



# Ten Essential Children's Books

Article Author:

[Geraldine McCaughrean](#) [1]

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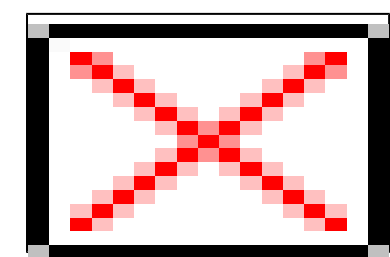
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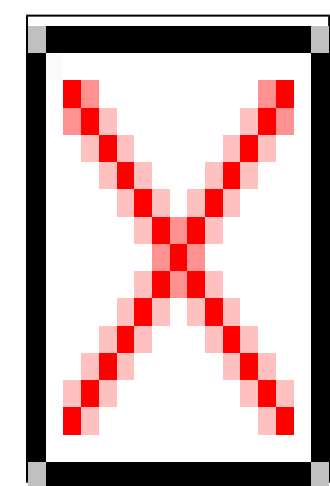
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**Ten essential books for young readers** chosen by **Geraldine McCaughrean**

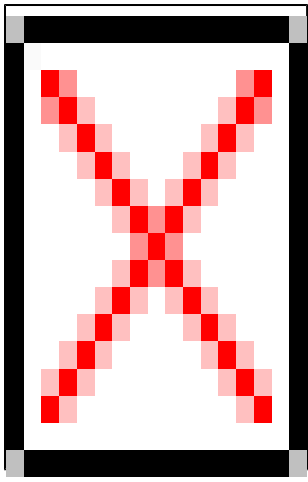
As part of the celebrations for our 40th anniversary, we are revising our long-running Ten of the Best feature and asking six leading children's authors to choose the books they consider essential reading. Our thanks to **Geraldine McCaughrean** for this selection



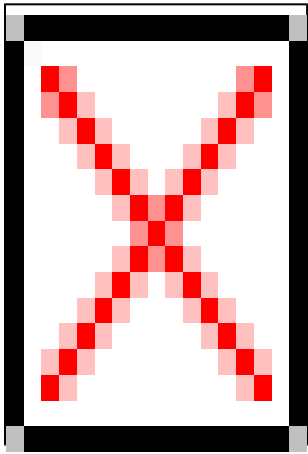
Memory isn't what it was. While I was thinking this out, plots surfaced without their titles, titles with little of their plots and books without their authors' names. I may spend the rest of the year recalling more momentous titles, but for now... (Note the unplanned, recurring theme of parent/child relationships.)



First, **The Silver Branch** by Rosemary Sutcliffe ? sequel to **Eagle of the Ninth** already mentioned in this series. The Roman standard ? wingless now ? is found by the next generation and carried into battle once more. It was a school prize that confirmed my love of historical fiction. And Sutcliffe doesn't date.

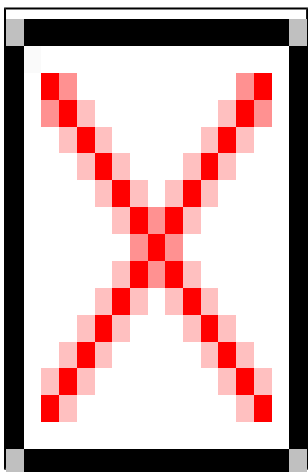


One of the greatest virtues any book can have, surely, is to make a young reader feel included, valued, at ease with themselves rather than fretful or ill-fitting. Hilary Mackay has a knack of embracing the reader and taking them, and her characters, somewhere ... warm. Her **Casson** series about Saffy, Indigo, Rose and Caddy leaves not only them but the reader feeling loved. The children are not without their problems ? loneliness, envy, parent trouble, love...but there?s always an enlightening resolution at the end of the tunnel. When [Saffy?s Angel](#) [3] was up for an award, each mention of it made every judge around the table involuntarily smile. What more could you wish from a book?

