



The 100 Best Children's Books

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Editor's Choice:

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When I reviewed the Grolier Club's **One Hundred Books Famous in Children's Literature** for the Newsletter of the [Children's Books History Society](#) [4], I remarked that quibbling over inclusions or exclusions was pointless, as 'every member of this Society could compile his or her own list of a hundred books, and each of these lists would be different and equally valid.' Brian Alderson, the founder of the **CBHS** and also a contributor to the Grolier volume, has taken me at my word, and after a lifetime of devotion to the study of children's literature has produced his own '100 Best' selection.

Alderson has restricted himself to works of fiction (though allowing enough leeway for **The Tailor of Gloucester** and Quentin Blake's wordless **Clown**), whereas the Grolier selection admitted poetry and picture books. Nevertheless there is a significant overlap in the two choices - 26 titles, by my count. Both books close with **Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** - not perhaps one of the 'best' in terms of originality or language, but certainly a hugely important milestone in the history of children's reading.

The feeling that each chosen book forms such a milestone has been a strong factor in determining Alderson's intriguing selection, so that 'the bestness of my authors of choice may not always lie in their absolute literary accomplishment but in their importance as waymarks in the development of a literature.' So there are books here whose importance is primarily a matter of historical value rather than everlasting freshness. Alderson starts with **The Pilgrim's Progress** in 1678, and 34 of his 100 were published before the twentieth century. This may disappoint some who are looking for recommendations for today's children, but it means his commentary on every book right up to **Harry Potter** is rooted in a sound understanding of the history of the children's story as a distinct genre, or 'multiplicity of genres.'

Alderson writes that, 'What I have been looking for in the authors that I have chosen is a distinctiveness in their writing which brings it close to that of the told story.'

So alongside such obvious choices as **Black Beauty**, **Bevis: The Story of a Boy**, **The Wind in the Willows**, **The Hobbit**, **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**, and **The Borrowers**, Brian Alderson finds room for a number of relatively unsung treasures. Here we find Christopher Pearse Cranch's fantasy **The Last of the Huggermuggers**, Hesba Stretton's story of a street waif **Jessica's First Prayer**, J. Meade Falkner's adventure story **Moonfleet**, K. M. Briggs's

folklore-drenched **Hobberdy Dick**, and Janni Howker's historical novel of the borders [Martin Farrell](#) [5].

There are some surprises, too. Who would have imagined finding W. E. Johns' Biggles stories **The Camels Are Coming** in a list of the 100 best children's books? Yet Alderson writes very interestingly about this and indeed all the books. He is a very genial companion as he walks us through his selection, becoming especially animated when he arrives at a particular favourite, such as Masfield's **The Midnight Folk** or de la Mare's **The Three Mulla-Mulgars**.

One might cavil at some of the choices from within an oeuvre. I would have chosen **The Box of Delights** rather than **The Midnight Folk** because of its breathtaking narrative momentum, its delight in language, and its influence on authors such as Alan Garner and Susan Cooper via the 1943 radio adaptation by John Keir Cross. And while there are two books by Philippa Pearce - her own **The Battle of Bubble and Squeak**, and her brilliantly deft editing/rewriting of Brian Fairfax-Lucy's **The Children of the House** - it seems odd to prefer these to her three bona fide masterpieces, **Minnow on the Say**, **A Dog So Small**, and **Tom's Midnight Garden**.

But this is Brian Alderson's choice, not mine. His knowledge in this area is both wide and deep, and he has made that choice with taste and discretion. Some of what he writes will be familiar to readers of **Books for Keeps**, because he draws on the articles he has written for this journal over the years on classic children's books.

The one really controversial choice is the decision to include **A Swarm in May** by William Mayne. No one can deny this is a really fine book. But is it blighted forever by Mayne's conviction in 2004 for 'having abused young girls some thirty years previously'? The problem of William Mayne is one that will haunt children's literature scholarship for many decades to come. How can it be that the uniquely voiced author of **A Swarm in May**, and so many other unparalleled books - **No More School**, **A Year and a Day**, **Ravensgill**, **Earthfasts**, **The Jersey Shore** - was also a child abuser? In his books he treats his child protagonists with such empathy and understanding. But those books, brilliant as they are, 'are all out of print.' Can we value the work despite the man? It's a conundrum with no easy answer.

Oh - and really no room for **Harriet the Spy**?

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