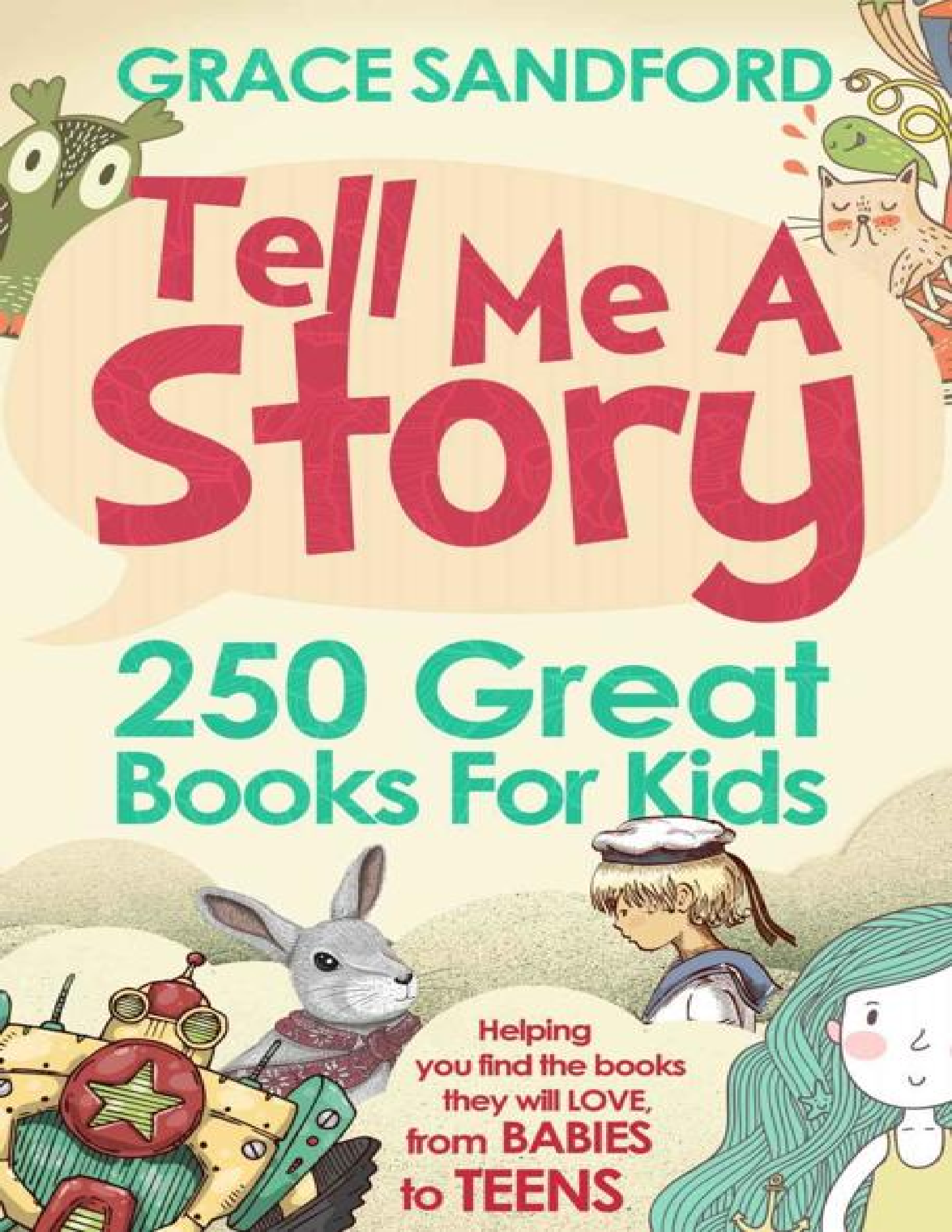


GRACE SANDFORD

# Tell Me A Story

250 Great Books For Kids

Helping  
you find the books  
they will LOVE,  
from BABIES  
to TEENS



Tell Me A Story:  
250 Great Books for Kids

Grace Sanford

[www.teamsandford.com](http://www.teamsandford.com)

1<sup>st</sup> Kindle Edition 2013

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## Introduction

First of all, I'd like to thank you for purchasing this book – a lot of love, sweat and tears have gone into its production and I hope that you'll enjoy it. And if you haven't yet purchased the book, here is some background information to give you an idea of why this review book might be for you.

Right off the bat let me tell you a bit about myself: I'm a mom, a godmother, an aunt and a friend to lots of people who have kids. I'm also a massively keen bookworm and have always loved books. Those are my main qualifications for writing this book. I'm not a professional book critic, or a literary expert, nor am I a child education specialist.

But, when I first became an aunt – before having my own kids – I realized right away that I wanted to share my love of books with my niece. I duly took myself off to the nearest bookstore and immediately panicked: there were just so many great looking books to choose from! I spent hours in the store and left with nothing, my brain addled by all the possible options – should I go for an old classic from my own childhood, or something contemporary that was geared more towards today's kids? Browsing an online bookstore was even worse: there were over 50,000 books listed just for kids under the age of two! Crazy!

Eventually, as I gained more and more friends with children over the years, more nieces and nephews and my own kids as well, I started to compile a list of old and new favorites that were sure winners with the kids I knew. That list formed the backbone of this book: along with extensive research using trusted resources and authorities (you'll find information about all the resources I used at the back of this book in the section marked References), endless discussions with friends and their kids who were older than mine, consulting numerous 'Top 100' type booklists, reading reviews, reading and re-reading the books themselves.

The result is *Tell Me a Story: 250 Great Books for Kids*, from birth right up to early teens. The basic criterion for each book is this: why is a child

going to love this book? I hope you'll agree that this should be the overriding factor when deciding if the choices here are suitable for your kids.

Naturally, with a limit of just 250 books, there are bound to be titles that you will feel are missing from my list. As the saying goes "You can't please all of the people all of the time" – but what I have tried to do is offer up a broad a range of books so that there will be something for everyone.

To this end I have included classic picture books and classic literature as well as popular contemporary books, and even a bit of easy-read escapism makes its way onto my list: because, just like adults, every child is different. The aim has got to be to get our kids reading and, in my opinion, the best way to do this is by finding the books they will love rather than the books we think they ought to read!

This book is for anyone who wants to pass on their love of reading to the next generation – it's for parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, godparents and friends looking to choose a great gift for the children in their lives. It's for people who appreciate that instilling a love of reading at a young age is a real gift, and to give this gift all you need to do is find great books that will motivate your child to read more, and more and more!

## **A note about how to use this book**

The book is divided into five sections for these different age groups: babies to age 2; 3 to 5-year-olds; 6 to 8-year-olds; 9 to 11 year-olds; and 12 into teens. I don't consider any one book as 'better' than the next – all the books here are great! But what I have done is loosely group the books in each section into categories, and within each category they are then listed alphabetically by title.

However, as each child develops and matures differently, and learns to read in his own time, some books will crossover from one age group to the next. I have tried to be clear in my review when a book might be better suited to the upper or lower end of the age group; and also to point out when a book might have a more challenging theme which needs to be considered.

With the vast number of great children's authors to choose from, I also made an executive decision to include each author only once in this book, and on the whole I have chosen what I believe is their stand-out book. Where possible, I mention other great books by the same author that you might want to consider and whether a particular author writes books for different age groups. My hope is that you will see these suggestions as a basis from which to explore each author fully and see what other great books they have written.

Finally, occasionally you'll see the phrases "we think" or "for us" – this "royal we" refers to me, my family and the other parents and friends who helped shape this book. For us reading is a collaborative experience: we all love reading and sharing the same books. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank them all for sharing my passion!



## **A note about the awards mentioned in this book**

Where relevant, I have mentioned when a book has received a particular literary award. However, please note that some books have won lots of awards, and in order to spare you information overload I have only focused on the main awards that are recognized internationally. Any omission is entirely my fault and I apologize now! Below are the awards I have mentioned, plus a brief description of what they are awarded for.

*Caldecott Medal* - awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children. Also a number of runner-up books are awarded the Caldecott Honor.

*Dromkeen Medal* - awarded annually by the Courtney Oldmeadow Children's Literature Foundation for those who have advanced children's literature in Australia.

*Geisel Award* - awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the author and illustrator of the most distinguished American book for beginning readers published in English in the United States during the preceding year.

*Greenaway Medal* - awarded annually by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in the United Kingdom for an outstanding book in terms of illustration for children and young people.

*J.M. Barrie Award* - the Action for Children's Arts charity organization in the United Kingdom presents the J.M. Barrie Award annually to a children's arts practitioner or organization whose work will stand the test of time.

*Man Booker Prize* - aims to promote the finest in fiction by rewarding the best novel of the year written by a citizen of the United Kingdom, the

Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland.

*Margaret A. Edwards Award* - administered by the Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association, and sponsored by School Library Journal magazine, to honor an author, as well as a specific body of his or her work, for significant and lasting contribution to young adult literature.

*Michael L. Printz Award* - administered by the Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association, this award annually honors the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit, each year.

*Newbery Medal* - awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. Also a number of runner-up books are awarded the Newbery Honor.

*Pulitzer Prize for Fiction* - awarded for distinguished fiction by an American author, preferably dealing with American life.

*Pura Belpré Award* - co-sponsored by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, and REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking, the Pura Belpré Award is presented annually to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth.

## And finally ...

As I have mentioned, this book is divided into five age groups, and in each group there are fifty titles. I chose this amount as I believe fifty is a manageable number of books to contemplate, and I'm confident that most people will find at least five titles in each section that they like. However, for further reference I also highly recommend the following books:

*100 Best Books for Children* offers a smaller selection of books but they are selected and reviewed in greater depth by the leading children's book critic Anita Silvey.

*1001 Children's Books You Must Read Before You Grow Up* is compiled by Julia Eccleshare, the children's books critic at *The Guardian* newspaper in the United Kingdom, and includes many European titles that you might not have heard of.

*The New York Times Parent's Guide to the Best Books for Children* is a gigantic reference tome; with over 1700 titles it is quite overwhelming, but it does have a very impressive cross-referencing section so that you can really drill down to find books that match your kid's interests/ age etc.

## Great Books for Babies to 2-Year-Olds

Helping our children to learn to read is one of the greatest gifts we can give them and according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, it's never too early to start reading to your child: newborn infants will benefit from hearing the sound of your voice as this helps develop listening skills and starts him on the journey to language acquisition. There is also evidence that even fetuses still in the womb recognize their parents voices, so – as long as you don't feel too silly reading to your bump – why not prepare your read-out-loud skills before birth with one of the great books listed here?

In fact, for us, a book's "read-out-loud"-ability was one of the main criteria in choosing great books for under two-year-olds: it is essential that the books you read to them at this stage are ones that you'll both enjoy. For those new parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents who maybe don't have much experience in reading to kids, finding a book that is well-written naturally encourages you to be enthusiastic in its reading (very important when you have to read it for the fifth time in a row!) and is more likely to encourage a child to continue exploring the book on his own. Books that feature strong rhyming texts tend to dominate this age group for that very reason: by having a strong rhythm and rhyme, the text is easier both to read and to understand.

The second most important criteria at this early stage are the pictures. Words and images that combine to "tell the story", will always be winners as they allow your child to interact with you beyond the story, as you point out objects, colors and more. Interactive books that include flaps, holes, textures, tabs and pop-ups are also vital additions at this stage: by keeping books fun to play with, you will naturally inspire curiosity.

So, below is our list of the top fifty books for under-tuos. As with all the sections in this review book, we have chosen a range of books from childhood classics to contemporary works; books that have stood the test of time and books that promise to be great favorites in years to come. We

have specified a number of books that are best suited to tiny babies under 6 months, but most of the books listed are suitable from around 6 months and no doubt many of these books will be revisited over time well beyond the age of two. For example, we suggest introducing the enduringly popular Dr. Seuss books right away, knowing that they will likely be a staple of your child's library right through to middle school!

The main factor for choosing books for under-tuos is to tap into their exploration of their universe: books that “speak” to them of the things they do and the things they’re interested in - like choo-choo trains or ladybugs, playing peek-a-boo and getting ready for bed – these are the books that will get them started on the wonderful journey that is reading!

# Books for very, very early readers – babies under 6 months

## FUZZY BEE AND FRIENDS

by Roger Priddy, 2003

***“A cloth book that kids can enthusiastically touch and chew, with simple, two-sentence rhymes that sound appealing to babies. My kids loved the crinkly front cover!”***

*- Amy Broadmoore, Delightful Children's Books*

Author/ illustrator Roger Priddy has been at the forefront of children's educational books, first working with publishing giants Usborne before branching off on his own to create Priddy Books. And, whilst our reviews of great books for kids aims to focus, mainly, on children's fiction rather than on purely learning books, many of the books made for the youngest of our children necessarily combine both areas. And this is what we love most about Priddy's book *Fuzzy Bee and Friends*.

Made specifically for babies and pre-toddlers, this is a cloth book – all the pages are made of fabric – making it easy to handle for babies as young as 3 months. Unlike other cloth books which often simply present a series of bold images, perhaps with one word per page, *Fuzzy Bee and Friends* has a fun rhyming text that parents can read to babies, offering up the critical bonding opportunity of storytelling from a very young age.

Priddy also goes the extra mile, for as your baby explores a brightly illustrated insect world through its textured pages, snippets of useful information contained within the rhyme reinforce the texture. For example on the dragonfly page the rhyme goes, “Don't be fooled by a scary name, this dragonfly is really tame”, and its wings are made of a gossamer light, soft material which confirms that the dragonfly is far from a scary thing at all.

And if bugs don't take your fancy, then there are a number of these great Priddy cloth books exploring other animal kingdoms including, *Squishy Turtle and Friends*, *Fluffy Chick and Friends* and *Snowy Bear and Friends*.

## **LOOK, LOOK!**

by Peter Linenthal, 1998

***“This board book responds to the findings that very young children react best to high contrast black and white illustrations.”- Children's Literature***

Black-and-white picture books for very young babies have become all the rage in parenting circles in the past few decades, and this one from Peter Linenthal is one of the best.

Child development researchers are largely in agreement that whilst a baby's sense of sight develops slowly from birth, the right kind of stimulus can be a helpful tool in his/her understanding of their new surroundings. We now know that at birth a baby can really only see objects 8-12 inches away and as their sight develops they begin to enjoy looking at highly contrasted images, particularly those rendered in just black and white.

This is where books such as *Look, Look!* come into their own. Amongst the first of its kind, this board book comprises a series of black-and-white illustrations depicting simple objects and animals in Linenthal's bold and curvaceous style, along with a small amount of text on each page in a limited range of bright colors.

Clearly, this isn't the stuff of bedtime stories! But as a very early introduction to the joy of books *Look, Look!* can't be beat. As such, it comes as no surprise that Linenthal's range of black-and-white books are part of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, a fantastic scheme that ensures that one book each month reaches the homes of children from birth to 5 years old in over 1600 communities across the United States.

## **PEEK-A-WHO?**

by Nina Laden, 2000

***“The exuberant illustrations in this guessing-game board book will enchant infants and toddlers.”***

*– Lisa Falk, School Library Journal © 2000*

Books aimed at the very, very young should be all about having fun, and *Peek-A-Who?* by Nina Laden is just the ticket, drawing on the familiar game that can often hold a baby’s attention for ages. Ideal for babies as young as 6 months - in fact from the minute your baby gets the concept of the peek-a-boo game - this book will please almost as much as the game.

The combination of brightly colored, highly contrasted images and die-cut holes that keep you guessing until you reveal the hidden object are simply irresistible. Babies also love exploring the tactile sensation of putting their hands through the holes and, of course, the page that contains a mirror (“Peek-a...YOU!”) is the best bit of all!

Laden wrote and illustrated her first book when she was just 5 years old, and her sense of fun and understanding of the world through a child’s eyes continues to dominate her best books. We really like Laden’s work and her follow-up book, *Ready, Set, Go!*, is also worth mentioning here. Based on a similar concept and with the same bold imagery, this time the die-cut holes reveal witty illustrations that go with the surprising words that all rhyme with “go”, for example, “Ready, set... BLOW” reveals a girl blowing bubbles.

## **THIS LITTLE BABY**

by Sandra Lousada, 2002

***“There is some evidence that babies can recognize voices and faces within weeks of birth.”***



- Howard Reinstein, *Babycenter.com*

Babies love seeing other babies, and there are several good picture books featuring photographic images of babies, but if you can get this one – generally only available in the United Kingdom – then it'll be worth the effort, because we think it's the best!

Created by the noted portrait photographer Sandra Lousada – whose work in the 1960s snapping celebrities and other notable people was featured in glossy magazines such as *Vogue*, *Queen* and *Tatler* – *This Little Baby* cleverly puts together a simple yet expressive rhyming text with adorable and expressive black-and-white photographs of babies. But that's not the best bit... the best bit is the end, where the rhyme goes "And this little baby is the one I love best!" and instead of a photograph, there's a mirror for babies to see themselves in. Brilliant!

We were given this book second-hand when our daughter was about 5 months old. She went wild for it! And even now, aged 2, she comes back to it, chiming in with the rhyme and screaming her name out when she sees herself in the mirror. It's really a lot of fun, beautifully executed and – importantly, if your child loves it as much as ours – hardwearing!

# Textures, flaps and holes: interactive books for under twos

## COUNTING KISSES

by Karen Katz, 2001

***“With buoyant cartoons rendered in a bouquet of vibrant pastel tones, Katz creates a book as irresistible as a baby's smile.”***

*– Publishers Weekly*

Since the publication of her first children's book in 1997, Karen Katz has been nothing short of prolific, turning out over fifty books that she has written, co-authored or illustrated. Many of her books are specifically aimed at the under-twos and it's clear that her success is due to a very natural talent for knowing what babies and young toddlers enjoy, both visually and conceptually.

She is, perhaps, best known for a series of lift-the-flap type books, which offer variations of the peek-a-boo game revealing different hidden things: the most popular of these books is *Where is Baby's Belly Button?* with bold illustrations cleverly hiding different parts of baby's body. Thoughtfully presented with both boy and girl babies and of multiethnic origins, this is a book that any parent and baby can easily relate to.

However, our favorite Katz book is not one of her typical lift-the-flap ones. Instead *Counting Kisses* has a very simple concept – a fussy baby needs many, many kisses from all her family members to help her get to sleep. Starting with “ten little kisses on teeny tiny toes” and ending with one last kiss on her “sleepy, dreamy head”, the book not only introduces counting and identifying parts of the body but, most importantly, the comforting message of all-encompassing love from her family.

We also love Katz's wonderful book *Over the Moon*, which relates the story of a couple adopting a young baby, based on the author's own experience of adopting her daughter from Guatemala. Written in simple language in the style of a classic fairytale, it's a beautiful way to explain the journey of adoption to young children.

## **DEAR ZOO**

by Rod Campbell, 1982

***“Simple, stylish and highly interactive, the patterned text invites constant re-reading.”***

*– Booktrust*

For many children, *Dear Zoo* will be their first foray in to the wonderful world of lift-the-flap books. For therein lies the specific brilliance of the book: the endless satisfaction that a young child gets from revealing what's behind the flap simply cannot be underestimated and the author, Rod Campbell, certainly knew this when he created it over 25 years ago!

The story recounts a youngster's search for a suitable pet: he/she writes to the zoo and they send different animals – each more problematic than the last – the lion is too fierce, the giraffe is too tall and so on. Will our protagonist ever find the perfect pet?

But what draws children into this book is not just wondering if the pet will ever be suitable, but also the fact that they have to open the flap of each animal container, box or crate to see what the zoo has delivered. For parents, it's a great opportunity to practice creative animal sounds as you help your child open the flap. You'll never forget the moment your child first starts mimicking the “hiss” of the snake and the “roar” of the lion! It will be both adorably cute and one of those many precious moments when you realize your child is learning and growing.

There are now several different versions of *Dear Zoo* in many different languages, pop-up versions, touch-and-feel versions, and even an app version for iPad! But for us, the original lift-the-flap version will always be the best!

## **PAT THE BUNNY**

by Dorothy Kunhardt, 1940

***“... a classic loved by generations.”***

*– Karen Wellhousen, Common Sense Media*

There are classic books and then there are favorite classic books. These are the ones that come readily to adults’ minds when we think of our childhoods. *Pat the Bunny* is one of those: a staple of many of our childhoods that reminds us of simpler times. The fact that the book still remains popular today – over 60 years since its first publication – is perhaps more to do with the soft spot it holds in our hearts than anything else.

Nevertheless, the fact also remains that the original book was one of the very first interactive books for very young children, and this element of the book is exactly why it still works for contemporary under two-year-olds. The simplicity of the text followed with a call to action (“Judy can pat the bunny. Now YOU pat the bunny.”), is exactly the kind of straightforward phrasing that young children will respond to. And the different textures, peek-a-boo activity and mirror will all help to engage your child’s growing fascination with books.

*Pat the Bunny* is also available in a box set edition with two other interactive books in the same vein, *Pat the Puppy* and *Pat the Cat* written by Kunhardt’s daughter Edith Kunhardt Davis. There’s even a *Pat the Bunny* app for iPad.

## **TAILS**

by Matthew Van Fleet, 2003

***“Youngsters will hardly realize how much they're learning in this entertaining and eye-catching caper.” - Publishers Weekly***

Following the success of his first published children's book, *Fuzzy Yellow Ducklings*, Matthew Van Fleet has dominated the market of interactive books for toddlers.

What's particularly great about his take on the interactive book is that often there is not just a touch-and-feel aspect, or a lift-the-flap aspect or a pop-up aspect – but a fantastically fun combination of all of these and more. His playful combination of bright cartoon-like illustrations with textures, flaps, pull-tabs and even scratch-n-sniff are sure-fire winners for this age group that are so eager to explore.

We particularly like *Tails* precisely because it encompasses all these great interactive qualities, but also because the theme – different animal tails – is so fascinating to youngsters. The rhyming text takes you through every conceivable type of tail - furry tiger tails, wagging foxtails and even slightly stinky skunk tails! And added to this you also get opposites, counting and actions, so it's a book that really grows with your child's learning.

It's clear that Van Fleet is in touch with his inner child as he knows exactly what is going to excite a toddler. *Heads*, his follow-up to *Tails*, is an equally pleasing sensorial exploration, this time with over thirty moving and/ or tactile animal heads to engage with.

## **TEN LITTLE LADYBUGS**

by Melanie Gerth, 2000

***“[A] success starring gentle winged creatures: Ten Little Ladybugs... has sold more than three million copies.” – Publishers Weekly***

You can tell that a book is a hit, when the publisher commissions more books using the same concept and then other publishers copy them. This is true of *Ten Little Ladybugs* – there are now *Ten Rubber Duckies*, *Eight Silly Monkeys* and others that follow the same idea.

The concept is simple, but brilliant. The book has an easy-going rhyme, counting down the adventures of ten ladybugs and their encounters with various other garden critters. The hook is the addition of “real” three-dimensional plastic ladybugs attached to each page and cleverly incorporated into the bright and colorful images.

As the ten ladybugs reduce to nine, then eight and so on in the rhyme, so do the attached ladybugs! Simple, but effective, as young children enjoy both the rhythm of the words and the tactile element of feeling the bugs and putting fingers through the holes.

Part of the job (and the joy) of introducing books to very young children is to instill an early love of reading and finding books that are fun for this pre-verbal age group is essential. *Ten Little Ladybugs* is exactly that kind of book.

## **THAT’S NOT MY ELEPHANT**

by Fiona Watt, 1999

***“Sharing books plays an important part in developing language awareness, even when a baby or toddler hasn’t yet started speaking. It’s also a great way of having some close time together.” - Fiona Watt***

Fiona Watt is a great example of an author who found a magic formula and ran with it! Along with illustrator Rachel Wells, she has created over thirty book titles in the Touchy-Feely Board books range from publishers Usborne. And there seems no end to the variations of the theme: titles

already include most animals you can think of (both real and imaginary), several modes of transport including *That's Not My Tractor*, and story characters such as *That's Not My Fairy*.

The books all follow the same format: a series of cartoon-like illustrations with inserted tactile surfaces to demonstrate different qualities of the animal or character. For example, in *That's Not My Elephant*, ridged card is used to describe toenails that are “too bumpy”, and a smidgen of faux fur for the end of a tail that is “too tufty”. The books are fantastically popular with little ones – touching the different surfaces reinforces this introduction to basic nouns and adjectives.

Short and sweet, rarely more than about five pages long, the range of *That's Not My...* books are great little starter books that engage both sensory and language development, and worthy additions to your child's first library.

## THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR

by Eric Carle, 1969

***“One of the greatest childhood classics of all time.”*** – Kate Taylor, *The Guardian*\*

First published in 1969, translated into over thirty languages and with more than thirty million sales worldwide, Kate Taylor may well be right in praising *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* as the greatest kids' book of all time! Now part of a gigantic merchandising franchise – you can get almost everything to match the book, including baby's first dinnerware set, plush toys, coloring books and more - it's very clear that this book has captured the hearts and minds of generations of children since its first appearance.

The magic of the book, which was both written and illustrated by Eric Carle, is that it works on so many levels. The story introduces the butterfly life cycle in simple terms, as we follow the tale of a caterpillar hatching

from his egg, who then eats a lot, builds a cocoon and emerges as a beautiful butterfly. The book gets the ball rolling on learning to count and the days of the week, as each day the hungry caterpillar eats more and more food; and there's even a hint of a moral here, when the caterpillar feels ill after too much junk food!

The timeless design of the book offers up the unique collage-like graphics that epitomize Eric Carle's style, which are both bold and appealing for young readers, but also quite sophisticated artistically. But, and really this is the important bit, the punched out holes where the caterpillar has eaten through a piece of food are a source of endless fascination for little fingers to explore! (NB – make sure to get the hardboard version of the book, for optimal punch out hole fun!)

Genius! The popularity of the book led Carle to create a vast opus, all featuring his distinctive style and an underlying deep understanding of the themes that will engage children.

(\*quotation first published in The Guardian, reproduced with consent)

## **WHERE'S SPOT?**

by Eric Hill, 1980

***“I... was unaware that in the process of making this book, I had started a whole new development in children's books. I was just having fun.”***

*– Eric Hill*

This original lift-the-flap book is still a hit more than thirty years later! To look at it you wouldn't think that the *Where's Spot?* book was a groundbreaking phenomenon of its time. Published in 1980, the book was *the* original lift-the-flap book for children.

The author and illustrator, Eric Hill, had devised the lovely puppy character during improvised bedtime stories for his son. The story goes that, by chance, Hill was working on an advert that featured a flap hiding



an image and his son loved the peek-a-boo notion so much that Hill decided to use the idea in *Where's Spot?* Thus, in an instant, an entirely new idea of how children engage with books came to be.

Since then, the simple story of the mother dog Sally looking for her puppy Spot around the house has become a firm favorite, and spawned a huge range of Spot books, merchandise and even his own official website featuring interactive Spot games for children, learning tools, fun printouts for coloring and more.

Eric Hill is still actively involved with the development of the Spot brand, along with his son and daughter, ensuring that the brand's focus remains on learning through fun. In 2008 Hill was honored by Queen Elizabeth II for his services to children's literature and was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE), an award given to civilians by the monarchy in recognition of their contribution to society.

# Never too young: clever concept books for under twos

## FIRST THE EGG

by Laura Vaccaro Seeger, 2007

Caldecott Honor Book, 2008

***“Another perfectly pitched triumph from an emerging master of the concept book.”***

*– Kirkus Reviews*

It was really difficult to choose which of Seeger’s many amazing books to choose for this review. Her highly original and intelligent work has won her many awards, combining beautifully crafted artwork and engaging concepts that are perfectly pitched for the eyes and minds of young children.

Whilst many of her books are perhaps geared towards slightly older children (ages 3 up), there are a number of titles that you can introduce to babies – perhaps just as picture books to begin with and then really exploring the themes later.

One such book is the award-winning *First The Egg*, which tackles the age-old conundrum: which came first, the chicken or the egg? The book presents simple concepts, linking the things that go together (egg and chicken, tadpole and frog, caterpillar and butterfly) with bright die-cut illustrations that are a pleasure to the eye. Another of her books that we like for the under-twos is *Lemons Are Not Red*, where colors are introduced with vivid clarity. Also, her *Dog and Bear* series of short stories is a lovely exploration of friendship that will appeal to older preschoolers.

As with all of her books, the illustrations are an integral part of the work. Indeed, on her official website, Seeger describes herself as an artist rather than illustrator, and that distinction comes through very clearly when you look closely at the depth of texture and structure of the art in her books.

## **GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS**

by Jeff Mack, 2012

*“An instructive and entertaining primer on the art of friendship and the complexity of joy.”*

*– Kirkus Reviews*

In *Good News, Bad News* author/ illustrator Jeff Mack has come up with a neat way of explaining fairly complex ideas to little minds. The story of two friends - a rabbit and a mouse - demonstrates the importance of having a positive frame of mind, whilst at the same time showing that an understanding of the opposite negative thinking is also an essential quality in coping with the human condition.

Remarkably, he does this with just four simple words: it's the amazingly expressive imagery that does the rest of the talking. On the first page we see Rabbit arrive in a garden scene with a picnic basket declaring the words, “Good news.” Before he even gets a chance to unpack the picnic it starts to rain. “Bad news,” says Mouse. But the eternally optimistic Rabbit has good news – he has an umbrella. And as the story unfolds, with Rabbit's unfaltering positivity starting to really annoy Mouse's innate pessimism, one wonders if the pair will ever be able to reconcile their differences?

Besides the useful message, what also makes this a great choice for youngsters under two years of age is that it has so much detail packed into every image; there is always plenty for parents to point out and talk about in describing the scene.

## **NOT A BOX**

by Antoinette Portis, 2006

***“Full of mischief, the book’s simple line drawings open up a world of imagination, humor and interactivity that make it a superb introduction to children’s literature.”***

*– Pamela Paul, The New York Times*

It has often been noted that kids seem to have more fun playing with the box that a toy comes in than they do with the toy itself. There is a very good reason for this - a box opens up possibilities in a child’s fertile imagination. Sadly many toys today do so much that a child has little room to improvise and exercise their sense of fancy. A box can be anything at all to a child, not just a container for other items.

*Not A Box* by Antoinette Portis examines this truism. Utilizing simple one-dimensional line drawings, Portis explores some of the possibilities. Rabbit is sitting in a box. When asked why he is sitting in a box, Rabbit defiantly replies, “Not a Box”. On the very next page it is revealed to the reader what Rabbit imagines his box to be, and so on, exploring many possibilities.

Carrying on in the tradition of Crockett Johnson’s *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (the classic exploration of the power of imagination) , *Not A Box* should appeal to infants right up to 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Grab a cardboard box when you read this to your youngsters - especially the very young ones - and use it to illuminate the text. The simple line drawings make no attempt to convey dimensionality, the very smallest may not grasp that the square shape is meant to represent a three dimensional object although they will undoubtedly enjoy the story just as much.

## **ORANGE PEAR APPLE BEAR**

by Emily Gravett, 2006

***“...the five-word book that engages, on every level. It should be handed out at birth. The perfect book to read aloud to babies...”***

***– Dina Rabinovitch, The Guardian\****

When we first came across this delightful book from Emily Gravett – a book that only has five words in it - we weren't so sure about it's worth. At the same time the accolades it received rather intrigued us. And we're now very glad that we took the time to consider it, because it takes a moment to really appreciate the cleverness of this book and how it appeals to young children.

Gravett's illustrations are the essential ingredient that makes this book work. The series of five words (orange, pear, apple, bear, there) are arranged in different orders each time giving them a slightly different meaning, and the images are crucial in demonstrating this word play.

For example, we start with the simple list of the four words in the title with their accompanying images; on the next page the order has shifted a little and now it reads “Apple, pear, orange bear” and there are images of an apple, a pear and then an orange bear with an amusing quizzical expression. The book thus elegantly introduces concepts such as color, shape and sequences to the very young in an accessible and fun way.

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## **THE BABYLIT PRIMER SERIES**

by Jennifer Adams, 2011

***“Thanks to gorgeous illustrations and clever literary touches, you might enjoy this collection of amazing board books at bedtime even more than they do.” – Cool Mom Picks***

The BabyLit Primer series written by Jennifer Adams and illustrated by Alison Oliver has got to be one of the best ideas in young children's literature for a long, long time! The basic idea is to take well-known

classic (adult) novels and use them as inspiration to introduce babies and toddlers to both the stories and basic learning concepts such as colors, numbers, or opposites. It's inspired and genius!

Thus you have titles like *Pride and Prejudice: A BabyLit Counting Primer* where the pages go "1 English Village", "2 Rich Gentlemen" (Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy) and so on, or *Alice in Wonderland: A BabyLit Colors Primer* with a "white rabbit", "purple bottle", "red hearts" etc. In each book the learning concept has been carefully thought through and Oliver's illustrations are not only very stylish but rather witty too, with little details that will appeal to adults familiar with the stories.

There are currently nine titles in the series, each taking a famous novel and transforming it into an utterly charming, albeit bare, version of the story to share with your toddler. With a diverse range of classics from William Shakespeare to Herman Melville to Charlotte Brontë all given this quirky treatment, these books also make great gifts for literature-loving new parents.

# Great stories and rhyming books for little ones

## **A BALL FOR DAISY**

by Chris Raschka, 2011

Caldecott Medal Winner, 2012

*“Rarely, perhaps never, has so steep an emotional arc been drawn with such utter, winning simplicity.” – Kirkus Reviews*

Every so often an illustrator creates a book that speaks louder than words! *A Ball for Daisy* is one of Chris Raschka’s more recent picture books and is highly acclaimed for its simple yet comprehensive storytelling, done entirely through images. The book won the Caldecott Medal in 2012, awarded every year by the Association for Library Service to Children, part of the American Library Association, to recognize the best American children’s book illustrator.

The book tells the story of a dog, Daisy, her favorite ball and the sadness that follows when another dog destroys the ball – thankfully her owners are quick to supply another ball! Anyone who has lost or broken a favorite toy can relate to the tale – and for most children, that is likely to be an experience they are familiar with or will easily be able to connect to.

However, whilst we do appreciate Chris Raschka’s fluid watercolor illustration – and they are indeed very expressive – it is worth pointing out that the layout of the book can be somewhat confusing. Even for older preschoolers, this is definitely a book for sharing with an adult who can talk through each illustration to guide little ones through the story.

## **A BEAR CALLED PADDINGTON**

by Michael Bond, 1958

Awarded Order of the British Empire for services to children's literature,  
1997

***“Being English - or being like the English were in those days -  
Paddington spends a lot of time being scandalised by the prices of  
things.”***

*– Nicholas Lezard, The Guardian\**

In the United Kingdom the *Paddington Bear* books by Michael Bond are a quintessential part of everyone's childhood. Since the publication in 1958 of the first book, Bond has gone on to write over 150 titles in the series aimed at all ages, from board books for little ones and short novels for preschoolers.

The global success of these charming books means that today the *Paddington Bear* books have been translated into over forty different languages, and a vast franchise of merchandise has been created to accompany the books, including two animated series that are now available on DVD. Indeed, some of the Paddington Bear merchandise – particularly a range of Coalport china figurines that came out in the 1970s - is now considered highly desirable in the realms of children's toy collections.

But what is it exactly that makes Paddington so appealing? The clue is in the very first book, *A Bear Called Paddington*, which recounts how a small bear from Peru arrives at Paddington Station, London, with a suitcase, several jars of marmalade, and a label around his neck that read, "Please look after this bear. Thank you". Who could resist such a charming request?

And so, Paddington's adventures in England begin. He is taken in by a kind family and then sets out to learn about living in this new country, with numerous mishaps that occur along the way that Paddington's earnest character can't help but try to fix... and that children can't help but enjoy!



(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## **CHICKA CHICKA BOOM BOOM**

by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault, 1989

***“This nonsense verse delights with its deceptively simple narrative and with the repetition of such catchy phrases as ‘skit skat skoodle doot’.”***

*- Publishers Weekly*

Bill Martin didn’t enjoy reading as a child, and indeed only learnt to love reading at college having been inspired by a poetry teacher to memorize poetry. He went on to dedicate his life to educating children and teachers, and introducing his reading model via his many wonderful children’s books. His best known, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* is a classic, but *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, co-authored with John Archambault, is like no other book with its combination of poetic structure and silly nonsense that appeals to young children.

Once you’ve heard *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, you’ll never forget it! A staple of many of our childhoods, coming back to the book as a parent is a great joy. For those that aren’t yet familiar with it, the basic premise is this: a bunch of anthropomorphized baby alphabet letters race each other to the top of a coconut tree, fall off the tree as it strains under the weight, and then get rescued by the adult capital letters! Yes it’s silly, but it’s clever too!

True to Martin’s philosophy of creating chunks of poetic phrasing to enhance comprehension, *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* is written in clever rhyming stanzas that work best when read aloud. The book is decisively enhanced with brightly colored cutout illustrations by Lois Ehlert, adding to the somewhat surreal premise.

## **CHUGGA CHUGGA CHOO CHOO**

by Kevin Lewis, 1999

***“Lewis and Kirk... embrace an enduring childhood fantasy - the playroom that comes alive at night - and pare it down for very young readers.”***

*- Publishers Weekly*

If your kid is into trains, then this is the book you've been looking for. Though be prepared to read it over and over again! With his wonderfully catchy rhyming text, Kevin Lewis takes us on a fast-paced voyage where an engineer and his son ride their steam engine train to the city, picking up freight and such on the way. The infectious refrain "Chugga-chugga choo-choo, whistle blowing, Whooooooooooo! Whooooooooooo!" is sure to delight train enthusiasts of all ages.

But what also makes this book special are the delightful illustrations by Daniel Kirk. Through them you see that the story is taking place in a child's bedroom and the train and entire landscape of the story are all toys or bedroom furniture!

So when the train track goes “underground” it actually travels under the bed, when it heads “across the river” it does so on a bridge built over an aquarium, and along the way other toys help to load the train with freight made up of toy blocks! Anyone who's seen the *Toy Story* CGI animation franchise will get why this illustration concept is so appealing!

Lewis and Kirk have teamed up on two other transport themed children's books, all featuring strong verse and bold illustrations, so if your toddler prefers boats or trucks to trains, then have a look at *Tugger Tugger Tugboat* or *My Truck is Stuck!*

## **EACH PEACH PEAR PLUM**

by Janet Ahlberg and Allan Ahlberg, 1978

Greenaway Medal Winner, 1978

***“Thousands of children have enjoyed the Ahlbergs' pictorial guessing game - not only because the game is fun, but also because the pages contain action and humor and a sense of beauty.” – Scholastic***

*Each Peach Pear Plum* is not just a great picture book, it's a very clever rhyming tale featuring a cast of classic fairytale and children's story characters in an elaborate game of I Spy. Each page presents an amazingly detailed picture where the character in the verse is hidden (the opening line “Each peach pear plum, I spy Tom Thumb” should give you an idea of what we mean).

Together, we follow the familiar characters (Cinderella, the Wicked Witch, Robin Hood, The Three Bear *et al*) as they interact with each other in fairytale land, with the grand finale coming full circle to the plum pie that has been baked by Mother Hubbard at the beginning.

It's rare to find a book that appeals to both the adults and the children reading it. The concept is wonderfully witty and amusing for parents, while younger children will simply enjoy the pretty rhymes, and older children will enjoy searching out the hidden characters along the way. We also love that there are plenty of little animals in each image to point out too (ducks, mice, birds, rabbits and frogs), making it a great book to use beyond the first read through. This is a very good thing, because your child is likely to ask for it again and again and again!

## **FAVORITE NURSERY RHYMES FROM MOTHER GOOSE**

by Scott Gustafson (illustrator), 2007

***“Gustafson's vision of the Mother Goose characters is so utterly unique. The illustrations are breathtaking and give new life to the familiar rhymes we know and treasure.”***

*– Kim Harris Thacker, Bookshop Talk*

*Mother Goose* nursery rhymes have been handed down from generation to generation, and the history of some of the poems in the collection can be traced back as far as the 16th century. Needless to say, as a result, there are a huge number of *Mother Goose* nursery rhyme compilations. Many of them merit attention, but for us the absolute winner is the Greenwich Workshop Press version illustrated by master of the craft, Scott Gustafson.

Here you will find an utterly beautiful treasure trove of forty-five rhymes including all the well-known favorites, plus a few lesser-known ones, all brought to life with Gustafson's inimitable opulent style which speaks clearly of his fine art training. The illustrations - all oil paintings - are at once detailed, almost photo-realistic in parts, and also endearingly whimsical. And as such they give the book a kind of gravitas, as if it has been in print forever.

Critics may not like the fact that some of the nursery characters are depicted as anthropomorphic animals – for example *Jack Be Nimble* is a cricket – and others may be disappointed that longer rhymes have been cut short to accommodate the full-page illustration plates; but for us, the whimsy of the illustrations are part of the charm and we're happy to lose a few verses to enjoy such sumptuous visual delights.

## **GOSSIE & FRIENDS SERIES**

by Olivier Dunrea, 2001

***“Toddler-appealing story lines and the charismatic charm of the illustrations assure that these smartly clad geese will be marching straight into the hearts of readers.” – Kirkus Reviews***

Gossie and all her friends are baby geese - aka goslings. They are the creation of sculptor, painter and medievalist Olivier Dunrea, who perfectly showcases realistic childhood behaviors through his delightful anthropomorphic characters and endearingly rendered illustrations.

Gossie has a number of friends. In the first book, *Gossie* who rarely goes out without wearing her cute red boots, finds them missing. Searching for them, we are introduced to Gertie, another smaller gosling and we learn an important lesson about sharing. In *Gossie and Gertie*, natural leader Gossie expects her fast friend Gertie to always follow her wherever she goes. But isn't Gertie entitled to find her own path after all? In *Ollie the Stomper* we are introduced to a little male gosling who is somewhat contrary as well as stubborn and impatient. *Gideon* presents yet another boy gosling who hates taking naps, no matter how much his mother begs him to take them; *Booboo* is a little girl goose who is not the most discriminating diner, and *Peedie* is a forgetful little lad, who is always mislaying things.

There are thirteen books in the *Gossie and Friends* series. Dunrea's text is simple and features the repetition that so enchants younger kids. Similarly the simple ink and watercolor illustrations are repeated as well, using primary colors surrounded in white space and adding to the charming appeal of these little goslings.

## **I AM A BUNNY**

by Ole Risom, 1963

***"No child's library is complete without this gentle story of the seasons."***

*– Random House*

Ole Risom has been credited as being one of the most influential book publishers for children, having been the vice president and art director of Golden Books Western Press for thirty years, the publishing house behind many innovative children's book formats and who championed some of the greatest children's book authors of all time.

A lesser-known fact is that Risom also wrote a number of children's books himself. *I Am a Bunny*, a delightful story of a rabbit called Nicholas who tells us what he loves about the different aspects of the four seasons, is

largely considered the best of his books. It was published in 1963 and is one of the few Risom books that remain in print today, a testimony to its enduring value.

Its success is in no small part thanks to the utterly sumptuous illustrations by the great Richard Scarry. Scarry beautifully conjures Nicholas' outdoor world with amazingly precise detail, whilst still keeping the images accessible to children. In one image there are twenty-four butterflies, each a different species; in another, several different bird species have been accurately represented.

The detail and the deep and vibrant colors of each season serve to confirm what Nicholas is saying – that each season has its unique gifts to enjoy. A truly, lovely classic book to treasure.

## **IN THE TALL, TALL GRASS**

by Denise Fleming, 1991

***“Bold, bright, stylized illustrations capture eye and imagination as they convey the simple, rhyming text of this outstanding nature tale.”***

*- Virginia Opocensky, School Library Journal © 1991*

Author/ illustrator Denise Fleming, has written eighteen picture books for children and won the 1994 Caldecott Honor award for the illustration of her book *In the Small, Small Pond* which detailed the world from a frog's point of view with gloriously bold imagery.

In her first book, *In the Tall, Tall Grass* she used the same chunky pulp painting style of illustration, this time showing the world of the bugs and critters on land. She has more recently also added to the series with a look at animals that live beneath the grass in *underGROUND*.

All three books are wonderful additions to a children's library and are sure to be a hit with critter-crazy toddlers. However *In the Tall, Tall Grass*

remains our favorite for the very young under-twos who will be fascinated with the caterpillars, bees, ants and birds that populate the pages.

All three books not only feature her signature highly colored illustrations, but also her clever rhymes with rhythmic onomatopoeia that really appeals to younger readers. Lines such as “crunch, munch caterpillars lunch” and “dart, dip hummingbirds sip” are a joy to read out loud and give depth and richness to what is actually a very simple text.

## **KITTEN'S FIRST FULL MOON**

by Kevin Henkes, 2004

Caldecott Medal Winner, 2005

***“Kevin Henkes is a genius... yet he isn’t quite the household name that Dr. Seuss and Maurice Sendak are, though he should be.”***

*– Bruce Handy, The New York Times*

Thankfully, in more recent years, Kevin Henkes has been recognized for his impressive efforts: he was awarded the Newbery Honor in 2004 for his book *Olive’s Ocean* and in 2005 he won the Caldecott Medal for the illustrations in *Kitten’s First Full Moon*.

For us what makes Henkes really exciting is the fact that he writes both children’s books and young adult fiction, so you can follow his work as your child grows. Some of his other books that we would also recommend for older children are his series of books featuring Lilly the mouse for ages 6-8 ( *Lilly’s Purple Purse* is the best in our opinion) or *Olive’s Ocean* for ages 9+.

It’s not often that you come across an author that can so easily embrace all these age ranges, with their very different demands and needs, both in terms of literacy levels and emotional awareness. That’s what makes Henkes so special. He seems to effortlessly understand what a 2-year-old

wants from a picture book as much as he gets the ups-and-downs of those pre-teen years.

That he can do this both with the text and the visuals is, indeed, nothing short of genius! In *Kitten's First Full Moon* children are treated to the witty tale of a curious kitten trying to get to a big bowl of milk in the sky, combined with bold illustrations in the muted night time tones of black, white and grey. Both the text and the pictures complement each other perfectly, and that's what makes this book the perfect introduction to Henkes' work.

## **Moo, BAA, LA LA LA!**

by Sandra Boynton, 1982

***“The text lends itself to a boisterous read-aloud session, and young children will have oodles of fun.” – Ann Marie Sammataro, Common Sense Media***

Chances are that, in the unlikely event that you haven't yet come across Sandra Boynton's children's books, you'll have seen her work in the thousands of alternative greetings cards that kick-started her career as one of America's most popular humorists, authors and illustrators. Populated with whimsical animals and irreverent silliness, her vast output of creativity has made her a household name and a firm favorite with children everywhere.

She has written over fifty books for children, and so many of them are so good, it was hard to make a choice for this review. Runners-up include *The Going To Bed Book*, *Barnyard Dance!* and *Blue Hat, Green Hat* - all very much worth getting too - but we chose *Moo, Baa, La La La!* as our all-time top Boynton book, because it's just so well pitched for children from a very young age.



The musicality of the phrasing is clearly part of its appeal, along with the fun illustrations, but also the fact that you can't help but get enthusiastically involved in moo-ing, and baa-ing and la-la-la-ing along with the animal characters. The text also lends itself to the wagging of fingers and shaking of heads for "No, no ... that isn't right" and whispering at the end.

Children love seeing adults play-act being silly, and with this book even the most straight-laced parent will not be able to resist getting in touch with their inner comic!

## **OLIVE, THE OTHER REINDEER**

by Vivian Walsh, 1997

***"From the lovable main character and her very original story to the uniquely crafted illustrations, this book is fun, fun, fun."***

*– Patricia Tauzer, Common Sense Media*

It's pretty rare that a book for the under-twos actually makes us howl with laughter, which is entirely why *Olive, the Other Reindeer* has to be in our top fifty baby books! The story follows the madcap adventures of a dog called Olive who becomes convinced that she is a reindeer and heads off to the North Pole to assume her Christmas Eve responsibilities!

How on earth does this dog get the idea that she's a reindeer, you ask? Well, what happens is that she mishears the lyrics to the well-loved holiday classic *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer*: instead of "All of the other reindeer," she hears "Olive, the other reindeer" ... and so the hilarity begins! Will Olive prove a valuable member of Santa's team, or just a terribly costly liability?

The book reminds us of the recent trend in CGI animated movies from studios such as Pixar and Dreamworks, which seamlessly blend together the kind of slapstick comedy kids love and in-jokes that only grown-ups

will understand. Indeed, in 1999, a CGI animated version of *Olive, the Other Reindeer* was aired as a Christmas television special on Fox, with Olive voiced by Drew Barrymore.

Like many of Vivian Walsh's super clever children's books, in *Olive, the Other Reindeer* the cartoon-like illustrations are provided by J. Otto Seibold and are key in bringing to life the wit and humor that resonates with adults but also appeals to kids. Definitely an author - illustrator duo to follow.

## **READ-ALoud RHYMES FOR THE VERY YOUNG**

compiled by Jack Prelutsky, 1986

Children's Poet Laureate 2006-2008, America

***“Here are more than 200 little poems to feed little people with little attention spans to help both grow.”***

*– Jim Trelease, Read-Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young*

If you haven't already come across the legend that is Jack Prelutsky, then you're in for a treat. Specializing in humorous and inventive poetry for kids in over fifty poetry collections, his amazing contribution to children's literature was finally recognized in 2006, when he was named America's first Children's Poet Laureate by the Poetry Foundation.

What's even more amazing about Prelutsky's story is that, but for some chance encounters, his natural talent might never have been discovered. Prelutsky says that, as a child, he had pretty much been put off poetry by a dour schoolteacher who chose all the boring poems.

After a somewhat lackluster schooling career, he took up various jobs ranging from cab driver to photographer. It was a friend who, in 1964, encouraged him to send some illustrations he'd done to a publisher. He worked for months refining them and as an afterthought, one evening, Prelutsky added poems to the drawings. The publisher didn't care much

for the drawings – but loved the poems! And so his illustrious career began!

We love his poems too, and we love his generous spirit that delights in sharing his love for all things childlike. In *Read-Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young*, Prelutsky has compiled more than 200 short poems from different poets and authors across the ages that speak directly to children's experiences and sense of humor. It's a truly remarkable collection of verse that invites you to dip in and out, always finding something new and fun.

And for the ultimate experience of Prelutsky's own wonderfully whacky verse, then we highly recommend his book *Be Glad Your Nose Is on Your Face: And Other Poems: Some of the Best of Jack Prelutsky* which has 112 of his own brilliant poems spanning four decades.

