



The Children's Books of the Century

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Rosemary Stones on the most important writers, artists, poets and books of the century chosen by **BfK**'s readership.

You've probably done a lot of good with your questionnaire making so many minds think so furiously about children's books? wrote one **BfK** reader in a letter (one of many) attached to her questionnaire. Here then are the results of all that furious thinking ? some predictable choices, some quirky ones that added up tell us what you were thinking and feeling about children's books in the last months of this century and this millenium as you put pen to questionnaire. **Rosemary Stones** explains. <!--break-->

'Do you enjoy reading?' asked the **Books for Keeps Millenium Questionnaire** which was sent out in the May issue of the magazine. 'Dumb question' one of you replied and, as it turned out, we could indeed have taken that one for granted. Other questions were more problematic:

'How can anyone speak for the whole century?'

'You can't just have one favourite author!'

'There are a lot of flaws in trying to compile 'Best of' lists.' (Tell us about it.)

'A stimulating, testing and ultimately impossible exercise!'

'Even by cheating and squeezing in extras I keep thinking of books I left out?'

You sent covering letters and notes, you filled your questionnaires with indignant amendments, passionate afterthoughts, tipex, asterisks, exclamation marks, arrows and lots of wonderfully detailed and personal information about your relationship with books, children and reading.

Reading generations

Although we had not asked you to tick an age group box, the choices you made gave plenty of clues. Were you an adolescent in those innocent days when teenagers were reading **Oliver Twist** and Malcom Saville ('teenage fiction ? what's that?') or one of the **Fifteen** (? it showed teenagers there were books for them specifically?) or still later **Junk** generations. Our oldest respondent (so far as we know) is a retired librarian of 95.

Fiction Choice

'For God's sake not Roald Dahl?', wrote one teacher but Dahl easily came top as your choice of the outstanding

children's writer of the century. Philip Pullman, though, was voted your favourite writer, an interesting distinction that you did not make when you voted Quentin Blake both the outstanding illustrator of the century ('It has to be Mr Q. Blake doesn't it. Who else?') and your favourite illustrator. Michael Rosen was also voted both the outstanding poet of the century and your favourite poet.

Poetry and Non-Fiction

Some of you were less confident about voting for poetry and non-fiction than you were with fiction. **The Rattlebag** emerged from a long and eclectic list and in general non-fiction books rather than authors were known. There was considerable enthusiasm, however, for Terry Deary's 'Horrible Histories' series ('he got my boys reading') while David Macaulay's **The Way Things Work** 'changed the way we look at things'. Dorling Kindersley's 'Eyewitness Guide' were praised by many for their 'sheer quality innovation'.

The non-fiction book that you considered most important, however, is not only one of the key texts of European literature but perhaps **the** children's book of the century - written as it was by a child. It is **The Diary of Anne Frank**. 'When I read it I couldn't believe that such a thing could have happened to a girl my age', one of you remembered.

Influential Books

Sharing appears to have been an important element in some of your choices:

'Untermeyer's **Golden Treasury of Poetry** was significant to me as a family sharing experience across (now) four generations from infancy onwards.'

The emphasis you put on particular books and their significance might lead us to expect a long and disparate list of titles in response to the questions about which books mean most to you. There was plenty of evidence for this:

'I probably read Classics because of liking **Beloved of the Gods**. I certainly learned Norse because of **Noggin the Nog**.'

'**The Swish of the Curtain** gave me the inspiration to act.'

'**Catcher in the Rye** stopped me biting my fingernails ' Holden Caulfield expresses disgust about nail biting!'

'**Watership Down** ' stopped eating rabbit; **Talking Turkeys** ' made me write poetry; **The Lion, the Witch** ' became Christian.'

'I always wanted a ginger cat because of **Orlando**.'

'Aged 25, jobless and directionless I read Eric Allen's **Latchkey Children** and decided that if children's books were that good I'd better get a job amongst them. I did.'

'**Five on a Treasure Island** turned me from an indifferent reader into a passionate one.'

'**A Pair of Jesus Boots** was a real shock to my middle classness! I'd no idea children lived like this. I read it over and over again.'

'**William** influenced my powers of rhetoric.'

