"100 Children's Books that Belong in Every Library"

A chapter from

Children's Literature Gems

by Elizabeth Bird



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100 Children's Books That Belong in Every Library (Snarky Annotations Included)

No two children's librarians will ever come up with the same list of the 100 children's books for children up to age twelve that every library should own. This is my own personal list of titles and preferences that I think people (librarians as well as patrons) should seriously consider owning. They have been selected through my work with children and their presence in the literary canon. These are titles that will stand the test of time. Most, if not all, should still be in print.

Board Books (Birth to Age 2)

Board books are a tricky group to judge. In general you want books with bright colors that contrast nicely, rounded corners, and a jolly text. There are hundreds of fine and fabulous board books to choose from, but these three are my favorites.

- **Ten, Nine, Eight** by Molly Bang—A great number book where a parent and child count various items in a room. A sweet title containing father-daughter love.
- **Goodnight Moon** by Margaret Wise Brown—Comfort reading in the form of saying good night to various objects. I'm not personally a fan, but as bedtime fare goes, this title is famous for all the right reasons.
- The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle—A color book, number book, interactive book, and title with scientific underpinnings to boot. And it's gorgeous.

Picture Books (Ages 2 to 8)

With the understanding that these books are to be read to children when they are young and by children when they are older, here is a tiny picture book canon. I've tried to include some titles that are a bit more recent that your average *Millions of Cats* fare.

- Miss Nelson Is Missing! by Harry Allard, illustrated by James Marshall—The Allard/Marshall mix gave the world its most infamous substitute teacher. I had to limit this list to 100 books, so I allowed myself only one Marshall title. George and Martha, I proffer to you my apologies.
- Madeline by Ludwig Bemelmans—Creates a female character with just the right mix of spunk without ever becoming obnoxious. A visual stunner that also manages to read aloud brilliantly. No small feat.
- The Story of Babar by Jean de Brunhoff—A little elephant goes from innocent jungle denizen to dapper manabout-town. In spite of accusations of colonial underpinnings (to say nothing of the abundant dead elephants), Babar's snazzy style and charm are fit for any library collection.
- The Rabbit and the Turtle by Eric Carle—If you had to pick only one collection of Aesop's fables to include in your collection, go with the one created by the only children's book illustrator to have his own museum.
- Abuela by Arthur Dorros, illustrated by Elisa Kleven— A girl's relationship with her grandmother takes to the sky. Offering Spanish and English terms alongside one another, this beautiful tale is both touching and a wonderful read.
- Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge by Mem Fox, illustrated by Julie Vivas—A boy befriends an elderly woman whose memory is fading. "Issue" books are difficult to write and even harder to read. Fox's is one of the best of the lot, and illustrator Julie Vivas (to my mind) should be canonized at some point.

- Millions of Cats by Wanda Gág—A man comes home with more than his fair share of felines in tow. An oldie, a goodie, and one of those books that will get stuck in your head forever.
- Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse by Kevin Henkes—Lilly's relationship with her beloved teacher is strained when her antics lead to punishment. Lilly is one of the rare self-absorbed preschool heroines who can act naughty and indulgent without sacrificing personality for sympathy.
- The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats—The premise sounds simple: a boy plays in the snow. But it was considered a groundbreaking book when Keats made his small hero a black child. Now the book's look at the beauty of urban living and city environments serves as a rare sight on bookstore and library shelves today.
- The Story of Ferdinand by Munro Leaf, illustrated by Robert Lawson—A young bull prefers smelling flowers to goring matadors. It has been accused of anti-American pacifism, so you know it has to be good.
- Swimmy by Leo Lionni—A small black fish finds acceptance through difference. Though Lionni is better remembered for his mice, Swimmy remains his masterpiece due to its take on brains over brawn and a look at making differences work within the context of society.
- Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? by Bill Martin
 Jr., illustrated by Eric Carle—Storytime staple teaching
 colors and animals, and with it Carle makes his third
 appearance on my list. But seriously? How could I
 have the heart not to include it?
- Chicka Chicka Boom Boom by Bill Martin Jr., illustrated by John Archambault—The alphabet rendered in a catchy,

