

# A IS FOR . . .

## about, what's it all?

 *You Are Stardust*

ELIN KELSEY,  
ILLUSTRATED BY  
SOYEON KIM

 *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*

JOHN BOYNE

For some of us, it's the question we've been waiting for. Finally an excuse to get up on the soapbox and hold forth about the meaning of life, the universe and everything. For others among us, being asked to explain where we came from and where we go next as we're mashing up bananas can at best catch us on the hop and, at worst, provoke an existential crisis all our own. 🍌

Those wishing to approach the answer from a scientific point of view will appreciate the blend of biology and wonder in *You Are Stardust*. With simple words, accompanied by photographs of homespun dioramas by Korean artist Soyeon Kim, it takes us from our beginnings as atoms shooting out from an exploding star to living, growing organisms with constantly renewing cells. The emphasis is very much on being part of the great cycle of life - and on just how much we have in common with the rest of nature. Did you know, for instance, that the water inside our bodies is as salty as the ocean? Or that when we sneeze we expel air faster than a cheetah sprints? Or that bats and sperm whales get their friends to babysit? Of course, an inevitable part of being a living organism is that, along with everything else, we will one day die. But then the great cycle starts again. We are left with a sense of wonder at the miracle of it all - and the need to look after both our fragile planet and the precious ecosystem that is 'planet You'.

As children get older, the question becomes, more fundamentally, one of how to live a good life. *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* tells the story of nine-year-old Bruno, who has moved with his father from Berlin to a desolate place

called 'Out-With'. It's only gradually that we learn his father is the commander of the notorious Nazi prison camp.

Bruno hates his new home. There's a huge garden, but he has no one to play with. And why is it that the people on the other side of the fence – fathers, grandfathers, children, none of them girls – go around wearing striped pyjamas all day? Bruno fondly imagines that these people are having a wonderful time, riding their bicycles and enjoying their meals communally. Only the reader knows how horribly far this is from the truth.

When one of these pyjama-clad figures comes up to the fence one day, he finally makes a friend. He and Shmuel talk to one another through the fence, and Bruno brings him food. Later, when grilled by a Nazi officer who visits their house, Bruno finds himself denying that Shmuel is his friend – and we see the terrible complicity he's unwittingly embracing. But Bruno, in his innocence, also sees no reason not to stick by his friend when they embark on their awful, final adventure.

This book challenges the reader to ask what they know about right and wrong, what they know about human nature, and what they know about themselves. Bring it into your own household, and use it to establish the human values of justice, fairness and respect.



**CURE FOR GROWN-UPS**  *The Three Questions* JON J MUTH

If you are indeed having an existential crisis, see this handsome picture book, inspired by a short story by Leo Tolstoy. Featuring a giant panda delivering Zen-inspired wisdom, it's as potentially life-changing for a grown-up as for a child.

SEE ALSO: **death, fear of • god, wondering if there is a**

## abuse

 *A Family That Fights*

SHARON CHESLER  
BERNSTEIN,  
ILLUSTRATED BY KAREN  
RITZ

(continued)

It won't always be apparent that children exposed to abuse in the home – be it physical or emotional – are struggling. Children develop all sorts of coping mechanisms to help hide their shame or make themselves feel safe. Professional help should always be sought where abuse is suspected, but sharing a book that

 *The Words Hurt*

CHRIS LOFTIS,  
ILLUSTRATED BY  
CATHERINE GALLAGHER

 *Learning to Scream*

BEATE TERESA HANIKE

 *The Perks of Being  
a Wallflower*

STEPHEN CHBOSKY

reflects what may be going on\* might give a child who has suffered abuse some relief – and even begin to open the door to a conversation. Knowing that someone cares, and can be trusted to listen and give support, is crucial – and books are a way to create a safe and patient space.

On the surface, *A Family That Fights* is about an ordinary sort of family – one that ‘goes to movies, bakes cookies, plays games and builds snowmen’. But this one also includes a father that ‘fights with his hands’.

The range of things that can and do happen in this family are explored in careful detail: the mother becomes nervous when the father is due to come home; the child feels angry with the mother for pretending everything’s fine. The black and white pencil drawings capture pent-up emotional states with great sensitivity.

For verbal abuse, go to *The Words Hurt*, in which an angry father – a victim of abuse himself – unleashes regular torrents of criticism on his son, Greg. At night, Greg lies in bed wondering if other kids’ dads get so furious when they’re late for school, and whether cleaning your room is every family’s ‘VERY SERIOUS rule’. There’s always just enough truth in what his dad is saying that Greg’s left wondering if perhaps he deserves the yelling. It’s only when his best friend Joe and Joe’s parents witness one of the outbursts – the tell-tale blush burning on the father’s cheeks as he rapidly loses control – that Greg finally finds an ally. That the father immediately acknowledges what a bully he’s become and admits to needing help is rather too good to be true; but the fact that this family faces the abuse together, with the love between father and son soon flowing back in, provides a positive, hopeful model. In cases of abuse, children need assurance that asking for help won’t just make things worse.

