

*SAMPLE PAGES FOR*  
*BEFORE AUSTEN COMES ALICE*  
*Adventures in the Children's Great Books*

(elementary and secondary)

by  
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## Contents

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Introduction	4
What You Need to Know Before You Begin	9
How to Choose Your Own Adventure	11
Your Passport to the Three Adventures	
The Leisurely Adventure (all ages)	14
The Book Club(ish) Adventure (all ages)	16
The Scholarly Adventure (elementary)	18
Step 1-2: Preparation	22
Step 3: Inspectional Reading	26
Step 4: Slow Reading	28
Step 5: Summaries and Narrations	30
Step 6: Discussions	33
Step 7: Writing About the Story	41
Step 8: Enrichment Projects	44
The Scholarly Adventure (secondary)	46
Step 1-4: Preparation	52
Step 5: Inspectional Reading	58
Step 6: Structural Notetaking	60
Step 7: Slow Reading and Annotations	63
Step 8: Notetaking	68
Step 9: Summaries and Narrations	73
Step 10: The Freytag Pyramid Outline	76
Step 11: The Personal Response Essay	81
Step 12: Oral and Written Discussion	83
Step 13: The Literary Analysis Essay	90

Step 14: The Capstone Project

98

The Children's Great Books Reading List

Introduction	102
Part I: The Classical Era Through the Dark Ages	105
Part II: The Middle Ages Through Pilgrim Settlement	112
Part III: Colonization Through Mid-19 <sup>th</sup> Century	116
Part IV: The First Golden Age	123
Part V: The Great Depression Through World War II	133
Part VI: The Second Golden Age	139
Part VII: The Late 20 <sup>th</sup> Century	147

Appendices

A: Study Method Cheat Sheets	
B: Grading Rubrics for Parents	
C: The Crème de la Crème—A Short-term Study Plan	
D: The Children's Great Books Project	
E: Major Awards for Children's Literature	

Bibliography

## Introduction

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When I was in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I hit a snag in my life-long love affair with books. My English teacher led us through a study of the Thomas Hardy classic *Jude the Obscure*. Up until this point, I had made it through *Romeo and Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Good Earth*, and even long selections of *The Odyssey*—all with reasonable academic success, if not much appreciation. Except for *Romeo and Juliet*, whose Zeffirelli film version I knew and loved, I didn't understand any of them very well. Whether it was the quality of teaching or my limited intelligence or the book itself I am not sure, but at least the light stayed on in my mind most of the time. With *Jude the Obscure*, however, everything went dark. I lost myself so completely in its dense forest of words that I never did find my way out. To this day I can tell you exactly three things about it: 1) it is a classic English novel (though I have no idea why); 2) it is unbearably long; and 3) the main character is a man named Jude (though if you assured me that he was a dog or a gorilla, I wouldn't argue). In other words, I hated *Jude the Obscure* more than any other book I've encountered either before or since then. If I saw it in a bookstore today, I would probably shudder and slowly back away.

The memory of that novel didn't stay silent, as others have. Except for *Wuthering Heights* and *The Good Earth*, with which I also struggled but later reread as an adult with better success, I have mostly forgotten the other novels I endured. No, the memory of those weeks (months?) with *Jude the Obscure* rumbled around and around my mind for years afterwards, sparking questions about assigned literature until I became a teacher myself and was compelled to take them seriously—questions such as:

- 1) Why do we continually ask students to study literature far too difficult for them?
- 2) Why is classic literature so important? Or *is* it important at all?
- 3) Why do we rush students past juvenile classics to move on to adult classics faster?
- 4) When educators/parents decide that students are ready to read adult classics, why do so many of us feel that we need to get through as many in a year as possible?
- 5) Why do so many literature selections seem to be arbitrary? Why this one over that one?

- 6) When—and why—should students tackle the masterpieces of Western literature, such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Homer? How fast should they move through them?
- 7) Which is better: a survey that covers lots of books (dip-and-sip) or a deep study of only a few books (dive-and-drink)?
- 8) Should students study only authors of Western civilization, or is a literature program incomplete without attention to the literature of Eastern civilization, too?
- 9) How does childhood reading (leisure or academic) affect students' ability to understand and enjoy their reading as adults? What *kind* of childhood reading helps facilitate a rich literary experience in adulthood?
- 10) How important is poetry to a literary education, and should it be presented to students in the same way as prose? Should we study and analyze poetry or just learn the tools that help us appreciate and enjoy it?
- 11) And finally (for now), should juvenile literature play any kind of academic role in the teen years, or should it be relegated to leisure reading only?

