



# Non-fiction in the Spotlight

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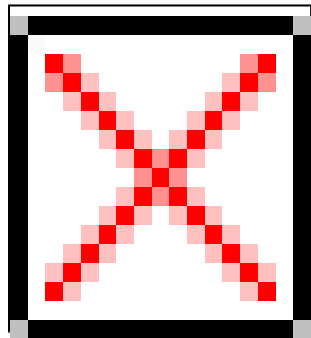
[Nikki Gamble](#) [1]

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**New Non-fiction** rounded up by **Nikki Gamble**

Nonfiction continues to see some high quality innovative publishing, with varied formats, engaging texts and appealing illustration. **Nikki Gamble** looks at recent new books, and selects must-have titles for the new term.

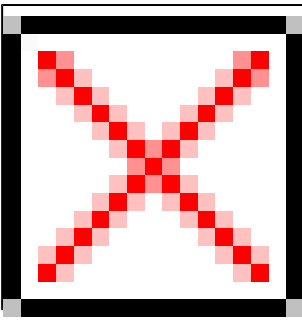


This year has seen some superb non-fiction titles, particularly about the natural world. Nicola Davies has teamed up once again with Emily Sutton to bring us a treasure chest of a book. **A First Book of the Sea** begins with an enticement to open the pages and an invitation to wonder at what will be discovered inside: *But remember? the waves tell a bigger story. Over years they have worn rocks into the very sand between your toes.* Nicola Davies has a wonderful voice, creating sublime images from the simplest of observations. She engages by seeing the world through a child's eye lens but in one skilful move expands the view. The collection is thoughtfully arranged, into four sections. The first, *Down by the Shore* captures a childlike delight in being the first to see the sea, *As if the whole ocean had been lost and found again*. It conjures images of idyllic summers paddling, surfing, building sandcastles, collecting shells and pebbles, finding sea creatures on the shore and in rockpools. The second section, *Journeys* invites reflection, contrasting the epic journey of the blue whale with the tiny steps taken by the humble limpet. *Under the sea* tells us about some of the strange creatures that live in the depths. The final section *Wonders* invokes a sense of awe: ending with a quiet reflection: *Sand in my shoes/Salt in my hair/a pebble in my pocket/The horizon in my eye.* As we close the page we are left to ponder the wonders that we have seen. Environmental messages are subtly interwoven, it is suggested that shells are left on the beach, we learn about people who live by the sea,

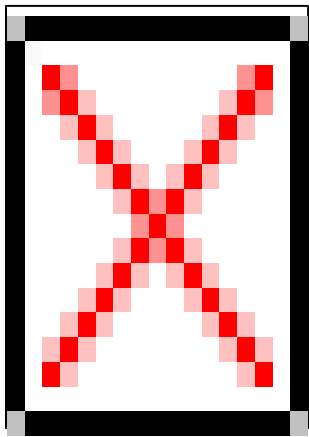
Emily Sutton's illustration captures the full range of tone and mood. A lighthouse pictured atop a cliff above swirling midnight blue waters splattered with spume and spray captures the elemental force of wind and ocean. An array of decorative shells and pebbles are patterned around the page inviting the reader to pause for close inspection, a dynamic, swirling shoal of fish captures the darting movement and glimmer of scales in the sunlight.

The turn of each page surprises and prompts gasps of delight. It is impossible to choose a favourite page in this gorgeous book, you will have to find your own. Give it as a gift, buy it for the classroom, or simply treat yourself. This one is a keeper.