- bouncy, goofy format. This one got hit hard with the "future classic" stick. If you haven't discovered it already, then you are out of the loop.
- Make Way for Ducklings by Robert McCloskey—Two ducks attempt to find a safe place to raise their brood and, let's admit it, fail. Charges of sexism briefly dogged this fabulous tale (Mr. Duck gets to go on a walkabout while Mrs. Duck stays home with the little duckies), but in the end it's the quintessential story of ducks and traffic congestion.
- And Tango Makes Three by Peter Parnell and Justin
 Richardson, illustrated by Henry Cole—Based on a true
 story, two male penguins raise a chick of their own.
 I've few informational books on this list and fewer
 titles with gay-friendly themes. Technically, Tango
 meets both of these needs and happens to be a great
 book as well.
- The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter—A naughty little rabbit gets his comeuppance. Potter made the book tiny for tiny hands. There is no denying the charm of the crisp language and scientifically accurate (albeit clothed) bunny rabbits in this story.
- Curious George by H. A. Rey—Another naughty animal, this time in the form of a monkey. Personally I can take this cheeky simian or leave him, but I sense potential outrage at his exclusion. And so on this list he crouches, grinning maniacally.
- Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak—A boy's fantasy at acting out leads to his kingship in foreign lands. Every psychoanalytic report and academic thesis to pry this book apart inevitably ends up at the same conclusion: Book good. Read book.

- Caps for Sale by Esphyr Slobodkina—A salesman runs into trouble when monkeys foist his wares. The shame of my life is that I encountered Slobodkina's tale only in my adulthood. Weirdo monkey noises aside, this is a king of the read-alouds.
- Chato and the Party Animals by Gary Soto, illustrated by Susan Guevara—Barrio boys in feline form is such a bizarre concept that it manages to work like a dream in this tale of miscommunication. A plethora of Spanish-language terms and phrases doesn't hurt matters.
- Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters by John Steptoe—Two girls vie for the hand of a handsome prince. No list of this sort is complete without a little Steptoe in the mix. The fable's strong to begin with; in his hands, it takes on a magical quality.
- Jumanji by Chris Van Allsburg—Speaking of magical qualities, I suppose we could go back and forth all day on which Van Allsburg offering is the strongest. My vote goes to the one with the tsetse fly.
- Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad
 Day by Judith Viorst, illustrated by Ray Cruz—Childfriendly child psychology with a kid having the
 worst possible day on record. Schadenfreude allows
 young readers the dual privilege of sympathizing with
 Alexander's pain and secretly chortling over the fact
 that it isn't happening to them.
- Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus by Mo Willems—A bird attempts to talk readers into letting him into a driver's seat. Taking seeming simplicity to another level, Willems smashes down the fourth wall and creates an icon for the new millennium. A wheeling-dealing icon at that.

- A Chair for My Mother by Vera B. Williams—A girl and her mother scrimp and save to get the perfect chair. Normally children's authors are reluctant to portray working-class characters unless they exist in a historical setting. Williams tromps that trend and tugs at the heartstrings without cloying or pandering.
- Show Way by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by Hudson Talbott—Woodson follows her own family history through several generations. It could have won for its pictures, but Woodson's personal story was a Newbery Honor book for a reason: the woman can write.
- Lon Po Po by Ed Young—Young's masterpiece. This Little Red Riding Hood tale somehow manages to be even creepier than the original while simultaneously being less disturbing.

Books for Beginning Readers (Ages 5 to 7)

When a child looks at you with all the pent-up frustration of an early reader, it is wise to acquiesce to his or her reading levels. These books will give them the substance they need while still remaining cool.

