

My Favorite 20 Chapter Books to Read to Your Kids

1. Dominic, by William Steig (1972)

- A simple, but eventful tale - and the perfect introductory chapter book for younger children. Plenty of pictures, short chapters, lots of action and quick plot developments. But it also has Steig's trademark revelry in language, and the occasional pause for musing and reflection.

2. the Giggler Treatment, by Roddy Doyle (2000)

- A hilarious, easy read for younger children. Can be read in one sitting. You can't go wrong w/ a scatological book about one of every kid's favorite subjects: dog poop. The first children's book by the author of the Commitments.

3. a Barrel of Laugh, a Vale of Tears, by Jules Feiffer (1995)

- One of two chapter books by the famed cartoonist. An irreverent, self-referential book that invites the reader in. Both younger and older children will get jokes at different levels. Despite the humour, a book w/ a real message (and heartwarming, too).

4. Island of the Blue Dolphins, by Scott O'Dell (1960)

- A more sophisticated book, often read by middle schoolers. A Robinson Crusoe story about an 18th c. Indian girl on an island in the Pacific. Won the Newbury Award in 1960. A book about perspective. Nature is a large character - both beautiful and scary. A book to let the prose do the work. The author is very good at showing, not telling.

5. Hatchet, by Gary Paulsen (1987)

- A more modern Robinson Crusoe story, this time about a boy in Alaska. One of two books on the list very popular w/ boys. Paulsen has many fine books in this vein.

6. Holes, by Louis Sachar (1998)

- An unexpected classic about a boy at a fableistic reform school. Sachar weaves two mysteries from the past while the boy struggles to stay stoic amid injustice. Also popular w/ boys, and perhaps w/ themes inappropriate for younger children.

7. Trumpet of the Swan, by E.B. White (1952)

- My personal favorite of White's classic trio. A boy who loves nature. White's famed prose. And a swan who can't honk - until he acquires a trumpet. Misadventures follow - some silly, some noble. The book to read if you can't get enough of Charlotte's Web or Stuart Little.

8. Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH, by Robert C. O'Brien (1971)

- A delightful and ingenious story about a resourceful mouse who needs to save her child - and the super-intelligent rats from NIMH. All children are compelled by the 8-chapter mystery revealed at the heart of this story. Two worthy sequels, too, penned by an O'Brien successor.

9. the BFG, by Roald Dahl (1982)

- My personal favorite by the classic, playful, and macabre author of James and the Giant Peach and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (and 5 other notable children's novels). Every adult will revel in performing the BFG's inventive and contorted speech.

- Note: My wife's personal favorite introductory chapter book is Dahl's Fantastic Mr. Fox.

10. the Iron Giant, by Robert Hughes (1968)

- A sleeper. And the seed of the excellent children's film. In 1964, to assuage his children after the suicide of their famous mother, the poet Sylvia Plath, Hughes (a poet of note in his own right), penned this fable. Not what you'd expect. But worth pondering why he thought its attributes would calm his children.

11. Just So Stories, by Rudyard Kipling (1902)

- Easier to read, and nearly as famous, as Kipling's classic Jungle Book tales. These fables - endowed w/ Kipling's prose and wordplay - are witty enough that even smaller children enjoy them. The rare book where just one chapter can get you through a car ride cross town - w/ something to talk about afterwards.

12. Caesar, by Patrick O'Brian (1930)

- A little known tale, written as a youth in the style of Kipling's Jungle Book, by the author of 20 historic sea tales for adults. Another story about nature, from the perspective of a Panda-Snow Leopard. A carnivorous tale. And, it made all three of my daughters cry (a good thing).

13. the Phantom Toll Booth, by Norton Juster (1961)

- A witty book better understood by older children. But a provocative read-aloud for a parent looking for something unexpected to share w/ a child on the eve of middle school.

14. the Chronicles of Narnia, by C.S. Lewis (1950-55)

- The classic seven-book series about the Peevey children (and two of their friends) who journey to an alternative, medieval land, peopled by creatures of fable and the imagination. A handful find these stories dated today. These books also have an architectonic Christian theme - which some revel in, and some pass right by.

15. the Indian in the Cupboard, By Lynne Reid Banks (1980)

- A five-book series (which also inspired a touching and worthy film) that created mania in Britain a decade before Harry Potter. Children really seem to identify w/ the responsibility of caring for tiny, but ornery, realistic characters from the past - in this case an Iroquois Indian and a Wild West cowboy.

16. Harry Potter, by J.K. Rowling (1997-)

- What more needs to be said? There are four books now (of a planned 7), and they keep getting longer. Yes, there are some scary parts, but these are great books to read together as a family. And isn't it worth reading each volume before the next film comes out?

17. Dr. Doolittle, by Hugh Lofting (1920)

- A far older series. Though Lofting penned a total of 12 volumes, they are admittedly a trifle uneven. The second volume - the Voyages of Dr. Doolittle - is by far the most well known and acclaimed. Only the first two are still in print. One of the easiest books to read on this list.

18. the Wizard of Oz, by L. Frank Baum (1900)

- When you read this for the first time, you will appreciate what the film-makers added: the songs and the black and white moral frame. But you will also discover an engaging, imaginative story that never fails to enchant children. Baum also spawned 14 somewhat uneven, but always creative, volumes in the Oz series. Watch out - I've known more than one child who wanted to hear it again and again and...

19. 101 Dalmatians, by Dodie Smith (1956)

- Another inspiration to a classic children's film. But the story holds up all by itself. For all ages.

20. Love That Dog, by Sharon Creech (2001)

- Totally unlike her Newbury Award-winning Walk Two Moons, this is a book that turns a child's resistant prose into poetry. Will convince any student, parent, or teacher that any kid can do poetry. Heartbreaking and uplifting - and it takes an hour to read.