



Reading the wave

CHILDREN

Surfing grannies and origami boats will delight youngsters, **Stephanie Owen Reeder** writes

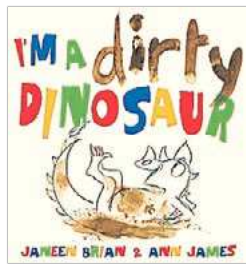
Young children often have a unique view of the world, which to them is full of fascinating possibilities and sometimes complicated domestic situations. Picture books that explore these possibilities and provide strategies for achieving domestic “bliss” are sure to resonate with both a young audience and their carers.

What better combination could a book for small children have than dinosaurs and dirt? Not surprisingly, ***I'm a Dirty Dinosaur*** (Penguin, 24 pp. \$19.99) by Janeen Brian and Ann James tells the story of a little dinosaur who loves to get dirty. He starts out with just a dirty snout but, as the story progresses, more and more of him is covered in a brown, muddy mess. And then, of course, it's time for a wash, just so the process can start all over again.

Brian's simple rhyming couplets, alliterative flourishes, onomatopoeiac refrains, and inviting action words – such as sniff, shake, tap, stamp and slide – are sure to have children joining in with gusto.

The little dinosaur is brought to life on the page by award-winning illustrator Ann James. Using minimal colour, loose lines, a rainbow pen and mud from the dam on her property, James creates a cheeky, childlike creature that squelches enthusiastically across the mud-bespattered pages.

Splashes of colour are provided in the full-page refrains – such as “Tap, tap, tap, tap it like a drum!” – that feature



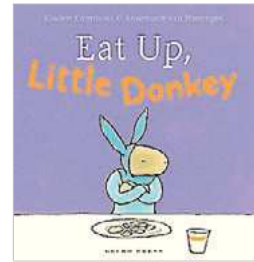
each time the dinosaur adds a little more dirt to his “collection”. The words are presented in large capital letters and bright primary colours. The square, hardback cover with rounded corners and the thick “child-proof” paper add to the overall appeal of this engaging picture book for preschoolers.

The Little Donkey books by Rindert Kromhout and Annemarie van Haeringen also have an endearing main character with whom children will identify. ***Eat up, Little Donkey*** (Gecko Press, 24pp. \$15.99) deals sensitively with a

problem that most parents confront at some stage – getting toddlers to eat what is put in front of them. While Little Donkey is keen to clamber into his highchair, he is not so keen to eat the lunch his Mama has so lovingly prepared. When Little Donkey gets silly, and things look like getting totally out of hand,

clever Mama diffuses the situation by taking Little Donkey for a walk to the park. There she starts feeding Little Donkey's lunch to the ducks, who are a much more appreciative audience. And then Little Donkey changes his mind. The final wordless image in *Eat up, Little Donkey* shows what a great incentive hungry ducks can be. With its embossed cover, feisty main character, and bright, expressive illustrations, this child-centric book deals humorously and engagingly with the often fraught subject of reluctant eaters.

Kromhout and van Haeringen's companion title, ***1 2 3 Little Donkey*** (Gecko Press, 24 pp. \$15.99), is similarly engaging. Mama comes home with one shopping bag. Two nosy friends – Little Donkey and Bobby – are very keen to eat the three bags of treats in it. However, Mama says no, and she puts the treats safely away from little hands. Of course, the two children try to get at them, and disaster strikes. This inevitably leads to nine fat tears, which of course can only be stopped by ten soft kisses from caring

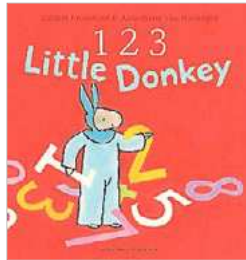




Mama. This is an interesting way to introduce numbers to the very young, while dealing in a warm and supportive way with the idea of facing the consequences of your actions.

Like mothers, grandmas are special people in the lives of young children, and none more so than the surfboard-riding grandmother of the little boy narrator in **Granny Grommet and Me** (Walker Books, 32pp, \$27.95), written by Dianne Wolfer. Granny and her grandson love going to the beach together, where Granny often meets up with the other adventurous members of the "Granny Grommets" – a group of enthusiastic beginner surfers. They go out in the surf and do their thing on surfboards and bodyboards – all except the little boy telling the story, who is afraid of the "strange things under the waves". Gently, and with great understanding, the grannies show him that, while the sea is indeed full of weird and even scary things, they are also "wonderfully strange", and they should not stop him from enjoying all that the ocean has to offer.

This lovely story about mutual support and overcoming fear also has the added benefit of portraying active, involved and adventurous grandmothers, although the illustrations do feature some "interesting" effects of gravity on the grandmothers' body shapes,



especially in their wetsuits.

Apart from that, Karen Blair's textural, colour-saturated illustrations capture with great humour, energy and verisimilitude the delights of a blue-and-gold summer day at the beach, as well as the simple pleasures of good company and a wonderful environment to explore – once, of course, you have overcome your fears.

Water also features in **Tom and Tilly** (Black Dog Books, 28pp, \$24.95) a creative look at bath-time adventures. In a paper origami boat made from a map of Tasmania, Tom and his toy bear Tilly explore a water wonderland. They encounter a giant duck, a busy city, fearsome frogs, a terrible storm, a whale and a threatening whirlpool. Luckily, the intrepid friends return home unscathed, just in time to snuggle into bed together. An added bonus of this book is the clear directions at the end on how to make your very own origami boat.

Author-illustrator Jemma Robaard engagingly explores the imaginative possibilities of bath-time. Using just a few words per double-page spread, and gentle but eloquent watercolour illustrations, she takes children on a thrilling adventure with a suitably reassuring ending – which is just what children need at the end of a long, busy day getting dirty, getting up to mischief and getting wet.

• Dr Reeder is a Canberra author, illustrator and editor.

