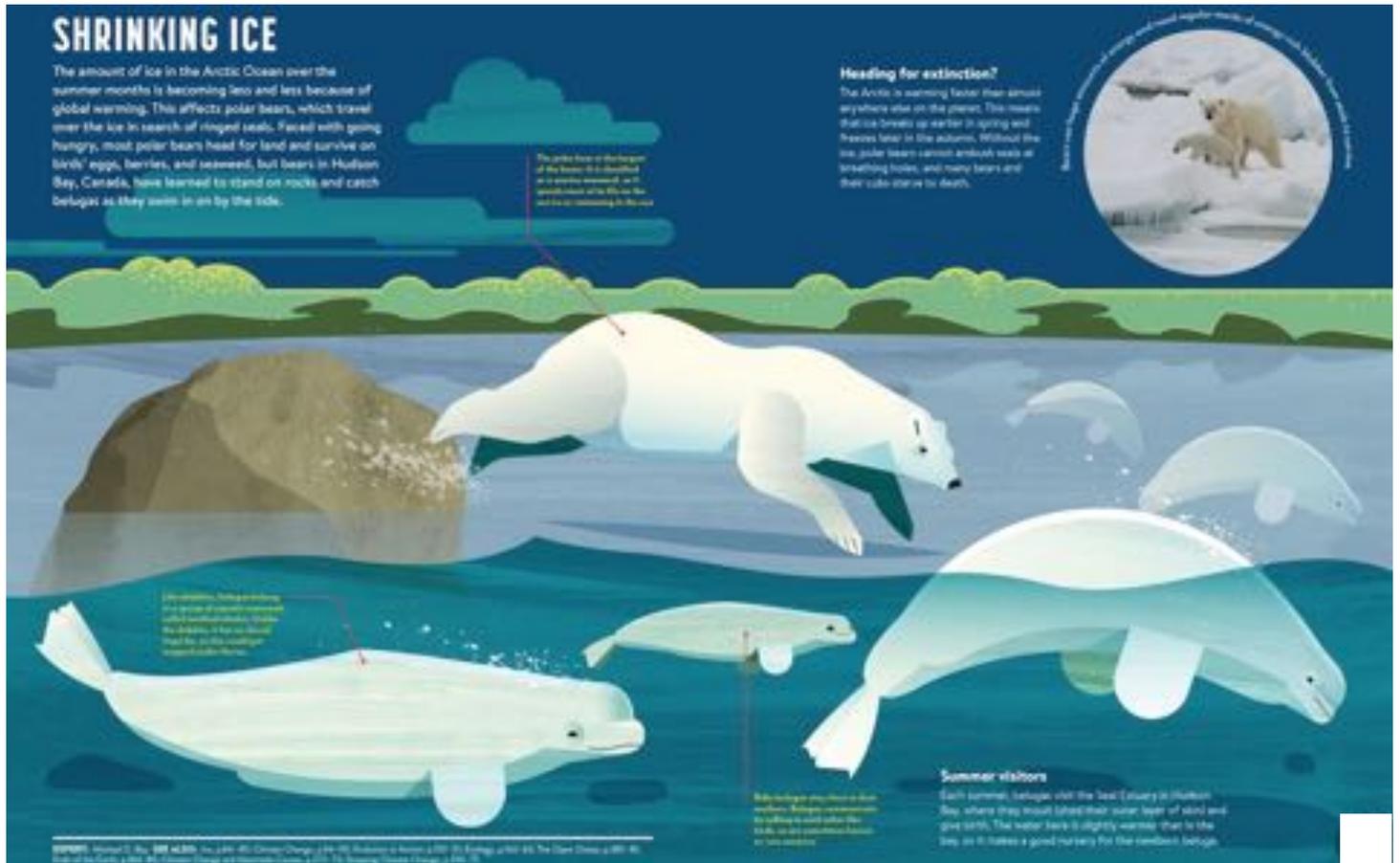


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## The new Children's Britannica: a fantastic voyage through the history of the world

More than three decades since it was last in book shops, the youngsters' version of the famous encyclopedia has been reimagined in print

By Claire Allfree

29 September 2020 • 7:00am



When Christopher Lloyd was a child, among a library of books his father inherited from his uncle was the Children's Britannica, all 20 volumes from 1978, standing proud on a shelf in their bright crimson livery. The children's edition was last printed in 1984 and in today's digital universe feels like a relic from a bygone era but Lloyd has his set still. "As a child, I was particularly fond of the thistle on the spine," he says now. "I found it rather reassuring."

