



Ten Essential Children's Books chosen by Philip Reeve

Article Author:

[Philip Reeve](#) [1]

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Ten of the Best

Byline:

Philip Reeve selects a top ten

*For the last twenty years, each issue of **Books for Keeps***

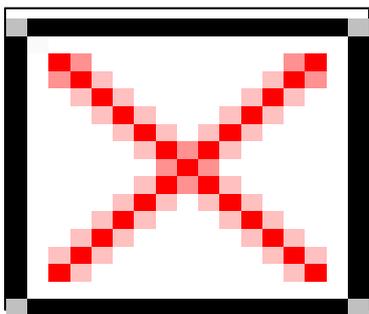
has included a Ten of the Best article, highlighting the ten best books on subjects as varied as World War I, human rights, the moon and ponies. In our 40th

year, we are asking six authors to each choose ten books they consider essential to a child's library. First, is Philip Reeve with his selection.

What makes a children's book 'essential'? I suppose the term suggests a deathless classic which will stand the test of time, like **The Wind in the Willows**, that spring from which so much of 20th century children's culture flows. But I don't want to assemble a list which consists entirely of 50 to 100-year-old titles I remember reading as a kid, so I've tried to aim for a mix of old and new favourites which I'd want to include if I were stocking a library.

[Owl Babies](#) [3]

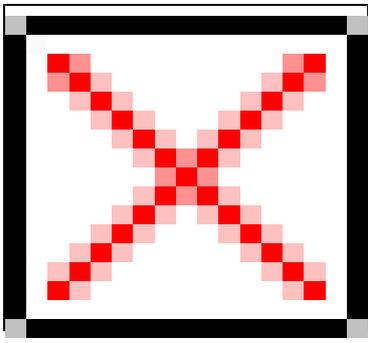
Martin Waddell illus Patrick Benson, Walker Books, 978-0744531671, £6.99pbk



Someone gave my son a copy of this little book when he was about three months old - way too young to understand stories, or so I thought. But I tried reading it to him anyway, and although he obviously didn't know what a book was or what any of the words meant he knew something was up, and listened in a way that was different to the way he would listen if I'd just been talking to him. It's a beautiful piece of writing, so simple and spare, and so elegantly paced. The tension of the baby owls waiting worriedly for their mother to come home rises just to the point of making you a bit teary before you turn the page and it's released with 'And she came...' A perfect, snugly, cuddly bedtime book.

The Snail and the Whale

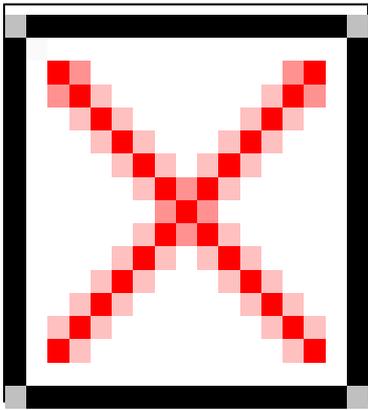
Julia Donaldson, illus Axel Sheffler, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1509878826, £6.99 pbk



Julia Donaldson's picture books are so successful and ubiquitous that I think we're sometimes in danger of taking them for granted and forgetting just how good they are. The stories are charming, the jokes land, the verse rhymes and scans, and Axel Sheffler's pictures are simple and colourful but also packed with the sort of well-observed detail that children love. I could have picked any of their many books together, but **The Snail and the Whale** was a particular favourite when my son was small.

