

INTRODUCTION

I think I've always loved books. One of my earliest memories is exploring the bookshelf at home and discovering a book with a fascinating cover illustration. It showed a boy, with an expression of panic on his face, running from men in red coats with guns. I was intrigued by this book. Who was the boy? Why was he running? Why was he so afraid? What did his pursuers want? The book was *Kidnapped*. It would be a long time before I was able to read that book, but it has remained a favourite ever since.

I believe that children from primary school onwards deserve to be exposed to quality literature written by the world's best writers. I believe that classic literature, whether it was written in a previous century (such as *Kidnapped*, *Frankenstein*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* or *Oliver Twist*) or in recent times (such as *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *Beyond the Deep Woods*, *Hatchet* or *Coraline*) should be read and enjoyed by all young children. Not only this, but it can be used to help stimulate their comprehension, thinking skills and creativity, and to develop in them a lifelong love of reading!

WHAT IS A 'CLASSIC NOVEL'?

Everyone has his or her own definition of what constitutes a 'classic book'. For me it's a book that contains important messages, vivid characters (some of them loved and others loathed), exciting plots, deep insights, history, rich language, imaginative fantasy, witty satire, surprising twists, unique personalities not found in our real lives, profound meanings and the exploration of what it is to be human.

Classics are irresistible books that you are ready for when you are little, such as *Where the Wild Things Are*, or the irresistible classics that you become ready for much later in life such as *Oliver Twist*. Sometimes these books are easy to read and sometimes they're near impossible – try reading the original version of *Gulliver's Travels* or *Robinson Crusoe*. Sometimes these books can be life altering. They can influence, support, inform and inspire you. Classics are the few books that never vanish. Books vanish off the shelves every day in bookshops and libraries, never to be seen again. Classics are seemingly always in print or always accessible. Sometimes they don't vanish because teachers keep reading them to their students. Sometimes it's because the public keep buying them or because they've been 'discovered' by Hollywood. The bottom line is that classics are classics because they have a meaning and a timeless quality that appeals to readers.

Critical reputation is unreliable and dependent on prejudice, intellectual climate and, quite simply, the time in which it is written. Many books have great merit but fail to impress critics. The initial mixed critical response to *Moby Dick* is a good example of this. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was written as a 'penny dreadful' and initially ignored by critics, while Charlotte Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* under a pseudonym. Some books are also highly praised, only to go on to wither and disappear. Simply winning a literary award is not a recipe for a nonstop print run and an enduring readership.

There are books that have run into critical problems such as *Lord of the Flies*, but which continue to be read. I tend to believe that readers have noted a quality in the book that critics have missed. Likewise critics highly praised the book *The Coral Island*, which inspired *Lord of the Flies*, when it was first written, but today they would say it was corny and contrived. However children still love it and it can still be bought.

What classic literature will prosper in the next hundred years? Will *Harry Potter* be read as intensely as it is today, or will it only have a niche market or benefit from the occasional nostalgic reprint like the *Wizard of Oz* or *Doctor Dolittle* sequels? If we knew what it was that made a book an endearing classic for generation after generation we would all quit our jobs and become publishers.

In a sense the conventional wisdom about popularity needs to be looked at carefully. The bestsellers are not necessarily the best sellers. Classics are the best sellers! A classic may not be the number one book for a year, but it may continue to sell for thirty, fifty, even one hundred or more years, long after that ‘number one’ paperback and its author are forgotten. Some books defy my notion of a classic. Enid Blyton’s continued success always surprises. I read the first *Famous Five* novel along with *The Railway Children* and *Swallows and Amazons* as part of a classic English children’s literature unit several years ago and I was amazed that the children didn’t bat an eyelid when I was reading out ‘golly’, ‘by Jove’ and ‘I say old boy’. You can love and promote the classics, but that example taught me not to be a ‘classics snob’.