While I have opinions on all these questions, it is the last one that concerns me most in *Before Austen Comes Alice*. Over the last 20+ years, I have observed, selected, and created literature programs for both my homeschooled children and for classes I've taught. I've also watched many young people choose books in my five-year role as a bookseller, and I've listened to reactions about literature from both children and teens. All of this has led me to three conclusions:

- 1) *Far too many children grow up without reading the great classics of children's literature.* Far too many have never been to Narnia, have never met Ramona Quimby or the Moffatts, have never experienced what it's like to survive like Julie amongst a pack of wolves, have never...well, I could go on and on! Children's literature—both the classic and the contemporary—is filled with rich and beautiful writing, incredible adventures, and characters who are just waiting to become our friends for life. When I meet teens who are reading books like *Wuthering Heights* without ever having met Winnie-the-Pooh, Mary Lennox, Heidi, or Tom Sawyer, I mourn a little. When will they ever do so, if they don't by the time they are grown up? Unless something compels them later, they probably never will.
- 2) *Nothing much has changed since I was a kid.* Teens still often dislike the adult classics they are assigned in school. How many teens do you know who would choose to read *Wuthering Heights*, *Ivanhoe*, *Animal Farm*, or *Don Quixote* over trendy YA picks? Of course there are some who would; there are exceptions to everything. Of course we should give students a nudge out of their comfort zones at times. And, of course, some students find they

enjoy the classics that are forced upon them. For the most part, though, teens still grumble and avoid the great classics as much as they can, mainly because they are too difficult, too unrelatable, and too boring. Could it be that many teens give their teachers grief about the adult classics we require them to read (even cheating with Cliffs Notes to avoid the chore) not because they want to rebel against schoolwork, but because they are just not ready for them? I think so.

- 3) *Teens differ in their ability to appreciate adult literature.* Some have the maturity and intellect to sail through it, and others find themselves hopelessly lost. Some enjoy analysis and discussion, and some do not. Some relish the opportunity to write response essays and literary analyses, and others get stuck at the first sentence. Nothing about these differences should surprise us, of course. Teens differ in their abilities for every subject. The boy who can't figure out the plot of *David Copperfield* may be a budding virtuoso on the oboe. The girl who can't articulate her response to *Walden* may be a natural with a microscope. With literature, though, we are dealing with the human experience and with profound themes and ideas that are often far beyond the scope of the teen's maturity. Those who have not been prepared for literary excursions into the world of adults or who are not yet adults themselves cannot be expected to navigate that world with any aplomb.

It may seem by now that I am advocating the kind of dumbing-down of our country's education that so many of us are trying to work against, but this is not at all true. I think that students *should* read the great adult classics—just not too soon. They would have a richer, deeper, more meaningful experience if we chose a gentler approach to literature instruction, one that allows teachers to ensure sufficient maturity and sufficient mastery of active reading and literary analysis skills before they lead their students into the labyrinth of adult classics.

I am not suggesting that we ask teens to study only contemporary juvenile literature or that we never ask them to reach beyond their maturity level when they read a book. What I am suggesting is that instead of teaching to one extreme or the other, we need to lay a foundation for their advanced literary studies that will help them manage the difficult, adult books better when they are ready—and which is later than we tend to think. I am suggesting that we often push them too hard, too soon, far too often in our quest to give them the best education possible. To fix the problem, we must allow the juvenile “great books” to take their rightful place in English courses—in the elementary grades but also beyond them to middle school and high school and also beyond leisure reading to the academic stratosphere. This book attempts to do that.

Just choosing literature more suited to teenagers, however, doesn't address the problem of what to choose and how to organize a literature program. There are still only a limited number of ways to do this. We can...

- make arbitrary selections based on our own opinions of what students should read.
- choose literature that fits specific themes, such as “coming-of-age” or “classics of the South” or “bullying.”
- design studies based on broader groupings, such as “short stories,” “American literature,” or “mysteries.”
- base our choices around a particular philosophy or approach, such as Core Knowledge (i.e., *Little Women* being a required selection for 5<sup>th</sup> graders, for example) or a religious worldview (i.e., *The Pilgrim’s Progress* for Protestant Christians)
- capitalize on our students’ personal interests by choosing literature that meets those interests and designing studies based on them.
- integrating literature with other subjects, history being the most popular (i.e., thus, a unit on the Revolutionary War might entail a study of the classic poem “Concord Hymn,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson)
- focusing on the works of key authors (i.e., a whole year on Shakespeare or Tolkien)

I have personally taken or admired these approaches at various times as a teacher/home educator, and they all have value. There is at least one more approach, however, that I haven’t mentioned: the classical approach. The traditional classical model focuses its literary instruction solely on the most influential, most important works on Western civilization, such as Sophocles, Plato, Virgil, and Shakespeare. These are the works that undergird the cultural thinking of our entire civilization. They have influenced writers of every generation, both the famous and the forgotten, which means that without these foundational works, “Western literature” would not exist as we know it. For those who want a classical education, which is fundamentally an education in Western civilization, these Great/Good books are essential reading.

The classical approach is the one I favor most for literature study, generally speaking. It makes the most sense to me in the broader context of a well-rounded education. It is the most meaningful, the most valuable, the most fundamental, and the most beautiful. At the same time, however, it is not the most kid- or teen-friendly. Some of it is, of course—myths, fables, Bible stories, and even the *Odyssey* in an accessible translation. Other “greats,” though, are not—Milton, Dante, Chaucer, and many others. So, what to do? How do educators smoothly bridge the way from here to there without losing students to a lifelong hatred of literature on the way?

I suggest what might be considered a “sidekick” approach. This is where the “great books” of children’s literature may get more attention than adult classics for a while, but they actually support and lay the groundwork for the future return to the classical literary canon. Such an approach follows Western children’s literature from roots to leaf, leading students through the literature that young people like them enjoyed throughout the centuries, beginning with ancient works like Aesop’s fables and Bible stories and

continuing through all the most influential works of the genre up to the most recent decades.