There's a Shark in the Bath

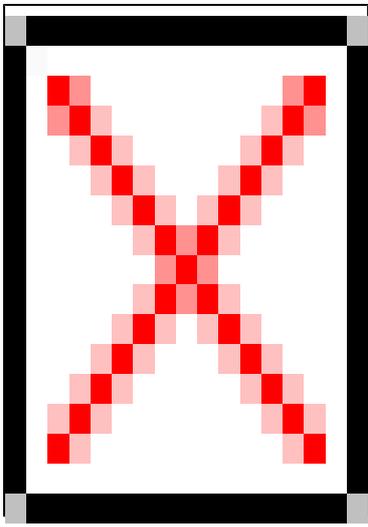
Sarah McIntyre, Scholastic, 978-1407185439, £6.99 pbk



Conflict of interest alert! Sarah McIntyre is my friend and co-author. But the reason I started working with her is because I love her lively illustrations, her dry humour, and her understanding of the way kids think. I regard every book she does as essential, but one of my favourites is **There's A Shark in the Bath**, the story of how little Dulcie copes with the family of hungry sharks which invades her bathroom. Despite their alarming size and massive, pointy teeth the sharks are too silly to be scary, and Dulcie easily distracts them with squirty toothpaste and festoons of loo-roll. A book full of the thrill of making a huge mess and then getting everything tidied away before the grown-ups find out.

Bunny vs Monkey series

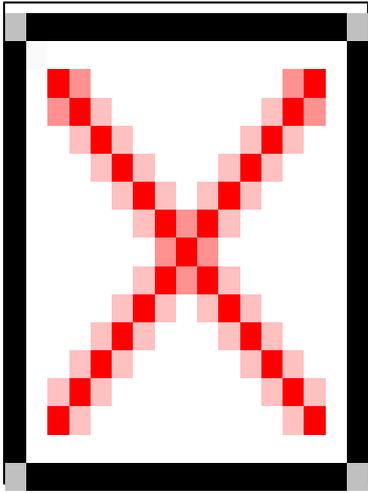
Jamie Smart, David Fickling Books, £8.99 pbk



Comics can be an important part of children's reading, and in recent years **The Phoenix** comic has built an excellent team of artists and writers. Many of the strips are now available as books, and there are several devoted to Jamie Smart's fantastic **Bunny vs Monkey**, all beautifully drawn and packed with hilarious and stupid jokes. Bunny, his silly friends, and the mischievous, gadget-obsessed monkey who disrupts their woodland life have the anarchic energy of classic **Warner Brothers** cartoon characters, and they're cute and simple enough that kids love to draw them. Jamie Smart is a comic genius, and also a comics genius.

Asterix in Britain

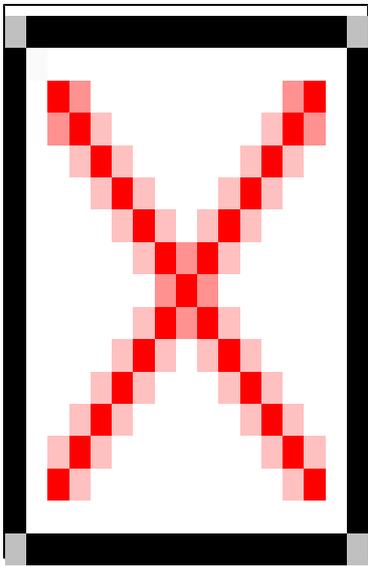
Reneé Goscinny and Albert Uderzo, Orion Children's Books, 978-0752866192, £7.99pbk



I didn't have the benefit of **The Phoenix** when I was growing up, but I did have the Asterix books, the ongoing saga of a village of indomitable Gauls who hold off the might of the Roman Empire with the aid of their local druid's magic potion. In the earliest books the drawing is a little cruder, in the later ones the stories can drag a bit or strain too hard for novelty, but in the middle there's a long run of near perfect ones, of which **Asterix in Britain** is a good example. The Britain which it gently spoofs - all Beatlemania, tea-breaks, and stiff-upper-lipped suburban chaps reading stone-tablet versions of the **Times** - was fading even when I read it in the '70s, but the drawings are magnificent, combining cartoonish humour with a real eye for historical detail, and the story (translated by the great Anthea Bell) bounces along, powered by the usual mix of friendship, slapstick violence and good-natured cultural stereotypes, with enough reversals to keep you rooting for our heroes till the last page (where it all ends, of course, with a huge feast).

