

## **CHOOSING BOOKS FOR YOUR CHILDREN**

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(See also a list of suggested books below).

“The stories and pictures we take to our hearts as children remain with us always”  
(Shirley Hughes)

One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is a love of reading. Reading feeds imaginative growth, opens the gateway to learning, introduces the child to ideas and circumstances beyond his/her own experience and last but not least, offers endless enjoyment and satisfaction. However the emergence of various technologies over the last 20 years or so offering 24 hour t.v., computer games, gameboys, etc. means that there are now many competing distractions for children’s attention. As a result children spend less time engaging with books and consequently reading suffers. At the same time many new technologies and our increasing move towards an information-based society makes it all the more important that children can read effectively and critically – how else e.g. will they evaluate the sort of information they receive from a website?

A powerful starting point for encouraging reading and a love of books is to share stories with our babies and small children at home. It is interesting how many parenting books encourage reading to our children as part of strengthening our bond with them. So there are obviously benefits beyond the reading itself in installing the bedtime story into your evening routine. One book I read recently encouraged parents to “make the bedtime story something you, the parent can’t help looking forward to: an opportunity to put your feet up in a comfy chair with a glass of wine and your favourite toddler beside you”! While it’s never too early to read to your child, don’t forget also that it’s never too late either – even confident readers enjoy being read to.

### **Categories of books important for babies/toddlers & pre-school children:**

- Picture books – wordless for the very young with increasing amounts of text as the child gets older
- Collections of nursery rhymes and poetry
- Alphabet and counting books
- Board books, flap books and pop-up books – especially for the very young
- Simple illustrated information books
- Collections of short stories – these can be a great way to discover new/different writers whose stories really appeal to your child
- Simple dictionaries and word books
- Illustrated folk and fairy tales

### **Categories of books important to the beginner reader/confident reader:**

- Picture books – though text becomes increasingly important as a child becomes a more confident reader, picture books continue to be very important for them.
- Information books with attractive illustrations
- Anthologies of poetry and rhyme, including lyrical and humorous verse
- Books of jokes
- Reference books – encyclopaedias, dictionaries, thesaurus, etc.
- Magazines
- Biography / autobiography
- Fiction – collections of short stories, plays, short novels, “classics” (become important from about the age of 8), books offering a range of themes including fantasy, science fiction, history, animals, school
- Series Fiction – this type of fiction tends to be very popular with the 6 – 10 years olds. Books in a given series will usually be of similar length and structure so that if a child is able for the first book, he/she will usually manage the whole series with a corresponding increase in confidence.
- Books which are not necessarily “children’s” books (some of my son’s favourites books are old science and engineering text books belonging to my husband!) I’m sure other members could tell about unusual favourites – toy catalogues are usually a winner in any house but Woodies Catalogue is very popular in our house too!!)

## **How to Find Out About Children's Books**

**The Public Library** system – did you know that a child of any age can become a member of the public library system in our locality and borrow up to 6 items for 3 weeks free of charge (most library authorities around the country charge)? This includes picture books, collections of stories/poetry, works of fiction and non-fiction, tapes, audio-books, videos, DVD's, etc. Many libraries also have collections of games and jigsaws for use in the library in addition to crayons and pictures for colouring. A trip to the library not only nets a bag of books for bringing home but can while away a wet afternoon in a very pleasant environment. While the resources of your local branch are at your disposal so also are those of the entire public library system – if you want a particular book not held in your branch, the library will get it for you from another branch in Dublin or from a library abroad if necessary. New books are bought in also at the request of library users. Raheny library, the one with which I am most familiar, has a particularly nice Junior section with attractive Disney characters on the wall and lovely book boxes for the picture books. Some of the local libraries run events for children – the Coolock branch e.g. has storytelling one morning a week during the school year for 2 – 5 year olds, Raheny and Donaghmede had a summer programme during August and a Science is Magic event during National Science week, earlier this month. They often have bookmarks or other handouts featuring lists of recommended books for different age groups.

**The Children's Book Festival** – is a series of events such as storytelling, author visits, competitions, etc which are held in public libraries and bookshops throughout the country during October each year. A free guide to recommended children's books published in the last year is produced – "**Book Fest**". The 2004 "Book Fest" has just been published and is available from libraries and bookshops.

Other **guides to children's books** can be very helpful e.g. The Rough Guide folk have produced 2 quite useful little publications on kid's books entitled "**The Rough Guide to Children's Books for 0 – 5's**" and "**The Rough Guide to Children's Books for 5 – 11's**". Clare County Libraries has produced a lovely guide to picture books entitled "**Picture This : a Guide to Choosing Books for Young Children**". I'm not sure if this is still in print but it's certainly available for reference use in the library. Very usefully, it organises the picture books it recommends under subject headings such as Bereavement, Fears and Anxieties, Babysitters, Bedtime reading etc.

The National Reading Promotion Unit in Britain has a set of guides to children's books called "**Simply the Best Books for Children**" covering the up to 7 year olds and the 7 – 11 year olds. The Cuidiu branch library has a book by **Dorothy Butler** - "**Babies need books**" - which though quite dated now (the book was last revised in the late 1980's) is useful as it explains where books fit in with the overall development and needs of small children (up to age 6). She has also written a similar book which covers 5 – 8 year olds.

Look out too for **book reviews** in the newspaper and on radio and TV especially coming up to Christmas.