## THE CARROT SEED

by Ruth Krauss, 1945

***“A free spirit whose own childlike sense of wonder and curiosity made her a natural writer for young children.”***

*- Karen MacPherson, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

The enduring tale of a determined young boy who plants and tends for a carrot seed, despite adults around him telling him it won't grow, is as resonant a story today as it was when it was first published in 1945. And, whilst the accompanying illustrations, by her husband and fellow acclaimed children's book author Crockett Johnson, may seem a little dated to today's adult eyes, they are simple and clear and perfect for young children.

For many, including the great children's author Maurice Sendak who referred to it as “the perfect picture book”, the publication of *The Carrot Seed* was the defining moment in children's literature of the time. The simple message of the virtues of patience, perseverance and hard work

must have spoken volumes to the parents of the day, as they emerged from the hardships and horrors of the Second World War.

For today's audience of young readers, so easily distracted by the instant gratifications offered by modern technology, the message is just as important, if not more so. The boy, who plants a carrot seed and looks after it so very carefully, is most handsomely rewarded in the end: a great life lesson, beautifully told.

## **THE HICCUPOTAMUS**

by Aaron Zenz, 2009

***“Bright, pudgy, round-eyed cartoon illustrations rendered in colored pencil are an apt match for the goofy slapstick of the text.”***

*– Kirkus Reviews*

What could be funnier than a hippopotamus? Well, a hippopotamus with hiccups, of course! Following in the tradition of nonsense verse from classic poets such as Edward Lear and Spike Milligan, Aaron Zenz brings us this really silly tale of a hippo afflicted with a terrible case of hiccups; indeed he hics “quite-a-lot-amus”, so badly that he’d “fall upon his bottomus”! It’s very silly, very funny and quite clever too.

Zenz is also the illustrator of this book, demonstrating an equally deft artistic talent with his brightly colored cartoon-like illustrations. His animal characters are quite hilarious – their startled expressions get ever more panicked every time the flailing hiccupping hippo wreaks havoc in their otherwise peaceful world.

Little children will love the total silliness of the story, and the overblown chaos provides ample opportunity for parents to really go to town with comedic storytelling: really exaggerating the hiccups will send your toddlers into giggling fits for hours on end! For that reason, this is

probably not a great choice for a bedtime story, but perfect for reading time on a dull and rainy day!

Zenz's follow-up book, *The Chimpansneeze* – about a chimp with a tickly nose - was published in 2012. We haven't had a chance to read it yet, but can only hope that it is as full of irreverent nonsense and fun sound effects as *The Hiccupotamus*.

## **WE'RE GOING ON A BEAR HUNT**

by Michael Rosen, 1989

Children's Laureate 2007-2009, United Kingdom

***“Beautifully produced, written and illustrated, this is a classic work for any age at any period.”***

*- The Independent on Sunday*

Involved in children's literature and poetry since the 1970s and in many guises (as poet, author, educator, scriptwriter, broadcaster), Michael Rosen has won many awards and plaudits over the years, including being chosen as the Children's Laureate for 2007-2009, awarded to distinguished children's book writers or illustrators in the United Kingdom.

It's easy to see why: his books and poetry speak directly to children in a language they understand. And Rosen is also not one to shy away from more grown-up topics and themes: in his book *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*, inspired by the deaths of his son and his mother, he presents the depths, breadths and challenges of grief in the most poignantly simple terms that children (and adults) will comprehend.

In *We're Going On A Bear Hunt*, we don't have massive emotional concepts to deal with, but there is a bear – a real life scary bear – not like the cute and cuddly ones that so often feature in children's books! Adapted from the popular camp song, we also get a fantastically rhythmic poem, telling the story of a father and his four children who set off into a

gloriously textured landscape to find a bear. Along with the wonderfully expressive illustrations by Helen Oxenbury, the book turns a perfectly every day kind of walk in the countryside into a sonorous adventure.

There is simply not enough room here to go into the full genius of this book. One of the reasons we love it, for example, are the double page spreads interspersing the story where the dad and kids have to traipse through tricky conditions such as grassy fields (“Swishy swashy!”) or muddy bogs (“Squelch squerch!”). The words and images just fit so perfectly, and are so appealing to read and to hear!

Some may find that *We’re Going On A Bear Hunt* is a bit long and wordy in parts for the very young, but it is certainly one of those books that you can (and will) keep coming back to as your baby reaches toddlerhood and onwards into preschool, and should definitely be included in every child’s library.

## **WHERE’S MY TEDDY?**

by Jez Alborough, 1992

***“The funny mix-up in *Where’s My Teddy?* will make kids squeal with delight.”***

*– Jennifer Gennari, Common Sense Media*

If your kid has a favorite teddy, you’ll totally get this book! A fantastical rhyming tale about a boy who goes into the woods to look for his lost teddy; little does he know that an enormous bear has also lost his teddy! You can imagine the surprise, confusion and terrible upset that arise when the boy finds the bear’s enormous teddy, whilst the bear finds the boy’s tiny teddy... will the boy and bear ever be able to find their real teddies in the end?

This comedy of errors, cleverly written for young audiences, is the first in a trilogy of Bear books written by award-winning children’s author Jez

Alborough. The other two books in the series, *My Friend Bear* and *It's the Bear!* continue to explore the unlikely but heart-warmingly funny friendship between a small boy and a great big bear!

Coupled with Alborough's expansively expressive illustrations, the text's rhythmic rhyme is very readable and accessible for two-year-olds and older toddlers alike. As with all of Alborough's work – over forty-five children's books to date – there is a clear understanding of both the topics that interest children and how to express them in simple terms, such as the terrible fear of losing a favorite toy.

Fans of his work, may also be interested to know that Alborough's official website has a wealth of downloadable activity pages, including imagination games, coloring-in pages and quizzes.

# Beddy-byes: perfect bedtime stories

## A BOOK OF SLEEP

by Il Sung Na, 2009

*“Na’s wonderfully illustrated debut is one of those bedtime books that children will likely turn to again and again.” – Abby Nolan, Booklist*

Why do children sometimes see sleep as something to be avoided at all costs, no matter how tired they may be!? It always seems that even the drowsiest kid will perk right back up when he’s put into his bed. So, the very best “bedtime” books are those that aid a parent in the, sometimes hopeless, attempt to calm and relax children rather than stimulating them further.

*A Book of Sleep* is the American debut of Il Sung Na, who originally published the book as *ZZZzzzz, A Book of Sleep* in the United Kingdom in 2007. The spare text is presented in comforting lines of iambic pentameter, the rhythmic pace playing a huge part in helping children wind down.

The creatures of the forest are settling down to their rest. That famously nocturnal bird, the owl, watches over them, making sure they sleep restfully. Penguins, elephants, whales, giraffes and more are all metaphorically tucked in by the owl’s watchful gaze.

Aside from the restful text, we also like that the animals are represented sleeping as they do in the wild, some standing, some lying down, some with eyes closed, some with eyes open, and that the imaginative illustrations utilize muted colors, switching to brilliant radiance as the book ends.



## ARE YOU MY MOTHER?

by P.D. Eastman, 1960

***“This classic tale is as appealing to modern-day children as it was to their parents decades ago.”***

*– Ann Marie Sammataro, Common Sense Media*

Author and illustrator P.D Eastman was first mentored by Dr. Seuss, who clearly saw Eastman’s abundant potential to connect with children’s imaginations and concerns. This is one of Eastman’s best-loved stories, telling the simply tale of a freshly hatched baby bird looking for his absent mother, and asking everyone and everything he meets that most vital of questions: “Are you my mother?”

Published in 1960, it’s easy to see why this classic book continues to win the hearts and minds of readers today. The simple, yet detailed, illustrations, which give a nod to Eastman’s early career as an animator with Walt Disney, and dramatic storyline – will the baby bird ever find his mother again? – never seem to age.

This is also a book that keeps on giving, because of the simple layout and language: having used it primarily as a bedtime story book in the early years, you can come back to this book as a primer when your child starts learning to read.

## CLOSE YOUR EYES

by Kate Banks, 2002

***“This beautifully written and charmingly illustrated story will be enjoyed over and over again.”*** – Kristin de Lacoste,

*School Library Journal* © 2002

Although billed as a book for slightly older toddlers, Kate Banks’ lyrical storytelling in *Close Your Eyes* is easily accessible to younger children

from around 18 months onwards. Coupled with evocative illustrations from Georg Hallensblen, we read about a mother tiger who helps her reluctant young cub go to sleep by exploring all the exciting things he will see in his dreamtime. All he needs to do is close his eyes to reach a magical world where he can play with the clouds and sit on the lap of the moon.

Banks is highly praised for her large body of work, and she is comfortable writing books for children of all ages, from very young readers right up to pre-teens; in recent years, she has been nominated for both the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Young Adult Fiction and the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Juvenile Fiction.

However Banks seems to have an exceptionally natural talent for exploring bedtime ritual: in another equally lovely book *And If the Moon Could Talk* she eloquently leads us through the nighttime view that the moon has of the world outside our bedrooms. As with *Close Your Eyes*, the words and images, again by Hallensblen, complement each other beautifully to create a peaceful vision to help children wind down.

## **GOODNIGHT, GOODNIGHT CONSTRUCTION SITE**

by Sherri Duskey Rinker, 2011

***“Perfect for sleepers who are more fascinated by the motorized and muddy than by the soft and fluffy.” - Mary Harris Russell, The Chicago Tribune***

Published in 2011, this relatively new children’s book became an instant hit with parents of young children who, by and large, are completely obsessed with construction site vehicles! We personally have no idea why our kids are so utterly fascinated with trucks, bulldozers, cranes and cement mixers – perhaps it’s the vast size of them, or the noise? Whatever the reason, they love them and their inherent mystery.

And so, with a stroke of genius, author Sherri Duskey Rinker came up with a question that perhaps we adults hadn't even thought of: what exactly happens to the vehicles when a tough day of busy building is done? Beautifully and wittily illustrated by Tom Lichtenheld, *Goodnight, Goodnight Construction Site* is a very unique bedtime story that sees Crane Truck cuddling up with his teddy bear and Cement Mixer enjoying bath time before bed!

There are so many wonderful bedtime stories that feature fluffy bunnies, twinkling stars and such sweet loveliness – but if you have a boy, or a tomboy, who simply doesn't really care about “all things nice” then this is a great choice for you. And if this book becomes your kid's biggest obsession, you may be interested to know that there is plenty of themed merchandise to match the story, including the *Goodnight, Goodnight Construction Site* plush toy bulldozer!

## **GOODNIGHT MOON**

by Margaret Wise Brown, 1942

***“Her unique ability to see the world through a child's eyes is unequalled.” – Harper Collins***

*Goodnight Moon* is the kind of book a child should be given by a doting grandparent. It's a classic bedtime story that evokes a time gone by; the beautiful rhyming couplets reminiscent of the gentle support and encouragement only an older, wiser person can give. First published in 1942 and still illustrated with Clement Hurd's brightly detailed images, *Goodnight Moon* has become an international bestseller, helping babies and young children get off to sleep all over the globe.

There is definitely something magical about this book. Countless customer reviews, and indeed our own experience, talk of how reading this book aloud – above all others – helps settle their little ones off to sleep. The simple lilting phrasing, first describing the objects in a little bunny's

bedroom, and then saying goodnight to each object in turn, has a calming repetitive quality that clearly has this effect.

But what we think is really clever, is the way Wise Brown both picks out objects that are familiar and fascinating to young children and also references things that connect with children's imagination. In turn, we say goodnight to the clock, the red balloon, the toy house, but also to the cow flying over the moon and the three bears sitting on their chairs. Only someone who is attuned to a child's mind could think to write those words, and that's why this book continues to delight.

## **GUESS HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU**

by Sam McBratney, 1994

***“This sentimental tale gives a good tug on the heartstrings without descending into sentimentality. Gentle humor and a pervading sense of love dominate the pages.”***

*- Ann Marie Sammataro, Common Sense Media*

Since its first appearance on children's bookshelves in 1994, this delightful bedtime story has gone on to sell more than twenty million copies worldwide and been produced in over thirty languages. This remarkable achievement is surely testament to the winning combination of a lovely text from author Sam McBratney and the delicate illustrations of Anita Jeram.

There's no real story in *Guess How Much I Love You*, instead we see the bedtime ritual of two nutbrown hares: the Little Nutbrown Hare asks the Big Nutbrown Hare the all-important question of how much he is loved, and what ensues is each hare coming up with ever greater expressions of their love for each other. It's a very endearing conversation, illuminating this everyday ritual that many families take part in. In our family, the game is the same but slightly different: “I love you”, “I love you more”, “Impossible!”

We also like the fact that, although the hares are never specifically assigned genders, it rather feels as if they are father and son, which is relatively rare in children's literature for this young age group. McBratney provides another great father figure in his more recent children's book *You're All My Favorites*, where a father bear explains why each of his three cubs are each loved equally.

## **I'LL SEE YOU IN THE MORNING**

by Mike Jolley, 2005

***“The gentle words which make night friendly and the reassurance of the mother's proximity are given visual expression with soft pictures.”***  
– *Children's Literature*

The back cover of this book says it all: “This dreamy little book is like a hug and a kiss goodnight.” It is an utterly charming poem designed to reassure and comfort children who might fear the approaching darkness of the night and the accompanying separation from their parents. The accompanying soft focus illustrations by Mique Moriuchi add to the tenderness of the words perfectly, creating a wholly satisfying bedtime story book.

The overall message of love and security that this book imparts is very beautifully conveyed – we particularly like the imagery of the night being like “just a blanket that helps the earth to sleep” - and what could be better for night time fears than the reassuring final line “and I'll see you in the morning”?

Even if your child is not particularly afraid of the dark, the soothing rhythm lends a sense of peacefulness at bedtime – especially good if you have a live wire of a toddler who needs help in winding down to sleep.

## **I LOVE YOU THROUGH AND THROUGH**

by Bernadette Rossetti-Shustak, 2004

***“This is a sweet book... It reads as an affirmation that the child will be loved, from top to bottom, when happy or sad.”***

*– Martha Topol, School Library Journal © 2005*

On her official website, Rossetti-Shustak talks of how her book *I Love You Through And Through* is all about the “unconditional love and total acceptance” that parents have for their children, and the importance of showing children as often as possible that they are loved exactly for who they are. And that is exactly why this book is so well loved by parents and children everywhere.

The elegantly precise words get straight to the point in a way that little ones will fully understand, even if they’ve had a rough day of typical growing-up challenges that might have tested their parents’ patience: “I love your happy side, your sad side, your silly side, your mad side”. The book moves on through the obvious things we love about our children – “fingers and toes... ears and nose” - to the more complex notions such as the actions and emotions that express their character. And the story beautifully rounds off with a promise that this love will last for all time.

Rossetti-Shustak’s book is something of a one-hit wonder. *I Love You Through And Through* was published in 2004 and so far she has sadly not published any other children’s books. But it is a stellar singular hit that simply must be on everyone’s top books list for this age group. Letting young children know how very much they are loved, right from day one, is that important!

## **JAMBERRY**

by Bruce Degen, 1983

***“Berries and jam are roundly celebrated in a lilting text that, coupled with the jaunty colored pictures, make it hard to resist thinking about***

*one of summer's lusher treats.”- Booklist*

*Jamberry* tells the joyfully fanciful tale of a bear and a boy romping through the countryside looking for as many berries as they can – including some that adults might not have heard of – just for the sake of eating lovely berries! It is pretty nonsensical and definitely quite silly, but its charming lyricism makes it a good choice for bedtime for very little ones.

Although published in 1983, *Jamberry* has an old-world feel to it that accentuates its charm. This is mostly thanks to the wonderfully detailed images of illustrator/ author Bruce Degen. The boy in the story, with his battered straw hat, tatty britches and braces, reminds us very much of the archetypal Tom Sawyer character and elements like the decorated capital letter in the opening line and the plant-based borders have clear links to ancient manuscripts.

But when you look a little closer at the detail, there are some fabulously fun surprises: cookies, sugar bread and jellybeans grow on bushes and trees, lily pads are actually butter pats and waffles, reeds are tipped with marshmallows. When you find yourself reading this book for the umpteenth time, these quirky details will certainly keep this book fun and fresh for you too.

## **LITTLE TUG**

by Steven Savage, 2012

***“With just 100 words, including the title, this book is a good one for last call, as any demand to “read it again” can be easily satisfied.”***

*– Roger Sutton, The New York Times*

One of the more recent books to cross our path whilst researching this book is this latest offering from award winning author/ illustrator Steven

Savage and, as soon as we read it, we just knew it had to be included. Published in 2012, *Little Tug* combines Savage's rich retro imagery, and a storyline that is reminiscent of family-favorite *The Little Engine That Could*, to great and charming effect.

Little Tug is not very big and not very fast. And he rather wishes he could be as big as an ocean liner or as fast as a speedboat, but he soon learns that when these other boats get into trouble, he's the only one who can help. And at the end of a long day helping everyone out Little Tug is richly rewarded by his bigger friends.

The chunky block cut illustrations and simple text is perfect for children under two years old, and learning to appreciate one's own individuality is a lovely message to convey to little ones who are trying to make sense of a very complex world. Some might feel that the ending of the story is a bit too sweet, but we think that the reassurance of the bigger boats looking after Little Tug as he gets ready to go to bed is exactly the kind of comfort small children will appreciate.

## **LLAMA LLAMA RED PAJAMA**

by Anna Dewdney, 2005

***“An uproariously funny tale detailing the true events that occur between lights out and when a wee one actually falls asleep.” – Kirkus Reviews***

Since the first appearance of Anna Dewdney's llama family in 2005, her series of children's books have taken a firm hold in parenting circles everywhere, with several of them topping best sellers lists the minute they are released!

It's easy to see why: the watertight combination of strong rhyming text, boldly eloquent illustrations, and every day themes is always a sure fire winner. But what really make the Llama Llama books work are, most importantly, the accurately drawn dynamics and emotions that play out



between family members that are so clearly recognizable to young children.

This is made clear right from the first book in the series, *Llama Llama Red Pajama*. It's time for Baby Llama to go to bed, but after Mama Llama tucks him in and heads downstairs, he gets scared and needs to hear her reassurance that "Mama Llama's always near, even if she's not right here" to settle him to sleep.

Other titles in the series that we particularly like include *Llama Llama Time to Share*, where little Llama learns to share his toys with his new friend; and *Llama Llama Mad at Mama*, where a shopping trip tantrum can only be resolved with co-operation from both parent and child. It's great that little Llama Llama reacts to real life just as our toddlers do and exploring these big emotions through books is a useful tool in helping our toddlers learn to manage them.

### **“MORE MORE MORE,” SAID THE BABY: 3 LOVE STORIES**

by Vera B. Williams, 1990

Caldecott Honor Book, 1991

***“A joyous expression of verbal and physical affection, these are truly love stories for our times.”***

*– Starr LaTronica, School Library Journal © 1990*

Vera B. Williams came into children's books a little later in life, having previously trained in graphic arts and working as a teacher. Her first books were published in the late 1970s when Williams was already in her 50s with a wealth of life experience, and it is perhaps because of this that her books are filled with so much carefully considered imagery and emotionally mature text.

In *“More More More,” Said the Baby: 3 Love Stories* you get three beautifully crafted stories depicting everyday family life and the utter love

that is shared between family members. But more than this, you also get three multicultural and multigenerational families, which underlie Williams' clear concern to showcase the universality of the love that exists between adults and their offspring.

Williams has won various awards for her work, including the 1991 Caldecott Honor for the illustrations that go with this book; the bright, fluid watercolor paintings with rainbow colored text add to the open, warm and celebratory tone of the book. And whilst we do love the imagery, what we enjoyed most about "*More More More*"... is the naturalistic, conversational style of the text that seems to hark back to traditional oral storytelling, effortlessly creating a sense of intimacy between the reader and the child who is listening.

## **OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!**

by Dr Seuss, 1990

***"A person's a person, no matter how small."***

*- Dr. Seuss, Horton Hears a Who!*

Of course, the outstanding importance of the Dr. Seuss' opus to the world of children's literature cannot be covered in a simple review here. And yet, at first, adults didn't really get the charm of his simple philosophy, that children want the same things as adults: "to laugh, to be challenged, to be entertained and delighted." It took twenty-seven attempts before a publisher accepted Dr. Seuss' first children's book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, back in 1937!

Now his collection of forty-six children's books has become part of the very fabric of American children's literature and a ubiquitous element of everyone's childhood. The silly/ serious tales have been collated in various compendiums, abridged and adapted for different age groups, turned into Broadway musicals and, more recently, superbly executed feature films, both in animated and non-animated genres.

Our personal all-time favorite is, in fact, the last story Dr. Seuss published, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* With its utterly lovely explanation of how we humans learn to adapt to the highs and lows in the journey of life, it's the perfect book choice for any child at any age.

Whilst it may seem a challenging theme for babies under two, the rhymes and rhythms of a couple of stanzas make for pleasant bedtime reading and will charm you, the parent, in those quiet moments when you take stock of the challenges of parenthood. And as your child grows and engages more in reading, there are many, many other versions and editions of all the Dr. Seuss classics to grow with him.

## **TIME FOR BED**

by Mem Fox, 1993

Dromkeen Medal Winner 1990, Australia

***“Charming illustrations and comfortable rhymes characterize this appealing bedtime book.”***

*– Joy Fleishhacker, School Library Journal © 1993*

Australian author Mem Fox is best known in her homeland for her hugely popular debut children's book *Possum Magic*, which has sold over four million copies worldwide. Since that first book, Fox has gone on to write many more wonderful children's books as well as having an active career as both an educator and advocator for literacy.

*Time for Bed*, first published in 1993 and an instant best seller, is Fox's best known book in the United States and has remained high on the list of best loved books with parents and children alike ever since. With its soothing, repetitive rhyming structure calling familiar animals to get settled to bed (“It's time for bed, little mouse, little mouse/ Darkness is falling all over the house.”) accompanied by delicately cozy watercolor

illustrations by Jane Dyer, it is a magical bedtime story that is both charming and effective.

Fox is a great believer in the importance of reading aloud to young children and, as with all her books, *Time for Bed* is underpinned with the author's very own "ten commandments" for reading aloud to children, as detailed on her official website. In particular her instruction to "read with joy and enjoyment: real enjoyment for yourself and great joy for the listeners" is made very easy with this beautifully structured book.

## **THE HOUSE IN THE NIGHT**

by Susan Marie Swanson, 2008

Caldecott Medal Winner, 2009

***"Artful simplicity, homely wisdom... quiet tone demonstrate the interconnected beauty and order of the world in a way that both children and adults will treasure." - Publishers Weekly***

This book is almost certainly like nothing you've ever seen before, thanks to the stunning visual imagery by illustrator Beth Krommes who richly deserved to win the 2009 Caldecott Medal for her contribution to this beautiful storybook. Using the scratchboard technique to create white on black images which are then infused with yellow gold highlights, Krommes offers up the perfect illusion of the night time world that is as reassuring and comforting as the lyrical text it depicts.

Inspired by cumulative nursery rhymes, poet and author Susan Marie Swanson weaves a poem together, describing the magical nighttime flight of fantasy of a young girl who is given a key to a house where she finds a book that comes to life. As the story expands ever outwards into the realms of imagination, you can't help but be drawn into the beautiful adventure. And for young children the cumulative style (where the

introduction of one object leads to another and so on) gives the narrative a structure that they can easily make sense of.

The lyricism and lightness of the text makes it a lovely read for bedtimes for very little ones, and older toddlers will enjoy exploring the unusual but familiar imagery of the black and white nighttime world.

## **THE SLEEPY LITTLE ALPHABET: A BEDTIME STORY FROM ALPHABET TOWN**

by Judy Sierra, 2009

***“The jaunty text and subversive humor in this hybrid alphabet book/? bedtime story will certainly lead to repeat readings and new discoveries.”***  
– *The Horn Book*

Judy Sierra worked for many years as a puppeteer before turning her hand to writing children’s books. On her official website she credits the author Uri Shulevitz, for inspiring this transition when she heard him say that “picture books are like small theatres”. Thank goodness for that eureka moment, for the world of children’s literature would be much poorer without Sierra in it! For, indeed, her books resonate with the “high drama and slapstick humor” that she knew children loved from her puppet shows.

This focus on dramatic comedy is very true of *The Sleepy Little Alphabet* – a gorgeously funny book where the “grown-up” capital letters of the alphabet chase, cajole and comfort their little letter offspring to bed. Sierra’s strong rhyming verse is deftly illustrated by Melissa Sweet, who visually brings to life the fantastical world of Alphabet Town. There are many laugh-out-loud moments, as the kid letters try to avoid bedtime, eventually – of course – succumbing as they all do in the end.

And if your toddler likes Sierra’s work, then there are many other Sierra books to explore. As an entertainer, Sierra often used traditional folklore to weave magical stories for her audience, and many of her books for older

children are also inspired by folklore – one of our favorites is *Silly and Sillier: Read-Aloud Tales from Around the World*, a collection of 20 madcap stories from around the world.

## Great Books for Preschoolers

### Aged 3 to 5

The three to five-year-old age group was one of our favorites to compile as many of the books here are classics from our own childhood that have really stayed with us to this day. That is a secondary part of the joy of reading with your kids – getting to rediscover all the great books that marked you as a child. Books like *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon* and *Where the Wild Things Are* have made their mark on millions of kids over the generations, and have a timeless quality to them that keeps them fresh for today's kids too.

At this stage you will still be looking for the best read-out-loud books that keep both you and your child entertained. And because under-fives will often still insist on reading the same favorite book over and over again, this age is a good time to introduce story series books – for example the *Curious George* books – so that whilst the character becomes a firm favorite who must be revisited every night, at least you can vary the actual story from time to time!

We also enjoyed getting to explore books from contemporary authors and in particular those books that introduce new concepts and life lessons in new and interesting ways. The preschool years are the ones where we really start teaching our children about the wider world they live in: the job for us now is to find great books that help them explore their creativity and imagination, books that offer strong role models and books that give useful guidance.

This is also a wonderful time to choose books that are simply funny! As children begin to truly mature into their personalities, their understanding becomes more sophisticated and they can begin to get the kind of humor that you'll find in some of the books listed here. To that end, the illustrations become even more important in relating the story: for example, in *The Gruffalo* the expressions on Mouse's face as he brags

about his fearsome friend are just perfectly rendered, so we all know he's making it up.

But as sophisticated as they are becoming, children under five often need lots of reassurance and are still fond of routines. Bedtime stories can play a big part here in giving that sense of security and structure. You'll likely still be reading some of the bedtime books from the under-two list, so here are just a few more that will be welcome additions at this age.

It's worth remembering again, that at this stage, the joy of reading is really also the joy of spending quality time interacting with a parent, grandparent or carer. The books and authors we've listed here are all very much geared to being enjoyed and explored together: some will make you laugh, some will raise questions to be discussed, and some will just result in a sleepy hug at the end!



# Classics for every child's library

## ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

by Lewis Carroll, 1865

***“Inventive language and charming fantasy make this a classic that both adults and kids love.”***

*– Monica Wyatt, Common Sense Media*

Lewis Carroll's classic novel of literary nonsense began its life one day in 1862 when he was rowing a boat down a section of the River Thames, in which the three daughters of Oxford Vice Chancellor Liddell were passengers. He began crafting a story to entertain the girls and one of them, Alice, asked him to write down the tale for her. He not only did that, he published it as *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, and it was destined to become an enduring classic.

The novel tells the tale of Alice who was very bored, sitting on a riverbank with her sister until she spied a white rabbit dressed in human clothes, which talked and carried a pocket-watch. She gave chase; fell down his rabbit hole and into the weird world of Wonderland. Here Cheshire cats disappeared leaving nothing but a smile, the Mad Hatter had a strange tea party, and the Queen played croquet with flamingos as mallets. Populated by Dodo birds, dormice, caterpillars and other anthropomorphic animals, the novel captured the hearts of the public and became a great success.

For most three to five-year-olds, the original *Alice in Wonderland* is likely to be a bit heavy-going with its nonsensical happenings and Victorian prose. However, the imaginative universe that Alice finds is perfect for this age, and so this is one time when the simplified Disney version of the story might be better suited to the age group, especially if they've seen the movie. That said, the original novel makes fine bedtime story material, though you may have to stop and clarify a few things along the way.

## **CAPS FOR SALE**

by Esphyr Slobodkina, 1938

*“One of the best readaloud picture books of all time.” – Elizabeth Bird,  
School Library Journal © 2012*

While adults may be easily bored with repetitive children’s books, those who read to preschoolers will understand the importance of repetition in relation to a child learning to read independently. Repetition reinforces memory, and is an important step towards word recognition in preschoolers. This classic book from 1938 is a great illustration of this principle.

*Caps for Sale: A Tale of a Peddler, Some Monkeys and Their Monkey Business* is based on an old Siberian folk tale, adapted and illustrated by Esphyr Slobodkina. The book tells the story of a peddler who sells caps in his village. He keeps his entire inventory on top of his head; many caps of various colors each stacked one upon another. He moves through the streets shouting “Caps! Caps for Sale! 50 cents!” One day, when sales are slow, the peddler sits down beneath a tree, his caps stacked beside him. He soon falls asleep and awakes to find all his caps gone. Looking up he sees a troop of monkeys on the limbs above him, each wearing one of his caps! How will he ever get them back?

Slobodkina’s stylized illustrations are bright and engaging; her color palette is dominated by orange, brown, olive green, with bits of red added in. While the peddler is rendered in black and white the caps are colored according to the rhythmic text which uses the repetition principle to great effect: the book was written in 1938 and has remained a bestselling children’s title ever since.

## **CORDUROY**

by Don Freeman, 1968

***“A timeless story... [that] speaks to many themes, including friendship, courage, and hope.”***

*– Mary LeCompte, Common Sense Media*

What happens in a department store after it closes for the night? As adults we know: next to nothing really. However, in the imagination of a child, all things are possible, including a toy teddy bear coming to life and wandering about.

Don Freeman’s *Corduroy* engagingly explores this fantasy. Corduroy is the name of a stuffed bear sitting on a shelf in a department store. One day a girl named Lisa, shopping with her mother, sees Corduroy and asks her mom to buy him for her. Her mother resists spending more money, and notes that the bear is a bit shop-worn; he’s missing a button from his overalls! This event inspires Corduroy to search the department store for his missing button that night. He embarks on a delightful excursion through the various areas of the store, seeing things he never has before. Does he find the button? Might Lisa come back?

Freeman wrote *Corduroy* in 1968, a turbulent time when many traditional values were being questioned. His aim was to contrast the differences between the artificial luxuries of the department store against how people really live; the book reinforces with a gentle wisdom some very basic values. When he shopped the book around to publishers (including Viking Press which had published his other books) he was met with rejection after rejection. He finally resubmitted the book to Viking and they took a chance on the title. And thank goodness they did - the book has become a classic bestseller enjoyed by legions of children in the decades since.

## **HAROLD AND THE PURPLE CRAYON**

by Crockett Johnson, 1955

***“An ingenious and original little picture story.”***

*– The Horn Book*

There is one children's book that is guaranteed to take most adults born in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century back to a place of warm and cherished memories in a heartbeat. That book is *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. Some of my own earliest memories involve being enraptured by the plucky young boy creating his own "reality" with the help of his oversized crayon. Crockett's simple line drawings (all in purple) evoke a sense of enchantment that more elaborate artwork could not have captured.

Written in 1955, Crockett Johnson's classic book is as captivating today as when it first appeared. Four-year-old Harold (in his footie pajamas) wants to take a walk in the moonlight. Unfortunately, there is no moon; so, Harold draws one! Needing a path to walk on, he also draws that. The magical landscape that continues to flow from Harold's crayon shows him many things which seem to surprise him as much as us. Harold also proves he's as resourceful as he is creative; when he encounters water, he draws a purple boat and he sketches landmarks so he won't get lost.

Harold's adventures are of a quiet and contemplative sort; the quest he goes on he goes on alone, just him and his fertile imagination. There is a quiet sense of wonder, and an unshakeable belief that anything is possible when you go on Harold's journey with him. Johnson wrote eight sequels to the original book, each a worthy successor to the enchanting original.

## **MAKE WAY FOR DUCKLINGS**

by Robert McCloskey, 1941

Caldecott Medal Winner, 1942

***Designated the official children's book of Massachusetts in 2003***

*Make Way for Ducklings* is an enduring children's classic. First published in 1941, its popularity and sales are still brisk over six decades later and the title has sold well over two million copies to date. The book was

awarded the prestigious Caldecott Medal in 1942, has been praised by generations of critics and is beloved worldwide.

*Make Way for Ducklings* follows the story of Mr. and Mrs. Mallard who are searching the Boston area for their nesting site. Mr. Mallard makes many suggestions, most of which Mrs. Mallard rejects. The pair visits some of Boston's famous landmarks before finally settling on an island in the adjacent Charles River. Here they nest and soon welcome eight ducklings. While Mr. Mallard decides to explore the river, Mrs. Mallard gets down to the business of teaching her brood to be ducklings. Having arranged with her husband to meet him at the Public Garden in a week, Mrs. Mallard works hard to get her ducklings ready for the trip that will be required. When the journey is undertaken, the little family encounters many obstacles and adventures.

McCloskey's charcoal illustrations are remarkable for their detail (not only did he consult with an ornithologist to get duck anatomy right, he adopted six ducklings and brought them to live in his New York City apartment!) while at the same time having an elegant economy of line. While some may find the lack of color disappointing, the texture and detail of the charcoal renderings more than compensate.

## **MILLIONS OF CATS**

by Wanda Gág, 1928

Newbery Honor Book, 1929

***“An outstanding example of a book in which text and illustrations seem to flow together.” – Children's Literature***

*Millions of Cats* was first published in 1929, has the honor of being the oldest American picture book still in print and is often described as a “perennial favorite”. Those who crave a return to a simpler, possibly purer, form of children's illustrations will find much to like here.

Having said that, *Millions of Cats* was ground breaking in its day, in the way it mixed text with illustration, spreading the two across both pages of the book as opposed to text on one page and illustration on the other. The result is a more immersive free flowing experience for the reader, aided in great part by the beautifully smooth handwritten text of the author's brother.

The story is the simple tale of a lonely old couple in search of a cat to keep them company. The old man sets off to find just one cat but when he comes across "Hundreds of cats, Thousands of cats, Millions and billions and trillions of cats" he is unable to choose and ends up bringing them all home! The old woman suggests they choose the most attractive one, which leads to an ungodly brawl between the cats. Unsurprisingly things get worse before they get better, but the old couple finally end up with their perfect kitten.

Is the story a warning against vanity? Or perhaps this is a cautionary tale against the irresponsibility of the old man? Either way this old folklore tale with its mesmerising text and drawings will please both parent and child.

## **MR. MEN AND LITTLE MISS BOOKS**

by Roger Hargreaves, 1971

***"The Mr. Men and Little Misses have been delighting children for generations with their charming and funny antics." – The Guardian\****

According to the official *Mr. Men and Little Miss* website, English author/illustrator Roger Hargreaves came up with the idea for the series in 1971 when his then six-year-old son asked him "What does a tickle look like?" Hargreaves thought about this very important question and then created a little round orange man with extra long arms and a huge grin: the first ever Mr. Man, Mr. Tickle was born! A few months later, a total of six Mr. Men were published and immediately found fans with millions of children.

Now, over forty years later, there are more than eighty Mr. Men and Little Miss characters, and according to the website “a Mr. Men book is now sold every 2.5 seconds worldwide” – along with a whole heap of merchandising!

Each of the main character books follows a similar pattern – telling a short story about the character displaying his or her major characteristic, and usually ending with a moral. Accompanied by Hargreaves’ simple, bold cartoon-like illustrations, where often the very shape of the character resonates with his or her name (*Mr. Messy* is drawn as a scribble, for example, whilst *Little Miss Curious*’ hair looks like a question mark and *Mr. Daydream* is shaped like a cloud), the stories are easy to follow narratives that are often quite amusing.

Within the world they live in (which looks very much like ours) the different characters often appear in each other’s books, and in recent years – now written and illustrated by Adam Hargreaves who took up the mantle following his father’s death – many of the original characters have been revisited with new stories. Whilst it’s true to say that the text is not exactly high literature, the instantly recognisable characteristic of each *Mr. Men* and *Little Miss* clearly do connect with children who relate well to clear-cut definitions – a fact borne out by their enduring success.

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## **THE COMPLETE TALES OF BEATRIX POTTER**

by Beatrix Potter, 1902

***“A classic title in the canon of children’s literature.” - Kathy Broderick,  
Booklist***

Since her first tale for children – *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* - was published in 1902, the *Tales of Beatrix Potter* have become nothing short of a Great British institution, and her anthropomorphic animal characters play a

significant role in the lives of many British children to this day. Potter is also an acclaimed illustrator, and it is as much for the delightful illustrations as for the stories themselves that her work is so widely recognised.

There are twenty-three tales in all, featuring a host of furry and fluffy countryside animals, many of whom have attained an almost iconic status in the world of children's literature: Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddle Duck, Squirrel Nutkin and Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle the hedgehog are just some of these much adored Potter characters. But cute images and cute names aside, what actually set Potter's work apart is the uncompromising elements of reality that are mixed into what at first seems like a fairytale world.

Potter spent much of her adult life living in and running a farmstead in the Lake District area of England. She was well versed in farming techniques and the day-to-day challenges of that environment. As such, some of her tales present her characters in a borderline world between fantasy and fact: Peter Rabbit may have a lovely blue jacket and smart leather shoes but that doesn't stop the human Mr. McGregor wanting to catch him when he trespasses into his garden; Jemima Puddle Duck waddles around in a very fetching bonnet and scarf combo, but is not spared the very real threat of her eggs being eaten by foxes and hounds; and silly Squirrel Nutkin, who likes dancing and singing, only just escapes being skinned alive by Old Brown owl!

Certainly *The Tales of Beatrix Potter* belong to a bygone day where different attitudes to childhood prevailed. Today's parents will need to make a judgement call as to which of Potter's tales may be too grisly for their little ones, but for the most part the tales are no worse than classic fairytales such as *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Hansel and Gretel*, and many of Potter's tales are charmingly gentle little stories that are sure to be enjoyed for generations to come.

## **THE COMPLETE TALES OF WINNIE-THE-POOH**



by A.A. Milne, 1926

***“The kindly wisdom depicted in the peaceful adventures of Pooh, Piglet, Rabbit, Eeyore, and others... [have] tickled the fancies and warmed the hearts of millions.”***

*– Matt Berman, Common Sense Media*

Alan Alexander Milne was a respected writer, playwright and screenwriter, but today he is remembered as the creator of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. His famous children’s book was published in 1926 and he followed the first book with another, *The House At Pooh Corner*. These books introduced characters as familiar for subsequent generations of children as their kin: Winnie, “a bear of very little brain”; Piglet (a toy pig), Pooh’s best friend; Owl, a real owl; Eeyore, a morose toy donkey and Rabbit, a live rabbit. These immortal characters were the playtime friends of a boy, Christopher Robin, named for Milne’s own son.

Winnie-the-Pooh is not the smartest bear on the block, but he is one of the most steadfast friends a child could have. *Winnie-the-Pooh* introduces the bear and most of his friends, the sequel, *The House At Pooh Corner* added new characters including the hyperactive toy tiger, Tigger. Christopher Robin, Pooh and friends have many delightful adventures in the Hundred Acre Woods.

Do not confuse the classic Pooh, with the so-called “Disney-fied” version that has spawned a publishing and merchandising empire of its own. The “real Pooh” is a charmingly written set of stories that involve silly characters getting into all manner of trouble through their own foibles. Milne managed to convey a great deal of wisdom with this premise, but did so gently and amiably without the need to preach. Excellent bedtime story material for the younger set, it will also be enjoyed by those slightly older as well.

## **THE CURIOUS GEORGE SERIES**

by H.A. Rey and Margaret Rey, 1941

***“Since its initial publication, Curious George has enjoyed an enduring popularity. The mischievous little monkey has been instantly familiar for generations” - PBS Parents***

Married couple Hans Augusto and Margaret Rey escaped from their native Paris ahead of the Nazi occupation, riding homemade bicycles, the manuscript of their now classic children’s book *Curious George* under their arms. When the book was published in 1941, it became an instant classic and has been beloved the world over ever since.

*Curious George* is a monkey who was captured by The Man In The Yellow Hat in Africa and taken to the big city to live in a zoo. The mischievous and adventurous George soon escapes the zoo; The Man recaptures George, and takes him home to live with him. In the books that follow, George has many adventures with The Man while living in his house and visiting new places. George and his curiosity make for many entertaining adventures, with George getting into scrapes and odd situations as well as learning new things and generally having fun.

In H.A. Rey’s lifetime, he and Margaret wrote a total of seven books featuring the fearless monkey and his human friend, the other six are: *Curious George Takes a Job*, *Rides a Bike*, *Gets A Medal*, *Flies a Kite*, *Learns the Alphabet* and *Goes to the Hospital*. And a television series, a motion picture and a line of merchandise have also featured the irrepressible monkey. The *Curious George* series makes for fun reading for preschoolers and provides a nice stroll down memory lane for parents who grew up on the tales.

## **THE MADELINE SERIES**

by Ludwig Bemelmans, 1939

Caldecott Honor Book, 1940 and Winner of the Caldecott Medal, 1954

***“The brisk rhyme moves the story along, and the illustrations capture children's interest.”***

***- Jennifer Gennari, Common Sense Media***

Ludwig Bemelmans was born of a Belgian father and a German mother in the waning days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After Ludwig's father fell in love with the boy's governess and abandoned the family, the young boy's mother took him to live in her native Germany. Disliking the German style of discipline, Ludwig was apprenticed to an uncle who ran a hotel in Austria. Getting himself into serious trouble there, he was given the choice of reform school, or being sent to the U.S.A. He chose the latter. Here he would become many things, including a U.S. Army soldier, a failed painter, a writer and finally a children's book author. What kind of children's book could such an intriguing author write?

Madeline lives in a house (a Catholic boarding school) in Paris with eleven other girls. They are all cared for by Miss Clavel. Other characters include the owner of the house, Lord Cucuface; the next door neighbor Pepito, the son of a Spanish Ambassador; and eventually a dog, Genevieve. In the book series Madeline is a feisty young girl who speaks her mind and isn't afraid of anything. She has many adventures including having her appendix out, being saved from drowning, encountering the bratty Pepito, going to the circus, visiting Pepito in London, enduring the Christmas where everyone got sick but her, and finally, inheriting a fortune from a relative in the U.S.

*The Madeline Series* consists of six books published during Bemelmans' lifetime. A seventh was found among his personal effects after his death in 1962, and eventually was published posthumously in 1999. As well as genuinely original illustrations we love the unexpected storylines which are so much more interesting than many of today's tamer books. These picture books are unique classics.

## **THE MITTEN**

by Jan Brett, 1999

***“Readers will sit back, suspend belief and welcome this tall tale from the Ukrainian tradition.” – Publishers Weekly***

Jan Brett is a prolific children’s book author and illustrator. Two of her most famous titles are *The Mitten* and *The Hat*, and both books are noted for their highly detailed watercolor and pencil illustrations.

Our favorite is *The Mitten*, which tells the story of a mitten dropped in the Ukrainian woods by young Nicki. The young boy requested that his Baba (Grandmother) knit him a pair in purest white; he does not listen when she says that if he drops them in the snow, he will never find them again. Out on a forest ramble, he does just that. The mitten soon becomes a cozy gathering place for the animals of the forest, with more and more animals coming to warm themselves in its wool lined interior. The creatures start small, but get bigger until a bear crawls into the mitten. When he sneezes, all the other animals are in for a surprise!

In *The Hat* a young Scandinavian girl called Lisa brings out her winter clothing to give it an airing before the cold weather sets in. One of her stockings is blown loose from the clothesline and lands where it is found by a hedgehog. Hedgie sticks his nose into the stocking and promptly ends up stuck! He tells the animals that come to laugh at him, that it is his new hat, which will keep him warm all winter. Will he ever free himself from his “hat”?

We love the gentle wit of these books, and Brett’s highly detailed and well-researched illustrations are lush and intricate making the volumes keepsakes to be treasured.

## **THE STORY OF BABAR**

by Jean De Brunhoff, 1933

***“Babar is one of childhood's most endearing and enduring characters. His adventures reflect a strong sense of justice and stress the importance of family and friends.” - Children's Literature***

For those who are not familiar with Babar the Elephant you may be surprised to learn that globally Babar is one of the most recognizable children's characters after Mickey Mouse. Written and illustrated by the Frenchman Jean de Brunhoff in 1931, *The Story of Babar (Histoire de Babar)*, and the subsequent five books in the series, have been family favorites now for more than three generations.

Babar is a happy young elephant living in the wild but when his mother is shot and killed by a wicked hunter Babar is forced to flee the jungle and ends up in the city. Eventually he meets a kind old lady who becomes his benefactor. We follow Babar as he works hard and integrates into society and finally travel's home where he gets married and becomes King of the Elephants.

Jean de Brunhoff was an established painter when his wife Cecile invented the tale of Babar for their two sons. He took the story, filled it out and created these wonderful color line drawings. If you were raised on these books take a look at them again and you will be amazed at how strong your recollection of his artwork is.

We suggest you try not to be influenced by adult criticism of colonial subtext because frankly this is not something young children will pick up on at all. If they're anything like we were at their age they are more likely to remember the illustrations of Babar travelling up and down in the store elevator and getting dressed in suits and spats!

Also, please don't be put off by the sad death of Babar's mother. These are great books for you to read aloud to your kids and will open up some valuable discussions. Indeed we feel Babar's ability to let go of the past, work hard for his future and finally triumph over adversity are valuable messages for young children.

## THE TIGER WHO CAME TO TEA

by Judith Kerr, 1968

***“One of Kerr's great strengths as a writer and illustrator is her grasp of the... child's-eye view of reality... The result is both very funny and slightly unsettling.” - Claire Armitstead, The Guardian\****

The fact that *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* reads like a story you've just made up on the fly is because, in essence, that was how it came to be. Author Judith Kerr devised the story for her three-year-old daughter after they had visited the zoo, telling it over and over again before deciding to actually publish it. And it is this very real “made-up bedtime story” feel that makes this book so charming.

The story is pretty much what you would expect from the title: a little girl called Sophie and her mother are sitting down to tea when, quite unexpectedly, a tiger rings the doorbell and asks if he can join them. However, this tiger is extremely hungry and eats and drinks just about everything in the house before leaving! When Sophie's father comes home, to find that there's no food for *his* supper, the family pop out for an evening meal at a local café. The next day Sophie and her mother go shopping for more food, making sure to get an extra large can of tiger food, just in case the tiger comes round again!

For kids who are so readily able to suspend their disbelief, *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* is a very real sort of a story, with plenty of real life aspects that they can easily relate to. First published in the United Kingdom in 1968, it has become something of a cult classic in that country, and remains high in the ranks of favorite children's books. The book still features the original artwork which, though perhaps a bit dated, shows a rather genteel version of family life that perfectly fits this gentle little tale.

Kerr is also the author of the acclaimed *Mog the Cat* series of books which are a great follow-up to *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*.

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## THOMAS THE TANK ENGINE SERIES

by Rev. Wilbert Awdry, 1943

***“I should like my epitaph to say, ‘He helped people see God in the ordinary things of life, and he made children laugh.’ ”***

*- Rev. Wilbert Awdry*

There always exists some tension in children’s literature between classic stories and their modernized and often animated versions. The purists want to see their kids exposed to the original stories of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*, however, young children today are more likely to have been introduced to these works by television series’ and movies based on the originals.

*Thomas the Tank Engine* is one such book: the original story comes from a set of books known as *The Railway Series*. It was written by Reverend Wilbert Awdry and begun in 1943 to entertain his son who was sick with measles.

Thomas is a plucky little engine who dreams of bigger and better jobs than the one he has as a pilot engine at the station. Eventually Thomas proves his worth and gets his wish, earning his own branch line. Thomas featured in ten of the original books of the Railway series.

Thomas was introduced in the second book of the series, but widely popularized by the British TV adaptation originally called *Thomas and Friends* (*Shining Time Station* in the U.S.). Although starting out faithful to the books, as time moved on, Thomas evolved. He became a more likeable and jolly character than he was originally portrayed, among other changes.

For younger children, we would suggest that the spin-off versions from the TV series will probably appeal more than the original tales, though these

could still make for excellent bedtime reading, especially as your child ages and begins to read on his own. Parents should, however, be aware that some of the original tales do have a very strong moralizing tone that may be a bit severe for more sensitive children.

## **WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE**

by Maurice Sendak, 1963

Caldecott Medal Winner, 1964

***“Let the wild rumpus start!”***

*– Maurice Sendak, Where the Wild Things Are*

*Where the Wild Things Are* is arguably one of the most famous children’s books ever written; it has also inspired an opera, several animated films and one live action motion picture. Published in 1963, the book did not meet with immediate critical acclaim. Early reviewers hated the book and libraries banned it, until they realized that kids loved the book and repeatedly checked it out. A similar situation occurred with the author’s book *In The Night Kitchen*, which is still frequently banned due to the fact that the protagonist cavorts naked through his dream adventure! (Haven’t we all?)

*Where The Wild Things Are* tells the story of Max, a boisterous little boy. Max has dressed in his wolf costume which portends the havoc to come. Running riot all over the house, his mischief culminates in an epic tantrum that gets him sent to his room without any supper. So disciplined, and feeling very angry with his mother, Max watches as his room magically transforms into a forest where he can rage and rampage with the other Wild Things.

Sendak’s Wild Things creatures may seem grotesque and appear as if they might frighten little kids, but they never quite manage to be as fierce or as scary as their looks suggest. The book is often viewed as a psychological



exploration of anger and how best to manage those strong negative emotions. Whether it is that or just good fun, this beloved classic should definitely form part of the backbone of your youngster's book library.

# Fun storybooks to read together

## BAILEY

by Harry Bliss, 2011

*“Deeper thinkers may see in this a message of acceptance of everyone for who they are; others may simply see fun, and there's nothing wrong with that.” – Kirkus Review*

Harry Bliss is best known for his cartoons and cover illustrations for The New Yorker Magazine. In 2003 he began illustrating children's books, providing artwork for Sharon Creech's *A Fine, Fine School*; he has gone on to illustrate many children's titles for various authors. In 2011 his first picture book as both author and artist was published: *Bailey*.