The possibility that a grown-up close to the child may know of the abuse but turn a blind eye is explored in the gut-punching *Learning to Scream*. Since the age of seven, Malvina has visited her grandparents every Friday and taken a bath with Granddad. Underneath the bubbles, Granddad touches ‘his little Malvina’ and makes her touch him too – while Gran waits outside with a towel, complicit. Now thirteen, Malvina has developed the habit of disappearing inside her head during these bath times, deciding that ‘he can do whatever he wants as long as he doesn’t touch my thoughts’. She tries to tell her father and her brother about what’s happening, but can’t seem to get the words out. ‘He kisses me,’ is all she manages to say, and they call her ‘little miss don’t-

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\* When tackling serious ailments, always read a book through to the end yourself before sharing it with a child. The picture books recommended here are written to capture what it can be like to experience violence in the home and unless the content bears some resemblance to the child’s own experience, it may disturb more than reassure.

touch-me’, as if she’s simply prudish. To compound matters, her grandmother’s dying words to Malvina are a request to keep her mouth shut. ‘Granddad can’t help it,’ the old lady says. ‘Promise me you won’t leave [him] in the lurch.’

It’s when she meets a boy her own age and starts wanting a normal, healthy relationship that Malvina comes to understand exactly how wrong what’s been going on has been. She wonders what her new friend Screwy would think of her if he knew the truth, and practises whispering to him: ‘You’ve got to help me.’ In the end it’s her grandparents’ neighbour, Mrs Bitschek, who realises that Malvina has something to say – though she has to kick her under the table to make her say it. As this story makes chillingly clear, sometimes even close family can stand between an abused child and the help they so badly need.

At the heart of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* lies the revelation that sometimes abuse can take years to come to light. Fifteen-year-old Charlie is the sort of boy who would rather observe from the sidelines than take an active part. A wannabe writer who suffers from bouts of depression, he’s nervous of starting high school – and when we find out that his best friend committed suicide at the end of the previous school year, it seems explanation enough for his mental state. But then he meets Sam, a girl he likes, and during their first kiss he’s assaulted by disturbing flashbacks. At first he ignores them; but they come back even more strongly. The discovery of the trauma in his past is shocking to all parties, including the reader; but Chbosky handles it delicately, with Charlie shown to be in control of how much is revealed. Teens will see that, with the trauma now uncovered, Charlie’s recovery has begun.

SEE ALSO: **bullied, being • bully, being a • heard, not feeling • foster care, being in • trauma • violence**

## academic, not very

SEE: **good at anything, feeling like you’re no**

## acne

 *Spot the Difference*  
JUNO DAWSON

Though in fact caused by a virus, the popular misconception that acne is a result of lack of cleanliness only adds to the misery it inflicts. Until recently, it featured in fiction only to express an inner ugliness. Thankfully, Juno Dawson has now brought us a heroine who we love – and who overcomes its stigma.

ACADEMIC, NOT VERY

Sixteen-year-old Avery is known as ‘Pizzaface’ at school. Her previous best friend, Lucy, dumped her to be with the ‘A-list’ – the girls who sit smugly within their bubbles, perfecting their hair, skin and nails. Her best friend now is Lois, who, with her button nose and Taylor Swift bob, might have made the A-list too, but for her one tiny arm. She is known as ‘T-rex’.

Then Avery is given a new drug that clears up her acne completely. Suddenly everyone can see her for the beauty she is. Swiftly courted by the A-list, she abandons Lois, acquires a boyfriend, Seth, and – feeling unstoppable – decides to run for head girl. But just as the battle for the position of head girl is about to reach its climax, Avery is told to stop taking the anti-acne drug: it has severe side-effects that are only now being understood. She makes her election speech with a paper bag over her head – ‘Imperfect, but content’ in her skin – standing not for her looks but for who she is and what she believes in. We never know which way the vote goes – and for kids reading this story it doesn’t matter. The empowering point has been made.

SEE ALSO: **adolescence • confidence, lack of • zits**

## ADHD

SEE: **fidgety to read, being too • short attention span**

## adolescence

Everything’s in flux for teens in these testing years – their body, their beliefs, their sense of self and their relationships with everyone else. No one should be expected to go through it without some fictional allies to hand.



