



Ten Essential Children's Books chosen by Patrice Lawrence

Article Author:

[Patrice Lawrence](#) [1]

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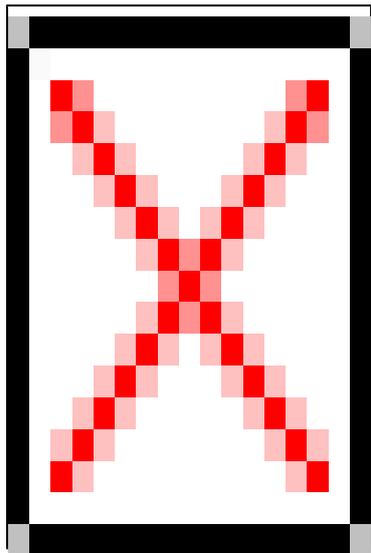
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Ten essential books for young readers chosen by Patrice Lawrence

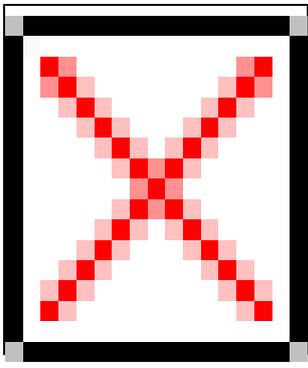
As part of the celebrations for our 40th anniversary, we are revising the long-running Ten of the Best feature, and asking six authors to choose the children's books they consider *essential* reading. Our thanks to **Patrice Lawrence** for this selection.



I have an odd relationship with reading. I absolutely love it and have done since I could read. Before I *could* read, I'm sure stories were read to me. However, I grew up in a time where there were no black fictional heroes in books and no black writers. So the more I read, the more I didn't see myself and, consequently, the stronger the message that people like me didn't belong in books or write books.

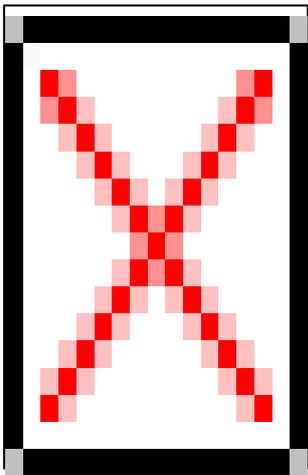
However, what I did learn was that books can reflect back our fears, our challenges and our deepest secrets. Here are some of my favourites.

[If All the World Were](#) [3] Joseph Coelho, illustrated by Allison Colpoys, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1786036513, £6.99 pbk



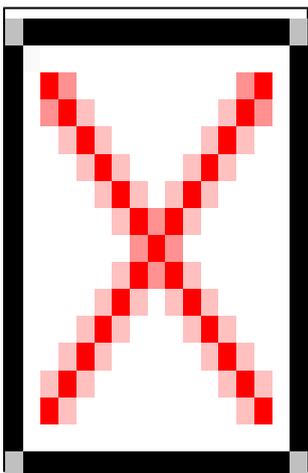
The temptation is to protect children from the tougher side of life. As adults, we can look back and recall how adults often underestimated the intensity of our childhood feelings. They are trying to protect us while stopping us from finding ways to articulate feelings that we may not understand. **If All the World Were** is a picture book that explores family relationships and bereavement through gorgeous lyrical language and beautiful illustrations. It made me cry.

[The Knife of Never Letting Go](#) [4], Patrick Ness, Walker Books, 978-1406379167, £7.99 pbk



The first novel in the **Chaos Walking** trilogy. Like many books I've come to love, I bought it purely by reading the blurb on the back in a book shop then heading straight to the till. It's also the book that confused me. How could this book be considered just for teenagers? The trilogy addresses tough subjects such as colonisation, propaganda, misogyny, family and gender-violence through a flawed hero, Todd. He lives in a world where men's thoughts are loud. It is normal. But where have all the women gone? And what happens if once they are found, the women's thoughts are secret and silent? It is utterly compelling.

