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The Golden Age Classics

A classic is classic not because it conforms to certain structural rules, or fits certain definitions (of which its author had quite probably never heard). It is classic because of a certain eternal and irrepressible freshness.

~ Edith Wharton

On a storm-blown Sunday afternoon in a creaky old manor house in England, I rediscovered the timeless delight of classic children's books. It took me by surprise. I was one of about thirty international students studying and living in England for the summer, and this was our first British teatime all together. A shy, awkward silence had fallen about us as we tried our best to balance philosophy, sophistication, and hot mugs of tea, when one of our tutors said something that sent us all staring.

"Let's read Winnie-the-Pooh."

A swift current of suppressed mirth ran the length of the room, but we were up for some fun, and the tutor assigned each person a part in the story. Pooh's expedition to the North Pole was the story of choice, and before we knew what was happening we were immersed in the comical, compact world of the Hundred Acre Woods. The story had all of us—tutors, college students, post-graduates, old, and young—laughing until our sides literally ached.

Amidst my giggles, I marveled at the ageless cleverness of the tale and the artfully captured personality of each animal (with resemblances to a few humans I could name). That unexpected hour brought back to me all the delight of the imaginative stories that so shaped my childhood. I left that day intent on rereading my old favorites.

Such is the peculiar charm of the children's classics. They have a staying power and a timeless beauty that endears them to adult and child alike. Of the many books I read throughout my childhood, these were the stories that most delighted and formed me. I almost can't imagine childhood apart from these books.

In the last few years, though, I have found that knowledge of the children's classics is increasingly rare. It took only a brief conversation with a Canadian flight attendant who regularly flew in and out of the famed Prince Edward Island but had never heard of *Anne of Green Gables* for me to realize that the classics need reviving. That startling encounter helped me to see that in an age of media entertainment, the Golden Age books have lost their charming reputation.

Perhaps you are in the same boat as my flight attendant friend. Maybe you have never come face to face with the delight of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Wind in the Willows*, or *Peter Pan*. If so, then you and your children are in for a marvelous adventure. These imaginative books contain some of the most beautiful stories ever written for children. I love these tales so much that I would tell you to choose them if you could only pick one type of books to read. Even if you never read any other genre of literature, your soul would be rich simply from the beauty and imagination that fill these graceful stories.

The history of these children's classics reveals some of the reason for their singular power and beauty. Written primarily in a historic blossoming of imagination during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, these books defined an era of writing that became known as the Golden Age of children's literature. The result of an unprecedented combination of social thought, artistic renewal, and fresh imagination, they broke new literary ground by being the first stories ever written specifically for the delight of children.

The birth of children's stories as a distinct literary genre was a fairly recent event, dating only to the early 1800s. Although there were some books for children before this time, they were written primarily for moral or educational instruction. The philosopher John Locke (1632–1734) was a great advocate of childhood education, but he believed children's stories should primarily educate and instruct, leaving children with a small selection of virtue tales that sacrificed any imagination

or aesthetic excellence to a pointed (sometimes pedantic) morality. Folktales saw a resurgence when they were turned into “fairy tales” by French author Charles Perrault (1628–1703). His stories of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Puss in Boots are among the best-known fairy tales of all time and greatly influenced the other famous authors of the fairy-tale genre, most notably the Brothers Grimm. In 1744, John Newbery wrote a whimsical little book, *A Little Pretty Pocket Book*, that was full of games and fun verses. Written to instruct through delight, it was unique in the history of books for children to that time.

But by the mid-1800s, a unique convergence of cultural changes set the stage for the birth of a new, almost revolutionary form of literature. The first major influence was Victorian society’s passion for home and family. Queen Victoria, crowned in 1838, ushered in a new era of reformed morals and respectability with her marriage to Prince Albert and her determination not to repeat the scandalous affairs of previous monarchs. The large royal family (Victoria and Albert had nine children), along with Prince Albert’s strong sense of duty and decorum, shaped Victorian society. The Victorians idealized the home as a small, near-perfect world and children as innocent souls to be formed within its walls by affection, courage, and beauty. The stories written during this period reflect a spiritual atmosphere that prized nobility in word and deed, loyalty to family, the purity of childhood, and a general love of uprightness.

