



Fiction For The Filofax

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I'm still kicking myself, of course. But when a nice lady from **The Times** calls you in mid-afternoon and actually seeks your *advice*, it's hard not to be instantly helpful. Especially when she tells you she's also enlisting the opinions of Nina Bawden, Eunice McMullen, Shirley Hughes, Elaine Moss, Jan Mark, Elizabeth Attenborough, etc . . . I mean, it's got to be all right, right?

Even so, by the time she'd phoned me back I was beginning to feel uneasy. 'Sorry,' I began. 'I'm afraid I can't stick to only six titles in each age category; kids and books are so diverse. About a dozen in every section is the smallest number I can manage.' 'Fine,' she replied. 'That's what everyone's saying.'

And so it turned out. When the article was printed on Friday, 19th February under the headline 'The Times 50: Books Children Should Read' it contained plenty of provisos to clear my conscience. 'It would be a thousand pities if any list were taken as a blueprint of what every child should read at whatever age,' Elaine Moss insisted. 'Reading should be a pleasure.' Puffin's Elizabeth Attenborough echoed the same point - and showed more presence of mind than most of us by refusing to offer a list beyond the age of 14. 'After that they should be reading and trying out absolutely everything.' Nice one Elizabeth, I thought. I wish I'd said that. Still, according to the article, we'd all agreed on one point:

.. we found [the experts] full of healthy misgivings about the whole idea. Unanimously they agreed that any mandatory check list was anathema.' What a relief! That put us completely in the clear ... Why, then, was I still so bothered?

Later that week I found out. Apparently **The Times** wasn't the only national newspaper taking an interest in this issue. On the very same day - Friday, 19th February - the **Daily Telegraph** had also entered the . . . er, lists. No half-measures with them, though: the piece was called 'The 100 books every school-leaver ought to have read'. There was no nonsense about consulting so-called 'experts', either. Here, augmented by a Tory MP, the team was strictly in-house: two of their own columnists plus their Arts and Literary editors. This bold stroke in excluding anyone tainted by first-hand experience of children and children's books had brought a marked toughening in 'the cultural content of the satchels that those leaving schools for the last time will carry with them'. For the object of the enterprise was to establish nothing less than 'a core of reading of which those heading for industry, medicine, the law, the Church or perhaps even the dole queue ought to be aware.'

So take a good look at the books they recommend. Two questions seem to me to be prompted at once:

1) If the list is intended for *every* school-leaver, why is it so highbrow`? For the record, I know of at least one middle-aged bookworm - 'literary' by temperament, training and occupation - who's *still* seven titles short of scoring this particular century. Yes, me.

2) How, given the list's heavy bias towards the past, do we avoid convincing school-leavers that the only good writer is a dead writer?

The first question points to the sort of debate about what 'literature' actually is that's routine in universities these days.

The second raises the matter of our relationship with it - do we want a mere tugging of forelocks or the sort of active engagement with texts that includes consideration of our own as well as the best of other people's?

Neither question, needless to say, detains our Famous Five at the **Telegraph**. What they're eager to establish is which notches count on a cultural totem pole. This, after all, is only a beginning. Why should they stop at 'The 100 books every school-leaver ought to have read'? Surely we can now look forward to `The 100 poems every school-leaver ought to know by heart'? Or 'The 100 movies every school-leaver ought to have sat through'? Or 'The 100 paintings every school-leaver ought to have gawped at'? Come on, team. There's work to be done. The filofax generation needs you. This is a show which will run and run - perhaps, with luck and a fair following wind, as far as 'The 100 tunes every school-leaver ought to have whistled in the bath'. If Education is a commodity, subject like everything else to market forces, why not offer it in a form that's handy, easy-to-operate, and above all testable?

Hold it, though. Maybe ... just maybe ... I'm over-reacting. There does seem some glimmer of understanding in the article that there's more at issue here than an amiable parlour-game. 'No-one could claim this to be a definitive list,' begins the final paragraph. And, earlier, 'it would be an ideal child who had read the lot and a pretty remarkable one who could score more than 50 per cent.' Really? Now that would explain why, in mid-article, there's a rather startling concession. The list, we're told, is what 'an intelligent, school-leaver ought either to have read *or at least to have thought about reading*' (my italics). Dear me! What softies these hard-liners turn out to be ...

The truth is, of course, that at *every* age and stage children `should be reading and trying out absolutely everything'. Lists of 'classics' can be a useful jog to the memory but following them slavishly is bound to bring the same result as making a meal out of every item on a menu: acute indigestion.

Mind you, there's one strategy I would recommend to the **Telegraph** team. If they're serious about creating a readership for these books, why not ban them completely? It worked a treat with **Spycatcher**.

