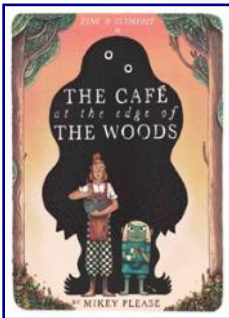




Read On!

For my first article of the new year, I thought I would highlight the novels that featured in several of the book reviewers 'best of 2025' articles as the same titles are often selected by different reviewers. These titles can make an interesting reading list, if you are looking for new authors, series, or genres. As 2026 is the National Year of Reading, I have shared the details about the Public Library Service's Reading Challenge for both children and adults. The Penguin Books website also has some ideas to widen your reading, and I have included the link. The Hazelwick School Book Club members have agreed the discussion themes for this year, and the themes with the dates of our meetings are listed at the end of my article. Thank you to Mr Elliott for being our guest book reviewer of an American classic this month.

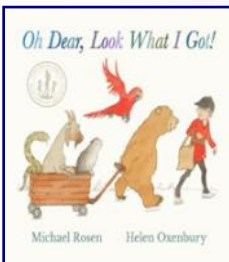
Children's Fiction – Picture Books



The Café at the Edge of the Woods by Mikey Please

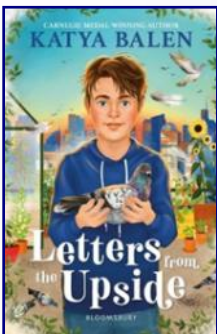
The winner of the Waterstone's Children's Book Prize for Illustrated Books 2025 has also made several other book award shortlists. At first glance, this picture book tells the story of café owner Rene who opens a café by a magical wood. Rene's customers have the most unusual menu requests. Can Rene and waiter Glumfoot keep their customers happy? The story's message about the importance of creativity is skilfully imparted.

AR Level: 3.0



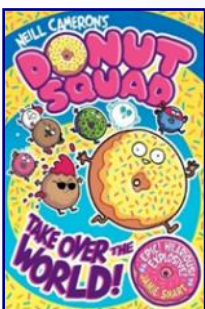
Oh Dear, Look What I Got! By Michael Rosen & Helen Oxenbury

The author and illustrator team that gave us the classic 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt' have teamed up to work their storytelling magic once again. This is a very simple picture book with a read-aloud story written in rhyming text about visits to the shop. The fun comes from guessing the rhymes and readers young and old will enjoy the ending.



Letters from the Upside by Katya Balen

Published in September 2025, this is a moving story aimed at readers in Year 6 and Year 7. The author's use of the internal perspectives of the main character is a clever device as it makes you root for them. Through Con, the central character, the author explores difficult issues of abandonment, grief, and guilt. Con's anger when his father leaves is realistically written. There is a hint that Con's father has been abusive, but this is not described in detail. The story is beautifully written, with a hopeful ending. I am sure this novel will feature in several book award shortlists.



Take Over the World! by Neill Cameron

Shortlisted for Waterstones Book of the Year 2025, this graphic novel for younger readers was a bestseller last year. I am sure 'Neill Cameron's Donut Squad' series will appeal to fans of the 'Dog Man' and 'Bunny vs Monkey' series. Book two is due to be published in May of this year. Meet the members of the Donut Squad who are led by Sprinkles. The Squad needs to battle their enemies – the Bagels, who have been busy plotting against our bakery product heroes. An excellent title for reluctant readers.

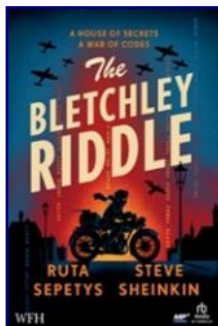


Read On Continued...



The Poisoned King by Katherine Rundell

Rundell's second book in the 'Impossible Creatures' fantasy adventure series won the 'Books Are My Bag Readers Awards' for Children's Fiction last year. One of the reviews I read stated that they thought this novel was better than the first in the series, in terms of plot and pacing. Though the book can be read as a stand-alone, I think more reading enjoyment will be had with having read the first title. There is a mix of characters, mythical beasts, and a rescue mission. I am sure that this series will be a future classic!

