



Ten Essential Children's Books

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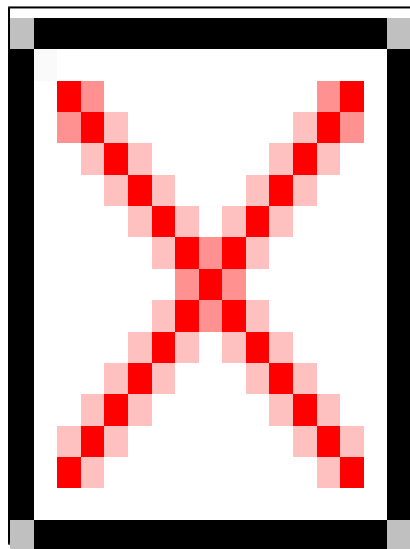
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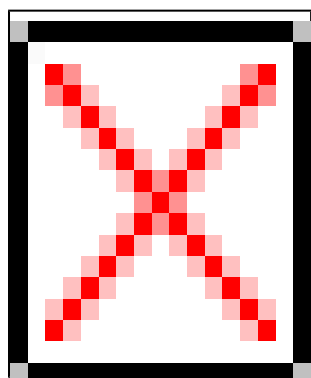
Ten essential books for young readers chosen by **Frank Cottrell-Boyce**

As part of the celebrations for our 40th anniversary, we are revising our long-running Ten of the Best feature, and asking six authors to choose the children's books they consider *essential* reading. Our thanks to **Frank Cottrell-Boyce** for this selection.



This is the hardest page I've ever written. Books were part of the architecture that sheltered me in school, and delighted me at home. Their doors opened into the past, the future and the secret gardens of the present. I always loved being read to and reading aloud so this is a list of books that I enjoyed reading aloud to my own children.

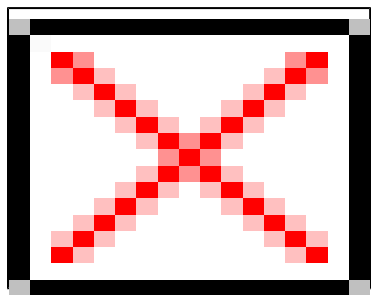
[So Much](#) [3] by Trish Cooke, illustrated by Helen Oxenbury, Walker Books, 978-1406390728, £7.99 pbk



This book is a wonder. A book about love, and family that swings back and forth between noise and quiet so that you barely notice that it is building up to a brilliantly noisy twist ending. One of the few children's books that finds a place

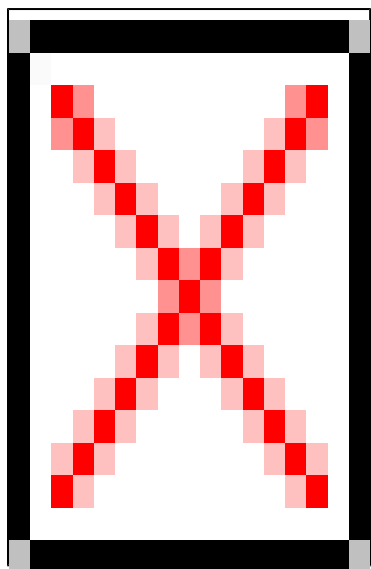
for boredom. A masterpiece of storytelling beautifully illustrated by Helen Oxenbury. In all the tortured discussions I've had with myself about which books to chose, this is the one book that I knew had to be on the list no matter what.

[Each Peach Pear Plum](#) [4] by Allan and Janet Ahlberg, Puffin, 978-0141502526, £3.99 pbk



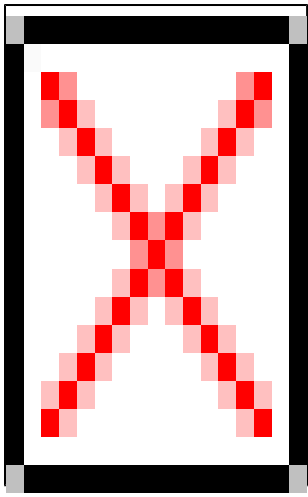
I feel privileged to have had my children during the Ahlberg era. Everything they did was rich and beautiful. I've gone for this because of the way it encourages the child-listener to join in the poem and the way it weaves together all the riches of our heritage of fairy stories. Each page anticipates the next through some tiny detail in the picture so the child is invited to look really closely at the page and enjoy all the details. A real box of delights.

King of the Copper Mountains, Paul Biegel, O/P



The thousand-year old king Mansolain is dying. A kindly doctor goes in search of the herbs that might save him. As the doctor goes on his journey, he meets various animals - from a horse with golden hooves, to a beetle and a dragon - and sends them back to the king to tell their stories. He's hoping that the stories will be exciting enough to keep the king's heart going. The stories all do - in their different ways - make your heart beat faster while the overarching story of the king's fate begins to bring all the tales together in an intricate web.

One Thousand and One Arabian Nights, retold by Geraldine McCaughrean, OUP, 978-0192750136, £8.99pbk

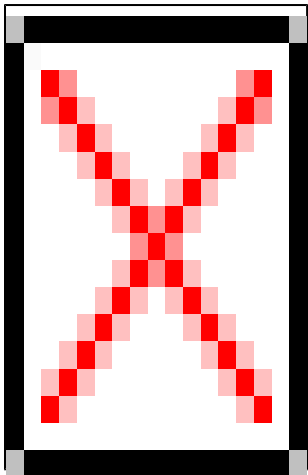


The Thousand and One Nights is a window - or a thousand and one windows - into the golden age of Islam, the era that gave us Averros, Al-Biruni, and Ibn Khaldun. These stories are an essential part of our patrimony. But every child should have a chance to meet them in something like their context ? Shaharazad?s great life or death experiment with suspense. Simple folk tales from India and the Middle East are woven into a gorgeous, sophisticated filigree, playing hide and seek with their own endings. I would highly recommend Geraldine McCaughrean?s retelling for Oxford Story Collections. In fact I?d highly recommend every sentence Geraldine McCaughrean ever wrote.