- Are You My Mother? by P. D. Eastman—A newborn searches tirelessly for his mom. Actually, my brother-in-law despises this title. But whereas he finds the barren, motherless landscape treacherous and forbidding, I love how Eastman's plucky bird hero searches for his heart's desire without a smidgen of self-pity or despair.
- Frog and Toad Are Friends by Arthur Lobel—Two friends have small adventures. Words do not do it justice.

 If there is such a thing as a perfect beginning reader book, this is it.

- The Cat in the Hat by Dr. Seuss—A dangerous playmate proves to two children that you should be careful what you wish for. Anarchic top-hatted felines aside, Seuss's book uses some basic words in a format that finally put the kibosh on good old Dick and Jane.
- My Friend Is Sad by Mo Willems—Piggie attempts to cheer up her friend without realizing that she's making matters worse. A comedy duo for the lollipop set. Parents have been known to stifle chuckles when reading these on subways as well.

Books for Young Readers (Ages 7 to 9)

And then suddenly they're too cool for books without chapter headings. Before you go tossing them 700-page fantasy tomes, however, consider handing them a couple of these fine and fancy early chapter books. All the words they want with a couple of pictures as well for comfort.

- Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales, selected and illustrated by Lisbeth Zwerger, translated by Anthea Bell—Choosing a favorite Andersen collection often comes down to finding the right translator. I trust Bell intrinsically, and Zwerger's uncanny sense of what makes up the heart of these tales renders her art the perfect match.
- Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing by Judy Blume—A fourth grader must deal with his little brother's antics. There isn't an older sibling alive who won't feel comforted and justified by Blume's dead-on sympathy for those who have the misfortune to be born first.
- The Stories Julian Tells by Ann Cameron—A boy and his exaggerations provide the background to these short stories. If you take the beating and whipping jokes in the book with a grain of salt, Julian provides the

- right sure-footedness and cocky attitude you need in a master of exaggeration.
- My Father's Dragon by Ruth Stiles Gannett, illustrated by Ruth Chrisman Gannett—The narrator's father goes to an island to rescue a baby dragon from its captors. It's remarkable how this one keeps chugging along through the years, and I've certainly never found a faster way to render third graders mute.
- **Toys Go Out** by Emily Jenkins, illustrated by Paul Zelinsky— Three toys live through several adventures. There are many tales of sentient toys but few with this level of pathos and wry humor.
- The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit as told by Julius Lester, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney— If you can't trust Lester to get to the bottom of the Brer Rabbit tales, then whom can you trust? Uncle Remus has been revived in an entirely new manner.
- The Year of the Dog by Grace Lin—A Taiwanese American girl navigates friendships and problems in school. Not since Laura Ingalls Wilder has an author so perfectly captured the magic in the protagonist's everyday life. Lin is a wonder.
- Ruby Lu, Brave and True by Lenore Look, illustrated by
 Anne Wilsdorf—Short stories about Chinese school
 and reflective tape. Spunky heroines are difficult to
 write without falling into facetious or twee territory.
 This gal will never be considered a knockoff Ramona,
 however, and her energy is superb.
- Sarah, Plain and Tall by Patricia MacLachlan—Homestead children meet their father's bride. Also sometimes known as "the short Newbery winner." And what it lacks in length it makes up for in incisive, smart, remarkable writing. Brevity in motion.

- Captain Underpants by Dav Pilkey—Two boys hypnotize their principal into becoming a superhero. How can I help but include him? Even if he wasn't catnip to reluctant readers, there's always room on the shelf for potty humor when it's done with such panache.
- Pink and Say by Patricia Polacco—The story of two friends during the Civil War. You could also put it in the picture book section of your library, but really it deserves a space of its own. When people ask me for a good, easy book for teens or adults who are learning to read, this is the book I go to.
- Seasons by Charlotte Zolotow, illustrated by Erik Blegvad—Poems about the seasons. Entirely a personal choice on my part, but this book evokes such remarkable sensations that I simply had to include it.

