



Ten of the Best: books for beginner readers

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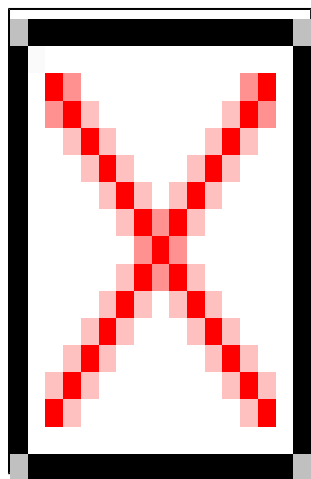
Ten of the Best

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Ten of the Best Books for Beginner Readers chosen by **Tony West** and **Margaret Wallace Jones** of **The Alligator?s Mouth Bookshop**

Books for children aged 6-8 are so important: this is where readers for life are made. Children need exciting, entertaining, funny, unusual and (crucially) beautifully illustrated books which will make them fall in love with reading forever. Booksellers Tony West and Margaret Wallace-Jones think it?s so vital that last year they launched [The Alligator?s Mouth Award](#) [4] for illustrated early fiction to celebrate the wonderfully imaginative books available for this age group. Below are ten of their favourites.

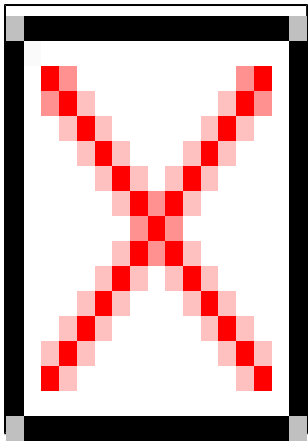
[The Cat and the King](#) [5]



Nick Sharratt, Alison Green Books, 978-1407135090, £6.99 pbk

After an unfortunate dragon-related incident, the King and his cat are exiled from their castle. They flee to a suburban bungalow and meet their new neighbours, the Cromwells. What could possibly go wrong? Charming adventures ensue as the delightful duo visit the supermarket, queue for the bus, go to car boot sales and try to be normal. The king is not of a practical turn of mind, but fortunately his cat is - this feline polymath can do everything (apart from talk - that would be silly). Picture book legend Nick Sharratt?s first venture into longer fiction is warm and witty, brilliantly illuminated by the detail in his engaging illustrations. Don?t miss the sequel, **Nice Work for the Cat and the King** which won the 2019 **Alligator?s Mouth Award**. **(Review by Margaret)**

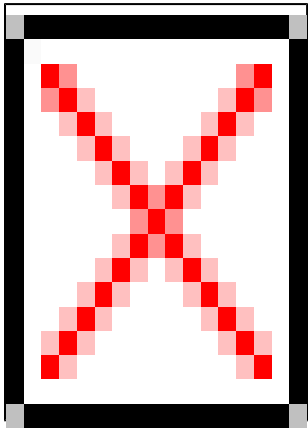
King Coo



[Adam Stower](#) [6], David Fickling Books, 978-1910989418, £6.99 pbk

While on the run from Monty Grabbe, the world's worst bully, Ben Pole falls into an extraordinary hidden kingdom, ruled by the irrepressible King Coo. Coo is not intimidated by bullies (or by anything) and soon a wildly inventive plan is hatched to thwart Monty and his ghastly sidekicks. Adam Stower demonstrates an impressive talent for elaborate Heath-Robinsonesque dens, traps and contraptions, and his joyous illustrations work perfectly with the hugely entertaining story. The revelation of King Coo's true identity made me gasp and giggle aloud on public transport. Fun from first page to last. **(Review by Margaret)**

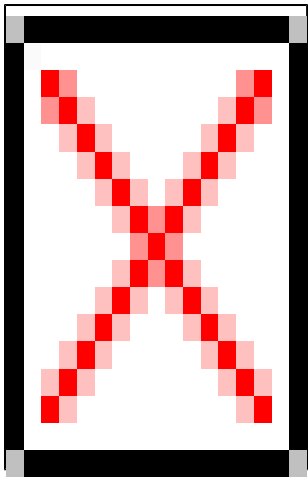
[The Adventures of Harry Stevenson](#) [7]