THE TIMES 50: BOOKS CHILDREN SHOULD READ

AGES 3-7	(The number of panellists' votes per book is given, below)
Just So Stories Rudyard Kipling	6
The Tale of Peter Rabbit Beatrix Potter	6
Charlotte's Web E.B. White	5
The Very Hungry Caterpillar Eric Carle	5

The World of Pooh A.A. Milne	5
Dogger Shirley Hughes	4
Mr Grumpy's Outing John Burningham	4
Where the Wild Things Are Maurice Sendak	4
Each Peach Pear Plum Allan and Janet Ahlberg	3
Mr Magnolia Quentin Blake	3
Now We Are Six A.A. Milne	3
Rosie's Walk Pat Hutchins	3
Where's Spot? Eric Hill	3

AGES 8-11	(The number of panellists' votes per book is given, below)
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The Wind in the Willows Kenneth Grahame	8
The Hobbit J.R.R. Tolkien	7
Tom's Midnight Garden Philippa Pearce	7
BFG Roald Dahl	5
The Iron Man Ted Hughes	5
The Secret Garden Frances Hodgson Burnett	5
A Christmas Carol Charles Dickens	4

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe C.S. Lewis	4
Alice in Wonderland Lewis Carroll	3
Complete Nonsense Book of Edward Lear Edward Lear	3
The Ghost of Thomas Kempe Penelope Lively	3
The Silver Sword Ian Serrailier	3
Stig of the Dump Clive King	3
The Stone Book Alan Garner	3
The Treasure Seekers E. Nesbit	3
The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler Gene Kemp	3
The Wolves of Willoughby Chase Joan Aitken	3

AGES 12-18	(The number of panellists' votes per book is given, below)
Eagle of the Ninth Rosemary Sutcliffe	6
Treasure Island R.L. Stevenson	5
Brother in the Land Robert Swindells	4
Smith Leon Garfield	4
The Machine Gunners Robert Westall	4
1984 George Orwell	3

Carrie's War Nina Bawden	3
Catcher in the Rye J.D. Salinger	3
The Box of Delights John Masefield	3
The Diary of Anne Frank Anne Frank	3
The Earthsea Trilogy Ursula Le Guin	3
Emit and the Detectives Erich Kastner	3
Goldengrove Jill Paton Walsh	3
Huckleberry Finn Mark Twain	3
Jane Eyre Charlotte Bronte	3
The Hound of the Baskervilles A Conan Doyle	3
Lord of the Flies William Golding	3
Moonfleet J. Meade Falkner	3
The Owl Service Alan Garner	3
Pride and Prejudice Jane Austen	3

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH CHOICE

CORNERSTONES

The Bible (authorised version)

The Iliad by Homer

Odes by Horace

The Canterbury Tales

by Chaucer

The Inferno by Dante

Le Morte D'Arthur by Thomas Malory

The Plays by William Shakespeare

Don Quixote by Cervantes

Paradise Lost by John Milton

The Life of Samuel Johnson by James Boswell

On the Origin of Species by Charles Darwin

History of Western Philosophy by Bertrand Russell

BEGINNINGS

The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter

Winnie-the-Pooh by A. A. Milne

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame

The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett

The Hobbit by J. R. R. Tolkien

The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe by C. S. Lewis

Kidnapped by R. L. Stevenson

Just William by Richmal Crompton

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain

FICTION IN ENGLISH

Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift

Tom Jones by Henry Fielding

Tristram Shandy

by Laurence Sterne

Mansfield Park by Jane Austen

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Bleak House by Charles Dickens

Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte

Moby-Dick, or, The Whale by Herman Melville

The Portrait of a Lady by Henry James

Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy

The Day's Work by Rudyard Kipling

Chance by Joseph Conrad

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce

A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemingway

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Sons and Lovers by D. H. Lawrence

The History of Mr Polly by H. G. Wells

To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf

Point Counter Point by Aldous Huxley

Mr Norris Changes Trains by Christopher Isherwood

MODERN FICTION IN ENGLISH

The Power and the Glory by Graham Greene

Decline and Fall by Evelyn Waugh

Afternoon Men by Anthony Powell

Animal Farm by George Orwell

The Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger

Lucky Jim by Kingsley Arms

The Adventures of Augie March

by Saul Bellow

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov

Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell

A House for Mr Biswas by V. S. Naipaul

Hemlock and After by Angus Wilson

Lord of the Flies by William Golding

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie by Muriel Spark

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

Darkness at Noon by Arthur Koestler

ENTERTAINMENT

Three Men in a Boat by Jerome K. Jerome

The Diary of a Nobody by George and Weedon Grossmith

My Man Jeeves by P. G. Wodehouse

Tales of Mystery and Imagination by Edgar Allan Poe

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd by Agatha Christie

The Big Sleep by Raymond Chandler

The Thirty-nine Steps by John Buchan

TRANSLATIONS

Short Stories by Guy de Maupassant

Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert

The Three Musketeers by Alexandre Dumas

Le Grand Meaulnes by Alain-Fournier

The Plague by Albert Camus

Anna Karenina

by Leo Tolstoy

Dead Souls by Gogol

Confessions of the Confidence Trickster Felix Krull by Thomas Mann

Metamorphosis by Kafka

Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Confessions of Zeno by Italo Svevo

Dr Zhivago by Boris Pasternak

POETRY

The New Oxford Book of English Verse, editor Helen Gardner

Poems by Keats

Lyrical Ballads by Wordsworth and Coleridge

Don Juan by Byron

Idylls of the King by Tennyson

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam by Edward FitzGerald

Collected Poems by T. S. Eliot

Collected Poems by W. H. Auden

High Windows by Philip Larkin

Les Fleurs du Mal by Baudelaire

PLAYS

Tartuffe by Moliere

Love for Love by William Congreve

The School for Scandal by Richard Brinsley Sheridan

The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde

The Master Builder

by Henrik Ibsen

The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov

Saint Joan by George Bernard Shaw

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett

POSTSCRIPTS

Father and Son by Edmund Gosse

Eminent Victorians by Lytton Strachey

Goodbye to all that by Robert Graves

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