**Best Children’s Books**

**Katharine England**
My favourite books this year have all been tales of self-discovery. I loved the teenage characters emerging from their crude, protective, school-induced carapaces into engaging, tender individuality that Melina Marchetta draws with such affection and humour in *Saving Francesca* (Viking). I was riveted by the magical adventures, beautifully told, of a nameless Chinese slave girl as she grows into her prestigious and responsible dragon-tending role in Carole Wilkinson’s memorable *Dragonkeeper* (black dog books); and by the lyrical language and clever interweaving of themes (the horrors of Hiroshima with the power of story and the blessings of friendship) in Kierin Meehan’s *Night Singing* (Puffin).

**Kaye Keck**
Two picture books and one novel touched a core with me. In *One Is a Snail, Ten Is a Crab* (Walker Books), by April Pulley Sayre, sienna gold, blue and purple make a vibrant counting book with a difference. In *When I Was Little Like You* (Allen & Unwin), by Mary Malbunka, the reader experiences the daily life of the Anangu people at Papunya. Flowing word patterns and creative illustration positioning make this book a delight to handle. Read Sofie Laguna’s captivating novel *Surviving Aunt Marsha* (Omnibus) and share in the embarrassment of young children left in the care of a spinster aunt.

**Stella Lees**
*Cat and Fish* (Lothian), written by Joan Grant and illustrated by Neil Curtis, is full of arresting black-and-white images that shimmer and change as you look deeper into them, while reminding the reader that friendship demands compromises. Darryl McCann’s *Rebel Hearts* (UQP) is a futuristic nightmare that challenges young adult readers to resist manipulation by propaganda and shadowy organisations, and to think for themselves about politics. Emily Ballou may have intended *Father Lands* (Picador) for adults, but the insecurity and misunderstanding experienced by Cherry, a white American child bussed to a black school during the 1970s, will connect with young readers on the cusp of adulthood.

**Pam Macintyre**
During a sultry summer in 1926 Broome, a town simmering with racial tensions and violence, Sam works at his father’s Sun Picture Stadium and confronts painful, unrequited first love and tries to protect the tragic Manilaman, Jesus, in the darkly comic, rites-of-passage novel *Nights in the Sun* (Penguin), by Colin Bowles. In *Dragonkeeper* (black dog books), Carole Wilkinson transports the reader to a richly evoked Ancient China during the Han Dynasty. Ping, a slave girl, must traverse the country and the underside of society to protect the old dragon and his precious ‘stone’ in an absorbing, textured, adventure story.

**Agnes Nieuwenhuizen**
In Martine Murray’s *How to Make a Bird* (Allen & Unwin), Mannie is seventeen. On her bike, in her long red dress, she heads for the city in search of many things. It’s an exhilarating ride. Ursula Dubosarsky’s *Abyssinia* (Penguin) involves dolls, mystery, family tensions, disappearing people and dazzling storytelling. Both are satisfyingly complex, as is David Metzenthen’s finely written, moving World War I saga, *Boys of Blood and Bone* (Penguin). In *Dragonkeeper* (black dog books), Carole Wilkinson mines Ancient Chinese history in Ping’s quest to reach ‘Ocean’ with her beloved rat and a shape-shifting dragon, and Garth Nix explores time in *Mr Monday* (Allen & Unwin), the first of a major new series. Great reads for discerning 10–17 year olds.

**Judith Ridge**
My hands-down favourite Young Adult book of the year (and there have been some great ones, including Melina Marchetta’s *Saving Francesca*) is Jaclyn Moriarty’s *Finding Cassie Crazy* (Pan MacMillan), a marvel of construction and characterisation, and hilarious to boot. Thank goodness for Kierin Meehan’s *Night Singing* (Puffin), a complex, challenging and entertaining novel for the neglected 9–13 year old reader. Margaret Wild and Ann James’s picture book *Little Humpty* (Little Hare) makes my heart sing. Richard Morecroft and Alison Mackay’s *Zoo Album* (ABC Books) taught me far more than I need to know about the mating habits of echidnas, with stunning illustrations by Karen Lloyd Diviny.

**Margaret Robson Kett**
In *Animal Architects* (Allen & Unwin), John Nicholson’s latest title, this accomplished writer lays out the facts, draws for illustrative instruction and neatly avoids didactic dryness. Young readers will feel encouraged to observe and absorb just what interests them. Bruce Whatley’s *Dragons of Galapagos* (Lothian) takes the picture book reader on an exciting journey into the perilous birth and early days of a giant lizard. The artist’s use of pastel colour is outstanding: a beautiful book. In a year overshadowed by Harry Potter 5, these two stand out.