It would be easy to put aside this body of literature with a dismissive sniff. After all, this is *children's* literature we're talking about. This is all fine in the elementary grades, but middle school and high school? Teens may not be adults, but they are also not children. Are you suggesting, you might ask me, that teens should actually spend even part of their few formative years before college reading a bunch of children's books?

Yes, I am and without apology. I am suggesting that they read a whole big bunch of them, along with many other books that were not written for children but that have been enjoyed by them for centuries (*The Pilgrim's Progress*, for example). If this sounds odd to you, not to mention a huge waste of time, I encourage you to consider what many librarians, teachers, and authors will tell you—that children's literature is every bit as rich, meaningful, engaging, and beautiful as adult literature. In fact, they will also tell you that many children's books are better than much of what is written for adults! Having read widely in both children's and adult literature myself, I emphatically agree.

This is good news for students. Because there is so much well-written children's literature available, both old and new, educators have plenty to choose from when seeking to prepare students for the challenging adult material they will *also* need to read if they want to prepare sufficiently for college. Unfortunately, a lot of wonderful books will need to remain leisure reading; there are just too many riches to enjoy! But if we follow a course that leads us on a path parallel to the traditional Western canon, if we study the true “great books” of children's literature, then I believe that we will not only give our students the best preparation possible for the great adult classics, we will also ensure that our young people do not grow up without experiencing the very best of the literature written just for them. These are the goals of *Before Austen Comes Alice: A Homeschooler's Guide to the Children's Great Books—and How to Experience Them*. Welcome!

# How to Choose Your Own Adventure

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This guide is primarily intended to ground grade-school students in what I call the “Children’s Great Books.” At the same time, I also provide parents with a way to demystify the study of literature appreciation for their students. An “appreciation” course is the ground-level study of every art, since its purpose is to give students the tools for enjoying an art to its fullest, as well as to prepare them for deeper explorations in more challenging courses. Many literature programs are “appreciation” courses, but this one is designed to show parents and students how to guide themselves in their study of any literature they choose.

To design their courses, teachers, publishers, and curriculum designers use certain principles. They use these principles to develop lesson plans that teachers/parents can follow. Anyone can access these principles, though; being a trained teacher isn’t a requirement! This doesn’t mean that trained teachers won’t often be more thorough as they guide us through literature; we will always need good, trained teachers. It is also easier to pick up a manual or workbook than it is to chart a course of our own. Still, when students want to work independently, they can use literature appreciation principles for rich and meaningful literary experiences that don’t depend on the expertise of a teacher or curriculum.

Literature can be experienced in several ways, and in *Before Austen* I will present the three ways that grade-school students can best understand. There are more that I won’t discuss—for example, the complex study of literary theory and criticism that serious scholars pursue in universities or the detailed study of writers seeking to hone their craft. The three ways, or “adventures,” that I will present in this guide are those that are relevant and easily accessible to children and teens. They may be used leisurely or intensively, as needed, but either way, the primary goal is the same—to immerse them in the “Children’s Great Books,” the most important literature written for or beloved by young people from the classical era through the second millennium.

To begin, choose one of the adventures below:

- *Leisurely Adventure* –if you are interested in experiencing the Children’s Great Books for pure delight, go to p. 14

- *Book Club(ish) Adventure* ~ if you are interested in a meaningful experience of the Children's Great Books with some informal accountability, go to p. 16
- *Academic Adventure* ~ if you are interested in a formal, academic study of the Children's Great Books for elementary students, go to p. 18. If you seek a formal, academic study for secondary students, go to p. 46

In addition, the appendices include information and aids that you may find helpful throughout your studies. Enjoy your adventures with the Children's Great Books!

*NOTE: For the sake of simplicity, male pronouns will be used in its traditional, gender-neutral sense in non-specific sentences.*

*The following two sections are from the secondary-level, academic study method guide. The elementary-level counterpart is simpler but similarly formatted.*

## The Study Method, Step 5: Inspectional Reading

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Once you have prepared your notebook, identified some reference materials that may be helpful, and reviewed the elements of literature, you are ready to open your book. A rich and meaningful experience of a literary work, however, happens on several levels. On the first level, we only need to skim the surface of the novel (or essay, poem, or short story). That is what inspectional reading is all about.

Inspectional reading isn't much of a "reading" at all. It is a *pre-reading* activity, intended to orient you to the literature and help your actual reading go more smoothly. It has two stages: systematic skimming and superficial reading. In systematic skimming you will examine the extraneous elements of the literature, such as the jacket blurbs and the copyright page. In superficial reading you will spend a little time skimming each page of the literature, letting your eyes grab bits and pieces as you move from beginning to end.

This shouldn't take you more than a few minutes. If it's a short work, you might spend only 5-10 minutes skimming it; if it's longer, you might spend 15-20 or so. Let your eyes move over it quickly, like a stone skipping across the water. This helps you get a sense of the writer's style, the vocabulary challenges you will face, and the gist of the story.

