

Comfort Reading: Top Ten Classic Books from Miss Bellwood

Here is my list of ten absolute classic reads. I think everyone should try some of these books at some point in their lives, and now feels like a pretty good time. Many of them were written a long time ago but they're so rich and imaginative that they will carry you away to other places and eras – the perfect way to escape! If the language is too hard, pester an adult or older brother or sister to read them as bedtime stories. And if you've read them before, then why not re-read one? Whether you're lying in the garden or snuggled in bed, there's nothing like a book for company.

So here they are, in no particular order:

1. Tom's Midnight Garden by Philippa Pearce

Tom is spending what he thinks will be the most boring summer ever at his aunt and uncle's house – until he hears the grandfather clock strike thirteen. Then everything changes and he enters a wonderful garden, populated by people from the past... This was written back in 1958 but is one of the most popular children's books ever. It's a wonderful tale which will keep you entertained and really make you think about the idea of time. Confession: I cried at the end.

2. The Machine-Gunners by Robert Westall

Chas McGill is off school and bored. Sound familiar? The difference is that he's living through the Second World War and facing the very real danger of falling bombs. Set in Tynemouth, this book tells the story of Chas's adventures after stumbling across a crashed German bomber, complete with machine gun. It's a fast-paced tale which really shows what wartime life was like for kids.

3. Cosmic by Frank Cottrell Boyce

To me this is a modern classic. Liam Digby is so tall that no-one believes he's only 12. This has its advantages (going on rollercoasters), but it also means he's expected to act like an adult – especially when he's drifting through space in a rocket, trying to look after a bunch of children and pilot them safely home! This is a funny and wildly original novel. If you enjoy it, there are many other books by the same author, including *The Forgotten Coat*, another favourite of mine.

4. Charlotte's Web by E.B. White

"Where's Papa going with that axe?" This is possibly the best opening line to a novel ever, and the rest of this well-loved story is just as good. Can Charlotte the beautiful grey spider save Wilbur, a fat but loveable little pig, from the terrible fate the farmer has planned for him? If you read to the end without crying, you're made of stone.

5. Stig of the Dump by Clive King

This book has always fascinated me. On the surface it's a straightforward tale of fun and adventure, but underneath lurks all kind of magic and mystery. Barney, staying with his grandparents during a long, hot summer holiday, makes a new friend – a shaggy-haired caveman he calls Stig. But is Stig a man or a boy? And is he even real? This warm-hearted book about friendship will make you smile.

6. The Ghost of Thomas Kempe by Penelope Lively

Something very strange is happening in James Harrison's house – winds whip through rooms, vases fly off shelves, spidery writing appears... and James is getting the blame. Can he confront the hilariously bossy poltergeist who's decided he knows better than everyone else (especially teachers)? This story made me laugh when it was first read to me at school, and it still does now.

7. Holes by Louis Sachar

Yes, I know many of you have read this in school, but it's just so wonderful it has to go on my list. Stanley Yelnats has been (unfairly) sent to a boys' detention centre where he must 'build character' by digging holes all day. But it doesn't take Stanley long to realize there's something more sinister going on. This story is like a jigsaw – lots of jumbled parts that gradually come together. It also has a beautifully upbeat message about hope. And it makes me cry at the end.

8. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

This is a book that a lot of people think they know but haven't actually read. Lewis Carroll loved logic puzzles and maths games, and you can really tell when you get into this brilliantly nonsensical story. The language can be a little tricky at times (well it was written in 1865!) but stick with it and you will find characters and scenes that stay with you forever.

9. The Eagle of the Ninth by Rosemary Sutcliff

Set in Roman Britain after the building of Hadrian's Wall, this is the epic tale of Marcus Flavius Aquila, a young Roman officer who sets out to discover what became of his father's lost legion. Immerse yourself in this powerful, moving story of friendship, honour and betrayal – it really brings the Roman era to life.

10. Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder

This book is often thought of as a soppy sort of fairy tale, but that's usually by people who haven't read it – in fact it's a fascinating study of Victorian life on the Great Plains of North America, when early settlers struggled to survive in the face of real hardships, including poverty, illness and extreme weather. It's written in a very simple style yet really draws you in to the life of Laura's family. This is actually the third book in a series, and I recommend them all.