Books for Middle Readers (Ages 8 to 11)

Although school assignments will mean that most of these are read anyway, be sure to find a way to press some of these goodies into the hands of kids who might say, "What's a tollbooth?" when you mention Juster's greatest.

- The Book of Three by Lloyd Alexander—A quintessential fairy tale complete with headstrong hero, outspoken maiden, scatterbrained bard, and odd, furry thing that really likes to eat.
- Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt—A family and their dealings with eternal life. Probably contains the most misleadingly slow beginning of any children's novel I know, but Babbitt's book is a classic for a reason. Eerie and wonderful.
- The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by Frank L. Baum, illustrated by Michael Hague—Why include it? Because because because because because of the wonderful

- things it does. And to see how different it is from the movie too, for that matter.
- Caddie Woodlawn by Carol Ryrie Brink, illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman—A fiery redhead and her pioneer life. Of course, it has to handle its fair share of cries of racism in terms of the American Indian characters, but I've always felt that Caddie gets a bad rap.
- **Wabi** by Joseph Bruchac—An owl falls in love with a beautiful human girl. And to my mind, you can never have enough superhero American Indians. All of Bruchac's humor and romance with a slam-bang story as well.
- The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett, illustrated by Inga Moore—Quite possibly the world's most perfect children's book. Gothic, heartwarming, and with two protagonists you'd love to kick in the shins until they find their ecological redemption. Choose whichever version you prefer, though I'm a fan of illustrator Inga Moore's take.
- Ramona the Pest by Beverly Cleary, illustrated by Louis
 Darling—The world according to a girl just beginning
 school. Often emulated and copied every single year,
 but never to be replaced. Ramona now and forever,
 amen.
- The Dark Is Rising by Susan Cooper—A boy discovers his fantastical legacy. Technically it was the second book in the Dark Is Rising series, but this is the title where the magic really is afoot. Worth a reread if you haven't had a chance to peruse it in a while.
- The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis—Small stories about an African American family, culminating in a tense visit to Birmingham at an explosive time. If you would like to see historical fiction done well, look no further.

- Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl, illustrated by Quentin Blake—A boy, a chocolate factory, and a potentially insane proprietor. Several people have equated sex in adult literature to food in children's. Candy, however, is a realm in and of itself, and only Dahl could have mixed in unpreachy moralizing this dark and delightful.
- Half Magic by Edward Eager, illustrated by N. M. Bodecker— What if you found an object that would grant you half your wishes? Behold girls as knights and cats that can half talk. If this doesn't charm you, nothing will.
- The Birchbark House by Louise Erdrich—Erdrich gave the
 Little House franchise a run for its money when
 she began this amazing and delightful series about
 American Indians in the Upper Midwest. Funny and
 heartbreaking by turns.
- Harriet the Spy by Louise Fitzhugh—Spying on your friends and family can lead to complications, it seems.

 Features an unlikable heroine who manages to inspire a whole generation of girls to keep journals of their own. If that isn't a testament to good writing, what is?
- The Whipping Boy by Sid Fleischman, illustrated by Peter Sís—A whipping boy and his prince find themselves up to their ears in adventure. Competes with Sarah, Plain and Tall for the title of "Most Preferred Short Newbery Winner." Raucous, fun, and exciting are other words you might use to describe it.
- Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key by Jack Gantos—Children everywhere with attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder found their spokesman in Joey, a kid who manages to charm you even while he's bouncing off the walls and driving you insane.

