

My Favorite Children's and Young-Adult Books: Eighty-Five Masterpieces

I'm a huge fan of children's literature and young-adult literature. I read these books as a child, and I continue to read them as an adult. In fact, I'm in two book groups where we discuss kidlit. I write about my love for this literature in my books *The Happiness Project* and *Happier at Home*.

People often ask me for recommendations, so I've made a list of my favorite books. *I love all these books*. Many of these books are towering classics of world literature; some are obscure and out of print.

I chose only books that I love so much that I could carry on a detailed conversation about them without re-reading them—and I eliminated any book written by my sister or a friend. I cheated by listing only one book by an author, even if that author has written many books that belong on the list—say, Elizabeth Enright or C. S. Lewis.

This list is weighted to books that I read in childhood, because I've loved those books the longest. But of this list, I will say—every book is a great, great book.

Of course, this list reflects my taste. You'll perceive that I love magic, and I have a real taste for a strong moral lesson, even when it's laid on pretty thick (see, e.g., *Little Women* on page 2, *Heidi* on page 6). I love stories of friendly ghosts.

Now, why 85? That number turned out to be the natural cut-off point of my enthusiasm. There are hundreds of other books that I love, but not quite as passionately.

You should read all these books yourself, but in case you're buying them for someone else, I've marked the books with  for “children,” and  for “young adult”—but that line is very hard to draw, and many books could be classified in the other category.

I'm saddened by the fact that some older books now have hideous modern covers. Close your eyes and open to the first page.

If you'd like to order a book on-line, **[this list is posted on my site here](#)**. There, you'll find links to Bookshop and Amazon.

Happy reading! So many wonderful, wonderful books.

GRETCHEN RUBIN



My Favorite Children's and Young-Adult Books Eighty-Five Masterpieces

The Wolves of Willoughby Chase

by JOAN AIKEN

C A secret passage, a stint at an orphanage, a journey in disguise—a thrilling book.

Little Women

(and many other books)

by LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

C A towering classic of world literature.

Fairy Tales

by HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

C These tales seem familiar, but when you actually read them... they're uncanny and unforgettable. "Thumbelisa" gives me chills.

Ghosts and More Ghosts

(and other books)

by ROBERT ARTHUR

C I've read the stories in this collection countless times.

Tuck Everlasting

by NATALIE BABBIT

C A short, beautiful, mysterious book that has the quality of myth.

Peter Pan

by J. M. BARRIE

C If you've only seen the movie, you've never experienced *Peter Pan*. Haunting. Mind-blowing.

The Wizard of Oz

(and following books)

by L. FRANK BAUM

C Again, the movie doesn't prepare you for the richness of these books. The Nome King! Pyrquxgll! The magic flower pot!

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret

(and many other books)

by JUDY BLUME

YA I'd read this book about ten times before I understood that it's really about *religion*.

What I Saw and How I Lied

by JUDY BLUNDELL

YA Unusual atmosphere for a YA book. A teenager gets pulled into the adult world, with its darker concerns and a mysterious death.

Andy Buckram's Tin Men

(and many other books)

by CAROL RYRIE BRINK

C So good. A great example of combining the fantastic and the realistic.

The Shades

by BETTY BROCK

C A perfect book. Hollis learns that if washes his face in the water of the dolphin fountain in the garden of his aunt's grand old house, he can talk to the kindly shadows of the people who came into the garden.

The Secret Garden

(and many other books)

by FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT

C My fifth-grade teacher told us that she re-read *The Secret Garden* every year. I'm sure I have, too.

The Midnight Fox

by BETSY BYARS

C Another perfect book. Beautiful, funny, satisfying. Just thinking about this book makes me happy.

Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You

by PETER CAMERON

YA An eighteen-year-old in Manhattan tries to figure out life. A smart, interesting main character.

Ender's Game

by ORSON SCOTT CARD

YA Dark, exciting, lots of battles, with a great twist at the end (I love a great twist).

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

(and sequel)

by LEWIS CARROLL

C Like no other books ever.

Graceling

(and the following books)

by KRISTIN CASHORE

YA Terrific books, including uncanny powers and a fascinating villain.

What the Witch Left

(and many other books)

by RUTH CHEW

C As a child, I loved the afternoons when my teacher would distribute the Scholastic books we'd ordered, and I ordered a *lot* by Ruth Chew.

The House on Mango Street

by SANDRA CISNEROS

C A childhood, a neighborhood, wonderful.

Jane-E Emily

by PATRICIA CLAPP

YA A wonderful story, but beware, it does get very scary. A malevolent child ghost.

Sister of the Bride

(and many other books)

by BEVERLY CLEARY

C Beverly Cleary! Enough said.

The Hunger Games

by SUZANNE COLLINS

YA A truly thrilling dystopia.

The Dark Is Rising

(and related books)

by SUSAN COOPER

C Newly discovered powers, good vs. evil, the chosen one, deep symbolism.

Walk Two Moons

by SHARON CREECH

C An intriguing story with a big twist and unforgettable characters; all about love.