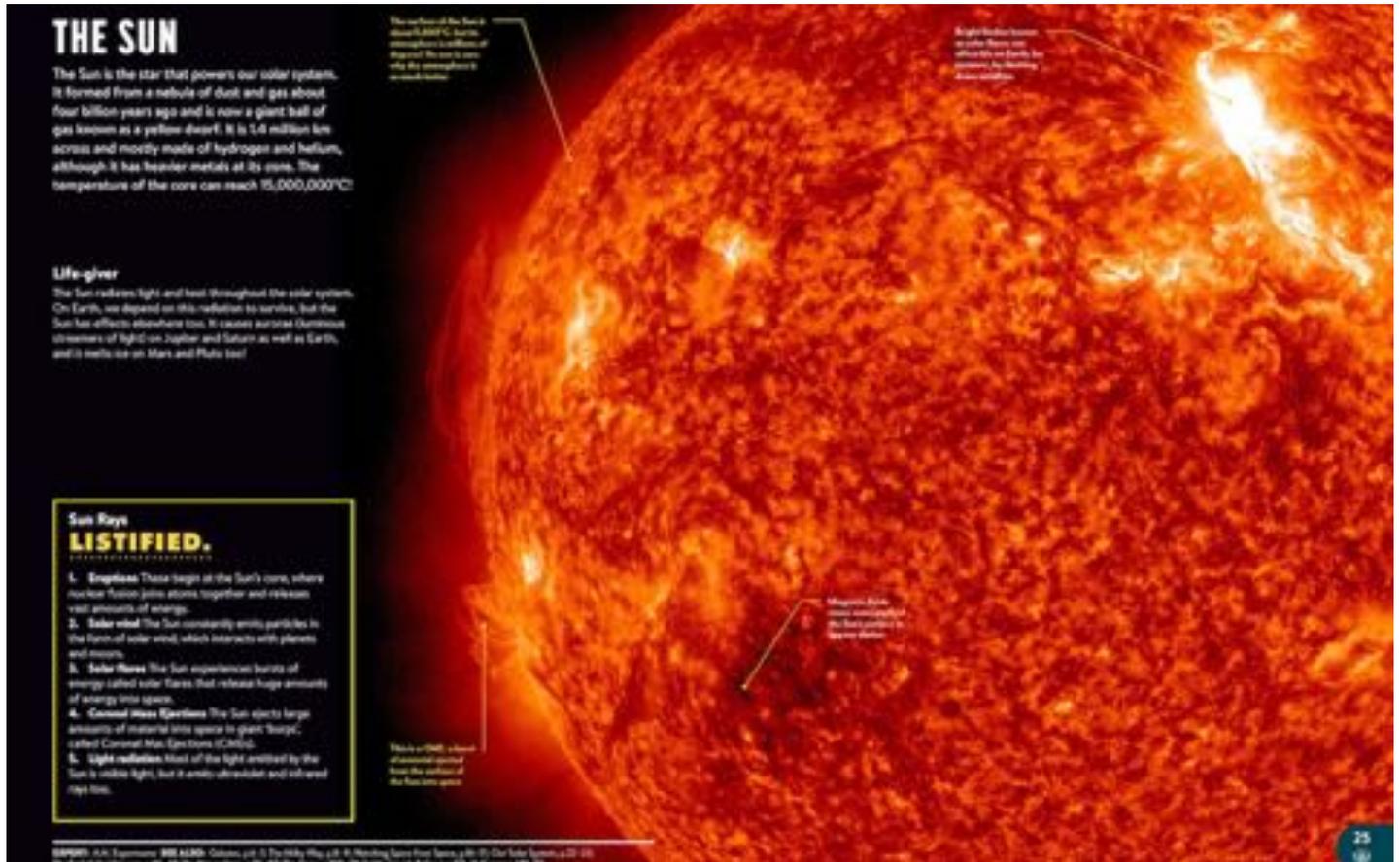
That thistle, which harks back to Britannica's Scottish heritage – the first Encyclopedia was published in Edinburgh in 1768, although the company has been based in America since 1909 – has not been seen on a new Britannica hardback for a decade. The final print edition of the world famous adult versions that once graced the bookshelves of households up and down the land was published in 2010. Since then, Britannica has been entirely online, its thriving free-to-use website managed by 400 editors in Chicago. But next month a new single-volume Britannica for children rises from the ashes of print publishing, the first of its kind for 36 years and with the famous thistle on the spine intact.

ADVERTISING



“The thistle feels like a thread connecting the deep past with my childhood and then with the children of today,” says Lloyd, a historian and author who has edited the new edition. “It feels like a stake in solid ground.”