Another major influence was the spirited philosophy of the Romantics, who rejected the strict rationality and reason so prevalent in the Enlightenment thought that preceded it. Romanticism's passionate defense of ideal beauty and its embrace of deep emotion and unhindered imagination led to a new breed of artists, writers, and musicians who sought to imbue their creations with the full force of their imaginative ideals. As this renewed value for imagination and beauty infiltrated society, it combined with that era's Victorian ideals to foster the view that children were perhaps the only human beings untainted by cynicism and uninhibited in their experience of the world's inherent beauty. William Wordsworth, a major Romantic poet, believed that children had a purer, more intuitive existence than adults. The cultivation and entertainment of these small souls, unspoiled by adult skepticism, became a focus for skilled writers.

Some of the first writers to delve into the riches of this new cultural imagination were Christian pastors and teachers who combined their desire to pass their faith on to their children with a deep passion for beauty. Norman MacLeod, a pastor and editor of a literary periodical for children called *Good Words for the Young*, wrote a winsome spiritual allegory for children called *The Gold Thread*. Published in 1860, it was one of the first stories that used literary form and imagination specifically for children. Soon after that, *Good Words* also provided a publishing home for the spiritual fantasy of George MacDonald, a prolific Victorian writer and pastor. *At the Back of the North Wind*, a tale MacDonald wrote to convey

an idea of heaven to his eleven children, was first serialized in *Good Words*.

The most dramatic historical turn came in 1865 with the publication of the now-famous *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Lewis Carroll (the pseudonym of Anglican clergyman Charles Dodgson) sent the whole literary establishment plunging into Wonderland. Entirely unconcerned with moral instruction, its sole purpose was delight and the amusement of children. At the time, it was a startling new creation.

The great success of *Alice* (its first printing sold out within months) opened the door to a whole new genre of literature: children's. The new possibilities kindled the imaginations of some of the most skilled, insightful writers of the time, as well as their wealthy publishers. With a growing middle class and the greater availability of books, people saw artistic and financial possibility in stories for children. Once the door of children's literature was opened, nothing could hold back the rush of writers. *Alice* was followed within the next twenty years by such favorites as *The Princess and the Goblin*, *Heidi*, *Treasure Island*, and *Little Women* (in America). The widespread enthusiasm for these books sparked an international hunger for children's stories. The result was a feast that lasted roughly from 1865 to 1914.

The books that most characterize this era possess an atmosphere of idealized beauty, innocence, and freshly unhindered imagination. Whether set in fantastical realms or realistic settings, these stories tend to portray the secret, inner

world of the imagination in which children find adventure and beauty and learn nobility. Stories such as *Peter Pan* (first published as *Peter and Wendy*), *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, *The Water-Babies*, and *The Secret Garden* reflect that love for secret, beautiful places and the new life and growth to be discovered within them.

Robert Louis Stevenson began writing adventure stories for boys, such as *Kidnapped*, *Treasure Island*, and *The Black Arrow*. Soon there was a wide range of adventure books, including Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*, and Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* Girls had their own beguiling heroines in such works as *Little Women*, *The Little Princess*, *Heidi*, and *Anne of Green Gables*. Beatrix Potter began a beloved set of animal tales with her bestselling work *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. It was soon followed by Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and the unforgettable and much-adored *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A. A. Milne.

That first exploration and expansion of the new frontier of children's literature lasted until around the beginning of the First World War. To this day, these stories are considered the classics of children's literature. They are remarkable for their sheer imagination, vivid beauty, and compelling, childlike adventures. To echo the words of Edith Wharton, I believe these books are classic because of their unfettered reach of imagination, the nobility and innocence of their child heroes and heroines, and the simple themes of quest, beauty, bravery, and compassion.