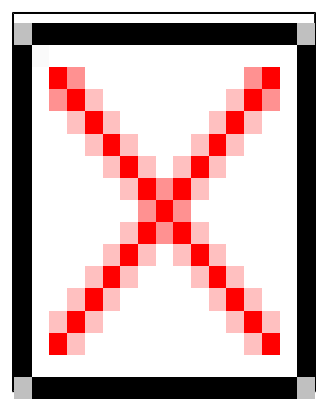


**Love that Dog** by Sharon Creech is a must for any child who thinks they don?t ?get? poetry. It overlays an existing poem (**Love that Boy**) with one boy?s need to exorcise an aching sorrow. It?s a salute to teachers and poets alike. I?ve tried reading it aloud in schools, but it makes me cry every time, and an abiding rule of poetry is not to read it when your nose is running.

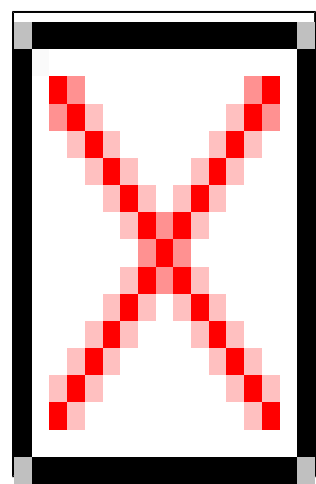
Staying with poetry, one book a reader can return to over and over, at any age, is Shel Silverstein?s **Where the Sidewalk Ends**. It?s a book that children won?t ?leave behind? as they get older. Hugely entertaining, witty and wise.



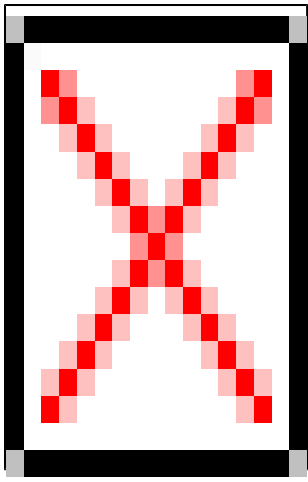
How to choose between [Framed](#) [4] and **Millions** by Frank Cottrell Boyce? Funny, uniquely inventive and unputdownable, with great plots. I suppose the Saints (God bless'em) tip the balance in favour of [Millions](#) [5]. Never has religion sounded less pompous or other-worldly. Brothers Damian and Anthony are blessed with huge, unexpected wealth gifted from above (by the train robbers who nicked it). Against the clock they must try to spend the money. It sparks avarice in one, charity in the other, and danger in the shape of the irate robbers. Over all hangs the loss of a mother. So, much more than a headlong adventure: an excursion into economics, bereavement, virtue, capitalism and a whole covey of helpful, chatty saints. And, of course, the father-son relationship.



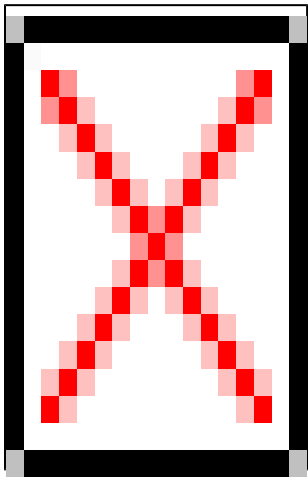
I came to Antoine de Saint-Exupery's **The Little Prince** in French, as a teenager, at a time I unaccountably wanted to be a pilot. I just wish I'd met it earlier. It either translates very well or its quirky simplicity is universal: it pleases young and old everywhere. Its wistful weirdness needs no 'explaining' to young readers. ... And since Saint-Exupery's final crash site was never found, I maintain he just flew into the night and followed the scent of roses to an asteroid of his choosing.



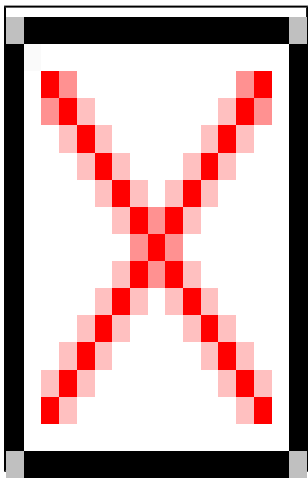
Ahead of all Roald Dahl's bonkers, bouncy books, I would put forward **Danny the Champion of the World** - the most 'realistic'. Danny and his Dad manage pretty well in their gypsy caravan, until Dad is injured and the local landowner gets nasty. Revenge is sweet and anarchic. The relationship between father and son is everything a father aspires to and a son (or daughter) hopes for. I read, online, a 'warning' about questionable content: poaching. Good grief. What a splendid chance for young minds to wrestle with the dilemma of adult moral turpitude.



