



Twenty-Seven of the Best: A Personal Reading Journey

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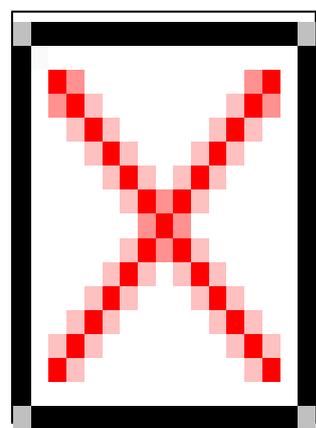
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Ten of the Best

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Daniel Hahn takes a personal reading journey round Europe

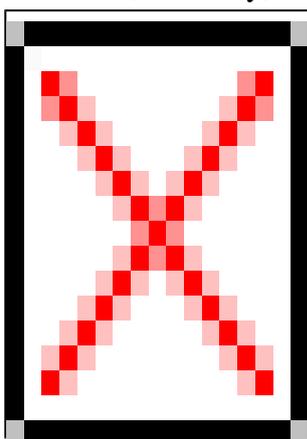
In a specially extended Ten of the Best, Daniel Hahn takes us on a special journey via 27 books you should read.



I've only recently noticed how many of the series I loved most as a child featured a protagonist who sought out their adventures in a different setting for each book. The globe-trotting **Tintin** was a particular favourite, but there were many others like it to open the world up to us young readers. Many of my non-fiction regulars were the same, now I think about it. Where children today might pore over **Maps** (that large-format marvel from Aleksandra Mizielewska and Daniel Mizielewski) to get their vicarious taste of the what the rest of this planet has to offer, in my childhood we collected the distinctive works of M. P. McKenna, in those days seemingly ubiquitous **This Is London**, and many others in the series. (If you had them as a child, I bet you can still picture exactly how they looked, too.)

And, I suppose, my tastes haven't totally changed since then; it's certainly true that many of my recent favourite literary heroes are themselves also pretty well-travelled. I've lately explored Lisbon and India, and various places between, in the company of Sally Jones, for instance; if you haven't yet experienced the brilliant **The Murderer's Ape**, I recommend that journey, and Sally Jones's company, most highly.

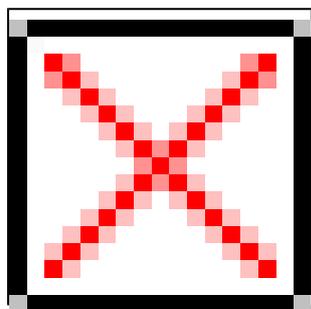
I also loved the Moomins, naturally, though they were rather more valley-bound. (I mean, what kind of monster



wouldn't love **The Moomins**?) And **Fattypuffs and Thinifers**, of course, with those fantastic

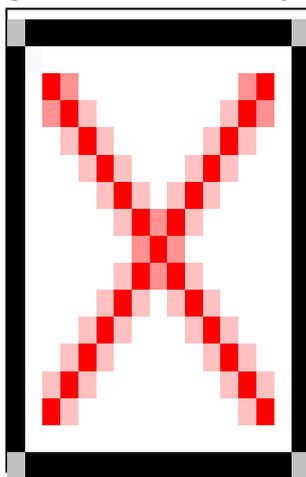
Fritz Wegner illustrations; though I suspect it's not as widely read today it should be, André Maurois's story of the uniting of two seemingly irreconcilable nations is a proper, solid-gold, unimprovable classic. Like the **Moomins**, I know I'll remember that one till the day I die – as any **BfK** reader will know, that's so often the case with favourite books from childhood, isn't it? To this day, I can't see a sky-blue suit without thinking of **Conrad, the Factory-Made Boy** (If you don't know this Christine Nöstlinger gem, it's about a boy who is accidentally delivered – in a tin can, obviously – to the wrong house; a great book about, and against, conformity.)

What I remember relatively little from childhood, curiously, are the folk-tales and fairy-tales – I must have heard them, I suppose, but they aren't what stayed with me. Though I'm increasingly fascinated by them now, by the stories that seem to pop up wherever in the world people build a community together, and which are retold, shared, adapted, passed down. I travel a lot (not quite as much as Tintin, but nearly) and every culture has its rich tradition – perfect for investigating on a holiday destination, I always feel. You can read the **Slovakian traditional tales collected by Pavol Dobžinský** when you're weekending in Bratislava, **Ivana Brlic Mazuranic's Croatian tales** in Zagreb, **Trevor Ahra's retelling of local folk tales** if you happen to find yourself in Malta (the attractive **rejjef Maltin** collection comes with a CD), or – if in Romania – some more recent stories in the collection by Mircea Sintimbreanu (**My Book of Twenty-Two Stories for Children**). The things they have in common and the things that make them unique are equally fascinating; they don't only enchant us, they teach us so much about each other, too. Libraries in our teeming multicultural UK should be full of such things, really.



