



# TEN OF THE VERY BEST

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Ten of the Best

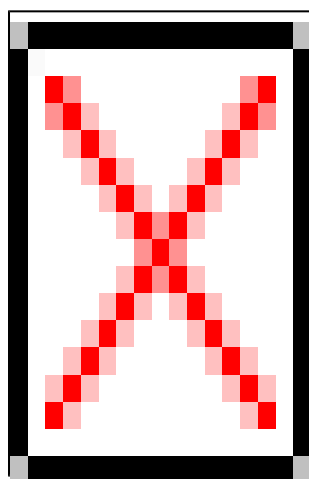
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**Ten of the Very Best Daniel Hahn** chooses ten of the best works of contemporary children's literature

For the past five years, each issue of **Books for Keeps** has included a Ten of the Best selection, in which an expert chooses ten books that exemplify a particular theme. For this our 200th issue, we gave Daniel Hahn, currently compiling the new **Oxford Companion to Children's Literature**, a nigh impossible task. To choose ten of the very best works of contemporary children's literature, as defined by the 33 years of BfK. Amazingly, he took on the challenge.

This will obviously be a disaster. Whatever I do, you'll disagree with, oh, probably all of it. Only ten books since 1980? The starting-point is naturally a list of options that's enormous and varied, and utterly magnificently wondrously rich in possibility. So first I invented somewhat arbitrary rules. No books from Australia / U.S. / New Zealand / Canada. No author/illustrator can appear twice. So the presence of a Dahl book illustrated by Quentin Blake spares me choosing between **Mr Magnolia** / **Cockatoos** / **Clown** / **Zagazoo**. (Really, how ever would one set about such a thing?) Later I contemplated imposing even more arbitrary restrictions on my choice, just to make the task seem more feasible. (No books by left-handers? No books by redheads, or Sagittarians? No titles with abstract nouns, nothing with collage?) I've been feverishly checking publication dates, always delighted to learn that something I felt compelled to include wasn't actually eligible. (**Dogger** ? published 1977. Excellent! **Each Peach Pear Plum**? 1978. Oh, thank God!)

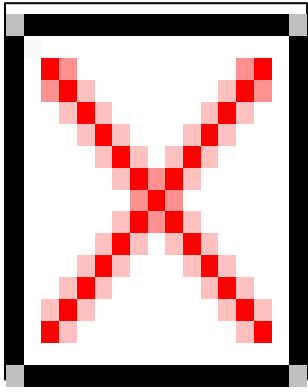
But there are still, of course, impossibly many to choose from.



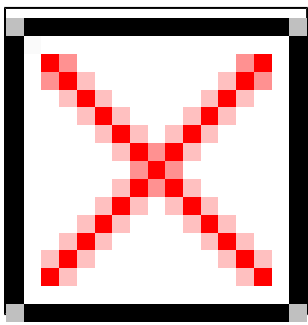
To begin, chronologically, at the beginning. My first choice, **The BFG**, just squeezes in, in 1982. I was eight when it appeared, and it's the first book whose publication I was aware of. Until then, books simply existed, or didn't; but there wasn't a BFG and then one day suddenly there it was. My dad took me to see Dahl talk about it. My signed copy ? For Daniel, with love from Roald Dahl ? remains my most treasured possession. Like all great Dahls, this story of Sophie and the Big Friendly Giant she meets, and their defeat of the other giants (even bigger, but not nearly as friendly) is spiky and energetic and alight with imagination and fun.

Whatever you think of the **Harry Potter** books, it's hard to deny their place as the massively dense centre of gravity of children's literature in recent decades. I happen to like them ? I like the plots, the characters, the originality, and the

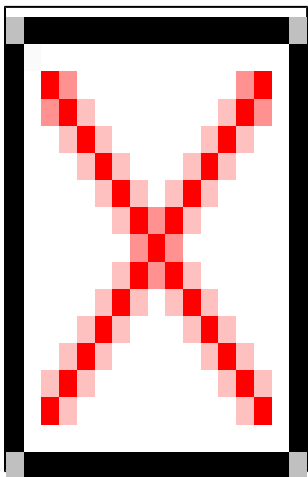
commitment JK Rowling clearly made to them. The prose is fine. The impact and the scope of that impact are like nothing we'd ever seen before in the history of books. Not sure I need say any more. **Harry Potter** makes my list.