You've heard the saying: "it's a dog's life?" Well Bailey is a dog living the life of a human boy. He gets up, brushes his teeth, picks which of his two collars to wear, then proceeds to school - with human children. Bailey may act like a person, but he retains many doggy behaviors. He likes to *chase* the school bus; stick his head out the window when he does ride inside; and has the regrettable habit of eating his OWN homework! The book follows Bailey through his daily school activities: reading; fetching; painting (with his tail); dancing, digging through trash and singing, all while making friends with his fellow students.

Bliss's art is lush, his palette tending toward warm, soft colors. Adults will be amused by his clever details, including the "Puppy Weekly" magazine in his bedroom, and "Hound Dog" as his choice in music class. This book is also particularly useful as a way to prepare your preschooler for the routines of kindergarten, especially if they are a bit anxious. Bailey's dog behaviour amuses while his school attendance gives young ones a general idea of what to expect.

## **BOY AND BOT**

by Ame Dyckman, 2012

*“The final, nearly wordless pages, with snapshots of the friends at play, are priceless.”*

*- Angela Leeper, Booklist*

Friendships are wonderful yet mysterious things; there is no way to tell who will become a friend and who won't. Sometimes the unlikely duos forge the strongest bonds. This is a theme explored by Ame Dyckman in her debut children's book, *Boy and Bot*.

While out collecting pinecones one day, Boy encounters a bright red robot which is shaped a bit like a rocket ship. He asks his new acquaintance to play, and the robot responds with a welcome “Affirmative”; Boy and Bot have loads of fun playing together. Bot gets accidentally powered off by a stray rock, and believing his new friend to be sick, Boy takes him home. Boy does his best to care for Bot, feeding him applesauce, reading stories - but nothing helps!

Exhausted by his efforts, Boy falls asleep. Bot gets accidentally powered back on... and he takes Boy's sleeping state for the robot equivalent of illness. He carries the boy back to the laboratory he's from and their roles reverse. Bot tries to give Boy oil and a new battery, all the things that revive him when he's feeling a bit off. What will make Boy wake up?

Dyckman's text is spare, her story is simple and the illustrations by Dan Yaccarino are quirky and colourful. The concern and care these two new friends have for each other is as touching as it is adorable. Dyckman may be new to children's books, but if her first effort is any indication, she'll have a long and happy career.

## **DRAGONS LOVE TACOS**

by Adam Rubin, 2012

***“Rubin and Salmieri... bring their kooky sensibility to this irresistible story. The dragons may screw up the party, but this book gets everything right.” – Pamela Paul, The New York Times***

Did you know that dragons just love tacos? No, neither did we until Adam Rubin set us straight with this hilarious book. Teaming up again with illustrator Daniel Salmieri (the pair also collaborated on the equally funny *Those Darn Squirrels!* series), both the silly text and the wacky images in *Dragons Love Tacos* will make both you and your kids belly laugh till your sides ache.

The book is essentially a how-to-guide for anyone who wants to host the most awesome dragon taco party – because, obviously, for taco-loving dragons, a taco party is the best thing ever! With useful tips including how to make sure you’ll have enough tacos (by using a boat as the ideal taco serving dish) and why, exactly, you might live to regret adding spicy salsa to the mix, you’ll be very glad that you’ve read up on dragon taco party etiquette before your big event!

Yes, this book is something of a one-trick pony and doesn’t really go anywhere and that may frustrate literary purists; and if you don’t care for the use of the word “hate” as the opposite of “love”, then you should also avoid this book. However, it’s the kind of silliness that many little kids just adore, and that many bigger (adult) kids secretly enjoy too, and for us provides a welcome little frisson of the absurd to the literature available for this age group.

## **GO AWAY, BIG GREEN MONSTER!**

by Ed Emberley, 1993

***“A graphic delight... This imaginative, original work is a most friendly way in which children can take control over their own 'monsters' or nightmares.” – Elizabeth Hanson,  
School Library Journal © 1993***

Ed Emberley is a Caldecott Honor winner and illustrator/author of over eighty books, including his very successful series of books that teach children how to draw. Indeed empowering children to take matters into their own hands seems to be a theme with Emberley. In *Go Away, Big Green Monster!* he helps kids master the kinds of fears and nightmares that monsters sometimes bring.

This hardback book is well thought out and cleverly manufactured. We start with a pitch black page and two wide yellow eyes staring back at us. As each page turns another die-cast cut out reveals a little bit more of the monster's face. Although the slow reveal of the monster might start to get scary, once the monster is revealed the reader can then show it whose boss. Just shout out "Go away" and start to turn the pages again to make each of his features slowly disappear.

This book is fun and quite specific, we think it's a great choice if your child is having issues with things that go bump in the night or is simply scared of the dark, as it will help them to banish their own fears. For other children it's just a great opportunity to shout at a monster!

## **I WANT MY HAT BACK**

by Jon Klassen, 2011

Geisel Award Honor Book, 2012

***"This is a charmingly wicked little book and the debut of a promising writer-illustrator talent."***

*— Pamela Paul, The New York Times*

To be deceptive means to be sly, underhanded, sneaky, and duplicitous. There is a growing movement within children's literature, and picture books in particular, to be just a little guileful in telling an entertaining story. Author/illustrator Jon Klassen is in the advance guard of this trend.

*I Want My Hat Back* features a bear whose hat has been stolen. He very politely asks every animal he encounters in the woods if they have seen or know who has his hat. Each animal very politely declines any knowledge, but one of them is not being truthful, as the skillfully rendered illustrations demonstrate. Bear really loves his hat, and when he realizes that one of the animals has lied to him the consequences are dire, and some might say, perhaps not suitable for this age group.

Klassen comes from a background in animation; his illustrations are stunning for their ability to communicate movement and tension on a static page. The disputed action occurs completely “off stage” but is readily surmised thanks to Klassen’s gifts both as a writer and artist. Chances are young ones won’t catch on to the twisted humor the ending offers, but it will delight older kids and parents.

Klassen followed this book up with *This is Not My Hat*, which presents a similar denouement to the tale of a wee fish who has stolen a bowler hat from a much larger fish. Klassen is unrepentantly devious, offering visual lessons to the consequences of dishonesty and thievery in both books.

## THE GRUFFALO

by Julia Donaldson, 1999

***“An odd little fantasy poem about an imaginary creature for children...***

***At once a tale, and a poem, it is small, but perfectly formed.”***

*– Robert Mc Crum, The Observer\**

Julia Donaldson was attempting to adapt an old Chinese folk tale into a children’s book; its text presented in rhyming couplets. The original story involved a fierce tiger, but what English words really rhyme with “tiger”? Hard pressed to find even one, Donaldson decided to invent her own creature with many more rhyming possibilities: the Gruffalo.

An intrepid mouse is taking a walk through the woods one day. He encounters several predatory animals (for which a mouse would make a tasty snack), and cunningly avoids being eaten by telling each animal in turn of a previous dinner date with a fearsome beast called the Gruffalo. The Gruffalo's favorite meal? Why it just happens to be whichever animal mouse is telling his story to. Frightened, the animals all run off, leaving mouse to continue his walk unmolested. What happens though, when, against all odds, the mouse encounters a REAL Gruffalo?

Donaldson has authored many other excellent books, and one of our other recommendations is *Room on the Broom*, the tale of an amiable witch and her cat, who go for a ride on her broom, during which the witch loses her hat, wand and hair ribbon. The animals that find them and return them to her ask for a ride on the broom with the witch and her cat, how will they fit? Being an amiable sort she can't turn them down! Like *The Gruffalo* the book is written in rhyming couplets and features something of a reversal on stereotypes, and excellent art by Axel Shuffler illustrates both tales.

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## **THE MONSTER AT THE END OF THIS BOOK (SESAME STREET)**

by Jon Stone, 1971

***One of the "Top 100 Picture Books" in the 2012 School Library Journal Poll***

We hardly need to go into the integral position of *Sesame Street* in American, and indeed worldwide, children's culture. First aired in 1969, forty years later this ground-breaking show which blended educational concepts with real people, puppets and animation, was being broadcasted in more than 140 countries. Winner of more television awards than any other children's show, various surveys continually show how essential the show has become to just about everyone: according to Wikipedia, 95% of

all American preschoolers have watched the show by the time they are three years old, and it has been estimated that 77 million American adults today watched the series as children!

So it comes as no surprise that one of the many books linked to the series has made our “best of” list. But, unlike much television tie-in merchandise that can often be content-poor and brand-rich, *The Monster at the End of This Book* is a really clever book that offers up something quite different in terms of the reader’s experience. The plot consists of the lovable puppet character Grover begging the reader NOT to read the book because, as the title clearly suggests, there is a monster at the end of the book! Poor Grover tries everything he can think of to stop the reader turning pages – tying them up, nailing them down and building walls – to no avail. And then, of course, the penny drops and Grover realizes that *he* is the monster of the title!

Engaging young readers by speaking to them directly and with such complicated humor is not a style that is often used for the under-five age group, which is a shame really because the vast majority of them seem to have an innate sense of comedy that is really receptive to these kinds of ideas. What we love most about *The Monster at the End of This Book* is that it doesn’t patronize our kids, trusting them to have exactly the kind of sophisticated intelligence to both enjoy and sympathize with Grover’s charming dilemma – plus it really is terribly funny!

## **THE OLIVIA SERIES**

by Ian Falconer, 2000

Caldecott Honor Book, 2001

***“A character who will gain instant recognition and quickly be taken to heart.” – Kirkus Reviews***



The *Olivia* series of picture books follows the adventures of a six-year-old pig called Olivia who lives in a city, probably New York, with her parents and two brothers. Although a pig, she is also instantly recognizable as a cheeky little monkey! Precocious, is probably the kindest word. As we find out early in the very first book, Olivia wears everybody out, including herself – it's clear that Falconer knows a thing or two about six-year-olds!

The *Olivia* books are definitely a success of our time. The illustrations are modern and minimalist, mostly in shades of grey and black with splashes of red; though in books further along in the series other colors and photo collage techniques are also used. Our porcine heroine is great fun and very amusing for a modern audience, but it is hard to imagine our grandparents approving of her behaviour and lifestyle!

Her adventures too are modern and easy to relate to for any 21st century family and it is because most kids will easily see themselves in Olivia that the series has been so well received. Both the writing and the illustrations are very witty, making them a firm favourite with adults as well as children. There are currently eleven books in the Olivia series, including other favorites of ours like *Olivia Saves the Circus* and *Olivia Forms a Band*, and Falconer has picked up several awards over the years for his excellent efforts!

## **THE PAPER BAG PRINCESS**

by Robert Munsch, 1980

***“... conveys the idea that it's great to be smart and to use those smarts...  
short, sweet and to the point in empowering young women.”***

*– Dear Author*

While the Disney Princesses are hugely popular, they tend (with a couple of rare exceptions) to follow the traditional girl-meets-prince, girl-is-rescued-by-prince, girl-marries-prince mold. That is fine, as long as there is a balance to that pervasive stereotype; one that teaches girls that

“getting the man” isn’t all there is to happiness. Robert Munsch provides a sterling example in his picture book, *The Paper Bag Princess*.

Princess Elizabeth is a beautiful girl who lives in a castle and dresses in pretty gowns. She’s engaged to be married to Prince Ronald; her future seems secure and on a traditional course. On the eve of her marriage, a dastardly dragon destroys the castle, and burns up all of Elizabeth’s clothes with his fiery breath. Worse, he kidnaps Ronald! Plucky and brave, Elizabeth gets up, dons a paper bag to cover herself and sets off to get her prince back from the fearsome beast. She tracks the dragon down relentlessly and uses her intelligence in an attempt to free Ronald from his clutches. Will they live happily ever after?

Princess Elizabeth is a strong, resourceful and brave young woman who personifies the idea of “girl power”. She is a great role model, showing young girls how important it is to be true to one’s self and to determine one’s own future. While the obvious target audience is girls, there is nothing wrong with reading this story to your sons. The earlier boys learn to reject stereotypes and embrace reality, the better!

## **THERE WAS AN OLD PIRATE WHO SWALLOWED A FISH**

by Jennifer Ward, 2012

***“The colorful and zany cartoon art does a phenomenal job of capturing the absurdity and hilarity of this outrageous spin-off.”***

*— Publishers Weekly*

We all remember the nonsense rhyme *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* in which a poor old woman accidentally swallows a fly, then swallows a range of other animals in order to catch the proceeding one. The rhyme grows more and more absurd with every swallow until the poor old woman, who by this time has swallowed a horse, “died of course.”

Jennifer Ward has taken the rhyme as her inspiration for a series of books illustrated by Steve Gray, which update and expand on the idea. *There Was an Old Pirate Who Swallowed a Fish* was her first foray and she soon followed this volume with more, featuring in turn: a coyote, an odd princess and a monkey. Each swallows increasingly improbable things. The unlucky pirate swallows both animals and objects, working his way up to an entire ship! What will happen to him? Something better than the old woman who swallowed a fly, we hope!

The use of repetitive phrasing and the sing-song rhyming scheme of all of Jennifer Ward's books will capture the attention of children in this age range and keep them not only entertained but singing along with the book and memorizing its words. The colorful and quirky illustrations by Steve Gray are digitally generated, perfectly matching the rhyming text. Expect this book and its companions to become your children's favorites in short order and brace yourself for the excited requests to read it, just "one more time"!

## **TIKKI TIKKI TEMBO**

by Arlene Mosel, 1968

***"Just right for story telling and tongue twisting repeating and... for reading aloud."***

*- Kirkus Reviews*

Arlene Mosel remembered a story she heard as a child which featured a boy with a long name who fell into a well. In 1968 she decided to adapt what she thought was a Chinese folktale, into a children's picture book. The result was *Tikki Tikki Tembo* which was greeted with accolades when first released; more recently, the book has been the target of controversy.

Tikki Tikki Tembo-no Sa Rembo-chari Bari Ruchi-pip Peri Pembo (meaning "The Most Wonderful Thing in the World" according to the author) is the eldest son in his family. First born boys are given long and

elaborate names to honor their position; second born sons are given short unimportant names. Tikki Tikki Tembo has a little brother named Chang (supposedly meaning “little or nothing”). When the elder brother falls in a well, his long name becomes problematic: his lengthy moniker is never to be shortened and no nicknames are allowed! Poor little brother Chang encounters difficulty in getting help thanks to the interminable name!

Controversy has raged over the language and cultural inaccuracies in the book, which some find offensive. The story itself appears to have been inspired by a Japanese, not Chinese folktale; the art in the book contains more Japanese references than Chinese. The name of the elder brother is verbal nonsense and Chang is a surname, not a first name. Regardless of the controversy however, the book has remained popular and has sold a million copies as of 2013. It is still a charming tale, in spite of the inaccuracies, and your preschooler will likely be delighted by it.

## **RICHARD SCARRY'S CARS AND TRUCKS AND THINGS THAT GO**

by Richard Scarry, 1974

***“What he focuses on isn't grouped purely by adult logic - it's what a child sees and wants to see.”***

*– Imogen Russell Williams, The Guardian\**

Creating a bestselling children's book need not be taxing. You really only need a few ingredients to get it right, as Richard Scarry makes clear in his 1974 children's favourite. Vehicles of any kind, animals and a healthy dose of insanity are really all it takes to engross a child and this book is filled with all three.

As with all of Scarry's great books, a simple text is teamed with Scarry's expressive cartoon illustrations. *Cars and Trucks and Things That Go* is crammed with delightfully funny animals driving all kinds of vehicles from the conventional to the decidedly odd. 'Pickle Truck' anyone? Meanwhile the meandering story line sees Officer Flossy's pursuit of

Dingo Dog continuing throughout the book and, as if there wasn't enough to look at on each page, Scarry - who clearly understands kids perfectly - has cleverly hidden a little Goldbug on each page.

We think this book is pretty much a “must-have” for your 3 to 5-year-old. Children younger than this will enjoy it too and don't think that it's just for boys; our two-year-old girl is crazy for it! Richard Scarry was very prolific, with over 300 books to his credit, and we highly recommend that you take a look at some of his other works too. In particular we like *Busy Town*, *The Best Word Book Ever* and the much loved *Adventures of Lowly Worm*.

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## **ZIN! ZIN! ZIN! A VIOLIN**

by Lloyd Moss, 1995

Caldecott Honor Book, 1996

***“Neatly done with flair and joy and a fine ending. Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin is a book from which music issues forth as clearly as from any music box.”***

*– Cynthia Zarin, The New York Times*

This board book blends colorful and slightly eccentric illustrations with delightful rhymes and a simple tale that engages and teaches as it goes. As a child's introduction to the concept of an orchestra it is second to none.

The book begins with a lone trombone player who is then joined by a trumpet, so a solo becomes a duo. By the end of the book we have an orchestra of ten and a cheering audience. At its simplest this is a counting book but, of course, offers so much more as children learn the names of different instruments and the terms for their groupings.

Illustrator Marjorie Priceman was awarded a Caldecott Honor in 1995 for her work in *Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin*. A well-deserved distinction, as the brashly vivid illustrations bring musical movement to the proceedings while the cat and dog audience bring plenty of fun. There's definitely a certain Jazz Age feel to the illustrations – a fitting reference to an age where music played such an essential role in shaping popular culture.

The illustrations are matched beautifully by Lloyd Moss' equally lyrical text that features such sumptuous lines as “With mournful moan and silken tone/ itself alone comes ONE TROMBONE”, making *Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin* a real pleasure both to read and to listen to. Don't be surprised if your little musician calls for an encore at the end!

# Early learning: books about life lessons and concepts

## A SICK DAY FOR AMOS MCGEE

by Philip C. Stead, 2010

Caldecott Medal Winner, 2011

*“This is a heart-warming story, comforting without a lot of fuss.”-  
BookPage*

Having true friends is one of the great blessings of life. The best friends are always there for you, sharing your struggles and your joys; they never judge, and love spending time with you. Friends also come in many shapes, colors and sizes, none of which have anything to do with the quality of friendship that they offer.

*A Sick Day for Amos McGee* tells the story of Amos, an elderly worker at the zoo. Amos loves his job and loves the animals even more. He has five special animal friends at the zoo (elephant, rhino, owl, tortoise and penguin) and he always makes time in his day to play with them and listen to their concerns and troubles. One day, Amos falls sick; the animals wait and wait, but he does not come. So, they take matters into their own hands and go to visit him. There they show how much they love Amos, equally as much as he has always loved them, playing games, brewing tea, offering warmth and companionship through his illness.

The central themes of *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* are that good deeds are rewarded, and friendship endures even during difficult times. The wise and gentle text is perfectly complimented by the wood block illustrations, which use a muted palette of colors with the occasional dash of red. An excellent bedtime offering or better yet a book to read to your child when

they are sick; this charming tale of friendship given and returned will enchant your youngsters.

## **DEAR JUNO**

by Soyung Pak, 1999

***“The messages that can be conveyed without words, language differences between generations, and family ties across great distances are gently and affectingly handled.” – Kirkus Reviews***

There really is no shortage of books for the 3 to 5 year old age range; the trick is to find those that offer up the unexpected. Unique themes and insights are to be treasured in this age group and we think *Dear Juno* by Soyung Pak is a good example of a children’s book that deserves our affection.

Juno is a young Korean-American boy whose grandmother still lives in Seoul. When he receives a letter from her he is at first phased by the Korean language that he doesn’t understand. But quickly he sees that there is much that he *can* understand, namely the visual information contained in her letter. He in turn sends his grandmother a letter of drawings. And so a dialogue across space and time is opened until both Juno and grandmother are brought together.

*Dear Juno* is an intelligent and thoughtful book that takes the young reader on a very different journey of discovery than many other children’s picture books. It explores different forms of communication, not least the age-old joy of sending and receiving a physical letter. It also explores communications between different generations and the strength of family bonds. The illustrations are as gentle and as rich as the storyline. In an all-too fast and superficial world this book is a rare gem.

## **DUCK! RABBIT!**



by Amy Krouse Rosenthal, 2009

***“Text and illustrations are intimately wedded in this fun, interactive read-aloud.”***

*– Kathleen Kelly MacMillan, School Library Journal © 2010*

Like Hervé Tullet’s *Press Here* (see below), *Duck! Rabbit!* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal cleverly plays with the power of imagination, though the main thrust is that of differing perspectives. The book plots an often amusing discussion between two people off-page debating whether the creature in front of them is a duck or a rabbit. Sadly, the duck-rabbit runs off before we’re able to confirm the animal’s true identity, and meanwhile our arguing couple has found another ambiguous animal to discuss!

The book pays homage to the original ambiguous duck–rabbit image that was made famous by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in the 1950s as a means of describing two different ways of seeing the same thing.

Illustrator Tom Lichtenheld has quite brilliantly translated the original more detailed image into a much simpler, yet still perfectly effective, line drawing: depending on how you look at it, the animal either has a duck’s bill or rabbit’s ears!

We love that *Duck! Rabbit!* allows us to introduce complex philosophical concepts to preschoolers! The importance of being able to see and respect different points of views is a life-lesson that we all eventually need to learn, and this book is a great stepping-stone toward that concept. But what’s also great fun in this book is that the layout of the text either side of the image rather lends itself to being read as a play script: you and your child can really go to town acting out the debate!

It’s also worth knowing that the dynamic author/ illustrator duo Krouse Rosenthal and Lichtenheld have collaborated on several other interesting books. In particular we like *The OK Book* and *Exclamation Mark* both of which also use clever illustrations to demonstrate the complex nature of personal perception, this time focusing on the importance of how you regard your own uniqueness.

## **GIRAFFES CAN'T DANCE**

by Giles Andreae, 2001

*“Andreae’s rhyming text has a jaunty rhythm that’s likely to spark interest in the read-aloud crowd.” – Publishers Weekly*

Giraffes certainly look ungainly, with their long legs, necks and those goofy knock-knees, but watch film footage of them galloping across the savannah, and you’ll see elegance in movement and motion. Whether real giraffes are graceful or not is beside the point of course. Giles Andreae utilizes the child appealing idea that giraffes obviously wouldn’t make good dancers to teach an important lesson in self-confidence in his book, *Giraffes Can’t Dance*, illustrated by Guy Parker-Rees.

Gerald the Giraffe loves to dance, wants desperately to dance, but he just isn’t very good at it. At the annual African Jungle Dance everyone makes fun of his awkward movements on the dance floor. Dejected and sad, Gerald leaves the party behind, while all the other animals dance on with wild abandon. It isn’t until Gerald meets a wise cricket that he learns that the key to graceful dancing might just mean finding the right music first.

This colorfully illustrated tale (illustrator Parker-Rees goes all out to show the other animals of the jungle getting their groove on!) is a simple yet profound lesson in the importance of self-esteem. Pumped up by the cricket’s wise advice about confidence and believing in oneself, Gerald finds out just how nimble he can be. It can never be too early to begin to teach the importance of self-confidence to young children, especially those who are already displaying signs of insecurity as they enter a wider world in preschool and kindergarten.

## **HOW ROCKET LEARNED TO READ**

by Tad Hills, 2010

***“An appealing picture of the learning-to-read process: the bird is an enthusiastic instructor, teaching Rocket to love the sounds and meanings of words.” – Abby Nolan, Booklist***

Read aloud picture books are wonderful tools to prepare your child to read; catchy rhyming schemes and bright illustrations work together to get kids excited about words and stories. Some books such as *How Rocket Learned to Read* and its sequel, *Rocket Writes a Story*, add to that by demystifying the reading and writing process.

Rocket is a happy-go-lucky black and white puppy who loves to play and romp. One day a little yellow bird flies down and gets his attention. She declares him her first student and states that she is going to teach him to read!

Rocket could care less about reading, but the yellow bird isn't going to take no for an answer. She comes, day after day with a pep talk extolling the wonders of the alphabet using visual aids, banners that show Rocket the alphabet she's talking about, cagily capturing Rocket's attention! Curious in spite of himself, he willingly becomes her student and the two use the alphabet to name things that Rocket sees every day. When the bird flies off for the winter, will Rocket stay the course, or forget his lessons?

This book illustrates in a way that preschoolers and kindergartners can easily grasp the basic steps in learning to read (and to write). Get comfortable with the alphabet, use the letters to describe familiar things, see how the letters fit together, sound them out and before you know it, you're reading! Hopefully Rocket's progress towards literacy will inspire your little one to follow in his footsteps!

**I AM ME**

by Karla Kuskin, 2000

***“[An] ability to captivate children - and capture the essence of their thinking.”***

*- Valerie J. Nelson, The Los Angeles Times*

Getting together with extended family members is one of the great traditions of summer. In Karla Kuskin's book *I Am Me* the narrator's multigenerational and bi-racial family is enjoying a pleasant summer outing at the beach. That the heroine is adored by her family is obvious, whether she's swimming, building a sand castle, riding a bike or sliding, she is the center of their universe. As a result she has self-confidence that comes from a sense of belonging and knowing she is loved.

Relatives, when they gather together love to talk about whom the younger generation takes after for some strange reason - we've all experienced it, haven't we? *I Am Me*'s heroine is no different, her relatives have parsed her various features out, declaring which originate from which family member. This young girl is a mixture of her parents, of course, but also shares a few quirks with other family members including her aunt.

The warmth and pride is tangible in this adorable picture book, and the child at the center is inspiring, both for her patience in the face of her family's scrutiny and in her strong resolve. This is brought vividly home as she declares, that wherever she gets her "parts", she is greater than their sum, she is uniquely HERSELF! What a simple, yet profound statement that is!

The text is enlivened by the impressionistic illustrations by Dyanna Wolcott. She uses a bright palette, flat perspective and flowing lines to perfectly illustrate this lovely exploration of the joys of a close family.

## **LITTLE CRITTER**

by Mercer Mayer, 1975

***“Sweet and engaging... Little Critter and his family often find themselves in situations similar to those in the lives of kids, which can be both funny and reassuring.”***

*– Dana Villamagna, Common Sense Media*

It's almost impossible to know where to start with the author/illustrator Mercer Mayer's many, many books featuring the adorable character of Little Critter. Since Little Critter's first appearance back in 1975 (in *Just For You*), Mayer's output in the series has been nothing short of heroic. In fact, including over seventy *Little Critter* books, Mayer has authored over 300 books in total to date!

But it's the lovable, adventurous, fun-loving Little Critter that has found his way into many a child's heart. What's so special about the series is that with so many titles, there's a theme that will appeal to every child and parent. There are stories where Little Critter spends the day with just one member of his family, stories of going to school, or visiting the hospital, holiday stories, welcoming a new baby, having bad dreams, getting mad, and all kinds of fun adventures too - even one where Little Critter searches for a missing dinosaur bone whilst on a class outing to the Natural History Museum.

It's the breadth of real life themes that really help children connect with Little Critter, coupled with the cute cartoon illustrations that are both wonderfully expressive and incredibly detailed, allowing children to fully immerse themselves into Little Critter's world.

Mercer Mayer is equally well known for his *Little Monster* series of books – not quite as prolific as the Little Critter series – but just as charming, with a world populated with super cute cartoon monsters that also enjoy everyday adventures just like us humans.

**No DAVID!**

by David Shannon, 1998

Caldecott Honor Book, 1999

***“Children will relish the deliciously bad behavior and the warm and cuddly conclusion.”***

– Susan Pine, *School Library Journal* © 1998

When David Shannon was a little boy, he anticipated his adult vocation by making a book, never published, called “No, David”. It was a reflection of that point in his childhood when kids play and romp with careless abandon, without much awareness of the effects of their actions. The only words in his childhood book were “no” and “David”! As an adult Shannon’s mother sent him his childish effort and David decided on a “make-over”. He rewrote and re-drew the book and *No David!* is the result.

Little David is a funny looking kid, with a head shaped like a potato; tiny, almost feral eyes and a mouth with pointy teeth. He is always doing something that gets him yelled at; frequent “no”s and the occasional “come back here!” or “not in the house!” are the only words he hears. No wonder, because he’s doing things like jumping on his bed, tracking mud through the house, running naked down the street, and writing on the walls in crayon!

David may not be visually appealing to adults, but little kids love how he’s drawn and relate strongly to how he is told “NO!” all the time: just like they are. The book has been used successfully as a behavior modifier by teachers of autistic and other special needs children as they learn from David’s mistakes and their own behavior improves. A quirky tale that, at rock bottom, is a testament to unconditional love.

**PRESS HERE**

by Hervé Tullet, 2011

***“A tour de force of imagination and playfulness that belongs on every family bookshelf.”***

– Karen MacPherson, *The Seattle Times*

Every so often a writer comes along and offers up something that is completely different. Hervé Tullet, is that man. From Normandy in France, this unassuming former advertising art director, has become a leading name in children's books that inspire creativity, imagination and independent thinking. In France he is known as the 'The Prince of preschool books' and has published well over fifty books, many of which are now available in English.

So what exactly makes Tullet's work so special? Ultimately it's the childlike awe with which he approaches an exploration of the world that makes his books so brilliant. This is very true of *Press Here*, which is simplicity itself, but total genius. And really the only way to describe this genius is to take you through the opening pages, because if we told you that in basic terms the book is simply about the interplay between a bunch of colored dots, directive text and the reader's imagination, you'd probably pass! So here goes:

The opening page has a yellow dot on a white background and the words "Ready? Press here and turn the page." When you turn the page, there's a second yellow dot beside the first one. "Great!" goes the text "Now press the yellow dot again." You do so, turn the page and a third yellow dot magically appears! The instructions continue, getting ever more interactive: rub yellow dots to make them red, tilt the book and the dots tumble to the edge of the page, clap twice and the dots get bigger and so on.

As you can imagine, the delight that children take in "magically" making stuff happen to the dots cannot be overstated! *Press Here* is just our favorite of many Tullet books that open the reader up to creative thought, in his very own uniquely playful way. Definitely, an author worth exploring.

## **THE BIG HONEY HUNT**

by Stan Berenstain and Jan Berenstain, 1962

***“A fun loving family of Bears whose love, loyalty and humor allow them to overcome any obstacle.”***

*– PBS Kids*

For most people Stan and Jan Berenstain need no introduction: they are of course the author/illustrator couple behind the phenomenally successful *Berenstain Bears* books, which first hit the shelves in the 1960s and which continue to be published today under the supervision of their son Mike Berenstain. With over 300 titles to date, two television series and huge amounts of franchised merchandise featuring the homely country-living bear family, you'd be hard pressed to have missed this ubiquitous brand!

But it is remarkable that the brand continues to achieve such success today, given that - on the face of it - the Bear family seem to enjoy a simpler way of life that is far removed from most contemporary children's experience. What does resonate for today's audiences, however, is that many of the titles offer a welcome aide in dealing with the numerous challenges and situations young kids need to face wherever or however they live: starting school, welcoming a new baby, going to the dentist and so on. Usually resolving with a lesson learnt, the series is sometimes criticised for being overly moralistic - and for often portraying Papa Bear as a buffoon, whilst Mama Bear generally sorts out his mess!

However, what today's parents may not realise is that the earlier Berenstain Bear books were less about problem-solving and much more about just fun adventures. They were intended to be reading primers and often written in verse form as opposed to the prose style of later books. In *The Big Honey Hunt* – the very first Berenstain Bear book – Papa Bear decides that, rather than buy more honey from the store, he and his son should go off in search of some honey direct from the source: needless to say much mayhem ensues! It's a rollicking read – with fantastic rhyme and rhythms and generously expressive illustrations – which are guaranteed to stay with your child for years to come.



## THE CLOUD SPINNER

by Michael Catchpool, 2012

***“... lessons about taking only what you need, about care for the needs of other... only add to the pleasure.” – Kirkus Reviews***

In Norse mythology, Frigga, the wife of Odin, spun the clouds into the sky with her spinning wheel. Norse tradition says that the constellation we know better as Orion is actually Frigga's sky-bound spinning wheel, from which the clouds originate. Michael Catchpool has touched on this ancient belief in his children's book, *The Cloud Spinner*.

In Catchpool's modern fable, a young boy is able to weave cloth out of the clouds in the sky. The material spun in the morning is golden, capturing the color of the rising sun; that spun in the afternoon is purest white; in the evening he is able to weave crimson cloth. The boy, respecting the clouds and his world, never produces more cloth than it takes to make a warm scarf, understanding that conserving precious resources is vital.

However, the king of his land has other ideas. He wants dozens of garments - or maybe hundreds - made from this special cloth. The boy protests, but the king's word is law; so the boy spins and spins and the world alters as he does so. Is there any way to reverse the destruction of the natural beauty that once was there for all?

Beautifully illustrated by Allison Jay, *The Cloud Spinner* is a thinly veiled lesson about the importance of respecting nature, managing resources respectfully, and resisting the temptation to plunder the earth's bounty. Sometimes the strongest lessons come from the most ethereal allegory and *The Cloud Spinner* has a profound message for all of humankind.

## THE PETE THE CAT SERIES

by Eric Litwin and James Dean, 2008

***“The vibrant illustrations and the simple story create a satisfying whole.” – Kirkus Reviews***

Keeping a positive attitude has been credited with everything from better health to living longer. If nothing else a positive outlook on life helps boost self-esteem and confidence. It’s a bit of a “fake it till you make it” proposition. Recognize the negative, but don’t let it overpower you and you’ll feel better about yourself and the world around you.

The *Pete the Cat* series is an excellent introduction to these concepts of having and keeping a positive outlook. In the first book, *Pete the Cat: I Love my White Shoes*, Pete sets out one day in his new white shoes; he sings about how much he loves them! When he steps in strawberries though his white shoes turn red! But Pete doesn’t let that get him down; he just changes his song to “I love my red shoes!” Pete’s shoes go through a number of color changes as he continues along, not really watching where he’s going (or else he might avoid a few of these shoe altering obstacles!). Will his shoes ever be white again?

Enlivened by illustrations that are bright and quirky, each volume in the six book series shows Pete at his best: unflappable no matter what happens. This is an excellent lesson for the preschool and kindergarten set to begin learning, as changes in their world are often met with fear and distress, leading to anger and tears. Remembering Pete and his “nothing bothers me” attitude is a good exercise for this age group in learning to manage their emotions.

## **YOKO**

by Rosemary Wells, 1998

***“Wells’s message is clear without being heavy-handed, making this brightly colored schoolroom charmer a perfect book.”– Publishers Weekly***

There are many people who believe that children's books should avoid the controversial or difficult and just present their stories as sunny and pleasant. Rosemary Wells, author of a number of juvenile fiction books believes the opposite, and that the key to tackling such ideas is in the presentation. She's proved this time and again through her use of animal characters standing in for humans, and never more brilliantly so than in *Yoko*.

Little Yoko is a kitten and on this fine school day, her loving mother has packed her favorite food into her lunch: homemade sushi! When lunchtime rolls around, Yoko can hardly wait to dig into hers, but the other kids begin to make comments about what she is eating, teasing her mercilessly as they eat their own favorite lunches. Yoko's wonderful day at school is spoiled. How can she feel good about herself when even her choice of lunch results in bullying?

Racism takes many forms, and more insidiously, our own mistaken beliefs can transfer themselves to even the smallest children in our family. Rosemary Wells uses the proclivity of kids to tease to teach an important lesson, and reminds us that racism is found in even the most innocent of places.

It is a gentle story, not soap box ranting, presented to young ones in terms they can understand and internalize. Wells has written further books with her heroine Yoko, and is also the author of the popular *Max and Ruby* books and many other children's titles.

## **USBORNE PHONICS READERS SERIES**

by Phil Roxbee Cox et al, 2002

***“Kindergartners who receive systematic beginning phonics instruction read better and spell better than other children.”***

*– National Reading Panel, USA*

I have always credited my lifelong love of reading to an early training in phonics. Being able to “sound out” words rather than memorize what they look like (to recognize them later) created a strong interest in words and their meaning that has served me well all my life. The process of sounding out is actually called “synthetic phonics” and is alive and well today after falling out of favor for a period in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Usborne Children’s Books, a UK company, has come out with a series of books that foster and encourage the practice of synthetic phonics among early readers. Using simple words that sound alike to tell their story, titles such as *Toad Makes A Road*, *Snail Brings the Mail*, *Sam the Sheep Can’t Sleep* and thirteen other titles comprise their current offerings. Each book is based on synthetic phonics principles and illustrated in a vibrant, eye-appealing manner.

Usborne is THE leading publisher of children’s books in the UK and offer books for every age from infant to young adult. In addition to the *Phonics Readers*, they offer an early reader series, *Very First Reading*, which is supported by a program designed to help parents and children through those first tricky steps to literacy. The company also created the Usborne Foundation which promotes early literacy among children. It is never too early to start kids on the path to solid reading skills. Usborne’s catalogue is a great place to start.

# Sweet dreams: books to help toddlers drift off

## ALL THE WORLD

by Liz Garton Scanlon, 2009

Caldecott Honor Book, 2010

*“Charming illustrations and lyrical rhyming couplets speak volumes in celebration of the world and humankind, combining to create...*

*Perfection.” – Maryann H. Owen,  
School Library Journal © 2010*

Warm summer days, sunny weather, family excursions, this is the stuff of which lasting memories are made. Rambling from beach, to town, across lush green fields - it is these quiet and simple pleasures that stay with us through the years. Not every children's book need involve a grand adventure, sometimes a gentle story as simple as relating the quiet joy of these pastimes is all that is required to soothe young ones into sleep.

*All the World* by Liz Garton Scanlon follows an interracial family on a lazy summer day as they first explore the seashore, then move on to other nearby attractions: a farmer's market, a pavilion on a lake, a sudden rain storm, interacting with other families, a warm meal before returning home. The presentation of the text is lively, curling around, arching up or down and hopping in graceful arcs around the watercolor and colored pencil illustrations. The text is comprised of rhyming couplets all of which pay homage to the simple wonders of the world.

The art by Marla Frazee is, at once, delicately rendered and charming, moving from small vignettes focusing on members of the family to appealing seascapes, landscapes, as well as expanses of blue sky and fluffy clouds. The text and illustrations complement each other perfectly. The cumulative effect is gentle and soothing while managing to convey a

profound message of wonder about the natural world, all with a splendid economy of words.

## **BEAR SNORES ON**

by Karma Wilson, 2002

***“The descriptive rhyming text... is perfect for reading aloud as well as for one-on-one sharing. Kids will ask for this book again and again.”***

*- Heather E. Miller, School Library Journal © 2002*

Karma Wilson's debut children's book, *Bear Snores On*, takes caring and sharing as its captivating central theme. Written in lyrical rhyme and illustrated by children's artist Jane Chapman this children's book is charming from beginning to end.

It is winter in the woods and Bear is deep into his hibernation, oblivious to the great snowstorm that is raging outside. His den is warm and attracts an “itty bitty mouse” who is seeking shelter from the biting cold and bitter winds. Mouse finds the Bear's cave so cozy that soon he is making himself at home, literally. Mouse is soon joined by other woodland creatures seeking shelter; Hare, Badger, Mole, Wren and Raven all find the bear's snug lair. The creatures chat and cook stew, pop popcorn and make tea, all while “bear snores on”. What will happen when Bear wakes up though, as must happen with all this activity going on?

Karma Wilson's infectious rhyming text is made even more delightful by her creative word choices and the use of onomatopoeia to describe the party activities and sounds. Her text evokes both the ferocity of the storm and the happy warmth of the den. The illustrations by Jane Chapman are the perfect accompaniment to the text; the art is lively and colorful and yet the palette is somewhat subdued. Chapman also manages some astonishing textures on the various animals. Pleasing to both eye and ear, this is one of those rare books that will appeal to adults just as much as the youngsters!

## HOW DO DINOSAURS SAY GOODNIGHT?

by Jane Yolen, 2000

*“This rib-tickling bedtime fare packs plenty of appeal.” – Publishers Weekly*

Do you have a little monster running rampant in your home? No, of course you don't, all our children our angels! But if you did have one, how would you expect them to behave? Swap monsters for dinosaurs and you have the delightful premise behind a series of books written by Jane Yolen and illustrated by Mark Teague.

The concept of the first book is to very gently encourage your children to act appropriately when it comes time to say goodnight. Each page shows a different dinosaur 'acting out' in their bedroom leaving their 'human' parents bewildered. Is this the right way to behave we ask *our* children? Of course not, and at the end of the book we see how dinosaurs *really* say goodnight; by getting tucked in with lots of kisses. The fun of the book is in the simple rhymes and the incongruity of these huge dinosaurs behaving badly within their small bedrooms.

Your dinosaur crazy kid will love each of the ten species found here and you can help them find the name of each hidden in their bedrooms. *How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?* is the first book in a series that grows bigger every year. There are currently around 19 different versions from *How Do Dinosaurs Eat Their Food?* to *How Do Dinosaurs Say Merry Christmas?* so presumably in a few years' time you will be able to let dinosaurs teach your child everything they need to know!

## I TOOK THE MOON FOR A WALK

by Carolyn Curtis, 2004

*“Curtis’ rhyming text is rich with descriptive language and images... Jay’s surreal, Salvador Dali-like illustrations... greatly enhance the*

*dreamlike quality of the text.” - Lauren Peterson, Booklist*

Since young children can be somewhat demanding at bedtime, the perfect bedtime storybook should be appealing and entertaining to kids and adults alike, and as favorite books will often be greeted with “read it again” at their conclusion, it truly saves a parent’s sanity if they enjoy the picture book as much as their children do! Some of the best bedtime choices couple lyrical prose with breathtakingly beautiful illustrations to wonderful effect.

*I Took the Moon for a Walk* is one such book. Just as the sun sets, a young boy decides to take the moon for a walk. Holding hands, they navigate through his neighborhood seeing what there is to see. Moon almost gets snagged on a church steeple; he loses his shoe and gets it back again; the pair encounters barking dogs and many other “adventures” as they take their evening constitutional.

The text of this picture book is truly poetic, with rich metaphorical descriptions of everything the boy and the moon see on their quiet stroll. The rhyming scheme is sophisticated and comes smoothly off the tongue making reading aloud a true joy.

The charming and inventive illustrations by Allison Jay tell small stories of their own visually (for example, the moon losing his shoe). The somewhat surreal artistic style suits the dreamy quality of the text perfectly and the overall effect of the book is restful and calm. This is one picture book you’ll find yourself keeping after your child grows up and recommending to friends with kids for years to come.

## **LIGHTS OUT, NIGHT’S OUT**

by William Boniface, 2009

*“This book will hold readers of all ages captive on their journey into this beautiful night life.”*



- *Night Owl Reviews*

When searching through the endless outpouring of books for young children, we have found that there are usually two types: the gimmicky ones and the good ones. *Lights Out, Night's Out* by William Boniface, seems to successfully balance between both these qualities.

The gimmick part is that the book is from a series from Accord Publishing featuring a printing technique called AniMotion which makes parts of the illustration appear to come to life: as you turn the pages of the book, the nighttime creatures that populate it seem to jump, move, spin or fly.

The good part is that each double spread page also features a satisfying rhyming text that appeals to young listeners, as well as the rather clever use of high definition fluorescent inks that give the moving illustrations added visual appeal. There is also a factoid page at the end of the book detailing fascinating snippets about each creature.

For kids this age, the book is generally a winner: optical illusions are always fascinating! Of course, when parents are maybe trying to foster a love for reading for its own sake, it may seem sacrilege to choose a gimmicky book over one with a great narrative. However, we feel there is always room for books that are just a whole lot of fun: after all enjoyment is key in fostering good reading habits.

## **ON THE NIGHT YOU WERE BORN**

by Nancy Tillman, 2006

***“This is one of those rare baby books that should make both skeptics and sentimentalists of all ages happy.” - Publishers Weekly***

Nancy Tillman presented us with one of those tricky challenges: which of her wonderful books to choose as her best. This is even more impressive when you know that Tillman has only recently joined the ranks of great children's author/illustrators and has less than a dozen books currently in

print. We whittled it down to two in the end, finding it almost impossible to choose between *On the Night You Were Born* and *Wherever You Are: My Love Will Find You*.

In the end we chose *On the Night You Were Born*, simply because you cannot ignore the phenomenal success of this her debut book, with over a million copies sold since it was first published in 2005. We also chose it because it is truly lovely, both in its sentiment and execution.

The theme is that of celebrating the arrival of your little one, enforcing a deep understanding of the love you have for him or her, and emphasizing his or her wonderful uniqueness. For Tillman, this celebration sees the entire universe come to life in an imaginatively poetic text, which may be a little overblown and indulgent at times, but certainly speaks from the heart.

Tillman's extraordinary illustrations weave together both magical whimsy with an almost photorealistic style, and the book as a whole balances sentimentality with authenticity, just about avoiding falling into an overly schmaltzy love-fest. However, do be prepared: this gorgeous book is likely to make even the most cynical of adults shed a small tear!

As for our other Tillman favorite, *Wherever You Are: My Love Will Find You*, again we love the amazing illustrations and the enduring message that the love we have for our children is uncompromising in its steadfastness. For some, Tillman's books will always be too saccharine and run the risk of inflating your child's ego beyond repair, but many will agree that the harshness of real life can withstand being tempered with a little bit of love and indulgence from time to time.

## **SLEEP LIKE A TIGER**

by Mary Logue, 2012

Caldecott Honor Book, 2013

***“This deeply satisfying story offers what all children crave when letting go -security and a trusted companion.” – Kirkus Reviews***

Children are never ready for bed when their parents think they should be. There is something deep within the psyche of young humans that rejects sleep as necessary, young minds apparently convinced they will miss something important when they close their eyes at night. No amount of cajoling will convince them otherwise, and often only exhaustion overcomes their recalcitrance.

*Sleep Like A Tiger* takes this scenario and uses it as a springboard to tell the story of a stubborn young girl who does not want to go to bed. She yields enough to get into her pajamas and into bed, but then asks her mother and father how the animals of the world go to sleep. Her parents calmly relate the bedtime habits of several familiar animals then kiss her goodnight and turn out the light. Does she continue to fight sleep or yield to its embrace?

Mary Logue writes the dialogue between parent and child very realistically, perfectly capturing the interplay between both. The beginning of the book is dialogue heavy, this changes as the book goes on, mirroring a gentle slide into sleepiness.

The highly stylized illustrations by Pamela Zagarenski provide an interesting counterpoint and complement to the text, especially notable is the mixed media approach the artist takes to the artwork; as well as her use of patterns. The illustrations are highly detailed in spite of their somewhat primitive flavor - for the child who truly isn't sleepy, a long perusal of the artistic details will provide hours of clandestine enjoyment.

## Great Books for 6 to 8 Year Old Kids

Most children will start formally learning to read at around age six, or when they enter the first grade of primary school. Hopefully you will already have helped instill a love of books in them by then, and they may even be able to pick out letters and simple words, so the road to full independent reading has already begun. As parents and carers, our role is to keep our kids enthusiastic about learning to read – encouraging them in as many different ways as possible to recognize new words.

Now, more than ever, the choice of books they read outside of school required reading may have a direct influence on how they get on with that task, so it makes sense to choose books and authors that they really enjoy.

That is why in our top fifty recommendations below we've not only included great classic children's books that have won numerous awards and accolades for their inherent quality, but also some contemporary popular fiction such as the *Never Girls* series from Disney. These popular books may not exactly match the quality of writing that you'll get from a Roald Dahl book, but if you have a child who is mad keen on fairies and nothing but fairies, then a book about fairies is definitely the way forward!

We have also looked at the best range of series or chapter books for this age group because, again, if you find a series that your child relates to well, having more than one book to read and explore can be both fun and a challenge.

This age group is also very specific in that, as far as your child is concerned, she/he will be maturing from being a "little kid" to a "big kid". So we have focused the majority of our choices for this section on books that are less "babyish" and a bit more "grown-up". It makes for a very interesting list where simpler tales like *Marshmallow* sit alongside longer stories like *The Polar Express*. The trick for parents and carers is to judge what level of complexity your child is ready for. To do this, simply try a

book out; if it holds their attention then you're on to a winner! If not, save it for a while to come back to when they're ready.

Books with great illustrations still play a big role for this age group – especially in books where the text is now getting longer and more complex, the illustrations can really help in getting the sense of the story across, as well as providing visual interest to keep your child focused.

Finally, whilst it is not the purpose of this book to list the best reading primers, we have included a selection of fun books where the language and layout are simple enough for children who are just learning to read. At this stage of early reading, there are still a vast number of books that are best used as read-out-loud books and the majority of books listed here are ones that you are going to read together, gradually building towards the happy day when it's your child who's reading you the bedtime story, rather than the other way around!

# The essential kid's book list: authors every child should explore

## BABE THE GALLANT PIG

by Dick King-Smith, 1983

*“One of the most delightful of children's authors, from one of the most unlikely backgrounds.”*

– Julia Eccleshare, *The Guardian*\*

Originally titled *The Sheep-Pig* when first published in the United Kingdom, *Babe The Gallant Pig* is possibly best known from the 1995 Oscar-winning motion picture adaptation of the book. Dick King-Smith wrote the children's book in 1983 and it became an instant classic, leading to its adaptation to the silver screen. King-Smith's novel is set in rural England; the author himself farmed in the area for many years.

Farmer Hoggett is a sheep farmer. One day at a local fair, he wins a young piglet. He has no use for pigs, really; his wife however envisions a nice plump ham for Christmas dinner. The piglet is soon taken under the wing of Fly, the farmer's sheep-herding dog. Fly teaches Babe everything she knows about sheep. Babe also makes the acquaintance of an ewe called Maa, who opens his eyes to the intelligence of sheep - something Fly had downplayed. Maa tells her fellow sheep Babe's story, they agree to allow the little pig to act as a sheep-dog (or rather sheep-pig) to the flock. Farmer Hoggett notices Babe's skill and takes the little fellow to the field with him every day. He proves himself invaluable, even saving the whole flock from sheep rustlers. Will Babe avoid being Christmas dinner? Or will a mistaken notion end his career prematurely?

Babe has often been compared with E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, a time honored classic considered the ultimate children's “pig book”. As

wondrous as that book is, *Babe* also deserves a place right alongside White's as another great "pig book".

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY

by Roald Dahl, 1964

***"There's a reason why kids like that book, why it's a classic – it speaks to them, there's a connection." - Tim Burton***

When we began assembling this collection of the best children's books I initially included four titles by Roald Dahl because he was far and away the most influential author during my childhood. I would therefore encourage you to offer any and all of his books to your children and to certainly consider *James and the Giant Peach*, *The BFG* and *Danny, the Champion of the World*. However eventually the decision was taken to include what we felt was Dahl's "must-have" children's book – *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

Mr. Willy Wonka is the eccentric and reclusive owner of the greatest chocolate factory in the world. So when he decides to open the doors of his factory to five lucky children and hides the invitations, five golden tickets, inside the wrappers of five chocolate bars, all hell breaks loose. Children across the world dream of finding a ticket and one such child is our hero Charlie Bucket. Charlie lives in a tiny, cold house with his parents and four grandparents. They're so poor that Charlie gets just one bar of his favorite chocolate per year on his birthday. The chances of Charlie finding one of the golden tickets is surely very slim, but find one he does and so begins a magical journey through the gates and into the magical world of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory.