I haven't been a child for quite some time, obviously, but children's books remain important to me, and so I've managed rather cannily to build some of my work around them. I've edited collections of stories (including a couple of volumes for the **Hay Festival's Aarhus39** project, featuring writers like Cathy Clement, with her story *Mediterranean Cruise*, and Andri Antoniou, with hers, *Why Rudolph Went to Rome Last Summer*); and when I'm lucky I get to review children's books, too: Evelina Daci's and Au'ra Kiudulait's picture book **The Fox on the Swing** (those lovely eye-catching illustrations) and Lu'ze Pastore's tremendously winning novel **Dog Town** [3] most recently.

Oh, and talking about dogs (and, in this case, talking about talking dogs), I've also over the years come to judge a number of children's books prizes, which in one case allowed me to reward one of the greatest children's literary dogs of all, the eponymous heroine of Bernardo Atxaga's **Shola** [4], a rather self-regarding, but very funny little animal who features in many spirited stories. (The same round of judging, incidentally, introduced me to **Anton and Piranha** [5] – another of those books that never seems to have got the attention it deserved and I can't understand why. It's a warm-hearted and hilarious story about a boy and a fish who meet on holiday and become the unlikeliest of friends – I never pass up an opportunity to recommend it.) Though at the risk of disloyalty to my beloved **Shola**, I should also mention a



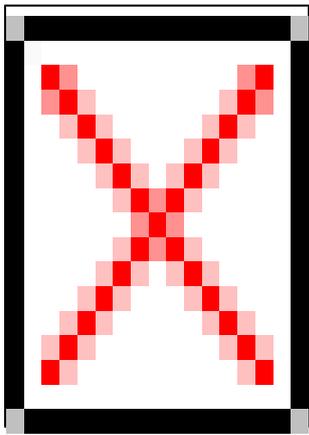
more recent passion: the gloriously enjoyable **Elise and the Second-Hand Dog**. Naturally, this

dog talks, too, though this time in an unexpected Scottish accent.

(And OK, in the interest of fairness, I do just occasionally also like some cat books. Read **The Cat Who Came in off the Roof** if you haven't already ? it's a treat. It's by the legendary Annie M.G. Schmidt.)

I've even translated some books myself, including many picture books ? if you don't know it, look at **Don't Cross the Line**, by Isabel Minhós Martins and Bernardo Carvalho, an incredibly clever look at how to challenge arbitrary authority built into a simple picture-book conceit. Translating a picture book can be harder than you think, by the way ? so few words, but they have to work with such density and detail, and speak to their images. Just consider something like Chris Haughton's work, a book like [A Bit Lost](#) [6] (he's another favourite of mine) ? apart from everything else, there's such incredible precision. **When I Want to Keep Silent** by Zornitsa Christova and Kiril Zlatkov (a young bear's thoughts on the strength of words and silence) contains fewer than eighty words, but great beauty and sophistication.

Of course, some of the most powerful of all picture books are totally wordless, which could allow sensible publishers to do without pesky translators entirely. I've just this week been introduced to Maja Kastelic's beautiful **A Boy and a House**, which happens to be from Slovenia, but you wouldn't know it ? apart from the jacket, you have no way of knowing that it happens to be a book without any Slovene words rather than without any English words?



(The one thing even harder for a translator than picture books is poetry, of course, but I try my best to avoid that sort of work myself ? yes, I'm a glutton for punishment, but only within reason. Others do it wonderfully, though: if you doubt that, [The Emma Press](#) [7] have just published a charming and delightfully peculiar collection by Contra, **Everyone's the Smartest**.)

Lest my choices above make you wonder whether my personal taste in children's books is overwhelmingly young and light and quirky, I should probably mention a couple of counterexamples (both for older readers) ? how about the Marsh Award-winning [In the Sea There Are Crocodiles](#) [8], based on the real testimony of an Afghan refugee, so gripping and so filled with compassion? Or **Tina's Web**, another story about a young person forced to cross a continent and make a new home, but in altogether different circumstances? That one's by Alki Zei, a children's/YA writer not much known here but who was a real ground-breaker in her native Greece. But yes, OK, allow me one more not-altogether-serious story to round things off, because the latest book to arrive in the post this week is called **Arnica**, by Ervin Lázár, and it's a fairy-tale about kindness and ducks (among other things). I love it. It's only just out ? order yourself a copy today.

So ? a very grand total of twenty-seven stories! Placed side by side, they are stories about travel and bravery and discovery; about freedom; about striving to be better and surprising ourselves. They are enlightening and various and fun, heart-warming and heart-breaking. They are stories about celebrating our differences and forming unlikely friendships, often in unexpected circumstances.

What else do they have in common? Each of my chosen twenty-seven stories comes from a different one of the twenty-seven countries who will continue, hereafter, to constitute the European Union. To me, their stories add up to something immeasurably precious, for which I've never been more thankful. What good fortune, what a privilege, to have shared them.

Daniel Hahn is a writer, editor and translator, and somebody who should know better than to write an article about international books without naming any of the translators. (Translators have a strictly enforced #namethetranslator campaign, which this article is quite spectacularly failing to respect; Daniel Hahn apologises grovelingly to his friends and won't do it again.)

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