

*“The best kind of book,” said Barnaby, “is a magic book.”*

*“Naturally,” said John.*

*There was a silence, as they all thought about this and how true it was.*

*“The best kind of magic book,” said Barnaby, “is when it’s about ordinary people like us, and then something happens and it’s magic.”*

It is a bold move, for a novel to declare itself the best kind of book on its very first page, but Edward Eager’s *Seven Day Magic* pulls it off. That it manages to do so with an air of charming humility rather than arrogance is a testament to Eager’s voice—especially considering the next line places another of his works, *Half Magic*, in that same category of “best”. References to other authors in the following pages begin to make it clear that this, like all of Eager’s books, is a joyful, loving tribute to the kind of books he himself likes best: stories of ordinary people finding magic.

The trope is common enough that I suspect Eager isn’t alone in his opinion. From *Alice in Wonderland* to *Harry Potter* and beyond, literature is full of children being swept suddenly into an adventure of magic and mystery. There are variations and sub-categories of the theme; for example, there may or may not be physical travel involved in finding the magic. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the Pevensie children literally stumble into another world. For Percy of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, the reveal is that gods, demigods, and mythological beasts exist all around him in *this* world, hiding in plain sight. Alice and Harry Potter face similar discoveries, respectively.

There are also books that do not entirely fit this theme, but share certain elements of it. *The Hobbit* is a good example. Bilbo does get pulled from his quiet, everyday life and thrown

into a journey full of magic and danger, but he did already know those things existed in his world. On the other end of the spectrum is *The Secret Garden*. The characters talk a lot about magic, but nothing explicitly magical happens. Still, Mary Lennox discovering the garden is not dissimilar to Lucy entering Narnia for the first time.

I did not include either of these books in my collection, but I doubt it is a coincidence that they, like most of this collection, are among my favorite books that I read growing up. My favorite movie, Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*, also deserves a mention for matching the theme.

I believed strongly in magic when I was young, and was utterly convinced I would find it one day (assuming it didn't find me first, which seemed equally likely). That belief has weakened over the years; I suspect it is more hope than conviction now, but nevertheless the feeling remains. Somewhere in the core of my soul, there is a child still waiting for adventure to sweep me away.

That part of me is why I have entirely failed to 'outgrow' this collection, even though it is made up of books ostensibly aimed at children. If anything, I would say that I need these books now more than ever.

I can't help but wonder *why* this trope seems to so rarely happen to adults. I suspect that it is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. We tell these stories romanticizing childhood as something wondrous and magical—and it is, but maybe if we told more such stories about adults, we would realize that the world doesn't stop being magical just because we grew up.

That is why this collection is so important to me. It can be hard to hold on to the magic in a world of increasing stress and responsibility, and I never want to stop seeing the magic around me.

I am not sure I agree with the premise that there exists a “best” kind of book. But assuming there were, I think Barnaby would probably be right; the best kind of book is one about ordinary people whose lives take an extraordinary turn. I am sure I agreed with him as a child; this collection is proof enough of that.

## Annotated Bibliography

Baum, L. Frank. *Ozma of Oz*. Rand McNally, 1970. Originally published as *Ozma of Oz: A Record of Her Adventures with Dorothy Gale of Kansas, Billina the Yellow Hen, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, Tik-Tok, the Cowardly Lion and the Hungry Tiger; Besides Other Good People Too Numerous to Mention Faithfully Recorded Herein*, 1907.

Premise: Dorothy Gale of Kansas is swept off a boat during a storm, and washes up on the beach of a land called Ev, where she has many adventures with friends both new and old.

This book was my mother's when she was little, and I cringe now thinking of the way I used to treat it. I think we have a copy of one of the other *Oz* books, but I didn't read that one over and over the way I did this one. I liked the size and weight of it, and the funny illustrations and absurdity captured me even as the wheelers scared me.

### ***The Sisters Grimm***

Buckley, Michael. *The Fairy-Tale Detectives*. Amulet Books, 2006. Paperback.

Buckley, Michael. *The Unusual Suspects*. Amulet Books, 2007. Paperback.

Buckley, Michael. *The Problem Child*. Amulet Books, 2007. Paperback.

Buckley, Michael. *Once Upon a Crime*. Amulet Books, 2008. Paperback.

Buckley, Michael. *Magic and Other Misdemeanors*. Amulet Books, 2008. Paperback.

Buckley, Michael. *Tales from the Hood*. Amulet Books, 2009. Paperback.

Buckley, Michael. *The Everafter War*. Amulet Books, 2010. Paperback.

Buckley, Michael. *The Inside Story*. Amulet Books, 2011. Paperback.

Premise: Two orphaned sisters go to live with their grandmother in Ferryport Landing, New York, where she informs them that the town is full of fairytale characters, and, as descendants of the famous Brothers Grimm, it is their family duty to record their stories.

My best friend recommended this series to me, when we were in about third grade. She lent me her copies the first time I read them, but when I wanted to read them again I figured I should buy my own. Somehow I never bought the last one!

