



# Ten of the Best Books for Young Feminists

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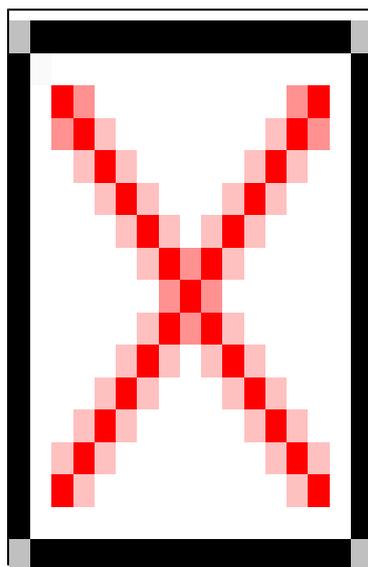
Article Category:

Ten of the Best

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**Geraldine Brennan** chooses

From [Northern Lights](#) [3] to **The Hunger Games**, there is no shortage of contemporary books for young people with iconic heroines, says Geraldine Brennan. For this Ten of the Best, she looked for examples that will help girls and young women steer a path through the world as it is, only resorting to fantasy and magic realism where it makes a point about the received wisdom we are offered. Being able to think is a key skill for a feminist and being able to laugh the last defence against the nonsense all around us, so these books encourage either or both.

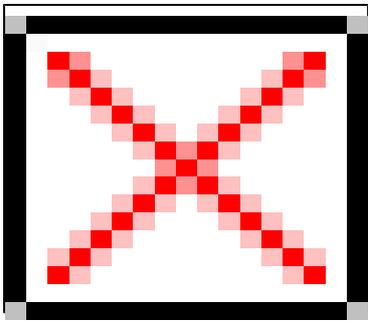


**Ballet Shoes** (1936)

Noel Streatfeild, Puffin, 240pp, 978-0141334424, £6.99 pbk

The eternally soothing quality to this classic tale of three sisters gathered into a loving makeshift family in bizarre circumstances, *Ballet Shoes* leaves room for feminism by stealth. When the Fossils take to the stage to support themselves (if published today, this would be the stuff of fantasy) their experience is low on stardust and high on reality: this is a book about knowing what you want and making it happen, whether you're committed ballet dancer Posy or middle child Petrova, who shuns the limelight and is brilliant with engines. Supported by a circle of strong women, the girls learn the value of hard work, generosity and persistence.

**Princess Smartypants** (1986)



Babette Cole, Puffin, 32pp, 978-0140555264, £6.99 pbk [www.babette-cole.co.uk](http://www.babette-cole.co.uk) [4]

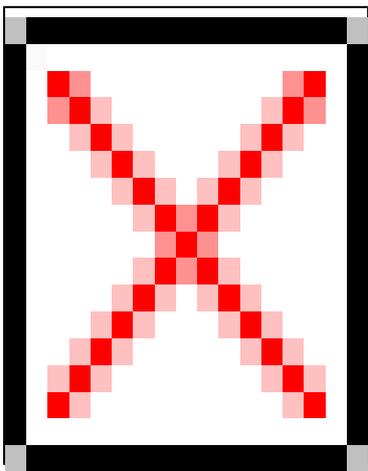
This tale of the princess who throws her toys out of the pram and the hapless princes out of the palace is rooted in a sense of howling irritation with the status quo of fairy-tale conventions. Babette Cole, with the chutzpah of her heroine, has set up her own e-book company to ensure that Her Royal Stropmy Highness achieves immortality. Long may she reign.

### **Bill's New Frock (1989)**

Anne Fine, Egmont, 112pp, 978-1405233187, £4.99 pbk

It would be depressing to find that this sharp satire of gender stereotyping in schools was still just as necessary, but its sheer entertainment value does not date.