Follow the instructions below for a good inspectional reading:

### Stage 1: Systematic Skimming (a.k.a. Prereading)

*This stage will give you a sense of background context for your chosen literature.*

1. Read all text on the front and back covers.
2. Open to the title page and read it.

3. Study the copyright page to understand when it was *originally* published. Note how many editions it has had since the first edition, if any. Note where the original publisher was located and whether it has been re-published in other countries. This information will provide insight into how old the book is and its importance to the literary world.
4. Read the table of contents to get a sense of the book's structure and content.
5. If there is a preface or introduction, skim it for any general information about the book and its author.
6. If the book contains an index or glossary, skim them to get a sense of the concepts or ideas addressed in the book.
7. Turn to chapters that seem to contain key aspects of the plot, characters, or setting (if fiction) OR key concepts and ideas (if non-fiction). Skim any introductory material and subheadings.
8. When you feel like you have the gist of the book, turn its pages. As you do, dip in to read any paragraphs or short sections that seem to contain key parts of the story (if fiction) or key information and ideas (if non-fiction). Of course, you may want to avoid the ending!
9. If the book has summaries or other closing remarks, skim them. Avoid epilogues if you don't want to know the book's ending, yet.
10. When you are ready, move to stage 2.

### Stage 2: Superficial Reading

*This stage will prepare you for a slow reading of the literature.*

In *How to Read a Book*, Adler advises that readers follow this rule for challenging literature: "*In tackling a difficult book [or poem, short story, or article] for the first time, read it through without ever stopping to look up or ponder the things you do not understand right away.*" In other words, with superficial reading you are only skimming the surface of the literature, like a stone skipping across a pond. Your goal should be only to understand the gist of the story: the plot, major characters, setting, and so on. It should be easy and quick reading. Don't get bogged down in the details during the superficial reading stage, and don't worry if you don't understand the story very well. Focus on the basic structure, the key events and main characters, the author's style, and the kind of diction (vocabulary and phrases) you'll encounter.

## The Study Method, Step 6: Structural Notetaking

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Once you have completed the inspectional reading, it's a good idea to complete one more step before you begin a slow reading of the literature. This step will take us closer to the story but not quite inside it, yet. It is called structural notetaking, and it is all about establishing context for what we are about to read. "Context" is the circumstances that form the setting of something, which enables us to better understand it. For example, when you give your mom a present, it is probably within the context of her birthday or Valentine's Day.

Structural notetaking is where we study the literature's external context, meaning its place in the world. In this step we are still in the prereading stage, but it takes us a little deeper than step 5. We look at when and why the literature was written, who wrote it and what kind of person he or she was, and how the literature fits in the broader realm of literature. By gaining this sense of context, you may better understand the literature as you read it. This can be valuable for picture books, as well as complex novels, so don't skip this step even if your selection is easy.

To complete your structural notetaking, you will need to gather the following information and record it in your reading notebook. First, prepare a new page in the reading log section of your notebook. If you have already been reading the book you are going to use, you should already have this page prepared. Record as much of the following information as you can in your reading notebook:

1. What kind of literature is it? What is its genre? Is it classic or contemporary (or neither), written for children or adults, influential in any way, etc.?
  - a. Read/examine all the following extra information in your book: copyright/title page, author notes, author biography (a.k.a. "About the Author"), preface, introduction, front and back covers.
2. What was the setting in which it was written? This is different from the setting of the story! It has to do with the historical and cultural context *in which it was written*.

Where was it written, and what was the society/culture of that place like? When was it written? What historical era does it belong to, and what major events occurred near its publication

➤ For example, we know that the books of the New Testament were written in the first century. To understand most accurately what the books are saying, some scholars believe, we need to understand the authors' culture, historical setting, and people to whom they were writing. Another example is *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, by Mark Twain. Before we meet its characters, who speak in dialects that may be difficult to understand, we might find it helpful to study the historical era and society/culture in which he wrote the story.

3. Who was the author, both as a person and as a citizen of his society? Here we seek to understand what kind of person is telling the story or discussing the ideas that we are about to read, because it may give us insight into the literature itself. Was the author man or woman, rich or poor, recluse or socialite, family-oriented or single, career person or homebody, etc.? What are the basic facts of his life?

➤ For example, returning to our New Testament source, if we understand who the apostle Paul was and some details about his life, we can better understand the reasons for some of his actions after his conversion on the road to Damascus, as well as his passion for his missionary work.

4. What is the author's purpose in writing the literary work? You may not be able to give an insightful answer to this until you read it, but you can get an idea by examining the book's cover and by skimming the content. Is it to examine an idea, to entertain and amuse children, to express a personal struggle, to make fun of a group of people, to inspire others to do something, etc.?

5. Finally, if you notice anything interesting or noteworthy, put the book aside temporarily to research more information. Both the internet and reference materials at the library can be useful, as well as any extra information in your edition of the book. Such research may be especially helpful for old, difficult, or foreign literature.

You don't need to find out a lot at this stage, so don't try to go in depth with this research. You just need a quick sketch of information. These may include...