These books are wonderful. Putting fairytale characters in a modern setting is guaranteed fun, and Michael Buckley captures preteen girlhood surprisingly well. I remember relating to the main character a lot--I'm pretty sure her eventual love interest, Puck, was my first fictional crush!

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures under Ground*. Dover Publications, 1965. Facsimile of 1864 manuscript. Paperback.

Premise: A young girl named Alice follows a white rabbit down a hole and ends up in a wild, wacky, wonderful place filled with riddles and populated by strange creatures and people. The whole thing may or may not have been a dream.

I didn't read this book when I was very little because I found the cursive difficult, but now I can appreciate its beauty. It reads like what it originally was: a rambling, nonsensical story being made up along the way. It lends itself very well to being read aloud, particularly the parentheticals.

Coville, Bruce. *The Unicorn Chronicles*. Scholastic, Inc., 2005. Originally published as *Into the Land of the Unicorns*, 1994 and *Song of the Wanderer*, 1999. Hardcover.

Premise: When Cara Diana Hunter and her grandmother find themselves being chased by a mysterious man, Cara's grandmother gives her a locket that lets her escape to Luster, the land of the unicorns.

I adore these books. I credit most of my love for unicorns to them. This series literally gets the best of both worlds, by being anchored to the real world while mostly taking place in an incredibly fleshed-out fantasy realm. Luster--and what a great name for a fantasy realm--feels real and full, populated with original creatures as well as classics like dragons and unicorns.

DiTerlizzi, Tony, and Holly Black. *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2004. Originally published as *The Field Guide*, 2003; *The Seeing Stone*, 2003; *Lucinda's Secret*, 2003; *The Ironwood Tree*, 2004; and *The Wrath of Mulgarath*, 2004. Hardcover, box set.

Premise: Three siblings move into their great-aunt's rundown mansion, where they discover a book written by their great-great-uncle, describing faeries that exist all around them.

The coolest thing about these books was the field guide that was published shortly after them. The book featured prominently throughout the story, so being able to own it felt a bit like owning a prop from a movie. It contained detailed faux-scientific descriptions and illustrations of all the faery creatures that show up in the books, and many that don't.

These books are very short, probably adding up to a standard novel if you combined all five. That made them a fun choice to reread, because it was such a small commitment!

Downer, Ann. *Hatching Magic*. Scholastic Inc., 2003. Paperback.

Premise: A wyvern accidentally travels forward through time a few centuries, where she lays an egg in Theodora Oglethorpe's backyard. Gideon, a wizard and the wyvern's owner, follows her through into early 2000s Boston.

There are a couple scenes in this book--the wyvern burrowing under a shed to hide, Theo finding the baby wyvern in a tree hollow--that I remember picturing happening in my own backyard while reading. I can still see them just as clearly as I could ten years ago. Finding a baby dragon in the yard is the kind of thing I used to *dream* about (and still do, a little bit), so it's no wonder that part made such a big impression on me.

### **Edward Eager's "Tales of Magic"**

Eager, Edward. *Half Magic*. Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999. Originally published 1954. Paperback.

Premise: Four siblings find a coin that grants wishes, but only by halves.

Eager, Edward. *Knight's Castle*. Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999. Originally published 1956. Paperback.

Premise: Two sets of cousins, children of the now-adults from *Half Magic*, find themselves in a cross between E. Nesbit's *The Magic City* and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.

Eager, Edward. *Magic by the Lake*. Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999. Originally published 1957. Paperback.

Premise: This time, the children from *Half Magic* end up with a whole lake full of wishes.

Eager, Edward. *The Time Garden*. Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999. Originally published 1958. Paperback.

Premise: The children from *Knight's Castle* discover a thyme garden that lets you time-travel to different eras based on the variety of thyme you wish on.

Eager, Edward. *Seven Day Magic*. Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999. Originally published 1962. Paperback.

Premise: Five children, describing all the attributes of a perfect book, find exactly that book waiting for them in the library--and it's about *them*.

The best thing about these books is how self-aware and self-referential they are. *Knight's Castle* and *The Time Garden* are about the children of the characters from *Half Magic* and *Magic by the Lake*, and they even meet up at one point, so you get to see the same scene play out in two different books, from two different perspectives. The kids in *Seven Day Magic* have all read *Half Magic* and end up getting to continue the end of that story--which was a little confusing for me, because for several years I only owned *Seven Day Magic*, and hadn't read *Half Magic*.

Having read *Seven Day Magic* over and over is probably why the opening lines came to me immediately when I thought about the theme of this collection. These books are the epitome of the theme, and deliberately so. They are witty, joyful, and wonderfully meta.

Funke, Cornelia. *Dragon Rider*. Translated by Anthea Bell, Scholastic Inc., 2004. Originally published as *Drachenreiter*, 2000. Hardcover.

Premise: Dragons have been forced into hiding by human development, and when it looks like they will have to move again, one young dragon and his brownie friend set out on a quest to find the fabled "Rim of Heaven," where humans will never find them. Along the way they meet new friends, including a human boy who joins them for the journey, and one very old enemy.