### THE TEN BEST BOOKS FOR ADOLESCENCE

 *Dogsong* GARY PAULSEN

 *Go Ask Alice* ANONYMOUS\*

 *The Chocolate War* ROBERT CORMIER

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\* This moving story about a teenage girl who becomes hooked on drugs after unwittingly taking LSD at a party – originally claimed to be taken from an actual diary but since acknowledged by its author, psychologist Beatrice Sparks, to be a work of fiction – contains explicit material. Full of compassion for the angst of adolescence, we recommend it as a cautionary tale about the dangers of drug use; but be sure your teen is ready.

-  *Dear Nobody* BERLIE DOHERTY
-  *The Princess Bride* WILLIAM GOLDMAN
-  *The Farthest Shore* URSULA K LE GUIN\*
-  *All Our Pretty Songs* SARAH MCCARRY
-  *Remix* NON PRATT
-  *The Square Root of Summer* HARRIET REUTER HAPGOOD
-  *The Scar Boys* LEN VLAHOS

SEE ALSO: **acne • alone, wanting to be left • arguments, getting into • astray, being led • bargaining, endless • body hair • body image • body odour • chores, having to do • clumsiness • dating • different, feeling • embarrassment • exams • friends your parents don't approve of, having • gaming, excessive • gay, not sure if you are • good at anything, feeling like you're no • happy ever after, had enough of • hormones, raging • innocence, loss of • laziness • moodiness • obstinate, being • periods • screen, glued to the • sulking • trashing the house while your parents are out • understood, not being • wet dreams • zits**

## adoption

 *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*  
SUN-MI HWANG,  
ILLUSTRATED BY  
NOMOCO

Once upon a time, adopted children were sat down at a random moment in childhood and delivered the 'oh, by the way, you're adopted' bolt from the blue. Thankfully, we've moved on since then, drip-feeding the knowledge from the beginning. Picture books are a great way to help do this, as well as reiterating the message that adopted children are planned and deeply wanted. Which stories strike a chord will depend on the particular circumstances of the adoption: find those that best fit the picture from the list that follows.

As adopted children get older, they generally ask more questions about their birth parents and may try to seek them out. This brings a flood of new and complex emotions for both the child and the grown-ups who adopted them.  A story which shows it's normal to have mixed feelings about your adoption is *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* by the South Korean author Sun-mi Hwang. Sprout is an egg-laying hen who harbours a dream – not to fly, in fact, but to become a mother. So, together with her friend Straggler, a duck, she escapes the barnyard and makes a new life in the wild, foraging for

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\* Best enjoyed after having read the previous two titles in the Earthsea cycle.

food and doing her best to avoid the ever-hungry weasel. When she stumbles on a nest in a briar patch containing a 'large and handsome', still-warm egg, she sits on it through the night. By morning she can feel the tiny heart beating inside the shell.

When the little duckling – as it turns out to be – emerges, Sprout's happiness is moving to behold. With her baby, Greentop, in tow, she struts proudly past the animals in the barnyard, impervious to their taunts. 'Sure, he's a duck, not a chick. Who cares?' she says to herself. 'He still knows I'm his mum!' When, all by himself, Greentop learns to swim, then fly – spending entire days wheeling over the reservoir – Sprout is happy for him, even though she's left on the ground. One day, Greentop senses something approaching the reservoir – something that will cover the entire sky and fill the air with its honking . . . and he begins to tremble with a mixture of excitement and impending loss . . .

This fable-like novella is about many things – the desire to be a parent, and the need for a child to be who they are. But what we remember most is the over-arching love Sprout feels for her baby. Sprout knows that the best way to love her son is to understand him – even if that means acknowledging he's different to her and may have to go away at some point and find out who he is. Give this to kids as they begin to ask questions about their birth parents to show that you understand.

## THE TEN BEST BOOKS FEATURING ADOPTION

 *The Teazles' Baby Bunny* SUSAN BAGNALL, ILLUSTRATED BY TOMMASO LEVENTE  
TANI

 *The Most Precious Present in the World* BECKY EDWARDS, ILLUSTRATED BY LOUISE COMFORT

 *The Nanny Goat's Kid* JEANNE WILLIS, ILLUSTRATED BY TONY ROSS

 *Anne of Green Gables* LM MONTGOMERY

 *Wintle's Wonders* (later renamed *Dancing Shoes*) NOEL STREATFEILD

 *Kimchi & Calamari* ROSE KENT

 *Find a Stranger, Say Goodbye* LOIS LOWRY

 *Girl Missing* SOPHIE MCKENZIE

 *Saffy's Angel* HILARY MCKAY

 *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* LAINI TAYLOR