Ali Pye, Simon and Schuster, 978-1471170232, £5.99 pbk

There just aren't enough novels about Guinea pigs. This lovely book addresses this with two thrilling tales about Harry, who prefers a quiet life but is destined for greatness. Harry fears the Outside, but when accidentally left behind by his family he embarks on an epic journey via bicycle, reluctant dog and pizza van until at last they are reunited. It's **The Incredible Journey** for guinea pigs. This furry, football-loving fan of leafy greens is a timeless hero - we can all relate to Harry's tendency to catastrophise and make poor decisions when peckish. Pye has invested Harry with irresistible charm, and her illustrations are a delight. As Harry himself would say: 'Wheeeek!' **(Review by Margaret)**

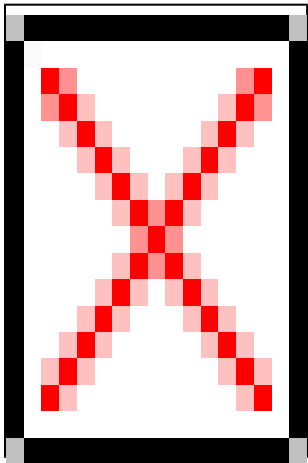
The Naughtiest Unicorn



Pip Bird and David O'Connell, Egmont, 978-1405294782, £5.99

Mira can't wait to arrive at Unicorn School where she will be given her very own unicorn and embark on a life of glitter and excitement. Unfortunately she is allocated the flatulent, truculent and disobedient Dave, who is mostly interested in eating doughnuts and earning dreaded Havoc Points. Despite these challenges, Mira makes friends with risk-averse Raheem and fearless Darcy, and finds Dave has surprising talents. There's fun and adventure on every page, the characters are pleasingly diverse and the pictures lead the reader happily through the story. Plenty more to come in this excellent recent series. (Review by Margaret)

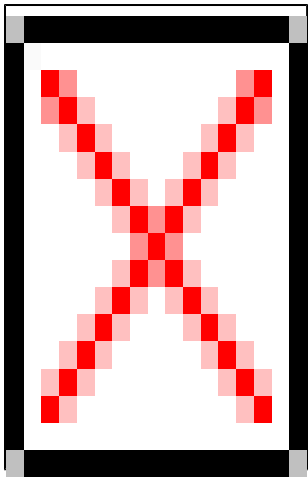
[Two Sides](#) [8]



Polly Ho-Yen, Stripes Publishing, illustrated by Binny Talib, 978-1788950626, £7.99 pbk

Lula and Lenka have been best friends forever. They are so different - Lula is messy, Lenka is tidy. Lenka is organised, Lula is always late. One likes cats, the other prefers dogs. None of this matters, until one day Lula's forgetfulness triggers a terrible argument. Can the girls work it out, or are they too different after all? This book is written with a warm understanding of the importance of friendship, and the beautiful, light-filled illustrations lend a sunny atmosphere to this celebration of loving someone who is not like you. (Review by Margaret)

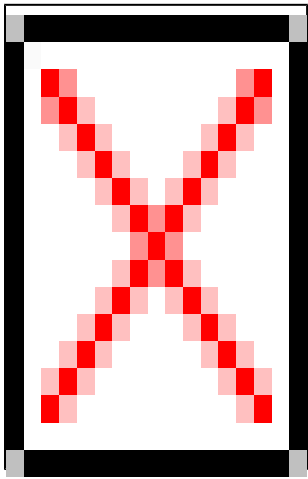
Little Wolf's Book of Badness



Ian Whybrow, illustrated by Tony Ross, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007458547, £5.99 pbk

When we first meet Little Wolf he has just started out on a long and perilous journey to Cuning College, deep in the woods, where he will learn how to be a big bad wolf. The trouble is he doesn't really want to be big and bad, such is his disposition, as he gets along with the hoomins and likes the little creechurs of the Forest. His letters home imploring his parents to let him return reveal as much about himself as with his escapades and the friends he makes along the way. He is not unlike Nigel Molesworth but with 9 extra rules of badness.