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is surely what dreams are made of? A poor, but kind and very deserving young boy overcomes all the odds to

become the ultimate winner. Lessons are learned against a backdrop of incredible confectionary. Show me a child that will not be enchanted by this fantastic story!

## MARSHMALLOW

by Clare Turlay Newberry, 1942

Caldecott Honor Book, 1943

***“Deserves its classic status... [w]ith themes small kids can really understand - and a perfectly happy ending.”***– Dawn Friedman, *Common Sense Media*

Clare Turlay Newberry loved cats. She started drawing them at age 2 and at age 16 made her first sale of her art: paper dolls for the publication John Martin's Book, a popular children's magazine of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. All but three of Clare's books featured cats as their protagonists; four of her books were winners of the prestigious Caldecott Medal.

*Marshmallow* is the story of a cat and a bunny and their friendship. Oliver the cat always wants, as most cats do, to be the center of attention. Then one day a baby bunny named Marshmallow comes to stay. Oliver isn't pleased with the intruder stealing his thunder and wants nothing to do with him. But Marshmallow is just a baby and thinks that Oliver is his mom. Only the hardest heart could resist the little bunny's charms! Soon enough Oliver is smitten and they become the very best of friends.

These days, animal videos showing “interspecies cuddling” are all the rage on the Internet. The videos may be new, but *Marshmallow* proves that this is not a new concept; even the unlikeliest pairs can and do become affectionate and demonstrative friends. The book was written in 1942, and is based on real life, the author simply chronicled the lives of her pet cat and bunny for all to enjoy. That she was an artist and illustrated her own



books adds icing to the cake. *Marshmallow* is a heart-warming and timeless story that your child will treasure far into adulthood.

## **MR. POPPER'S PENGUINS**

by Richard Atwater and Florence Atwater, 1938

Newbery Honor Book, 1939

***“Vivid imagery, clever word plays, and funny characters... one of those classic childhood books that kids always remember.”***

*– Pam Gelman, Common Sense Media*

Not to be confused with a novelization of the recent motion picture starring Jim Carrey, *Mr. Popper's Penguins* in fact has a much longer history. The book was published in 1938 by husband and wife team Richard and Florence Atwater, and was named a Newbery Honor Book in 1939. It also won the 1940 Young Reader's Choice Awards for juvenile fiction.

Mr. Popper is a house painter of modest means who lives in a small town called Stillwater in the 1930s with his wife and two children. Mr. Popper secretly longs for adventure, a yearning he is able to somewhat satisfy by listening to the adventures of The Admiral, a world famous explorer on the radio. Mr. Popper, a devoted fan, has written to his hero. The Admiral writes back, telling the Poppers about a surprise he is sending them. When the surprise arrives, it turns out to be a real penguin! Mr. Popper names the creature Captain Cook and he settles into his new home. But Captain Cook grows lonely; he needs a mate! That problem is soon solved, but then... well, let's just say the Poppers end up with a flock of twelve penguins!

This book is an ideal read-alone book for ages 8 and up, but is also a great read-aloud book for younger children. The increasingly zany predicaments Mr. Popper finds himself in as he tries to be a responsible owner to his twelve penguins will delight younger and older readers alike.

## PETER PAN

by J. M. Barrie, 1911

***“It is my belief that Peter Pan is a great and refining and uplifting benefaction to this sordid and money-mad age.”***

*– Mark Twain*

James Matthew Barrie was a Scottish novelist and playwright; to generations of children he's known as the “father” of Peter Pan. Barrie first introduced his most famous character in an adult novel, *The Little White Bird* published in 1902. In 1904 Barrie, inspired by making the acquaintance of five sons of Arthur and Silvia Llewellyn-Davies, wrote a play called *Peter Pan, The Boy Who Never Grew Up*. The play was a resounding success, and led to the publication of a novel version in 1911 originally called *Peter and Wendy* and two further books, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* and *Peter Pan, The Boy Who Never Grew Up*.

Peter Pan is a little boy who is able to fly and who never seems to age. He lives in Neverland; a place peopled by fairies, mermaids, Tinkerbell, and the Lost Boys - children who went missing from Kensington Gardens. Peter makes nocturnal visits to Wendy Darling and her brothers in London, enticing them away to Neverland, where many adventures are to be had.

Barrie is thought to have based the idea for the novel not only on the Davies children, but also on his own older brother, who died at age 14. Their mother took comfort from thinking he would remain eternally youthful. The character has become a cultural icon since he first appeared, and known most famously today for the 1953 Disney animation movie adaptation and the live-action feature film *Hook* featuring Robin Williams, Dustin Hoffmann and Julia Roberts. If all your children know of *Peter Pan* are the movies, introduce them to the original, you won't be sorry.

## RAPUNZEL

by Brothers Grimm, 1812 (illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky, 1997)

Zelinsky's illustrated version Caldecott Medal Winner, 1998

***“Their crystalline fairy-tale style... influenced generations of children's writers and paved the way for other masters of the genre, from Hans Christian Andersen to Maurice Sendak.”***

*– National Geographic*

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (collectively known as the Brothers Grimm) were cultural researchers and linguists who traveled throughout their native Germany collecting the many folk stories and fairytales of the German oral tradition. Their published adaptations of Germanic folklore were intended at first as scholarly treatises, but the brothers also wanted to preserve the folktales threatened by burgeoning industrialism. Only later did the brothers refine and adapt the stories for children. It is thanks to them that today we know such classic children's tales as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Snow White*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

There are so many Brothers Grimm tales that will naturally come into your child's orbit, but our all-time favorite is *Rapunzel*. A desperate father-to-be invades the garden of his neighbor, a sorceress, to gather the “rapunzel” plant his pregnant wife is craving. He is caught by the witch, who only lets him live if he gives her their baby at birth. The baby girl is named Rapunzel by her foster mother and grows to be a beautiful child. The witch, jealous of her beauty, confines her to a tall tower with no staircase at age twelve. One day a prince hears Rapunzel singing in her lonely tower and falls in love. They can only be together by the prince climbing Rapunzel's luxurious and long golden hair.

As with all the Brothers Grimm tales, there are many adaptations of *Rapunzel*, but for us the best is the one illustrated by Paul O. Zelinsky, whose illustrations are done in the style of Italian Renaissance paintings. They are gorgeous. However it must be said that this version of the folktale contains mature concepts that some parents may not find

completely suitable for this age group. This is one volume perhaps better read to the children by a parent while the youngsters look at the beautiful paintings throughout the volume.

## **SIDEWAYS STORIES FROM WAYSIDE SCHOOL**

by Louis Sacher, 1978

***“Thirty clever, fast-moving stories that describe the bizarre events at Wayside School... each story is refreshingly different.”***

*– Julia Eccleshare, The Guardian\**

When Louis Sacher was in college he had the opportunity to earn classroom credit by helping out at a local elementary school. Thinking it an easy way to earn college credit (no homework, no tests!) he ended up at Hillside School in Berkley California. He not only assisted in the classrooms but also became the “Yard Teacher”, the playground monitor. Little did Sacher realize that the experience would be life changing or that he’d find inspiration for a three book series, the first volume of which is *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*.

Wayside School is a strange place, with all sorts of supernatural events going on (like teachers turning students into apples!). The school itself is decidedly odd in that the builder got his instructions wrong. Rather than constructing a one-story school of thirty classrooms, the builder instead built thirty classrooms atop one another like a skyscraper! As it happens the construction is not the only weird thing about the school. Teachers have a third nostril or a third ear on their heads and do improbable things with and to an equally quirky student body.

With a writing style that is clothed in wackiness, the author manages to sneak some moral lessons into the stories: the value of being nice, that good triumphs over evil and that if you believe something about yourself strongly enough it has the power to come true. Sacher’s stories developed

a bit of a cult following when first published; their appeal has grown exponentially with further reprints and wider distribution.

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## STREGA NONA

by Tomie dePaola, 1975

Caldecott Honor Book, 1976

***“The telling, the pictures, the way it all comes together... it comes as close to being a perfect picture book as anyone could hope to find.”***

*- Elizabeth Bird, School Library Journal © 2012*

Tomie dePaola knew from an early age (four!) that he wanted to grow up to be an author and artist. Unlike some children who constantly change their minds about such things, Tomie stuck to his plan; he became a beloved children’s book illustrator and his most famous work is *Strega Nona*. Although DePaola recounts that the story is a retelling of an old tale, in fact the work is his own. It is this conceit, coupled with his gentle writing style and his illustrations that are inspired by folk art, that give the book a timeless appeal and whimsical charm.

“Strega” is the word for witch in the Italian Calabrian language; “Nona” means grandmother. The two words together form not only the name of DePaola’s colorful character but also tie her to a tradition of folk healers, “witch doctors” and wise women who were in centuries past often the only source of healing to be found.

True to this heritage, Strega Nona is known in her village for her helpful medicines, advice and – mostly – for her magical cooking pot which is always full of pasta. One day she goes to visit Strega Amelia over the mountains and leaves her home and cooking pot in the watchful care of her helper Big Anthony. Anthony makes the mistake of pronouncing a magical

incantation over the cooking pasta and a village wide disaster ensues. How to undo the damage? Will Strega Nona return in time?

Big Anthony, who was never supposed to touch the cooking pot, let alone say any magical words over it, learns his lesson about doing what he is told. Your child will surely relate.

## **SWIMMY**

by Leo Lionni, 1963

Caldecott Honor Book, 1964

***“This visually rich, life-affirming book teaches kids that relationships matter.”***

*- Esther Ehrlich, Common Sense Media*

Leo Lionni had a multi-faceted career during his lifetime. Born in 1910, his early career was spent as a painter in Italy where he was well known and admired. Lionni earned a Doctorate in economics in 1935 whereupon he entered the field of advertising, moving in 1939 to Philadelphia to work in the field. He was also a connoisseur of art, commissioning work from up and coming artists, among them Andy Warhol. He became the art director of Fortune magazine in 1948 and held this post until 1960, when he moved back to Italy and became a children's book author and illustrator.

One of his best-loved stories is *Swimmy* originally published in 1964. The book follows a school of fish in the ocean, happily exploring the wonders of their environment, until the dangers of ocean living make themselves known. They take to hiding to avoid being eaten by bigger fish until the day a lone little fish called “Swimmy” finds them. His own school was swallowed by a huge tuna fish and only he survived. He joins the fearful new school and teaches them clever ways to avoid the big fish and still enjoy the grandeur of their home.

As a children's illustrator, Lionni was one of the first to use the collage technique that has since become very popular. The illustrations for *Swimmy* are lush, colorful and delicately translucent. We like the book not just for its lovely illustrations, but for the valuable lesson it imparts: that with teamwork and ingenuity you can overcome anything.

## THE GIVING TREE

by Shel Silverstein, 1964

***“It is deservedly one of the best-selling children’s books of all time.”***

*– Peter Lewis, Common Sense Media*

Shel Silverstein had been many things: a soldier, a cartoonist, a writer of rock music lyrics, but he'd never studied poetry. Not one to let something like that stop him he invented his own conversational poetic style, and he is most famous nowadays for his children's book *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, a collection of children's poetry he illustrated himself. However, prior to that publication, Silverstein's biggest success in the children's market was a lovely story called *The Giving Tree* which remains our personal favorite.

The book tells the story of the relationship one man has with a particular tree, a friendship of a somewhat unusual sort. When he was a little boy, he communicated with the tree and played in its branches. Upon reaching adulthood, he comes back to the tree to collect her apples, which he intends to sell to make money. Later he cuts off her branches to build his house, and one day he cuts her down to construct a boat in which he sails away. The tree is sad because she feels she has nothing more to give her friend, and she might never see him again, but one day...

The book has received criticism for the one-sided relationship between man and tree, the latter being seen as giving selflessly, the former accepting selfishly with no reciprocation. But that is seeing Silverstein's work in too tight a focus. At its heart this book celebrates giving with no

expectation of receiving, which in our modern culture is a lesson we could all stand to learn.

## **THE HUNDRED DRESSES**

by Eleanor Estes, 1944

Newbery Honor Book, 1945

***“An exceptional book that has earned its place as a childhood classic.”***

*- Teresa Bateman, School Library Journal © 1999*

It can never be too early to stress to your children the importance of kindness, how wrong it is to persecute someone for their social status or appearance, and the power of words to hurt more than blows. Eleanor Estes' award-winning book is an elegant exploration of the effects of bullying and is an excellent way to broach this subject with youngsters, particularly as they approach that shift from junior to middle school.

Wanda Petronski is Polish American. Her fellow classmates find her name funny and notice that she wears the same faded blue dress to school each day. Her family is poor and it is all they can afford to send her to school in. These two facts are enough to make her the target of harassment, but when Wanda tells of having “one hundred dresses” at home it opens her up to even more victimization. The girls in her class force her to describe each one of them in detail, and then mock her for her “lies”. Her teacher, while seeming kind, does nothing to stop the mistreatment, and places Wanda at the worst desk in the room. Wanda is a social outcast, friendless and miserable. Maybe a dress design contest at the school may have the power to change all that?

This story is not only Wanda's story, but also that of the bullying girls, who learn important lessons in the wake of the competition; and it also serves as a note to teachers everywhere of the importance of their role beyond simply the academic education of our children.



Accompanied by expressive watercolor illustrations by Louis Slobodkin, *The Hundred Dresses* is a truly memorable book that you'll never regret sharing.

## THE LITTLE PRINCE

by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 1943

***“All grown-ups were once children... but only few of them remember it.”***  
*- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince*

*The Little Prince* is one of the most, if not the most, famous French language books – translated into over 250 languages and selling well over 140 million copies worldwide since its publication in 1943. Tragically its author, Saint-Exupéry, would never see the resounding success of his little story: a pilot during the Second World War, his aircraft disappeared during a reconnaissance mission off the coast of Southern France in 1944. But the legacy of his book remains a proud testament to his genius.

Though written for children, this fairytale like book appeals to readers of all ages with its profound messages told via the utterly beguiling title character: the Little Prince. The story is narrated by a pilot who has crashed into the Sahara Desert where he is confronted by the mysterious young boy who, rather oddly, immediately asks the pilot to draw a picture of a sheep. The two instantly connect when the Little Prince is able to interpret the pilot's rather inartistic efforts. We learn that he has come from a different planet, and is visiting Earth as part of a wider exploration of planets in the galaxy. Over the course of eight days, whilst the pilot tries to repair his plane, we hear of the things the Little Prince has learned during his voyage.

Among these insights are numerous gems that will stay with the reader for a lifetime – here are just a few of our personal favorites: “One sees clearly only with the heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye”; “What makes the desert beautiful, is that somewhere it hides a well”; “It is such a

mysterious place, the land of tears”; “You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed”; “I am who I am and I have the need to be.”

*The Little Prince* is a wonderful story to share with children who ask all the same kinds of questions that the Little Prince asks and who innately see the world with the same kind of wide-eyed amazement and innocence. Reading the book together will also be a wonderful experience for parents: it’ll remind you exactly what it means to be a child.

## **THE McELDERRY BOOK OF AESOP'S FABLES**

by Michael Morpurgo, 2005

***“Every library has an edition of these stories, which have been retold for children many times. But this large, spacious hardcover is perfectly designed for reading aloud.”***

*- Hazel Rochman, Booklist*

*Aesop's Fables* have been bringing wisdom to readers since 500 B.C. As Apollonius of Tyana stated in the first century, Aesop used humble stories to convey great truths. While in the modern era scholars believe that the Aesop collection of parables was written by several authors, rather than the reputed Greek slave (due mainly to fables that appear to contradict each other), this does not diminish the truly ageless wisdom contained in these stories.

The *McElderry Book of Aesop's Fables* takes the original text and updates it to make it more comprehensible for modern readers in the 6-8 year age range. Collected here are all the old favorites, *The Lion and the Mouse*, *The Fox and the Grapes*, *The Tortoise and the Hare* and eighteen others in which anthropomorphic animals illustrate the moral point that concludes each tale. No heavy philosophical lectures here, Aesop - whoever he was - favored using ordinary folk behaving in foolish ways to make his point.

Michael Morpurgo rewrites the tales in a vibrant and lively style; artist Emma Chichester Clark illustrates the fables in bold colors and appealing images. The ageless wisdom of the fables is opened to a whole new generation in a high quality edition that will quickly become a treasured part of the library of any young child. While there are dozens of versions of the fables, many targeting children, the combination of sparkling prose and dynamic illustrations make this volume the hands down winner for 21<sup>st</sup> Century readers.

## THE POLAR EXPRESS

by Chris Van Allsburg, 1985

Caldecott Medal Winner, 1986

***“The telling is straight, thoughtfully clean-cut and all the more mysterious for its naive directness; the message... belief keeps us young at heart.”***

*– Kenneth Marantz, School Library Journal © 1985*

Chris Van Allsburg came to be a children's book author and illustrator in an unusual way. He trained as a sculptor, set up his own studio and even taught the discipline. His wife, convinced that his drawing style was perfect for children's book illustration, showed samples of his drawings to a book editor. Before long Chris Van Allsburg had a whole new profession. He published his first children's book in 1979 and hasn't looked back. His books *Jumanji* and *Zathura* have both been made into motion pictures, as has his much beloved Christmas story, *The Polar Express*.

*The Polar Express* concerns a young boy who once loved Christmas, but as time wore on lost much of his enthusiasm. One night a train's whistle sounds outside his Grand Rapids Michigan home. Curious, he investigates and finds that the train has come for him. Destination? The North Pole! The book follows his journey and the adventures he has once there, arriving just as Santa is about to leave on his nighttime mission.

Van Allsburg's illustrations are sumptuous, rich with color and detail, almost like magical color photos. His artwork is especially noted for the perspective he employs in the illustrations: in almost every book he uses a child's eye view. Kids love this - it's how they see the world! *The Polar Express* has become a Christmas classic since its first publication in 1985, not only for the illustrations but also for its calm and soothing story, perfect for easing excited little ones to sleep on Christmas Eve.

## THE SNOWY DAY

by Ezra Jack Keats, 1962

Caldecott Medal Winner, 1963

***“With bold text and whimsical collages, Ezra Jack Keats captures the delight kids feel in the simplest pleasures.”***

*– Esther Ehrlich, Common Sense Media*

In the 1960s, when the twin causes of civil rights and racial equality became a violent and tragic battleground, an up-and-coming children's book illustrator named Ezra Jack Keats noticed something. Something significant. He noticed that children's books never featured ethnic characters, except, perhaps in the background. They never had a story with a hero of color as the central character. Keats had been illustrating the books of other authors, but now he decided to write and illustrate his own children's book and redress the balance. The result was *The Snowy Day*.

Keats' book follows Peter, a little boy (who just happens to be African-American) as he explores his neighborhood on a snowy day. The adventures he has during his ramble are not dangerous or thrilling; instead this sweet and gentle story celebrates the small joys that fresh snowfall offers. Little Peter quietly experiments with making snow angels, observing his own footprints in the snow, and the shivery fun to be had knocking the white stuff out of the branches of a tree. Keats manages in

his simple story and delicately rendered illustrations to somehow capture that peaceful, blanketing silence that snow brings with it.

Whilst *The Snowy Day* was the first full color children's book to feature an Afro-American protagonist when it was published in 1962, we like the fact that Keats never specifically draws attention to the boy's ethnicity: Peter is simply and rightly just another boy delightfully playing in the snow.

## THE STORY OF FERDINAND

by Munro Leaf, 1936

***“This has an irresistible appeal... The most original and amusing thing Leaf has done.”***

*– Kirkus Reviews*

Noted children's author Munro Leaf made a wise decision when he collaborated with his friend and relatively unknown illustrator Robert Lawson in 1935. The result was his most beloved and popular book, *The Story of Ferdinand*. Lawson's pen and ink art, based on real locations in Andalusia Spain, serves as a backdrop to the classical tale of the bull that had no desire to participate in bullfighting.

Ferdinand is an amiable bull who finds his happiness in sitting beneath a cork tree and enjoying the flowers that grow nearby. He doesn't care to romp, snort, kick and butt heads with his fellow bulls, he is of a more peaceable and amiable nature. One day he's stung by a bee and finds himself romping, snorting and kicking with the pain of it – unfortunately this is the same day that five men come to the rancho to find the perfect bull for bullfighting in Madrid. And guess who they see running fast and snorting wildly?

*The Story of Ferdinand* has continued to resonate with readers over the decades thanks to its enduring lessons: that wanting peace does not make you a coward, that being true to yourself is the only true path to happiness

and that goodness is a greater force than violence. The book is also notable for having a protagonist who appeals equally to boys and girls; at publication this book was one of the first that crossed gender lines in its appeal.

## THE UGLY DUCKLING

by Hans Christian Andersen, 1843 (illus. by Jerry Pinkney, 1999)

Pinkney's illustrated version, Caldecott Honor Book, 2000

***“Life itself is the most wonderful fairy tale.”***

*- Hans Christian Andersen*

Hans Christian Andersen knew what it was to be different. He was a tall, awkward boy with large feet who was bullied because of his appearance. He then grew into a man with a remarkable singing voice and the ability to write beautiful stories. Children the world over love him for his enchanting fairytales, which include *The Little Mermaid*, *The Princess and the Pea*, *Thumbelina*, *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *The Red Shoes*. And, of course, for one tale in particular... *The Ugly Duckling*!

This “new” fairytale (solely Andersen's and not based on a pre-existing folk tale) tells the story of a hatchling in a barnyard who doesn't seem to fit in anywhere. He looks nothing like his mother or siblings and has to endure abuse for being ugly from both his siblings and the other birds and animals of the barnyard. Dejected, he leaves the farm and struggles to survive on his own. He endures many scrapes and close calls until the day his destiny is revealed to him.

Andersen's fairytales are often published in collected editions of his works, but for your six to eight-year-old, why not choose one of the many single tale volumes available? An excellent choice is Jerry Pinckney's adaptation, for which he received the 2000 Caldecott Honor. Pinkney's illustrations are beautifully rendered in exquisite watercolors that will

captivate your young ones as you read together. The story itself teaches many important lessons about patience, belonging and looking beyond the surface to see the inner beauty that exists in all of us.

## THE VELVETEEN RABBIT

by Margery Williams, 1922

***“When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”***

*– Margery Williams, The Velveteen Rabbit*

Sometimes the simplest stories have the greatest power to reach and teach us. *The Velveteen Rabbit* first published in 1922 is one such story. It has become a classic in children’s literature and is so embedded in our culture that it is frequently referred to in movies, TV shows, and other books.

*The Velveteen Rabbit* tells the story of a small stuffed bunny, given as a gift to a little boy one Christmas. He’s made of soft velveteen, but he is just a stuffed toy, he doesn’t do anything spectacular and so the boy begins to gravitate to other toys. However when the little boy finds he needs a bit of comfort he picks up the stuffed toy and learns the rabbit’s true value. The Velveteen Rabbit dreams of becoming “real” which can only be accomplished, a wise old hobbyhorse tells him, by being loved by a human for a very long time. Will the Velveteen Rabbit achieve his goal of becoming real?

The book has been reprinted many times and illustrated by many different artists over the decades. The original illustrations were by artist William Nicholson, and it is well worth trying to find a copy of the 2005 edition that features all his original illustrations in full-color as their delicate and fluid lines are the perfect complement to this beguiling story.

*The Velveteen Rabbit* is a beautiful testament to the transformative power of love, and since its initial publication it has continued to resonate with

audiences, generation after generation. This is another of those books that should form the core of a child's library.



# Contemporary books: classics in the making?

## CLICK, CLACK, MOO: COWS THAT TYPE

by Doreen Cronin, 2000

Caldecott Honor Book, 2001

***“Kids and underdogs everywhere will cheer for the clever critters that calmly and politely stand up for their rights.” – Publishers Weekly***

What do you get when an experienced labor lawyer turns to writing children’s books? If *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* by Doreen Cronin is any indication you get absurdity, hilarity and a sly lesson in the value of negotiation and peaceful protest, amusingly illustrated.

One day the cows in Farmer Brown’s barn find an old typewriter. They proceed to make good use of it, industriously typing away day after day. Very soon, Farmer Brown receives a neatly typewritten note from the cows. They are cold in the barn and want electric blankets. Astounded, the farmer turns down their request, and subsequently the cows go on strike. Demands fly back and forth, always delivered with precise politeness and calm by the bovines. The entire barnyard comes together to demand better conditions before the book’s hilarious conclusion.

There are a few words that might sail over the heads of the younger set, and require a bit of explanation such as “dispute resolution”, “neutral” and “ultimatum” but don’t let that spoil your enjoyment! This whimsical volume will amuse and delight children purely with the ridiculousness of its role reversal. The illustrations are bold and clever - how would a cow type, you’ll ask yourself, illustrator Betsy Lewis will show you. As farcical as it may seem, this book teaches a valuable lesson about compromise, something all children must learn and especially at this age.

## **CREEPY CARROTS!**

by Aaron Reynolds, 2012

Caldecott Honor Book, 2013

***“This beautifully shaded creation is a great example of how to get the tone of a picture book exactly right.”***

*– Elizabeth Bird, School Library Journal © 2012*

Take the idea of a cute bunny rabbit and combine it with the tone and flavor of the old TV series the *Twilight Zone*... impossible you say? How could the two come together? The answer is *Creepy Carrots!* written by Aaron Reynolds and masterfully illustrated by Peter Brown, who immersed himself in hours of the old TV classic to get just the right look for the art in the book.

*Creepy Carrots!* tells the cautionary story of Jasper Rabbit, a young bunny who just LOVES carrots, especially those that grow in the Crackenhopper Field. He drops by the carrot patch on just about every occasion, going to and from school, after sports games, whenever he can. He doesn't think anything is wrong with his predatory visits to the carrot field until the carrots start following him EVERYWHERE he goes! Is Jasper really being stalked by the wee orange demons, or does he just have a particularly overactive imagination coupled with a guilty conscience?

A unique tale filled with thrills, chills and suspense; made an award winner (Caldecott 2013) and instant classic thanks in great part to Brown's atmospheric art. Brown uses stark lighting effects in his art, the only color on each page the eerie orange of the carrots! He also employs dramatic “camera angles” to enhance the creep-out factor in each drawing. Possibly not suitable for anxious children, but if your kid enjoys a good safe scare *Creepy Carrots!* is a must-have that conveys the simple message that greed is not good!

## GOLDILOCKS AND THE THREE DINOSAURS

by Mo Willems, 2012

***“With three Caldecott Honor Books to his name - plus zillions of fans - Willems is children’s book royalty.” — Andrew Medlar, Booklist***

It’s a rare talent that can write a children’s book that appeals not only to the child, but entertains the parents as well. Author, animator and former Sesame Street writer, Mo Willems is one of those talented individuals and his prolific outpouring of kids’ books deserves thorough exploration. Amongst his best are such amusing titles as *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, *We Are in a Book!* and *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale*.

But it is Willem’s reworking of the timeless classic *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* that gets our vote as his best work to date. In *Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs* there’s Mama Dinosaur, Papa Dinosaur and well, their guest, a dinosaur from Norway who just happens to be over for dinner! This time it isn’t porridge, but chocolate pudding that attracts little Goldilocks, and this time the dinosaurs aren’t the unaware victims of the girl’s innocent thievery, they happen to like chocolate filled little girls and plot to serve her up for the main course!

Willems writes with incisive wit that might go over the heads of very young children but which should amuse six to eight-year-olds and their beleaguered parents. The illustrations, also by the author, are hilarious on their own. Willems slips clever little inside jokes and puns into the background: a to-do list on the dinos’ fridge, or an advertisement poster parodying well-known products and services are just two examples. Willems also inserts small cameos by some of his other characters into the artwork. This is a book your kids will love, and one that you will enjoy right along with them!

## INTERRUPTING CHICKEN

by David Ezra Stein, 2010

Caldecott Honor Book, 2011

***“This story is very sweet and silly and fun to read aloud with children.  
There will be giggles.”***

*– Hudson Area Library Reviews*

The trials and tribulations of trying to get an energetic youngster to settle down to sleep are familiar to every parent. You read the stories in the hopes of soothing little hearts and minds into a restful slumber only to be interrupted: “I want a glass of water,” “Read me another book”, “Where does the light go when the switch is off?”!

This familiar scenario is employed to charming effect by David Ezra Stein in his adorable book *Interrupting Chicken*. Papa Rooster is trying valiantly to get his Little Chicken off to slumberland. He attempts heroically to read his chick to sleep, but she is forever leaping right into the stories to warn the characters of impending doom or forthcoming surprises. The result? Every book Papa tries to read to his daughter is finished after just a few minutes - prematurely ended by this little “interrupting” chicken of his. Frustrated, Papa requests that his child invents and tells *him* a story. She rises to the challenge! Who will fall asleep first? Will the chick interrupt her own story? Colorful and quirky illustrations enliven the ingenious text.

As well as receiving a Caldecott Honor, *Interrupting Chicken* is the winner of the 2010 Cybils award for fiction picture books, given to the best children’s book by those who blog about juvenile fiction - the very folk who have a finger on the pulse of the best and brightest offerings. *Interrupting Chicken* is definitely a clever and captivating take on a familiar bedtime ritual; just don’t expect your lively youngster to quit interrupting you!

**MR. AND MRS. BUNNY - DETECTIVES EXTRAORDINAIRE!**

by Polly Horvath, 2012

***“An instant classic, with a contemporary resonance and a tone of yesteryear, fairly begging to be read aloud.”- Thom Barthelmess, Booklist***

Everyone loves a mystery, right? Even kids - it's just finding age appropriate books that will appeal to this age bracket. We know someone who read Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories at age 8, but not everyone can manage that. The trick is finding a mystery for kids that is well written, with enough youth appeal, lively characters and just the right amount of suspense and prose suitable to the age level. We think Polly Horvath does a great job getting the balance just right in her book *Mr. and Mrs. Bunny - Detectives Extraordinaire!*

Madeline has always had to be the adult in her family, her hippie parents are still mired in the 1960s and too busy finding themselves, meditating or doing whatever it is hippies do. When her parents go missing, abducted by talking foxes, it is up to Madeline to find them. Hopping to her rescue are newly minted detectives, Mr. and Mrs. Bunny (wearing their just purchased fedoras)! Can the intrepid pair get to the bottom of the kidnapping plot and help Madeline rescue her parents?

Horvath summons up a riveting tale full of snappy dialogue, fast paced action, witty and often satirical prose and Sophie Blackball's occasional illustrations provide visual interest to the novel. However, this is definitely for kids aged 8, or advanced early readers, due to some of the language and cultural references that will sail over the heads of younger readers.

## **OFFICER BUCKLE AND GLORIA**

by Peggy Rathman, 1995

Caldecott Medal Winner, 1996

***“It has definite child appeal... and the emotions portrayed will hit home with children.”***

***- Kirkus Reviews***

Teaching safety rules and tips to children can be a thankless endeavor: distractible as kids are in this age group you really have your work cut out to keep them engaged when you're trying to convey important messages. Peggy Rathman has hit on the perfect way to capture and keep children's attention in her book *Officer Buckle and Gloria*.

Officer Buckle is a safety officer. He's very dedicated to teaching schoolchildren how to be safe, avoid accidents and dangerous situations. Unfortunately his delivery is less than enthralling and his audiences tend to fall asleep during his worthwhile but dry lectures. One day he is partnered with Gloria, an astute police dog. Unbeknownst to Officer Buckle, the talented pooch proceeds to mime the safety lessons that he is giving, literally behind his back, which delights the children. His lessons now end to great applause and cheers - little does he suspect that all the accolades are really for clever Gloria! Will Officer Buckle continue to labor under this misapprehension or will he catch on to Gloria's antics? What will happen if and when he does?

Children's safety is a serious issue especially for young ones in this age group who are only now starting to gain more independence. As any comedian knows, sometimes the best way to teach important lessons is to make them funny. Children will be entertained by *Officer Buckle and Gloria*, but they'll also take away information that could save them from harm. For further emphasis, the book's final pages contain Officer Buckle's best tips for staying safe.

## **THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX**

by Kate DiCamillo, 2003

Newbery Medal Winner, 2004

***“As with the best stories, there are important messages tucked in here and there.”***

***- Ilene Cooper, Booklist***

Kate DiCamillo is first and foremost a wonderful storyteller. Telling a story of depth to this young age group is a special art and we encourage parents to take a look at her other titles, such as *Because of Winn-Dixie* and *The Magician's Elephant* as well. We chose *The Tale of Despereaux* to show that the art of creating a great fairytale is far from dead.

*The Tale of Despereaux* is divided into four stories which detail the lives of three of the characters who become pivotal in the fourth story, which in turn is the main adventure. The origins and childhood of Despereaux the little romantic mouse with big ears comprises Book I, the ancestors of the light-loving dungeon rat Roscuro are chronicled in Book II and Book III describes the sad life of Miggery Sow, who is a kitchen worker in the castle they all live in. Book IV draws these characters together to recount their shared destiny, which revolves around Princess Pea, with whom Despereaux is madly in love.

Though written for intermediate readers, it also makes good bedtime story material for younger kids. DiCamillo uses some big words, but pauses in her narrative to explain what they mean. This gentle form of vocabulary building is admirable and, along with its four-part structure, sets this book apart.

The book is deftly illustrated with pencil drawings by Timothy Basil Ering. And the darker aspects of the book - Despereaux's rejection by his family, Roscuro's conflicted existence, and the abusive background of Miggery (her father sells her into virtual slavery) - add a level of sophistication unusual for a children's book.

## **THE TRUE STORY OF THE 3 LITTLE PIGS!**

by Jon Scieszka, 1989

***“While adults will undoubtedly draw larger lessons from this razor-sharp fairy tale parody, kids will probably just think it's funny.”***

*- Peter Lewis, Common Sense Media*

How different folk tales would be if they were told from the perspective of the villains! Imagine the witch getting to tell her side of the story in *Snow White* or *Sleeping Beauty*! We might not be totally unsympathetic. Jon Scieszka turns the classic tale of the *Three Little Pigs* on its ear, telling the familiar story from the perspective of the Big Bad Wolf.

Well, make that Alexander T. Wolf (aka A. Wolf) who, in this book, at long last gets to tell his side of the story. Apparently he just wanted to borrow a cup of sugar to make a cake for his own poor bedridden grandmother; how all that huffing and puffing was nothing more than a bad cold; and that he didn't eat any live pigs - he just couldn't stand seeing good pork go to waste after they'd died in the collapse of their homes. Yes, the collapse was caused by his GREAT sneeze, but it was an accident!

Scieszka, also the author of *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* presents a cleverly sympathetic version of the classic folk tale. Lane Smith's illustrations are colorful and quirky with many delights hidden in their detail. Fairytales and folk tales can be a bit too serious, so it's delightful to find a comedic take on this well-known one.

## **ZEN SHORTS**

by Jon J. Muth, 2005

***“... an accessible, strikingly illustrated story and a thought-provoking meditation.”***

*- Gillian Engberg, Booklist*

Jon J. Muth has had a lifelong interest in all things Asian, including the art of sumi ink drawing, tai chi and the “way of tea”. He spent two decades of his career as a writer/illustrator of award winning graphic novels. He then



came to be a children's book illustrator in 1999 and has worked with notable authors including Neil Gaiman, Caroline Kennedy and Mo Willems. Drawing upon his interest in Asian culture, he eventually authored his own book *Zen Shorts* which introduces children to ancient stories of wisdom from the Zen philosophic tradition.

Stillwater the Giant Panda arrives one day in the backyard of a family and introduces himself. Over the next three days the three children of the family come one by one to visit him. Stillwater tells each child stories which have the effect of challenging their worldviews and assumptions in a gentle way while helping them to connect to one another on a deeper level.

Muth believes that children are quite adept at picking up the lessons of ancient wisdom, and like children's author E.B. White, believes that one does not need to condescend to them. Using a combination of gentle watercolors and ink drawings to illustrate the tales, Muth introduces the Zen concept of questioning assumptions and views in order to find one's own answers. A beautiful book gently expounding universal questions and truths, *Zen Shorts* is a perfect addition to your child's book collection.

# Early readers: fun books to encourage reading skills

## BLACKOUT

by John Rocco, 2011

Caldecott Honor Book, 2012

***“Rocco’s sublime account of a city blackout reveals a bittersweet truth: it sometimes takes a crisis to bring a family together.”***

*– Publishers Weekly*

How much do we unthinkingly rely on electricity? Lose the power and the computer won’t compute, refrigerators won’t cool, stoves won’t cook, streetlights and signals don’t work. And what would a blackout mean to you? What would you do when your power goes off? Panic? Eat all the ice cream in the freezer before it melts?

John Rocco’s *Blackout* explores the possibilities to be had when the grid goes down. It is summertime in the city, the heat is oppressive and a family is going about its usual business, watching TV, cooking dinner, working on the computer. Then it happens. The electricity goes off! The family is startled at first and then a bit frustrated, but when they decide to go to the roof they, for once, can see the stars! Neighbors join them and it soon becomes a party. In the streets below, people are coming out of their apartment buildings and enjoying themselves! Playing games, talking to each other, relishing the blackout... imagine that!

John Rocco’s imagined blackout gives the people of his city the chance to take a break from their rushed lives. Rocco’s artwork is comic book like, with large panels and word balloons, colorful when the power is on and subdued when it is off. A great bedtime story and a chance to discuss with your child what you’d do as a family if the lights went out.

## **EXTRA YARN**

by Mac Barnett, 2012

Caldecott Honor Book, 2013

***“A delightful read-aloud or read-alone with a gentle message about giving rather than taking.”***

*- Regan McMahon, Common Sense Media*

We look at the world around us, not always liking what we see. We are individuals, relatively powerless in the grand scheme of things; or so we are conditioned to believe. Could it be that we all have the power within us to impact and change our world?

In Mac Barnett’s book *Extra Yarn* Annabelle is a little girl who lives in a drab world reduced to black and white. One day Annabelle discovers a box of colorful yarn and decides to knit herself a sweater. Once she’s done she notices that there is still yarn in the box, so she knits a jacket for her dog Mars. Once she finishes the coat for her dog, she discovers she *still* has yarn left! She proceeds to knit for friends, family, total strangers, animals, buildings and inanimate objects, and still the yarn is not used up!

Annabelle is on to a good thing, but there is a villain about who wants the magical yarn box for himself.

This charming story shows how very small actions can accumulate and induce change. As Annabelle knits, she brings color, warmth and, most importantly, joy to her drab monochrome world. Mac Barnett’s laconic text is perfectly matched with the sharp illustrations of Jon Klassen. At first all people, animals and buildings are rendered in black, white and greyscale; as Annabelle knits each new article, color is introduced, until it dominates the book. A glowing testament to the power of kindness and generosity, *Extra Yarn* is a true gem.

## **FROG AND TOAD ARE FRIENDS**

by Arnold Lobel, 1970

Caldecott Honor Book, 1971

***“The stories also have a quality of joyful optimism, celebrating things such as the spring and friendship in a fresh and unsentimental way. I bow before Lobel's generous inventiveness; he is my utter hero.”***

*– Julia Donaldson, author of The Gruffalo, in The Guardian\**

Creator of the Gruffalo, Julia Donaldson is definitely one of our most favorite contemporary children's authors, so if she says Lobel is her hero, then we'd be crazy not to be recommending his work too! Actually, like many parents of our generation we loved Lobel way before coming across Donaldson's homage – but it's good to hear that she's a fan too! Amongst his many great books, Lobel's *Frog and Toad are Friends* is the best in our opinion.

*Frog and Toad are Friends* by Arnold Lobel celebrates all the joys of a fast and true friendship. Frog and Toad are diametric opposites, Frog is joyful and fun loving, and Toad is a bit of a pessimist. Together they share many heartwarming adventures. They go for a swim (Frog is *not* to look at Toad in his bathing suit); an ill-equipped Toad struggles to tell a sick Frog a story to make him feel better; the pair go off to hunt a lost button; Frog must convince the happily hibernating Toad that Spring has finally arrived; and finally, Toad loves getting letters, but no one is sending him any until Frog comes to the rescue.

*Frog and Toad are Friends* is the first book in a trilogy; Lobel's follow-up books *Days with Frog and Toad* and *Frog and Toad All Year Long* chronicle the further adventures of the amphibious best friends. Lobel both wrote and illustrated the books; his artistic style is captivatingly detailed and illustrations appear on almost every page. A wonderful testament to what it means to be and have a friend, this is a “must-have” for any child's book collection.

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## HOW TO BABYSIT A GRANDPA

by Jean Reagan, 2012

*“A tongue-in-cheek reversal of roles... with laugh-out-loud scenes and funny hidden details.”*

– *Kirkus Reviews*

Jean Reagan's second book only recently came to our attention and we've included it here because of its fun concept that is sure to amuse your kids, as well as its clear language and layout that will encourage them to read. It is a gentle and amusing parody, written in the style of a "How to" instruction book and it includes lots of super useful information a kid needs to know to look after their grandparent.

For example, what to do when Grandpa arrives: hide, of course! A list of Grandpa's favorite snacks: "ice cream topped with cookies" or "cookies topped with ice cream" or "anything dipped in ketchup"! Top tip for waking Grandpa from his nap: sing *On Top of Old Smokey* softly, then much, much louder! There are also good ideas on what to do during walks, how to prepare for different weather conditions outside and what games Grandpa likes to play! Naturally, most of these tips are rather more advantageous for the kid, than the poor long-suffering grandparent.

But as amusing as the text is, the book really comes to life with the fantastically funny illustrations by Lee Wildish: a series of bright and energetic vignettes depicting what is clearly a glorious and loving relationship between the child and grandparent. We particularly like the image of the Grandpa bundled up in oh so many layers for a winter walk: evidently, payback time for the many times the kid has felt overly dressed!

*How to Babysit a Grandpa* certainly made us laugh out loud, and it is to be hoped that Reagan continues to produce more of these clever books.

**GRANDPA GREEN**

by Lane Smith, 2011

Caldecott Honor Book, 2012

***“The book is subtle and clever, working on many levels visually and communicating the deep love and respect a young boy has for his grandpa.”***

*– Regan McMahon, Common Sense Media*

Lane Smith has worked with some of the most famous authors in children’s publishing. He illustrated an edition of Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* and oversaw design on the movie made from the book. He frequently partners with Jon Siesczka, illustrating many of his books including *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* and *The Stinky Cheese Man*.

He’s also written and illustrated his own children’s books and has won multiple awards, including being named the Carle Honor Artist in 2012. We chose his more recent book *Grandpa Green* for this list partly because it provides a complete contrast to Reagan’s book *How to Babysit a Grandpa* (see above), but mostly because it is utterly charming.

Grandpa Green was many things during his long life, when he was a small boy he lived on a farm. He got chickenpox once, and as a young man he became a soldier. He got married and had kids, and was above all an artist. His medium was his garden; he turned trees, bushes and hedges into fantastic shapes using the art of topiary. The book follows his young great-grandson on an exploration through the garden that is Grandpa Green’s enduring legacy.

Lane Smith uses a limited color palette in his illustrations here; green is the predominant color. Trees, hedges and bushes are bold in their green detail; the other figures in the narrative are delicately rendered, almost insubstantial. Smith manages to convey some large truths about aging, memory, familial love and history in his whimsical exploration of Grandpa Green’s garden. As well as being suitable for early readers, this is a perfect

volume for your parents to read to their grandchildren; both will be touched by the profound wisdom to be found in the book.

## **PUFF, THE MAGIC DRAGON**

by Peter Yarrow and Lenny Lipton, 1962, (illus. Eric Puybaret and Bruce Foster, 2011)

***“Puff the Magic Dragon has changed a lot for me because of the thousands of stories people have told me...[about] how the song moved them as children... how they’ve sung it to their own children and grandchildren.”***

*– Peter Yarrow, Puff the Magic Dragon*

Who doesn’t know the song, *Puff the Magic Dragon*? Immensely popular since its release by folk singers Peter, Paul and Mary in 1962, the song is now a staple in many pre-school music repertoires, so the chances are your child will already be familiar with the song. And because of this, getting a book version of the song to read along with is particularly helpful for younger readers.

For some the language in *Puff the Magic Dragon* may seem ambitious, with big words like “frolicked”, “billowed” and “mighty” to master, but we don’t think you should baulk at this – reading along with a child allows them to tackle the words they know, while the grown-up takes up any slack. More importantly, the story of Puff is sure to engage young readers and encourage them to try those harder words too.

The song tells the story of Puff, a dragon who lives forever in a land called Honalee. There he has a friend, Jackie Paper, a little boy with whom he romps and has adventures, sailing on the sea, triumphing over pirates, and having kings and other nobles bow before them. But, inevitably, Jackie grows up and leaves all those childish antics and Puff behind, and the original song ends on a bittersweet note.

There are a number of book versions of *Puff, the Magic Dragon* currently on the market, but we really love the 2011 edition pop-up version illustrated by Eric Puybaret and engineered by Bruce Foster, which also comes with an audio CD featuring the song. The words become even more magical with the gatefold pop-ups and special effects scattered throughout. A further lovely touch is that Yarrow and Lipton have seen fit to add a final verse where the grown-up Jackie Paper returns to Honalee to introduce his daughter to the delighted Puff! So all is well in the end!

## THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

by Watty Piper, 1930

***“The text, with its, I think I can, I think I can refrain, is a timeless piece of children's literature and so familiar that it needs no elaboration.”***

*— Roxanne Burg, School Library Journal © 2010*

Published first in 1930 in the familiar version, *The Little Engine That Could* can trace its roots back at least three decades. In 1906 a version of the story appeared as part of a published sermon by Rev. Charles Wing. In 1910 another incarnation appeared under the name of the *Pony Engine*, by Mabel C. Bragg. In the 1920s the story appeared in a set of books sold door to door. Each incarnation of the story varied in details, but all used the book's most famous phrase: “I think I can!”

Watty Piper (pen name of Arnold Munk) wrote the most beloved incarnation. A little engine works diligently pulling train cars from one switch to another. One day a very long freight train is stranded, but must cross over a steep mountain to deliver its goods. The freight train asks other powerful locomotives in the train yard to pull it over the mountain, each one refuses. Desperate, the freight train turns to the little switch engine for help. It seems an impossible request but it is willing to try announcing proudly: “I think I can!” and sets itself to the task.



With its charming anthropomorphic trains, the book conveys a simple message: work hard and be optimistic and you'll find you have the power to do just about anything. The Piper "Engine" has seen many revisions, updates and change of artists. Whichever edition you end up buying, this is one classic that should be in every child's collection.

## **THE LITTLE MOUSE, THE RED RIPE STRAWBERRY, AND THE BIG HUNGRY BEAR**

by Don Wood and Audrey Wood, 1984

*"Known and loved by millions of children around the world."*— Elizabeth Bird,  
*School Library Journal* © 2012

Audrey Wood is a natural storyteller; married to an artist, Don Wood, together they have produced a remarkable body of children's fiction. One of their best-known and loved titles is *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear*, which teaches an endearing lesson about learning to share and the value of compromise. We like this book partly because it is ideal for the new reader in your family to read on their own, as the language is simple and the text is large.

We also like it for Don Wood's colorful illustrations that round out the story: in fact what really sets this book apart is the clever interplay between the narrative structure and the illustrations. The text is directed at Little Mouse, so it appears that the narrator (the reader) is talking to him. The conversation is about a lovely, ripe, juicy strawberry that Little Mouse is about to pick; but the narrator tells him to watch out because there's (supposedly) a Big Hungry Bear who loves strawberries too and who is bound to find it!

Little Mouse never speaks in the book, but through Don Wood's brilliant illustrations, we see him go through numerous emotions as he tries out

different tactics to prevent losing the strawberry. Perhaps in the end the narrator will help the little fellow to outwit the big bear?

What's also great about this book is that its clever structure allows for further play and learning beyond the first reading. You can encourage your little one to make up speech for the Little Mouse; discuss ways in which Little Mouse could hide the strawberry; and round off the day with a march around the house like Little Mouse does when he's guarding the strawberry!

## THE DOT

by Peter H. Reynolds, 2003

***“Simplicity itself, like the dot in the title, this small book carries a big message.”***

*- Ilene Cooper, Booklist*

How often do we say we can't do something without first having tried? More often than we care to admit. We allow our insecurities to limit what we try and sadly, you'll never know what you are capable of, until you give it a go. Peter H. Reynolds bases his children's book *The Dot* on this very simple, but profound, truth.

Young Vashti is not an artist, and she'll be the first to tell you so. For her, art class is a chore, no matter how hard she tries, she can't draw anything. Her art teacher wisely tells her to just “make a mark and see where it takes you”. Frustrated, Vashti does so, jabbing her pencil into the paper and making a tiny dot. When she sees the drawing of her dot on display a few days later, she looks at it and thinks, “I can do better than that!” And before she knows it, she *is* an artist! Of her very own and very special brand of art!

This simple tale tells profound truths about creativity, perseverance, flaunting convention, and the rewards that come from making an effort, all

well told with quirky text and illustrations (proving that art needn't be neat and tidy). As any artist will tell you, your skills improve with every drawing you do, the trick is not to be discouraged. Of course, this lesson applies to most things in life. In a world, which often discourages more than it encourages, this is a valuable lesson for children.

## THE MOON IN MY ROOM

by Uri Shulevitz, 1963

***“I had assumed that using many words skillfully was central to writing. I was overlooking what was of primary importance - what I had to say.”***

*— Uri Shulevitz, St. James Guide to Children's Writers*

Judy Sierra (see Part 1) is amongst many authors who cite Uri Shulevitz as playing a key role in inspiring them to create books for children. On her official website Sierra writes how the moment she heard Shulevitz describe picture books as “small theatres”, was like “a big light bulb went off inside my head” and led her to developing her unique take on theatrical storytelling.

Shulevitz's clear understanding of what exactly is important when imparting a story to a child, particularly the importance of being able to present the story visually, is most lucidly seen in his own work, for which he has won many awards including the Caldecott Medal and Caldecott Honor. Shulevitz likes nothing more than to keep the text spare and let the illustrations do the talking.

This is particularly true in his beautiful book *The Moon in My Room* where a series of almost childish doodles fill in the detail of the story. The opening pages are particularly well executed. On the first page the text reads “This is the little house” and we see a house on a hill with many steps going up to it, a shingled roof, a porch festooned with a washing line of laundry, a garden flanked by flowers in bloom and there's mail in the mailbox. Inside the house we go into a boy's room, where the text says “In

his little room there is a whole world” and here we see all the elements of this child’s marvellous world: toys, books, coloring pencils, fishbowl, mobiles, drawings on the walls, a half-made train set, a sword peeking out from under a cupboard.