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They are also classics because they portray true things about the world and the human heart. Though secular scholars don't always recognize it, I believe that these books are classics in large part because they portray truth, goodness, and beauty. They clearly portray moral and aesthetic goodness; they celebrate what is lovely. In these stories there is no ambiguity regarding right or wrong. Virtue, honesty, and courage are portrayed as noble and worthy of pursuit, and innocence is presented as desirable and worthy of protection.

Though they are children's tales, they have a spiritual insight, a soul-striking poignancy that is remarkable in literature of any genre. They offer a solidity of spiritual truth that satisfies our souls and shapes the way we look at the world. It is not often that moral and artistic excellence combine so well, and it is a rare thing in history for children and family to be so deeply valued. Books such as these have a far more long-lasting impact than that of mere entertainment. They picture what is true and beautiful again and again for each succeeding generation.

I hope that a love for the Golden Age children's classics will be revived in my generation and in those to follow. We need these stories to help form a culture that values the true, the good, and the beautiful. Such is the legacy of the Golden Age books. As you discover them with your children, may it be yours as well.

Children's Classics Collections

If you are interested in gathering a high-quality set of children's classics to last your children into adulthood, finding some beautiful collections is quite easy. My dad began searching for *The Children's Classics* (Dilithium Press) when I was small and now has the complete collection. He's just waiting for grandkids now. There is an endless variety in bindings, illustrations, size, and price. If you are going for the long term, look for a hardbound series with acid-free paper, high quality binding, and illustrations by the classic illustrators. I highly recommend the following:

- *The Children's Classics, Dilithium Press* (hardcover)
- *Everyman's Library Children's Classics* (hardcover)
- *The Children's Library, Penguin Classics Complete Collections* (paperback)

Golden Age Illustrators

Hot on the heels of the visionary authors of the children's classics came equally visionary artists and illustrators, intent on capturing the enchantment portrayed in the stories. The whimsy and imagination of the illustrations that accompanied the first or other early editions of many of the classics add to their enduring charm. If you possibly can, get editions that include artwork by the original illustrators or the great Golden Age artists. In the following reviews, I have included the name of an illustrator if one of the Golden Age artists was

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linked with that book. In any case, look for books illustrated by these artists:

- Walter Crane
- Edmund Dulac
- Kate Greenaway
- Arthur Rackham
- Jessie Wilcox Smith
- John Tenniel
- N. C. Wyeth

Further Reading

If you are interested in finding out more about the Golden Age of children's literature, take a look at the following books:

- *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History*, edited by Peter Hunt
- *Behold the Child: American Children and Their Books* by Gillian Avery

Louisa May Alcott

Little Women, 1868. Illustrated by Jessie Wilcox Smith.
Elementary through Junior High.

Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March are four of the most beloved sisters in literary history. This tender, humorous story of four girls with vastly differing personalities growing up in New England is still one of the favorite books of girls worldwide. With a brave father fighting in the Civil War and a wise, gracious mother called Marmee, the March girls grow up in a whirl of drama, sisterly squabbles, family idealism, unhindered creativity, and an abiding love for each other. Based on Louisa May Alcott's own family, this is a wonderful mother-daughter read-aloud.

Little Men, 1871. Elementary through Junior High.

Continuing the tale of *Little Women*, *Little Men* centers on the lively school run by Jo and her husband, Professor Bhaer. With her sisters and their children close by, Jo becomes Mother Bhaer to a mischievous household of orphan boys, raising them with the vim and grace characteristic of Marmee's training. Ideal for boys, this book is filled with the escapades and thrills of daydreamer Demi (Meg's son); plucky, rebellious Dan; and musical Nat. There are characters to match any boy's personality. When my mom read this book aloud, my brother Nathan said he wanted a gang of boys just like the little men.

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Jo's Boys, 1903. Elementary through Junior High.

This story starts ten years after the end of *Little Men*. There is a somber note to this heartwarming tale of Jo's boys as they venture into life. They continue to turn to the grace and compassion of Mother Bhaer to help them through new loves and near tragic struggles as they seek to find their place in the world. But find their place they do—one as a musician, one as a sailor, and one as an adventurer in the unexplored West. A satisfying conclusion to the saga of the March family.

J. M. Barrie

Peter Pan, 1911. Elementary.