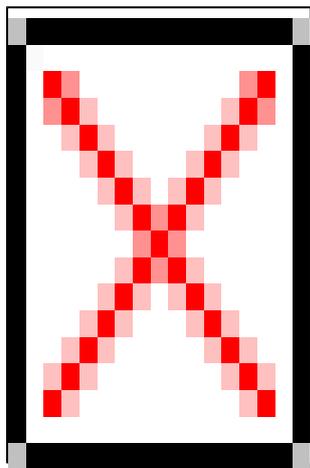
Planet Omar: Trouble Magnet, Zanib Mian, illus Nasaya Mafaridik, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444951226, £6.99 pbk



I saw this in its first incarnation, **The Muslims**. The author is a Londoner who set up her own publishing company

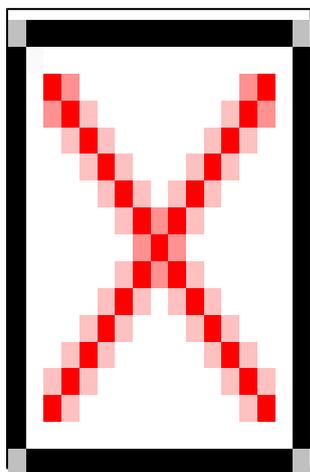
because the only books she could find about Muslim children were usually about Islam. Oddly enough, her own children already knew about that? Where were the **Tom Gates** and **Wimpy Kids** with Muslim characters? Zanib wrote them. Omar is endearing, empathetic and hilarious, navigating dragons, bullies, annoying siblings, Regents Park Outer Circle and a racist neighbour. A wonderful book that also challenges stereotypes.

[You Against Me](#) [5], Jenny Downham, Definitions, 978-1909531123, £7.99 pbk



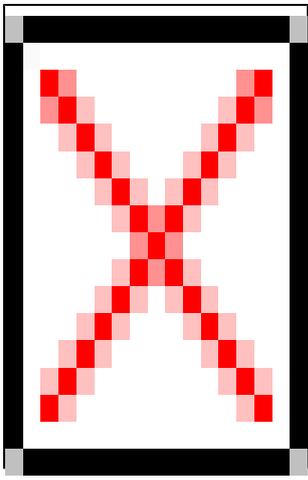
I love all of Jenny's books, but this is the one I can't stop thinking about. Mikey lives with his alcoholic mother and two sisters. He is the glue that holds the family together but he can barely raise enough money to buy a pint of milk. Ellie's family are well off, recent arrivals. Mikey's older sister, Karyn believes that Ellie's brother, Tom, raped her. Mikey plans revenge but what happens when he and Ellie fall for each other? It's thought-provoking and tender asking questions about class, power, consent and so much more.

[The Graveyard Book](#) [6], Neil Gaiman, illus Chris Riddell, Bloomsbury, 978-0747594802, £7.99 pbk



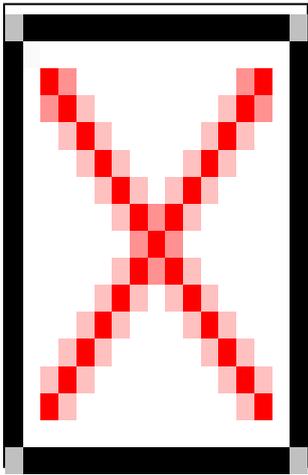
I read this to my daughter, long before I was a published author. The beginning, well? I had no idea that books marketed for children could be so, well, full on! It's a repurposing of **The Jungle Book** inspired by an old Victorian graveyard. As a baby, Bod Owens escapes a murderer by crawling into a cemetery where he is adopted by ghosts, gradually growing up and pushing the boundaries of his existence. It feels so real and I still step back whenever I meet someone called Jack.

[I Will Not Be Erased](#) [7] by gal-dem, Walker Books, 978-1406386370, £7.99 pbk



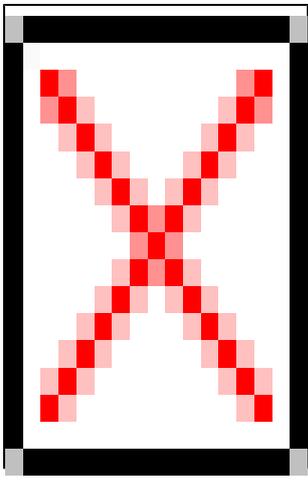
The gal-dem collective is only five years old. It's an online magazine written by women and non-binary writers of colour. It is also so much more, a movement that explores a multiplicity of voices and experiences. Fourteen writers give advice to their younger selves. It's a rope hurled towards the young people who are struggling now, offering strength and safety until times are less turbulent. This is the book I would have loved when I was growing up believing that everything about me was wrong. I was the first in my family to be born in the UK. I thought I was English, but society had many ways of telling me I was not. I would have longed for a book that made me feel less alone and given me hope for the future.