- study guides—i.e., Cliffs Notes, Spark Notes, Shmoop.com
- literary commentaries—a website or book devoted to examining *The Hobbit*; commentaries at the end of study guides like *Cliffs Notes*
- encyclopedia entries—i.e., *World Book Encyclopedia* or *Encyclopedia.com*
- biographies—i.e., a website devoted to C.S. Lewis or Beverly Cleary or *Biography.com*

- For example, to understand a Shakespearean play, it would be a good idea to research the historical, cultural, and physical settings of the play before you begin to read it. This is because Shakespeare often chose non-English settings but did not provide director's notes to explain them.

The Children's Great Books  
Reading List

# Introduction

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At the heart of *Before Aesop Comes Alice* is, of course, the reading list. This list presents the “great books” of children’s literature as an important prequel to the Great Books of Western civilization, which are the foundation of Western literature and thought. The Great Books list was developed by educators in the 1920s who sought to improve American higher education by returning it to a Western, liberal arts focus. This does not mean that the great works of Eastern civilization are not valuable, too; of course they have made their own important contributions to the world. In a classical education, however, time is simply too short to give equal attention to Eastern literature. During grade school, the classical student would instead do well to add some Eastern tales to their studies of history or to their leisure reading selections. Suggestions for those are beyond the scope of this book, however.

The works the Great Books compilers included in the canon are far beyond the comprehension of most grade-school students—the *Dialogues* of Plato and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, for example. For classical educators and many homeschool parents, however, preparing students to read the Great Books is an important goal.

A “great book” of Western literature has at least three main qualities:

- It has layers of riches, meaning that readers can return to it again and again and find value in each reading.
- Its ideas and themes have been representative of and meaningful to Western thinkers since its own era (or at least near it).
- It remains relevant and significant to contemporary readers.

In composing the “children’s great books” reading list, I did not use the above criteria to determine whether a literary work belonged or not, because they work best for adult literature; however, I did use criteria that are compatible with a future study of the Great Books. These criteria included the following:

- It has played a significant role in the history of children’s literature.

- It has influenced the development of Western literature—children’s, adult, or both.
- It has been beloved by children at some point in its history.

I also considered how popular it has been since its publication, but I could not make long-standing popularity a deciding factor. Some important children’s books have long been forgotten but were nonetheless considered favorites among juvenile readers during their time period. Other archaic books on this list continue to be relevant to today’s readers.

The literature included on the reading list, therefore, are not necessarily those that have earned the most critical acclaim, the best reviews, the most classroom instruction, the most library and bookstore shelf space, or the most parental support. Many of them *do* meet all these additional criteria; in fact, most of the contemporary works on the list are featured on “best books for children” lists. They are not the criteria that won them a place on *this* list, however. Nor are they works that reflect my own preferences, except for the rare occasion when I had to make simple judgment calls.

For that reason, you will likely be surprised by some of the works included here. You may even be a bit annoyed to discover that your own favorites are either relegated to the “other classics” list or left out altogether. Even I was a little put-out that I couldn’t include some of the books that I liked and that I had to include some books that I didn’t like.

The books you are about to encounter on this list, then, are those that history seems to indicate are the “great books” of Western children’s literature. In a magical world of thousands of delightful tales and rhymes, we all have our favorites—those we’d shoot to the top ten if we had a choice. To give students the best preparation possible for an advanced, classical literature program, though, I suggest that the books featured on this list are the ones that should receive the most attention. Those in the “others” list at the end of each section are also important to the canon of children’s literature. They may have even contributed to the development of children’s literature in a lesser way.

I must add here that all the entries on this list are *optional* for you, the parent. As a homeschool parent, you already know this, because you are the decision-maker for your child’s education. Sometimes, though, we parents feel like we must do everything that books and programs recommend or we will fail at our job. The purpose of this list is not to tell you what your child *must* study to be well-prepared for adult literature; it is to help you make informed, appropriate decisions without relying on a structured curriculum. I am offering this list of the “greats,” the “best of the best,” and the “most important” as history indicates to me, but you are still the one who decides which books are best for your student.

Finally, this list is genre- and reading-level blind. It features picture books, poetry, middle-grade literature, young adult literature, and even adult literature that has been claimed by young readers throughout history for their own. This is because art is no respecter of age or genre. Brilliant, beautiful literary art is found beginning in the board book section of your local bookstore (I’m looking at you, *Goodnight, Moon!*). Let your student enjoy the whole range of children’s literature. We may grow out of the vocabulary and simplicity of “baby books,” but we never grow out of beautiful art. Because my goal is to be thorough and to encourage a rich, broad literary experience, children’s literature of all kinds must be included.

As you begin your study of the children’s “great books,” I encourage you to select the literature you want your students to merely read and enjoy and the literature you want them to formally discuss and study. You might even choose some middle-ground books—those you want your student to discuss and ponder but in more of a relaxed, book club format. Perhaps forming a book club centered around some of these selections would be a fun and meaningful way to study the children’s greats. If you choose a more formal, analytical approach to some of the literature, you may use the study guide provided earlier in this book, or you may search for published, homeschool-friendly study guides.

And now for the fun part! Enjoy the list!

## Marking Key

*Understanding this key will help you make your selections.*

Titles preceded by “**E**” – These are “essential” works that parents may want to make a priority in their students’ literature program. They have been foundational to the Western child’s literary experience and have helped shape the children’s literature genre. They may have also been strongly influential on later works and/or genres.