**Moth: An Evolution Story** is brought to us by another inspired pairing: writer Isabel Thomas and illustrator Daniel

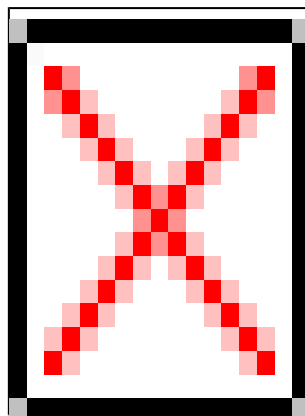


Egnéus. The narrative starts, *‘This is a story of light and dark. Of change and adaptation, of survival and hope.’* Using the famous example of the peppered moth, Thomas explains the concept of natural selection in a way that can be easily understood by young children. Some moths are born with peppered wings and some are jet black. The peppered moths have more effective camouflage, until industrial pollution leaves black sooty deposits on buildings and trees, then the survival rates of the black moths increase and so do their numbers. However, this is reversed as the world moves away from fossil fuels. The moths are a sign of hope for a greener cleaner world. The presence of a child reading a book on the opening spread and the same child observing moths in their natural habitat on the final spread show that we can learn from books but also from first-hand observation of our world. *‘Be silent. Be still. Look closely at the trees.’*, Thomas urges the reader. Egnéus’ artwork adds emotional depth to this science story, contrasting the delicate speckled moths and their feathery antennae with the heavy blocks of dark smoke and spattered soot.



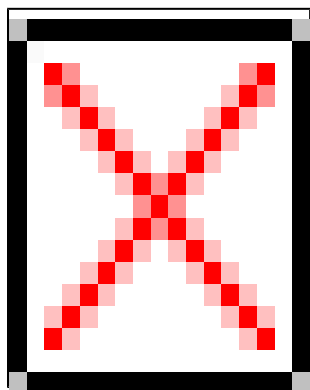
Following the success of **Creaturepedia**, **Plantopedia** is a glorious introduction to 600 fascinating plants. As with the previous book, **Plantopedia** uses a creative approach, grouping bite-sized nuggets of information and an aesthetically pleasing layout. In the historical section we learn that pyramid builders were paid partly in onions and that the red sap of the Dragon Tree was used as ink in Roman times. In a section titled *‘The Giants’* we discover the 15-metre-high Elephant Cactus and learn that the Kapok tree grows to the height of a 20 foot story building. This book is great for dipping into.

For school libraries, Simon Chapman’s **Expedition Diaries** is an authoritative and informative series. The latest title **Himalayan Mountains** charts an expedition into the Eastern Himalayas in the Yunnan Province of China. The strength of this series is the writer’s authentic voice, delicate watercolours and many photographs which provide fascinating detail. It is a pity that photographs aren’t given more space as finer detail is lost and consequently so is the opportunity for maximising learning from the visual information. There is a glossary, which is useful – though the dictionary style



definition of alpine *‘connected to high mountains’* is an example of a less helpful, abstract definition for a young reader. An extended definition with exemplification would be a better aid to understanding.

For independent summer reading James Campbell's **The Funny Life of Pets** will provide hours of amusement. The non-linear format works in a similar way to a 'create your own adventure story'. For instance, dipping into page 104 describes the habit that some dogs have of rubbing their bottom on the ground (no doubt causing hilarity). To find an explanation, the reader is directed to page 54 and from there they can follow several choices including information about dogs with worms on page 68. If gross humour is your bag, this has a happy balance of grossness and fun facts.



Andy Seed's **Wild Facts about Nature** is another good book to keep children entertained this summer. This miscellany of easily-digestible information, is a good choice if you want to learn how to say cat in 14 languages or otter in 15 languages (I'm hoping to impress a few friends with my new linguistic competence).

One caveat for publishers: it would be good to see more nonfiction for children providing information about sources. It is important that young readers not only learn about the world we live in, but also come to understand how we know.

Nikki Gamble is Director of **Just Imagine Story Centre** and Associate Consultant at the **University of London, Institute of Education**.

Books mentioned:

**A First Book of the Sea**, Nicola Davies illus Emily Sutton, Walker Books, 978-1406368956, £14.99hbk

**Moth: An Evolution Story**, Isabel Thomas illus Daniel Egnéus, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1408889756, £12.99hbk

**Plantopedia**, Adrienne Barman, Wide Eyed Editions, 978-1786031389, £14.99hbk

**Himalayan Mountains (Expedition Diaries)** Simon Chapman, Franklin Watts, 978-1445156781, £13.99

**The Funny Life of Pets**, James Campbell, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1408889947, £6.99pbk

**Wild Facts about Nature**, Andy Seed, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1408891872, £6.99pbk

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