'. Bob Graham's latest picture book is recommended for children age three and above. As usual, the writer/illustrator's work is whimsical and sweet,

with busy street scenes and lots of detail for the little ones to pore over. A community rallying together to save something precious is a simple message that preschoolers can understand. Stella too is a good choice in heroine; normally hiding in the shadows of her mother, she has a chance to come out and shine, as her desire to save the bus enables her to overcome her shyness.

Thuy On is a Melbourne reviewer and manuscript assessor

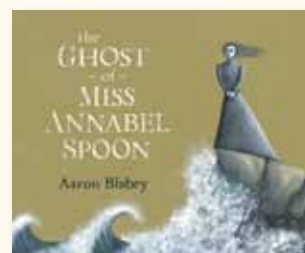


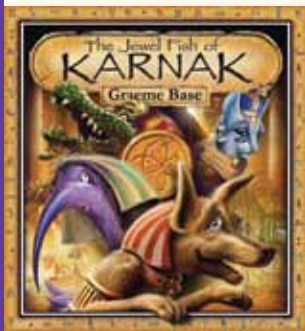
The Ghost of Miss Annabel Spoon (Aaron Blabey, Viking, \$29.95 hb, ISBN 9780670074747, October) ★★★★★

The Ghost of Annabel Spoon is the story of a group of townspeople who are horrified by a miserable ghost-girl called Annabel Spoon. Out of their wits with fear, the people of the village of Twee become hysterical. But then a little boy called Herbert Kettle steps forward and calmly suggests they speak to Annabel. When the Mayor rebuffs his idea as utter madness, Herbert takes the task upon himself. He walks through the forest and up to Annabel's house, all the while growing increasingly frightened. He enters and comes face-to-face with the ghost-girl. As it turns out, Annabel is simply sad from loneliness as everyone is too frightened to become her friend. Aaron Blabey, author of the CBCA award-winning *Pearl Barley and Charlie Parsley*, has written a simple story that teaches

children that they can overcome their fears—emphasising the importance of keeping calm and communicating. Blabey's pastel-sketched illustrations have a thrilling ghostly style reminiscent of Edward Gorey's macabre ink drawings in *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*. Written in sing-along rhyming-verse, this picture book is great for children aged five and up, particularly those who are a little shy.

Andrew Wrathall is publishing assistant for BOOKSELLER+PUBLISHER



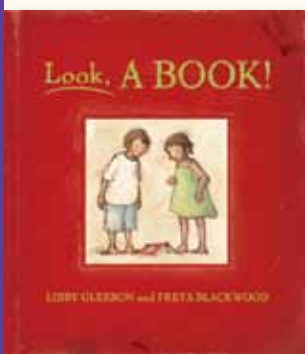


The Jewel Fish of Karnak (Graeme Base, Viking, \$29.95 hb, ISBN 9780670074679, October) ☹ ★★★★★

Graeme Base's latest picture book is a cautionary tale about avarice—with a puzzling, witty twist—in Ancient Egypt. It follows two thieves, Jackal and Ibis, on a quest to recover a magical Jewel Fish on behalf of the Cat Pharaoh. While stealing the treasure's the easy part, heeding the Pharaoh's warnings about taking care of the fish—and not stealing anything else—proves much harder. So when temptation gets the better of the greedy duo, and they end up losing the treasure in the Nile among a school of identical-looking fish, it's up to the reader to uncover the right one. While the story plays second fiddle to the puzzle somewhat, its clever blend of hieroglyphics and code-cracking will enthrall fans of Base's similar books. The solution, which can only be found online

(unavailable at time of reviewing), shows that Base is keen to push the boundaries of the picture book form into the digital realm, but also raises questions about the ultimate life of a work 'concluding' in cyberspace. For the time being, though, there's plenty to keep readers aged eight and up entertained—not least Base's sumptuous, velvety illustrations, here brilliantly matched to the Egyptian theme.

