

Introduction

I have always loved Children's Literature.

I soaked it in as a child. Nearly every Sunday, Dad would lead us into the church library before heading out the door, giving us a few minutes to check out a couple of books. I felt so important signing my name on those little cards, understanding that my signature was a *huge* promise to take care of the book and bring it back the following week.

When I was in fifth grade, my school librarian asked my parents if I could help her with a special job. She wanted me to read a stack of books that were highly acclaimed for their literary value but which had objectionable language. She asked, "Could Alison read these books and make a list of which curse words are on which pages? Then I can use her notes to quickly go through the books and mark out the bad language before I put them into circulation." I was honored to have this important responsibility, and honored that both my parents and my librarian would trust me with it. .

As a teenager, I reread *The Chronicles of Narnia* and other treasures written "for younger kids," and I went straight to the bookshelves whenever I was asked to manage kids in the church nursery or work as a babysitter.

While a student at Virginia Tech, I found time to take Intro to Children's Lit, an atypical elective for a Mathematics major. The textbook from that class by DL Russell is one of the few college texts I kept. I pulled it off the shelf as I was writing this and skimmed over some of my scratchy notes.

Then, 20 years ago, something life-changing happened to Tim and me. A little girl was born into the world. She did something which none of her siblings had the honor or ability to do. Her presence gave us the most important title we will ever hold: parents.

Suddenly, my love for Children's Literature was transformed from a hobby into a passion. I wanted to find *the best* books for her, not only storybooks but non-fiction works as well. For example, when she was learning colors, I spent *at least* two hours reading book reviews to discover which board book was going to be both the most fun and the most effective at teaching her how to recognize the difference between red, orange, and pink.

However, you won't see any board books about colors on this list. Whichever ones I chose for her got chewed to the point of disgusting and then discarded. Also discarded, a few years after she learned her colors, was *my* need to thoroughly research books before my kids read them. My commitment to find the exact right books for my kids was replaced with a different strategy. For that, I have my husband to thank. Here's what happened:

About 15 years ago, Tim surprised us late one afternoon. He walked into the house carrying a large box with both hands and set it on the floor. The entire box was filled with library books: fiction, nonfiction, board books, and traditional books.

I freaked out. I glared at him and asked, "*How will I keep them clean? How will I not lose them? Wait, we'd better count them now, before *any* leave the box, so I will be prepared to take an accurate inventory when we get ready to return them. When is the due date anyway, and *how will I remember it?* I have a five-year-old and two little ones under foot, are you crazy?"*

When I finished pitching my little fit to my sweet husband who deserved far better, I turned around to look at our children. I observed a five-year-old and a three-year-old standing around the box, slowly pulling books out, amazed and silent. You could almost hear their thoughts, “Wow, there are *so many* books.” They were enthralled. They each quickly found a book they liked, sat down, and began to read or look through its pages.

Our 18-month-old also stood by the box, removing all the books which his older siblings had left inside it. He would take a book out, drop it on the floor (clearly, to his mind, that was where the books *belonged*), look at us with a big smile, and then return to his work.

I was hooked.

Since then, the Meredith family library boxes have had a permanent home in our living room. We use two laundry baskets; they last one to two years before they get so cracked we have to replace them. We go to the library monthly or more often, and check out the maximum number of books allowed by four library cards (thankfully, kids can have library cards too).

People ask me how I keep up with it all. I reply: “I don’t. I pay fines. We try not to be late, and we try not to lose or damage books, but sometimes it happens.”

The first time we paid a fine, I was so disappointed in myself. Then, as life became more complicated, I adopted the “I can’t bat a thousand” mindset. My check to the Bristol Public Library goes to a great cause, and the fines I pay are a pittance set against the value of reading all these books. I *do* teach my kids to treat the books carefully and with respect. But with the quantity we check out, I haven’t solved the puzzle of avoiding fines altogether.

This different strategy—I’ll call it “quantity, quantity, quantity”—has worked exceedingly well. Surprisingly, we ended up with quality too, a far deeper, broader quality than we could have attained had I continued to be our family’s primary researcher of great books.