Likewise **The Gruffalo** ? it's not the first Donaldson-Scheffler (**A Squash and a Squeeze**), nor my favourite (**Tiddler**), but it's the one that is a global superstar, that made the style recognisable, a brand that's appeared on all manner of merchandise, with spin-offs in different art-forms and media. It's everywhere. I've never been quite sure how well the toddlers whom I know follow the plot (mouse convinces animals that fictional beast is real and the scariest animal in the wood, then turns out fictional beast is in fact not fictional at all, and mouse must persuade not-fictional Gruffalo that he ? the mouse ? is the scariest animal in the wood); but that seems to be my problem more than theirs, because they all love it.

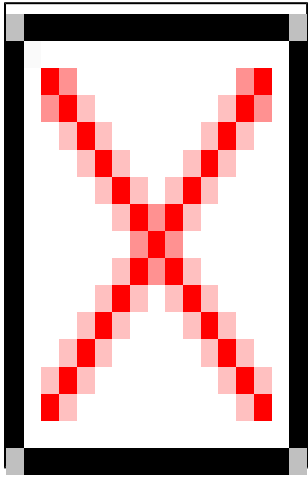


**Orange Pear Apple Bear**, meanwhile, couldn't be simpler ? only five words in varying combinations, combined with gorgeous, warm and subtle watercolour artwork; even in its seeming simplicity it almost has a plot, and manages playfulness and humour, too. It also has what's perhaps my favourite ever picture-book bear. This was my first Emily Gravett book, and since then everything she's done has felt like a particular treat. Apparently it took her just eleven hours to produce.



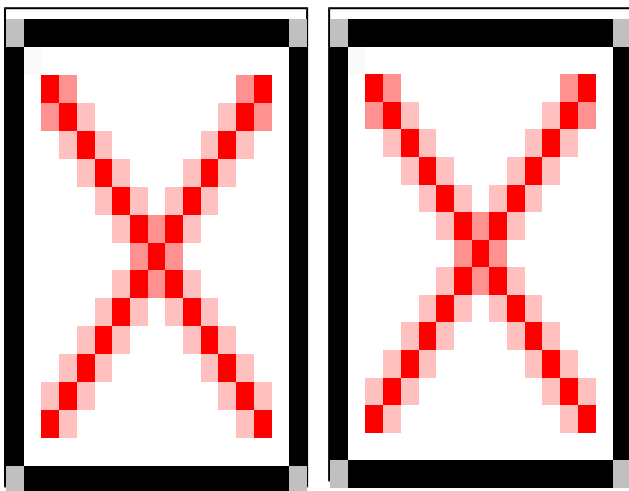
**Skellig** was the book that introduced young readers to David Almond, and won him the Carnegie Medal; but for me **Kit's Wilderness** is the one. Kit moves to the town where his grandfather lives, where he meets a strange boy called John Askew, who plays a game called Death. Kit's Wilderness is dark and beautiful, and about things that are there even if you sometimes can't see them, things beneath the surface, full of menace and the spirits of the past ? but this

wilderness is full of things that are precious, too. **Kit's Wilderness** is a book that changes the way you see the world, I think, and you can't say that about many.

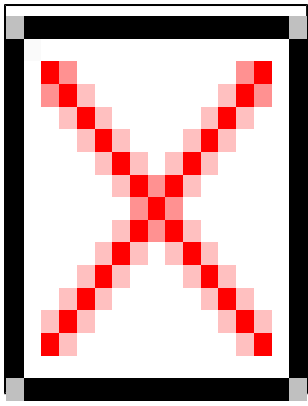


For ambition, it's hard to beat the epic **His Dark Materials** trilogy. The scale of the canvas, and the scope of the ideas the books grapple with, fearlessly, helped to make this an exhilarating experience for so many readers. My tastes tend towards realism more than fantasy, on the whole, but these books are so irresistibly plotty and characterful and thoughtful and intricate and teeming? They are about huge, unwieldy and important things, they are uncompromising, unpatronising, and enthralling. They take their readers to Lyra's world ? or worlds, I should say ? where she and her daemon (one of Pullman's thousand extraordinary imaginings) race into a great adventure, a quest with the highest possible stakes. It is massive in its ambitions and its capacity, and it delivers.

My next two choices are both easy and difficult. Certainly, Anne Fine and Geraldine McCaughrean earn their places on this list without my needing to give the matter much thought ? to my mind they're perhaps the most consistent children's writers of the last three decades or so. Each has produced many dozens of books of incredible variety (neither follows a groove, book after formulaic book, perhaps explaining why they aren't the zillion-selling superstars they deserve to be), but the consistency of the quality is astonishing. But faced with this embarrassment of riches, what to choose?