Meredith Tate is a freelance proofreader, editor and reviewer who has worked for a children's publisher



Look, A Book! (Libby Gleeson, illus by Freya Blackwood, Little Hare, \$24.95 hb, ISBN 9781921541803, October) ☹ ★★★★★

Look, A Book! celebrates the magic of the book. Among the decay of the outer suburbs, two children discover a book and it takes them on an extraordinary journey as their imagination transforms the landscape around them. They fly on a monster-sized softdrink bottle over forests of electricity poles; they ride on a duck's back past huge shopping trolleys. The text extols the virtues of a book as an object to be cherished and protected. It may remind some readers of Lane Smith's bestselling picture book, *It's a Book*. However, unlike Smith's book, this isn't a reaction to the digital age but rather an emphasis on the importance of putting books in the hands of those children who rarely come across them. The children in the story live in an underprivileged community and

the book becomes a device which brings them together. The urban landscape is beautifully brought to life in Freya Blackwood's rough-sketch illustrations, and the characters are depicted in a similar manner to previous collaborations between Blackwood and author Libby Gleeson, such as *Clancy & Millie and the Very Fine House*. *Look, A Book!* will appeal to anyone who loves reading, and in particular to parents who wish to teach younger children the importance of the book.

Andrew Wrathall is publishing assistant for BOOKSELLER+PUBLISHER



Once There was a Boy (Dub Leffler, Magabala Books, \$24.95 hb, ISBN 9781921248375, September) ☹ ★★★★★

This book is really a vehicle for the illustrations, which, even though the story is set on an island, evoke the vastness of the Australian landscape, the colours, the tropical beaches and the sky, especially the spectacular sunsets. A boy lives alone on an ancient boat on a beach, so the illustrations portray vast landscapes inhabited by just one solitary figure. The sense of aloneness is almost palpable. Until a girl appears. Their first encounter occurs while the boy is picking and eating sapotes, a delicious tropical fruit that tastes like chocolate. What follows is a tender story of the power of love and friendship in the face of temptation, and a subsequent broken heart. The language is beautiful and touching. 'This is my heart,' the girl says, 'and because I broke yours, I'm giving it to

you.' A note from the author states: 'I wrote *Once* to show kids that boys have feelings too (just like girls) and that sometimes those feelings can get hurt and that's okay; especially when you're willing to let your friends help when you're feeling sad.' The sentiment is beautifully achieved. This is an impressive picture book that extends to an amazing 72 pages, which gives the illustrator scope for his wonderful double-page spreads and the sense of place portrayed. It is highly recommended for sensitive readers of all ages.

Margaret Hamilton is a former children's book publisher. She provides freelance publishing services and runs Pinerolo, the Children's Book Cottage



The Perfect Present (Fiona Robertson, Viking, \$24.95 hb, ISBN 9780670074761, October) ☹ ★★★★★

It's exciting when a book comes along that tells an original story in a very engaging way, that has innovative illustrations and endearing characters. This is just such a book. As well as those attributes, this simple picture book is divided into chapters, which serve to break the story up into days and give a realistic sense of tension, leading to a satisfying conclusion. The story begins with Henry being too excited to sleep because tomorrow is his birthday: a scenario that will immediately capture the young reader. Henry guesses the presents he'll receive in alphabetical order—a nice touch. Henry's best friend Spot (a duck) has planned the perfect present but his presentation is usurped by a big box from Henry's grandparents, which contains a very special surprise. Henry is besotted and

totally neglects his best friend. So Spot sadly leaves home. The dangers he encounters threaten to engulf him until at last he is rescued by Henry and the perfect present. The simple illustrations contain extra reading in the labels and conversation, and the split-action pages move the story along and provide extra detail and interest. This is a thoroughly enjoyable book in every way; a touching and heart-warming story about loyalty and friendship that is highly recommended for beginner readers.

Margaret Hamilton is a former children's book publisher. She provides freelance publishing services and runs Pinerolo, the Children's Book Cottage

Sam, Grace and the Shipwreck (Michelle Gillespie, illus by Sonia Martinez, Fremantle Press, \$24.95 hb, ISBN 9781921696008, October) ☹ ★★★

Sixteen-year-old Grace Bussell is a real-life Australian heroine. On 1 December 1876, Grace and stockman Sam Isaacs performed a daring rescue, saving the lives of around 50 people from the sinking steamer *SS Georgette* off the coast of Western Australia. *Sam, Grace and the Shipwreck* is an evocative picture-book retelling of this incredible event, which gives young readers a fresh look at an inspiring young woman. Impressively, author Michelle Gillespie wrote this book when she was only 19. It's a simple, straightforward narrative, and the story is beautifully illustrated by Sonia Martinez, whose drawings provide a real sense of the Australian outback. Pitched at lower primary-age children, this book should make an excellent resource for teachers and librarians trying to

encourage young readers to learn more about Australia's history. *Sam, Grace and the Shipwreck* is featured as part of a month-long exhibition at the State Library of Western Australia. (The story is also told in *Amazing Grace: An Adventure at Sea*. See the review below.)