A celebration of childhood, *Peter Pan* is the tale of a young boy who has decided never to grow up. Hungry for friends, he whisks three children away from their home in London to visit him in Neverland, a country of perpetual childlike imagination. Battling pirates, dancing with Indians, swimming with mermaids, and fascinated by a fairy named Tinker Bell, the children revel in this strange land of childish imagination. Eventually they must decide if they will stay or return home to grow up. The sequel is *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, illustrated by Arthur Rackham.

Frances Hodgson Burnett

The Little Princess, 1905. Elementary.

Sara Crewe is the adored daughter of a wealthy, widowed father when she is sent to London for boarding school. Imaginative and enigmatic, she charms her peers, nettles her teachers, and dazzles the daily life of the school. When tragedy comes, however, she must decide how she will meet it and what it means to be a princess even when she is forgotten. This cherished story for girls illumines the true nature of dignity, beauty, and self-worth.

The Secret Garden, 1911. Elementary.

My personal favorite by Burnett, *The Secret Garden* is the story of Mary, an orphan transported from India to her uncle's old mansion on the windy moors of Yorkshire. Lonely and bad-tempered, Mary discovers the key to a forgotten, secret garden with a mystery surrounding its overgrown beauty. Through the friendship of young Colin and his animal friends, the good-natured ministrations of maid Martha, and the enigmatic wisdom of gardener Ben Weatherstaff, both Mary and her secret garden find their inner spaces blossoming anew. The edition with Tasha Tudor's quaint illustrations is one of my favorites.

Little Lord Fauntleroy, 1886. Elementary.

Cedric is a "charming little fellow" living with his demure, widowed mother in Brooklyn when he receives the

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astonishing news that he is the grandson of an English earl and heir to a vast estate. Transported across the sea to be raised by a grandfather he has never met and who refuses to even speak to his mother, Cedric must use all his simple courage to win the old man's affection, protect his mother, and defend his title against an imposter. A runaway best seller when it was first published.

Lewis Carroll

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 1865. Illustrated by John Tenniel. Elementary.

The book that turned the literary world upside down, *Alice* is the topsy-turvy, fantastical adventure of a little girl who falls into Wonderland, a realm peopled by perpetually late white rabbits, foolish knights, and tyrannical queens. Some readers find allegory and symbolism; some find the strange delight of pure whimsy. But all find this book to be a classic of childish imagination. The sequel is *Through the Looking-Glass*.

Mary Mapes Dodge

Hans Brinker, or, The Silver Skates, 1865. Elementary through Junior High.

Set in the countryside of the Netherlands, *Hans Brinker* is the story of a selfless young boy. While Hans and his sister Gretel dream of entering the great winter skate race and competing for the prize of the silver skates, they must scrape pennies together just to support their family and injured father. When a brilliant but gruff doctor comes to town, Hans must make a choice between two dreams. This noble, riveting tale offers an intriguing glimpse into the colorful customs and culture of the Netherlands.

Kenneth Grahame

The Wind in the Willows, 1908. Illustrated by Ernest H. Shepard. Young Child through Elementary.

Down by the river beneath the willows live a clan of friends: bumbling, adorable Mole; clever, capable Mr. Ratty; the mysterious and rather frightening Mr. Badger; and the madcap, incorrigible Toad. *The Wind in the Willows* is the chronicle of their adventures from picnics and boating on the river to the pursuit and rescue of the reckless Mr. Toad from a gang of weasels. This timeless story is imbued with a comforting spirit of friendship and wonder. While the

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Shepard illustrations are classic, Michael Hague's illustrations are equally enchanting and might be my favorite.

The Reluctant Dragon, 1898. Elementary.

When a young English boy discovers a clever, mushroom-loving dragon in the hills near his home, the two become fast friends. But when the nearby townspeople find out about the dragon, they call in an elderly St. George to slay him. A sympathetic knight, a fake joust, and echoes of English legend complete this charming little tale.

Charles Kingsley

The Water-Babies, 1863. Illustrated by Jessie Wilcox Smith.
Elementary through Junior High.