Freedom, Catherine Johnson, Scholastic, 978-1407185484, £4.99 pbk



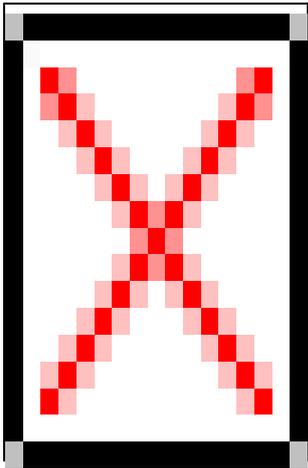
It was hard to choose a favourite of Catherine's books. Catherine uses fiction to challenge deeply embedded ideas about English history, especially colonialism and slavery. She literally places people of colour into history and gives them agency. Nat, an enslaved young man on a Jamaican plantation is forced to accompany the English slave owners back to London. The book challenges the 'white saviour' abolitionist narrative and explores England's complicity with the brutality of slavery.

[Running on Empty](#) [8], S E Durrant, Nosy Crow, 978-0857637406, £6.99 pbk



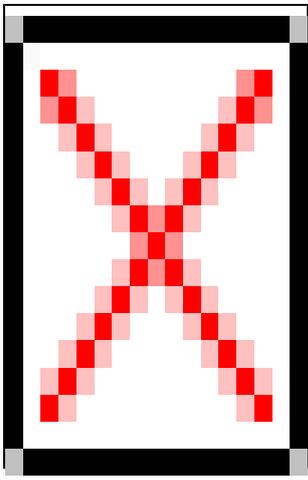
AJ wants to be a runner. He'd been in the stadium when Usain Bolt triumphed during the 2020 Olympics. But when AJ's grandpa dies, life becomes complicated. AJ's grandpa not only supported AJ, but helped AJ's parents, who have learning disabilities, keep on top of life's challenges. Suddenly, he is trying to take his grandpa's place while starting secondary school and fearing that he will be taken into care if his circumstances are discovered. And, then of course, how do you run if you can't afford trainers? This is a story about grief, dreams, empathy, warmth and family love.

I am Thunder, Muhammad Khan, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1509874057, £7.99 pbk



Even as I write, debates about 'cultural appropriation' and 'writer censorship' rumble on. I certainly don't believe that writers should stick within their own experiences. I would be a hypocrite if I did. However, sometimes so-called own voices writers can provide a depth and insight that outsiders can't. In 2015, Muhammad was a teacher in a south London secondary school when three fifteen-year-old girls, Amira Abase, Shamima Begum and Kadiza Sultana left east London to join the Islamic State. We know now that it is a tale with a tragic ending. The Muslim students in Muhammad's school wanted to try and make sense of what happened. This book is the response, unpicking how a modern young Londoner can become radicalised. It is also a book about trying to carve out an identity that is our own.

Pig Heart Boy, Malorie Blackman, Corgi, 978-0552555616, £6.99 pbk



I found out about this book ? and Malorie ? via the BBC adaptation in 1999. I was shocked to see a series about a black family that wasn't **The Fresh Prince of Bel Air** or about crime. Cameron is dying of a heart condition. His only chance of survival is a transplanted pig's heart. Whatever he decides, there will be consequences. Last year, I mentioned this book at a school event in Hong Kong. A wave of excitement went round the room ? they were reading it in class. It has universal appeal and can provoke so much debate. It's about friendship, families and life-or-death decisions. As I said earlier, as children and young people we are often faced with challenges in our lives. Books can help us find ourselves.

Patrice Lawrence's debut YA novel, **Orangeboy** [9], published in 2016, won the **Bookseller YA Prize** and the **Waterstones Prize for Older Children's Fiction**, and was shortlisted for the **Costa Children's Book Award**. Since then she has written more YA novels as well as fiction and non-fiction for younger readers. **Eight Pieces of Silva** will be published in August.

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