Courtney Nicholas is a blogger and bookseller at TLC Books in Manly, Queensland



Amazing Grace: An Adventure at Sea (Stephanie Owen Reeder, National Library of Australia, \$29.95 hb, ISBN 9780642277435, November) ☹ ★★★

Grace Bussell was a teenage girl living on her family property in 1876. When the steamer *Georgette* ran aground, Grace became an integral part of the efforts to rescue the passengers and crew of the stricken ship, riding her horse into the surf to save people. This book tells the stories of Grace and the other rescuers, as well as survivors of the *Georgette*. This book tells a true historical story through an imagined narrative, supplementing the story with information boxes on the period and a wealth of illustrations, some from the period and others by the author. The book includes a glossary, background reading, full references for the illustrations, and an epilogue outlining the lives of the characters after the incident. Stephanie Owen Reeder's writing style is clear

and engaging, and this style of book can often bring an historical incident to life in a way the simple facts cannot. This is recommended for upper primary school readers with an interest in history and real-life heroism. (The story is also told in *Sam, Grace and the Shipwreck*. See the review above.)

Heath Graham is an educator currently working at the State Library of Victoria



Evangeline, The Wish Keeper's Helper (Maggie Alderson, Viking, \$19.95 hb, ISBN 9780670075355, October) ☹ ★★★

Evangeline, The Wish Keeper's Helper opens strongly as the reader gets the bittersweet sense of a child moving from one toy to the next. After being increasingly ignored by her owner, Evangeline the elephant is finally taken to a mysterious place known as 'Upstairs', a sort of toy heaven where children's wishes are granted. Once Upstairs, though, the story becomes weighed down by its own complexity. There is too much for a young reader to take in: the process of granting wishes, 'un-wishes', the evil Kybosh, Upstairs and Downstairs. No sooner is one aspect of wish-granting explained than another puzzle arises. The 'dainty' Evangeline is a sweet heroine and her friends are equally kind. However, it is Kylie the Koala who stands out, mixing Aussie slang with observations

about style (a nod to author Maggie Alderson's background in fashion writing). This cross-dressing koala could have easily become a caricature but instead seems entirely plausible. While the language lends itself to being read out loud and readers will definitely sympathise with the protagonist, young readers may be perplexed by the barrage of information in this story. The book is pitched at children aged six and up.

Fay Helfenbaum is a literature major and bookseller with an interest in children and young adult fiction



'The Unicorn Riders' series (Aleesah Darlison, illus by Jill Brailsford, Walker Books, \$12.95 pb, October): **Quinn's Riddles** (ISBN 9781921529979), **Willow's Challenge** (ISBN 9781921529986), **Krystal's Choice** (ISBN 9781921529993) and **Ellabeth's Test** (ISBN 9781921720000) ☹ ★★★

Marketed at girls in the eight-plus age bracket, this series will surely tempt those obsessed by horses, ponies or indeed unicorns. Illustrated by simple black-and-white line drawings, the novels centre on the adventures of a team of four young riders—Quinn, Willow, Krystal and Ellabeth—and their unicorns in the kingdom of Avamay. Here, at the behest of Queen Heart, the girls are responsible for protecting the regal domain against dark forces, including the machinations of evil Lord Valerian. Their missions are helped by the fact that each unicorn has a unique magical power radiating from its horn, whether it's the ability to calm and heal, to enchant, to sense danger or to create light. To encourage readers to identify with

the girls, each rider also has a different personality type that's reflected on her uniform by a symbol. 'The Unicorn Riders' is pure escapism; fantasy-lite for young readers, with strange beasts and exciting quests to follow. The girls' motto, 'We ride as one', underlines their commitment to work together when challenges confront them and hence reinforces the idea of friendship and teamwork. Though each book is a self-contained story, it's best if they are read consecutively in a series.

