

What Makes a Children's Book a Classic?

Ask any adult what authors they most loved as a child, and odds are you'll hear the same names over and over again: Beatrix Potter. Dr. Seuss. Maurice Sendak. Laura Ingalls Wilder. In fact, the odds are good your child has a few of these authors' works on his or her shelf right now. Why is it that some books become timeless favorites, destined to be read and re-read, while others get set aside after the first cursory glance? And how can parents predict what kids will love?

Well, first of all, it's not as impossible a task as you might think. Picking winners is far from random. According to Philip Nel, Director of the Program in Children's Literature at Kansas State University, children's classics have a few things in common. They "speak to those basic concerns that define human beings as a species – love, fear, hope, anger, family, power, and the need for acceptance," he says.

Books stand the test of time because their authors write about topics that matter. Judy Blume wrote frankly about the physical changes of puberty; Maurice Sendak wrote about children conquering their fears and frustrations through fantasy. While times may change, people don't, and kids today find these themes just as comforting as we did.

What else makes a classic? Well, they're fun. But they also share other qualities. "A book that children will like typically has a central character who is a believable child, and shows that child confronting the world with energy and imagination," says Tim Morris, Professor of English at University of Texas at Arlington and author of *You're Only Young Twice: Children's Literature and Film*.

Although taste is subjective, very young children typically enjoy reading about familiar, everyday subjects with colorful illustrations and lots of rhyme and repetition – for example, Mother Goose or Dr. Seuss. Most children begin reading independently around first grade, and will find simple stories with basic vocabulary words the easiest to master. As they get older and become better readers, kids can handle more complex stories and tend to develop strong interests and tastes of their own.

Luckily, there's no need to invest blindly in books. Money doesn't grow on trees, and it doesn't have to. "Get them a library card and have them check out huge stacks of books," says Professor Morris. When it comes to reading, even a preschooler knows what she likes, and she'll be more than happy to tell you!

For more advice on picking children's books, check out www.cbcbooks.org, the website of The Children's Book Council.