### **Amazing Grace (1991)**

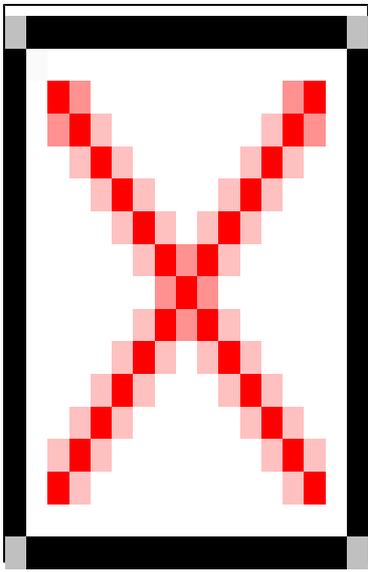


Mary Hoffman, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 978-1845077495, £6.99 pbk

The first and most enchanting Grace book, **Amazing Grace** offers opportunities for talking about race, gender and self-esteem with young children who can go on to enjoy the Grace storybooks. The reader is compelled to cheer on a little girl who loves acting out stories, who creates her own cast of thousands with her toys and cat and who fights tooth and nail for the role of Peter Pan (not the Virgin Mary) in the school play. Caroline Binch's watercolours present affirming glimpses of real family life, including an exhausted working mother and a wise Nana who tells Grace: 'you can be anything you want to be, if you put your mind to it?.'

### **The Illustrated Mum (1999)**

Jacqueline Wilson, Doubleday, 320pp, 978-0440867814, £6.99 pbk

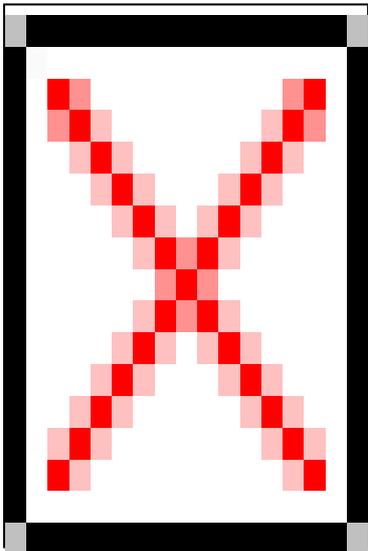


Many of Jacqueline Wilson's books show young girls coping with whatever life has thrown at them with courage and ingenuity: the **Tracy Beaker** and **Hetty Feather** tales stand out, plus the Girls trilogy for older readers. The Illustrated Mum is particularly impressive because of the complexity of the mother-daughter bond it explores. To outsiders the chaotic Marigold is a hopeless parent, spending the housekeeping on tattoos and cake and unable to manage her alcohol dependency and manic depression. Older daughter Dolphin often struggles to parent both her mum and her younger sister. But it is clear that while Marigold's vulnerability attracts scary situations, she and her daughters offer the only port in a storm for each other.

### **Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging** (1999)

Louise Rennison, HarperCollins Children's Books, 256pp, 978-0007218677, £6.99 pbk

Louise Rennison's **Confessions of Georgia Nicolson** series ? all 10 laugh-out-loud volumes ? is firmly in the



my-so-called-life tradition of teenage diary fiction. The tales are for and about girls who are trying to beat puberty into submission, and Rennison understands the need for stimulation, fun and comfort in this age group. Georgia is self-obsessed, melodramatic and boy-crazy but also funny, loyal, and deft with language. She has sensible friends who curb her excesses with kindness, like fun teachers or adventurous aunts. The books are much more substantial than the covers make them appear. Above all, they teach non-acceptance of the adults' design for living, with laughter the best weapon in the battle for teenage identity.

### **Lady: My Life as a Bitch** (2001)

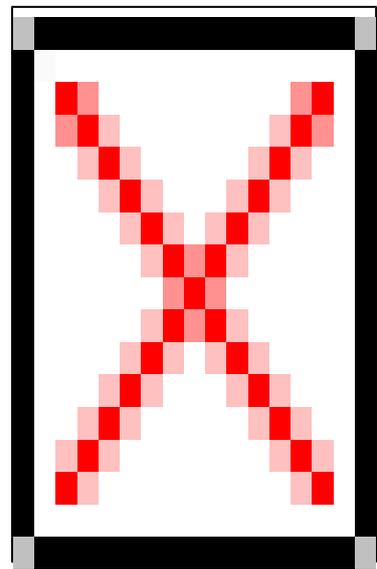
Melvin Burgess, Puffin, 208pp, 978-0141310282, O/P

A funny, poignant tale about a 17-year-old girl and her relationship with sexual desire. When Sandra turns into a dog, a world of extremes opens to her. The excited fascination with sex that had led her into conflict with adults when she was a human (although it was legal) is now expected behaviour. The message is that sex can be fun but that compulsive

promiscuity is not a wise lifestyle choice and even dogs might not be allowed to enjoy it for long. Thoughtful readers will enjoy the canine debate on what it means to be human, and note that Sandra is becoming 'sensible' without adults' intervention before her dog life even starts.