Thuy On is a Melbourne reviewer and manuscript assessor





The Golden Door (Emily Rodda, Scholastic, \$16.99 pb, ISBN 9781862919129, September) ☹ ★★☆☆

It is 'skimmer season' once again, and the ancient walled city of Weld is under nightly attack as the vicious winged beasts come over the wall to prey on animal and humans alike. The people of Weld are worried, so when the warden asks for male volunteers to journey beyond the wall to find and destroy the source of the skimmers, there are plenty of willing citizens. Too young to volunteer, Rye waits anxiously for the return of his heroic older brothers, but when they are both declared lost he realises that it is up to him to find them if there is to be any hope for Weld. This is a fantasy story with all the classic elements; there are helpless (and, pleasingly, helpful, clever and occasionally crotchety) maidens, terrible creatures, deceptively magical objects and awful villains that meet satisfying ends. While

the incorporation of all these elements has the potential to become predictable, and the character of Rye did remind this reader a little of Rowan (of Rin), Emily Rodda weaves the story effortlessly. *The Golden Door* is a solid start to what is sure to be a popular trilogy. For any readers eight years and older who enjoyed Rodda's previous titles, or are simply partial to a richly created fantasy, this will not disappoint.

Clare Hingston is a bookseller and librarian-in-training



Goliath: Leviathan Book 3 (Scott Westerfeld, illus by Keith Thompson, Viking, \$29.95 hb, ISBN 9780670073054, October) ☹ ★★☆☆

Alexandar, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, returns to the airship Leviathan, exemplar of Darwinist technology, a living craft 300 metres long. He leaves behind him the Ottoman revolution, but brings with him the perspicacious Loris Bovril, whose English seems to be improving. Alek feels his destiny is to bring peace to the world, and Leviathan's new mission will introduce him to a potential ally—but can the ultimate weapon really bring peace? Meanwhile, his friend and crewmate Deryn's secret life seems more precarious than ever: is it only a matter of time until she is found out as a girl, and what will become of her when she is? Mad scientists, media moguls and revolutionaries all enter the mix in this climactic story of a world war in a very different world.

This is the final volume of Scott Westerfeld's steampunk/biopunk alternate-history action-adventure trilogy, and it maintains the breakneck pace and wild inventiveness of *Leviathan* and *Behemoth*. Alek and Deryn are engaging leads, and Westerfeld's world is a fascinating one, enriched by Keith Thompson's illustrations. This is a ripping yarn—highly recommended, and compulsory reading for fans of the earlier volumes.

Heath Graham is an educator currently working at the State Library of Victoria



The Key to Starveldt: The Rare Book 2 (Foz Meadows, Ford St, \$19.95 pb, ISBN 9781921665257 October) ☹ ★★☆☆

Foz Meadows recently snuck into my reading pile with the first book in 'The Rare' series. I was intrigued. A group of teenagers who were in possession of varying powers, brought together on a quest by the vampire Solace, the rightful heir to the castle Starveldt. Amid the overwhelming number of vampire books that were (and still are) filling the shelves, this series came as a welcome surprise. Although Solace is a vampire, the teenagers are not, and Meadows considers the dynamics of their group where each member is marked by a particular difference. These dynamics are probed even further in the second book, as Solace hurtles towards her destiny. The majority of the book is spent in the Rookery, a safe haven for paranormals, misfits and others, and the vivid descriptions

of character and place are a delight to read. The reader is also given the opportunity to learn more of the complex back story. Foz Meadows seems to have hit her stride in the second book, and the characters, plot and setting that started out strong in her 2010 debut have found a steady rhythm, and will no doubt secure her readers' interest in books to come.

Bec Kavanagh is a Melbourne-based writer and reviewer and an ex-bookseller



When We Were Two (Robert Newton, Penguin, \$17.95 pb, ISBN 9780143566830, October) ☹ ★★☆☆

Reading Robert Newton's latest historical novel for teens, I was often reminded of the popular Rolf Harris song, 'Two Little Boys'. Here, in the context of World War I, Newton evokes similar sentiments surrounding mateship and protectiveness with his tale of two young, vulnerable brothers journeying across the dusty Australian landscape. Sick of his father's abuse, 16-year-old Dan runs away in search of his mum, who abandoned him and his younger brother Eddie years earlier. Trudging through the bush, however, Dan realises he's not alone—Eddie is following him—and he is left with little choice but to take him along. After much hardship on the road, the two fall in with a group of would-be soldiers, discovering a sense of direction and belonging they'd never experienced

before—until tragedy forces Dan to stand on his own two feet. With an underlying message about how running away isn't enough, you need to know where you're going, this richly crafted character piece has all the hallmarks of classic Australian literature. Blending fact with fiction, Newton explores issues around heroism, masculinity and national identity with tenderness and intelligence, making this an excellent resource for sparking an interest in local history among readers aged 12 and up. (See interview, page 7.)

Meredith Tate is a freelance proofreader, editor and reviewer who has worked for a children's publisher