Titles preceded by “**I**” – These are “important” literary works that, while not essential/foundational, still played a significant role in shaping the children’s literature genre.

Titles preceded by a “**E!**” or “**I!**” – These are “essential” or “important” literary works that are recommended with caution. They are included to preserve the integrity of the list; however, some homeschool parents will want to avoid them because of mature or offensive content. That said, it is impossible to anticipate every family’s values. Even the titles listed without the caution symbol should be screened by parents.

The “Other” lists at the end of each era include other beloved classics in the children’s literature canon – though by no means all of them! In particular, the books listed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were selected largely by judgment call. Space limitations didn’t allow for every wonderful book to be included.

# Part I

## The Classical Era through The Dark Ages: 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.-c. 1000 A.D.

### Introduction

As much as it might baffle modern readers, the most ancient literature of Western civilization is also some of our most important literature. To some people it may seem as if our foray into literature would naturally begin on a weak note and grow stronger with time. Great works, however, have been produced in every era; therefore, a methodical study of Western literature is best begun with the greats of the classical world. Throughout the centuries they have held their place as cornerstones of not only Western literature, but also of Western culture and thought. They have also had a profound influence on many other adult and children's literary works throughout the centuries. Even in the most contemporary literature, astute readers can still find tales that either reference or retell great works and oral tales of the ancient canon.

Except for Aesop's famous fables, perhaps, the works listed below are essentially "adult" literature, meaning literature that was written without attention to a possible audience of children. Even so, they were introduced to the children of their time, often as part of their formal education, and they have remained a major part of the Western child's literary experience ever since. As you read the entries for every era, you will find this phenomenon to be quite common. In fact, this reading list cannot possibly include every adult work that has been popular with children; there are too many! Those that are included have been the most *important* works to the child's literary experience throughout the ages, as well as to the development of the children's literature genre. Because of their influence in the world of children, then, these adult works are included in this guide as "children's literature."

#### *E- Old Testament from the Holy Bible (roughly 1500 B.C. -100 B.C. \*)*

The influence of the Bible on Western literature is so profound that it can hardly be exaggerated. Throughout the centuries since the birth of Christ, the Western world has been steeped in Christian teaching and culture through all the arts. Children's literature is no exception. From the invention of the first picture alphabet in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to the anti-God subtext of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity has had a profound influence on children's authors. The Bible itself has been the most important source of this influence, because of its importance to all Christian branches and denominations. Happily for even the most pious of families, its many stories provide not only memorable entertainment, but also important doctrinal and moral lessons that every Christian child needs. And because the Western world has had Christianity as its primary religion for more than 1000 years, most early children's literature alludes to the Bible in some way.

Despite its inherent importance to Christian students, it would be a mistake for non-Christian students to ignore the Bible in their literary studies. Both classic and contemporary literature of all kinds frequently alludes to Bible stories and other aspects of Christian teaching. The student who is well-grounded in the Bible, even if he regards it as mere literature, is much better equipped to make sense of biblical allusions, retellings, and direct references in other literature than the student who is not.

If you have a student who knows these stories well already, you may want to skip over this section or else find resources that allow him to dive deeper into their historical context or spiritual dimension. If your student has not grown up with Bible stories, though, you might find one of the listed resources helpful. The best source is the original source, the Bible itself, but those who find the Bible confusing or intimidating will do well with orthodox adaptations or retellings.

*Note: The resources suggested below are only a few possibilities among hundreds, and they do not include any of the many direct translations available, with the exception of the King James Version \*\*. In addition, these resources were not chosen to support any particular denomination. They are only provided to get you started in your search for a resource that suits your student.*

- *The Golden Children's Bible* (Based on the King James Version, this is one of the few story Bibles whose vocabulary is appropriate for an older student.)
- *The Whole Bible Story: Everything That Happens in the Bible in Plain English*, by Dr. William H. Marty
- *Walking With God: A Journey Through the Bible*, by Tim Gray and Jeff Cavins
- *Bible Stories from the Old Testament* (DVD), by The History Channel
- *The Bible* (DVD), by The History Channel
- *The Story (Teen Edition): The Bible as One Continuing Story of God and His People*, by Zonderkidz

\*Author's note about the end date: Protestant Christians consider the last book of the Old Testament to be Malachi, which was completed c. 400 B.C. Catholic and Orthodox Christians consider the last books to be those of the Maccabees, which were completed c. 100 B.C. I have chosen to use this latter dating to include all the books considered to be part of the Old Testament canon within the Christian religion.

\*\* Author's note about the King James Version: If you choose to read a direct translation, consider using the King James Version for your literature studies no matter what your religion, denomination, or translation preference may be. When considered from a literary standpoint, the KJV is the translation most referenced in Western literature, and it is widely considered to be the most beautiful of all the translations. Because its language is rich and poetic, it is also the easiest to memorize. I can attest to this personally, because I was required to memorize passages from

both the KJV and the modern New International Version when I was in grade school. Today, the only ones that I still remember are the KJV passages. Again, this recommendation is regarding literature study only, not necessarily Bible study or church use.