- The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame, illustrated by Inga Moore—One of the first novels for children to put clothes on animals. Various edited versions prove quite popular, as do those with well-illustrated full texts.
- The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales by Virginia Hamilton, illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon—Tales of African Americans are coupled with Dillon and Dillon's smooth, insightful pictures. Hamilton's voice rings cool and clear on every page, enticing readers to find her other works.
- Redwall by Brian Jacques—Abbey mice fight a team of nasty rats in this breathtaking beginning to a series. As I always say, if you want to write a series about adults for children, just make those adults furry woodland creatures. Jacques is a master storyteller, and his hit series begins with a magnificent bang.
- The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster, illustrated by Jules Feiffer—A bored boy finds himself in an alternate world. The Juster/Feiffer pairing brings this ribald satire into full-breathing life.
- Isaac Newton by Kathleen Krull, illustrated by Boris Kulikov—A better biography of Newton for kids I have not seen. A brilliant, fun, and funny read. Everything nonfiction should attempt to be.
- A Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula K. Le Guin—A self-centered boy finds that magic isn't as easy to control as he thought it was. Le Guin did wizarding schools before it was cool. Better still, she was good at them.
- A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle—A girl and two boys attempt to rescue her father from evil otherworldly forces. Writers, do not try this at home! The mixing of science fiction and religion is tricky at best, car

- wrecky at worst. L'Engle's success in this arena can be attributed to her mad skills.
- The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by C. S. Lewis—
 Speaking of mixing religion into your works, Lewis wasn't afraid of making his metaphor shockingly obvious to adults and entirely invisible to children.
 The idea of kids entering an alternate fantasy world is hard to top in this one.
- Pippi Longstocking by Astrid Lindgren, illustrated by Lauren Child—A wild girl with her own horse entertains the local tots. To my mind, Pippi is the original child superhero. Super strength, tons of money, her own monkey. What more could any child want?
- **Rules** by Cynthia Lord—A girl deals with her little brother's autism and gaining the acceptance of the new girl on the block. Lord's pitch-perfect storytelling takes the difficult subject of autism and works it into a universal tale of friends and siblings.
- Number the Stars by Lois Lowry—A child helps save some Jewish people in World War II Denmark. It's always very difficult to make the Holocaust a subject that is comprehensible to children. Lowry's is perhaps one of the smartest, and her storytelling abilities shine on every page.
- The New Way Things Work by David Macaulay—Inventions, sound, even digital aspects are all explained in Macaulay's signature style. Informational books are rarely so intriguing. Macaulay has a way with concrete objects and mechanics that few match and fewer still try.
- Winnie-the-Pooh by A. A. Milne, illustrated by E. Shepard—A boy and his bear in a book that manages to be cute without being twee. A way to attempt to banish Disney's version from the minds of young readers.

- Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH by Robert C. O'Brien—
 A mouse turns to artificially intelligent rats to help
 her in her hour of need. Science fiction is rarely this
 engaging. A book that takes the whole talking mice
 idea and turns it entirely on its head. Wonderfully
 dark.
- Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson—A boy and a girl become friends, creating their own imaginary world.

 While some kids encounter their first literary death in Charlotte's Web, others hit it in this stark and haunting tale. One of the finest novels there is.
- The Higher Power of Lucky by Susan Patron, illustrated by Matt Phelan—A girl attempts to find "home" with her guardian in the smallest town imaginable. Full of subtle human moments, this delicious story of Lucky's struggle and life becomes much more than the sum of its parts.
- Hatchet by Gary Paulsen—To my mind, Paulsen is the Ernest Hemingway of children's books. And no title backs this theory up better than his harrowing tale of one boy's fight for survival in the wilderness.
- Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J. K. Rowling— A boy discovers that he is a wizard. Love the series or hate it (and I love it), Harry is unavoidable and undeniably popular. The fact that the books are incredibly fun doesn't hurt matters any either.
- Holes by Louis Sachar—This isn't just the story of a boy named Stanley Yelnats. This is the story of America (she said without irony). To my mind, the best Newbery Medal winner in the past twenty years.
- Where the Sidewalk Ends by Shel Silverstein—Twisted poetry from the craziest children's author out there. I had a hard time deciding between this and A Light in

