



Ten Essential Books for Children

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[Anthony McGowan](#) [1]

243 [2]

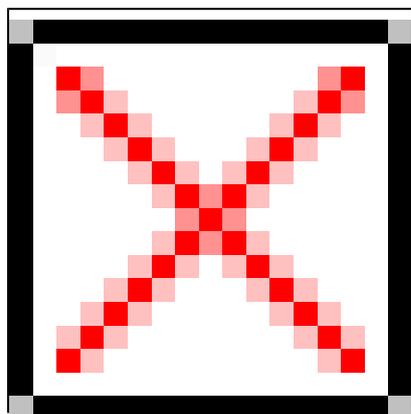
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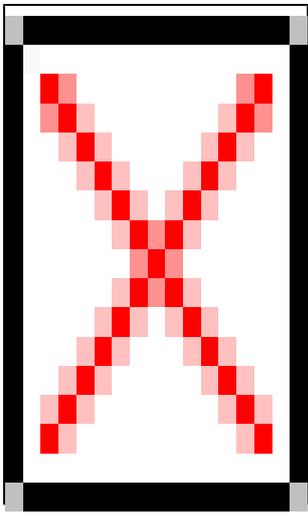
Ten essential books for young readers chosen by **Carnegie Medal winner Anthony McGowan**

*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 **Anthony McGowan** for this selection, and our congratulations on his **Carnegie Medal** win.*



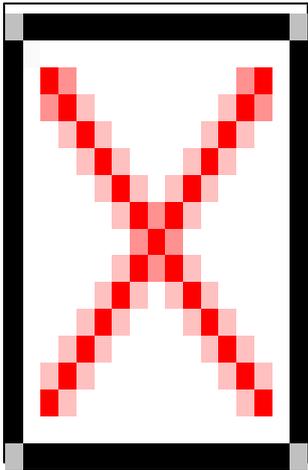
It's almost impossible, of course, to choose 10 'essential' books. Apart from anything else, whatever we book fanatics occasionally claim, books are not essential, as food and water are essential. We can live without them. We just don't want to. So I have picked books which I have loved and wouldn't want to live without. On another day, I could easily have chosen 10 completely different titles. And perhaps not all of the ones I have plumped for will work for all young readers. But they are all part of the furniture of my head, and I wouldn't be me without them being there. I've noticed that most of the books are decades old, and it's heart-breaking to exclude brilliant recent historical novels by [Tanya Landman](#) [3] and [Catherine Johnson](#) [4], the emotionally gripping YA by [Phil Earle](#) [5], the tense and exciting work of Alex Wheatle. So the list is a little long in the tooth - but then so am I!

A Kestrel for a Knave by Barry Hines, Penguin, 978-0141184982, £8.99 pbk



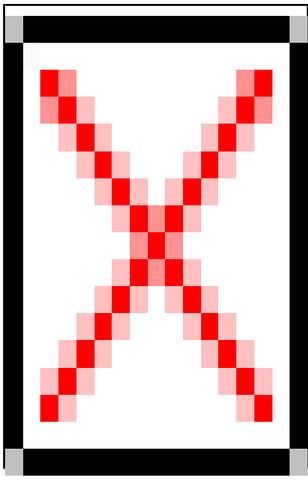
This book changed me. I read it as a class reader in Year 9, in a tough school in Leeds. Most of the kids there weren't big into books, to say the least. But soon we were all gripped, not only by the narrative, about the struggles of young Billy Caspar and his beautiful kestrel, but also by the world – that gritty, hard-scrabble, working-class Northern world so brilliantly depicted; and also by the language: the perfect precision of the descriptions, and the total realism of the speech.

[Red Shift](#) [6] by Alan Garner, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007127863, £6.99 pbk.