My kids have become literary analysts. The best books in the library box are read by everyone multiple times. A few months later, we check out those favorites again. When a library book really shines, one of our kids will ask Nana Cary to give it to him for Christmas.

Every book on this list is either a well-worn book we own or a well-worn book we frequently check out of the library. I commend them to you, to enjoy with the children you love.

For Laptime Reading with 2-5 Year Olds

Can You Guess? by Margaret Miller

Caps for Sale by Esphyr Slobodkina

Hello Ocean by Pam Munoz Ryan

Are You a Butterfly? by J Allen and T. Humphries

Rhyming Dust Bunnies by Jan Thomas

Chicka Chicka Boom Boom by Martin & Archamb.

The Best Nest by P. D. Eastman

All Night Near the Water by Jim Arnosky

My Lucky Day by Keiko Kasza

Over in the Meadow by Ezra Jack Keats

Raindrop, Plop! by Wendy C. Lewison

Octopus Opposites by Blackstone & Bauer

Feathers for Lunch by Lois Ehlert

Ox Cart Man by Donald Hall

Fox in Socks by Dr. Seuss

The Gruffalo by Julia Donaldson

My First Day by Steve Jenkins & Robin Page

A Mud Pie for Mother by Scott Beck

From Head to Toe by Eric Carle

Put Me in the Zoo by Robert Lopshire

Board Books

Planting a Rainbow by Lois Ehlert

Moo, Baa, La La La by Sandra Boyton

Poems to Read to the Very Young by Eloise Wilkins

I am a Bunny by Richard Scarry

Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? by E. Carle The Carrot Seed by Ruth Krauss

For Kids who are Afraid of the Dark

Tiger Can't Sleep by S.J. Fore

Go Away, Big Green Monster! by Ed Emberley*

Emberly brilliantly prompts the child and his accompanying adult reader to chant “Go away, big green monster!” on every page—no child can read this book without feeling braver than he did before.

For Couch Snuggle Time with 4-10 Year Olds

The Hungry Thing by J. Slepian and A. Seidler

Gotta Go! Gotta Go! by Sam Swope

Tikki Tikki Tembo, retold by Arlene Mosel

Aesop's Fables, retold by Brad Sneed

The Pink House by Kate Salley Palmer

Frog and Toad are Friends by A. Lobel

Richard Scarry's Great Steamboat Mystery by R. Scarry

The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant

Owl Moon by Jane Yolen

Eeny, Meeny, Miney Mole by Jane Yolen

Sniff-Snuff-Snap! By Lynley Dodd*

The Busy Body Book by Lizzy Rockwell

Farmer Will by Jane Cowen-Fletcher

A Book About Color by Mark Gonyea

How Do You Lift a Lion? By Robert E. Wells

One Tiny Turtle by Nicola Davies

Make Way for Ducklings, by R. McCloskey

50 Below Zero by Robert Munsch

Lynley Dodd weaves together brilliant poetry and jolly paintings to create one masterpiece after another. The book listed above regards a bossy warthog; her other works include tales about Hairy Maclary, Slinkly Malinki, Zachary Quack, the Smallest Turtle, and Schnitzel von Krumm.

For Couch Snuggle Time with 8-12 Year Olds

Sybil Ludington's Midnight Ride by M. Amstel

An Egg is Quiet by Dianna Aston

A First Look at Caterpillars by M. E. Selsam and J. Hunt*

Just a Few Words, Mr. Lincoln by J. Fritz*

How to Think Like a Scientist by S. P. Kramer*

A Child's Book of Flowers by K. N. Daly

Marven of the Great North Woods by K. Lasky

Oak & Company by Richard Mabey

A Treasury of Children's Literature, edited by A. Eisen*

Little Farm by the Sea by Kay Chorao

How Ben Franklin Stole the Lightning by R. Schanzer

All the Places to Love by P. MacLauchlan

Brooklyn Bridge by Lynn Curlee

George Did It by Suzanne Tripp Jurmain

My daughter called me from college to thank me for teaching her the scientific method. I replied that I was certain I deserved no such credit. She said, “Mom, that little pink book you read to us, about how to think like a scientist—don't you remember it? We read it multiple times; it was great. Anyway, I was the only one in my class who could define the scientific method, and I promise it's all because of that book.”