James and the Giant Peach

(and many other books)

by ROALD DAHL

C Roald Dahl is one of the most distinctive writers ever. Hilarious, absurd, deliciously twisted.

*D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*by INGRI AND EDGAR PARIN
D'AULAIRE

C There's something about the odd illustrations in this book that made it especially riveting. A great introduction to Greek myths, which every child (and adult) should know.

The Blue Hawk

by PETER DICKINSON

C I love a novel where gods intervene in human fate, so I love this novel. Plus, court intrigue. Or should I have chosen *Tulku*? I love many novels by Peter Dickinson.

Half Magic

(and many other books)

by EDWARD EAGER

C So, so, so good. These books had a lot of influence on my writing (I hope).

Mandy

by JULIE ANDREWS EDWARDS

C It's not fair that on top of everything else, Julie Andrews is also a brilliant writer. An orphan finds a deserted shell cottage in the forest.

The Saturdays

(and many other books)

by ELIZABETH ENRIGHT

C Each of her books is *so good*. I can't find the words to say how much I love them all. (Except, weirdly, *Thimble Summer*, which was the book that won the Newbery.)

*Understood Betsy*by DOROTHY CANFIELD
FISHER

C As a child, I loved the single footnote in this book, which made me feel very grown-up; also the meditation on the nature of character. This is a book about courage in an unexpected, non-annoying way.

The Greengage Summer

(and many other books)

by RUMER GODDEN

YA So many books by Godden, so good.

M. C. Higgins, the Great

by VIRGINIA HAMILTON

YA This novel has an unforgettable atmosphere and setting.

The Silent Strength of Stones

by NINA KIRIKI HOFFMAN

C This was the first novel I read set in Hoffman's intriguing world of supernatural powers.

Up a Road Slowly

by IRENE HUNT

YA A thoughtful story that unfolds over many years.

The Animal Family

by **RANDALL JARRELL**

C A very quiet and serene book; beautiful illustrations by Maurice Sendak. The first line reads, “Once upon a time, long, long ago, where the forest runs down to the sea, a hunter lived all alone...” Who could resist these enchanting words? Plus, mermaid.

Fire and Hemlock

(and many other books)

by **DIANA WYNNE JONES**

C I discovered Diana Wynne Jones only recently, and raced through a giant stack in a few weeks. Other people might like the *Chronicles of Chrestomanci* better. Very tough call.

The Phantom Tollbooth

by **NORTON JUSTER**

C Brilliant. Unique. Unforgettable.

From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler

(and many other books)

by **E. L. KONIGSBURG**

C The first time I went to the Metropolitan Museum, all I cared about was seeing the pieces mentioned in the book. Konigsburg has written so many outstanding books! But I do love this one the very best.

K-Pop Confidential

by **STEPHAN LEE**

YA Super fun. What happens when your big dream comes true, and you have to deal with consequences?

A Wizard of Earthsea

(and many other books)

by **URSULA LE GUIN**

C A strange, eerie magical world.

A Wrinkle in Time

(and many other books)

by **MADELEINE L'ENGLE**

C Good vs. evil, traveling through space and time, encounters with other worlds, romance. So good.

Strawberry Girl

by **LOIS LENSKI**

C A great heroine, a great story, and an interesting look at a time and place in American history.

The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe

(and all the Narnia books)

by **C. S. LEWIS**

C Words can't capture how much I love these books.

The Golden Name Day

(and following books)

by **JENNIE LINDQUIST**

C My family comes from Sweden, so I took special delight in all the Swedish traditions.

Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle

(and following books)

by **BETTY MACDONALD**

C Brilliantly funny on so many levels. If you loved them as a child, you will love them as an adult, and you will find them funny in a very different way.

Beauty

(and many other books)

by **ROBIN MCKINLEY**

C Re-tellings of fairy tales are often disappointing, but this one, a re-telling of *Beauty and the Beast*, is terrific.

Twilight

(and following books)

by **STEPHANIE MEYER**

YA You either love it—or not. I *love* it.

Anne of Green Gables

(and following books)

by **L. M. MONTGOMERY**

C I never get enough of Anne. And she's a rare red-haired character.

The Girl Who Owned a City

by **O. T. NELSON**

YA My sister and I share a passion for this book.

The Railway Children

(and many other books)

by **E. NESBIT**

C So good. Nesbit is best known for her ground-breaking books about magic, but this realistic novel is my favorite of her work.

The Whirling Shapes

by **JOAN NORTH,**

C Supernatural, suspenseful, great characters. A frightening situation, but somehow not frightening, just interesting. I feel like I'm the only person who has ever read this novel, and I just learned that it's practically unattainable. I pledge that when it goes out of copyright, I will make sure it's available in print. So stay tuned for 2063.

His Majesty's Dragon

by **NAOMI NOVIK**

C This is usually classified as an adult book, but to me, it seems to belong here. “Patrick O’Brian with dragons” may not sound appealing, but I love this book. If you know my “Four Tendencies” framework, Captain Will Laurence is such an Upholder, and the dragon Temeraire is such a Questioner.