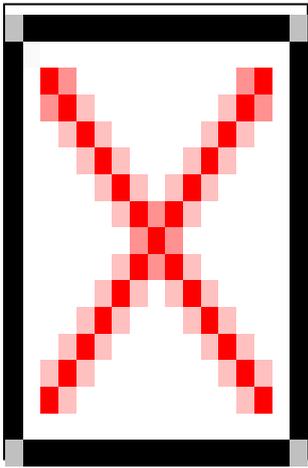
[Alan Garner](#) [7] is one of the all-time greats of children's writing. He's perhaps best known for his fantasy works (or rather books that weave fantasy and realism together), such as **The Weirdstone of Brisingamen**, but this is my personal favourite. It's a difficult, demanding book, that entwines together three different timelines, and the reader has to work hard to keep up with the lightning flashes of the language. But its power, once it grips you, is immense. You finish it shattered and broken. But in a good way?

[Doing It](#) [8] by Melvin Burgess, Andersen Press, 978-1783440634, £7.99 pbk



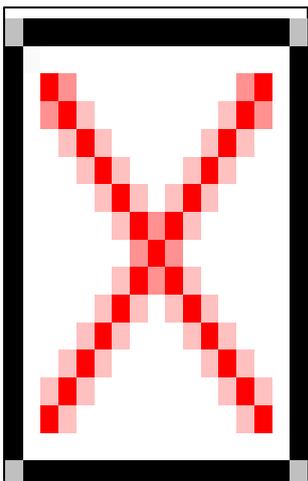
Melvin Burgess was the first writer to portray adolescent boys as they truly are: funny, filthy, vulnerable, tender, violent. **Doing It** is a little less well known than his equally fine novel about addiction, **Junk**, but it adds an extra dose of humour. It can be an uncomfortable read ? the truth is often uncomfortable ? but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't stare it in the face. And that's precisely what Burgess does.

The Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien, HarperCollins, 978-0261103252, £20.00 pbk



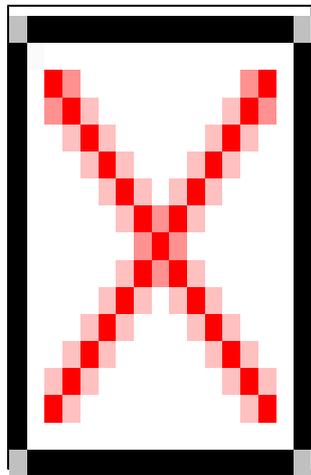
Until I was 8 or 9 years old, my main reading obsessions were the natural world and war. There wasn't a tank, an aircraft or a bird that I couldn't identify. But then a teacher, more or less out of the blue, gave me a copy of **The Lord of the Rings**. It was the first novel I ever read and it took me a couple of years to work my way through it. But by the end I was a different person ? a novel reader, and one day a novel writer. Tolkien may now seem a little dated (it's hard to avoid the conclusion that he really wasn't very interested in women) but his world-building, the beauty and power of his language, and the engrossing plot, make this surely the greatest fantasy work ever written.

The Eagle of the Ninth Chronicles by Rosemary Sutcliff, OUP, 978-0192789983, £12.99 pbk



Rosemary Sutcliff was one of the few children's writers I loved when I was younger. Although her plots are wonderfully exciting and action-packed, she can be a challenging writer. Her language is intricate and relatively complex, and the reader is never spoon-fed. All of her many books are brilliant (her retellings of the Iliad, **Black Ships before Troy** was by children's favourite bedtime reading) but I think her masterpiece is the three linked novels about the Romans in Britain, **The Eagle of the Ninth**, **The Silver Branch**, and **The Lantern Bearer** ? which are available as a single volume. They combine great learning and epic storytelling.

Orange Boy by [Patrice Lawrence](#) [9], Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444927207, £7.99 pbk

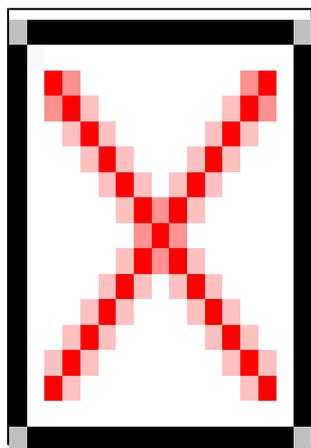


I read **Orange Boy** a couple of years ago, and was immediately seized by the style and the story. Although it has a powerful message about racism and inequality, it is in no sense a simple 'message' book: it's an exciting thriller, one of those books where you can hardly turn the pages quickly enough. Patrice Lawrence is simply one of the finest writers for young adults working today.