And as each illustration vividly fleshes out the poetic text, you can’t help but be drawn into this very gentle tale of a boy who can’t find his favorite toy bear. It’s a lovely book, both to read and to look at.

# Series and chapter books worth getting hooked on

## **BALLPARK MYSTERIES SERIES**

by David A. Kelly, 2011

***“Combines the allure of baseball parks with the challenge of solving a mystery... Historical details... will keep the young baseball fan reading.” - Kirkus Reviews***

Frankly we don't understand why there aren't a lot more sports themed storybooks and novels for young readers. Firstly, if we want to encourage our children to be more active then it makes sense to offer them active role models. Secondly, and perhaps more obviously, as adults we love playing and watching sports, every year brings its share of inspiration sports related movies, so why wouldn't our kids want the same?

*The Ballpark Mysteries* is a chapter book series written by David A. Kelly and illustrated by Mark Meyer. Each volume in the series takes place in a different Major League ballpark in the United States. The first book in the series is called *The Fenway Foul-Up* and takes place at the world famous Fenway Park near Boston Massachusetts. In this volume nine-year-old baseball fans Kate Hopkins and Mike Walsh solve the mystery of a Red Sox slugger's bat that disappeared in front of at least a dozen witnesses. Will they be able to find the bat and restore the player's winning status?

The series presently stands at six novels. The books contain in-depth details on each park that are guaranteed to delight any young baseball fan. Included in each volume is a fact sheet about the ballpark in question, but the prose is also full of well-researched detail. The winning combination of baseball and mystery novel broadens the appeal of the series to budding fans of both.

## CLASSIC STARTS SERIES

by various authors

***“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.”***

***- Dr. Seuss, I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!***

There are few greater reading pleasures than enjoying a real classic, and there is no better time to develop an appreciation for literature than in childhood. Understandably, classical literature presents a number of problems for young intermediate readers: archaic language and material written for an adult audience present a challenge that may seem insurmountable at an early age.

The *Classic Starts* series from the Sterling Publishing Company is a great way to introduce your children to the pleasures of reading great literature. The series offers abridged versions of classic tales like *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Treasure Island* and many more. By tailoring the original texts to the reading level of intermediate readers, an entire new world comprising of tried and tested favorites can be opened to your child.

The *Classic Starts* series endeavors to keep the original essence of each story even while simplifying language for young readers. The books are illustrated for additional visual appeal. *Classic Starts* books are available in either single volumes or boxed sets combining several titles under a theme that brings several novels together in a slip cased collection (such as *Tales of Adventure* and *Best-Loved Library*). The books are affordably priced with no sacrifice in quality.

## MY FATHER’S DRAGON SERIES

by Ruth Stiles Gannett, 1948

Newbery Honor Book, 1949

***“Doubt you the power of a great story? Look no further. This title has a hold on kids that most folks would kill to achieve.”***

*– Elizabeth Bird, School Library Journal © 2012*

The *My Father's Dragon* series was first published in 1948 and has become a much-cherished classic in the decades since. Author Ruth Stiles Gannett, and her stepmother, artist Ruth Chrisman Gannett have created these unique fantasy tales beloved for their humor and absurdity. The original volumes, *My Father's Dragon*, *Elmer and the Dragon* and *The Dragons of Blueland* were first issued as separate volumes, but for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the trilogy, an omnibus edition with the original illustrations restored was published and is still widely available.

Elmer Elevator is the young hero of the trilogy and the father of the narrator in the first volume (hence “my father's dragon”). One day, on the advice of an alley cat of all things, young Elmer departs for a faraway land to rescue a baby dragon. The subsequent volumes continue Elmer's adventures; the second book details the eventful journey home, and in the third, the dragon seeks out his family, only to find them about to be sent to zoos. He and Elmer join forces to try to save them.

Ruth Stiles Gannett writes in a highly entertaining style, with absurd leaps of logic and offbeat humor. *My Father's Dragon* was an American Library Association “notable book”, and was nominated for both Newbery and Ambassador Book awards. The trilogy is consistently listed as one of teachers' top 100 books for children.

## **THE ALVIN HO SERIES**

by Lenore Look, 2008

***“Look's humorous, warm, and thoughtful treatment... will comfort sensitive readers and remind them that if Alvin can confront his fears, so can they.” – Courtney Jones, Booklist***

Plenty of kids suffer with anxiety at some point in their childhoods; after all there's plenty to be anxious about! But few kids are as anxious as poor old Alvin Ho. He's anxious about almost everything. Furthermore Alvin suffers with selective mutism and whenever he gets stressed he is unable to speak at all, which at school means all of the time. Now if a book about a scared child with selective mutism sounds a bit heavy going... don't worry it's not at all.

The first book in the *Alvin Ho* series, *Allergic to Girls, School and Other Scary Things*, follows Alvin as he starts second grade. At home he's gregarious but at school... not a word. His loving and supportive parents wonder how he'll cope. Well it won't be easy but with his PDK (Personal Disaster Kit) and his new best friend Flea he might just stand a chance.

What we like about this series is the way Look brings her characters, with all their defects and disabilities, right into the mainstream. This is not a series of stories about children with disabilities; it is a charming and funny romp with a motley cast of characters, some of whom just happen to have disabilities. Really these books are about making friends and surviving childhood... something every child can relate to.

There are five books in the series, so far, and the titles all hint at the some of the new challenges that Alvin will have to face -*Allergic to Camping Hiking and Other Natural Disasters*; *Allergic to Birthday Parties, Science Projects and Other Manmade Catastrophes*; *Allergic to Babies, Burglars and Other Bumps in the Night*; and *Allergic to Dead Bodies, Funerals and Other Fatal Circumstances*.

## THE CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS SERIES

by Dav Pilkey, 1997

***“... for every downtrodden fun-seeking kid who never wanted to read a book.”***

*- Marlene Gawron, School Library Journal © 2010*



Can a book series that features a superhero that runs around in his underwear, and which indulges in a lot of scatological humor, really tempt children who hate to read into picking up a book? You bet it can! Dav Pilkey, author and artist of the *Captain Underpants* series has a proven track record in doing just that.

Fourth graders Harold Hutchins and George Beard are best friends who find coping with fourth grade a bit problematical, thanks in no small part to their mean principle. The two boys are neighbors and notorious pranksters; *Captain Underpants* comes into being when they hypnotize Principal Krupp and he turns into a comic superhero that chases bad guys in his jockey shorts and a red polka dotted cape.

The first book in the series *The Adventures of Captain Underpants* sets up the fun; ten more books with suitably silly titles round out the series. Thanks in part to the frequent potty humor, the books particularly appeal to boys in the 6-8 age bracket who otherwise wouldn't be caught dead reading a book; Pilkey's idiosyncratic illustrations add to the attraction.

Populated by a quirky cast of supporting characters the books follow Harold and George as they get into all sorts of scrapes, mostly because of their incessant pranks. Highbrow this ain't and not every parent will appreciate the bathroom humor that runs rampant through the series, but that is a small price to pay if these books get your non-reader to change his or her ways.

## THE ELOISE SERIES

by Kay Thompson, 1955

***“... sheer delight for children, whose giggles pile one on top of another as the pages turn.”***

*- Jennifer Gennari, Common Sense Media*

Kay Thompson was a remarkable woman. In her time she was an actress, singer, musician and a composer. She was a choral director and vocal arranger on some of the biggest Hollywood musicals. She was a friend to Judy Garland and godmother to her daughter, Liza Minnelli. She certainly sounds like a formidable woman and perhaps gives us a clue into the character of her famous creation, Eloise.

Eloise is a preternaturally self-possessed six-year-old who lives at the Plaza Hotel in New York City. She lives in the penthouse on the “tippity-top floor” along with her Nanny, a pug dog named Weenie and Skipperdee her pet turtle. Eloise personifies self-confidence and precociousness, or to put it another way she is self-will personified. Her motto is “getting bored is not allowed” and with an enviable freedom, she does whatever she wants, whenever she wants. Because of her antics the other guests at the Plaza know her, or of her, whether they want to or not. Eloise is irrepressible, irreverent and impish and has been beloved since her debut in the 1950s. Certainly not a role model, but somehow mesmerizing.

Kay Thompson wrote five Eloise books in collaboration with illustrator Hillary Knight; in addition to the eponymous first volume, *Eloise* they are: *Eloise in Paris*, *Eloise at Christmas*, *Eloise in Moscow*, and *Eloise Takes a Bawth*. Thompson adopted a breathless writing style which perfectly mimics how young children talk, with lots of ‘and thens’ and very few punctuation marks. Thompson’s books have been best sellers since the first volume was published in 1955, and have sold over a million copies in the decades since. Eloise’s portrait even hangs in the real Plaza Hotel!

## THE FLAT STANLEY SERIES

by Jeff Brown, 1964

***“Jeff Brown’s sophisticated humor keeps adults entertained, while kids identify with Stanley’s feelings and enjoy his adventures.”***

*– Mary Dixon Weidler, Common Sense Media*

Poor Stanley Lambchop! His life (and body) are bizarrely altered one night when the bulletin board hanging above his bed comes off the wall and squashes the sleeping boy flat (he's only a half inch thick!). Stanley awakes to his new predicament and, making the best of it, slips under doors rather than walking through them, uses himself as a kite to play with his brother and travels economically to visit friends by mailing himself! He can even solve crimes!

Author Jeff Brown wrote five *Flat Stanley* books before his death in 2003. The popular series has enjoyed an unusual renaissance, with new authors picking up Brown's pen and continuing the plucky young boy's adventures series in nine additional *Flat Stanley* stories that take him on exciting adventures around the United States and the world.

Additionally, in 1994 a Canadian schoolteacher launched the Flat Stanley Project, which still enjoys huge popularity for the innovative way it encourages grade school kids to take up the lost art of letter writing. Involving many schools in a cooperative arrangement, children document their own adventures with Flat Stanley and trade letters with other students in the project.

While the concept may be outrageous, Stanley teaches some great lessons about coping ("when life hands you lemons, make lemonade" could be his personal motto) and the only limits you truly have are those you put upon yourself.

## **THE IVY AND BEAN SERIES**

by Annie Barrows, 2006

***"Ivy and Bean are irresistible. Readers will look forward to... this series that celebrates the joys and thrills of friendship, unrestricted play and unfettered imagination."- Kirkus Reviews***

Not every child loves to read, for some it is a bother and a chore. However being able to read is not just a required skill, it can open whole new worlds to young readers, and greatly enrich their lives. The trick is finding something for your non-reading child that will captivate them. The *Harry Potter* series does that for slightly older children, and the *Ivy and Bean* series is a winner in the age 6-8 year old category.

Ivy and Bean are eight-year-old girls of very different dispositions. Ivy is quiet and bookish; tomboy Bean is spunky, rebellious and opinionated. They might never have met, let alone become friends, had their moms not forced them to play together. They don't care for each other at first, but end up best friends, in spite of their differences. The series explores their adventures and follows them as they navigate through family dramas and fun times.

There has been some comment that the series doesn't provide much in the way of good role models for young girls. Bean, with her irreverent and sometimes contrary attitudes is often singled out for particular criticism. It is true that she uses disparaging words and isn't very respectful to others; however contrasting personalities provide more depth and realism to the books. Not everyone is the same. There are valuable lessons embedded in the series about finding friendship (even with the unlikeliest people) and keeping it, that make it more than worthwhile to add to your child's library.

## **THE JUDY MOODY SERIES**

by Megan McDonald, 2000

***“Portrays challenges and pleasures from a kid’s perspective, and shows how making the best of things can have surprising rewards.”***

*- Shelle Rosenfeld, Booklist*

Judy Moody is a unique heroine in children's literature; she's possessed of a changeable and not always easy-going temperament as her surname

suggests. Being moody or in touch with some of our less appealing emotions is not something often expressed in literature for this age group, but is a fact of life whether we discuss it or not. In fact Judy has been used by elementary school counselors as a role model for dealing with emotions and channeling them productively.

Judy is very much out of sorts in the first book of the series, *Judy Moody (Was In A Mood)*. Summer is over, and it is the first day of third grade. Judy doesn't anticipate the new school year going well, everything will be different from last year and she doesn't hide her disgruntlement. Her life is also complicated by her know-it-all younger brother Stink. During the course of the novel Judy learns to turn negatives into positives and cope with the inevitable changes that life brings.

Judy, despite her mercurial nature, is a smart, witty and resourceful young lady and is fortunate enough to be surrounded by adults who understand her and don't try to change her personality. The series, now up to fifteen books, chronicles Judy's many adventures humorously as she continues on her path of self-discovery. Peter Reynolds' illustrations complement the text perfectly and are as wryly funny as Megan McDonald's prose.

## THE LULU SERIES

by Judith Viorst, 2010

***“This inventive, lighthearted fantasy should be a solid hit with young readers looking for a lively first chapter book.”***

***- Marilyn Taniguchi, School Library Journal © 2010***

Judith Viorst is a well-known newspaper journalist and psychoanalysis researcher as well as being an author of adult non-fiction and children's books. In partnership with noted children's illustrator Lane Smith, she has written the *Lulu* series of books.

Lulu is, what one would politely term, a spoiled brat. In the first book, *Lulu and the Brontosaurus* this girl, who can shatter glass with her petulant screeches, launches a thirteen-day standoff with her parents when they refuse to get her a Brontosaurus for her birthday. When they won't budge, she packs a bag and heads off to the forest to find one herself. And find one she does, but she isn't quite prepared for the fact that *he* wants to make her *his* pet. In the sequel, *Lulu Walks the Dogs*, the still obstinate young lady takes up a series of odd jobs in order to buy "that special thing she is always and forever going to want" and which even her indulgent parents can't afford. Finally she hits on the idea of becoming a dog walker with hilarious results.

Viorst imbues her strong-willed heroine with plenty of attitude and yet matures her from the first book to the second so that she becomes only a part-time pain-in-the-butt; and Lane Smith has fun with his humorous illustrations of Lulu's adventures in his usual inimitable style. She may not be the best role model in the world, but she does learn a few lessons along the way. Who knows, there may be hope for her yet!

## THE MAGIC TREE HOUSE SERIES

by Mary Pope Osborne, 1982

***"I want my students leaving third grade feeling proud of themselves. I know that the number-one thing they will remember about this year is reading the entire Magic Tree House series."***

***- Cindy Ventura, Magic Tree House Educator of the Year, 2005***

Mary Pope Osborne must be one of the more prolific book authors in children's literature. Her *Magic Tree House* series currently clocks in at forty-nine volumes, plus several associated fact guides that flesh out the locations, history and background of some of the books of the series. More volumes in the series will be forthcoming.

In the first twenty-eight books we meet brother and sister, Jack and Annie, who are sent by Sorceress Morgan Le Fay on magical missions in an enchanted tree house. Their adventures include solving ancient puzzles and preserving ancient “lost” stories. Starting with book twenty-nine of the series, Jack and Annie are now sent on quests by Merlin the Magician, occasionally backed up by two new apprentices Kathleen and Teddy in some volumes. The first twenty-eight books are somewhat simpler stories; the Merlin books are longer and take place in mythic lands (such as Camelot) and other fantasy realms.

*The Magic Tree House* series is not only popular with kids, but also with parents, teachers and librarians, and there is now a dedicated Magic Tree House website promoting the books, various resources and connected literacy initiatives such as the Magic Tree House Educator of the Year contest. Even the most stubborn non-reader becomes entranced by the adventures of Jack and Annie and will want to see where they will be sent next. And since there are so many volumes and adventures, *The Magic Tree House* series is likely to draw young readers in and keep them both entertained and *reading*!

## **THE NEVER GIRLS SERIES (DISNEY FAIRIES)**

by Kiki Thorpe, 2013

***“Short chapters, a large font, and plentiful black-and-white illustrations make this book accessible to beginning chapter-book readers.***

***Recommended where demand for fairies is high.”***

*- Kay Weisman, Booklist*

The Disney Fairies book series, a franchise of the Disney Company, of course owe their existence to J.M. Barrie who first introduced the world to Tinkerbell and Peter Pan. Using Barrie’s characters, Disney has expanded and refined the mythos introduced in the 1902 novel; beginning with their 1953 Disney animated film, *Peter Pan*. The Disney Fairies franchise is built around Tinkerbell (now the mascot for the corporation).

The *Never Girls Series* written by Kiki Thorpe and illustrated by Jana Christy is part of the Disney Fairies publishing empire. Introduced in the first book of the series, *In A Blink*, young girls Kate, Lainey, Mia and Gabby find themselves magically transported to Neverland, the mythical land of mermaids, fairies and lost children. Tinkerbell and the Queen of Neverland formulate a plan to return the girls to the “real world”, but the four friends are not that eager to leave.

The *Never Girls* series currently has three volumes: *Never Girls #1: In a Blink*; *Never Girls #2: The Space in Between* and *Never Girls #3: A Dandelion Wish*. The sequels detail the further adventures of the four girls, who learn to do what Tinkerbell has claimed impossible: return to Neverland once they’ve left.

While some parents may be wary, the novels are well crafted, the adventurous girls provide positive role models and the series can help spark a new interest in reading. Sometimes you can’t ask for more than that!

## **THE RAMONA QUIMBY SERIES**

by Beverly Cleary, 1955

Newbery Honor Book, 1978 and 1982

***“Ramona is justifiably one of the most famous and loved characters in children’s fiction.”***

*– Publishers Weekly*

It isn’t often that a children’s book series follows its protagonist as he or she grows up. Too often characters are stuck in time and, while their experiences in the books render some changes, they are essentially the same kids introduced in the opening chapter. Beverly Cleary had a different approach; she followed her heroine Ramona from age four until fourth grade. The series is also a compliment to Cleary’s equally charming



*Henry Huggins* books where we first meet Ramona and her family as supporting characters.

The first volume of the *Ramona Quimby* series, *Beezus and Ramona*, was published in 1955; the eighth and final book in the series *Ramona's World* was published in 1999. If you're wondering, Beezus is Ramona's older sister: actually named Beatrice, her unusual nickname originated with her baby sister's mispronunciation of her name. Over the course of the eight books in the series we see Ramona maturing as she encounters real life situations such as her father losing his job, the death of a pet and the arrival of a baby sister. All ordinary events in life, but Ramona is remarkable in her growth and adaptation to change.

Ramona is portrayed during the years when her personality is developing and before the adult world can have its subjugating influence on her. She's intelligent, creative and possesses great integrity. Cleary, throughout the series, celebrates these characteristics, never diminishing or surrendering them. In terms of positive role models, Ramona is among the best, and the series is a great addition to any youngster's library.

## Great Books for Older Kids

### Aged 9 to 11

By the time most children enter the fourth grade, or around aged 9, they should be able to read independently, fluently and able to tackle new and more complicated words. They'll be reading a lot of different kinds of texts for schoolwork which will require them to start developing the kind of analytical skills that helps them pick out the useful information for a project. So now is also the ideal time for them to be encouraged to enjoy fiction that strengthens other important facets of their personalities.

Great fiction will ignite our children's imagination and open them up to creative expression. They get to voyage beyond the confines of their real world, to foreign and magical places, go back or forward in time, get involved in wild adventures and meet exotic characters. In classic books like *Charlotte's Web* and *Black Beauty*, they get to live inside the minds of animals; whilst in books like *Ella Enchanted* and *Harry Potter*, they get to play out dreams of being princesses or wizards. This is a fabulous age for reading, as the vast range of book themes tap into almost every kind of fantasy imaginable!

This is also a time where you can introduce books that offer deeper life lessons to consider. This is particularly true of many of the stand-out contemporary books on our list below, where authors are using the powerful tool of fiction to discuss the kinds of important issues that kids come up against as they get older – especially as they cross the threshold from primary to secondary education, and head towards adolescence. Themes such as physical disability, sibling rivalry, the meaning of friendship, bullying and homelessness are all sensitively tackled in some of the books here.

We have tried to strike a balance between these more thought-provoking books and the all out just-for-fun adventure type books, with the hope that the breadth of choice here will offer up something for everyone. But – as each child is as different as each story - when considering a book for your

child from this list, we highly recommend reading the book fully yourself first to ascertain whether your child will be ready for its theme.

As always, the rule of thumb is to pick great books that your kid is going to connect with and love! If those are books that you also enjoy so much the better: this will allow you to connect and share a love of reading that will be even more rewarding and will last a lifetime.

# Stand-out contemporary authors to explore

## 11 BIRTHDAYS

by Wendy Mass, 2009

*“A rewarding choice for readers and a natural for booktalks and discussion groups.”*

*- Carolyn Phelan, Booklist*

We've all had days we wish we could have over, a chance to correct things that went wrong, make different decisions, avoided certain situations. Unfortunately time marches ever onwards and we aren't allowed makeovers of that type. But such is the stuff of fiction; Wendy Mass gives her protagonists a chance to relive one particular day over and over until they get it right in *11 Birthdays*.

Amanda and Leo have been lifelong friends; their parents met each other at the birthing center where both children were born, and later at the same venue when celebrating their babies' first birthdays. The parents decide that Amanda and Leo should celebrate their shared birthday together each year and so they do for the first ten years, both children the best of friends.

Until their eleventh birthday. The fast friends have grown estranged over a careless remark made by one of them on their tenth birthday and this year they are celebrating separately for the first time. But when both wake up the next day and their birthday repeats minute for minute they find themselves caught in a time loop where they have to relive an uncomfortable day over and over. Will they ever be able to break the cycle and, more importantly, repair their broken friendship?

While an unbelievable premise is the main plot device in *11 Birthdays*, the issues the novel presents are very believable and real. We've all lost friends over trivial events or unthinking comments. The idea of a

mysterious power forcing us to fix what went wrong is irresistible here. As the two children begin to make different choices and alter small things, large changes come about. A nice break from the vampires, werewolves and wizards that dominate the realm of pre-teen publishing.

## **A SINGLE SHARD**

by Linda Sue Park, 2001

Newbery Medal Winner, 2002

*“A moving tribute to perseverance and creativity in this finely etched novel.” – Publishers Weekly*

The Newbery Medal was established in 1921, the first ever book award to recognize distinguished contributions to children’s literature. Since then, winners of the award have ranked amongst the finest children’s authors, and Linda Sue Park is one of them, recognized in 2002 for her book *A Single Shard*.

Set in 12th Century Korea, the narrative recounts the story of an orphan called Tree-Ear who, after years of admiring the work of the potters in his village, ends up playing a key role in the future fortunes of a potter called Min. Tree-Ear has helped Min discover a new technique and must now undertake a long and perilous journey to show pottery samples to the royal court’s pottery expert. By the time he gets there, the pots have all broken, there is only a single shard left, and we await with baited breath to see if it will be enough to secure Min the recognition he deserves.

There are a number of beautifully explored themes in this book: the perseverance of Tree-Ear who triumphs over the odds; the often complex dynamics of a community; the relationships between the orphan and the people who look after him (sometimes without him even knowing); the ownership of creativity; and the ways in which we value art.

The book also deserves praise for the delicate rendering of its historical context and Park's unpretentious style that connects effortlessly with her readers. By carefully balancing historical detail, inherent humor, a sense of adventure and tenderness in the story, Park is able to offer up an historical narrative that resonates easily with children today.

## **BUD, NOT BUDDY**

by Christopher Paul Curtis, 1999

Newbery Medal Winner, 2000

***“This portrayal of people at their best when circumstances are at their worst... ultimately makes the story a hopeful and heartwarming one.” –***  
*Stephany Aulenback, Common Sense Media*

One of the exciting things about books for the 9+ age group is that many of them tackle important historic periods in greater detail than books for younger kids. The best of these kinds of books treat their subject with great care, bringing the world of that time to life in a way that is much more effective than any straight history lesson. *Bud, Not Buddy* is one such book, set in the 1930s during the Great Depression.

Bud is an African-American orphan who has endured abuse, cruelty and mistreatment in foster homes and Hoovervilles in Depression era Michigan. He decides to run away from his last foster home after being locked in a shed with a nest of angry hornets. Bud suspects that his real father isn't dead, but owns a club in Grand Rapids. He runs away to find him, enduring sometimes harrowing experiences along his way. When he arrives at the club in Grand Rapids, his “father” seems indifferent, but the denizens of the club take him under their collective wing.

Author Christopher Paul Curtis has written a very affecting story that accurately depicts the realities of life during the Depression but does not wallow in the misery of the era. Interspersing pathos with humor, the

overall effect is one of hope and optimism. With well-drawn characters and Dickensian plot twists, the book is an engrossing read. *Bud Not Buddy* won the 2000 Newbery Medal as well as the Coretta Scott King Award (given to outstanding African-American authors) the same year.

## **ESPERANZA RISING**

by Pam Munoz Ryan, 2000

Pura Belpré Award Winner, 2002

***“Her style is engaging, her characters appealing, and her story is one that... bears telling to a wider audience.” – Kirkus Review***

As I write this, immigration reform is looming large in the news, causing the usual contentious debate in our nation’s capital to heighten. Whatever your opinion on this hot button issue, a good background knowledge of the issues and history of migrant workers in the US would not go amiss, especially for children.

Esperanza (her name means “hope” in Spanish) was raised in a wealthy family in Mexico in the years following the Mexican Revolution. Her life was easy; she had everything she wanted until the day her prominent father was killed by bandits. In the aftermath of the tragedy, the family home and assets became a point of violent contention between her mother and her uncles, the latter literally holding the former hostage in their pursuit of their stepbrother’s wealth. They intend that the mother should marry one of them, and in that way gain total control over any assets left to her. To escape, Esperanza and her mother join their former gardener and his family who are migrating to the United States to work in the Californian agricultural industry. Unfortunately, at the same time, displaced Oklahoma residents are heading to California as well, hoping to make a new start after the devastation of the Dust Bowl and Depression. Conflict is inevitable.

Not only does this lyrically written novel explore the tension between different migrant worker ethnicities, it also tells the story of one family's fall from a high social class down to the lowest. Esperanza must adjust from being a little princess to a field worker; her transformation is not an easy one. Peopled with well-rounded, thoughtfully crafted characters and taking place against a backdrop of well researched history, *Esperanza Rising* deals with real life issues which still have relevancy today and offers an enlightening read for young and old alike.

## Hoot

by Carl Hiaasen, 2002

Newbery Honor Book, 2003

***“Full of offbeat humor, buffoonish yet charming supporting characters and genuinely touching scenes of children enjoying the wildness of nature.” – Bill Ott, Booklist***

Of course, what's funny and what isn't is very subjective, but Carl Hiaasen's series of adult fiction novels have always had me weeping with laughter. Carl writes comedy crime thrillers set in his native Florida and invariably they have a “small guy versus corporate/ government greed and corruption” feel to them. Hiaasen began his career as a reporter and you can tell from his books that he's very protective of his home state when it comes to big business and corrupt civil servants.

*Hoot* is Hiaasen's first foray into children's literature and he sticks with what he knows best. The plot revolves around three middle school teenagers, all outsiders in their own way, who band together and go head to head against various Goliaths, including the school bully, greedy land developers, corrupt politicians and the hopeless police. At the center of their battle is a colony of rare owls whose natural habitat is in danger of being bulldozed.



*Hoot* was awarded a Newbery Honor in 2003 probably for its sound ecological message; it would be an exaggeration to call this a literary classic. We just like the tongue in cheek satirical way that Hiaasen takes us on his roller coaster adventures. Not everything your child reads needs to be deep and meaningful. This is great fun with a heartfelt message.

## **PETER NIMBLE AND HIS FANTASTIC EYES**

by Jonathan Auxier, 2011

***“Auxier has a juggler’s dexterity with prose that makes this fantastical tale quicken the senses.”***

*– Kirkus Reviews*

What caught my attention with *Peter Nimble and his Fantastic Eyes* first was the fantastic cover: a block printed illustration of a barefoot figure, carrying a sack over one shoulder, in silhouette against the nighttime rooftops of London. I immediately recalled the rooftop chimneysweep dance from the classic Disney movie *Mary Poppins*, and remembered how fascinating it was for me as a kid to think that people could actually be on rooftops – never mind dance on them! The cover promised intrigue and adventure, and I wasn’t disappointed.

Jonathan Auxier’s debut novel is jam-packed with exactly the kinds of flights of fancy that kids love. The story centers on ten-year-old Peter, a blind orphan boy who is also a very, very good thief. One day he steals a box containing three pairs of eyes, and when he tries on the first set of eyes he is instantly drawn into a magical quest that will eventually lead him to his true destiny. Along the way Peter travels to desert islands and secret kingdoms, meets strange, fantastical characters such as an enchanted knight (who is also part horse, part cat), and has to navigate perilous challenges in order to fulfil his quest.

Auxier is clearly a true storyteller and his writing is great for this age group, it is descriptive, clear and witty too. What he also does particularly

well is to not shy away from using complicated vocabulary, but uses a number of techniques to help young readers learn new words without even realizing it. We can only hope that Auxier will be able to repeat this feat with his next work.

## **RULES**

by Cynthia Lord, 2006

Newbery Honor Book, 2007

***“This sensitive story is about being different, feeling different, and finding acceptance. A lovely, warm read, and a great discussion starter”***  
- Connie Tyrrell Burns, *School Library Journal* © 2006

Catherine is a typical twelve-year-old girl who just wants to be normal. But the needs of her younger autistic brother David, and the ways that she and her family have to adapt to his disability, mean that her life is anything but normal. During the course of one summer – faced with social conundrums concerning her desire to make friends with her new neighbor and the nature of her relationship with a paraplegic boy that she meets at her brother’s clinic – Catherine is forced to examine her own behavior and discover what exactly constitutes “normal”.

Ultimately *Rules* is a book about acceptance. Catherine thinks she is accepting the realities of David’s autism by devising numerous rules to help him navigate the complex landscape of social interaction; in reality she is desperately seeking acceptance from others who she believes look at her and her family as different and strange. In the end she must learn to accept her own feelings, and understand that there aren’t always rules for every situation in life.

Cynthia Lord’s debut novel is written in a clear accessible style that will appeal to pre-teen youngsters who will undoubtedly also identify with Catherine’s deep desire to just be “normal”. What makes the book so

compelling is the honest truthfulness of what life is like for those living with an autistic child, something that the author has personal experience of, as one of her two children is autistic. Lord has also instinctively captured the voice of her twelve-year-old heroine Catherine, so that every moment of this lovely book is entirely believable.

## **SPLENDORS AND GLOOMS**

by Laura Amy Schlitz, 2012

Newbery Honor Book, 2013

***“The book builds slowly and ends stunningly.”***

*- Mary Harris Russell, The Chicago Tribune*

The Victorian age is a popular era for modern authors of both adult and juvenile fiction. In the latter genre, the period is often presented as a quaint and charming time featuring horse drawn carriages, long dresses, upper class mansions and simpler forms of entertainment. It's a rare author of any stripe who presents all this, but also accurately depicts the squalid aspects of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century London living. Laura Amy Schlitz is one of those rare authors.

*Splendors and Glooms* begins with the planning of a birthday party for twelve-year-old Clara; for the occasion her parents have hired a street performer to present a puppet show in their home. The puppeteer, Grisini, is a master of his craft and the effects he produces with his puppets are magical. He is ably assisted by two spirited and resourceful orphans, Lizzie Rose and Parsefall. Disaster falls upon the family when Clara goes missing the night of the birthday performance; Grisini and his apprentices are considered prime suspects in the disappearance. Then the puppet master himself vanishes, and the orphans are left to solve the mystery of both Clara and Grisini's disappearances with the help of a rich, dying witch who has her own agenda.

Featuring well-developed characters that spring from the page as though alive and breathing, Schlitz's prose combines suspense, the supernatural, mystery and history into a highly appealing and eminently readable gothic adventure. The ever-present suffocating fog, filthy streets, overcrowded conditions, substandard housing and the horrific crime all evoke London as it really was during that period; but in ways that enhance the plot, not detract from it. Schlitz has received numerous awards both for *Splendors and Glooms* as well as for her six other books as well, and is certainly an author worth exploring further.

## THE INVENTION OF HUGO CABRET

by Brian Selznick, 2007

Caldecott Medal Winner, 2008

***"It's wonderful. Take that overused word literally: Hugo Cabret evokes wonder."***

*- John Schwartz, The New York Times*

Perhaps you and your children have seen the 2011 movie *Hugo*? As beautiful and magical as that adaptation is, the original novel, written and illustrated by Brian Selznick, is a visual phenomenon that should be experienced for itself. Selznick described the novel as part picture book, part graphic novel, part flip book and part film - and it truly is an exotic hybrid of them all. The novel won the 2008 Caldecott Medal normally given to picture books, the first novel to be so distinguished.

Set in 1930s Paris, Hugo Cabret is a twelve-year-old orphan who lives secretly in a train station. Forced to fend for himself, he turns to thievery to support himself. His most prized possession is a broken automaton left to him by his father, and Hugo makes it his mission to repair it. In order to do so, he needs spare parts, which he steals from a toyshop at the station. Little does he know that the toy shop owner is the once-famous film maker

and special effects pioneer Georges Méliès; or that Méliès' goddaughter Isabelle holds the secret to unlocking Hugo's mysterious automaton.

*The Invention of Hugo Cabret* is a novel like no other and its mix of imagery and well-crafted plot will certainly appeal to today's sophisticated and visually stimulated kids. Parents should not be put off by the fact that this visual literary feast runs to 526 pages! Nearly 300 of the pages are entirely devoted to the illustrations, and the fast-paced story makes light work of the rest. Selznick is certainly an interesting contemporary author: his follow-up book *Wonderstruck*, delivered in the same unique style, is equally impressive.

## THE LEMONADE WAR

by Jacqueline Davies, 2007

***“This compelling tale about growing up and getting along is appealing and engaging.”***

*- Book Links*

It is a rare children's novel that teaches multiple lessons of great value within one tome. Imagine a book that explores family, especially sibling relationships, how to make friends and influence people, deals with pride and the assaults upon it, the difference between right and wrong and which also serves as a primer on business management, complete with vocabulary terms, charts, diagrams and math problems. Never mind the tips for operating a successful business!

*The Lemonade War* by Jacqueline Davies does all those things in an entertaining manner that is imminently accessible for the grade-schoolers the novel is intended for. Evan is a boy, enjoying the last days of summer between third and fourth grade. He has great social skills, but he's not a stellar student like his little sister, Jessie. She is a top scholar and math whiz, but not as adept as Evan when it comes to social graces and handling emotions. Not only is Jessie skipping the third grade and going right into

the fourth, a letter arriving a week before school starts states that she will be in her brother's class. Evan is mortified - and a sibling rivalry soon turns into the "lemonade war" as the siblings each set up a lemonade stand and engage in a duel to the "death" to see who earns the most money before the school year begins. Who will emerge the ultimate victor? What price will they both pay for this rivalry?

*The Lemonade War* is the first volume of a series (in total there are three books, *The Lemonade Crime* and *Candy Smash* round out the trilogy.) The author's writing style deftly weaves together humor, charged emotions, sibling rivalry and real life business acumen in an enjoyable package. The characters are well-developed and likeable, the writing top-notch. Even adults can enjoy the book, and maybe learn a thing or two, right along with their grade-schoolers.

## **THE ONE AND ONLY IVAN**

by Katherine Applegate, 2012

Newbery Medal Winner, 2013

***"How Ivan confronts his harrowing past yet stays true to his nature exemplifies everything youngsters need to know about courage."***

*— Kirkus Reviews*

A quick glance at any number of reader's reviews will reveal very quickly that this book has moved and inspired just as many adults as children, despite its categorization as a children's book. Certainly this beautifully written book will appeal to the more sensitive child in your family and bring to them some exceptional lessons on friendship.

The story is told to us by Ivan, a Silverback gorilla that lives in captivity as an exhibit at the Exit 8 Big Top Mall and Video Arcade. He has two friends Stella, an elderly elephant, and Bob, a stray dog. He doesn't think much about life in the jungle before the mall – in fact he mostly thinks

about art and making art. When new arrival Ruby, a baby elephant, turns up Ivan is forced to take a fresh look at his life.

Although a work of fiction *The One and Only Ivan* is based on a real gorilla called Ivan who spent a pretty grim twenty-seven years in a circus themed mall in Washington State before, happily, being rescued and rehabilitated at Zoo Atlanta. You can read more about the real Ivan on the author's official website, where she explains her desire to give Ivan "the chance to be the mighty silverback he was always meant to be".

The result is a great book that speaks of staying true to one's own nature, of being the best we can be and respecting the relationship between humans and animals. It will also, we should warn you, bring a tear to your eye along the way.

## **WHERE THE MOUNTAIN MEETS THE MOON**

by Grace Lin, 2009

Newbery Honor Book, 2010

***"Children will embrace this accessible, timeless story about the evil of greed and the joy of gratitude." – Andrew Medlar, Booklist***

China's rich heritage of folklore is a never-ending source of inspiration for writers. Children's author Grace Lin interweaves her fantasy/adventure with traditional folktales in *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*.

Minli (her name means quick thinking in Chinese) lives in the very poor Village of the Fruitless Mountain, with her equally destitute parents. The area surrounding the village is bare; nothing will grow there. Minli's Ba (Father) and Mama are as different from each other as the sun and the moon. Her father tries to distract his family with stories about the Jade Dragon (who keeps their mountain bare and infertile) and the Man of the Moon who has the answers to all questions. Her mother is embittered by their poverty, which causes her to mistreat Minli.

One day, determined to improve her family's fortunes, Minli sets off to find and visit the Old Man of the Moon, who is said to know the secret of Good Fortune. On her journey she meets Buffalo Boy, a flightless dragon, a Green Tiger, a King and the twins Da-fu and A-fu. She has many adventures before finishing her quest.

Enlivened by the author's illustrations in full color and monochromatic chapter heading vignettes, the story deftly incorporates the rich legacy of Chinese folklore into the narrative of Minli's quest. There is emotional resonance in Minli's desire to help her family and the grief that her Ba and Ma feel while she is away. The traditional stories are engaging and the plot keeps flowing along thanks to the elegant prose of the author. There are a good many lessons to be learned in this book, one of the most important being to appreciate your family and treat them with understanding, as the orphan Buffalo Boy advises Minli. Destined to become a classic.

## **WONDER**

by R. J. Palacio, 2012

***“This book is a glorious exploration of the nature of friendship, tenacity, fear, and most importantly, kindness.”***  
– Devon Corneal, *The Huffington Post*

One of the more recently written books to make this list, *Wonder* was published in early 2012. The deftly written debut novel from R. J. Palacio hit the ground running, earning plaudits from all quarters and swiftly becoming a #1 *New York Times* bestseller, and something of a viral hit in schools and homes everywhere. Having heard of its phenomenal success, we were quick to read it and realize that it definitely had to be one of our books for this age group.

*Wonder* is special because it addresses a wholly unique situation but in terms that are so very common. It tells the story of a ten-year-old boy entering into the highly charged social arena of the fifth grade. So far, so



typical. The difference is that our character, Auggie Pullman, has a severe facial deformity and this is his first time attending public school: he is, as his father puts it “a lamb to the slaughter”.

The fact that people can be unknowingly cruel when they encounter disability is something we can all recognize; the fact that fifth-graders are quite often decidedly cruel to those that don’t “fit in” is something many of us may well have had experience of. But the tribal struggles that most fifth-graders undergo pale into insignificance compared to the challenges that Auggie has to deal with. Through his own internal dialogue and other chapters narrated by key characters around him, we get an insight into the reality he has to negotiate and learn a dramatic lesson in compassion.

For those that have actually been in Auggie’s position, *Wonder* may not quite hit the mark. But Palacio’s intentions are clear. On her official website she relates how she was inspired to write the book following a real-life incident where she reacted badly when she and her children encountered another child with facial disfigurement. It made her think about the role she played in setting an example to her children and the need to engage her children in a dialogue about empathy. What results is, as she puts it, a “meditation on kindness” that is an essential life-lesson we can all identify with.

## Modern-day classics

### A WRINKLE IN TIME

by Madeleine L'Engle, 1962

Newbery Medal Winner, 1963

***“You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children.”***

*– Madeleine L'Engle*

Madeleine L'Engle is one of those great authors that refuse to condescend to children. Indeed, as you can see from the quote above she knew that children are often more likely to understand complex concepts than adults, primarily because children are much more open to learning new things and do not have a fixed mindset. As a result, L'Engle's books are hugely engaging. *A Wrinkle in Time* is L'Engle's most famous book, effortlessly blending science fiction, fantasy and philosophy for young readers into a gripping story.

The book's heroine is Meg Murry, who at fourteen is something of a misfit. One stormy night Meg comes downstairs and finds her mother, her five-year-old genius brother Charles Wallace and their strange neighbor Mrs. Whatsit, sitting around the kitchen table. During the course of their conversation Mrs. Whatsit reveals that there is such a thing as a tesseract - a means by which one can travel the universe by “folding the fabric of space and time” - much to the upset of Meg's mother. The next day, Meg discovers that this strange phenomenon was the subject of her father's scientific research until he mysteriously vanished. Can Meg and her brother use the tesseract to find their father? And who or what exactly is Mrs. Whatsit? And what are the powers that control the universe?

*A Wrinkle in Time* is the first volume in the *Time Quintet* series; followed by *A Wind in the Door*, *Many Waters*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* and *An Acceptable Time*. The books continue the adventures of the Murry and O'Keefe families (Calvin O'Keefe is a friend of Meg's), but are independent of each other. The novels do not follow a chronological arc, instead moving forward and backward in the lives of the protagonists. With its strong, intelligent characters and engrossing themes, the series makes for a great introduction to the science fiction/fantasy genre.

## **BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA**

by Katherine Paterson, 1977

Newbery Medal Winner, 1978

***“... vivid and sensitive character portrayals and changing relationships  
... are superb.”***

*- Betsy Hearne, Booklist*

Although death is a part of life how often do we struggle against accepting this reality? When death comes to the young, we are devastated, for the loss of the child and their unfulfilled potential. Katherine Peterson wrote *Bridge to Terabithia* in the year after her eight-year-old son's best friend was killed by a lightning strike. Katherine took her own shock and grief and channeled it into her novel.

Jesse Aarons intends to enter fifth grade as the fastest runner in his school; he's worked hard at his goal all summer long. Imagine his surprise and chagrin when a newcomer to the school, tomboy Leslie, ends up winning the competition! Jesse is prepared to hate this interloper, but instead ends up building a friendship with her. Not just any friendship; one of those rare and wonderful once in a lifetime relationships. Together the two create their own imaginary private world called Terabithia, a place of fantasy and adventure where they rule as king and queen. Only they know where Terabithia is and how to get there. One day Jesse accepts an invitation to

visit an art museum and doesn't inform Leslie. An unthinkable tragedy occurs during his absence and Jesse is utterly shattered by the loss. He must somehow learn to continue on without his soul mate.

This book has been the source of much controversy over the years, the reasons are many: its frank portrayal of unexpected death, the fact that Leslie has no religious beliefs, condemnation of language, unwarranted charges of Satanism and the promotion of secular humanism. But our view is that banning such books rarely works: we might as well forbid our children to grow up and enter the real world. Peterson, writing from personal experience, creates a wrenching but hope-filled tale that illustrates how grace can come from tragedy and loss.

## **ELLA ENCHANTED**

by Gail Carson Levine, 1997

Newbery Honor Book, 1998

***“This refreshing take on one of the world's most popular fairy tales preserves the spirit of the original but adds plenty of humorous twists and a spunky, intelligent female lead.” – Kirkus Reviews***

The Kirkus review above neatly sums up this very popular children's book primarily for girls. Since its publication it has been turned into an equally successful movie. The popular fairytale in question is *Cinderella* but this story and, in particular, our heroine Ella is very different from the original.

When Ella is born she is given the “gift” of obedience by a fairy called Lucinda. When her beloved mother dies she is left with a pretty hopeless father and, yes, an awful stepmother and two equally unpleasant stepsisters. She sets off to find Lucinda and undo the curse and encounters many challenges, as well as her prince, along the way.

The story is told in the first person by Ella, and it is this resourceful and feisty voice that makes this clever version of *Cinderella* stand out for today's young reader. Obedience is not something Ella chooses for herself; she is definitely more interested in relationships with mutual respect and consideration.

Whilst we do not think there is any real harm in the original Cinderella story – the tale of meek princess meets heroic prince and lives happily ever after is one that imbues our popular culture and is somewhat unavoidable – it is certainly refreshing to counter balance those stereotypes. Like *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch (see our review in Part 2), *Ella Enchanted* offers a strong and ambitious young female character for the 21st century.

## **HARRIET THE SPY**

by Louise Fitzhugh, 1964

***“Kids love her independent thinking and outspoken ways... Girls, in particular, will identify with Harriet's strong drive to be true to herself.”***

*– Stephany Aulenback, Common Sense New Media*

Like her famous character, Louise Fitzhugh was an independent thinker. She also excelled at bringing unconventional stories to life. In *Harriet the Spy* she created not only one of the greatest girl characters in children's literature but, for its time, a ground-breaking style for children's literature: realism. Both these elements courted controversy when the book was published in 1964, but it has gone on to become a much-loved classic – entirely thanks to the very unique personality of Harriet.

Harriet is eleven years old and lives in Manhattan with her parents, who often leave her in the care of her nanny Ole Golly. Harriet is a pretty quirky, fairly self-confident kid who decides at an early age that she intends to become a spy. To this end she spends much of her time observing others, including her school friends and neighbors, and writing

about them in her notebook. Harriet is very forthright and honest in her opinions about the people she observes – sometimes to the point of being unkind – so it is a major disaster when she loses her notebook and her friends find out all the hurtful things she’s written about them. Will Harriet survive their retribution and be able to mend the damage she’s caused?

Harriet is often cited as a role model for tomboyish, quirky, misfit kids, and for these kids the advice Harriet receives from Ole Golly will certainly resonate: “Sometimes you have to lie. But to yourself you must always tell the truth.” Harriet is also often criticized for being unkind, sneaky and self-absorbed: just like almost all the kids I know! But as with our kids, whilst Harriet does have those qualities, they do not tell the whole story of who Harriet is. She also gets lonely and sad; is funny and feisty; is curious and clever; and is brave and determined. In short, *Harriet the Spy* makes for a very realistic and relatable portrayal of an eleven-year-old that your kids will love!

## **HATCHET**

by Gary Paulsen, 1987

Newbery Honor Book, 1988

***“A heart-stopping story... poetic texture and realistic events are combined to create something beyond adventure.” – Publishers Weekly***

What would you do if your plane crashed in the wilderness and you were left alone in the middle of nowhere? Would you be able to survive with only minimal supplies and one tool? *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen is a wilderness survival novel that explores this very premise.

Ben Robeson is thirteen and on his way to visit his father who is working in the Canadian wilderness. He is the lone passenger in a bush plane and is looking forward to nothing more than spending some time with his dad.

Midpoint in the flight the pilot of the plane has a heart attack and dies at the controls; Ben tries to fly the plane, but manages only to mitigate the inevitable crash that soon follows. Uninjured, Ben has only a hatchet, given to him by his mother before he left, to arm himself against the dangers of the wild. He must learn quickly to live off the land, take advantage of the plants and animals around him and keep himself alive. Will he ever be rescued?

*Hatchet* is a coming of age story set against a struggle for survival in the wild. In learning to adapt to a world that has no grocery stores, microwaves or warm houses, Ben must mature and quickly adjust to his surroundings: both physically and mentally. He swiftly learns there is no room for self-pity; if he hopes to stay alive, he must make difficult choices and decisions in his struggle to survive. A story of courage that is at once thrilling and harrowing, it's a kids book that adults will enjoy as much as their kids.

## **MONKEY ISLAND**

by Paula Fox, 1991

***“This is no exciting survival adventure; rather... it tells with almost unbearable clarity about a boy’s quest to find himself.” - Hazel Rochman, Booklist***

The fascinating thing about books for the 9-11 age group is the breadth and range of topics and genres, from classic adventure stories that bring to life mythical lands, to sensitive explorations of real-life situations.

*Monkey Island* certainly falls into the latter category and, straight off, parents should know that it deals with quite grown-up themes, including family breakdown, parental abandonment, homelessness and violence. It is also beautifully written and provides a well-drawn insight into a life that – thankfully – many of us will never know.

The plot centers on eleven-year-old Clay Garrity, whose once affluent family has hit hard times: his father lost his job and, unable to find work, sinks into a depression and then abandons Clay and his now pregnant mother. Clay and his mother are forced to live in a dingy hostel on welfare. One day Clay realizes that his mother, presumably unable to cope, has also disappeared and Clay must now fend for himself on the streets of New York. He goes to a park that the locals call Monkey Island, for the homeless people who live there, and two men take him under their wing. Though they keep him out of harm's way he is witness to much violence and terror. Will Clay ever be able to overcome these circumstances or be reunited with his mother again?

Clearly, this is not a laugh-out-loud book. But whilst the topic is serious, Fox does a magnificent job of treating it with both the gravitas it requires whilst at the same time showing us the darkly comic elements of this world through an eleven-year-old's eyes. Within the bleak reality of New York's homeless, there are moments of kindness and care that allow us to see the humanity that abounds even in the darkest times. To this end, *Monkey Island* is definitely a book that all mature children should be encouraged to read.

## **MRS. FRISBY AND THE RATS OF NIMH**

by Robert C. O'Brien, 1971

Newbery Medal Winner, 1972

***“A compelling mix of fantasy and science fiction... [with] values that make this an outstanding book for children.”***

***- Wesley Sharpe, Common Sense Media***

With such a huge selection of children's books to choose from it would be quite understandable, in our opinion, if having only read the basic plot line for *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* you then decided to give it a miss.



For indeed, the plot does possibly sound as if it was taken from any one of a dozen made-for-kids movies.

Mrs. Frisby is a mother (and a mouse) and her youngest son, Timothy, is very sick. Sadly there isn't a Mr. Frisby to save the day and their home is about to be ploughed over by the local farmer. Mrs. Frisby must find help if she's going to move her family away from the impending danger and in desperation she turns to a group of escaped laboratory rats with some exceptional skills. A decent premise to be sure, but do we really need another animal adventure story?

Well, we think you do. There's a reason that his book is a Puffin Modern Classic and has received dozens of awards, most notably the Newbery Medal. As well as having an exciting plot-driven story, written with wit and warmth, this tale has some strong positive messages that we think are worth sharing with your child.