### *E – The Iliad (c. 750 B.C.)*

Usually considered to be the earliest literary works of Western civilization, according to the website *Classical Literature*, the epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are mostly composed of Greek mythology. The historical facts that do undergird *The Iliad* in its recounting of the fall of Troy are overshadowed by the fact that the poem was written hundreds of years after it happened (c. 1184 B.C.). In addition, the context of *The Iliad* is the Greek culture that existed when the poem was written, not the Greek culture that existed when the historical events occurred. Whatever their basis, both of Homer's epics have been a mainstay of children's literary entertainment and education since the classical era. In fact, a study of Western literature—either adult or juvenile—is incomplete without attention to these works. Students would do well to read these tales first in age-appropriate adaptations during childhood and then again in translation in upper high school or college.

#### Resources to try (in order from middle-grade to adult):

- *The Trojan War*, by Olivia Coolidge (retelling, not translation)
- *The Children's Homer: The Adventures of Odysseus and the Tale of Troy*, by Padriac Colum
- *The Iliad* in translation (Acclaimed translators include Samuel Butler, Richmond Lattimore, Emil Rieu, Robert Fitzgerald, Robert Fagles, and Stanley Lombardo.)
- *The Odyssey* in translation (Acclaimed translations include Richmond Lattimore, Allen Mandelbaum, Robert Fitzgerald, Albert Cook, Robert Fagles, and Stanley Lombardo)

### *E – The Odyssey, by Homer (c. 725 B.C.)*

See notes for *The Iliad*.

### *E – Classical mythology (first recorded roughly between 700 B.C.-8 A.D.)*

For thousands of years, the world's peoples expressed their ideas and beliefs about natural phenomena that they didn't understand through tales we call "myths." In fact, myths are the first type of story ever invented, and it is the foundation of the folklore genre. The mythology of ancient Greece and Rome is central to a study of Western literature and has formed part of the child's literary experience for centuries. Like the Bible, mythology finds its way into children's

literature through allusions, retellings, and direct references. Even in the most contemporary tales, classical mythology still influences children's literature.

Major mythological literature during this era:

- *Metamorphoses*, by Ovid (8 A.D.) – This was an important work of the classical era and was likely well-known among the youth of that time. Ovid was a Roman poet who drew on the works of other writers (like Vergil, Lucretius, and Homer) to write his masterpiece. It consists of 15 books that give a poetic narrative of the history of the world, including about 250 Greek and Roman myths. *Metamorphoses* was not only popular in its own time, it also heavily influenced medieval and Renaissance writers, including William Shakespeare.

Contemporary resources (a sampling in order from middle-grade to adult):

- *Favorite Greek Myths*, by Mary Pope Osborne
- *D'Aulaire's Greek Myths*, by Ingri & Edgar Parin d'Aulaire
- *Famous Men of Greece: Stories of Great Greek Heroes*, by John Haaren & A.B. Poland
- *The Golden Fleece and the Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles*, Padraic Colum
- *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne
- *Tanglewood Tales*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne
- *Bulfinch's Mythology: The Age of Fable*, by Thomas Bulfinch
- *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, by Edith Hamilton
- *World Mythology*, by Donna Rosenberg

*E* – fables by Aesop (probably first recorded by Demetrius of Phaleron about 320 B.C. but composed closer to 600 B.C.)

Facts about both Aesop and his famous fables are elusive. Scholars disagree on a variety of basic facts and details, including the true source of the stories attributed to him, but one fact is indisputable. This collection of moral tales has had a far-reaching influence on Western culture from popular thinking to everyday idioms to the arts, including children's literature. Although Aesop's fables were not originally "children's literature," since the genre didn't exist then, they have been told and retold to children throughout Western history. In fact, according to author Seth Lerer in *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*, "[Aesop's] fables have been accepted as the core of childhood reading and instruction since the time of Plato."

Choosing a collection of Aesop's fables is more a matter of personal preference, rather than one of translation. There are scores of editions filled with beautiful illustrations, and most are presented as children's books. A brief internet search will also offer entire websites devoted to Aesop's fables. Allow your student to choose a resource that is appealing and preferably at the appropriate reading level. I personally like the version by Milo Winter with his old-fashioned, charming illustrations; it was published in 1919. His collection contains enough fables to provide a good grounding in Aesop without overwhelming the reader.

I also suggest that you require your student to do a research project on Aesop and his fables before diving into a collection. Gaining a little background knowledge about such a foundational element of Western culture will deepen your student's experience of these simple moral tales.

### *E – Aeneid, by Vergil/Virgil (c. 20 B.C.)*

Just as Homer's epics were foundational literary works to classical Greek culture, Vergil's epic of the hero Aeneas was foundational to classical Roman culture. The *Aeneid* was an epic written to glorify the Roman empire and all its virtues, one of the end goals being to win the educated citizens of Rome over to the new imperial form of government, rather than the republic they had previously known. In fact, Aeneas himself was characterized to represent the ideal Roman citizen, inspirational and impressive for his sense of duty to the state. Of course, such a powerful testament to the glories of Rome was not meant for adults alone. Young people, too, needed to learn how to become model Roman citizens, so they, too, studied Vergil's masterpiece as part of their education. In fact, since the *Aeneid* was considered virtually perfect as poetry and was so important to classical Roman culture, it became a standard text in Latin-centered schoolrooms everywhere for hundreds of years and remains a foundational part of Western culture. It has had a profound influence on some of the "greats" of Western literature, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Spenser's *The Fairie Queen*, as well as some children's literature, such as Richard Adam's *Watership Down*.