In twenty years of reading classics to children and encouraging them to read them for themselves I have reached the conclusion that children love great literature and will readily choose it when they feel their reading skills are fluent enough. Classics are far more accessible than when I was a boy. Many excellent classic adaptations can now be found in abridged versions or graphic formats for reluctant readers. They generally prefer them to forgettable, formulaic books even though they may have some short-term book club-inspired interest or movie tie-in. Reading the classics is the start of a joint pursuit of the truth for students and teachers, rather than the endless ‘ticking off’ of ‘outcomes’ without any identified connection to life and all its richness. The classics can form the background to all our learning.

USING CLASSIC LITERATURE

Once children are sufficiently exposed to classics they become more comfortable with three-dimensional characters, vividly-described settings and richly-textured words. These classics-loving children delight in and expect more from their reading – sound ideas, rich characterisation, depth, complex plots, exotic settings, cleverness, stimulating language, originality and meaning. In short, all the things adults look for in a good book!

Classics-educated children take pride in having read books that the whole world loves. They find quality exciting. They know when a book is worth reading. Teachers sometimes need to introduce children to the classics. Publishers in the past packaged their books most unattractively. Children today may need a bold illustration and intriguing blurb on the cover to entice them in, but once they read the quality they are hooked. I found this recently with Lilith Norman’s *Climb a Lonely Hill*. The novel I had was tattered and moth-eaten with a dreary 1970s cover illustration, but once I started to read it they were engrossed. Children are seemingly inherent book lovers; even small children enjoy being read to and love their favourites. If adults model the love of good literature then children will follow suit and imitate that.

Teachers, and more importantly parents, must be readers if they want children to be readers. Sometimes parents and teachers just think that children are not ready for the classics. They might think they are books best left to high school or elite readers. This is nonsense. Having taught in multi-age classrooms for nearly fifteen years I can confidently say that children are always receptive to classic literature, especially if it is sensitively abridged to make it accessible to them. It should not be sanitised, just simplified. Even then it’s hoped that some of the rich language of the original is not totally lost. The classics can provide all readers with the greatest gift of all – our magnificent language.

A reader introduced to classic literature can’t help but be exposed to a huge vocabulary. At a time when children seem to be coming to school with an increasingly limited vocabulary, this exposure to the rich language of the classics is essential. Open *Treasure Island* and let the words sweep over you like the waves on that insidious island itself. You will read words like: accoutrement, acquiescence, disquietude, emissary, obsequious, niggardly, truculent, sojourn and more. Most teachers would need to look them up with their students. I only wish I could remember to ‘drop them into’ conversations more often!

Classics are of course international. They tell of the human spirit and can be told in many languages for many cultures. I have recently been reading classic French literature to my students (*The Three Musketeers*, *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*) all of which became firm favourites.

TREASURE ISLAND

BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON
ACTION/ADVENTURE, 1883

ABOUT THE BOOK

Treasure Island is undoubtedly one of the most popular children's adventure stories ever written. In fact Robert Louis Stevenson wrote his classic pirate yarn during a wet holiday in Scotland to entertain his young stepson.

Treasure Island features many remarkable characters. Long John Silver is a magnificent three-dimensional character. At one point he is a caring father figure for his erstwhile forlorn ward, Jim Hawkins, and then suddenly to Jim's and our amazement he becomes a bloodthirsty pirate as greedy and vicious as the real Captain Kid or Blackbeard. There is the well-meaning but bumbling Squire Trelawney, the steadfast and constant Doctor Livesey and the redoubtable Captain Smollett. (Not to mention Billy Bones, Blind Pew, Israel Hands and the omnipotent ghost of Captain Flint.)

Most of the action takes place on a seemingly idyllic desert island which becomes the graveyard for greedy pirates and loyal crewman alike. Apart from *Treasure Island* itself, Stevenson brings the hustle and bustle of a busy English seaport to life as well as a remote coastal inn and the good ship *Hispaniola*. Jim Hawkins, the teenage hero of our story, is the son of a widowed innkeeper barely making ends meet. Suddenly he has the opportunity to seek adventure and fortune. He is accompanied on his journey by the good, the bad and the ugly. What boy or girl wouldn't make the most of that opportunity? (This book is compatible with *Kidnapped*, *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Robinson Crusoe*.)