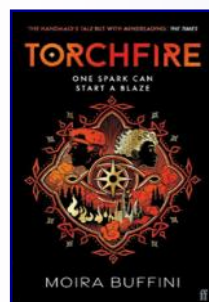


The Bletchley Riddle by Ruta Sepetys and Steve Sheinkin

This historical novel has been shortlisted for the book cover (The Week Junior Book Awards Book Cover of the Year 2025) and the story made the 'Best of 2025' for The Times book reviewer. Jakob Novis is recruited to the codebreaking centre at Bletchley Park, thanks to his maths skills. Jakob begins work on cracking the Enigma cipher, whilst his sister Lizzie is trying to find their mother. In addition to the codebreaking element to the story, it also portrays life in World War II.

AR Level: 4.1

Fiction - Young Adults



Torchfire by Moira Buffini

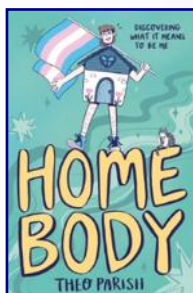
The sequel to 'Songlight' is aimed at an older teen readership due to the themes and occasional strong language. Buffini's dystopian 'Torch' trilogy will appeal to readers who enjoy the combination of sci-fi with fantasy. War between the Aylish and Brightland continues to rage with a new threat looming over the four central characters. Buffini is a skilled world-builder, and the novel is perfectly set-up for the final book in the trilogy.



What Happens Online by Nathanael Lessor

Lessor's novel about a teen who blurs the truth between his online persona and his real life offline has already been listed for two book awards. Fred's online life is far happier than his offline one. His online alter ego has tonnes of followers but offline, Fred is unhappy with his home and school life. Fred starts to tell lies online and spread rumours. Will he be found out? Lessor is very skilled in writing natural dialogue which I think makes the story so relatable for the intended audience.

AR Level 5.3



Homebody by Theo Parish

A graphic novel for older teens, this is Theo's memoir of his life as a trans, nonbinary person. Theo's story of self-discovery and exploration of gender identity makes for a moving read and would provide a useful springboard for discussions about gender identity. The book has been shortlisted for both the UKLA Book Awards and the Carnegie Medal for Illustration.

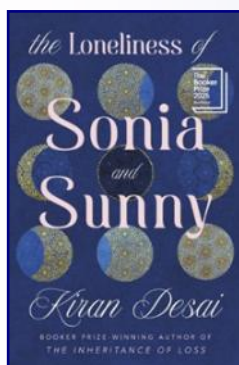
If you are looking for further inspiration, please check out the library web page for a selection of our themed recommended reads.

<https://www.hazelwick.org/teaching-and-learning/library>



Read On Continued...

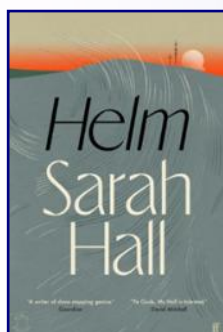
Adult Fiction



The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny by Kiran Desai

Shortlisted for the Booker Prize 2025, Desai's love story follows central characters Sunny and Sonia on their search for happiness. The author explores the themes of class, race, and inter-generational bonds. If you have yet to discover Desai's beautiful writing style, this would make an excellent introduction to their work. I have shared the link to the author's page on 'Fantastic Fiction' for a full listing of their novels and the titles that have won book awards.

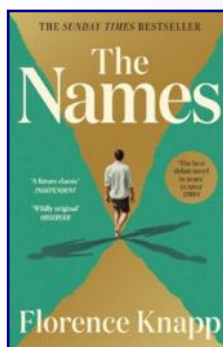
<https://www.fantasticfiction.com/d/kiran-desai/>



Helm by Sarah Hall

Described as an elemental tale, Helm has long been a folklore subject, described as part-god of the elements and part-sky demon that has dominated the North England landscape since the beginning of time. Over the centuries, humans have taken different approaches to this unique life force, but Dr Selima Sutar fears that the end is nigh. This is an original and unusual novel that examines the relationship between nature and people.