A fanciful allegory written by an Anglican clergyman (who was appointed as Canon of Westminster by Queen Victoria), this tale of the woeful young chimney sweep Tom imaginatively pictures the journey of redemption in an underwater world. When the Queen of the Fairies transforms Tom into a water baby, he is whisked away through the waves to meet Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, just two of the delightful menagerie of characters who aid in his transformation from a dirty chimney sweep with no awareness of his soul to a noble, cleansed young man. This is a thoroughly odd but wondrous tale.

Rudyard Kipling

The Jungle Book, 1894. Elementary.

The most famous of Kipling's collection of jungle animal tales set in India is the yarn of Mowgli, a boy raised by wolves. His best friends Baloo the bear and Bagheera the panther help him escape the murderous tiger Shere Khan. Each story portrays a noble character quality, and most are accompanied by Kipling's intriguing poems.

Also written by Kipling:

♡ *Just-So Stories*

♡ *Kim*

Charles and Mary Lamb

Tales from Shakespeare, 1878. Elementary.

A brother-sister team modified twenty Shakespeare plays (including fourteen comedies) in content and vocabulary for younger readers. This is a wonderful way to shepherd children into the wit and wonder of Shakespeare and whet their appetites for his full genius later on.

George MacDonald

At the Back of the North Wind, 1871. Illustrated by Jessie Wilcox Smith. Elementary through Junior High.

One of my favorite authors, George MacDonald was gifted with the rare skill of clothing spiritual concepts in word-pictures. His confidence in and devotion to God's love shone through in every story he wrote. C. S. Lewis said that no writer he had ever read seemed closer to the Spirit of Christ. Using his love for fairy tales and his vivid Scottish imagination, MacDonald wrote to illuminate God's truth and reality to his eleven children.

At the Back of the North Wind is the haunting tale of a little boy named Diamond who comes to know the beautiful and frightening woman who is North Wind. Carried by her throughout the world, Diamond witnesses her acts of blessing and justice, and for a short, blissful time, visits the unforgettably beautiful country at her back. This poignant allegory pictures the mystery of God's Spirit as it moves within the world and us. A sense of the longing for heaven imbues this beautiful book, making it one of my favorite children's classics of all time.

The Princess and the Goblin, 1872. Illustrated by Jessie Wilcox Smith. Elementary through Junior High.

Irene is a plucky young princess living on a mountain with goblins beneath her house and a mysterious woman in the attic. When the goblins hatch a plot to kidnap her, Irene must

journey with Curdie, the son of a humble miner, through the dark caves. They both must follow the nearly invisible thread that will lead them back to the light and safety of the castle tower and Irene's wise great-great-grandmother. A fairy tale that radiantly pictures the light of God as it leads us out of darkness.

The Lost Princess, 1875. Retold and illustrated by Karen Mezek. Young Child through Elementary

This story of the spoiled Princess Rosamond pictures the journey of a selfish young soul as it is transformed by the gentleness, grace, and severity of wisdom. Kidnapped by the cloaked Wise Woman, Rosamond wanders the halls of her mysterious house, climbing into different pictures in which she learns patience, self-control, and gentleness of heart. If you can find it, the illustrated version of this story published by Eerdmans brings the tale to life.

Also written by George MacDonald:

The Golden Key

The Light Princess

The Princess and Curdie

The Gifts of the Child Christ: And Other Stories and

Fairy Tales

Norman MacLeod

The Gold Thread, 1860. Elementary through Junior High.

A literary allegory, this story of young Prince Eric and his journey through a dangerous forest bears all the mystery of a good fairy tale, while artfully instructing its reader in the virtues of honesty, loyalty, and purity of heart. With only a slim golden thread for guidance, Eric must ignore every temptation to let it go if he is ever to reach the center of the forest and find his heart's desire.

A. A. Milne

Winnie-the-Pooh, 1926. Illustrated by Ernest H. Shepard.
Young Child through Elementary.