### **A Gathering Light** (2003)

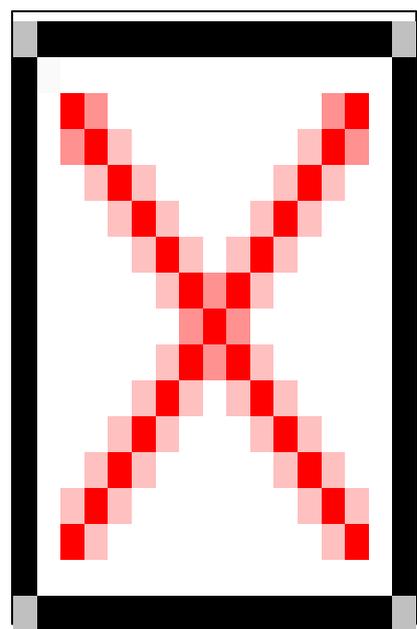
Jennifer Donnelly, Bloomsbury, 400pp, 978-0747570639, £6.99 pbk



A glimpse of rural women's and girls' lives in the startlingly recent past as a desperately poor logger's daughter born early in the 20th century in upstate New York has to fight all the way for her education while filling her dead mother's role at home. A multi-layered tale embracing the true story of the murder of Grace Brown by her lover on Big Moose Lake in 1906 (the same case that inspired **An American Tragedy** by Theodore Dreiser), it introduces concerns of race, gender, class and poverty through Mattie's determination to increase her choices in life. The most chilling predicament is that of Mattie's teacher, whose husband once tried to have her committed for writing poetry.

### **Just Like Tomorrow** (2004)

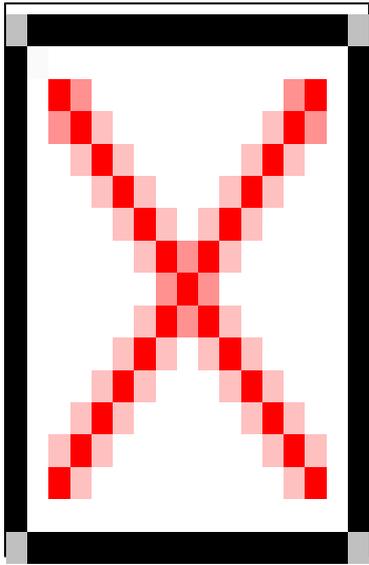
Faïza Guène, translated by Sarah Ardizzone, Definitions, 192pp, 978-1862301580, £5.99 pbk



Doria, a second-generation Moroccan immigrant, lives in a grotty suburb north of Paris, a million miles in spirit from the tourists' City of Lights. Her father has abandoned her mother in search of a younger wife who can give him a son. We follow Doria's inner thoughts, stoical but packed with attitude, through her fifteenth year. While she struggles with being patronised by officialdom and misunderstood by males, she and her mother take small steps towards a better

future. The translation breathes the life of the streets through its Franco-Arabic slang, allowing us to live inside Doria's head. This proves to be a turbulent but illuminating place.

### **Daughters of Time (2014)**



**The History Girls**, Templar, 352pp, 978-1848771697, £7.99 pbk

From Boudicca to the Greenham Common protestors via Aphra Behn, Mary Seacole, Emily Davison and Amy Johnson, the group of significant writers for children behind The History Girls blog (Mary Hoffman, Catherine Johnson, Celia Rees among others) correct myths and bring reputations to life in stories about remarkable women through the ages.

Geraldine Brennan is a journalist specialising in children's books and education, regularly reviews for the **Observer** and has judged several literary awards.

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