I realized recently that this is one of my favorite books. Somehow I hadn't ever noticed. It, like most of this collection, is an old standby, always ready for a reread. The characters are

interesting, and there are enough twists and turns in the plot that there's always something I don't remember from the last reread. It never gets old.

This book also stands out from the rest because it approaches the trope from the other side. The story starts with the fantasy characters, and then they stumble upon a *human*. He goes through the same stages of disbelief, wonder, and joy as many other characters from this collection, but we get to see it from a new perspective.

Funke, Cornelia. *Inkheart*. Translated by Anthea Bell, Scholastic Inc., 2005. Originally published as *Tintenherz*, 2003. Paperback.

Premise: Meggie learns that her father is able to read things out of books and make them real, and that he accidentally read a villain right into this world.

I think this is the only book from this collection that I have only read once, for the first time just a few years ago. We owned a copy long before that, because my sister read the trilogy as each book came out. I honestly don't know why it took me so long to get around to reading them, but I'd like to read them again.

Lewis, C.S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. HarperCollins, 2000. Originally published 1950-56. Paperback, box set.

Premise: Various stories surrounding the land of Narnia, a magical realm that can be accessed from ours through different means.

These are classics, of course. The books are enjoyable in themselves as adventures, but what makes them truly compelling are the underlying themes and oft-discussed Christian allegories. They aren't something you notice consciously as a kid (although I remember being aware that they were there long before I had any idea what any of it meant, probably because my mother loves these books and talked about them when she first read them to us), but they deepen the story all the same.

### **Percy Jackson and the Olympians**

Riordan, Rick. *The Lightning Thief*. Disney-Hyperion, 2006. Paperback.

Riordan, Rick. *The Sea of Monsters*. Disney-Hyperion, 2006. Paperback.

Riordan, Rick. *The Titan's Curse*. Disney-Hyperion, 2007. Paperback.

Riordan, Rick. *The Battle of the Labyrinth*. Disney-Hyperion, 2008. Paperback.

Riordan, Rick. *The Last Olympian*. Disney-Hyperion, 2009. Paperback.

Premise: Percy Jackson, a kid from New York, finds out that he is the son of Poseidon. He goes to a special summer camp, where he meets other demigods and eventually many other beings from Greek myth.

I think everyone my age read these. Most of my friends certainly did. I avoided them for a long time, because I already liked Greek mythology and was a bit of a snob about it becoming “mainstream.” But I got over myself eventually, and they are very fun books. It’s another instance of putting old myths into a modern world, this time featuring Poseidon in Hawaiian shorts.

Rowling, J.K. *The Harry Potter Collection: His First Three Years at Hogwarts*. Scholastic, 2002. Originally published as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, 1999; *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 2000; and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, 2001. Paperback, box set.

Premise: On his eleventh birthday, orphan Harry Potter is informed that he is a wizard and will be attending a special school to learn magic. He also learns that he is famous in the wizarding world for having “defeated,” as a baby, the evil wizard who killed his parents, and who might not actually be dead.

Harry Potter is an obvious choice for this collection, and might be the most well-known example of the trope. It is certainly the most famous modern example.

I don't remember the first time I read Harry Potter. I remember the later ones, waiting at the door for the Amazon delivery, pre-ordered so it would arrive on the release date, and then waiting another couple of days while my sister read it first. (I didn't mind. She was a faster reader, so it made sense that she got it first. She finished the sixth book in less than two days.)

But I don't remember a time when I hadn't read the first Harry Potter book. I must have memories

Okay, something very weird just happened. I remembered, just as I was typing. My mom gave it to me. Maybe I had mentioned not having anything to read, or maybe she just thought I'd like it. I remember her handing me the book, and I remember reading the first words, and wondering how to pronounce "Privet." I was sitting on the stairs, by the front door.

Wow. I hope it's okay to leave this section as-is. I just experienced something pretty cool, and I think it should be preserved here.

Maybe it was magic.

## Wish List

Buckley, Michael. *The Council of Mirrors*. Amulet Books, 2013.

I borrowed the final *Sisters Grimm* book from a friend (the same friend who originally recommended the series) when I first read it, and only recently realized I don't have the complete set!

Funke, Cornelia. *A Griffin's Feather*. Translated by Anthea Bell, Chicken House, 2018.

I somehow didn't know there was a sequel to *Dragon Rider*, and I must have it!

Gaiman, Neil. *Coraline*. Harper Collins, 2002.

Gaiman, Neil. *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. William Morrow and Company, 2013.

I love Neil Gaiman, and much of his work fits this theme, but I hardly own any of his books! I borrowed the audiobooks of these two and enjoyed both greatly. I would like to read them in print as well.

Nesbit, E. *The Enchanted Castle*. Unwin, 1907.

Nesbit, E. *Five Children and It*. T. Fisher Unwin, 1902.

Nesbit, E. *The Magic City*. Macmillan, 1910.

I am ashamed to say that I read very little E. Nesbit--ashamed because of how frequently Edward Eager's books acknowledged her influence. He was quoted as saying that he referenced her in each of his books "so that any child who likes my books and doesn't know hers may be led back to the master of us all," so I really feel I should read some of her books.