Lloyd is hoping parents will agree. The Britannica All New Children's Encyclopedia, to give it its full name, has all the scholarly authority you'd expect from a Britannica book, but the idea, says Lloyd, has been to reinvent it for a 21st-century readership.



The solar spread from the new Children's Britannica

“We’ve done away with the A-Z model because these days people look up individual facts on the internet,” he says. “Instead, we provide a slalom journey through the history of the world in eight chapters; four devoted to the history of Earth, four to the history of mankind. We’ve backed up pretty much every page with contributions from more than 100 experts in the hope children might see those experts as future role models.

“And crucially, where the old encyclopedia would always provide an answer, we’ve made it clear that we don’t always have one. We give you an outline about what is known that hopefully opens up a whole load more questions.”

Subtitled *What We Know and What We Don't*, and co-published by Lloyd's publishing company What On Earth books (set up in 2010 and specialising in books that connect knowledge through “giant narratives”), the All New Children's Encyclopedia is indeed a cartwheeling compendium of interconnected facts, questions, answers and not-sures, taking the reader from the Big Bang to the future of thought-controlled body parts, and bursting with colourful visuals and snappy paragraphs on what, for instance, would happen to an astronaut if they fell into a black hole. (Scientists don't know but think if they fell into its outskirts, they would quickly resemble a piece of spaghetti, much to the delight of my seven-year-old daughter.)



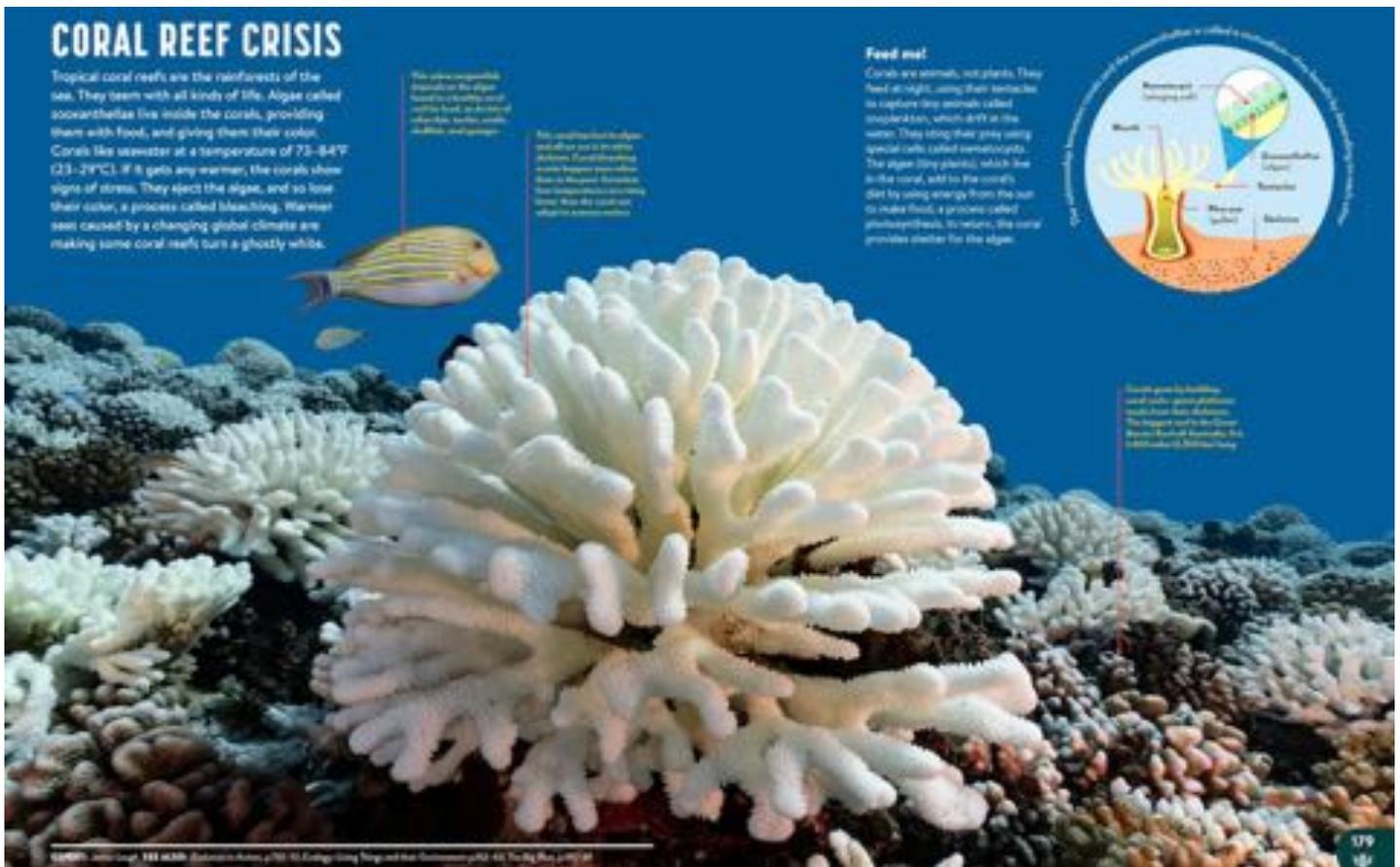
Insects ahoy in the new Children's Britannica