The importance of reading and the power it brings, the subverting of what the majority regard as unpleasant (i.e. rats), the power of a mother's love and an examination of the relationship between mankind and the animals they share the planet with are all topics explored here. If children's literature is as much about introducing new ideas as it is about entertaining then we urge you to give *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* a second look.

## **OLD YELLER**

by Fred Gipson, 1956

Newbery Honor Book, 1957

***“Occasionally, but very rarely, one reads a book with the increasing certainty... that a classic is unfolding before one's eyes.”***

***- The Chicago Sunday Tribune***

For Americans of my generation, *Old Yeller* is remembered primarily as a 1957 Walt Disney movie, which routinely re-ran on television on the Wonderful World of Disney. I was somewhat surprised to find out that it was originally a work of juvenile fiction by children's author Fred Gipson. Gipson, it turns out, published the book in 1956, and Disney quickly optioned it, hiring the author to help write the screenplay. The book was released originally in an illustrated edition, with art by Carl Burger, a well-known children's book illustrator.

For those who are not familiar with this family classic, Old Yeller is the name of a big yellow dog that arrives uninvited at a ranch in 1860s Texas. On the ranch young Travis Coates is responsible not only for the family's plot of land, but also his mother and younger brother in his father's absence. Travis' father has left the ranch to join a cattle drive, hoping to earn desperately needed money to support his family. At first Travis just wants to be rid of this mongrel which he considers to be a nuisance, especially given the canine's predilection for robbing smokehouses. The dog soon proves his worth though, protecting the Coates family more than once. Travis accepts the dog and christens him Old Yeller. The two become inseparable and weather both trials and tragedies together.

*Old Yeller* is remembered fondly by baby boomers as the quintessential "boy and his dog" tale in both its book and cinematic forms. The novel teaches important lessons about responsibility, loyalty, coping with poverty, and the realities of life and death. The novel (and film) may seem overly sentimental by today's standards, but is a solid, wholesome read that has earned its classic status fairly.

## **SECRET LETTERS FROM 0 TO 10**

by Susie Hoch Morgenstern, 1996

***"This charming translation of a French award-winner is certain to enchant readers on this side of the Atlantic... A novel to cherish."***

*— Kirkus Reviews*

It is all too easy to fall into a rut, to get stuck in routines, isolate ourselves from the world at large and limit our friendships. It seems comfortable and safe to follow the path of least resistance; it certainly requires less effort. The bitter truth is, however, that in conserving our energy we forget to live, something we only get one shot at.

Ernest is a young French boy living a somewhat sequestered life. His mother is dead, his father abandoned his family at Ernest's birth and he lives with his eighty-year-old grandmother who doesn't speak to him much. Ernest's life consists of three daily events. Going back and forth to school, eating the same snack every day and doing his homework.

One day all that changes with the arrival of a new student in his class, Victoria. The young girl is a force of nature who immediately falls in love with Ernest, drawing him out into the larger world with her exuberance. Ernest, following Victoria's example, learns to try new things, to have and show love for others, and somewhere along the way, he even learns to love himself. In essence he learns to live - and live large.

This charming novel (available in the original French or translated into English), shuns grand adventure for a more personal and quiet exploration of self and our relationship to the world at large. Ernest, Victoria and the rest of the book's cast are all vital, memorable characters who provide the story with all the verve and vitality it needs.

The novel may be a harder sell to some youngsters who crave excitement in their reading material, but is likely to be a book they will remember fondly in the years to come if given the chance. The themes are universal and will resonate long after the book is finished.

## **SHILOH**

by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, 1991

Newbery Medal Winner, 1992

***“Nothing is simple in this taut, unforgettable drama... which challenges readers to think for themselves.” – Matt Berman, Common Sense Media***

How often, in children’s literature, are life’s lessons portrayed as black and white, with protagonists behaving with extraordinary honesty and morality? While it is admirable to present good role models who make all the right choices, it doesn’t often reflect reality. In real life the answers to problems are sometimes confusing and far from clear-cut.

Shiloh is a beagle, one of several hunting dogs owned by protagonist Marty Preston’s neighbor. The eleven-year old boy has noted with growing discomfort that the neighbor, Judd Travers, abuses his animals. One day when Marty is taking a walk through the hills near his home, he finds Travers’ beagle wandering there. The dog follows him home where Marty is told by his father that the dog must be returned to his owner. Marty cannot, however, bear to see the dog he has named Shiloh returned to a man who will beat and starve him. Marty decides to rescue Shiloh, and what follows are his various attempts and the complications arising from his good intentions.

This novel touches not only on the subject of animal abuse, but human abuse as well. How can a man treat an animal with love if he has never known kindness from others? Marty’s actions are often far from honest but his desire to prevent the maltreatment of a defenseless animal seems worth the deceit. Is it morally right that because a man owns a dog he has the right to treat it however he wishes? These and other ethical questions face Marty as he struggles to save the dog. Children in this age group are just learning to reason as they develop their moral characters: this book offers some solutions for dealing with the grey areas in life.

## **THE INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD**

by Lynne Reid Banks, 1980

J.M. Barrie Award Winner, 2013

***“Skyhigh fantasy that will enthrall readers.”***

*– Publishers Weekly*

Lynne Reid Banks is a best-selling British author who has written many novels for both adults and children. Of her children’s literature she is best known for her novel *The Indian in the Cupboard*, published in 1980.

Indeed, even if they haven’t read it, many of today’s parents will be very familiar with this classic children’s story thanks to the 1995 hit movie of the same name, based on the book and directed by the great Frank Oz. Of course, whilst the film adaptation is good, the book is better!

It’s Omri’s birthday and, typically, both his best friend Patrick and his older brother Gillon have failed to buy him decent presents: Patrick gives him a second-hand plastic toy Indian figure and Gillon gives him an old bathroom cupboard salvaged from the trash!

Despite his disappointment, Omri accepts the gifts with good grace and even manages to find a key that fits the cupboard lock, from a bunch of old keys that his mother keeps. Once these three elements come together, when Omri locks the Indian in the cupboard, the magic begins. A fantastical story ensues, as Omri learns about the responsibilities of looking after someone else and being a good friend.

Lynne Reid Banks has just recently been awarded the J.M Barrie Award by the British charitable organization Action for Children’s Arts. This singular award is given annually to a children’s arts practitioner or organization whose work, in the view of ACA, has stood the test of time: a glowing testament to the high regard in which Reid Bank’s work is held. *The Indian in the Cupboard* is, in fact, just the first of five books following the adventures of Omri and Little Bear, each of them exploring the true nature of friendship.

## **THE LAST OF THE REALLY GREAT WHANGDOODLES**

by Julie Andrews Edwards, 1974

***“Julie Andrews Edwards has never lost touch with the magic of childhood.”***

*– Jennifer M. Brown, Publishers Weekly*

Dame Julie Andrews is best known as a singer and actress, famous for roles in *The Sound of Music*, *Mary Poppins* and many other films and stage productions. But did you know that she is also a children's book author? In 1974 Andrews published a children's book called *The Last of the Really Great Whangdoodles* under the name of Julie Edwards (she married Blake Edwards, and so is July Andrews Edwards: later editions of the book use her full name). Almost forty years after initial publication, *The Last of the Really Great Whangdoodles* is still a popular children's title and is considered by some critics to be a modern classic.

A long time ago, many wonderful creatures used to inhabit the world. There were furry Flukes, the High-Behind Splintercat, the Whiffle Bird and the fun-loving, kind and wise Whangdoodle. While people believed in them these fantastical creatures flourished, but as that belief faded away their existence was threatened. It was then that the Whangdoodle created a land where all these now forgotten beings could live on in safety, peace and solitude. That is until three children and a professor, who never stopped believing in wondrous things, embark on a journey to Whangdoodleland in search of this magic realm and the Whangdoodle himself. The only way to get there is through imagination.

Not unlike Mary Poppins, Andrews has a gift for opening up worlds of possibilities that set youngsters' imaginations afire. Her writing style is bouncy and witty, drawing young readers into her fantasyland so irresistibly that it seems as though they are taking the grand adventure themselves. Her prose is so magical that children will swear they've not only seen Whangdoodleland, but have heard its sounds and tasted its flavors too!

**THE PHANTOM TOLLBOOTH**

by Norton Juster, 1961

***“Think Alice in Wonderland for the modern age. Brilliant.”*** – Lucy Mangan, *The Guardian*\*

I have very strong childhood memories of watching a movie in which a boy drives a toy car through a tollbooth in his bedroom and into an animated fantasy world where very strange things happen. As an adult I discovered that the film was an adaptation of this book, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and I mention this only because, while the film was enthralling, the book was even better.

Milo is a very bored little boy, almost stubbornly so! What he needs is some inspiration, which comes to him in the shape of a small tollbooth that mysteriously appears in his bedroom one day. Driving his toy car through the tollbooth he finds himself in the Kingdom of Wisdom where he sets off on a quest to rescue a princess called Rhyme and Reason. His journey through this surreal world and the crazy characters he meets along the way ensure that young Milo is never bored again.

The novel contains some pretty complex ideas and plenty of sophisticated word play for a young reader. However this is balanced by a crazy world of oddness that children unquestionably adore, much as they do with *Alice in Wonderland*. And what makes this book truly great is that it is the kind of book that young readers can return to time and again as they get older and are able to peel back a new layer of meaning.

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## **TUCK EVERLASTING**

by Natalie Babbitt, 1975

***“Flawless in both style and structure.”***  
– *The Horn Book*

The idea of living forever, eternally young seems irresistible in theory, but is immortality all that it's cracked up to be? Things you once knew are lost forever in the march of time; people you love grow old and die; you have to hide the fact that you live forever from those that don't; there are plenty of negatives to cancel out the positives. *Tuck Everlasting*, a children's novel by Natalie Babbitt, takes the hypothesis and fleshes it out.

Winnie Foster is a ten-year-old who feels stifled by the overprotectiveness of her family. One day she decides to leave her fenced in yard and go into the woods. There she meets a boy named Jesse Tuck. He looks seventeen but claims to be one-hundred-and-four, the result of drinking water from a particular stream at the base of an ash tree. Jesse's mother and brother then appear, and Winnie comes to understand that the entire Tuck family is immortal. They are good and loving people, who must live a lonely existence away from other people, lest their secret be discovered. What will happen to Winnie? Will the true nature of the Tucks' lives become known? Will unscrupulous profiteers seek the stream and turn it into their own money making scheme?

Natalie Babbitt has been universally praised for the elegance of her prose, and for writing highly entertaining fantasies that deliver very profound truths to her readers. *Tuck Everlasting* is perfect for the thoughtful child in the 9-11 age group; it is one book they will read and contemplate long afterward.



# Must-read book series for today's big kids

## DIARY OF A WIMPY KID SERIES

by Jeff Kinney, 2007

*One of TIME Magazine's 100 "Most Influential People in the World",  
2009*

If you have an older child and haven't heard about the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, then you've clearly been living under a rock! The unbelievably popular and successful series – which first started out as an online comic strip back in 2004 - now counts seven books in total, two additional accompanying books and three movies based on the books. There are currently more than seventy-five million copies of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books in print in forty-one different languages!

Nevertheless, we had our doubts about including the series here. We weren't initially sure that the format of the book matched up to the numerous works of classic literature that make up much of our list. The *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* – charting the misadventures of weakling misfit Greg Heffley through the social minefield of middle school - is presented as a hand-written journal interspersed with amusing comic-style drawings. Can a cartoon-style book be judged alongside classics such as *Treasure Island*?

After much debate, we decided it could, because ultimately this review list is mainly about finding books that your kids are going to want to read – it's about getting kids to engage and enjoy reading above all else! Plus, frankly, the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series is completely hilarious, achingly true in parts and extremely clever. It uses humor to highlight the darker aspects of middle school life – the bullying, the cruel advent of adolescence that means children of the same age might be at different stages of physical and emotional development, the fear of not fitting-in,

the endlessly complicated interactions between different school tribes, and the basic kind of everyday trouble that kids just happen to get themselves into! We love it!

## **PERCY JACKSON AND THE OLYMPIANS SERIES**

by Rick Riordan, 2005

***“The Lightning Thief is perfectly paced, with electrifying moments chasing each other like heartbeats, and mysteries opening out in sequence.” – Polly Shulman, The New York Times***

Some critics have pointed to similarities between Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* books and the *Harry Potter* books by J.K Rowling, but we don’t feel that Riordan’s books suffer through any comparisons. They are actually very different in their style and pace. And with Greek and Roman Mythology at their core young readers can expect to be submerged in a very different world to that of *Harry Potter*.

There are five books in this series and book one, *The Lightning Thief*, introduces us to what seems at first glance an unlikely, even possibly undesirable, hero. Percy Jackson has been thrown out of numerous boarding schools and suffers with ADHD as well as being dyslexic but, as they say, you can’t always judge a book by its cover. The real problem, it turns out, is that Percy is a demigod, the son of Poseidon to be exact, and once his true nature is discovered, along with the fact that the rest of the gods are far from dead, that’s when the adventures really begin.

Riordan cleverly weaves the Greek myths into a completely modern setting and the action is fast paced, making these novels a favorite of young boys. *The Lightning Thief* has been turned in to a movie and the Percy Jackson series is such a success that Riordan is now four books into a follow up series called *The Olympians*.

## SHAKESPEARE STORIES SERIES

by Andrew Matthews, 2007

***“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them.”***

*- William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night*

If you want your children to experience and appreciate the work of William Shakespeare, the world's greatest playwright, please don't leave it until they get given the plays to study at school. If you do, and your child's English teacher is anything other than first class, then there's every chance that your child will never really "get" why Shakespeare's plays are held in such high esteem. Giving these stories to your children as early as possible, even if only in simplified form, could well pay dividends later.

Andrew Matthews has written sixteen short and intelligent adaptations of Shakespeare's most famous works, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There are other simplified versions of Shakespeare's plays available but we feel that these ones have been written with the most individuality and style. The trick here is to retain some of the lyrical power and poetic beauty of Shakespeare, while making the stories accessible and exciting for younger readers. This is something Matthews does admirably. The style of Tony Ross' black and white illustrations will be very familiar to British readers; we like his work but aren't sure if it's a great match for these books, but they certainly don't distract from these clever books.

The books are really quite short, easy to read and could probably be tackled by children as young as eight. In our opinion their value lies in arousing an interest in Shakespeare's plays early so that children become very familiar with the plot and aren't so fazed when confronted with the real thing at a later date. Each book is available separately or in a box set, although you may have trouble finding the box set in the US.

## THE HARRY POTTER SERIES

by J.K. Rowling, 1997

*“Each successive volume expands upon its predecessor with dizzyingly well-planned plots and inventive surprises.”*

*- Publishers Weekly*

Many critics appear to liken J.K. Rowling’s talent to that of Roald Dahl. Now, I was brought up on the books of Roald Dahl and given the diversity and sheer volume of his work, both for adults and children, I believe J. K. Rowling still has a little way to go before she can be said to have eclipsed the great Mr. Dahl. However, it is unarguable that the success and popularity of the *Harry Potter* series of children’s books is unprecedented and certainly makes the young wizard, Harry Potter, the most globally famous children’s character ever.

In a nutshell – Harry Potter is a wizard, like his parents before him. When Harry is just a year old his parents are killed by the evil wizard Voldemort but Harry survives and is placed in the “care” of his unpleasant and non-magical Uncle and Aunt. It is not until he is 10 that orphan Harry discovers he is a wizard, when he is invited to attend boarding school at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It is here that his adventures begin in earnest and we follow his progress through adolescence as he fulfills his magical destiny.

There are seven books in the series and they are suitable for readers from the age of nine onwards. As each book covers one year of scholarly life at Hogwarts, young readers who start with these books at nine can literally grow up with Harry. Certainly nine seems to be a good age to introduce these books and given the mega success of the series in both print and celluloid it would appear that grownups find these books pretty irresistible too.

## THE SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS SERIES

by Lemony Snicket, 1999

***“Written with old-fashioned flair... Those who enjoy a little poison in their porridge will find it wicked good fun.” - Kirkus Reviews***

Sadly, the older and wiser we become the greater the likelihood that we conclude “there’s nothing new under the sun”. Whether in films, fashion or literature we tend to become jaded as, time and again, we sense that we’ve already ‘seen it’ somewhere before. And so it is with *The Series of Unfortunate Events* children’s books because if one wanted to be uncharitable one could say that these macabre tales are just an extreme imitation of Roald Dahl.

BUT...we don’t want to be uncharitable and, more importantly, we should remember that while we may be jaded, our children are not! Children love to be shocked, scared and revolted and there’s no point pretending that the modern child will necessarily feel these emotions as strongly when reading Roald Dahl as we did. No, what today’s children need are their own dark tales and here they are in spades. Thirteen books to be precise, that follow the miserable lives of three orphaned siblings, Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire, who, from the moment their parents are killed in a fire, lurch from one very unpleasant experience to another in these fantastic tales of black comedy.

As the fictional author Lemony Snicket makes crystal clear from the start: “If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book.” And with this warning out of the way, the reader can embark happily into this gruesome, but very funny, world. While this series has been written to appeal to the adult reader, as well as the young, it is our opinion that they are best suited to children.

## **THE WARRIORS SERIES**

by Erin Hunter, 2003

***“An intriguing world with an intricate structure and mythology, and an engaging young hero.”***

*– Mara Alpert, School Library Journal © 2003*

Erin Hunter has written the wildly popular *Warriors* series of fantasy books that feature feral cats as their protagonists. Prolific Erin Hunter isn't your average author; in fact, she's really a cooperative of five different authors working together, each fulfilling certain roles within each volume's production. Erin Hunter is their collective penname.

In the first book, *Into the Wild*, housecat Rusty dreams of grand adventures and epic heroism, something not readily available in his “kittypet” home. A chance encounter with a young feral cat reveals the existence of a clan of feral felines who live by a warrior code and engage in great and valiant exploits. Rusty leaves his comfortable existence behind to join the clan living in the forest, and the epic series commences.

The feline protagonists inhabit an intricate and honorable warrior caste society and their behavior is based on that of real cats, the characters aren't just mimicking human behavior. The concept is brilliantly conceived and executed using a story arc worthy of any fantasy classic.

The latter books in the original six book series do take a darker turn after the fourth volume, with increased violence and body counts. This isn't a fuzzy feel-good fairytale of wild cats at all, but chances are your pre-teen will eat it up. The series has expanded far beyond the original six books (to somewhere in the vicinity of fifty volumes!) and also includes related works (field guides, manga and exclusive e-book editions). Beware your bank balance once your kid is hooked!

# Favorite books that have stood the test of time

## ANNE OF GREEN GABLES

by L. M. Montgomery, 1908

***“Anne Shirley is still one of the most beloved characters in children's literature... her ability to see beauty in everything is inspiring.”***

*– Betsy Bozdech, Common Sense Media*

Lucy Maud Montgomery was a Canadian author, most famous for her *Anne of Green Gables* series of books. Those volumes were only one portion of her writing output, she wrote twenty novels in all, and over five hundred short stories and poems. The *Anne of Green Gables* series is her best loved, depicting life on Prince Edward Island; she was eventually given an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1935 for popularizing Canada and the maritime province in literature.

*Anne of Green Gables* is the story of Anne Shirley, a young orphan girl sent to live with Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert on their Prince Edward Island farm. She's not quite what they expected; they had wanted a boy who could help with the farm work. The novel - which was originally written for people of all ages - details how Anne gets on in her new home, following her from the age of eleven to sixteen.

All told there are eight books in the series featuring Anne as the central character, with each title devoted to a certain period of her life. Lucy drew on her own experiences growing up, and based Anne's arrival on the Island on something that had actually happened to a couple she knew growing up. Anne is a feisty and independent girl (and woman), yet retains her femininity, a lesson that some writers of modern “kick-ass women” could stand to learn.

The books were warmly embraced by people all over the world, and became immediate classics; the character of Anne Shirley has provided an excellent role model for generations of girls ever since the first book was published in 1909.

## **BED-KNOB AND BROOMSTICK**

by Mary Norton, 1957

***“Mary Norton has an infallible instinct for blending imagination and humor... the real and the fantastic in just the right proportions.”***

*– The Chicago Tribune*

Mary Norton is probably best known for *The Borrowers* series of novels about the race of tiny people who live secretly in the midst of us, the unsuspecting “human beans”. Indeed, Norton won the 1952 Carnegie Medal – an annual award recognizing outstanding children's books in the United Kingdom – for *The Borrowers*. But as charming as the secret world of the Borrowers is, the story rather seems a bit uneventful and the style, particularly in the opening chapter, somewhat overly fussy and old-fashioned for today's 9+ age group.

We rather prefer Norton's more eventful and somewhat funnier stories in *Bed-Knob and Broomstick*. First published in 1957 as one novel, it is actually the combination of Norton's first two children's books: *The Magic Bed Knob; or, How to Become a Witch in Ten Easy Lessons* and its sequel *Bonfires and Broomsticks*. The books recount the surprising adventures of three British children who discover that their neighbor Miss Price - a seemingly very prim and proper lady - happens to also be a trainee witch. To keep their silence, Miss Price gives them a spellbound bed-knob that turns a bed into a magical travelling machine, transporting the children to any place in the world and any time in history, with often hilarious and sometimes dangerous consequences!



The stories are a great read, offering a much gentler version of the powers of magic than some contemporary magic-themed novels, whilst still having a fast-paced and interesting plot. However, parents should be aware that the 1971 Disney movie starring Angela Lansbury and David Tomlinson is only very loosely based on the books: the premise is the same, but many of the magical action scenes and cartoon animated scenes in the movie do not appear in the book. This does not take away from the fun adventures in the book in any way, but could leave you disappointed if you're expecting to read about animals playing soccer, moving suits of armor and extravagant underwater ballroom dances!

## **BLACK BEAUTY**

by Anna Sewell, 1877

*“Anna Sewell was a natural writer... For well over a hundred years, readers have been proving that she got it right.” – Penguin Books*

Anna Sewell loved horses and worked very hard to understand them. Injured in a fall at a young age and the victim of substandard medical treatment she was unable to walk. She therefore depended upon the magnificent beasts to take her where she needed to go via horse drawn carriages. Quite often bedridden, Anna helped her mother, an author of juvenile fiction herself, to edit her works. It was only in the last years of her short life that she turned to writing herself. Her strong belief in respect for animals and fellow humans was central to her work, and the result was the classic novel *Black Beauty*.

The novel is written from the perspective of a horse - Black Beauty, of course - a literary device that had never been attempted before. Anna portrayed horses as thinking and richly emotional creatures. Black Beauty recounts his life, from being a frisky colt to his time as a cab horse in London to his retirement back in the country. The novel is presented in short episodic chapters each of which illustrates the importance of treating horses kindly, sympathetically and with understanding.

The book was published in 1878; Anna Sewell only lived five more months after its publication, just long enough to see her magnum opus become an unqualified success. Not only was the book embraced by the public, her descriptions of the hardships encountered by cab drivers in London and their financial plight actually changed license regulations and fees for the better. Sewell did not write the book for children, so parents should be aware that some of the scenes of animal cruelty might upset sensitive youngsters. However her message about treating animals and men with equal kindness is an infinitely suitable theme for any child, and just as relevant now as it was then.

## CHARLOTTE'S WEB

by E. B. White 1952

Newbery Honor Book, 1953

***“As a piece of work it is just about perfect, and just about magical in the way it is done.”***

*– Eudora Welty, The New York Times*

Elwyn Brooks White wrote extensively for both adults and children, but is best known for being the author of *Charlotte's Web*, the enduring classic and much-loved children's novel. For some reason, I never actually read this as a child, but having read it now as an adult I can attest to the fact that *Charlotte's Web* is a great read for any age. White's rhythmic and lyrical prose is quite delightful to read and the story's message of the nature of true friendship is one worth being reminded of over and over again.

The runt from a litter of pigs is rescued by a young girl, Fern Arable, who names him Wilbur, nurses him to health and loves him unreservedly. Unfortunately, when Wilbur becomes strong enough to be separated from his mother, he is sent away to the farm of Fern's uncle. The little pig does not know it, but he's destined for the cooking pot, a fate he has narrowly

escaped once before. Accustomed to the love and companionship of Fern, he is anxious to make friends in his new home, but is snubbed by all the other farm animals. All, except a barn spider named Charlotte. Charlotte works to save Wilbur from his fate, extolling his virtues and values via tributes spun into her webs. Are Charlotte's efforts ultimately successful, or will Wilbur end up as the farmer's dinner?

White is also the author of *Stuart Little*, another much beloved children's classic, about a mouse being raised in a human family (or is he just a rather odd looking and tiny little human boy?) Both *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web* were illustrated by Garth Williams and his delicate touch with line and color contribute to the books lasting success. This is a must have for children and adults alike.

## **D'AULAIRES' BOOK OF GREEK MYTHS**

by Ingri d'Aulaire and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire, 1961

***“This action-packed, attractive book... should be a part of every child's library.”***

*- Matt Berman, Common Sense Media*

The myths of the ancient Greeks are colorful legends that are studied by academics to this day for insight into the beliefs, rituals and societal structure of that golden civilization. The Greeks have given the world so much in terms of philosophy, art and democracy - no child is too young to begin learning their mythology. However, the standard texts of Greek myth might be a bit heavy-going for pre-teens. Thankfully, the husband and wife team of Ingri and Edgar d'Aulaire gifted the children of the world with a timeless introduction via *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*.

Lavishly illustrated and written with great skill, in prose easily understood by even the smallest children, the D'Aulaires present the adventures of the Greek gods and heroes in a memorable and evocative compendium. Zeus, king of the Gods; Hera, his queen; Poseidon god of the Sea; Gaea, the

original “mother earth”; her husband Uranus, the sky; wise Athena and others are depicted in their often all-too-human glory.

Indeed there is much to learn here about human behavior, as the Greek pantheon experienced all the emotions of their human subjects. The Greek gods could be impetuous, indiscreet, jealous and vengeful; they often lashed out in anger, were driven by base desires, but were also capable of great joy, merry mischief and incredible bravery.

The D’Aulaires illustrations are beautiful, colorful, bright and vibrant; they perfectly complement the elegance of the book’s prose. The volume is full of distinctive images that young readers will remember fondly. A great book for this age group to read independently; these myths will also thrill and entertain younger children when used as read-aloud bedtime stories.

## **GULLIVER’S TRAVELS**

by Jonathan Swift, 1726

***“If I had to make a list of six books which were to be preserved when all others were destroyed, I would certainly put Gulliver’s Travels among them.” – George Orwell***

Despite himself – in adult life he hated Swift’s politics – George Orwell loved *Gulliver’s Travels*! And what young boy wouldn’t love the dazzling adventure and incredible fantasies that combine to make Swift’s book the classic that it is? For our kids, as with Orwell, the political satire that underlies Swift’s text is entirely irrelevant. What resonates for them is a giant man amongst the tiny Lilliputians, flying islands, talking horses, silly names such as the Yahoos, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg and Glubbudbrib, and even sillier wars about which end to crack a boiled egg!

As with many classics, there are several different versions of *Gulliver’s Travels* that have been adapted to suit a younger audience. We particularly

like the Oxford Illustrated Classics version that has been adapted by James Riordan and illustrated by Victor G. Ambrus.

The visuals are particularly strong in this version: Ambrus fleshes out the different characters in his uniquely vivid style and also adds maps of the voyage which give a further dimension to the story telling. Riordan has done a fine job of adapting Swift's 18th Century language, making it accessible for today's children whilst retaining all of the rich detail and humor.

And whilst this adapted version, perhaps, does not offer the full force of Swift's satire, it's still able to carefully relay the basic lessons about human nature and politics that Gulliver learns during the course of his voyage. This is a wonderful book to introduce discussions about the sources of conflict and the concept of relativism to the 9-11 year age group.

## **LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE**

by Laura Ingalls Wilder, 1932

***“The finest firsthand picture of American pioneer life ever written for children.”***

*– The San Francisco Chronicle*

Long before the television program based on her works hit the airwaves, Laura Ingalls Wilder was a beloved author. Laura wrote what she knew best, the experiences of growing up in a pioneer family in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Her books became instant classics, depicting the realities of life in the westward expansion from the point of view of an ordinary family. There has been some debate for many years about the books being classified as fiction, given that they were based on actual experiences of Laura and her family. The fact that dialogue has been added and some facts and events rearranged from their actual occurrences, has seen them catalogued as fiction by libraries.

*Little House on the Prairie* is actually the third book of the series, preceded by *Little House in the Big Woods*, and *Farmer Boy* (which describes the childhood of Wilder's husband, Almanzo). All told there are nine books in the series, two of which were published posthumously after Laura's death in 1957.

*Little House on the Prairie* follows the Ingalls family as they relocate from Wisconsin (location of the first book in the series) to Kansas. Pa builds a one-room log cabin and settles his family in, anticipating that the Indian Territory will be opened up to settlers. Life in Kansas proves more challenging than life in the Big Woods was: their new life is marked by illness, natural disasters, and the presence of the Native Americans the territory is named after.

Her realistic depictions of the joys, terrors, and dangers of being a pioneer family have made these books classics ever since the first volume was published in 1932.

## **LITTLE WOMEN**

by Louisa May Alcott, 1868

***“I’ll try and be what he loves to call me, “a little woman,” and not be rough and wild; but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else.” - Louisa May Alcott, Little Women***

Prior to the publication of *Little Women* in 1868, children's books were moralistic tales where the life lessons imparted were more important than the characters presented. Louisa May Alcott was a feminist before her time; she would later support the suffragette movement and be the first registered woman voter in her state of Massachusetts. Arguably her most important contribution was providing characters that American girls at the time could readily relate to. The fact that today's girls can still identify with the cast of *Little Women* is testament to the universal truths Alcott wrote about.

*Little Women* is a semi-autobiographical novel about the four March sisters, who live in humble circumstances in Massachusetts during and after the American Civil War. Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy are as different from each other as can be. Meg the eldest sister is pretty, and the epitome of womanhood as was accepted at the time; Jo, the second eldest is a tomboy who wanted to go with her father to fight in the War; Beth, frail and plagued by illness wants nothing more than for her family to go on as it is, an impossibility of course; Amy, the youngest, is seen as the family pet, coddled and spoiled. Of them all it is Jo, who believes in equality and self-determination, who comes to embody a new American ideal.

*Little Women* is remembered as a beloved children's classic, but its importance to literature is often forgotten in modern times. As well as offering distinctly different female characters, the novel was the first of its kind to offer a realistic, rather than a moralistic, view into family life and coping with larger events in the world. This book is the first of three that Alcott wrote featuring the March family, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* fill out the trilogy.

## **MY SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN**

by Jean Craighead George, 1959

Newbery Honor Book, 1960

***“[One of] the great classics of nature books that will always be relevant for our time and all time to come.” – Wendell Minor, Publishers Weekly***

Every child has fantasized about running away from home at one time or another; fortunately most never carry through with their plans. But the desire to remove oneself physically from stressful or unhappy situations is a strong one in us all. Jean Craighead George explores the tale of a boy who runs away to escape New York City and his family's crowded living conditions in *My Side of the Mountain*.

Sam Gribley is twelve years old and fed up with living with eight siblings and his parents in a small New York apartment. He decides to run away to his great-grandfather's farm in the Catskill Mountains. Unfortunately once he finally finds the homestead, there is nothing left but the ruins of the foundation. Rather than return home, Sam decides to make his home in a hollowed out tree on the property.

The novel explores young Sam's struggles for survival in his home of choice, how he learns to make a fire, to subsist on the plants and animals, how to dress a deer and tan its hide, to survive the changes of climate as fall rolls into winter. Sam encounters several humans during his exile, eventually realizing that as much as he craves solitude, he also misses human companionship. Will he be able to stay or will loneliness drive him back to the city and his family?

*My Side of the Mountain* is at heart a coming of age story. Sam evolves from an impetuous and immature child into a resourceful and mature young adult during his sojourn in the Catskills. Rich with detail of the wilderness and survival living, including observations of the life cycles of animals, the novel is a particularly memorable reading experience. This critically acclaimed classic is a recommended addition to any child's core book collection, as are a number of Craighead George's other amazing books including *Julie of the Wolves*.

## **PADDLE-TO-THE-SEA**

by Holling C. Holling, 1941

Caldecott Honor Book, 1942

***“An incredible story complete with geography, nature, drama, and adventure.”***

*— Shauna Yusko, School Library Journal © 2004*



One of the best things we can do for our children is to encourage and protect their imaginative capabilities. Giving them *Paddle-to-the-Sea* by Holling C. Holling to read is an excellent place to start. Both beautifully written and illustrated by Holling, the book takes young readers on a dramatic journey that truly sparks the imagination.

A young First Nations boy, living in landlocked central Canada, dreams of making a canoe trip from his home on Lake Nipigon to the great Atlantic Ocean. Unable to go himself, he carves a foot long canoe complete with a First Nations figure seated inside and names it Paddle-to-the-Sea. With remarkable foresight the boy etches a message on the bottom of the canoe: “Put me back in the water, I am Paddle-to-the-Sea.” Placing the canoe into a river, the boy sends his surrogate on his way. It is a journey that is fraught with any number of obstacles and dangers; wild animals, saw mills, fishing nets and shipwrecks, but Paddle-to-the-Sea endures. Will the little canoe make it to the Atlantic Ocean?

Holling C. Holling crafted the tale of an epic journey in prose so picture perfect that the reader has no difficulty in following the toy’s progress toward the sea, in fact they will feel as though they have travelled with it. Along the way Holling shares his knowledge generously, teaching valuable lessons about geography, wildlife, even saw mills and how they operate. *Paddle-to-the-Sea* is one of those books that live large in the memories of those who have read it thanks to the vivid imagery and entrancing, well researched authentic prose.

## **PIPPY LONGSTOCKING**

by Astrid Lindgren, 1945

***“Champion of fun, freedom and fantasy and long happy thoughts, Pippi is an inspired creation knit from daydreams.” – Kirkus Reviews***

Astrid Lindgren was asked by her nine-year-old daughter, home sick from school, to write her a get-well story. The result of the request is a truly

memorable nine-year-old heroine, whose eccentricity vies with her enormous strength to set her apart from other nine-year-olds! Initially refused by publishers, the book was eventually accepted by a Swedish publishing house in 1944.

Pippi is possessed of tightly braided red pigtails, that tend to stick out from the sides of her head, and freckles! She lives alone in her own house (no parents or other adults in sight!) and her only companion is a monkey. She also owns a horse which lives on her front porch. Her full name is “Pippilotta Delicatessa Windowshade Mackrelmint Ephraim's Daughter Longstocking” or Pippi (old Swedish slang for “quirky”) to her friends. She moves in next door to Tommy and Annika and soon makes friends with them. Pippi is incredibly self-sufficient, resourceful and very protective of her new friends.

The adventures of Pippi proved so popular that Astrid Lindgren went on to write a total of eleven *Pippi Longstocking* books. Translated into over sixty languages, Pippi quickly became the girl that everyone wanted to be, not just to be like. Her irreverent attitudes about rules, manners, adults and just about everything else make her one of the most peculiar and unforgettable characters in children's literature.

## THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA SERIES

by C. S. Lewis, 1949

***“Very special, somewhat mystic fantasy... for imaginative children, this is rich fairy-tale fare.”***

*- Kirkus Reviews*

Clive Staples Lewis was an unlikely children's book author. He was a novelist, poet, academic (Cambridge and Oxford), medievalist, literary critic, essayist, lay theologian, and Christian apologist from Belfast, Ireland. Indeed *The Chronicles of Narnia* may never have been written if it weren't for the fact that in 1939 he welcomed three schoolgirls to his

country home when they were evacuated from London during World War II: Lewis credits his experience, making up stories for the girls, as the inspiration for the enduringly popular series of fantasy novels.

Drawing heavily from Christian theology and tradition, but also from Greek and Roman mythology as well as English and Irish fairy tales, Lewis created the mythical world of Narnia. The first book published in 1950, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, introduced the young heroes of the series and Aslan (a talking lion) as they band together to save Narnia from evil. Subsequent volumes in the series continue the adventures of the protagonists, while the penultimate volume goes back and establishes the history of Narnia and the last volume depicts its destruction.

There are seven volumes in the Narnia series and because they were not all written in historical sequence, you can chose whether to start with *The Magician's Nephew*, book six, which establishes the backstory or just start the books in the original order they were published.

Whichever strategy your child employs they are apt to be fascinated by the world of Lewis's best-known works. While not without controversy in the decades since their publication (gender issues, racism and the Christian themes being combined with pagan elements), their popularity is proven by the fact that they have sold over one hundred million copies and have been translated into forty-seven languages.

## **THE RESCUERS**

**BY MARGERY SHARP, 1959**

***“Miss Sharp’s delicate and sophisticated humor is good fun for wise children from age 10 to 100.”***

***- Jerome Cushman, The Los Angeles Times***

Jerome Cushman is absolutely right: big kids and little kids alike will delight in Sharp's utterly original story about the brave white mouse, Miss

Bianca, and her companions in their perilous missions for the worldwide Prisoner's Aid Society. Indeed, in researching this review list, it was a real pleasure to revisit this fantastic tale, which is much more interestingly textured and nuanced than the Disney movie based on the book.

We love that, straight off, the reader is plunged without question into the secret world of mice everywhere, who – as everyone knows – have for centuries been the friends of the prisoner, sharing food with him and “allowing themselves to be taught all manner of foolish tricks... in order to cheer his lonely hours”. Within the first paragraph we are asked to accept all kinds of wickedly whimsical conceits, such as the Jean Fromage Medal that was created to honor a particularly brave French mouse who sailed to Turkey to be a companion to a French prisoner in Constantinople!

And we love the endless action-packed adventures that the mice get up to. It is particularly satisfying that the seemingly over-privileged heroine, Miss Bianca, is so effortlessly cool, calm and collected in the face of so much danger! She seems to epitomize that post-war can-do attitude that embodied the more liberated women of the late 1950s, and provides a great role model for little ladies everywhere.

*The Rescuers* ended up being the first of a series of nine children's novels following the exploits of Miss Bianca and co, each of them also showing the importance of friendship in the face of adversity and offering us the promise of good overcoming evil!

## THE SECRET GARDEN

by Frances Hodgson Burnett, 1911

***“This orphan story with a touch of mystery and a touch of magic has charmed readers since its 1911 publication.” - Patricia Austin, Booklist***

Frances Hodgson Burnett was a well-respected author at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, known for her plays and her other famous book, *Little Lord*

*Fauntleroy*. The latter became an instant cultural icon, inspiring a new way to dress little boys (in breeches). Burnett's third children's novel, *The Secret Garden* did not match the success of *Fauntleroy* in her lifetime; rather critical success came to the book only after her death in 1924.

Contrary Miss Mary had grown up in India ignored by her parents and raised by servants. When a cholera epidemic kills not only her parents but also her servant caretakers, Mary is left an orphan. In short order she is sent to her only relatives in England. Her uncle has lost his wife and his only child is bedridden; he has isolated himself in his grief over both.

Mary makes friends with a local boy, Dickon, softens her disposition and learns the sad story behind her uncle's bereavement. Her late aunt had a lovely garden on which she doted; at her death her husband ordered the garden locked and the key thrown away. Mary vows to find this secret garden and when she does she finds it hopelessly overgrown. She decides to restore it with Dickon's help. The garden seems to have magical properties which can help her cousin, but how will her uncle react to her violating his command?

Beloved in the decades since the author's death, *The Secret Garden* has become one of the best known and critically regarded children's novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. With gentle lessons about the power of positive thinking and the healing power of all living things (as well as its tension between common sense and accepted wisdom), it makes a very worthy addition to your child's library.

## **THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS**

by Kenneth Grahame, 1908

***“[I have] read it and re-read it, and have come to accept the characters as old friends.”***

*– President Theodore Roosevelt*

If you are British then *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame barely needs an introduction, no doubt you will already have bought a copy or have had one bought for you. If you are from outside the UK and need further persuading to try this 1905 children's classic then perhaps the dramatic words of A.A. Milne (author of *Winnie-the-Pooh*) might persuade you: "One does not argue about *The Wind in the Willows*... When you sit down to it, don't be so ridiculous as to suppose that you are sitting in judgment on my taste, or on the art of Kenneth Grahame. You are merely sitting in judgment on yourself. You may be worthy: I don't know. But it is you who are on trial".

So there you are. Like it or be damned!

The story concerns the life and adventures of four animal friends, Mole, Ratty, Badger and Toad. Although there is an overarching plot to the book, many of the chapters are self-contained stories making them great as a bedtime read. Each of the four main characters has a very strong, distinct and unique personality and children will most likely delight in the irresponsible character of Toad. Hopefully, they will also come to learn the lessons of his ill-advised actions.

If you delve deeper into the historical context of the book the adult reader will find much of interest, as the story reflects the social and political upheaval of the time. However for today's parent it is probably more interesting to note that the book started life as a series of letters from Grahame to his son. Therefore this is, first and foremost, a story for children told by a father, which is to say with an adult voice and touching on grown-up themes but always with the innocence of youth in mind.

For many parents the difficulty will come not in trying to decide whether to try *The Wind in the Willows*, but which edition to buy. Although the original story didn't include illustrations almost every edition since does, so take the time to choose a version with illustrations that you think your child will enjoy.

# THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ

by L. Frank Baum, 1900

***“Author L. Frank Baum tells a good tale, has a lively imagination and writes from the heart.”***

*– Mary Eisenhart, Common Sense Media*

Published in 1900 by Lyman Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* received instant success and was on the best-selling list for children’s books for two years following its release. The tale of young Dorothy, who is transported by a cyclone to a strange and magical land where she meets friends and foes during her determined journey to get back home to Kansas, remains to this day a great American classic.

Considered by many as the first ever truly American fairytale, with countless adaptations – including a musical stage version that Baum himself adapted in 1902 – the book has become part of the very fabric of American popular culture, with its iconic imagery and characters instantly recognizable all over the world.

For those who are most familiar with the classic 1939 movie version of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, it may come as a surprise that the book of the same name is just the first in a series of fourteen stories that explore the adventures of a whole host of characters in the magical Land of Oz. With its richly imagined cast of Munchkins, Tin Man, Scarecrow and Lion, Witches and, of course, the Wizard, the 9+ age group is the perfect age to delve into the full series – but be aware that the first book does differ in some parts to the film.

There are also many versions of the original story in print, including abridged ones for younger readers, but we particularly like the version published by Unicorn Publishing House which has both the full text and simply glorious illustrations by Greg Hildebrandt.

# TREASURE ISLAND

by Robert Louis Stevenson, 1883

***“[He] seemed to pick the right word up on the point of his pen, like a man playing spillikins.”***

*– Gilbert Keith Chesterton*

*Treasure Island* is as exciting to kids today as it was back in 1883 when it was first published. And this is only fitting, as it is the original pirate story: in fact just about anything that you might think of as being “piratey” probably originated in this book. *Treasure Island* is where we first see all the things that are now part of iconic pirate imagery: treasure maps marked with an "X", the Jolly Roger, exotic tropical islands and one-legged seamen with parrots on their shoulders. And, of course, this is also where we meet the vitally complex figure of Long John Silver.

Divided into six parts, the book is narrated by the young James “Jim” Hawkins who tells the tales of his encounters and adventures with some of the most legendary swashbucklers of all times, as they sail uncharted seas in search of treasure! Drawing on Stevenson’s real life travels to far-away lands, the book is rich with detail and action – two of the most important ingredients in engaging readers at this level. Indeed, thanks to its compact structure and richly drawn characters, Stevenson is often credited with transforming the boys’ adventure novel genre of the time and *Treasure Island* has served as a model of the genre for many writers to this day.

Of all the many different versions of the book, we particularly recommend the Sterling illustrated Classic, illustrated by Robert Ingpen. The incredibly detailed illustrations do an amazing job of enhancing the already exciting story, and are a pleasure to simply look at beyond reading the story.



## Great Books for Early Teens

### Aged 12 to 15

One would hope that by the age of twelve, your soon to be young adult is now so absolutely in love with reading that he is rarely seen without his nose stuck in a book! You've accomplished your goal of helping him discover a love of reading and he's all set to explore a variety of authors and texts.

That is the hope! The reality is that the early teens are wracked with all kinds of emotions, and being "forced" to read "boring" books at school can sometimes derail an earlier passion for reading. In fact, we almost didn't include this age group in our list because it is such a tricky time; kids this age define their own tastes much more, and it becomes harder and harder to predict what kind of book they will really enjoy. The good news is that there is such a vast range of books aimed at this age group that it should not be difficult to find books that your kid will connect with.

To this end, we have tried to include here as wide a range of books as possible. For example we have not shied away from including trendy chapter books such as *The Hunger Games* or *The Twilight Saga* series – both of which have been re-imagined as movies in recent years and have proved incredibly popular, igniting reading passions in many teens who will willingly read the entire series in one go! Critics who argue that these books are not as highbrow as classical literature are missing the point: reading for pleasure should be enjoyable!

In the past few decades, there have also been a number of excellent contemporary books that have connected with the general public and which are more than suitable reading material for teens. Books such as *The Book Thief* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* were not necessarily conceived as teen books, but address themes and ideas that they will connect with.

However, we feel that it is also important not to ignore the classics for fear of them being “boring”, irrelevant or too linguistically complicated. For the most part, good abridged versions of the classics can be found to meet your child’s reading level and true classics always have attributes that connect them to today’s young adults, be it the passionate romance of *Jane Eyre* or the Gothic fantasy of *Frankenstein*.

We have also highlighted a number of 20th century classics that we imagine are quite likely to be on your teen’s school reading list and, if not, they should be! These are the classics that continue to shape and define our culture today: books that leave their mark for all the right reasons. Some of these books do tackle rather more serious themes, but we see no reason why a mature minded teen shouldn’t be offered the opportunity to be challenged through reading. Where necessary, we have given a age guide for these more challenging books.

The early teen to young adult years are all about exploration, discovery and learning about who you are and what you stand for: reading great books that give them food for thought must surely be one of the main reasons we helped them learn to read in the first place?

# The all time “must-read” classics

## FRANKENSTEIN

by Mary Shelley, 1818

***“There never was a wilder story imagined, yet, like most of the fictions of this age, it has an air of reality attached to it.”***

*– The Edinburgh Magazine, 1818*

The monster of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s novel has very little in common with the modern horror creation called Frankenstein, the “star” of dozens of films, and a popular costumed character at Universal Studios tours which has struck fear into the hearts of adults and children alike for generations. Popularized by Boris Karloff (in heavy makeup) in a film adaptation of the novel, subsequent films divorced the monster character from his true literary legacy.

In actual fact Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* is considered by many to be the first science fiction novel; she based her fantasy on the scientific experimentation that was beginning to take hold in the popular imagination of the time. Aged just 18 at the time, Shelley was one of a party of guests at Lord Byron’s villa in Geneva Switzerland. A conversation about galvanism and the idea of reanimating dead matter led to a writing challenge between the guests, and Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was the result.

The story tells the tale of a scientist called Victor Frankenstein who witnesses a lightning strike and sets about to harness this natural phenomenon for his own scientific uses. Ultimately he attempts to construct a human and bring his creation to life using lightening. He rejects the results of his experimentation, falls ill from the horror of its appearance and his “monster”, rejected, flees, only to reappear in Frankenstein’s life over and over again in horrific and tragic ways.

The novel at its heart is a cautionary tale about the misuse of power and its ability to destroy civilization. However, with the growing trend in contemporary teen and young adult fiction for all things Gothic, vampire, living dead and werewolf, introducing an older teen to one of the original Gothic novels is more likely to be the focus of *Frankenstein's* appeal.

## **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

by Charles Dickens, 1860

***“In none of his other works does he evince a shrewder insight into real life and a clearer perception and knowledge of what is called the world.”***  
***– The Atlantic, 1861***

Charles Dickens only wrote two novels in the first person narrative: *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. The latter, and the second to last novel he would complete, is widely judged to represent Dickens' work at its pinnacle; written in dense and, unusually for Dickens, concise prose. It is full of graphic imagery, fights to the death, prison, and poverty. It combines both mystery and intrigue, which results in a narrative tension that sets the novel apart from his previous works. As is typical of Dickens we get a vivid portrait of the times and the author's concern with social issues.

*Great Expectations* is the story of Philip Pirrip, nicknamed “Pip”, as he grows from child to man. Orphaned, Pip lives with his sister and her husband, and has no greater ambition in life than to grow up to be a blacksmith, just like his brother-in-law Joe. Joe is a kind man and an excellent role model; the young boy could do worse than follow in his footsteps. However, Pip's modest ambition undergoes a drastic transformation, thanks to a fateful encounter one night. He is plucked from poverty and sent to London to become a gentleman, with “great expectations” of success and prosperity.

Dickens' themes in this work include crime, guilt, and poverty. Also, the constrictions of a rigid social class system; as Pip grows up he is exposed to and interacts with members of the various social classes that existed in England's Georgian period, in which the novel is set.

*Great Expectations* is a great read for twelve-year-olds and up; indeed my husband, who was not much of a reader in his youth, often refers to it as the only book he really enjoyed as a child. The 19th century language is a bit complicated at times, so if at first your child has doubts, do encourage them to stick with it, for Pip's tale is no ordinary coming of age story and as the story unfolds they will be gripped by the drama.

## **JANE EYRE**

by Charlotte Brontë, 1847

***“Better to be without logic than without feeling.”***

*- Charlotte Brontë, The Professor*

Ah, the romance of *Jane Eyre*! A recent poll among readers in the United Kingdom named *Jane Eyre*'s Mr. Rochester, the Byronic hero of Charlotte Brontë's novel, as THE most romantic figure in literature. And it is true that generations of female readers have fallen in love with Rochester right along with Jane. Complex, dark and brooding, Rochester is the stuff of matinee idols. There have been countless adaptations of the novel for both TV and film that may help younger teen readers get into the story, my personal favorite being the award-winning 2006 BBC production starring Ruth Wilson as Jane and Toby Stephens as Rochester.

*Jane Eyre* chronicles the life of its eponymous heroine from childhood to adulthood. We follow Jane from her orphaned childhood, where she is the victim of abuse and bullying from her aunt and cousins. She's summarily sent off to Lowood School, where she gains an education, but suffers further abuse and privation at the hands of the strict couple who run the school. Jane spends eight years at Lowood as a student, and two as a

teacher before she advertises for a governess's position. She is soon hired by Mr. Rochester's housekeeper, to be governess to his ward, Adele. Her first situation as an independent woman will profoundly alter the course of her life, as she uncovers the secrets behind Rochester's dark demeanor, and is forced to choose between her passion and her principles.