Winnie-the-Pooh, a stuffed bear of "very little brain," is the beloved friend of Christopher Robin. Milne's delightful cast of characters includes the incorrigible Tigger, skeptical Rabbit, timid but loyal Piglet, and the endearingly pessimistic donkey Eeyore as they explore and enjoy life in the Hundred Acre Wood.

Also written by Milne:

- ♥ *The House at Pooh Corner*
- ♥ *Now We Are Six*
- ♥ *When We Were Very Young*

Lucy Maud Montgomery

Anne of Green Gables series, 1908–1921. Elementary through Junior High.

Anne of Green Gables is the beloved first book about Anne Shirley, a spunky, imaginative, red-haired orphan sent to live with prickly spinster Marilla Cuthbert and her gentle brother Matthew on their farm in Prince Edward Island, Canada. Anne's buoyant love of life and penchant for scrapes and unexpected friendships transforms Marilla, Matthew, and the little town of Avonlea. Every girl simply must read the Anne books. There is no match for Montgomery's winsome prose as it expertly illumines the foibles of human hearts, the passionate wonder of imagination, and a young girl's love of beauty. Once you begin, you'll have to continue with the rest of the series:

- ♥ *Anne of Avonlea*
- ♥ *Anne of the Island*
- ♥ *Anne of Windy Poplars*
- ♥ *Anne's House of Dreams*
- ♥ *Anne of Ingleside*
- ♥ *Rainbow Valley*
- ♥ *Rilla of Ingleside*

The Story Girl, 1911. Elementary through Junior High.

Of all her books, Montgomery said this charming tale was her favorite. Sara has a wondrous gift for bringing stories to life as she tells them to her lively cousins on the King

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Farm on Prince Edward Island. This lovely read-aloud is a perfectly woven tapestry of rambunctious adventures that celebrates childhood friendships, poignant stories, and the simple goodness of a family farm.

The Golden Road, 1913. Elementary through Junior High.

This sequel to *The Story Girl* continues the growing up of the King Cousins as they begin to imagine what they will find on “the golden road of youth.” Wistful and hopeful as the world begins to expand in possibility for all the different children, the story ends with an unforgettable afternoon ramble just before Sara’s father returns to take her back with him to Europe.

Also written by Montgomery:

- ♡ *Emily of New Moon*
- ♡ *Emily Climbs*
- ♡ *Emily’s Quest*
- ♡ *Jane of Lantern Hill*
- ♡ *Magic for Marigold*

E. Nesbit

The Story of the Treasure Seekers 1899. Elementary.

This is the story of Dora, Oswald, Dicky, Alice, Noel, and Horace Octavius (H.O.) Bastable as they attempt to recover the fallen fortunes of their motherless family. An ingenious

little group, they hatch numerous plans for financial expansion, including excavation in the backyard, highway robbery, and pleas to the rich. Told entirely in the frank, unconsciously humorous voice of an unnamed Bastable child, this is a hilarious family tale. Its sequels include *The Wouldbegoods* and *The New Treasure Seekers*.

The Railway Children, 1906. Elementary.

Sent to live in the country with their mother after their father mysteriously disappears, Roberta, Peter, and Phyllis must learn to be very brave in their poky old cottage and decidedly poorer lifestyle. But with the whole countryside to roam and the fascinating train to watch every day, they soon find friends and adventures enough to keep them busy until they can figure out a way to bring their father home. I love this story for its portrayal of the joy that is possible even in the midst of a family's struggle.

Eleanor Porter

Pollyanna, 1913. Elementary through Junior High.

The much-beloved story of a little girl whose unassailable joy in life infects a whole town, *Pollyanna* could best be called a tale of gladness. Sent to live with grim and dutiful Aunt Polly, Pollyana determines to keep up the "glad game" taught her by her father before he died. Despite her grief, Pollyana determinedly finds joy in every possible situation. Her lively

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spirit wins its way into the hearts of the town, including the stubborn invalid, Mrs. Snow, and the crotchety old bachelor, Mr. Pendleton. It takes a great tragedy, however, to finally touch the frozen depth of Aunt Polly's heart and lead her to give Pollyanna the tenderness she needs.

Just David, 1916. Elementary through Junior High.