This Bowl of Earth, Jan Mark, O/P

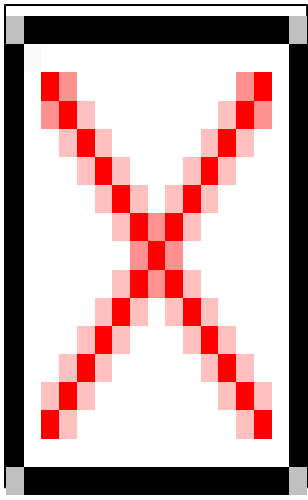
This is inexplicably out of print. It?s a deceptively simple picture book in which the narrator takes you through a year in which she tries to grow various different seeds and cuttings in a bowl of earth parked near her drain. It captures both the wonder and the disappointment of growing things from seed, and is the perfect way to introduce a child to this essential life skill and deep pleasure. A really substantial, enriching book.

The Spanish Letters, Mollie Hunter, Kelpies, 978-0863154126, £34.99 pbk



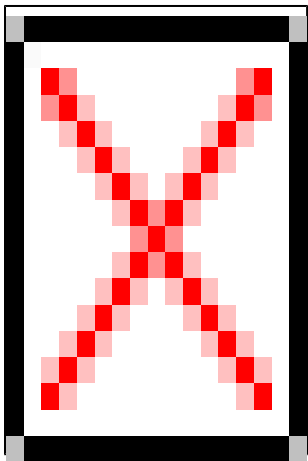
I always loved historical thrillers, and so did my children. We gobbled up Rosemary Sutcliff and Leon Garfield for the way they plunge the reader into that foreign country - the past. I asked them to chose one book from this category for the list and they went for this - Mollie Hunter?s brilliantly plotted spy story set in sixteenth century Edinburgh against the background of a second potential Armada. The characters are terrific - endearing, complex and valiant. The book is so detailed that reading it becomes an immersive experience.

The Treasure Seekers, E.Nesbit, Dover Editions, 978-0486815237, £4.99



I would be betraying myself if I didn't have an Edith Nesbit on the list. I think in the end she is our greatest children's novelist. She is funnier than almost anyone but she can shatter your heart with a single phrase - for instance 'Daddy oh my daddy'. **The Treasure Seekers** is both one of her funniest and her most emotional books. It tells the story of the Bastable children's attempts to restore their lost fortunes by for instance, attempting to kidnap a cabinet minister and getting involved in some kind of alcoholic pyramid selling scheme (when the vicar tells them that alcohol is a source of great woe in the land they reply 'but not if you put sugar in it?'). It's also a great piece of technical virtuosity in that she has this very smart and funny riff about who is really the narrator. Time has made her language difficult to follow. This doesn't matter at all if a grown-up is reading it out loud.

The Adventures of Tintin, Hergé, Egmont, various, £7.99 pbk

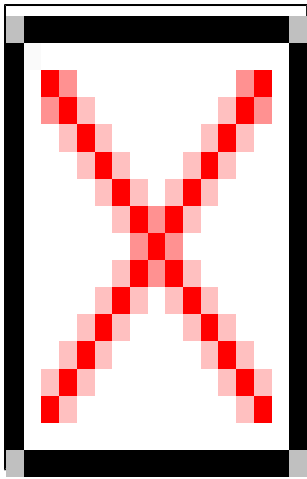


Do I need to explain this? Amazing storytelling. Terrific world-straddling adventures. A brilliantly dysfunctional alcoholic sidekick in Captain Haddock. Some of the most beautiful colour-work in the history of illustration. Comics and graphic novels like **Tintin** and **Asterix** are an essential part of learning to love reading. We are starved of great comics here, the honourable exception being **The Phoenix**.

The Phoenix Comic

The first thing I had published was in **Beano**'s sister paper **The Sparky** and I still love a good comic. **The Phoenix** is a great comic. I love its lavish layouts and inventive strips. Particular favourites of mine are **Bunny versus Monkey** and **Evil Emperor Penguin**. But **Corpse Talk** - in which great figures of the past are summoned from the grave to talk about their lives, like an especially maggoty moment from **Bill and Ted** has a special place in my heart.

Ring of Bright Water, Gavin Maxwell, Penguin, 978-0140290493, £14.99pbk



I think this was the first book I read that might have been an adult book. I had travelled in Narnia, Middle Earth and Moominland but this book drew enchantment out of the real rock pools, beaches and islands. A magic land that you could drive to. We live in a great age of nature writing and I could have chosen something by Robert Macfarlane for this category but I wanted to say thank you to Gavin Maxwell for being the first to show me what would become my own ambition - to strike the fire of magic from the ordinary flint.

Frank Cottrell Boyce is an award-winning author and screenwriter. His books include [Millions](#) [5], winner of the **CILIP Carnegie Medal** as well as **Cosmic, Framed**, [The Astounding Broccoli Boy](#) [6] and **Sputnik's Guide to Life on Earth** all published by Macmillan Children's Books. His latest book for children, [Runaway Robot](#) [7], is available now in paperback.

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