The point, says Lloyd, is to provide a cross-curricular approach that you wouldn't necessarily get online so that the reader can understand why, for instance, the fact the sun releases more energy in a second than has been used in the entire history of mankind makes it a potentially invaluable player in the future of renewable energy.

"Of course, you can look anything up online," he says. "But this book is designed as a journey of curiosity. It allows you to explore through time, and to follow your individual interests, rather in the same way the brain isn't divided into individual subjects. And all the information is editorialised to make it accessible and easy to understand. Plus, it's a book. So no distractions!"

Perhaps even more crucially, its purpose is to encourage children to engage intellectually with what they are reading.

"I don't mean to sound heretical, but I do think reading non-fiction is more beneficial to children than fiction," says Lloyd, who runs his company out of a barn in Sevenoaks. "It's crucial to developing a child's critical skills. In today's sea of fake news where no one really trusts experts any more and where we are surrounded by a mass of uneditorialised information and opinions, giving children the equipment to determine for themselves whether something may or may not be true is more important than ever."



OK, coral? The undersea crisis is tackled in the new Children's Britannica

Facts may indeed be under threat like never before, but the Children's Britannica arrives in the midst of an interesting moment for children's non-fiction. Traditionally, fact-based books in the children's market have been the poor relation to make-believe, partly the fault of well intentioned parents who are invariably more likely to buy a child a lavishly illustrated edition of *Alice in Wonderland* than a book about volcanoes.

Yet the tide is starting to turn. Nielsen BookScan (which collates book sales in the UK) reports that the growth of non-fiction book sales for children have been outpacing fiction for the last five years, and in 2019 commanded 13 per cent of the children's book market (children's fiction sales remain stable at 37 per cent) thanks in no small part to the popularity of inspirational series such as *Little People*, *Big Dreams* and the runaway bestseller *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*.

Moreover, a recent National Literacy Trust survey reported that 50 per cent of children who took part said they were reading more non-fiction during lockdown than they were before, and more than 60 per cent were reading the news more, while Nielsen's reported a 234 per cent increase in educational titles for children in the last week of March, no doubt from parents panicking at the prospect of home schooling.

"We all read because we have a reason to read," says Fiona Evans, director of schools programmes at the National Literacy Trust. "And if children read because they want to find out how things work or why things are, then non-fiction is going to be much more useful and appealing.

"In the past, children have been classed as reluctant readers if they haven't immediately engaged with, say, Roald Dahl or Harry Potter. Particularly boys or children from disadvantaged backgrounds. But often it's not that children are reluctant to read, but that they are reluctant to read what we give them in the classroom or at home, which historically tends to be fiction."

Lloyd often visits schools, having written several non-fiction books himself (and is frequently depressed to find himself introduced as the first non-fiction author the school has hosted). He agrees there is often a bias in favour of fiction, but he also thinks there is a bigger problem with a curriculum that for years has been obsessed with league tables and SATs results and encourages spoon-feeding.

"Universities want students who can think for themselves, who are self-learning systems, which is what we will all need to be if we are to meet the challenges of the future. It's hard to reverse something that's become institutionalised. At the moment we seem to view schools as a mass production factory where we are trying to create a load of drones. It does tremendous damage.

"Ironically, there are more opportunities to redress these things than there has been, as long as we get children out of this hell of screens where they are being distracted all the time," he says. "The need to engage children with how everything connects has never been more

important. We need to fill them with a determination that knowledge is worth fighting for.”

**Britannica All New Children’s Encyclopedia by Christopher Lloyd (editor) (RRP £25). Buy now for £19.99 at [books.telegraph.co.uk](https://books.telegraph.co.uk) or call 0844 871 1514**

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