- *the Attic,* but I think the poem about Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout alone breaks the tie.
- The Arrival by Shaun Tan—An immigrant attempts to make a new life in a strange world. Convinced that a wordless graphic novel (or is it a wordless novel?) can't make you cry? Think again.
- Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor—Fourth grader Cassie Logan deals with racism in the 1930s American South. One of the true children's literary epics and a blunt introduction to racism.
- **Team Moon: How 400,000 People Landed Apollo 11 on the Moon** by Catherine Thimmesh—A gripping nonfiction play-by-play of the people responsible for the moon landing. A breathtaking book.
- Charlotte's Web by E. B. White, illustrated by Garth Williams—A pig and a spider strike up an unlikely friendship. For many, it's the book that gently introduced them to the concept of death. For others, it's an almost perfect barnyard tale.
- Little House in the Big Woods by Laura Ingalls Wilder, illustrated by Garth Williams—Mothers, don't let your babies grow up to not read at least one Little House book. And if you read any of them, you may as well begin at the beginning.

Books for Older Readers (Ages 11 to 12)

Chains by Laurie Halse Anderson—A slave in colonial America finds that neither the British nor the Americans have her best interests at heart. Pulse pounding and an excellent corrective to anyone who sees this moment in history in terms of good guys versus bad guys.

- The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins—Children compete to stay alive in a dark and distant future. Gripping. Violent. Intense. Unforgettable from cover to cover.
- Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story of Brain Science by John Fleischman—The true tale of one man's close association with a six-foot pole and the hole it left in his brain. Quite possibly my favorite book to booktalk.
- Lincoln: A Photobiography by Russell Freedman—When they ask you for a Lincoln biography, this is the one to hand over time and time again. The rare nonfiction Newbery Medal winner.
- The House of Dies Drear by Virginia Hamilton—A great ghost story and mystery with the Underground Railroad worked in for spice.
- The Outsiders by S. E. Hinton—Rich and poor boys fight for their lives. Even if you remember that Hinton wrote this when she was sixteen, you will hardly be able to believe it. One of the few books for young readers that actively deal with class.
- The Giver by Lois Lowry—A boy takes on the memories of his community. Allegory done right (and that's no small task). Once you've finished reading it, you can decide what to make of the ending on your own.
- Anne of Green Gables by L. M. Montgomery—A girl searches for "home" while wrangling with her own overactive imagination. The world's most popular Canadian redhead in her first (and best, if you ask me) tale.
- Bad Boy: A Memoir by Walter Dean Myers—Myers records his own boyhood in 1940s Harlem. I bet a lot of people would fill this list to brimming with Walter Dean Myers if you asked them to. And if you need a good autobiography, then this is probably the one to pick.

- The Westing Game by Ellen Raskin—A game that could lead to riches in the end. It's hard to find people who aren't a fan of this one, as evidenced by the many, many reissues and editions it's associated with. If we were to play the What's the Most Popular Newbery Medal Winner game, this might even give Holes a run for its money.
- Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval
 Village by Laura Amy Schlitz—Twenty-two
 monologues written in the voices of children living in
 an English village. Not only will this come in handy
 for your students who need audition and forensic
 pieces, but it is also a fun, factual, downright amusing
 ride as well. And that shiny medal on the cover
 doesn't hurt matters much either.
- The Hobbit by J. R. R. Tolkien—A small creature called a hobbit goes on adventures against his will. I suppose that I could have added one of the other Lord of the Rings books if I'd wanted to, but sometimes it's a good idea to begin at the beginning.
- **Homecoming** by Cynthia Voigt—Child abandonment and an epic quest to find "home." Raises the great children's fear of what would happen if your mom left you in a car in a parking lot and then never came back.
- American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang—A boy tries to fit in with the other kids in his school. It was hard to pick and choose among the many graphic novels, but if Yang's story is anything, it's a deft look at assimilation and the price of giving up your soul to be like everyone else.