**Children's Books Ireland** (17 Lower Camden St., Dublin 2. Tel: 4750445 [www.childrensbooksireland.com](http://www.childrensbooksireland.com)) is an organisation which works to promote quality books and reading. It describes itself as "an ideal support for parents, teachers...and anyone with an interest in children's literature". Its activities include the Children's Book Festival mentioned above, an annual Summer School, the Bisto Book of the Year Awards and the publication of a magazine and Children's Book News.

**Reading Association of Ireland** (Education Research Centre., St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9) produces recommended reading lists and organises conferences on reading and generally works at promoting reading and reading performance.

Another useful aid to book selection would be to look at **Award-winning books**

The Kate Greenaway Medal, Mother Goose Award (both given for best illustrations)

Caldecott Medal, Emil/Kurt Maschler Award, Carnegie Medal,

Nestle Smarties Children's Choice (in 3 age categories)

Whitbread Children's Book Award (7+), Red House Children's Book Award

Newberry Medal, Guardian Children's Fiction Award, Bisto Book of the Year Awards are the ones you are most likely to come across.

**Irish Publishers of Children's Books** – I make no effort to be comprehensive under this heading but I know that the O'Brien Press in particular produce some lovely, good quality and reasonably priced children's books.

**Bookshops** – Most of the larger bookshops have good children's sections and would be happy to help you in your book selection.

### **FAVOURITE AUTHORS/BOOKS IN OUR HOUSE**

(Please note: the age categories are loose – many books in each category would be enjoyed by children in a slightly younger or older age group)

#### **Age: 0 – 3**

**Martin Waddell** – almost anything by him is brilliant but his “You and Me Little Bear” series is particularly good

**Benedict Blathwayt** – The Little House by the Sea (boys like this one a lot!)

The **Usborne Farmyard Tales** series by Heather Amery and Stephen Cartwright – gentle stories featuring animals and the all-important tractor!

**Virginia Miller's** series about Bartholomew Bear – again a brilliant series with lots of titles that parent and child can relate to – on subjects like potty training, eating dinner, going to bed. “Be Gentle Bear” was as real favourite in our house.

“**The Rattletrap Car**” by Phyllis Root

Anything by **Kim Lewis** – beautifully illustrated, mainly farm-based stories

**Helen Oxenbury's** “Tom and Pippo” series about a toddler and his toy monkey

**Debi Gliori's** “Flora's Blanket”.

**Shirley Hughes** has been a prolific producer of children's books for years. Her series about a brother and sister called “Lucy and Tom” and her “Nursery Collection” are particularly suited to this age group.

**Sally Grindley's** series about a little fox called “Figgy Twosocks” is delightful.

Other authors to look out for include: **Jan Ormerod, Mick Inkpen, John Burningham** and **Flora McDonnell**.

#### **Age : 3 – 6**

**Penny Dale** – “Ten in the Bed” and “Ten Out of Bed” – both of these books are beautifully illustrated and very entertaining

**Shirley Hughes** – almost everything she's written is loved in this house but especially a series about a brother and sister called “Alfie and Annie Rose”

**Elsie Minarik's** “Little Bear” stories

**Maurice Sendak's** “Where the Wild Things Are” (very popular with one of my wild things!)

**Jane Hissey's** lovely series about a set of toys including a Little Bear, Bramwell Brown, Old Bear, a giraffe called Jolly Tall and lots more besides.

**Judith Kerr** - “The Tiger who came to Tea”

**Quentin Blake** – “The Story of the Dancing Frog”

**Amy Hest** – “Baby Duck” stories

**Allan Ahlberg** – “Cops and Robbers”

**Russell Hoban's** lovely series about a little badger called “Frances”

**Arnold Lobel's** “Frog and Toad” series

**Harry Horse** “A Friend for Little Bear”

**Angela McAllister's** book about a brother and sister “Jack and Lily”

**Marc Brown's** series about “Arthur”

**Helen Palmer** – “Fish Out of Water”

#### **Age : 6 – 8**

**Allan Ahlberg** – “Ten in a Bed”

**Dorothy Edwards** – “My Naughty Little Sister”

**Anne Fine** – “The Jamie and Angus Stories” is a lovely book about a little boy and his toy bull.

**Phillippa Pearce** – “Lion at School”

**Margaret Mahy** – “Lion in the Meadow”

**James Herriott** has several lovely children's stories including “Blossom Comes Home” and “Only One Woof”

**Dick King-Smith's** series of 6 books about a girl called "Sophie" – great hit especially with kids who like animals

Various books in the **Dr. Seuss** series

**Catherine Storr's** "Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf"

**Roald Dahl** – various titles but particularly "**Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**"

**Joan G. Robinson** – "Teddy Robinson" – about a little girl and her teddy.

**Astrid Lindgren's** series about the "Bullerby Children"

**Margery Williams** - "The Velveteen Rabbit"

**Don Conroy** – various titles

**Shirley Hughes** – again!

"**How Tom Beat Captain Najork**" (sorry can't remember the author of this one but it definitely appeals to boys)

**Sam McBratney** – again various titles

**EB White** "Charlotte's Web"

**Florence Parry Heide** - "The Shrinking of Treehorn"

Age: 8+

**Phillipa Pearce** – "Tom's Midnight Garden"

**Eugene McCabe** – "Cyril – the Quest of an Orphaned Squirrel"

**Ted Hughes** – "The Iron Man"

**Kenneth Graham** – "The Wind in the Willows"

"**The Little Prince**"

**Richmal Crompton** - "Just William" series

**Tom McCaughrean** – "Run to the Wild Woods"

**CS Lewis** series about Narnia starting with "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe"

**Frances Hodgson Burnett** – "The Secret Garden"

Any Asterix or Tintin book