In her most famous novel, Charlotte Brontë did nothing less than revolutionize and redefine the craft of fiction. *Jane Eyre* is remembered today as a feminist landmark in literature with its focus on a woman's feelings and inner life. Despite it being set in the 1800s, today's teens, who are both growing in their independence and entering into the emotional whirlwind of first romances, will find much in common with Jane and her dramatic story. And the fact that Jane is one of the strongest female characters in classic literature, with her sound moral ethics, steadfast determination and deft intelligence, makes it essential reading for young women.

## **PRIDE AND PREJUDICE**

by Jane Austen, 1813

***“Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy are two of the most romantic and memorable characters in the whole of English literature, and their story never fails to entertain.”***

*– Barbara Schultz, Common Sense Media*

Of the novels written by Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* is often cited by critics as the pinnacle of the writer's craft. Austen's command of the English language, her wit and incisive observations of life among the gentry have also insured that 200 years after its initial publication, the novel continues to be immensely popular and relevant among modern readers.

*Pride and Prejudice* follows the fortunes of Elizabeth Bennet and her four sisters. Although part of the landed gentry, they are not rich. None of the

five daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have sufficient dowries to insure good marriages, and to make matters worse, thanks to the British inheritance laws of the time, the family home is to be lost to a male cousin. Unless each can make a good match, the Bennett sisters might ultimately find themselves homeless. Elizabeth is the heroine of the novel, a strong, independent, intelligent character. When she meets Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy she at first finds him arrogant. The novel is the story of their eventful romance, as well as a portrait of the life of the landed gentry at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Any concern that parents might have that teens may not be able to relate to the historical context of the book are overridden by the universality of the emotional dynamics that are examined. A fact that is borne out in the 2004 film adaptation of the book entitled *Bride and Prejudice*, which transposed the story to a contemporary Indian setting. Austen explores many themes in *Pride and Prejudice*, not merely the qualities from which the title is derived (which afflict both Elizabeth and Darcy in equal measure). Yet at its heart, *Pride and Prejudice* is about the search for self, and teaches us that small steps in one's own sphere are just as fruitful as an epic quest – a message that has immense value for teens as they approach maturity.

## **THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN**

by Mark Twain, 1885

***“All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.”***

*- Ernest Hemingway*

It is somewhat daunting to comment on a novel that holds such a lofty position within American literature and one that still courts so much controversy. Equally, when a text is on the school reading list it can be hard to convince your child that this is something they might want to read by themselves for pleasure. Whether you leave *Huckleberry Finn*, and

other modern classics, to be introduced by your child's teachers is entirely up to you, but a very important piece of fiction it most certainly is.

The story is told in the first person by Huckleberry 'Huck' Finn, the son of the town drunk, who readers first meet in Twain's previous novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. In this sequel Huck is now a year older, thirteen or fourteen, and living with a guardian, the Widow Douglas, who is trying to "sivilize" him. Huck escapes these attempts at an education and flees to Jackson Island where we get to the heart of the novel, Huck's relationship with Jim, a runaway slave. Huck Finn is a true innocent who must come of age on his own terms and through his own decisions.

As the quote above from Earnest Hemingway makes clear, there is so much more to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* than just the issue of slavery and racism. Nevertheless it is these themes, and the frequent use of racially derogatory language, that continues to fuel the debate about this book, as well as how and if it should be introduced to young readers. We personally do not believe that the problem is solved by changing controversial vocabulary, as has been attempted in some modern reprints of the work. Indeed, a true reading of the book soon reveals that the message in *Huckleberry Finn* is defiantly anti-racist and anti-slavery.

To this end we feel that parents shouldn't necessarily shy away from controversial books. Carefully engaging with thoughtful twelve-year-olds when reading such material can give rise to positive discussions and, if done well, should result in a greater enjoyment of this fantastic adventure story.

## THE CALL OF THE WILD

by Jack London, 1903

***“Written in a style that is at once muscular and poetic, it is both an adventure story and a meditation on civilization versus savagery.”***

*– Matt Berman, Common Sense Media*



*The Call of the Wild* is, of course, a great American classic which hardly needs introduction here. Largely acknowledged as Jack London's greatest book it was first serialized in 1903 in the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine before subsequently being published in its entirety later that year. It became an instant hit, praised both for London's simple direct style of writing as well as its mythic portrayal of 19th Century America where the story is set.

But it is the vivid anthropomorphic narration of its principal character – a dog called Buck – that really resonates with young readers. Buck is a domestic St. Bernard-Scotch Collie living the good life at a ranch in California's Santa Clara Valley. He is kidnapped and sold into the brutal world of work, as a sled dog in the Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush, where Buck is forced to discover his wilder dog instincts. The challenging situations that ensue serve to teach Buck as much about human nature as about himself, and ultimately lead him to return to living in the wild.

You may find a mixed response to *The Call of the Wild* from today's children who are more used to high-speed technology than the great outdoors and who are perhaps less inclined to engage with the somewhat old-fashioned language that London uses. Depending on your child's reading level, you might want to opt for an abridged version of the book where the language has been adapted and simplified for a modern audience. However, the original book is well within the reach of more mature twelve-year-olds and, thanks to its episodic serialized style, it is also perfect for them to read to a younger sibling.

Jack London's follow-up book *White Fang*, the story of a wild wolf-dog who is tamed, is a great continuation of the central themes of nature versus nurture.

## 20th Century classics

### BRAVE NEW WORLD

by Aldous Huxley, 1932

***“Words can be like X-rays if you use them properly - they’ll go through anything. You read and you’re pierced.” - Aldous Huxley, Brave New World***

Published in 1932 at a time of great technological advances, *Brave New World* explores the relationship between humans and technology and remains a great novel for today’s mature fourteen-year-olds, allowing them to contemplate the potential harm that advances in science can bring. Huxley puts forward a sort of utopian society where, on the surface, everything seems fine, but in reality this highly advanced society is constructed on the premise of giving up every sense of freedom.

In Huxley’s imagined earth of 2540, London is part of the “World State” a population controlled global society (limited to 2 billion people) where resources, goods and services are bountiful thanks to the population cap. Children are created in hatcheries and sent to conditioning centers before assuming their places in society, which are determined by a five-tier caste system. Babies in the highest caste develop normally; in the four subordinate castes, development is interfered with to control intelligence and physical size. Depression is prevented among World State citizens by the consumption of the intoxicating drug soma, and by propaganda that is part of the conditioning center training. Sex is recreational and an approved activity, everyone dies at age 60 after lives of perfect health; a mock religion is used to draw caste members together, its rituals culminating in orgies. In marginal environments not conducive to the good life, “savages” are contained on the 26<sup>th</sup> Century version of a native reservation and largely left to their own devices. The novel follows what

happens when one of these savages comes into contact with the “brave, new world”.

For today’s teenagers, whose lives seem dominated by technology, there are already some elements in *Brave New World* that are part of their reality, such as the “Feelie” films that echo today’s 3D movies and televisions. How much further *Brave New World* becomes part of their reality is a question that this generation and those to come will continually have to resolve and, therefore, the arguments that Huxley explores makes this book essential reading.

## **ENDER’S GAME**

by Orson Scott Card, 1985

***“Card understands the human condition and has things of real value to say about it. He tells the truth well – ultimately the only criterion of greatness.” – Gene Wolfe***

By the time you read this the chances are you will already be very familiar with *Ender’s Game* by Orson Scott Card thanks to the major motion picture adaptation of the novel to be released in November 2013. Frankly it is surprising that this science fiction classic was not made into a movie before now. Published back in 1985, winner of several awards including science fiction’s highest accolades, the Nebula Award and the Hugo Award, this novel is the first in a four part series that has received so much praise that it is required reading in many schools. If you’re looking for something with a bit more depth than the typical superhero/ET fare than the *Ender’s Saga* series is a good place to start.

In the not so distant future, political conflict on Earth is temporarily put on hold while mankind attempts to deal with a greater threat. Two major military conflicts with an insect-like alien race, the Formics, have taken their toll and the threat of a “third invasion” has mobilized government agencies to come up with a final solution. To that end, child geniuses are

being genetically bred and then trained at an off-world Battle School in order to create a superior fighting force. In particular they are looking for a future commander to match the legendary Mazer Rackham, savior of the two previous wars. Young Andrew “Ender” Wiggin seems to be that boy and *Ender’s Game* follows him from his home life at the age of six, through his brutal schooling and on to his destiny of commandeering the International Fleet and saving the world. But is everything as it seems?

The remaining novels in the four part *Ender’s Saga* are *Speaker for the Dead*, *Xenocide* and *Children of the Mind*, but there are further novels that are set in and around the Ender quartet for devoted fans to get stuck into. What we particularly like about Card’s work, and indeed the majority of our other selections, is the way he speaks up to children. His plots and themes are complex, but not overly so, and offer more than just a black and white portrayal of good versus evil. Card himself states that the novel is about leadership and the fact that the US Marine Core has it on its recommended reading list for lower ranking officers clearly support this view.

## **FAHRENHEIT 451**

by Ray Bradbury, 1953

***“Over a 70-year career, he used his fecund storytelling talents to fashion tales that have captivated legions of young people and inspired a host of imitators.”***

*– Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times*

Acclaimed science fiction author Ray Bradbury’s landmark novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, takes its title from the temperature at which paper burns. Written at the time of the McCarthy anti-Communist hearings and reflecting his fears about the increasing censorship of the era, his novel has long been seen as an eerie exploration of where our society could be headed.

In a distant future, television has become the primary source of diversion and escape. Answering a thirst for simplistic, happy answers to every question, the medium has become utterly mindless. Not only do people no longer read books, firemen now ferret out books and burn them, rather than putting out fires.

Protagonist Guy Montag is one such fireman, tasked not only with burning books but the houses in which they are found. He never thinks to question the practice until he makes the acquaintance of his neighbor Clarisse. She's lively and witty and he's observed her family having spirited conversations about ideas, that most fearful of things. His gradual awakening to the magic of books forms the backbone of the novel.

Bradbury accurately predicted a good many things we take for granted in our technologically advanced era. His seashell radio has become realized in the iPod; his wall-televisions pre-empted our flat screen TVs of increasing size. His fears of a "Big Brother" style government seem to have more credence by the day. Television, overrun by "reality shows", has become increasingly mindless and trivial, whilst dramas and documentaries are often considered passé. It remains to be seen if any more of his dystopian vision comes to pass.

What we love most about *Fahrenheit 451* is that it is a thought-provoking, relatable novel worth reading together as a family and is likely to stimulate even the most reluctant teenage reader.

## **LORD OF THE FLIES**

by William Golding, 1954

***"... his novels which, with the perspicuity of realistic narrative art and the diversity and universality of myth, illuminate the human condition in the world of today."***

*– The Nobel Prize Foundation*

Author William Golding was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1983, in recognition of the importance of his writing. *Lord of the Flies* was his first novel, published in 1953, and it is also his most famous work of fiction, even though many of his subsequent works were recipients of prestigious literary awards. As an author, Golding made use of classical literature, Christian symbolism and mythology in his works to illustrate his somewhat pessimistic view of mankind. He favored examining closed communities in his novels, through which he explored the moral ambiguity of humankind and the frail nature of civilization.

*Lord of the Flies* takes place at an unspecified time, against the backdrop of an impending nuclear war. British schoolchildren are being evacuated to “safe locations”. One such airlift of British students crash lands on an uninhabited island, where schoolboys aged six to twelve are left marooned. The novel explores their attempts to survive and the choices they make as they are increasingly distanced from the structure of civilization. They initially try to behave within the constructs of their culture and upbringing, to impose order, both on their environment and themselves, as proper British gentlemen; but some members of the group soon give in to their more savage nature with tragic consequences.

Themes in the novel include the classic elements of man vs. nature, man’s inhumanity to man, and the boundary between humanity and animalism. Its two central characters, Ralph (a natural leader with good intentions and moral fiber), and Jack (who represents another natural leader who becomes unfettered and increasingly savage in the absence of civilizing influences) are allegorical models of the opposing tensions faced by humanity as we attempt to impose order on the world.

Parents may be concerned about the violence and darkness in *Lord of the Flies*, but for teens this book is compelling and provocative; Golding’s uncomplicated writing presents the debate about whether or not humans are instinctively evil in clear and accessible terms. For teens that are becoming rapidly more aware of the violence that is present in our current society, this is a debate that merits careful consideration.

## OF MICE AND MEN

by John Steinbeck, 1937

*“...justifiably considered a classic of American literature” – Michael Berry, Common Sense Media*

Few of us will have got through middle or high school without reading Steinbeck’s novella *Of Mice and Men*, and it continues to feature as a staple on countless school’s reading lists. It is one of the most profoundly moving works in all of literature and is definitely one book that your teenager should be encouraged to read even before they encounter it at school.

*Of Mice and Men* takes place during the Great Depression, and follows George Miller and Lennie Small, two migrant workers who travel around California in search of new job opportunities. George is uneducated, but intelligent. Lennie is a giant of a man in size, but has the mind of a child. During their journey together, they share a dream of one day owning their own farm, and start working towards that dream in earnest when they find work at the Salinas ranch. But George is faced with the ultimate test of his friendship with Lennie when the gentle giant’s strength results in a horrific accident with grave consequences.

*Of Mice and Men* is at heart a story about friendship and compassion. The friendship between George and Lennie is extensively explored; George is Lennie’s protector in life, a role that he is called upon to perform over and over again, even until its tragic conclusion.

The narrative is powerful, emotionally gut wrenching and an accurate depiction of the harsh realities of life for migrant workers during the Great Depression. However, we don’t feel that this is a depressing story; it is very accessible for young teens with compelling themes to explore, and its short length also makes it a perfect introduction to serious literature.

## OUT OF THE DUST

by Karen Hesse, 1997

Newbery Medal Winner, 1998

***“The novel is harsh and ugly, strong stuff that made my eleven-year-old cry when we read it aloud. But the similes shine like jewels in dark caves, lighting the heroine, finally, to a resolution she can live with.”***

*Susie Wilde, Children's Literature*

Karen Hesse is an award-winning children's author who often sets her stories in historical periods, bringing them alive with intricate and beautifully written stories of teenagers' lives at the time.

*Out of the Dust* details the life experiences of its young heroine, fourteen-year-old Billie Joe as she lives through the Dust Bowl years in 1930s Oklahoma. Billie Joe loses her mother to an accident involving kerosene placed too close to a hot stove. Billie's hands are also burnt in the accident, destroying her one solace, playing the piano. She's left alone with her father, whom grief and illness have profoundly changed. The young girl shows a quiet strength and resiliency of spirit in spite of all the tragedy, and this is ultimately a story of the triumph of the human spirit against devastating odds.

*Out of the Dust* is a Newbery Award winner. The novel is written in a unique style using first person, free verse poetry that reads like a young girl's diary, rather than a standard narrative. This gives immediacy to her life and experiences that will likely connect with the older teenagers that the novel is intended for. Seeing the epic twin disasters of the Dust Bowl and the Depression through a young girl's eyes makes this tragic period in our history relatable to young readers in a way no movie or documentary could.

Hesse is certainly an author worth exploring, and some of her other historically based novels that we like include *Letters from Rifka*, set in 1919, following twelve-year-old Rifka's eventful and often dangerous



journey from a Jewish community in Russia to the promised land of America, where she hopes she can live free from persecution; and *Stowaway*, which is set in 1768 and based on the true story of eleven-year-old Nicholas Young who stowed away on the *Endeavour*, the ship of legendary Captain James Cook, and participated in the fantastic adventures that the ship's crew encountered during their long voyage to Australasia.

## **ROLL OF THUNDER, HEAR MY CRY**

by Mildred D. Taylor, 1976

Newbery Medal Winner, 1977

***“I had a driving compulsion to paint a truer picture of Black people... I wanted to show a Black family united in love and pride, of which the reader would like to be a part.”***

*– Mildred D. Taylor*

Some children consider history a dull and dry subject; a view not helped by the way the subject is sometimes taught at school. This is why we should value great historical fiction that brings to life families or groups of people coping with life's challenges, allowing us to view epic events through their eyes. Mildred D. Taylor is a master of bringing an important historical era to vivid life through the eyes of her compelling characters.

*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* explores the trials and tribulations of a black family in Mississippi during the Great Depression. Set in 1933, the Logan family must not only cope with the economic crisis, but also the rampant racism that was typical of the Deep South at the time. Taylor depicts the realities of growing up black in an intolerant society through the eyes of the four Logan children. For them, being white means being privileged and being black means you face indignities, inequalities and violence on a daily basis.

A Newbery Award winner, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* is the middle book in a five book series. Compellingly placed against our nation's worst economic crisis and in a location where civil rights abuses and hate crimes were the order of the day, this book provides a valuable contrast to our more prosperous and somewhat more tolerant times. A truly eye-opening and inspirational novel: its core message is the importance of family in times of adversity. However, parents should be aware that there are some violent scenes that may disturb younger readers, which is why we think this book is best introduced to more mature teens.

## THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

by J. D. Salinger, 1951

***“This Holden, he's just like you. He finds the whole world's full of people say one thing and mean another and he doesn't like it; and he hates movies and phony slobs and snobs and crumby books and war.”***

*– James Stern, The New York Times*

*The Catcher in the Rye* has been widely lauded as one of the most important and influential novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The novel was originally intended for adult audiences, but its theme of teenage angst, rebellion and alienation quickly made it required reading for high school students. It has also been one of the most consistently banned novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, for reasons as varied as its vulgar language, references to sex and homosexuality, as well as its seeming glorification of destructive behavior and teen rebellion.

*The Catcher in the Rye* follows its anti-heroic protagonist, Holden Caulfield, aged seventeen, through two days of his troubled life, which he recounts from a bed in a mental institution. Expelled from his prep school, and troubled by the death of his younger brother and a classmate's suicide, Holden takes off for New York City and checks into a hotel where he tries to deal with his inner turmoil.

The novel is written in a stream of consciousness narrative style, with many detours into Holden's perspective on the people, places and things he encounters. Ultimately it is only the innocence of young childhood, as portrayed by his little sister Phoebe, which really resonates with Holden.

The novel has been described as being an accurate picture of New York City in the 1950s and, while some of the language now seems dated, it accurately represented the teenage vernacular of its day. While some critics decry Holden's self-absorption and find him ultimately unlikeable, most agree that he is a complex, multilayered character, dealing alone with the bewildering onslaught of maturity. In particular the novel accurately captures the existential angst that the teen years seem to engender and your rebellious teenager probably won't care what the critics think! Due to the mature themes in this book, we would advise that *The Catcher in the Rye* is best suited to older teens around 14+.

## THE CHOCOLATE WAR

by Robert Cormier, 1974

***"Mature young readers will respect the uncompromising ending that dares disturb the upbeat universe of juvenile books."***

*- Kirkus Reviews*

As we know, life doesn't always have a happy ending and if, like us, you are sometimes exasperated by young adult fiction that insists on a super sweet saccharine ending then *The Chocolate War* certainly won't disappoint. Indeed be careful what you wish for as this provocative novel is far from conventional. In fact its main driving theme is one boy's refusal to conform and the consequences of trying to buck the system. Is it right to hold steadfast to your decisions in the face of insurmountable opposition?

Jerry Renault is a bit of a loner with some pretty intense questions running through his head. His mother is recently deceased and his father is

emotionally distant. Combine this with all the usual teenage angst and what we have is a troubled young man. At his all-boys, Catholic school he faces another problem. Dueling for influence with the school administration is a shadowy and powerful student society called The Vigils. Vigil head prankster Archie Costello ‘assigns’ Jerry the task of refusing to sell chocolates for the first ten days of the annual school fundraising event, which brings Jerry into direct conflict with the schools administration. This initially brings Jerry great standing amongst his fellow peers, but when Jerry’s refusal to sell chocolates continues after his assignment he then brings himself into conflict with The Vigils as well. Increasingly isolated, will Jerry’s attempts to “disturb the universe” end well?

On the one hand *The Chocolate War* has been taught in hundreds of schools and on the other it is one of the most censored books for teenagers. Strong language and references to masturbation have been cited as reasons for banning the book. We agree with Cormier who said the language and controversial scenes simply reflect how kids talk and what they think about. Some parents will also have a problem with the fact that the protagonist does not win through at the end of the novel, but we feel that the early teen years is a suitable time for kids to learn that sometimes life simply isn’t fair.

## THE DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL

by Anne Frank, 1947

***“In the end, Anne’s teen angst pales beside her profound insights, her self-discovery and her unbroken faith in good triumphing over evil.”***

*- Publishers Weekly*

Whilst our intention with this review book was to focus purely on fiction, no list of essential reading for our children could be complete without Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*.

*The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank chronicles the true story of the time spent in hiding by thirteen-year-old Anne and her family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Hidden by neighbors in a secret annex, Anne faithfully recorded the details of their life in hiding for two years. Her diary details life under suppression, as well as the inner life of a young girl exploring her own hopes and dreams. Anne's story has been published in over sixty languages all over the world, and has never been out of print. Anne's diary remains a much beloved and exquisitely poignant record of existing under the Nazi occupation, and arguably, the most profound memoir to come from World War II.

What makes this book even more compelling for today's teens is that Anne really is just like them: apart from the descriptions of her day to day existence, Anne talks of her friends, the boys she likes, and her relationship with her sometimes annoying parents. It makes for a very accessible read, and gives teens elements that they can relate to in an otherwise unimaginable environment.

It is only by chance that we can read Anne's story today. Originally written only for herself, Anne heard a broadcast made by one of the members of the Dutch government in exile, which requested collection of first person accounts of life under the Nazi occupation. At that point her story became one for the whole world. This book is important for our children to read, to understand the great human tragedy of the Holocaust, lest we forget.

## **THE HOBBIT**

by J.R.R. Tolkien, 1937

***“All those, young or old, who love a fine adventurous tale, beautifully told, will take *The Hobbit* to their hearts.”***

*– Anne T. Eaton, The New York Times*

Thanks to the financial success of the *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy, directed by Peter Jackson, a whole new generation is discovering its

predecessor, *The Hobbit; or, There and Back Again*. J.R.R. Tolkien originally wrote the book to entertain his children, and for the most part *The Hobbit* is a light-hearted, charming adventure story, with a simple plot and likeable characters. A publisher asked Tolkien to write a sequel to the book, and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was born. The trilogy took on a more complex and darker tone as Tolkien continued to expand and refine his fantasy world.

*The Hobbit* tells the story of a time before the “Dominion of Men” when Hobbits lived in their shires, enjoying life and its pleasures. The hero Bilbo Baggins is a rather conservative Hobbit who cleaves to hearth and home and has no room in his life for adventures. All that changes once he is enticed to leave the shire and embark on an epic quest, during which he learns to accept the adventurous side of his nature.

*The Hobbit* was considered a classic almost instantly upon its publication. Tolkien called it a “faery story for children”, and reportedly considered the trilogy (and a subsequent work *The Silmarillion*) as more serious works in which he further explored the mythos of the *Lord of the Rings* universe.

Most young teens, especially boys, will find *The Hobbit* easy and entertaining to read, while only the serious fantasy fan will devour the following trilogy of books. Peter Jackson has recently turned this simple (and short) novel into another movie trilogy, having to pad each film with Tolkien minutiae to justify the expansion to three movies. Ideally, anyone seeing the new films should first experience the novel for the wondrous, charming (and brief) tale that it is.

## **THE OUTSIDERS**

by S. E. Hinton, 1967

***“Taut with tension, filled with drama.”***

***– The Chicago Tribune***

Susan Eloise Hinton wrote her first and best-known novel, *The Outsiders*, while still a junior in high school. She was only eighteen years old when the book was published in 1967. Something of a literary prodigy, Hinton went on to write other well-regarded juvenile fiction titles, including *That Was Then, This is Now*. Her novels are now required reading in most middle and high schools, but have also been frequently banned for language, depicted gang violence and family dysfunction.

*The Outsiders* takes place in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1965 and reflects Hinton's own experiences. Tulsa teens are divided into two competing groups, the Greasers and Socs (pronounced "sosh", short for Social). The Socs are of a higher socioeconomic status than the Greasers, leading to tensions between them that often erupt into violence. The protagonist of the novel is Ponyboy, who is a Greaser and all too aware of his group being stigmatized as outsiders and troublemakers. If anyone is going to get in trouble, even for something a Soc does, it's the Greasers. Ponyboy is always ready to rumble and proud of his Greaser status, until the night a tragedy occurs. The novel follows the fallout from that tragedy.

*The Outsiders* is considered to be a seminal coming of age novel with important themes about the meaning of family (including its absence or neglect), friendship, not judging others on looks or social position as well as the devastation of violence. While not every teen will be able to relate to the realities of the life of Ponyboy and his friends, the novel will resonate with that feeling of not fitting in that we all experience as we make our way through the teen years. The fact that the book was written by a teenager, who effectively speaks their language, should also make it enticing.

## **THE VIEW FROM SATURDAY**

by E.L. Konigsburg, 1996

Newbery Medal Winner, 1997

***“Wrought with deep compassion and a keen sense of balance, her imaginative novel affirms the existence of small miracles in everyday life.”***

*– Publishers Weekly*

Elaine Lobl Konigsburg is one of just a few children’s authors to have twice won the prestigious Newbery Medal for outstanding children’s literature. Not only that, but the time lapse of 29 years between the two awards (she won the 1968 medal for *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*) illustrates a very singular ability to connect with children of different decades and generations.

What is also very singular about her work is that she rarely shies away from choosing topics or writing structures that might challenge her young audience. In *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* the story is set in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan – not perhaps an obvious choice to engage many youngsters, and yet the tale of two runaway kids hiding out at the museum is a perennial favorite.

It is the structure of *The View from Saturday*, where the third-person narrative is interspersed with other first-person narratives from key characters, that presents a challenge to young readers, slowly drip-feeding clues in order to resolve the entire plot. It is for this reason that we have chosen *The View from Saturday* for our list, as we feel that it is important to offer our kids both easy reads that are currently trending and more complicated writing that might take a bit longer to work out. With *The View from Saturday*, the main storyline is one that most kids can relate to, which makes the structure somewhat easier to decode.

The plot follows the surprising success of an unconventional group of four sixth-grade Academic Bowl teamsters, and asks the question how come these four particular people were chosen to be teammates and why is it their group works so well together. Along the way, we learn of the complex relationships between the foursome, and the teacher who chose them, in a unique exploration into the strength of friendship.



## **THE WESTING GAME**

by Ellen Raskin, 1978

Newbery Medal Winner, 1979

***“... amazingly imaginative entertainment.”***

*- Denise Wilms, Booklist*

Some of the best children's books are those that adults enjoy reading too; and so it is with Ellen Raskin's murder-mystery novel *The Westing Game*, which - like all brilliant who-dunnits - is the perfect book for family members to read separately and compare notes over the dinner table.

We are thrown into the mystery right from the start, as sixteen people move into the Sunset Towers apartment building on the shore of Lake Michigan. We then discover that they are all the seemingly random heirs of the enormous fortune of an eccentric millionaire, Samuel W. Westing. However, in order to get their hands on the money, they need to solve the puzzle that the cunning Westing has set in his will! Which of the sixteen heirs will solve the mystery of Westing's death and eventually inherit the vast fortune?

Ellen Raskin received the 1979 Newbery Medal for *The Westing Game*, in recognition of its clever plot and writing style, one that deftly manages to appeal to a truly wide age group. But please bear in mind that it really is the kind of book you'll only enjoy if you're really into solving mysteries. It does get quite complicated at times and whilst suitable for younger readers they may struggle to keep up with the large cast of characters, the many twists and turns and all the riddles and clues. However, for the average twelve-year-old trainee sleuth, deciphering the puzzle in this book is as good a training ground as you'll find!

## **TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD**

by Harper Lee, 1960

Pulitzer Prize for Fiction Winner

***“A novel of great sweetness, humor, compassion, and of mystery carefully sustained.”***

*- Harper's Magazine*

The sooner you can get books like these (and sadly there aren't that many of them) into the hands of your children the better things will be for everyone. As Harper Lee herself is reported as saying, this novel needs no introduction, so we will try to keep this review brief. Suffice to say it is still as relevant today as it was when it was written in 1960.

The story is set in the American South and is a coming of age story, narrated by the tomboy Jem 'Scout' Finch, and tells the adventures of her, her brother and their new friend Dill as they grow up in a sleepy Alabama town. At the heart of the novel is Scout's father, Atticus Finch, who courageously defends a black man wrongly accused of raping a white woman. In so doing he incurs the anger of the white community and finds himself and his family in danger.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* has been called the one novel everyone should read in their lifetime; fifty plus years after its publication, the novel still teaches powerful lessons about race, class, courage, compassion, and gender roles. And whilst at its core this novel has some very serious messages, young readers will initially be drawn in and attracted to the very real and exciting adventures of youth as told by one of their own.

Author Harper Lee has only written one book and has eschewed personal publicity since 1964. Why she never took up pen to write another novel is unknown, but perhaps she knew that any follow-up work would be subject to comparison to her masterpiece. Greatly beloved and phenomenally influential since its publication in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a true American classic.

**WATERSHIP DOWN**

by Richard Adams, 1972

Carnegie Medal Winner, 1972

***“Spellbinding... Marvelous... A taut tale of suspense, hot pursuit and derring-do.”***

*- The Chicago Tribune*

Many, many children's books for younger readers involve anthropomorphized animals playing out various amusing adventures, so you would be forgiven for at first thinking that *Watership Down*'s cast of bunny rabbits is too young for the average twelve-year-old. However, these bunnies are far from cute and cuddly, and Richard's Adams allegorical tale contains grown-up themes that are perfectly pitched for mature children and pre-teens.

Indeed *Watership Down* has been a beloved novel since it was first published in 1972 and has never been out of print. The book details the lives of a colony of rabbits in the English countryside, imbuing the bunnies with their own language, culture and mythology. When Fiver, a clairvoyant, has visions of the destruction of their warren, an intrepid band of survivors sets out to find a new home, a place called Watership Down. A perilous journey ensues, and once Watership Down is found, they must further deal with a despotic neighboring colony in order to secure their future. The novel is rich with adventure, triumph and tragedy, and the alternative culture presented is imaginatively and richly detailed.

*Watership Down* has become a beloved classic by tapping into the themes of exile, survival, heroism, the triumph of freedom over tyranny, as well as a hero's quest, not unlike the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid* of classic times. Adams claimed to have only put in writing the stories he had told his daughters on long trips, dismissing the religious symbolism that many critics have seen in his work. Still, the hero's quest, the idea of a journey undertaken and obstacles overcome are time-honored themes that have had great resonance with readers through the ages. You might not be able to

convince your children to read the Aeniad and Odyssey, but rest assured that the lessons to be learned from *Watership Down* are the same.

## Modern series and chapter books

### AL CAPONE DOES MY SHIRTS/ ALCATRAZ SERIES

by Gennifer Choldenko, 2004

Newbery Honor Book, 2005

*“... exceptionally atmospheric... fast-paced and memorable.” –  
Publishers Weekly*

Often a good deal of detailed examination is required in order to define what makes a book great for kids: sometimes it's the sensitive treatment of a particular theme, sometimes it's the exceptional quality of the writing, sometimes it's the fascinating plot. But sometimes what catches our attention is a title that you just know kids are going to love! This is very much the case with Gennifer Choldenko's book *Al Capone Does My Shirts* – few pre-teens (especially boys) are immune to a tale that appears to be about gangsters!

However, *Al Capone Does My Shirts* is not exactly about the famous mob boss. Set in 1935, the story is actually about twelve-year-old Moose Flanagan whose father has taken a job as a prison guard on Alcatraz and has relocated his family to the island where the famous mob boss is in residence. Part of the reason for this upheaval in Moose's life is the hope that his younger sister, who is autistic, might be able to attend a specialist school in San Francisco. During the course of the book, Moose learns to adjust to life on the island, deal with the challenge of helping to care for his sister, and navigate his friendship with the warden's daughter Piper who often gets him involved in her madcap schemes. Along the way, Alcatraz's most infamous inmate will play a small but significant part in Moose's journey.

At heart, Moose's story is simply about the complicated family dynamics and everyday kinds of things that many twelve-year-olds will readily relate to: making friends, being responsible for a younger sibling, adjusting to a new environment. The fascinating and well-drawn historical setting, and inclusion of infamous characters that have shaped American culture, simply add appeal to this already engaging coming of age story.

Choldenko has followed up *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, with two more books in the *Alcatraz* series – *Al Capone Shines My Shoes* and *Al Capone Does My Homework* - following Moose, his family's life on Alcatraz and his growing connection to its best-known inmate.

## **HIS DARK MATERIALS TRILOGY**

by Philip Pullman, 1995

***“Pullman is a master at combining impeccable characterizations and seamless plotting, maintaining a crackling pace to create scene upon scene of almost unbearable tension.”***

*– Publishers Weekly*

If you think your child would like something a bit more challenging than Harry Potter, then we think Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* is probably a good place to start. While conceived as a children's book, it really is as appealing to adults as it is to children. Topics as varied as quantum physics, parallel worlds, theology, honor, integrity, family and more are weaved together in a fantastical history with a gripping and epic plot.

*His Dark Materials* offers not just one parallel world, but a multitude of them, through which the child protagonists, Lyra and Will, travel on their epic adventure. Readers will be introduced to daemons, flying creatures, armored polar bears, witches and angels to name but a few.

Pullman uses these constructs to explore concepts of physics, religion and philosophy. The first book of the trilogy, *Northern Lights* (better known in the US as *The Golden Compass*), features an earth where automobiles and airplanes were never invented and which seems to resemble the Victorian era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also possesses scientific concepts which do not exist in our reality. A dominant religion, The Magisterium, exerts a powerful influence on society. Lyra and Will come of age against this backdrop.

The trilogy is rounded out by the sequels, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*. Critics have likened the trilogy to Milton's *Paradise Lost* but with a twist: this trilogy takes what Milton thought of as humanity's fatal flaw and presents it as a redeeming grace. We don't feel the trilogy is anti-God or anti-faith but it's fair to say that organized religion takes a bit of a pounding, which may be a problem for some readers. However, we feel the trilogy is less anti-Christian than it is anti-mindless belief. Pullman sees hazard in blind faith and the dogmatism that can arise from it. No less a person than the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has endorsed the series, citing that very danger. The books are suitable for children interested in a more complex portrayal of good and evil.

## THE ALEX RIDER SERIES

by Anthony Horowitz, 2000

***“The plot is, of course, preposterous, but young readers won't care as they zoom through numerous cliffhangers.” – Kirkus Reviews***

Anthony Horowitz is one of Great Britain's most prolific living authors in the suspense-action-thriller genre, an author who seems to have the knack of being able to write just about anything with great success! Not only has he written several novels for both children and adults, he is a highly acclaimed award-winning scriptwriter, responsible for many popular television series. Indeed he was also given the honor of continuing the

legacy of the great Conan Doyle, commissioned by the Conan Doyle Estate to write the 2011 Sherlock Holmes novel *The House of Silk*.

The *Alex Rider* series remains Horowitz's most popular children's book series to date, and it's easy to see why! Essentially James Bond for kids, here are a collection of classic spy novels following the fourteen-year-old protagonist, Alex Rider, on numerous super-dangerous, super-exciting missions! Clearly, realists among us have to get over the completely unrealistic concept of a teenager being drafted in as a spy for the British government; but once you do it's well worth it, because these action-packed books are fast-paced, plot-driven escapades with all those brilliant cliffhanger moments that you'd expect from the genre. Oh, and don't forget all the great gadgets!

There are currently nine novels in the *Alex Rider* series and a further four graphic novels, three short stories and a supplementary book. A tenth book is to be published late 2013. In the opening title, *Stormbreaker*, we are given the background story as to how Alex began his career as a teen-spy and then follow him through his first mission. The story has plenty of death-defying scenes, gadgets galore – including a quite hilarious smoke-bomb emitting Game Boy – and takes readers on a whirlwind ride of 007 style proportions, leaving you desperate for more! Great fun and a great alternative to the vast outpouring of fantasy-based chapter books for this age group!

## **THE BEAUTIFUL CREATURES/ CASTER SERIES**

by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl,

*“Smart, textured and romantic.” - Kirkus Reviews*

Youth fiction based on supernatural elements has become big business since the success of books like the *Twilight* series. Every publisher is looking for the next big phenomenon, hoping to duplicate the success of that popular series. The results are something of a mixed bag, with a good



deal of dreck being churned out. However, there are some gems to be found amongst the chaff, including the *Caster* series, the first novel of which has been made into a 2013 film.

*Beautiful Creatures* is the first volume of the *Caster* series. It is told from the point of view of Ethan Wate, a high school student in South Carolina, whose dreams are filled with a mysterious girl. When details from his dreams, such as a song and a scent of rosemary and lemon start intruding in his waking life, Ethan takes note. At school he hears of a new girl in his class, odd since he lives in a tiny town that seldom attracts new families. He meets Lena Duchannes who is a Caster (one who can make magic) and the embodiment of his dreams. On her sixteenth birthday Lena will be claimed either by the darkness or the light.

There are four volumes in the series: *Beautiful Creatures*, *Beautiful Darkness*, *Beautiful Chaos*, and *Beautiful Redemption*. The sequels carry on the story of Ethan and Lena, each volume following on from the events of its predecessor. The books have been critically lauded for being “moody and atmospheric” while at the same time chiming with the realities of teenage life and small town living. Teenagers will easily relate to the central theme of having the courage to be yourself, even when your community sees you as different. And of course at its core this is a love story.

## THE CONFESSIONS OF GEORGIA NICHOLSON SERIES

by Louise Rennison, 1999

***“... the author creates a winning protagonist in the persona of 14-year-old Georgia Nicholson.”***

*— Publishers Weekly*

Louise Rennison is a triple threat when it comes to talent; she’s a comedian, scriptwriter and the author of an immensely popular series of books, *The Confessions of Georgia Nicholson*. In the series she uses some

autobiographical elements, such as her family's relocation (she was fifteen) to New Zealand. She now lives in Brighton, England, and her juvenile fiction is both popular and award-winning, no doubt because she keeps her finger on the pulse of teen culture and language

*The Confessions of Georgia Nicholson* series begins with the delightfully titled *Angus, Thongs and Full Frontal Snogging*. Here Rennison introduces her heroine and the world in which she lives. Fourteen-year-old Georgia lives in the UK with her mum, little sister and Angus, a wild cat found on a family holiday to Scotland. Angus is the source of much excitement among Georgia's neighbors, dogs and female cats. Georgia's circle of friends is called the Ace Gang, and the series follows their fortunes, both up and down, angst ridden one moment, hilariously funny the next.

As might be evident from the titles of the ten book series, Rennison writes in a hip, fresh and breezy style that has won her legions of young fans both in the UK and across the pond (Rennison provides a handy "Georgia's Glossary" to clear up any confusion caused by UK teen slang.) The Georgia Nicholson series has been called the *Bridget Jones Diary* for teens, capturing a girl on the edge of womanhood dealing with her eventful life as best she can and doing so with entertaining charm. Teens will relate to Georgia and the Ace Gang, as they deal with subjects as varied as the trials of wearing one's first bra, first love and being parted from a best friend. Great for teens who like their fiction a bit more down to earth.

## THE DISCWORLD SERIES

by Terry Pratchett, 1983

***"My personal theory is that he has a very firm grasp upon reality, it's simply not a reality the rest of us have ever met before."***

***– Terry Pratchett, The Color of Magic***

The *Discworld* series by Terry Pratchett is a long running fantasy series that has sold seventy million copies and has been translated into over

thirty-seven languages. Discworld is a flat world, balanced on the backs of four elephants that stand on the back of a turtle - a brilliant send up of pre-Copernican ideas about Earth. The series is a delightful combination of parody, myth, folklore and fairytales, which Pratchett weaves together in entertaining novels that satirize political, cultural and scientific issues of our modern world.

The first *Discworld* book, *The Color of Magic* was published in 1983 and tells the tale of Rincewind, an incompetent wizard and his misadventures as he takes on the role of guide to a rich tourist called Twoflower. As they travel across the Disc, they learn that they are nothing more than pawns in a board game being played by the Gods. In this, and the novels that follow, Pratchett sends up fantasy clichés and various subgenres of fantasy. He also parodies authors as varied as Shakespeare, Tolkien, Lovecraft and Beatrix Potter with wicked humor as well as the aforementioned real life political, scientific and cultural issues.

To date there have been thirty-nine novels in the *Discworld* series. Some involve wizards, others vampires, werewolves and witches. Pratchett frequently examines humanist ideas, and promotes critical thinking over blind belief. Pratchett had been the UK's best-selling author prior to J.K. Rowling and her *Harry Potter* series. The *Discworld* series has won the Prometheus Award and a Carnegie Medal. Not like anything you will have read before, these books are hysterically funny and biting insight at the same time. They are good to get into for anyone at any age, but are particularly good for the teen who doesn't take themselves or the world around them too seriously!

## **THE DIVERGENT SERIES**

by Veronica Roth, 2011

***“A memorable, unpredictable journey from which it is nearly impossible to turn away.”***

*— Publishers Weekly*

Veronica Roth is an exciting and young new talent on the young adult fiction stage. She published her first novel in 2011 at the tender age of twenty-three and it was soon a *New York Times* bestseller. That novel, *Divergent*, is the first of a three book series that will be sure to delight fans of novels like *The Hunger Games*.

Imagine, if you can, a future where at age sixteen, and after undergoing extensive testing, you are required to choose a faction into which you will be locked for the rest of your life. You haven't lived long enough to possibly know yourself or what the direction of your life might be and yet you must choose.

This is the dilemma facing Beatrice Prior, the heroine of the *Divergent* series. In Book 1, Beatrice is forced to make this choice, just like all sixteen-year-olds in a far future Chicago. The trouble is that the system matches individuals to one of five different factions, each requiring members to uphold a particular human virtue (honesty, selflessness, bravery, peacefulness or intelligence). The system doesn't allow for anyone who might not fit neatly into any one faction. Those who are tested as fitting equally well in two or more factions are called "Divergent" and told to keep this knowledge to themselves. The series follows Beatrice (aka Tris) as she chooses her path and learns what it truly means to be a Divergent. To whom (or what) do Divergents pose a threat?

Tris is a strong, independent (dare one say kickass?) heroine and this series will appeal to teens, especially girls, who like their intelligent futuristic adventure fiction without too much gooey romance. Does it offer a realistic view of our future? Probably not, but it's certainly a well-paced and captivating page turner.

There are to be three novels in the series: *Divergent*, *Insurgent* and *Allegiant* due to be published in October 2013. The two published novels have received largely positive critical response and topped several best-selling book lists since first publication. Fans are eagerly anticipating the release of the third.

## THE GALLAGHER GIRLS SERIES

by Ally Carter, 2006 onwards

***“The spy game isn't just a guy game.”***  
– *Publishers Weekly*

As the quote above makes clear, the action/adventure spy genre is no longer the sole domain of young boys. Teenage girls may still want some romance in their fiction, but they also want a heroine who can crack computer code and practice advanced martial arts! Yes, things have moved on since the fictional girl sleuth *Nancy Drew*. Today's smart and confident fictional schoolgirls are more than capable of looking after themselves.

The *Gallagher Girls* series by Ally Carter follows the educational career of young heroine Cammie Morgan, a student at Gallagher's School for Exceptional Young Women. This may seem a normal all-girls school from the outside but inside it is a training-ground for budding CIA spies! Cammie is introduced in the first novel as beginning her sophomore year and the remaining four books in the series to date follow her through the latter half of her sophomore year and beyond. While training as a spy, Cammie experiences life as any young woman does: falling in love, balancing her secret identity with a normal life and indulging in some pretty harrowing espionage adventures!

The series currently has five books with a sixth due in 2014. Titles include: *I'd Tell You That I Love You But Then I'd Have to Kill You*; *Cross My Heart and Hope to Spy*; *Don't Judge a Girl By Her Cover*; *Only The Good Spy Young*, and *Out of Sight, Out of Time*. Popular with both teens and critics, these books offer thrill-packed escapism for girls mixing humor, romance and spy gadgets galore.

## THE GIVER QUARTET

by Lois Lowry, 1993 - 2012

Newbery Medal Winner, 1994

***“This tightly plotted story and its believable characters will stay with readers for a long time.”***

*– Amy Kellman, School Library Journal © 1993*

*The Giver Quartet* by Lois Lowry is a well-regarded, award-winning example of contemporary dystopian youth fiction. As introduced in the first book of the series (which gives the set its name), a society called the Community seems to have created the perfect world: eliminating the concept of pain and strife by embracing something called “Sameness”, a flat means of existing in which all emotion is effectively stripped from its members. The Giver of the title is the only being allowed to access the memories of the time before Sameness, in case information from the past is ever needed in the present.

Twelve-year-old Jonas is designated as the next “Receiver of Memory” which is transmitted to him by the Giver. The novel explores Jonas’ awakening to the power of knowledge and what living without Sameness means. Unlike his peers, Jonas is now able to do things like see colors, feel sunshine, and enjoy tastes – but he is now also aware of pain and suffering. He also learns the full extent of the lengths to which the Community will go in order to keep its people in line, and is faced with a soul-searching dilemma. Will Jonas fulfill the destiny the Community has chosen for him and maintain the status quo or will he abandon his society in search of a larger, emotionally rich life and thus bring chaos to his world?

There are four novels in the series, which are loosely connected, inhabiting the same dystopian world. The novels include: *The Giver*; *Gathering Blue*; *Messenger* and *Son*. Each explores another facet of this dystopia, new characters are introduced and our understanding of their society is broadened.

*The Giver* was the recipient of several awards including the Newbery award, and is considered a seminal work in fiction for teenagers. As opposed to adult dystopian novels such as *Brave New World* which has

become a school reading list staple, *The Giver* was written specifically for the 12+ age group and presents the case for the impossibility of utopia in a very balanced and direct way, whilst also offering a gripping read that will keep kids fascinated

## THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY SERIES

by Douglas Adams, 1979

***“This pioneering classic introduction to the genre of British sci-fi humor can become an obsession.”***

*– Matt Berman, Common Sense Media*

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* started its remarkable life as a BBC radio series; only later did Adams write the novels. The first two volumes were adaptations of scripts from the popular radio show, the rest all new material. Despite its somewhat backwards entry into literary form, Adams' hysterical parody of science fiction tropes became a publishing phenomenon. It further spun off a television series, a movie and stage production (not to mention merchandise!)

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and its sequels chronicle the sometimes zany, sometimes weird, but always incredibly funny experiences of Arthur Dent of the late Planet Earth. Arthur is fortuitously whisked off the planet just as the Vogon Empire is about to destroy it so they can put in an on-ramp for an intergalactic highway. He's rescued by his actor friend, Ford Prefect, who it turns out, is an alien researcher for an electronic "Guide to the Galaxy". In short order, Dent becomes enmeshed with a group of colorful characters including Zaphod Beeblebrox, the two headed President of the Galaxy; Marvin, the depressed robot; and Trillian, a woman who has also been rescued from Earth.

There are five sequels to the first book, four of which were written by Douglas Adams ( *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*; *Life, The Universe and Everything*; *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish*; *Mostly*

*Harmless*); a sixth book was written after Adams' death by Eoin Colfer (*And Another Thing*). The sequels follow the characters from the first novel as well as incorporating new and ever zanier additions. During the course of the series, Adams managed to send up every cliché in literary science fiction to hilarious effect. While not written specifically for children, the novels are still likely to charm the younger set especially those who are fans of the absurd.

## THE HUNGER GAMES TRILOGY

by Suzanne Collins, 2008

***“I was so obsessed with this book that I had to take it with me out to dinner and hide it under the edge of the table so I wouldn't have to stop reading... The Hunger Games is amazing.”***

*- Stephenie Meyer, author of The Twilight Saga*

It's just as well that Stephenie Meyer is a big fan of Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy as it has become as much a phenomenon as her *Twilight Saga* series, with legions of fans across the globe and even characters in popular television series like *Parenthood* name-checking the books!

In *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins we are presented with a post-apocalyptic United States where a capital city rules over 12 outlying districts. To atone for a previous rebellion against the Capitol, every year one girl and one boy between the ages of twelve and eighteen are chosen from each district as “tributes” who must battle to the death. This tradition has become known as the Hunger Games and in this dystopian world, “reality TV” has morphed into something disturbing: much like the gladiators of old Rome, the Hunger Games are broadcast live to the nation.

The first book follows the heroine Katniss Everdeen as she becomes one of the tributes from her district. In a twisted version of an *American Idol* like



competition, she's made over for the cameras, trained in survival, and then set loose to kill her fellow tributes.

There are three books in the series: *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*. The sequels feature the continued story of Katniss Everdeen. *Catching Fire* sees Katniss returning to the Hunger Games for a special edition competition; *Mockingjay* is the story of the inevitable backlash to the Capitol and its Game. Will the tributes rise up and overthrow their despotic government and end its murderous, twisted Games?

Katniss is a strong and resourceful character who is well developed throughout the series, and the books are well plotted, fast-paced and frankly compelling! However, the series does tackle heavy subjects including poverty, oppression, and war; and the concept of children being forced to kill each other is clearly disturbing which some may find distasteful. So whilst the book is rated for ages twelve and older, due to the heavy subject matter 15+ seems more prudent.

## THE TWILIGHT SAGA SERIES

by Stephenie Meyer, 2005

***“...the portrayal of dangerous lovers hits the spot; fans of dark romance will find it hard to resist.”***

*- Kirkus Reviews*

*The Twilight Saga* novels by Stephenie Meyer are a bona fide worldwide commercial phenomenon. The novels are immensely popular, especially among pre-teen and teenage girls (and sometimes their mothers), having sold more than 116 million copies worldwide; they have spawned a series of blockbuster movies that have earned hundreds of millions at the box office.

The novels take place largely in Forks, Washington - a real logging town on the Olympic Peninsula. The heroine is Bella, who is loved by Edward, a

vampire, and Jacob, a werewolf. The plots follow the epic romantic triangle between teen Bella and her two suitors to its resolution and beyond. Meyer reinvents the vampire myth and combines horror with epic romance.

The literary merits of the four books in the series (*Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse*, and *Breaking Dawn*) have become the subject of fierce debate among critics, some lauding the series as on a par with Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* while others decrying Meyer's mediocre writing and the seeming glorification of abusive romantic relationships in the novels. Whatever the truth, teenagers love them.

The books have, at their core, the themes of choice and free will and were reportedly inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, respectively. Even if parents are not convinced of the literary merits of the novels they may be well advised to ride the wave of their extraordinary popularity and discuss the controversies surrounding the books with their kids frankly.