The Call of the Wild by Jack London, OUP, 978-0199538898, £5.99 pbk

The Call of the Wild is perhaps the greatest of wilderness adventure stories. Its depiction of the lives of both people and dogs (and wolves) in the wilds of Canada is often brutal: these animals (and men) hunt and fight and kill. We're a long way from Disney: the animals are never anthropomorphised, never do anything inauthentic. And yet we come to care desperately for the fate of Buck, a huge and pampered pet, who is stolen and used as a sled-dog. After many adventures, Buck answers the call of the wild, and joins the wolves, entering into the legend of the native Americans. He still haunts my imagination.

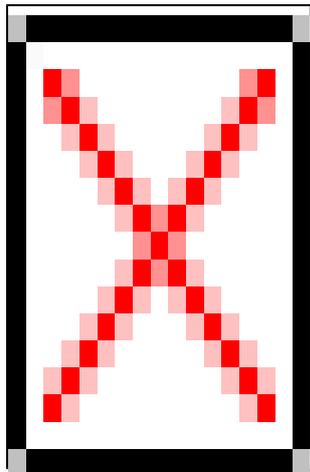
You're a Bad Man Mr Gum by [Andy Stanton](#) [10], Egmont, 978-1405293693, £6.99 pbk



The **Mr Gum** series are simply the funniest children's books ever written. My wife and I used to fight over who got to read them at bedtime to our children. Although young and old both find them hysterical, it isn't quite true to say that there are two different levels of humour ? one for the kids and one for the adults. It's more that almost every page has

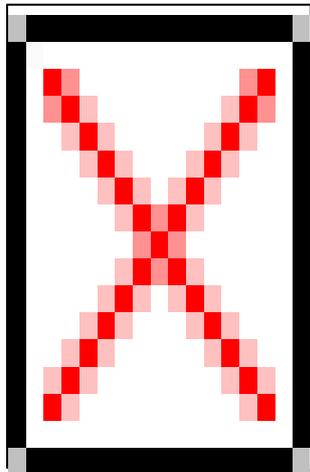
such a dazzle of brilliant comic ideas, sophisticated and silly, that you feel like you're in the middle of a comedy blitz, with every part of your funny-bone rubbed raw. But there's also heart in there, amid the intellectual fizz, and you come to care for characters, whether a dancing bear or a schoolteacher made of gingerbread.

A Wizard of Earthsea by Ursula K Le Guin, Puffin, 978-0141354910, £7.99 pbk



I said earlier on that **The Lord of the Rings** was the greatest fantasy work ever written, but the **Earthsea** series runs it a close second. Tolkien gives us a brilliantly realised world, a rich and poetic language, and an exciting plot; Le Guin does all that, but adds characters with a little more complexity and nuance, and also sprinkles ideas that stretch the mind, and challenge expectations. It's a cliché to say of a book that 'It makes you think?', but **Earthsea** does just that. And it's ultimately the reader that has to answer those questions.

Tom's Midnight Garden by Philippa Pearce, OUP, 978-0192734501, £6.99 pbk



Tom's Midnight Garden has, I think, the greatest plot of any children's novel. Pearce gives us characters not instantly lovable, and her writing can be a little stiff and formal (I seem to recall a page with eight semi-colons!), but that story, involving the eponymous hero slipping back through time, but then also losing what he'd found, is so gripping and engrossing that no one who's started the book has failed to finish it. As I closed the book for the last time, I remember the darkened room resonating around me, like the silence as a piece of music you've loved comes to an end.

Anthony McGowan is one of the most widely acclaimed young-adult authors in the UK and his novel [Lark](#) [11] won the **2020 CILIP Carnegie Medal**.

Page Number:

4

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Links:

- [1] <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/anthony-mcgowan>
- [2] <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/243>
- [3] <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/212/childrens-books/articles/a-conversation-with-2015-cilip-carnegie-medal-winner-tanya-landma>
- [4] <http://w2w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/241/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-241-catherine-johnson>
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