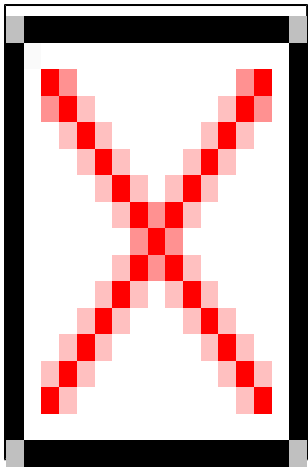
[The Man Who Wore All His Clothes](#) [9]



Allan Ahlberg, illustrated by Katherine McEwan, Walker Books, 978-1406381641, £5.99 pbk

This is the first of four stories about the Gaskitt family liberally sprinkled with Ahlberg touches that make it extra quirky. We meet each of the happy-families-style Gaskitts plus their cat and their communicative fridge and a bank robber which in Ahlberg world means car chases and prison will be involved but why would someone go to work wearing all their clothes? It's not very English, surely? Lovely colourful illustrations on every page by McEwan at her best. **(Review by Tony)**

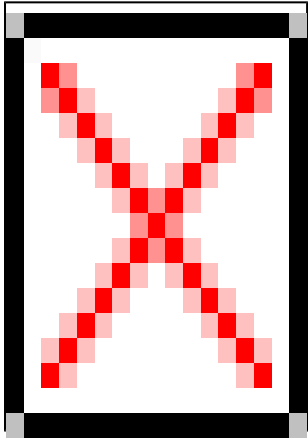
Mac B Kid Spy Undercover



Mac Barnett, illustrated by Mike Lowery, Scholastic, 978-1407196343, £6.99pbk

When Mac Barnett was a child in the 80s he was recruited by the Queen no less on a top secret mission to find the Crown Jewels. For one so young this was an awesome responsibility which, in this faithful retelling of the facts (she was only missing a spoon it quickly becomes apparent) brings this little understood historical period to life. How fortunate that Mike Lowery was on hand to capture this young sleuth's globetrotting adventure. **(Review by Tony)**

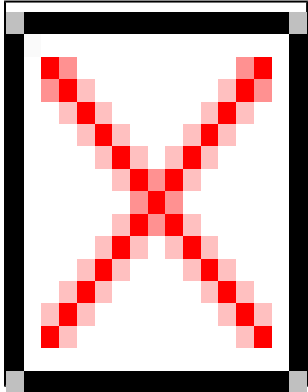
[The Legend of Kevin](#) [10]



Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre, Oxford, 978-0192766090, £6.99pbk

Any of the books by Reeve and McIntyre are worthy of inclusion on this list but I particularly like the roly-poly flying pony for its perfectly cute but wildly imaginative scenario. After a storm blows him into town from the Outermost West Kevin alights on the building where Max lives. There are some mermaids and sea monkeys, a roof-top rescue and some meditations on biscuits, but not in that order. The pictures enhance the words and every turn of the page McIntyre's bold, humorous illustrations lead the reader on. **(Review by Tony)**

Frog and Toad series



Arnold Lobel, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007512928, £7.99pbk

These are not found as readily as they were in the eighties and nineties (we import ours from America) and though these are an easier level of reading than other titles reviewed here I believe they are the most perfect books for a child to discover deeper meanings in the pages of a book. Wise Frog and his bewildered and naive friend Toad teach us nuggets of zen wisdom in each of the four* books - memorable for me are **The List, The Lost Button, The Letter** - I could go on. Every story is a gem. Full of kindness and unwavering friendship these are the books I wish I had written so my debt to humanity is paid. **Grasshopper on the Road** is as deft a portrait of a freethinker in a world of headless numpties and narrow-minded zealotry as you could hope to find. **(Review by Tony)**

*with five stories each

Five years ago, **Tony West** and **Margaret Wallace-Jones** opened [The Alligator's Mouth Children's Bookshop](#) [4] in Richmond - a bookshop at the heart of the community. Tony has a background in teaching and over 20 years in the book trade. Margaret studied children's literature at **Roehampton University** and bookselling is the best job she has ever had.

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