# Compelling contemporary authors

## ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME MARGARET

by Judy Blume, 1970

Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner, 1996

***“With sensitivity and humor Judy Blume has captured the joys, fears, and uncertainty that surround a young girl approaching adolescence.”***  
*- Publishers Weekly*

There is some tension among parents and educators about what constitutes “appropriate reading material” for children, especially pre-teens. Do we want our teens reading books that tackle topics such as puberty, religion or sexual awakening at such a young age? We certainly feel that authors who responsibly tackle these issues head on are to be admired.

*Are You There God? It's Me Margaret* by Judy Blume is a refreshingly frank and funny novel about a sixth grade girl confronting puberty, religion and other coming of age issues, physically as well as spiritually. Margaret is the product of a religiously mixed family, one parent Christian and the other Jewish. As part of a yearlong school project Margaret is required to examine the topic of what people believe, which brings into sharp focus her own spiritual dilemmas and identity. She talks to God about events in her life, including menstruation, bra sizes, sanitary pads and dealing with a move, from New York to New Jersey, away from life as she previously knew it.

First published in 1970, the novel was named by *Time Magazine*, in 2011, as one of the 100 top fiction books written in English since 1923. Blume has since become a beloved top selling children's author, as well as a lightning rod for the “what is acceptable” controversy. Parents can, understandably, be uncomfortable about discussing the facts of life with

their children. Blume, by tackling these subjects head on and with verve, provides some much needed candidness on the difficult transition from childhood into adulthood by fearlessly unveiling some of its mysteries in entertaining prose.

It is worth noting too that, whilst we personally feel that Blume's young adult fiction is where she really excels, her works for younger readers are also highly acclaimed. In particular we recommend her *Fudge Books* series ( *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, *Superfudge*, *Fudge-a-Mania*, *Double Fudge* and *Otherwise Known as Sheila the Great*), which chart with much hilarity the relationships and adventures of nine-year-old Peter Hatcher, his siblings, family and neighbors!

## **FREAK THE MIGHTY**

by Rodman Philbrick, 1993

***“Easily read but compelling: an intriguing and unusual story.”*** – *Kirkus Reviews*

Rodman Philbrick is a versatile author, writing fiction for both adults and children, but he is best known for his much loved young adult novel, *Freak the Mighty*, that was subsequently adapted into the 1998 Kieran Culkin film *The Mighty*. And what's not to love about the story of the unusual friendship between Kevin and Max – two eighth-graders who find that their individual difficulties can be overcome when they work together as a team?

The story of their friendship is told by Max, a gentle giant of a boy who is often ridiculed by his classmates, as much for his great stature and apparent learning difficulties as for the fact that his father is in prison, having been found guilty of murdering Max's mother. One day a boy moves in next door: Kevin, aka “Freak”, has Morquio syndrome which has severely stunted his growth as well as obliging him to wear braces and use crutches, but has done nothing to stunt his advanced intellect. The boys

become friends, and – with Kevin sat atop Max’s shoulders – form the dynamic duo they call “Freak the Mighty”, using each other’s strengths to tackle challenges both in and out of school. But for Max the biggest challenge is yet to come, when he must learn how to move on after Kevin’s short life comes to an end.

Written with great sensitivity and wit, the story speaks to pre-teen kids who are starting to become more and more aware of the things that make them either fit in or stand out from the rest of the class. With themes including bullying, learning and physical disability, and the power of friendship, this is a great book for kids to engage with. Philbrick returned to Max’s life in 1998 with a follow-up book called *Max the Mighty*, however the plot is more of an adventure story and perhaps not as interesting as some of Philbrick’s other books for this age group.

## **HOPE WAS HERE**

by Joan Bauer, 2000

Newbery Honor Book, 2001

***“When it comes to creating strong, independent, and funny teenaged female characters, Bauer is in a class by herself.”– Tracey Firestone, School Library Journal © 2000***

If you can’t bring yourself to buy your teens another of the many supernatural/dystopian/fantasy novels that are so popular right now, and would prefer something with its feet planted a little more in the ‘real’ world, then Joan Bauer’s books are a good place to start. Bauer’s strength lies in tackling grown up family issues. *Hope Was Here* looks at issues of abandonment and illness, without being too heavy handed. She always keeps the plot moving with lightness and humor.

Hope was born sixteen years ago to a hippie mother who named her Tulip Yancey and, deciding she couldn’t be a mother, took off. Little Tulip was

sent to live with her aunt Addie in Brooklyn, New York, and at the age of twelve she officially changed her name to Hope. She's a star waitress at the diner where Addie works, knowing just how to treat the customers to keep them coming back. One day, Addie and Hope pull up stakes and travel to Mulhoney, Wisconsin, to help out a diner owner, G.T. Stoop, who has been diagnosed with leukemia. Stoop has political ambitions that he will not allow his illness to interrupt. What follows is Hope's coming of age story and finding her joy amid an increasingly contentious election season in that small Wisconsin town.

*Hope Was Here* was named a Newbery Honor book in 2001. Joan Bauer has been praised for her rich prose and use of metaphor, as well as her ability to craft a cast of characters that spring to life from the page. Her realistic depiction of family life, her wit and writing style have earned Bauer and her work many devoted fans especially among teenage girls. *Rules of the Road* and her latest novel *Almost Home* are just two others also worth considering.

## **How I Live Now**

by Meg Rosoff, 2004

Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, 2004

Michael L. Printz Award Winner, 2005

***“... beautifully and painfully captures the sometimes overwhelming uncertainties of growing up.” - Julia Eccleshare, The Guardian\****

Meg Rosoff left it later in life to start writing. The death of her sister from cancer spurred her into action and her debut novel for young adults, *How I Live Now*, published in 2004 is the exceptional result. She may have written the book in her late forties but the voice of her fifteen-year-old protagonist, Daisy, is right on the money. The story is told in the first person by Daisy and the style, which might not be to everyone's taste, is very much a stream of consciousness with scant regard for correct

grammar and sentence structure. We find this style compelling, as if the story is being spoken directly to you by the lead character.

Daisy is a fairly self-obsessed Manhattan teenager who is sent to England by her father and pregnant stepmother, who she does not get on with, to stay with her aunt and cousins who she has never met. Shortly after her arrival her aunt goes abroad and leaves the teenage children alone in the house. While Aunt Penn is away, terrorist forces attack London and then invade and occupy the country. The first half of the novel is mainly concerned with the secluded life of the children on the remote country farm where Daisy's cousins live, but as the war draws ever closer the story becomes one of survival.

*How I Live Now* has so much going for it. Appealing to both a US and UK readership, it straddles the traditional coming of age themes with the dystopian/apocalyptic genres which are so popular right now. Unlike *The Hunger Games* or similar fare, what we like is that the characters are fairly 'normal' teenagers rather than hardened mini-adults, beset with all the normal teenage emotional turmoil, making their fight for survival wholly believable. Set neither in the present or the distant future the story has an immediacy to it that resonates for today's young teens and will appeal to boys and girls alike. As you might expect, there are some harrowing scenes of war that make this more suitable for a 13+ age group. Rosoff has gone on to write more highly acclaimed novels for teens, amongst them *Just in Case*, *What I Was* and *There is No Dog* are also really great reads.

(\*quotation first published in *The Guardian*, reproduced with consent)

## **MONSTER**

by Walter Dean Myers, 1999

Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner, 1994

Michael L. Printz Award Winner, 2000

***“An extraordinary literary achievement.”***

*- Michael Cart, Booklist*

Walter Dean Myers is no slouch. The African-American children's author has written over fifty books and is best loved for his young adult fiction. His gritty and mostly urban fiction is probably most suited to boys and we could easily have chosen any number of his books to review here. Much loved novels include *Hoops*, *Motown and Didi*, *Fallen Angels* and *Scorpions* but we have chosen *Monster* for its unique presentation.

In Walter Dean Myer's innovative novel, *Monster*, sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon is in jail and on trial for felony murder. The neighborhood drugstore was robbed and its owner killed, his own gun turned back on him by the robbers. Steve stands accused of being a lookout for the gang, although no hard evidence exists that proves he was anything other than an innocent bystander. The prosecutor in his trial has called Steve a “Monster”, something Steve does not believe himself to be. As he sits in jail or in court, Steve writes his story in the form of a screenplay, and a journal. What follows is a gut-wrenching look at what it means for a young offender to be jailed in an adult facility, and what it is to endure a trial for a crime that he may not have committed.

*Monster* is not only the story of incarceration and trial by jury it is also a chronicle of one young man's search for identity, as Steve grapples not only with his predicament but the label that has been applied to him. Young teens will love the way Myer utilizes a unique narrative style in the novel, combining a screenplay format with hand written journal entries, margin notes, strikeouts, photos, video stills and drawings. The novel won a National Book Award, a Michael L. Printz award and was also awarded the Coretta Scott King Honor in 1999, the year of its publication.

**SPEAK**

by Laurie Halse Anderson, 1999



***“The plot is gripping and the characters are powerfully drawn... a novel that will be hard for readers to forget.” – Kirkus Review***

While Joan Bauer, above, uses lightness and humor to tackle serious social issues, Laurie Halse Anderson prefers to give it to her young readers straight. Her most well-known work is *Speak*, her debut novel, a hard hitting, powerful but ultimately uplifting story of one young girl’s journey through high school.

A freshman in high school at the beginning of an academic year, Melinda Sordino has grown pathologically silent. She’s isolated and ostracized because during a party over the summer she called 911; the police came to break up the party and several teens were arrested. Her fellow students blame her for making the call and she becomes the school pariah. In her isolation, she has only her diary and her artwork to comfort her. What we learn, as the story unfolds, is that a popular senior boy raped Melinda at the party and it is this trauma that has led to her inability to speak. We follow Melinda as she heals, comes to terms with her secret and ultimately emerges triumphant.

*Speak* is presented in diary format and, as such, the plot isn’t linear. The story jumps around, accurately reflecting Melinda’s emotional state of mind. It should be noted that, while the central theme of this novel is dark, the story is not without wit. Melinda’s withering cynicism about high school life lends a black humor, which will appeal to young teens who, like Holden Caulfield, are disillusioned by the ‘phonies’. As well as being a *New York Times* best seller, *Speak* has won numerous awards and is a great choice for teens that don’t need their fiction sugar coated.

## **STARGIRL**

by Jerry Spinelli, 2000

***“Every middle schooler should read and discuss this - and, fortunately, many of them do.”***

– *Matt Berman, Common Sense Media*

Jerry Spinelli is something of a genius when it comes to tapping into the mindset of the pre-teen audience he writes for. And whilst he is best-known for his excellent Newbery Award winning novel *Maniac Magee*, which we also highly recommend, it's his novel *Stargirl* that we've decided to include on our "must-read" list, as it eloquently deals with a theme that is a quintessential element of every middle schooler's life: conformity.

Narrated by Leo Borlock, the book tells of how he got to know the very non-conformist, somewhat eccentric Stargirl – a new student who joins the 10th grade at his school having been home-schooled until that point. Stargirl is like no-one anyone has ever met before – especially not Leo – she is a law unto herself, doing whatever she feels like, whenever she feels like it: wearing kimonos to school, playing a ukulele in the cafeteria, putting a vase with a daisy on her desk every day, being kind to others. Leo is at once entranced, while other classmates are appalled and shun her. Leo implores Stargirl to try and be "normal" like the others, but try as she might, Stargirl cannot hide her true nature and Leo must choose between being with her or being just like the others.

The character of Stargirl has been likened to that of St-Exupéry's Little Prince (see Part Three): both having a supernatural quality about them that is hard to define, more in touch with inner emotions and feelings than the world around them and displaying a self-confidence that is rare amongst most kids. But it is Leo's internal struggle that really captures the essence of the book's central question: what are you prepared to lose for the sake of other people's opinions? It's a question that all teens should discuss as they mature into themselves and Spinelli's very readable prose makes this book a very accessible way to open up that debate.

## **THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN**

by Sherman Alexie, 2007

National Book Award for Young People's Literature, 2007

***“... a powerful look at the life of Native Americans on reservation, and the struggles one teen faces in an effort to escape.”***

*- Matt Berman, Common Sense Media*

Screen writer and author of adult fiction Sherman Alexie's first foray into young adult fiction is semi-auto biographical. Having been encouraged to write juvenile fiction for years by educators and editors, Alexie examines his early experiences on a Native American reservation to form the basis of his novel. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* is a coming of age story that uncompromisingly deals with issues of alcoholism, discrimination, racism and poverty.

Alexie's protagonist is Arnold Spirit Jr., aka “Junior,” a fourteen-year-old Native American of the Spokane tribe who lives on the reservation. Arnold was born with water on the brain and suffers from many physical challenges. Arnold is often bullied and beaten for his physical differences. His family, like most on the reservation, is extremely poor and most have been touched tragically by alcohol abuse in one way or another. At the urging of one of his on-reservation teachers, Arnold is encouraged to attend an off-reservation, predominantly white, high school in Reardan, Washington. The narrative follows him as he makes this significant change and moves on to realize his dreams.

Although the novel tackles serious social issues, the book is written with warmth, humor and plenty of hope. Arnold is a budding cartoonist and his creations are rendered throughout the novel by artist Ellen Forney. Sixty-five excellent and hilarious illustrations serve plot points and character development. Alexie condemns the social system that marginalizes the Spokane (and all Native Americans) without the bitterness that might be expected. Frank language, references to masturbation, as well as several tragic incidents during the narrative, have resulted in some school districts banning the novel. We feel it is a beautiful piece of fiction, based on a true story, which will take your teenagers on a joyous journey filled with both laughter and tears.

# THE BOOK THIEF

by Markus Zusak, 2006

***“Brilliant and hugely ambitious... it's the kind of book that can be life-changing.”***

*– John Green, author of The Fault in our Stars, in The New York Times*

*The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak has chosen a unique literary voice as narrator: Death, who tells the story of a girl named Liesel Meminger during her childhood in Germany, at the onset of World War II.

The story begins in 1939 when Death first encounters the then nine-year-old Liesel stealing her first book at the funeral of her brother - a gravedigger dropped the book in the cemetery. She is unable to read, but keeps the book anyway. Soon after this, she is placed in foster care by her mother, her father having been “sent away” by the Nazi regime. Liesel is taught to read by her kindly foster father. She develops a love of words, and a very particular larcenous compulsion: stealing books. She shares these with her foster family, neighbors, and eventually a Jewish fighter who is sheltered from the Nazis by the family. The story follows her and her extended family through the increasing horrors of the war years. During her journey into adolescence, Liesel learns the bittersweet truth that the words she loves to read can also be used to promote untold hatred and violence; she also learns the power of love and hope in the face of such suffering.

Zusak has been praised for his ability to write action so vividly that it seems almost as if one is reading a graphic novel, his descriptions are so visual. At the same time his prose is lauded as being poetic and lyrical; the reader is torn between lingering over his mastery of language and following the action as it unfolds. With themes of hope, friendship and loss set against the horrors of Nazi Germany and its crimes against humanity, this is an important work for all ages to read. Whether ignorant of the events portrayed, or expert, the reader will take away a deeper understanding of what it took to survive.

However, *The Book Thief* is a hefty tome – 552 pages in all – and some teens may find it slow going to start with. But those who stick it out are rewarded with a truly remarkable book – one that not only illuminates an important part of our shared history, but also very elegantly demonstrates the power of words and stories.

## THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

by Mark Haddon, 2003

***“... the novel brims with touching, ironic humor. The result is an eye-opening work in a unique and compelling literary voice.”– Publishers Weekly***

The title of this book is a quote from a short Sherlock Holmes story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle called *Silver Blaze*. In it Sherlock Holmes must determine why an otherwise reliable and constant dog did not bark the night a prize racehorse was stolen from the property where he lived. In Mark Haddon’s novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* it is his young protagonist Christopher Boone, a massive Sherlock Holmes fan, who must turn super sleuth to discover who is responsible for the violent death of a neighborhood dog.

Christopher is fifteen years old and has Asperger’s Syndrome, a form of high functioning autism. He is an intelligent and gifted mathematician, but he has trouble relating to other people. When he is accused of killing his neighbor’s dog, Christopher decides to find the real culprit to clear his name. This is no easy task given his condition. He is drastically inhibited by his anxieties, his inability to read expressions and his lack of empathy with other people. His investigation brings him into contact with people he’s lived on the same street with for most of his life, but whom he has never met before. As he perseveres to find his answer, he learns some life changing truths about himself and his family that challenge everything he has been led to believe.

The book is written in the first person from Christopher's perspective. Mark Haddon is a child developmental psychologist and gives Christopher a truly authentic voice. On the surface we have an absorbing "who-dun-it", but we very quickly discover that this is a deeply moving personal story about Christopher's family. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* is a great example of the latest trend for 'cross-over' novels that appeal as much to an adult audience as they do to teenagers. It is a short, easily accessible novel that your teenager will devour in short order.

## THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

by John Green, 2012

***"A love story, one of the most genuine and moving ones in recent American fiction, but it's also an existential tragedy of tremendous intelligence and courage and sadness."***

*- Lev Grossman, TIME Magazine*

As the quote above makes clear *The Fault of our Stars* is first and foremost a love story and if you hold on tightly to that fact then the intense subject matter becomes a lot less daunting. Because, put simply, this book is about teenagers suffering with cancer. Yes, it doesn't sound quite so appealing now does it? If you have a teenager in your life who is left cold by the likes of *The Twilight Saga* or *The Hunger Games* and prefers something with a bit more emotional depth then this book might be the answer.

*The Fault in our Stars* is the story of sixteen-year-old Hazel who has been living with a terminal, stage IV thyroid cancer diagnosis for three years. A new drug has extended her prognosis indeterminately, but she's doomed to be tethered to oxygen bottles and IVs that force the drug through her system to keep the tumors now in her lungs, under control.

Understandably depressed, Hazel is encouraged to attend a kids-with-cancer support group by her doctor and parents, a prospect she does not

look forward to. Here she meets Gus, a former athlete with bone cancer, and their lives become inextricably intertwined. The novel is the story of their journey through issues of mortality, remission, and living lives suspended between illness and health. This young couple face their challenges with courage, humor and grace as they form the legacy of their too short lives.

*The Fault in Our Stars* is the fourth young adult novel penned by John Green, joining *Looking For Alaska*, *An Abundance of Katherines*, and *Paper Towns* all of which examine teenage angst and romance in fraught circumstances. The book has received high praise from the critics and is soon to be released as a movie in 2014. Perfect for smart and mature teenagers who aren't averse to a good weep!

## THE FIRST PART LAST

by Angela Johnson, 2003

***“Johnson makes poetry with the simplest words in short, spare sentences that teens will read again and again.” - Hazel Rochman, Booklist***

A friend recommended Angela Johnson when we were discussing our top teen books, and I am forever grateful that I managed to read her work before finalizing my list, because it simply would not be complete without one of Johnson's titles. Johnson writes both for younger and older children, but it is her teen fiction that I believe is particularly interesting as she often handles real life themes with delicate sensitivity and realism.

In *The First Part Last* we meet Bobby, a teenage boy who gets some devastating news on his sixteenth birthday: his girlfriend Nia is pregnant. The couple struggle with the decision of whether or not to put the baby up for adoption. Ultimately, it is Bobby who takes the decision to raise the baby on his own. It is not until the final chapters that we find out why Nia is no longer present: she has succumbed to a post-partum coma having developed eclampsia during labor.

We love this book because it takes the rarely treated perspective of the teenage father, in terms that are both believable and understandable. Bobby runs the gamut of emotions looking after his baby girl and we feel every moment. This realistic portrayal allows the reader to fully understand how the pressures of responsibility cause him to spiral briefly out of control, and then how he grows to accept that his life will never be the same again. Johnson presents us at first with a typical teenage boy, who soon becomes very atypical in his maturing reactions to his situation.

We also love the structure of the book. Written in a first person stream of consciousness style, we really get into Bobby's head, and Johnson graces Bobby with a poetic turn of phrase that signals early on how this sensitive and sensible teenage boy is going to step up to the challenges he's been dealt. The narrative structure also flits between "then" and "now" – flashbacks cleverly interspersing with the present-day to flesh out the background of the story, allowing us to slowly piece together what happened to Nia and how Bobby has evolved in a very satisfying way.

*The First Part Last* is actually the second of Johnson's *Heaven* trilogy of books; each book is a stand-alone story, but readers may like to know that Bobby and his daughter feature as part of the supporting characters in the first of the trilogy, called *Heaven*. The final book in the trilogy - *Sweet, Hereafter* - develops the story of one of the other characters from the first book.

## **THE PRINCESS BRIDE**

by William Goldman, 1973

***“An edge-of-your-seat adventure... Goldman's wild ride evokes virtually every emotion possible.”***

*– Ellen Dendy, Common Sense Media*

William Goldman is a prolific screenwriter in addition to being an accomplished novelist. He's won two Academy Awards (screenplays for



*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *All the President's Men*) and three Lifetime Achievement Awards in Screenwriting. But for an entire generation and beyond, Goldman's greatest accomplishment is the penning of the beloved romantic adventure story, *The Princess Bride*.

*The Princess Bride* follows the eventful life of heroine Buttercup who lives in an era reminiscent of the Renaissance. Goldman uses a clever literary device, claiming to have merely abridged the work of one S. Morgenstern, cutting out all the boring bits and presenting only the good stuff. In fact, the novel is, of course, all Goldman's own work. In Goldman's own words the plot may be summarized as follows: "Fencing. Fighting. Torture. Poison. True love. Hate. Revenge. Giants. Hunters. Bad men. Good men. Beautifullest ladies. Snakes. Spiders. Beasts of all natures and descriptions. Pain. Death. Brave men. Coward men. Strongest men. Chases. Escapes. Lies. Truths. Passion. Miracles."

In a break with traditional novel writing, Goldman also invented a fictional version of his own life, which he injected into the book as a running commentary manuscript by "Bill Goldman" which largely summarizes the boring bits he supposedly cut out.

Goldman's narrative style is inventive, lively and funny, combining elements of satire with a romping romantic adventure. The reception of the book, Goldman has noted, has exceeded the reaction to all his other works in his long career, having struck some mysterious emotional chord with his readers. Recommended for both its wit and for being a ripping good read, chances are your kids will fall in love with the book just like everyone else who has read it since its publication in 1973. Great fun!

## **THE TRUE CONFESSIONS OF CHARLOTTE DOYLE**

by Avi , 1990

Newbery Honor Book, 1991

***“Tautly plotted, vividly narrated, carefully researched: a thrilling tale.”-***  
*Kirkus Reviews*

What distinguishes award-winning children's author Avi, whose real name is Edward Irving Wortis, from many other writers is his reluctance to be pigeon-holed in one genre: he is a prolific writer of both young adult and children's fiction, with over seventy books to his name covering all kinds of different genres including fantasies, ghost stories and even picture books.

But for us, it is his historical fiction books that are the best. *The True Confession of Charlotte Doyle*, received huge critical acclaim for being both the coming of age tale of a brave and resourceful young girl and a well-researched and presented piece of historical fiction. Avi sets the scene on a 19<sup>th</sup> Century ship to tell the story of the eponymous heroine, an upper crust, proper English girl who voyages from England aboard the clipper Seahawk, en route to her father in Rhode Island.

Charlotte is the only female aboard the ship, other families who were to have chaperoned her having been warned off voyaging on the Seahawk. Only thirteen years old, sheltered and naïve, nothing in her past experience prepares her for life aboard the ship. There is high tension between the crew and the reportedly cruel and despotic Captain Jaggery, which at any minute might erupt into mutiny. She is recruited by the Captain to report any sign of mutiny she might discover as she roams freely about the ship, but Charlotte befriends an African-American sailor, Zachariah, and is caught between the unrest of the crew and the captain. When tensions erupt into violence, Charlotte finds herself directly involved, her life in danger, her destiny irrevocably changed.

At its heart the book is an all-out swashbuckling adventure, with the relationships that Charlotte establishes during her voyage bringing an added depth and dimension to the story. It's a great light read for twelve-year-olds who will no doubt liken Charlotte to Keira Knightley's character Elizabeth in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie franchise; thankfully, the lack of romantic interest in this story, means readers can simply enjoy

immersing themselves in this brilliantly evocative tale of life on the open seas!

## **THIRTEEN REASONS WHY**

by Jay Asher, 2007

***“The message about how we treat one another... makes for compelling reading.”***

*- Cindy Dobrez, Booklist*

The first thing parents need to know about *Thirteen Reasons Why* is that it is a book about teenage suicide and it also contains other challenging themes including rape, underage drinking and revenge. Thus we would recommend it only for mature teens aged 14+.

Heartbreakingly, suicide is one of the leading causes of death among teens, and perhaps more than any other group of suicide victims, there is the inevitable question of why? Jay Asher's bestselling and critically acclaimed novel makes a heroic attempt to explain how seemingly small things can result in such a terrible tragedy.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* begins with a high school student, Clay, coming home to find a package containing thirteen cassette tapes on his front porch. The package turns out to be from Hannah Baker, a girl at his school who committed suicide two weeks before. Hannah has recorded these tapes and sent them to thirteen people in an effort to explain what led her to her ultimate decision, claiming that each played a role in her death. Clay not only listens to the tapes, but following Hannah's narrative, he visits the places in his hometown where her story takes him. He wants not only to understand her decision, but why he is one among the thirteen reasons.

The novel articulates that suicide is seldom the result of just one event in the victim's life, but is more likely to be the result of a series of smaller

events, snubs, disappointments or mistakes, all piling up and sending the victim into a downward spiral from which they can see no escape. Asher's novel chronicles this descent into hell in heart-breaking and haunting prose that stays with the reader long after they close the book. Talking to your kids frankly about suicide is important, and this book provides a strong starting point. Read it with your kids and open the dialogue.

## **WALK TWO MOONS**

by Sharon Creech, 1994

Newbery Medal Winner, 1995

***“An engaging story of love and loss, told with humor and suspense... A richly layered novel about real and metaphorical journeys.”***

*– Connie Tyrrell Burns, School Library Journal © 1994*

The adage “Don't judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins” is as wise as it is simple. We can never truly understand, accept or forgive another person until we've put ourselves in their place and thought about how we'd respond to events, living their life. This saying provides the title and theme for *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech. While ostensibly a book for children, the wisdom of its message contains profound lessons for adults as well.

Thirteen-year-old Salamanca Tree Hiddle has faced many changes in her young life. Her mother left the family home apparently to “find herself”; her father moved their home from Kentucky to Ohio to accept a job offered to him by his new girlfriend. Not all the changes have been bad; she has found a new friend called Phoebe Winterbottom who seems to share many of Sal's own life challenges.

The story develops when Sal and her grandparents embark on a cross-country drive, retracing her mother's route as detailed in messages and notes she sent back to Sal. During the drive, Sal tells humorous stories to her grandparents to entertain them on the long trip - including Phoebe's.

As the trip progresses, just how much Sal and Phoebe have in common is made poignantly clear, and ultimately Sal makes peace with the tragic circumstances surrounding her mother's disappearance.

*Walk Two Moons* explores life lessons that we all grapple with at one time or another. Feeling betrayed and abandoned, experiencing loss, having to adjust to new living arrangements and dealing with our feelings about people we don't like. It is a rare novel, let alone a work of juvenile fiction, which examines with sensitivity and insight the struggle to process these emotional challenges. A Newbery Award winner, this is one book you will benefit greatly from reading with your children.

## Endnote

Thank you for reading and I hope you now have a great shortlist of books to get started with. I certainly hope in the years to come that I will have the opportunity to update my selections in a future edition.

So if you have any feedback on my selections or if there is a book that you passionately believe ought to be included, please do let me know.

I can be contacted at: [sandfordgrace@gmail.com](mailto:sandfordgrace@gmail.com)

Just before I go there is still one review to write for this book and I'd like to recruit your help in writing it. As I'm sure you know, book reviews on Amazon play a huge part in helping people choose what they should be reading – and it's one of the ways that small independent publishers like us can get our voices heard. So if you've found my book helpful, I'd love it if you could take a minute to visit our book on Amazon and leave a quick review.

[Tell Me A Story: 250 Great Books for Kids on Amazon](#)

and to stay up to date with new books, news and updates please like our Facebook page. <http://www.facebook.com/250GreatBooksForKids>

Once more, thank you and happy reading.

## **250 Great Kids Authors**

### **Quick Reference**

For ease of reference, here are the 250 authors – in alphabetical order by surname - whose work has been included in our list of great kid's books! Our intention is that you should use this list as a guide from which to explore not just the author's work that we have reviewed, but also the other great books they have written.

Please note that some of these authors have turned their talents to books that span lots of different age groups, from the very young to early teens – so it's worth really exploring each author that piques your interest. Many authors' works have also been abridged or reworked in different versions to suit different age groups – so for example the vast opus of work by Dr. Seuss now includes baby-friendly board books as well as the longer full-text books – and that means that, whilst we've listed a certain author in a certain age group, their work may well be suitable for older or younger children too.

## **Part 1: Great Books for Babies to 2-Year-Olds**

Jennifer Adams

Janet Ahlberg and Allan Ahlberg

Jez Alborough

Kate Banks

Michael Bond

Sandra Boynton

Rod Campbell

Eric Carle

Bruce Degen

Anna Dewdney

Olivier Dunrea

Sherri Duskey Rinker

P.D. Eastman

Denise Fleming

Mem Fox

Melanie Gerth

Mother Goose

Emily Gravett



Kevin Henkes

Eric Hill

Mike Jolley

Karen Katz

Ruth Krauss

Dorothy Kunhardt

Nina Laden

Kevin Lewis

Peter Linenthal

Sandra Lousada

Jeff Mack

Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault

Sam McBratney

Antoinette Portis

Jack Prelutsky

Roger Priddy

Chris Raschka

Ole Risom

Michael Rosen

Bernadette Rossetti-Shustak

Steven Savage

Dr. Seuss

Judy Sierra

Il Sung Na

Susan Marie Swanson

Laura Vaccaro Seeger

Matthew Van Fleet

Vivian Walsh

Fionna Watt

Vera B. Williams

Margaret Wise Brown

Aaron Zenz

## **Part 2: Great Books for Preschoolers Aged 3 to 5**

Giles Andreae

Rev. Wilbert Awdry

Ludwig Bemelmans

Stan Berenstain and Jan Berenstain

Harry Bliss

William Boniface

Jan Brett

Lewis Carroll

Michael Catchpool

Carolyn Curtis

William Boniface

Jean De Brunhoff

Julia Donaldson

Ame Dyckman

Ed Emberley

Ian Falconer

Don Freeman

Wanda Gág

Liz Garton Scanlon

Roger Hargreaves

Tad Hills

Crockett Johnson

Judith Kerr

Jon Klassen

Amy Krouse Rosenthal

Karla Kuskin

Eric Litwin and James Dean

Mary Logue

Mercer Mayer

Robert McCloskey

A.A. Milne

Arlene Mosel

Lloyd Moss

Robert Munsch

Soyung Pak

Beatrix Potter

H.A. Rey and Margaret Rey

Phil Roxbee Cox et al (Usborne Phonics)

Adam Rubin

Richard Scarry

Maurice Sendak

David Shannon

Esphyr Slobodkina

Philip C. Stead

Jon Stone

Nancy Tillman

Hervé Tullet

Jennifer Ward

Rosemary Wells

Karma Wilson

Jane Yolen

## **Part 3: Great Books for 6 to 8-Year-Old Kids**

Hans Christian Anderson

Richard Atwater and Florence Atwater

Mac Barnett

J. M. Barrie

Annie Barrows

Jeff Brown

Beverly Cleary

Doreen Cronin

Roald Dahl

Tomie dePaola

Kate DiCamillo

Eleanor Estes

Brothers Grimm

Polly Horvath

Ezra Jack Keats

David A. Kelly

Dick King-Smith

Munro Leaf

Leo Lionni

Arnold Lobel

Lenore Look

Megan McDonald

Michael Morpurgo

Jon J. Muth

Dav Pilkey

Watty Piper

Mary Pope Osborne

Peggy Rathman

Jean Reagan

Aaron Reynolds

Peter H. Reynolds

John Rocco

Louis Sacher

Antoine de Sainte-Exupéry

Jon Scieszka

Uri Shulevitz

Shel Silverstein

Lane Smith

David Ezra Stein

Ruth Stiles Gannett

Kay Thompson

Kiki Thorpe

Clare Turlay Newberry

Chris Van Allsburg

Judith Viorst

Mo Willems

Margery Williams

Audrey Wood

Peter Yarrow and Lenny Lipton

Classic Starts Series



## **Part 4: Great Books for Older Kids Aged 9 to11**

Louisa May Alcott

Julie Andrews Edwards

Katherine Applegate

Ingri d'Aulaire and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire

Jonathan Auxier

Natalie Babbitt

L. Frank Baum

Gail Carson Levine

Jean Craighead George

Christopher Paul Curtis

Jacqueline Davies

Louise Fitzhugh

Paula Fox

Fred Gipson

Kenneth Grahame

Carl Hiaasen

Susie Hoch Morgenstern

Frances Hodgson Burnett

Holling C. Holling

Erin Hunter

Laura Ingalls Wilder

Norton Juster

Jeff Kinney

Madeleine L'Engle

C. S. Lewis

Grace Lin

Astrid Lindgren

Cynthia Lord

Wendy Mass

Andrew Matthews

L. M. Montgomery

Pam Munoz Ryan

Mary Norton

Robert C. O'Brien

R. J. Palacio

Linda Sue Park

Katherine Paterson

Gary Paulsen

Lynne Reid Banks

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Rick Riordan

J.K Rowling

Laura Amy Schlitz

Brian Selznick

Anna Sewell

Margery Sharp

Lemony Snicket

Robert Louis Stevenson

Jonathan Swift

E. B. White

## **Part 5: Great Books for Early Teens and Young Adults**

Douglas Adams

Richard Adams

Sherman Alexie

Jay Asher

Jane Austen

Avi

Joan Bauer

Judy Blume

Ray Bradbury

Charlotte Brontë

Orson Scott Card

Ally Carter

Gennifer Choldenko

Suzanne Collins

Robert Cormier

Sharon Creech

Charles Dickens

Anne Frank

Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl

John Green

William Golding

William Goldman

Mark Haddon

Laurie Halse Anderson

Karen Hesse

S. E. Hinton

Anthony Horowitz

Aldous Huxley

Angela Johnson

E.L. Konigsburg

Harper Lee

Jack London

Lois Lowry

Stephenie Meyer

Walter Dean Myers

Rodman Philbrick

Terry Pratchett

Philip Pullman

Ellen Raskin

Louise Rennison

Meg Rosoff

Veronica Roth

J. D. Salinger

Mary Shelley

Jerry Spinelli

John Steinbeck

Mildred D. Taylor

J.R.R. Tolkien

Mark Twain

Markus Zusak

# **250 Great Kids Books**

## **Quick Reference**

For quick reference, here are the books that made our top 250!

## **Part 1: Great Books for Babies to 2-Year-Olds**

**For very, very early readers – books for babies under 6 months**

[\*Fuzzy Bee and Friends\*](#) by Roger Priddy

[\*Look, Look!\*](#) by Peter Linenthal

[\*Peek-A-Who?\*](#) by Nina Laden

[\*This Little Baby\*](#) by Sandra Lousada

**Textures, flaps and holes: interactive books for under twos**

[\*Counting Kisses\*](#) by Karen Katz

[\*Dear Zoo\*](#) by Rod Campbell

[\*Pat the Bunny\*](#) by Dorothy Kunhardt

[\*Tails\*](#) by Matthew Van Fleet

[\*Ten Little Ladybugs\*](#) by Melanie Gerth

[\*That's Not My Elephant\*](#) by Fiona Watt

[\*The Very Hungry Caterpillar\*](#) by Eric Carle

[\*Where's Spot?\*](#) by Eric Hill

**Never too young: clever concept books for under twos**

[\*First the Egg\*](#) by Laura Vaccaro Seeger

[\*Good News, Bad News\*](#) by Jeff Mack



[Not a Box](#) by Antoinette Portis

[Orange Pear Apple Bear](#) by Emily Gravett

[The BabyLit Primer Series](#) by Jennifer Adams

## **Great stories and rhyming books for little ones**

[A Ball for Daisy](#) by Chris Raschka

[A Bear Called Paddington](#) by Michael Bond

[Chicka Chicka Boom Boom](#) by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault

[Chugga Chugga Choo Choo](#) by Kevin Lewis

[Each Peach Pear Plum](#) by Janet Ahlberg and Allan Ahlberg

[Favorite Nursery Rhymes from Mother Goose](#) by Scott Gustafson  
(illustrator)

[Gossie & Friends Series](#) by Olivier Dunrea

[I Am a Bunny](#) by Ole Risom

[In the Tall, Tall Grass](#) by Denise Fleming

[Kitten's First Full Moon](#) by Kevin Henkes

[Moo, Baa, La La La!](#) by Sandra Boynton

[Olive, the Other Reindeer](#) by Vivian Walsh

[Read-Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young](#) compiled by Jack Prelutsky

[The Carrot Seed](#) by Ruth Krauss

[The Hiccupotamus](#) by Aaron Zenz

[\*We're Going On A Bear Hunt\*](#) by Michael Rosen

[\*Where's My Teddy?\*](#) by Jez Alborough

## **Beddy-bye-bye: perfect bedtime stories**

[\*A Book of Sleep\*](#) by Il Sung Na

[\*Are You My Mother?\*](#) by P.D. Eastman

[\*Close Your Eyes\*](#) by Kate Banks

[\*Goodnight, Goodnight Construction Site\*](#) by Sherri Duskey Rinker

[\*Goodnight Moon\*](#) by Margaret Wise Brown

[\*Guess How Much I Love You\*](#) by Sam McBratney

[\*I'll See You in the Morning\*](#) by Mike Jolley

[\*I Love You Through And Through\*](#) by Bernadette Rossetti-Shusta

[\*Jamerry\*](#) by Bruce Degen

[\*Little Tug\*](#) by Steven Savage

[\*Llama Llama Red Pajama\*](#) by Anna Dewdney

[\*"More More More," Said the Baby: 3 Love Stories\*](#) by Vera B. Williams

[\*Oh, the Places You'll Go!\*](#) by Dr Seuss

[\*Time For Bed\*](#) by Mem Fox

[\*The House in the Night\*](#) by Susan Marie Swanson

[\*The Sleepy Little Alphabet: A Bedtime Story from Alphabet Town\*](#) by Judy Sierra

## Part 2: Great Books for Preschoolers Aged 3 to 5

### Classics for every child's library

[\*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland\*](#) by Lewis Carroll

[\*Caps for Sale\*](#) by Esphyr Slobodkina

[\*Corduroy\*](#) by Don Freeman

[\*Harold and the Purple Crayon\*](#) by Crockett Johnson

[\*Make Way for Ducklings\*](#) by Robert McCloskey

[\*Millions of Cats\*](#) by Wanda Gág

[\*Mr. Men and Little Miss Books\*](#) by Roger Hargreaves

[\*The Complete Tales of Beatrix Potter\*](#) by Beatrix Potter

[\*The Complete Tales of Winnie-the-Pooh\*](#) by A.A. Milne

[\*The Curious George Series\*](#) by H.A. Rey and Margaret Rey

[\*The Madeline Series\*](#) by Ludwig Bemelmans

[\*The Mitten\*](#) by Jan Brett

[\*The Story Of Babar\*](#) by Jean De Brunhoff

[\*The Tiger That Came to Tea\*](#) by Judith Kerr

[\*Thomas the Tank Engine Series\*](#) by Rev. Wilbert Awdry

[\*Where the Wild Things Are\*](#) by Maurice Sendak

### Fun storybooks to read together

[Bailey](#) by Harry Bliss

[Boy and Bot](#) by Ame Dyckman

[Dragons Love Tacos](#) by Adam Rubin

[Go Away, Big Green Monster!](#) by Ed Emberley

[I Want My Hat Back](#) by Jon Klassen

[The Gruffalo](#) by Julia Donaldson

[The Monster at the End of This Book \(Sesame Street\)](#) by Jon Stone

[The Olivia Series](#) by Ian Falconer

[The Paper Bag Princess](#) by Robert Munsch

[There Was an Old Pirate Who Swallowed a Fish](#) by Jennifer Ward

[Tikki Tikki Tembo](#) by Arlene Mosel

[Richard Scarry's Cars and Trucks and Things That Go](#) by Richard Scarry

[Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin](#) by Lloyd Moss

## **Early learning: books about life lessons and concepts**

[A Sick Day for Amos McGee](#) by Philip C. Stead

[Dear Juno](#) by Soyung Pak

[Duck! Rabbit!](#) by Amy Krouse Rosenthal

[Giraffes Can't Dance](#) by Giles Andreae

[How Rocket Learned to Read](#) by Tad Hills

[\*I Am Me\*](#) by Karla Kuskin

[\*Little Critter\*](#) by Mercer Mayer

[\*No David!\*](#) by David Shannon

[\*Press Here\*](#) by Hervé Tullet

[\*The Big Honey Hunt\*](#) by Stan Berenstain and Jan Berenstain

[\*The Cloud Spinner\*](#) by Michael Catchpool

[\*The Pete the Cat Series\*](#) by Eric Litwin and James Dean

[\*Yoko\*](#) by Rosemary Wells

[\*Usborne Phonics Readers Series\*](#) by Phil Roxbee Cox et al

### **Sweet dreams: books to help toddlers drift off**

[\*All the World\*](#) by Liz Garton Scanlon

[\*Bear Snores On\*](#) by Karma Wilson

[\*How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?\*](#) by Jane Yolen

[\*I Took the Moon for a Walk\*](#) by Carolyn Curtis

[\*Lights Out, Night's Out\*](#) by William Boniface

[\*On the Night You Were Born\*](#) by Nancy Tillman

[\*Sleep Like a Tiger\*](#) by Mary Logue

## Part 3: Great Books for 6 to 8-Year-Old Kids

**The essential kid's book list: authors every child should explore**

[\*Babe The Gallant Pig\*](#) by Dick King-Smith

[\*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory\*](#) by Roald Dahl

[\*Marshmallow\*](#) by Clare Turlay Newberry

[\*Mr. Popper's Penguins\*](#) by Richard Atwater and Florence Atwater

[\*Peter Pan\*](#) by J. M. Barrie

[\*Rapunzel\*](#) by Brothers Grimm

[\*Sideways Stories from Wayside School\*](#) by Louis Sacher

[\*Strega Nona\*](#) by Tomie dePaola

[\*Swimmy\*](#) by Leo Lionni

[\*The Giving Tree\*](#) by Shel Silverstein

[\*The Hundred Dresses\*](#) by Eleanor Estes

[\*The Little Prince\*](#) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

[\*The McElderry Book of Aesop's Fables\*](#) by Michael Morpurgo

[\*The Polar Express\*](#) by Chris Van Allsburg

[\*The Snowy Day\*](#) by Ezra Jack Keats

[\*The Story of Ferdinand\*](#) by Munro Leaf

*The Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Anderson

*The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams

### **Contemporary book: classics in the making?**

*Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* by Doreen Cronin

*Creepy Carrots!* by Aaron Reynolds

*Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs* by Mo Willems

*Interrupting Chicken* by David Ezra Stein

*Mr. and Mrs. Bunny - Detectives Extraordinaire!* by Polly Horvath

*Officer Buckle & Gloria* by Peggy Rathman

*The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo

*The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!* by Jon Scieszka & Lane Smith

*Zen Shorts* by Jon J. Muth

### **Early readers: fun books to encourage reading skills**

*Blackout* by John Rocco

*Extra Yarn* by Mac Barnett

*Frog and Toad are Friends* by Arnold Lobel

*How to Babysit a Grandpa* by Jean Reagan

*Grandpa Green* by Lane Smith

*Puff, the Magic Dragon* by Peter Yarrow and Lenny Lipton

[\*The Little Engine that Could\*](#) by Watty Piper

[\*The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear\*](#) by  
Audrey Wood and Don Wood

[\*The Dot\*](#) by Peter H. Reynolds

[\*The Moon in My Room\*](#) by Uri Shulevitz

## **Series and chapter books worth getting hooked on**

[\*Ballpark Mysteries Series\*](#) by David A. Kelly

[\*Classic Starts Series\*](#) by Various authors

[\*My Father's Dragon Series\*](#) by Ruth Stiles Gannett

[\*The Alvin Ho Series\*](#) by Lenore Look

[\*The Captain Underpants\*](#) Series by Dav Pilkey

[\*The Eloise Series\*](#) by Kay Thompson

[\*The Flat Stanley Series\*](#) by Jeff Brown

[\*The Ivy & Bean Series\*](#) by Annie Barrows

[\*The Judy Moody Series\*](#) by Megan McDonald

[\*The Lulu Series\*](#) by Judith Viorst

[\*The Magic Tree House Series\*](#) by Mary Pope Osborne

[\*The Never Girls Series \(Disney Fairies\)\*](#) by Kiki Thorpe

[\*The Ramona Quimby Series\*](#) by Beverly Cleary



## Part 4: Great Books for Older Kids Aged 9 to11

### Stand-out contemporary authors to explore

[\*11 Birthdays\*](#) by Wendy Mass

[\*A Single Shard\*](#) by Linda Sue Park

[\*Bud, not Buddy\*](#) by Christopher Paul Curtis

[\*Esperanza Rising\*](#) by Pam Munoz Ryan

[\*Hoot\*](#) by Carl Hiaasen

[\*Peter Nimble and his Fantastic Eyes\*](#) by Jonathan Auxier

[\*Rules\*](#) by Cynthia Lord

[\*Splendors and Glooms\*](#) by Laura Amy Schlitz

[\*The Invention of Hugo Cabret\*](#) by Brian Selznick

[\*The Lemonade War\*](#) by Jacqueline Davies

[\*The One and Only Ivan\*](#) by Katherine Applegate

[\*Where the Mountain Meets the Moon\*](#) by Grace Lin

[\*Wonder\*](#) by R. J. Palacio

### Modern-day classics

[\*A Wrinkle in Time\*](#) by Madeleine L'Engle

[\*Bridge to Terabithia\*](#) by Katherine Paterson

[\*Ella Enchanted\*](#) by Gail Carson Levine

[\*Harriet the Spy\*](#) by Louise Fitzhugh

[\*Hatchet\*](#) by Gary Paulsen

[\*Monkey Island\*](#) by Paula Fox

[\*Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH\*](#) by Robert C. O'Brien

[\*Old Yeller\*](#) by Fred Gipson

[\*Secret Letters from 0 to 10\*](#) by Susie Hoch Morgenstern

[\*Shiloh\*](#) by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

[\*The Indian in the Cupboard\*](#) by Lynne Reid Banks

[\*The Last of the Really Great Whangdoodles\*](#) by Julie Andrews Edwards

[\*The Phantom Tollbooth\*](#) by Norton Juster

[\*Tuck Everlasting\*](#) by Natalie Babbitt

### **Must-read books series for today's big kids**

[\*Diary of a Wimpy Kid Series\*](#) by Jeff Kinney

[\*Percy Jackson and the Olympians Series\*](#) by Rick Riordan

[\*Shakespeare Stories Series\*](#) by Andrew Matthews

[\*The Harry Potter Series\*](#) by J.K. Rowling

[\*The Series of Unfortunate Events Series\*](#) by Lemony Snicket

[\*The Warriors Series\*](#) by Erin Hunter

## **Favorite books that have stood the test of time**

[\*Anne Of Green Gables Series\*](#) by L. M. Montgomery

[\*Bed-Knob and Broomstick\*](#) by Mary Norton

[\*Black Beauty\*](#) by Anna Sewell

[\*Charlotte's Web\*](#) by E. B. White

[\*D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths\*](#) by Ingri d'Aulaire and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire

[\*Gulliver's Travels\*](#) by Jonathan Swift

[\*Little House on the Prairie\*](#) by Laura Ingalls Wilder

[\*Little Women\*](#) by Louisa May Alcott

[\*My Side of the Mountain\*](#) by Jean Craighead George

[\*Paddle-to-the-Sea\*](#) by Holling C. Holling

[\*Pippi Longstocking\*](#) by Astrid Lindgren

[\*The Chronicles of Narnia Series\*](#) by C. S. Lewis

[\*The Rescuers\*](#) by Margery Sharp

[\*The Secret Garden\*](#) by Frances Hodgson Burnett

[\*The Wind in the Willows\*](#) by Kenneth Grahame

[\*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz\*](#) by L. Frank Baum

[\*Treasure Island\*](#) by Robert Louis Stevenson

## Part 5: Great Books for Early Teens Aged 12 to 15

### The all time “must-read” classics

[\*Frankenstein\*](#) by Mary Shelley

[\*Great Expectations\*](#) by Charles Dickens

[\*Jane Eyre\*](#) by Charlotte Brontë

[\*Pride and Prejudice\*](#) by Jane Austen

[\*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn\*](#) by Mark Twain

[\*The Call to the Wild\*](#) by Jack London

### 20th Century classics

[\*Brave New World\*](#) by Aldous Huxley

[\*Ender's Game\*](#) by Orson Scott Card

[\*Fahrenheit 451\*](#) by Ray Bradbury

[\*Lord of the Flies\*](#) by William Golding

[\*Of Mice and Men\*](#) by John Steinbeck

[\*Out of The Dust\*](#) by Karen Hesse

[\*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry\*](#) by Mildred D. Taylor

[\*The Catcher in the Rye\*](#) by J. D. Salinger

[\*The Chocolate War\*](#) by Robert Cormier

*The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank

*The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien

*The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton

*The View from Saturday* by E.L. Konigsburg

*The Westing Game* by Ellen Raskin

*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

*Watership Down* by Richard Adams

### **Modern series/ chapter books**

*Al Capone Does My Shirts/ Alcatraz Series* by Gennifer Choldenko

*His Dark Materials Trilogy* by Philip Pullman

*The Alex Rider Series* by Anthony Horowitz

*The Beautiful Creatures/ Caster Series* by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl

*The Confessions of Georgia Nicholson Series* by Louise Rennison

*The Discworld Series* by Terry Pratchett

*The Divergent Series* by Veronica Roth

*The Gallagher Girls Series* by Ally Carter

*The Giver Quartet* by Lois Lowry

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Series* by Douglas Adams

*The Hunger Games Trilogy* by Suzanne Collins

*The Twilight Saga Series* by Stephenie Meyer

## **Compelling contemporary books**

*Are You There God? It's Me Margaret* by Judy Blume

*Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick

*Hope Was Here* by Joan Bauer

*How I Live Now* by Meg Rosoff

*Monster* by Walter Dean Myers

*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson

*Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie

*The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon

*The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green

*The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson

*The Princess Bride* by William Goldman

*The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* by Avi

*Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher

*Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech

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