[The Eagle of the Ninth](#) [4]

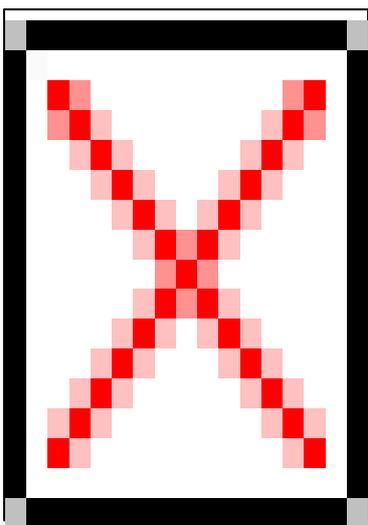
Rosemary Sutcliff, Oxford, 978-0192753922, £8.99pbk



I was fascinated by ancient history as a child, which may partly have been due to all those **Asterix** books. But it was probably more thanks to Rosemary Sutcliff, whose novels of Bronze Age, Roman, and Early Mediaeval Britain are so vividly written that I've been returning to them with pleasure ever since. The essential one (and my favourite as a boy) is **The Eagle of the Ninth**, the story of a young Roman officer who arrives in Britain eager for military glory, is disabled by a crippling wound, and finds meaning instead on a lonely quest north of Hadrian's Wall, searching for the eagle standard of the lost Ninth Legion. It's a great adventure story, but it's much more than that - between the battle early on where Marcus is injured and the quest for the eagle there is a long and heartfelt section dealing with his recovery; the painful operations he endures, his bitterness and depression at finding himself an invalid, his cautious, slow-blooming friendships with a British girl and with his slave, Esca. Even as a child it was these parts that stayed with me, lending the adventure a weight that few adventures have. Rosemary Sutcliff's Roman Britain is clearly a product of the 1950s, and I believe later research has debunked the legend of the Ninth Legion, but that doesn't matter; **The Eagle of the Ninth** rings true.

The God Beneath the Sea

Edward Blishen and Leon Garfield, illus Charles Keeping, Doubleday, 978-0857533111, £12.99pbk

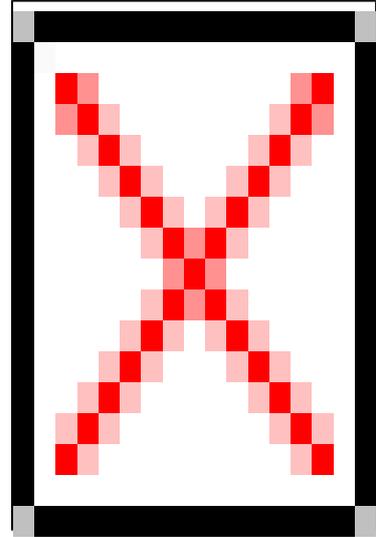


A grounding in myths and legends is one of the best things you can give a child; apart from being great stories in their own right, they are the key to so much of art and literature. **The God Beneath the Sea** retells the stories of the Greek gods, their war with the Titans, the creation of human beings, Prometheus, Persephone, weaving all the strands into a continuous narrative which reads like a novel. It is full of cruelty and wonder (the opening image is of a blazing baby falling out of heaven), the writing is brilliant, and every one of Charles Keeping's eerie illustrations is a masterpiece. It's one of the great children's books (and it has a great sequel, **The Golden Shadow**, which deals with the Labours of

Heracles).

[Northern Lights](#) [5]

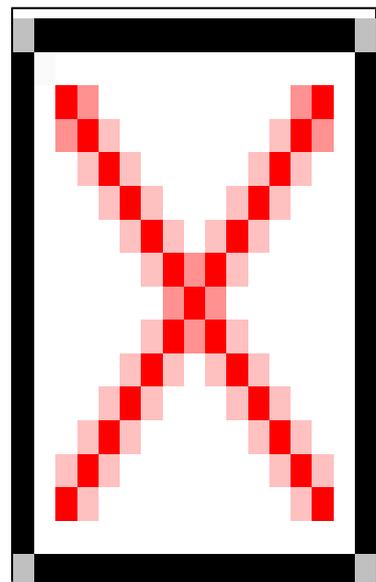
Philip Pullman, Scholastic, 978-1407130224, £7.99 pbk