Written just three years after *Pollyanna*, *Just David* was meant to be a boy's companion to the girl's story, but the outbreak of World War I and a paper shortage ensured this beautiful tale was quickly forgotten. David is a joyful little boy who has lived with his father in a mountain cabin until a sudden crisis sends them on an unexpected journey into the valley. With the sudden and mysterious death of his father, David is left to the care of a crusty old farming couple. David's stunning gift as a violinist perplexes the town, while his kindness and innocence bring about a slow redemption in the lives of his friends. A perfect family read-aloud and one of our all time favorites.

Gene Stratton Porter

Freckles, 1909. Junior High.

Set in the swamps of the Indiana forest, this story is rich with the author's love of the natural world. A "plucky waif," Freckles is a red-haired orphan in desperate search of work and belonging when he is hired to be a timber guard of the

valuable trees in the Limberlost Forest. Befriended by the eccentric Bird Woman, Freckles struggles to outwit the timber thief named Black Jack, earn the love of a girl he calls simply “The Swamp Angel,” and learn the truth of his history.

Girl of the Limberlost, 1909. Junior High.

Elnora has grown up on the edge of the strange and beautiful Limberlost Swamp with a mother who blames her for her father’s death. Determined to gain an education, she attends the high school in the local town, paying her way by selling the ethereal moths she captures in the Limberlost. Through the kindness of her childless old neighbors and the mentorship of the Bird Woman, Elnora discovers her gift for music, revels in her education, and begins an unexpected process of redemption with her mother. This is one of my favorite books.

The Keeper of the Bees, 1925. Junior High.

Jamie is a World War I veteran with a wound that will not heal but a heart still full of grit when he decides to abandon his dank hospital room and strike off on his own up the sunny coast of California. A chance meeting with an old man in trouble lands him as the keeper of a cottage and caretaker of several thousand bees. The healing he finds in the fresh, earth-centered living of his new home and the spiritual peace he gains prepare him for another adventure with a beautiful, troubled girl. This is a story that celebrates God’s creation.

Beatrix Potter

The Tale of Peter Rabbit, 1902. Young Child through Elementary.

An eccentric, artistic spinster living with her parents in London, Beatrix Potter was shocked when her little nature tales for children became national bestsellers within months of their publication. Her observation of nature led to the intricate, humorous illustrations that fill her books. With bunny mothers, gullible ducks, mischievous mice who take over a doll's house, and the famous Peter Rabbit, Potter's books are ideal for young children and soon became the best beloved bedtime stories for generations of families. Potter's stories and illustrations have been conveniently bound into one volume, *The Complete Tales of Beatrix Potter*, but there are also picture-book editions of her individual stories, including:

- ♥ *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*
- ♥ *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle*
- ♥ *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*
- ♥ *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*

Howard Pyle

The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood, 1883. Elementary.

Every adventurous boy ought to read Pyle's classic retelling of the medieval Robin Hood legends. With jolly Friar Tuck

as an ally and the love of the winsome Maid Marian, Robin Hood robs the rich to feed the poor, keeping justice and faith alive in a kingdom yearning for the return of its courageous king. Strong, skillful drawings enhance the story.

The Story of King Arthur and His Knights, 1903. Elementary.

This excellent retelling of an old legend chronicles the valiant doings of “the most honorable, gentle Knight who ever lived in all the world” and his brotherhood of the world’s fairest and bravest knights who gather at the Round Table in Camelot. This original model for knightly chivalry, adventure, and courage will feed the budding gallantry of any young boy.

Caution: Families who are concerned by these elements should know that the King Arthur stories include a fair amount of good and evil magic. The source of the magic is never fully explained, though the good knights all pray to God and are considered faithful Christians.

Christina Rossetti

Sing-Song, 1872. Elementary.

The sister of famous artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti was a prolific poet with a deeply held Christian faith. This collection of poems and songs for children reflects her whimsy, wonder, and devotion. It was considered an

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example of the rising quality of children's writing when it was published.

Anna Sewell

Black Beauty, 1877. Elementary through Junior High.