In Louis Sachar's [Holes](#) [6], the desert setting of the juvenile correction facility is vivid and oppressive. Feel the heat, feel the desolation, and rage inwardly against the injustice, past and present, that have beset Stanley Yelnats' family. Stanley's rescue of his friend Zero has the reader exulting in the triumph of innocence over evil. The spare, perfect text makes every word count, and it grips the reader so tight, they too are incarcerated until The End releases them.



William Nicholson's [Wind on Fire](#) [7] trilogy is right up there with Philip Reeve's comparable [Mortal Engines](#) [8] but Reeves' **Hungry City Chronicles** may have more characters for children to identify with, more twists, turns and offshoots to keep them coming back for more. Wheeled cities, large and small, roam the futuristic landscape, eating up lesser towns. The heroes Hester and Tom are pitted against big adversaries: callous self-interest, pitiless slaughter, impossible odds, scars physical and mental... A juggernaut of an endeavour.



In Janet & Allan Ahlberg's [Jeremiah in the Dark Woods](#) [9], Jeremiah sets off to catch the thief who stole Grandma's tarts, and meets a string of oddities along the way. My daughter and I enjoyed it so much that I was moved to write this. Many years on, I can't remember precise reasons, but it clearly shone for us.

*Given paper's origins,  
in felled and pulped arboreal things,  
I always found an irony  
in paper books concerning trees.  
But hauled by an insistent child  
clear from the margins deep into the wild  
heart of this one book,  
we stood and trembled both, as the story shook,  
and we snatched at the tilting, turning leaves  
that curled around us from the book-spine's eaves.  
We looked around and found, like birds,  
on every branching sentence, singing words!  
Such perfect spacing  
perfect placing  
perfect pacing,  
root to crown,  
that we lay and gasped beneath a spire of sounds  
as the spinning seeds of Story tumbled down.*

One last extra, long gone: **The Voyages of the Limping Flamingo** written and illustrated by Neil Jones ? my brother - and published when he was 14. Submitted bound using a cornflakes box, it was accepted on the grounds that the Harraps Editor's children had fallen off the bed laughing as they read it. Children still would. It was brilliant. I became a writer out of envy and hero-worship.

[Geraldine McCaughrean](#) [10] has won the Carnegie Medal (twice), the Whitbread Children's Book Award (three times), the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, the Smarties Bronze Award (four times) and the Blue Peter Book of the Year Award. **The Supreme Lie**, a timely new novel set in a world paralysed by natural disaster and dangerous politics, will be published by Usborne Publishing in April 2021.

Books mentioned:

**The Silver Branch**, Rosemary Sutcliff, OUP, 978-0192755056, £8.99 pbk

**Saffy's Angel**, Hilary McKay, Hodder Children's Books, 978-0340989043, £6.99 pbk

**Love That Dog**, Sharon Creech, Bloomsbury, 978-0747557494, £6.99 pbk

**Where the Sidewalk Ends**, Shel Silverstein, Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, 978-0714530956, £9.99

**Framed**, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529008784, £7.99 pbk

**Millions**, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529008760, £7.99 pbk

**The Little Prince**, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Egmont, 978-1405216340, £12.99 hbk

**Danny the Champion of the World**, Roald Dahl, Puffin, 978-0141365411, £6.99 pbk

**Holes**, Louis Sachar, Bloomsbury, 978-1408865231, £6.99 pbk

**The Wind Singer**, William Nicholson, Egmont, 978-1405239691, £6.99 pbk

**Mortal Engines**, Philip Reeve, Scholastic, 978-1407189147, £7.99 pbk

**Jeremiah in the Dark Woods**, Janet and Allan Ahlberg, Puffin, 978-0141304960, £6.99 pbk

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[8] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/133/childrens-books/reviews/mortal-engines>

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[10] <http://wvjxyve.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/230/childrens-books/articles/an-interview-with-2018-carnegie-medal-winner-geraldine-mccaughrea>