The Armand Eisen Treasury has many classics: Snow White, Paul Bunyan, Three Little Pigs, and more.

Any book by Jean Fritz is worth reading; she's a master of adding just enough humor and random detail to captivate young audiences with the wonder of our history. Likewise, if you can lay hands on any book by Millicent Selsam, grab it and use it to spark in your kids the delight of studying nature.

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For Big Kids to Read Independently

Archimedes and the Door of Science by J. Bendick
Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule by H. G. Robinet
The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett
The Mystery of the Periodic Table by B. D. Wiker

Moccasin Trail by Eloise Jarvis McGraw
James and the Giant Peach by Roald Dahl
Mara, Daughter of the Nile by E. J. McGraw
Straw into Gold by Gary D. Schmidt

For Adults to Read Aloud to Kids, One Chapter Per Night at Bedtime

Farmer Boy by Laura Ingalls Wilder
The Horse and His Boy by C. S. Lewis
Homer Price by Robert McCloskey
The War that Saved My Life by K. B. Bradley
The Magical Monarch of Mo by L. Frank Baum
The Hundred Dresses by Eleanor Estes
My Father's Dragon by Ruth Stiles Gannett

By the Great Horn Spoon by Sid Fleischman
The Sign of the Beaver by E. G. Speare
Twenty and Ten by Claire Huchet Bishop
The Hobbit by J. R. R. Tolkien
Charlotte's Web by E. B. White
Anne of Green Gables by L. M. Montgomery
Noodlehead Stories by M. A. Jagendorf

Poetry

Every Time I Climb a Tree by David McCord
When We Were Very Young by A. A. Milne
Favorite Poems Old and New by Helen Ferris

Nibble Nibble by Margaret Wise Brown
Now We Are Six by A. A. Milne
Eric Carle's Animals Animals

Let your child pick a poem he likes. You pick one too. Each of you commit to reading your poem 3-6 times per week. Within 2 weeks your child will have his memorized verbatim, likely beating you to the task. The adventure doesn't end there, though. The fun part is this: each of you take a turn reciting your poem to your family. Here's one of the first poems each of my kids memorized and recited with pride. It's from the Wilkins book referenced in the Board Books section of this list.

Reflection, by Myra Livingston: In the mirror / I can see / Lots of things / But mostly—me.

Books which Prompt Laughter from Kids and Adults—but for Different Reasons

Mr. Putter and Tabby Spill the Beans by Cynthia Rylant*
Grasshopper on the Road by Arnold Lobel*
Winnie-the-Pooh by A. A. Milne*

Mouse Tales by Arnold Lobel
Fix-It Duck by Jez Alborough
The House at Pooh Corner by A. A. Milne

Lobel is a mastermind of crafting hilarious stories for kids which are actually a commentary on adults. His tale about Grasshopper's journey is filled with childlike humor. While reading it to your child, though, you'll enjoy a deeper meaning which our kids may not yet catch: the book is about small-minded people. How does Grasshopper react when other critters say or do illogical, silly, or unkind things?

Any book in Rylant's Mr. Putter series is especially delightful for grandparents to share with grandkids.

If you think Winnie the Pooh is just a cartoon character, you are missing a treasure. A. A. Milne's insights into how a child perceives the world are unparalleled. Like Lobel, he paints characters which children and adults find funny for different reasons. Milne portrays characters with radically different viewpoints and personalities and then describes how a caring, insightful boy pursues a relationship with each. If only more of us adults could be like Christopher Robin, patiently interacting with the pessimistic eeyores, anxious piglets, ruminative owls, and bouncy tiggers in our own lives.