Originally meant as a novel for horse-lovers, this book quickly became a favorite children's story because of its winsome narrator and hero, the stallion Black Beauty. This tale of his life from birth on a farm to his work as a prize horse, a London cabby, and a packhorse teaches kindness to animals and the merit of integrity. With memorable characters such as the fiery mare Ginger, the plucky pony Merrylegs, and the simple-hearted boy Joe, this tale is sure to delight any animal-lover.

Johanna Spyri

Heidi, 1880. Illustrated by Jessie Wilcox Smith. Elementary.

One of the best-known pieces of Swiss literature, *Heidi* is the story of an orphaned little girl who lives with her crusty grandfather high on the slopes of the Swiss Alps. Affection slowly blossoms between them as she revels in her grandfather's hut, his goats, and the friendship of the herder Peter. When Heidi is suddenly taken away, her grandfather realizes the depth of his love for her. A redemptive story with

clear spiritual themes of grace and restoration, the book is also highly descriptive. I can still remember the accounts of toasted cheese, fresh mountain winds, and Heidi's little nest in her grandfather's attic.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Treasure Island, 1883. Illustrated by N. C. Wyeth. Elementary through Junior High.

A swashbuckling, high-seas adventure set in the eighteenth century, *Treasure Island* is the ultimate pirate's tale. Jim Hawkins, son of an innkeeper, has accidentally stumbled upon the legendary pirate treasure map of the infamous Captain Flint. Jim's wealthy friends eagerly set up a sea voyage in search of the treasure, hiring the best sailors that they can find. But as they near the mysterious Treasure Island, it becomes clear that pirates are aboard and a battle is going to be fought, led by the charismatic, one-legged cook, Long John Silver.

Caution: Though never graphic in nature, this classic pirate novel does have quite a bit of sword and gun play, with quite a few bad guys (and several good ones) meeting an early death.

Kidnapped, 1886. Illustrated by N. C. Wyeth. Elementary through Junior High.

This is the tumultuous tale of young David Balfour, stranded in the highlands of Scotland and forced to seek his

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fortunes during the Jacobite Rebellion. Betrayed by a greedy uncle, David is kidnapped and set on a ship where he falls in with the daring and audacious Alan Breck, a fierce Scottish highlander who drags him on a mad journey through the highlands. It takes a mighty amount of valor and a trek through the English countryside before David can figure out how to reach his home and reclaim his fortune. I read this aloud to my siblings one autumn, and we could barely stand the suspense between reading times.

Also written by Stevenson:

♥ *The Black Arrow*

♥ *David Balfour*

Mark Twain

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, 1876. Junior High.

Mark's Twain's boisterous "hymn" to the "idyll of childhood" follows mischievous young Tom through the hot, lazy days of a southern town in summer. With his penchant for trouble and a love of showing off, Tom gets tangled up in a murder trial and a hunt for treasure buried in a cave, all while wooing the lovely Becky and escaping his aunt's strict ministrations. An exuberant picture of boyish summer fun.

Caution: A key element of the plot is a murder in a graveyard, witnessed by Tom and his friend.

The Prince and the Pauper, 1881. Junior High.

Young Prince Edward (son of Henry the VIII) and the beggar boy Tom Canty have almost nothing in common—except their identical looks. After a chance meeting at the palace gates, the boys embark on a daring adventure by switching places. Tom Canty is immersed in the noble life for which he has yearned, while the prince tastes the struggle of life as a beggar and the cruelty of the English courts. But when the real king dies, Edward must find a way to get back to the palace and convince the nobles that he is their true king.

Caution: Mark Twain vividly recreates life in the 1500s, including the gruesome and cruel punishment practiced by the English courts at that time, which included burning at the stake, dismemberment, and torture.

Also written by Twain:

♥ *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Kate Douglas Wiggin

Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, 1903. Elementary.

Rebecca is a little girl sent to live with her two great-aunts in small-town Maine at the end of the nineteenth century. With one aunt stern and one sweet, Rebecca is immediately immersed in a challenging whirl of a new life. But her zest,

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love, and best friend Emma help her to prevail and win over her new family in the end.