

A Classic

What makes a book a 'classic'?

Firstly what does 'classic' actually mean? The word classic is used to describe something that is judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality and outstanding of its kind.

So with that in mind, let's consider the following points and see how they might make a book to be of the highest quality and outstanding.

The passing of time: the age of a book would be the first thing I think of when considering if a book is a classic or not. Generally a classic would have to have been around for a while. Looking at some well-known children's classics it seems they would be at least 50 to 100 years old. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was first published way back in 1865 – that's 156 years ago! Beatrix Potter started creating her *Peter Rabbit* stories in 1893 and they are still being printed today. *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1926), *Charlotte's Web* (1952), all of Roald Dahl's books (1943+) and also Richard Scarry's (1963+), and of course, Dr Seuss's *Cat in the Hat* (1957) are other examples of books over 60 years old but that are still read by children today.

You'd be forgiven for thinking *Where The Wild Things Are* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* would be modern classics but they were first published back in 1963 and 1969 respectively. That's about 50 years ago and I'm sure even Mr Tait read them when he was little.

There are books less than 50 years old that are already defined as classics so maybe it's not just the age of a book on its own that counts. Since its publication in 1986, *Ender's Game* is thought of as a science fiction classic. *The Giver* (1993), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) and *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2011) are all relatively young but are still considered as classics.

Maybe it's not about how many years old a book actually is, but if it is passed down and read by many generations. My parents remember their parents reading Dr Suess, Richard Scarry, Roald Dahl and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to them and I remember them reading these to us when we were little.

A book's 'reach' around the world: the popularity of a book across the world would be the second thing I think of when considering a book as a classic. Usually a classic has been translated into many different languages for distribution around the world. A good example is the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007). The first book, *The Philosopher's Stone* has been translated into 79 different languages, the latest being Māori last year.

However, when you look at the top 100 bestselling books of all time today, the majority of the titles listed are still relatively young. All seven *Harry Potter* books are in the top ten bestsellers, but they are only 14 to 24 years old. Even though they are the bestselling series of all time selling over 500 million copies since 1997, can they actually be considered a classic when they're less than 50 years old? Maybe in 25 years they can be.

I believe a classic has to be a combination of at least age and popularity. A book may be a bestseller but not necessarily of a high quality or outstanding of its kind. Take fifth bestselling book of all time, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example. I haven't read it myself but have confirmation from a reliable, trustworthy source that it is definitely not classy enough to be a classic!

Which brings me to ...

Writing style: for a book to be considered a classic it really needs to have a certain level of class and sophistication. It actually has to be good. Generally I think classics tend to be heavy going which means I am not always that keen to read them even though I love reading. The stories aren't necessarily boring or too long, it's just, I like to read for enjoyment and to relax. A true 'classic' puts me off as it seems too dense and feels like it needs too much overthinking.

Relevance of topic or subject or theme: underlying messages in known classics can relate to real life events, change people's views on life or influence later pieces of writing, art, film or theatre.

Animal Farm (1945) has references to the Soviet Union, communism and Joseph Stalin. Reading this book, one learns a lot about history. *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947) gives insight into what it would be like to be a Jew in World War II. What Anne Frank wrote about has also influenced modern thinking in that we would never think it acceptable to treat people the way the Nazi's did. *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) has themes relating to anxiety, unfriendliness and people being fake. Readers over generations can still relate to these all too

common human feelings. John Lennon's killer, Mark David Chapman, was influenced by the main character in *Catcher of the Rye*, Holden Caulfield. As a matter of fact, he stayed at the scene of the shooting reading *Catcher of the Rye* over John's body.

Even though a book like *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is often used in schools as required reading which may make it seem deadly and boring, it still inspires many different artistic forms today. The reality TV show *Survivor* is based on two teams or 'tribes' competing against each other. Iron Maiden's 1996 song, *Lord of the Flies*, has lines in it referring to Jack not caring about what's right or wrong, killing to survive and saints or sinners.

Whether or not a movie representation helps or hinders a 'classic'

classification: Children and adults can be encouraged to reading through film. The best example would probably be Peter Jackson's trilogy film series, *The Hobbit* (2012-2014). Publisher Harper Collins' sales of the book rose 50-60% ahead of the first film's release.

Watching a film before tackling a classic book may help the reader understand the plot and characters especially if they are as complex as something like *The Luminaries*.

On the downside, books tend to have a lot more detail and the reader has to engage their imagination. A movie can leave a lot of the detail out and only represents one or two people's imaginations. The viewer doesn't have to think as hard as the reader. This often means movies aren't as good as the book. The *Ender's Game* film in 2013 is a good example of a movie ruining a good book.

At the end of the day, the quality of a book is an personal choice and I believe you can create your own individual set of classics.

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