'I identified strongly with Titty in **Swallows and Amazons** ' she had individual odd feelings and so did I. It allowed

me to be different and individual when I was sent to a rather conformist boarding school.?

And yet, amongst all these important individual reading experiences when you found the 'right' book at the right moment, you mention a handful of books (**The Secret Garden** , **Dear Nobody** , **Homecoming** and **Goodnight Mr Tom**) over and over again. The moral and material transformations of such titles appear to have an especially powerful and inspirational appeal of an enduring kind:

? **The Secret Garden** ? consoled me after my mother's death when I was seven.?

?The insight into juvenile feelings in **Dear Nobody** is amazing. I wept when I read both sides of the story by the boy and girl main characters.?

New Talents?

J K Rowling of **Harry Potter** fame (?brilliant plots, well rounded characters and not afraid to tackle fear, death, rejection etc within the safety of an imagined but realistic world?) was easily your choice for the new talent of the next century. ?She will probably last?, you said, ?but there are too many cheap fireworks about to confuse the eye.? ?I don't think we've seen the new talents yet?, wrote another, ?they're still children. People like David Almond are well known in this century, although quite new.? This is a good point - the reputations of children's writers and illustrators used to build gradually. In our marketing lead days, publishers' resources are devoted to a lucky few whose names are quickly established. Will such speedily built reputations endure? Some 'big names' of the last decade were notably absent from your questionnaires and it will interesting to see how the current crop fare in the new century.

Very many thanks to all our readers who took time and such trouble to fill in their questionnaire.

FICTION

The outstanding 20th century children's writer

Roald Dahl

Runners-up: **Enid Blyton** and **C S Lewis**

BfK readers' favourite 20th century children's author

Philip Pullman

Runners-up: **Anne Fine** and **Jacqueline Wilson**

The most important 20th century novel

1. For younger readers

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (C S Lewis)

Runners-up: **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory** (Roald Dahl) and **Winnie-the-Pooh** (A A Milne)

2. For older readers

The Hobbit (J R Tolkien)

Runners-up: **Goodnight Mr Tom** (Michelle Magorian) and **Northern Lights** (Philip Pullman)

3. For teenagers

Junk (Melvin Burgess)

Runners-up: **Lord of the Rings** (J R Tolkien), **Forever** (Judy Blume) and **Dear Nobody** (Berlie Doherty)

ILLUSTRATION

The outstanding 20th century children's illustrator

Quentin Blake

Runners-up: **Anthony Browne** and **Shirley Hughes**

BfK readers' favourite 20th century children's illustrator

Quentin Blake

Runners-up: **Shirley Hughes** and **Anthony Browne**

The most important 20th century children's picture book

Where the Wild Things Are (Maurice Sendak)

Runners-up: **The Snowman** (Raymond Briggs) and **Rosie's Walk** (Pat Hutchins)

The most important 20th century children's novelty book

The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Eric Carle)

Runners-up: **The Jolly Postman** (Allan and Janet Ahlberg) and **The Haunted House** (Jan Pienkowski)

POETRY

The outstanding 20th century children's poet

Michael Rosen

Runners-up: **Ted Hughes** and **Roger McGough**

BfK readers' favourite 20th century children's poet

Michael Rosen

Runners-up: **Roger McGough** and **Charles Causley**

The most important 20th century children's poetry book

Please Mrs Butler (Allan Ahlberg, ill. Fritz Wegner)

Runners-up: **Heard It in the Playground** (Allan Ahlberg) and **Now We Are Six** (A A Milne)

The most important 20th century children's anthology

The Rattlebag (Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney)

Runners-up: **I Like This Poem** (ed. Kaye Webb) and **The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes** (ed. Peter and Iona Opie)

NON-FICTION

The outstanding 20th century children's non-fiction writer/illustrator

Terry Deary

Runners-up: **David Macaulay** and **Stephen Biesty**

The most important 20th century children's non-fiction book

The Diary of Anne Frank

Runners-up: **Eyewitness Guides** (Dorling Kindersley) and **The Way Things Work** (David Macaulay)

NEW TALENTS

The new talent for the 21st century

J K Rowling

Runners-up: **David Almond** and **Jane Simmons**

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