#### Resources to try (a sampling in order from middle-grade to adult):

- *Aeneas: Vergil's Epic Retold for Younger Readers*, by Emily Frankel
- *The Aeneid for Boys and Girls*, by Alfred J. Church
- *In Search of a Homeland: The Story of the Aeneid*, by Penelope Lively
- *The Aeneid of Virgil*, by Virgil—translated by J.W. Mackail (Project Gutenberg e-book)
- *The Aeneid*, by Virgil (Penguin)—translated by Robert Fagles
- *Bulfinch's Mythology: The Age of Fable*, by Thomas Bulfinch

### *E* – *New Testament from the Holy Bible* (c. 50 A.D.-95 A.D.)

Like the Old Testament, the stories of the New Testament are essential reading for anyone who wants a thorough grounding in Western literature, even readers who are not members of the Christian faith. The acts and words of Jesus Christ, as well as his disciples, have had such a profound impact on our civilization that they need to be understood in the context of their source, the books of the New Testament. The stories are also essential reading for a thorough grounding in children's literature. Though not written *for* children, stories of the New Testament have been told and retold to children for most of Western history. Along with Homer, Vergil, and Aesop, they helped form the backbone of the Western child's literary experience.

See the entry for *Old Testament from the Holy Bible* for more information and suggested resources.

### *I* – *Beowulf*, by anonymous (first known manuscript—c. 900-1000 A.D.)

Unlike the previous golden age, the Dark Ages did not produce much notable literature. The only fiction that young people commonly enjoyed, aside from classical tales of Greece and Rome, was likely mythology and other folktales transmitted orally from generation to generation. Among these stories, the best-known is that of the hero Beowulf and his quest to destroy a horrific monster named Grendel.

While the epic we know today was written sometime between 700-1000 A.D. by a Christian author, the story itself had been circulating orally for many years by that time. Because the author was Christian and thus wrote his version of the tale through a Christian lens, it is important to understand that the *Beowulf* he wrote probably differs markedly from the oral versions in their original pagan context. For those who want to experience the children's literary entertainment of this period as authentically as possible, however, *Beowulf* and European folklore are the only Dark Ages options available to the modern reader.

*Beowulf* stands in its own right as a major work of Western literature, though—no waste of time for today's students. In fact, though the single surviving text was not discovered until the 1800s and thus did not influence authors until after that, it is commonly thought to be the first major work of English literature. Critically-acclaimed translations of *Beowulf* from the original Old English include those by the following authors:

- Michael Swanton
- Michael Alexander
- Frederick Rebsamen
- Seamus Heaney
- and for fans of J.R.R. Tolkien...he also translated *Beowulf*; however, my research indicates only a lukewarm reception to that work, despite the great respect of reviewers for the man himself.

If you would like a children's adaptation, try *The Story of Beowulf*, by Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall from Dover Children's Classics.

## *I* – Norse mythology (recorded c. 900-1200 A.D. but composed much earlier)

Norse mythology has also been deeply influential in children’s literature, although it has not been a traditional part of the Western child’s experience like classical mythology has been. Today we can see the Nordic influence in both major works – like *The Hobbit*, *Harry Potter*, and the *Chronicles of Narnia*– and lesser-known works like Nancy Farmer’s *The Sea of Trolls* and Diana Wynne Jones’ *Eight Days of Luke*. Norse mythology was not recorded as quickly and systematically as Greek and Roman mythology, so source material was difficult for later writers and scholars to piece together. The dates and authors/composers of original sources are unknown; however, the mythology of this people was rich and carefully preserved, making it possible for the earliest collection known as *The Poetic Edda* to exist.

### Major Nordic literature of this era:

Unlike Greek and Roman mythology, Norse mythology was not recorded for general use until long after it was composed. Our first sources come from the medieval period and consist of two works:

- *The Poetic Edda* (unknown date, probably somewhere between 900-1200 A.D.) – The poems in this collection were likely written in the tenth to thirteenth centuries, possibly by Saemund the Wise or Snorri Sturluson; however, both the date and author are only speculation. This collection is not easily accessible to the average reader, since relatively few translations exist, but it is the primary source of Nordic mythology.
- *The Prose Edda* (c. 1200 A.D.) – Probably written by Snorri Sturluson, this collection is the other major source for Norse mythology. It contains both genuine Nordic lore, as well as information which may only have been assumed or imagined by Sturluson. Naturally, this has made it difficult for scholars to separate the authentic material from Sturluson’s own ideas. Still, *The Prose Edda* contains the most information on early Norse mythology, religion, and history.

### Other resources (a sampling in order from middle-grade to adult):

- *D’Aulaire’s Book of Norse Myths*, by Ingri D’Aulaire
- *Famous Norse Myths*, by Mary Pope Osborne
- *The Children of Odin: Nordic Gods and Heroes*, by Padraic Colum
- *Bulfinch’s Mythology: The Age of Fable*, by Thomas Bulfinch
- *World Mythology*, by Donna Rosenberg

### Other Children’s Classics of this Era: none