The Silver Crown

(and many other books)

by **ROBERT O’BRIEN**

C Or should I have named O’Brien’s *Mrs. Frisby* and the *Rats of NIMH*? So hard to decide.

Island of the Blue Dolphins

by **SCOTT O’DELL**

C Physical survival is a surprisingly common theme in children’s books, and this is one of the best. A girl survives alone on an island off the California coast—for decades.

Akata Witch

(and other books)

by **NNEDI OKORAFOR**

YA Powers, students of magic, a quest—one of my favorite combinations.

Time at the Top

(and sequel)

by **EDWARD ORMONDROYD**

C Whimsical, delightful time-travel by elevator.

Wonder

by **R. J. PALACIO**

YA Very sad, but read it anyway. You won’t regret it.

The Twenty-One Balloons

by **WILLIAM PENE DU BOIS**

C What a story! Balloon flight, a volcano-island government based on unlimited wealth and fine dining.

The Sherwood Ring

by **ELIZABETH MARIE POPE**

C I love books with loving ghosts, and this is my favorite of all. Plus a healthy dash of Revolutionary War history.

The Golden Compass

(and the *His Dark Materials* trilogy)

by **PHILIP PULLMAN**

C Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. Run don’t walk.

The Westing Game

by **ELLEN RASKIN**

C I’ve read it fifty times, and am entranced by the puzzle every time.

Where the Red Fern Grows

by **WILSON RAWLS**

C A friend told me, “You will shed many sad tears, but you will love it,” and I do. Also, it’s a dog book, if you like dog books.

Long Way Down

by **JASON REYNOLDS**

YA A haunting story that unfolds in sixty seconds, told in bursts of verse.

The House Without

a Christmas Tree

(and following books)

by **GAIL ROCK**

C These were made into great TV specials, as well. That’s how I discovered the books.

Freaky Friday

by **MARY RODGERS**

C A daughter and a mother switch bodies for the day, and hilarity and insight ensue. Crazy fun.

Missing May

by **CYNTHIA RYLANT**

C I’m astonished that this novel isn’t better known. I love, love, love it, especially the first chapter.

Harry Potter and

the Sorcerer’s Stone

(and the following books)

by **J. K. ROWLING**

C These don’t need a plug.

The Good Master

(and sequel)

by **KATE SEREDY**

C A wonderful family story. Set in Hungary at the turn of the last century.

House of Stairs

by **WILLIAM SLEATOR**

YA Scientists perform evil experiments on a bunch of teenagers.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

by BETTY SMITH

YA I bet it's not what you remember.

Black and Blue Magic

(and many other books)

by ZILPHA KEATLEY SNYDER

C A *perfect* book. Perfect! I love *this book*. A book about good deeds, wishes, prophecy, and being good at sports. Also, being able to fly.

Miracles on Maple Hill

by VIRGINIA SORENSEN

C I do love a cozy book, and boy this is cozy.

Heidi

by JOHANNA SPYRI

C Not everyone has a taste for so much goat milk and didacticism, but I love it. (Coincidence, there's goat milk in *Miracles on Maple Hill*, too.)

In a Mirror

(and many other books)

by MARY STOLZ

YA I want to lead the re-discovery of Mary Stolz's work. Complex, unusual, thought-provoking.

Ballet Shoes

(and many other *Shoes* books)

by NOEL STREATFIELD

C I love the theme of children earning-money-for-their-family, and this is one of the best.

All-of-a-Kind Family

(and following books)

by SYDNEY TAYLOR

C More cozy!

The Hobbit

(and *The Lord of the Rings* books)

by J.R.R. TOLKIEN

C If you like this sort of thing, you'll love it, and if you don't like this sort of thing, you'll stop on page 5.

Mary Poppins

(and the following books)

by P. L. TRAVERS

C The character of Mary Poppins is more interesting than in the movie. Though don't get me wrong, I love the movie. (Note, see *Mandy* on page 3.)

The Queen of Attolia

by MEGAN WHALEN TURNER

C I love the entire *Queen's Thief* series, and this second book is my favorite of them all. Read carefully; huge twist. "Tell your queen that I will not return her Thief a second time."

The Boxcar Children

by GERTRUDE CHANDLER WARNER

C Survival *and* earning money.

Daddy-Long-Legs

by JEAN WEBSTER

C The first epistolary book I ever read. Great twist.

Charlotte's Web

by E. B. WHITE

C A towering classic of literature. I cried for four days straight after I read it the first time.

The Sword in the Stone

by T. H. WHITE

C I love the theme of vindication, and this is great vindication. Also, the Arthurian legend re-imagined. Also, people turning into animals.

Little House in the Big Woods

(and all the *Little House* books)

by LAURA INGALLS WILDER

C The *Little House* series is one of the greatest masterpieces in children's literature. I have no words to describe how much I love, love, love these books. Now is now.