

Charlie Higson's top 10 fantasy books for children

1. Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone by JK Rowling

Potter is classic fantasy. An ordinary wimpy kid in glasses suddenly finds out that he is something special and enters a magic realm via flying motorbike and enchanted station platform. Who among us has not dreamed of finding a hidden door to another reality? Kids' books are full of them, whether it's in a wardrobe, down a rabbit hole, or, as in Steven Butler's recent book, *The Wrong Pong*, down the loo. And who among us has not dreamed of developing superpowers? I won't hear a word against JKR. She's done more for children's books than any writer since, I don't know, Enid Blyton. She'd got kids reading and adults talking about children's books. She's a great writer for kids. The books are engrossing, exciting, detailed and it's as if she's used a secret page-turning magic spell on them. I wouldn't have started writing for kids if it wasn't for Jo, so I will always thank her for that.

2. Tales of the Greek Heroes by Roger Lancelyn Green

It was reading the Greek myths and legends as a boy that first instilled in me a love of storytelling. They contain the archetypes for just about every story told ever since, especially in the hero department. Without the Greek myths we'd have no Marvel comics, for instance. Any good collection would do, but I've gone for the version I first read as a boy. Roger Lancelyn Green did so much to make these ancient stories accessible for children. I also loved his versions of King Arthur and Robin Hood.

3. Titus Groan by Mervyn Peake

Having worked my way through Achilles, Lancelot and Little John I moved on to historical fiction and fantasy. Any story in which the hero had a sword was all right with me. Inevitably I got around to Tolkien. He's missing from the list, as are the Narnia books, because I suppose they're taken as read. It's a bit like how I might leave the Beatles out from a list of favourite

music. I've heard them too many times and they hardly need my recommendation. I discovered Tolkien at about 14 and spent many happy months in Middle Earth before emerging, blinking and bereft into the harsh light of reality. After that I looked for anything fantasy-based. There wasn't a lot around in the early seventies. Nowadays, every American with access to a computer seems to have churned out a sub-Tolkien quasi-mediaeval fantasy book with a dragon in it and a title that sounds like a heavy metal album. It will be full of characters whose names have pointless apostrophes and say "aye" instead of "yes". [Mervyn Peake](#) was in a different league. Although set in an unimaginably vast rambling gothic castle – the "Gormenghast" that gives the series its title – it is something of a shock to discover, about halfway through, that the books take place in a sort of alternative 1930s. The books are dense, horrific, funny, massively detailed and contain the greatest disaffected teenage outsider in fiction – the psychotic yet seductive Steerpike.

4. The Knight of the Swords by Michael Moorcock

Alongside Peake, I also devoured Michael Moorcock's fantasy books about the Eternal Champion. Unlike most fantasy series, where the quality of the books seems to be judged on their inordinate length, each of Moorcock's books are a considerably less daunting and more manageable 150 pages or so. (He compensated by writing lots of them.) You can start anywhere, but I've chosen the one I first read, about the last prince of a doomed race who is forced to become a reluctant hero. Moorcock's universe is one that is engaged in a ceaseless bipolar battle between the stultifying, life-denying Gods of Law and the anarchic, destructive Gods of Chaos. His hero is reborn in many guises in many different worlds where he has to try to restore the balance, sometimes fighting for law, sometimes for chaos. It is a hipper, more morally complex world than Tolkien, with lots more sex and violence. His heroes are conflicted, and their magical weapons and attributes all have a terrible price to pay.

5. [The Earthsea Quartet by Ursula le Guin](#)

The bookshelves are groaning under the weight of stories about teenage wizards learning their skills and/or training dragons. It didn't start with Harry Potter, though. Ursula le Guin was there before anyone else with

these wonderful books about a world in which magic is commonplace but must be learned and mastered.

6. Mortal Engines by Philip Reeve

Philip Reeve is my favourite living children's author. He's a great writer and a fabulous storyteller. I particularly love his Mortal Engines series. The central concept is irresistible – In the distant future cities have become mechanised and they trundle across the dried-up oceans on caterpillar tracks hunting down smaller towns and cities and consuming them for spare parts. The books mix properly inventive scientific detail with swashbuckling high adventure and include many memorable characters. Reeve is ruthless and unsentimental and really gets kids. (He has also written the best modern take on the Arthurian legend with his brutal "Here Lies Arthur".)

7. The Vampire's Assistant by Darren Shan

Did you know that the biggest selling kids' book of all time is not Harry Potter, or even Enid Blyton, it's The Poky Little Puppy by Janette Sebring Lowrey. You remember it? You must have read it! What do you mean you've never even heard of it? It is inevitably American and obviously aimed at younger readers than the books on my list, but things have changed drastically since Poky's day. Perhaps we shall soon see The Poky Little Zombie Puppy? With his Vampire's Assistant series Darren Shan ushered in a whole new era of children's fiction. His gruesome, gory series about a boy who becomes a vampire and the adventures that follow are horror stories a million miles from the Famous Five and their bloodless thrills. When my eldest was 10 he tore through the first nine books in this series in about a month. Shan writes directly for kids, he's not bothered about pleasing adults and he knows what kids like.

8. The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins

The feeling I got reading this book was similar to the one I got when I first read Darren Shan – we're not in Oz any more. The Hunger Games doesn't pull any punches. There are echoes of Greek mythology – the innocent young being sent off to ritually die in order to atone for the sins of the fathers. In a distant future (I know, I know...) the poorer provinces of North America are punished for daring to rise up (vainly) against the ruling elite

by having to send children to compete in the annual hunger games. You keep thinking, oh well, I'm sure no one will actually get hurt, but the games are a fully armed fight to the death – and deaths there are a-plenty. A strong heroine, a well-realised society (with parallels to our own reality TV and celebrity-obsessed culture) unflinching violence... Fantastic.

9. Northern Lights by Philip Pullman

Pullman's great trilogy has already achieved classic status and you feel it will be read for years to come. I almost didn't put him on the list, because, like CS Lewis and Tolkien, he makes it on to everybody's list, but I fear that some people might have been put off reading him by the frankly awful film version of *The Golden Compass* (the American title of the first book in the trilogy). The film managed to get just about everything wrong. The book is really special. Read it.

10. Neuromancer by William Gibson

This is sci-fi rather than fantasy, and not really a children's book at all, but it's my list, so I can put what I want on it. *Neuromancer* was probably the most influential sci-fi book of the late 20th century, because in it Gibson pretty well came up with the whole idea of the internet and our plugged-in future. The story goes that a US general came into the Pentagon one day with a copy of this book, slapped it down on the table and said "Build me this!" And we have built it. So much of what Gibson envisaged has come true, which means he's written himself out of a job. Its story of a bunch of renegade tech-heads trying to play God and create artificial intelligence is hip and witty and cool and sexy and will appeal to any techno-obsessed teenager.