

Choosing only one memorable book seems next to impossible. Should it be the original P.L. Travers' *Mary Poppins*, an enduring favourite of my own childhood, or the Ahlbergs' wonderful *Each Peach Pear Plum* with its reassuring rhythms and delightful use of familiar storybook characters – a book I read regularly to my own children? In the end I feel I must choose a more recent book that has continued to delight me since its publication in 2000, Lauren Child's *Beware the Storybook Wolves*. Like the Ahlbergs, Child makes reference to much-loved storybook characters, but creates a new, hilariously chaotic world for them. The wolves want to eat Herb, but they aren't too sure whether little boys should be eaten before or after the main course, and then, the little wolf, complete with ball dress, gets sent off to Cinderella's ball! The text swirls around the highly original illustrations to create a world worth visiting again and again.



Marianne Adey



The smiling, moon-faced, no-nonsense hero of this and a whole series of fantastic adventures represents Bob Wilson's gentle and affectionate riposte to the persistent southern myth about the grimness of things 'oop north'. Attired as always in fair isle sleeveless pullover and baggy knee-length shorts – the latter, please note, a staple garment long before the style became universally fashionable – the ever-amiable Stanley proves with effortless insouciance that things in 'Huddersgate' 'where he resides with his Grandma / At number 4 Prince Albert Row' are by no means so 'boring and slow' as they're often assumed to be. And certainly not on the day he and his mate Ted – allotment-holder, nature buff, general all-round philosopher, wearer of cloth cap, all-weather overcoat, military medals (likely to be his own) and CND badge – encounter the leviathan of the title casually making its way along the Grub Street Canal. As in all Bob Wilson's books, dead-pan humour goes hand-in-hand with witty, atmospheric and topographically and architecturally appropriate artwork. On the first outing of *Stanley Bagshaw and the Twenty Two Foot Whale*, in 1983, the 'Twenty Two' of the title referred to the whale's tonnage rather than its length; but although the specifications have altered the story remains the same, as does the pleasure.

Chris Stephenson

The book I would currently most look forward to re-reading is F.H. Anstey's *Vice Versa*. This tale of a father and son unexpectedly changing bodies was published in 1882 but remains as funny now as it was then. Mr Bultitude's travails with other pupils who go on to push him around ("I could have you up for assault for that!") wonderfully makes the point about how so much of childhood, especially outside lessons, exists in a comparatively lawless state. His headmaster Dr Grimstone, reading the evening paper in the train "with an air of impartial but severe criticism", is still the best caricature of holders of this high office yet. Each carefully weighed sentence is an exemplar of the special vocabulary teachers once felt forced to adopt, with 'chips' referred to as "chipped potatoes" and the director of the Christmas film treat as a Mr Walter Disney.



Nicholas Tucker



I loved Robin Hood stories when I was a girl and *Bobs Against the Barons* was my favourite. It was one of the few books I owned and treasured but somehow it got lost. I told this to Geoffrey Trease when I met him at his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party, hosted by the Society of Authors. It was 1991 and one of my own books had just been reviewed in the *Guardian* next to one by Geoffrey Trease so my cup was already overflowing. Now I was talking to this gentle man and he was telling me that critics accused him of inciting the young to revolt when it was first published in 1934. Well, the merry men do call each other comrade and the society depicted is one of harsh divisions, the poor oppressed by both church and state. It's a realistic, unromantic story, with life in Sherwood Forest shown as tough and a hardship to be endured before the creation of a better world. Shortly after this meeting I received a parcel. Inside was a copy, but not the faded grey edition I'd owned, printed on war-time thin paper. This cover depicted Sherwood Forest in vivid greens, and inside were bold black and white illustrations by C. Walter Hodges. There was a letter too, with a warning: "A return to an old favourite can be a disappointing – even a mystifying – experience." But from the first word *Crack!* I was transported. Even better, it still works. My ten year old grandson shares my enthusiasm.

Julia Jarman

Three abandoned youngsters escape the hopelessness of their children's home – Whitegates – by sailing off on a homemade raft down the River Tyne. There's desperate exhilaration in the brief voyage until they become grounded on the Black Middens. A mysterious girl, *Heaven Eyes*, rescues them and offers shelter in the derelict painting works she shares with her suspicious grandfather. Whilst with her a strange healing eases their lives so that when they are returned to Whitegates, as TS Eliot says,

"And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time"

Like any great poem or painting, each re-reading offers more to consider. Beautifully written, intensely imagined, dark, ferocious yet suffused with hope, the book is a breathtaking experience.

Tina Massey



Alan Garner's *Stone Book Quartet* is my choice. It is a selection which gives me four stories for the price of one and answers the questions I ask before making up my mind. Is it a book which can be read and re-read with pleasure? Does it carry me, effortlessly, into a world which is new yet recognisable? Does it stir up memories of my own childhood and remind me of people and experiences I once had? And, because I enjoy stories where the reader becomes the executant, are there rich opportunities for me to act out, interpret and bring to life the words on the page? Garner's Quartet hits the target on all counts. It will go with me when I make my last visit to my favourite Yorkshire dale. As the quiet of a gentle summer's evening settles over the Swale valley I will have a fair old bazup, blasting out excerpts from these generous, ingenious pieces: Mary climbing the spire with her father's baggin; Robert finding the mason's mark above the chapel clock; Joseph accompanying his father and Damper Latham on the E flat cornet. My audience of black-faced sheep, rabbits and water-birds will be suitably amazed and startled by the comfortable, rolling tones of Garner's grand stories. I have a set of signed, first editions. Not for sale.

Jack Ousbey

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