For these two, where I feel the writers' work has earned its place here overall, rather than for one outstanding title, I'm simply allowing myself entirely personal choices. My favourite McCaughrean (of many favourites) is **A Little Lower than the Angels**, which takes us back ? vividly with atmosphere and excitement ? to a medieval world of apprentices and travelling players, as young Gabriel runs away to join the performing troupe led by God (played by Master Garvey), and goes on the road with them and their Mysteries. And for Anne Fine, the book that's stayed with me since I read it ten years ago is **Up on Cloud Nine**; in which Ian sits by the hospital bedside of his best friend, Stolly, who's fallen out of a window. It's funny, moving, warm, brilliantly observed ? a magical combination that Anne Fine pulls off, book after book, better than any writer I know.



In 2012, **A Monster Calls** became the first book ever to win both the **Carnegie Medal** and the **Greenaway Medal**. The feat was hardly a surprise ? **A Monster Calls** is about as good as they come. Written by Patrick Ness and illustrated by Jim Kay, it takes an idea by the late Siobhan Dowd, woven into a potent, brave and painfully honest story, and then overlaid with a powerful web of detailed black artwork that?s at once entrancing and disturbing; and together they tell a story that seems so vast, and yet is really only small and personal: a boy, Conor, who has to say goodbye to his mother, because she is ill and going to die.

Finally, what?s to make up the ten? My final choice would be something amazing, of which you?ve never heard. A truly great, bold, enduring work for children, one of those generational books, those landmarks. Breath-taking, ingenious, endearing, original. You know the kind of book I mean. But I won?t tell you what it is, because you probably can?t read it anyway. Frustrating, isn?t it? But I?m not just being perverse. Most writing in the world is happening in languages that are not English. (There are 6.7 billion of them; maybe 0.4 billion of us.) A recent estimate claimed that in the UK one children?s book in fifty is translated from another language ? I suspect it?s even lower. We?ve had extraordinary riches in our children?s publishing in the last three decades, that?s hard to dispute; but there?s a big gap, too. A brilliant generation of publishers who were ? as I was ? brought up on **Asterix** and the Moomins, **Tintin** and Grimm and **Emil and the Detectives**, have for the most part stopped looking outwards for new talent. Yes, Cornelia Funke is one of those 6.7 billion, but there are others. In the next thirty years, I?d like the chance to read some of them, too, please.

But for now, the above is my selection, for what it?s worth; and for all the lack of foreign work we must be doing something right if we can compile a list that can?t even find room for the likes of Philip Reeve, for Hilary McKay (another particular favourite), for the glorious Eva Ibbotson, for Helen Oxenbury, Polly Dunbar, Marcus Sedgwick, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Neil Gaiman, Mal Peet, Catherine Rayner, Mini Grey, Gillian Cross, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Tony Ross and on and on?

But I?ve got my ten, and I can stop now ?oh Lord, but I really should have included Michael Foreman, shouldn?t I? And everybody loves **We?re Going on a Bear Hunt**, don?t they? And all those giants like Joan Aiken, Susan Cooper and Philippa Pearce were still writing well into this period. Leon Garfield, too. And where?s Diana Wynne Jones, for goodness? sake?! I?m just finishing work on the new Oxford Companion to Children?s Literature, and I thought cramming everything into 450,000 words was a struggle, but really, this is something else. (Oh ? **Something Else!** I love Chris Riddell. He should definitely be in.)

No, it?s done now. Stop. It is what it is. No ? wait?

Oh God, I?ve completely forgotten Allan Ahlberg! Better start again?

Daniel Hahn is a writer and award-winning editor and translator.

**The BFG** Roald Dahl, illus Quentin Blake, Puffin, 978-0141346427 £6.pp pbk

**Harry Potter Boxed set** J.K. Rowling, Bloomsbury Children?s Books, 978-1408812525 £59.99

**The Gruffalo** Julia Donaldson, illus Axel Scheffler, Macmillan Children?s Books 978-0333710937 £6.99 pbk

**Orange Pear Apple Bear** Emily Gravett Macmillan Children's Books 978-1405090223 £4.99 pbk

**Kit's Wilderness** David Almond, Hodder Children's Books, 978-0340944967 £5.99

**His Dark Materials trilogy** Philip Pullman, Scholastic, 978-1407135595 £16.99

**A Little Lower than the Angels** Geraldine McCaughrean, Oxford, 978-0192752901 £5.99 pbk

**Up on Cloud Nine** Anne Fine, Corgi Children's Books, 978-0552554657 £5.99pbk

**A Monster Calls** Patrick Ness, illus Jim Kay, Walker Books, 978-1406311525 £12.99 hbk

**Daniel Hahn** is a writer and award winning editor and translator.

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