There's a clear through-line from **The God Beneath the Sea** to Philip Pullman's **His Dark Materials**; another story woven out of myths by another author who, like Blishen and Garfield, like Rosemary Sutcliff, respects children enough to talk to them frankly about serious things. The later books in the trilogy move between several different worlds, including our own, but my favourite is **Northern Lights** because it stays in one world, both familiar and utterly strange, and sketches it so clearly and yet so economically that within a few pages you feel as if you've lived there all your life. Like C.S. Lewis's Narnia books or Tolkien's **The Lord of the Rings**, it is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand 20th Century British fantasy, or who just likes a really good story.

The White Darkness

Geraldine McCaughrean, Oxford, 978-0192726186, £7.99pbk

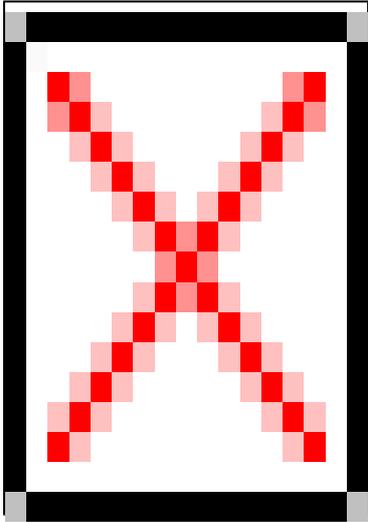


Geraldine McCaughrean is another author who has never written an inessential book. Her children's books - all adventure stories, all different, all wonderful - are written with the wonder of a child and the wisdom of a very thoughtful grown-up. Her adult novels were the spark that set me writing. **The White Darkness** is as close to adult (or Young Adult) as her children's novels come, a strange, unsettling, utterly gripping story about a shy, partially deaf girl whose eccentric uncle drags her off on a hallucinatory quest across Antarctica. The prose shimmers with perfectly

chosen words and brilliant metaphors, but is never flashy, and doesn't distract from the extravagant twists and switchbacks of the page-turning plot.

Winnie the Pooh The House at Pooh Corner

A.A. Milne, illus E.H.Shepard, Egmont, 978-1405280846, £14.99 hbk



I tried to start this list with books for younger readers and progress to books for older ones, but I think **Winnie the Pooh** works just as well for both. Pooh and his friends and their adventures in their small, safe world are instantly appealing to children, but the adults reading them aloud will recognise Rabbit's pomposity, Eeyore's passive-aggressive gloominess and Owl's immense but slightly flimsy gravitas for the wry character studies that they are. They'll also recognise that the books' theme is childhood innocence and its passing. So many of the incidents and lines of dialogue are clearly based on things the real Christopher Robin said or did; they shine like captured sunlight. My son used to laugh so hard at some of the funny bits that we had to go back and read them over and over again (not bad for jokes that are almost a century old) but he probably didn't understand why I was always in floods of tears when I read the final page of **The House at Pooh Corner**.

Finally, whatever you like...

The most essential book of all is the one that a child loves. It might be one of those I've mentioned, but it's just as likely to be one I haven't read, or haven't even heard of it. It could be a classic picture book, but it could also be something by an unknown author, picked up at a supermarket. It could be a comic. It could be a car manual, or a book about football. It might be written by a revered author, worshipped by her peers, her career garlanded with awards and critical acclaim. It might be written by David Walliams. What makes it essential is that, while the child is reading it, and for as long as it lives in their minds, it expands their world a little, or frees them from worry or boredom, or makes them laugh, and makes them want to read more, see more, know more. Just about every book is essential to somebody.

Philip Reeve is the author of [Mortal Engines](#) [6], recently adapted for the screen by Peter Jackson. He has written many other works, including [Railhead](#) [7], [Here Lies Arthur](#) [8], and a series of popular books for younger readers with the illustrator Sarah McIntyre.

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