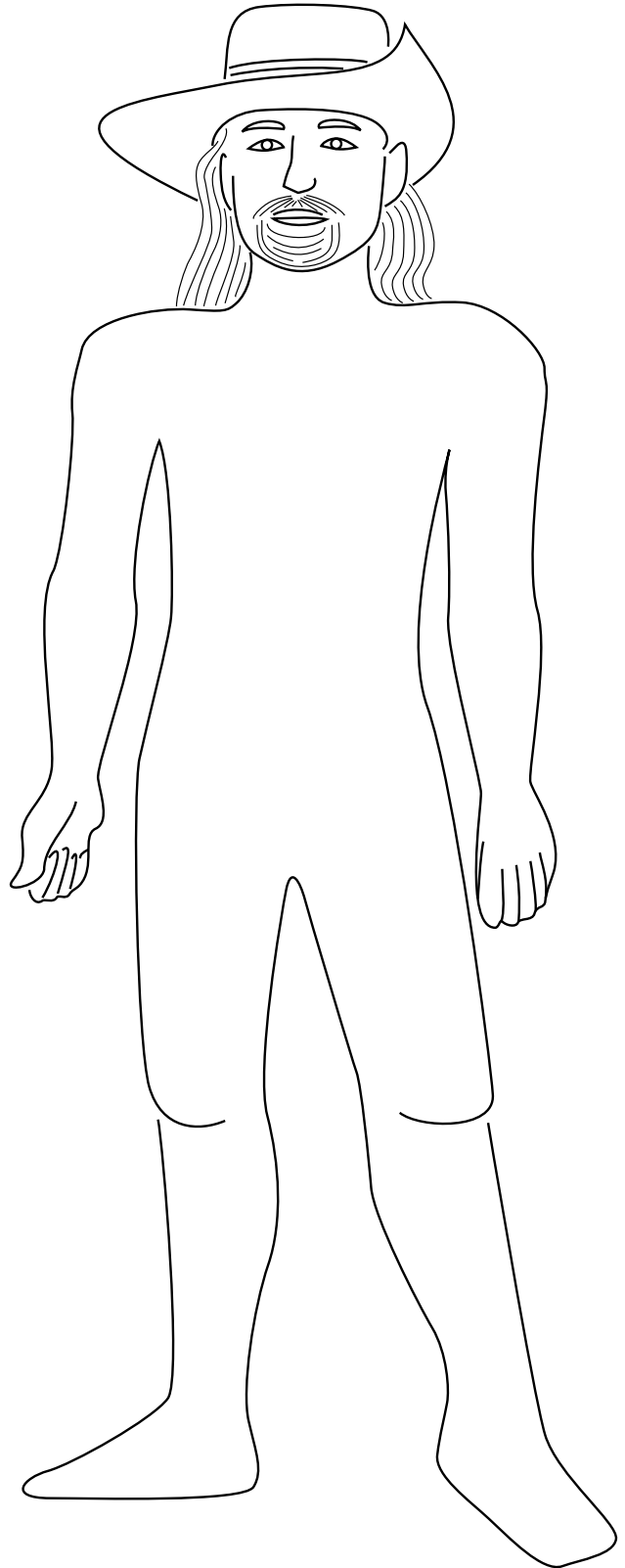


Musketeer Paper Doll

Dress the Musketeer.

- He needs to be draped in a blue tunic
- He needs knee high leather boots
- He needs an embroidered collar
- He needs a plume in his hat
- He needs a leather belt
- Finally, he needs a sword in his hand

You can either colour the musketeer in or use craft materials or anything at hand to create his outfit. Consider enlarging to A3 and placing on card.



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Coraline

Neil Gaiman
Honor, 2002

About the Book

A young girl walks through a secret door and discovers a parallel reality that is eerily similar to the life she already knows. Upon first glance, Coraline begins to believe that the alternate version of her life is even better than the real thing, but when her parallel-universe parents attempt to keep her forever, the young girl must summon her resourcefulness and bravery in order to find her way back home and save her real family.

*Coraline is a truly creepy and disturbing book (and graphic novel) suitable for gutsy girls who like reading about courageous and intelligent heroines. (This book is compatible with *Alice in Wonderland* and *Marianne Dreams*.)*