<https://www.fantasticfiction.com/h/sarah-hall/helm.htm>



The Names by Florence Knapp

Set after the Great Storm of 1987, this debut novel is full of hope and makes for a moving read. Central character Cora and her nine-year-old daughter must register the name of her newborn son. Cora has promised her husband that they will follow his family naming tradition. However, Cora is having second thoughts about the name but knows that breaking her promise will have consequences. Three versions of her son's life are then related, each shaped by a different first name. With each version of her son's life, the author explores some complicated themes surrounding family life.

My Year of Reading: Reading Challenge

West Sussex Library Service has launched their reading challenge for this year, and I thought you may wish to sign up! Each month will have a different reading theme, and you can join as an individual reader or as part of a reading or family group. The challenge aims to 'Discover new stories and share together in a love of reading.' The challenge for January is to read a short book or short story, and the February challenge is to read a book set in another country. Further information can be found by clicking the link below:

<https://arena.westsussex.gov.uk/my-year-of-reading>

Penguin Books Fourteen Fun Reading Challenges

Penguin Books have some creative ideas to mix up your reading habits for the year. I like these as they are a departure from focusing upon the number of books read in a year.

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/reading-challenges-for-bookworms>



Read On Continued...

Hazelwick School Book Group

I have just shared the dates and discussion themes for the Hazelwick School Book Group for this year. The group is open to students from all year groups. Our first meeting takes place on Friday 30th January in the library after school and we will be discussing our best reads of 2025.

Dates and discussion themes:

Friday 30th January: Our best books of 2025

Friday 27th February: New author swap

Friday 20th March: Fiction vs Non-Fiction

Friday 24th April Spring meeting: Graphic novels

Friday 26th June Summer meeting: Summer Fun

National Year of Reading 2026

The Education Secretary made the announcement about the National Year of Reading last year. The Department for Education and National Literacy Trust are working together to 'foster a love of reading for pleasure in children and young people, ensuring all children get the best start in life'.

Please check out the link to the Press release for further information.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/parents-urged-to-read-more-to-boost-childrens-life-chances>

Keep reading!

Mrs Thornton BA (Hons) MCLIP
School Librarian



Read On Continued...

Guest Reviewer

Our guest reviewer this month is: Mr Elliott

Book Title: The Great Gatsby

Author: F. Scott Fitzgerald



I once thought to myself, who decides which books, art, or any form of media is famous? Are they the best ones? The ones with the most interesting backstory? The works are often put into a 'canon', which generally defines the most important works of the Western World. I decided to give one of these celebrated books a go when I read *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Despite being considered a relative commercial failure at the time, this book has been catapulted into the higher ranks of literary works in the century since its release. The book deals with themes such as; 'The American Dream', the mentality of the American upper-class, and Love/Marriage. Fitzgerald does this not through the perspective of the titular Gatsby, but through someone just on the outside of this world, Nick Carraway.

I won't spoil it of course, but the book follows the extravagant adventures of Jay Gatsby, an incredibly wealthy and famous man who throws huge parties at his mansion in the outskirts of New York City. The author examines the relationships between Gatsby and his friends (some might argue fanatics), the mystery surrounding the millionaire, and everyone's desire to be famous and important.

What do I think of the book?

I feel like the context of the book is very important, and I definitely would have got a lot less out of the book without it as a backdrop. The story can wander at times and there is no clear villain or hero, which I actually found refreshing since I sometimes have the tendency to fall back into familiar stories and structures. I loved the characters and how they felt stereotypical yet complex. It was fun thinking about who these people were, picturing their likes and dislikes, and what they want in life.

Who would enjoy this book?

Anyone interested in American History, or the decade of the 'Roaring' 1920s. The setting plays a key role in the film and I think it would enhance your experience if you enjoy the time period. Anyone who wants to get invested in characters and their backstories too since this is very much a character-driven story. Exploring the characters and why they do what they do in the book was the most fun I think!

