

## Canadian authors tell us the books that shaped them (and the ones kids should read today)

Margaret Atwood, Esi Edugyan and more talk about what they loved reading when they were young, and the contemporary books they recommend for kids

**SARAH LAING**

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“To learn to read is to light a fire,” wrote Victor Hugo in the 19th century. “Every syllable that is spelled out is a spark.” Nowhere is that aphorism proved truer than in the books that catch the imaginations of children that grow up to be writers themselves – and shape the words that they will one day pen.

From the curriculum set piece that overwhelmed a future poet to the Canadian classic that felt like a kindred spirit to a one-day children’s author, these are the pieces of literature that captivated an assemblage of Canadian writers (and one politician). Plus! Some of the contemporary books they’re recommending to the kids in their lives now.

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## Esi Edugyan

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*Two-time Giller Prize-winning author of Washington Black and other novels*

**The book that shaped me as a child ...** *Matilda* by Roald Dahl. I remember my 8-year-old self feeling that here was a book so outrageous I was surprised I’d been allowed to borrow it from the library. I had, of course, read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, but this seemed to have sharper teeth. I was taken by the story of an isolated, misunderstood girl who eventually finds her way – which, for all its antics, felt very consoling.

**... And the book I’m pressing into the hands of kids today** My son was riveted by Jacqueline Woodson’s *Each Kindness*, the story of a new girl who arrives at school and is casually mistreated by the other students. It is wistful in a way we don’t expect of children’s books, and very beautiful. It has something forceful to say about inclusivity, but doesn’t feel at all pat or preachy.



## Margaret Atwood

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*Award-winning novelist and poet*

**The book that shaped me as a child ...** I think my childhood is so long ago now the choices would be antiquated. It would be something dark by Beatrix Potter. *The Tale of Mr. Tod*, say.

**... And the book I’m pressing into the hands of kids today** My five-year-old grandson is keen on a book called *Anna Hibiscus* by Atinuke. Track it down.



## Emma Donoghue

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*Man Booker-nominated author of, most recently, The Pull of the Stars*

**The book that shaped me as a child ...** Julie Andrews's *The Last of the Really Great Whangdoodles* lingers in my head as a fantasy that takes children and their challenges and ambitions quite seriously.

**... And the book I'm pressing into the hands of kids today** The seven-book series *The Popularity Papers* is a delightful modern epistolary novel in which every word and picture feels credibly scrawled from one of these best pals to the other.



## Thomas King

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*Governor-General's Award-winning author of The Back of the Turtle*



**The book that shaped me as a child ...** The books I remember from my childhood were the books in the Edgar Rice Burroughs "Mars" series, like *John Carter of Mars*, the *Princess of Mars* et cetera. They were adventure books set on a different planet. At that time in my life, I was perfectly willing to put Earth in my rearview mirror. I don't know that these books shaped me so much as they entertained me, and gave me an escape hatch from my life at that time. I'm not sure I'd recommend these books for young readers today, because I'm pretty certain the patriarchal nature of the books wouldn't appeal to today's youth.

## Heather O'Neill

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*Award-winning novelist and essayist*

**The book that shaped me as a child ...** I was smitten by everything about Ludwig Bemelmans's *Madeline* as a child. I liked that it was set in Paris. I encountered Paris often in picture books. It was a place where mice spoke and cats lived on rooftops and pigeons intervened in political affairs. And I naturally always dreamed of being sent to a boarding school made up of a student body completely composed of girls.

**... And the book I'm pressing into the hands of kids today** A book I've been buying for children lately is one I came across by chance in a little bookstore called *The Milk of Dreams* by Leonora Carrington. A surrealist painter and writer, Carrington is always provocative and absurd in her writing for adults. When you turn the page quite literally anything could be described on the next page. You can meet a hyena that a girl has dressed up to take her place at a ball or a man with navy-blue skin and zippers over his orifices.



## Steven Guilbeault

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*Minister of Canadian Heritage*

**The book that shaped me as a child ...** Books weren't a big part of my life growing up, but I made sure they were for my four kids. I read a series of fantasy fiction books with my son called *Amos Daragon* by Bryan Perro, featuring the adventures of a 12-year-old in strange lands populated by legendary creatures. I started reading it with my son, but he was so captivated he didn't wait and secretly read hundreds of pages without me! Books open up our imagination, and this series really helped him get to love reading and school in general.

**... And the book I'm pressing into the hands of kids today** *Greta and the Giants* by Zoe Tucker tells the story of a young girl who wants to protect a

beautiful forest that is threatened. It's actually a story about the young climate activist Greta Thunberg. I'm a strong believer in the power of books to change the world, and of strength in unity. It also brings back memories of my climate activism debut, as I climbed a tree at 5 years old to block a land developer from clearing a wooded area behind my home.

## **Ian Williams**

*Giller Prize-winning novelist and poet*

**The book that shaped me as a child ...** My Grade 6 teacher read *Bridge To Terabithia* to our class. I thought it was going to be just another story about an imaginary kingdom, but, by the end, my little child heart could barely handle the scale of emotion in that book.

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**Editor's note:** (April 30) An earlier version of this article had an incorrect time reference for the quote from Victor Hugo. This version has been updated.



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