

Top 10 unlikely friendships in books

1. [The Jungle Book](#) by Rudyard Kipling (1894)

Unlikely friendships between humans and animals are staples of both children's literature and cinema. Kipling's tale of a child, Mowgli, growing up in the jungle alongside Baloo the Bear and Bagheera the Panther while taking care to avoid the attentions of the tiger Shere Khan – because he might, you know, eat him – presents this as an entirely natural state of affairs. The stories are fables, the animals offering moral lessons, particularly in the three stories featuring the “man-cub” himself. Adapted so often and into so many different shapes, it's best to go back to the source, to the jungle, and read it as Kipling intended.

2. [The House At Pooh Corner](#) by AA Milne (1928)

No childhood would be complete without a little time spent in Ashdown Forest alongside Pooh, Piglet, Eeyore, Tigger and Roo. Pooh, of course, has no brain (according to his friends) but I daresay we've all had this accusation flung at us from time to time, which makes it so easy to relate to him. The little bear remains at the centre of all his friends' activities, usually through his misdeeds, but the manner in which each looks out for the other is as charming as it is believable. Unusually for a book of this sort, there are no villains, no one trying to upset the status quo of the forest, just lots of fun and games and to read them again, as an adult, is to lose oneself in an almost unbearable level of nostalgia.

3. [Of Mice And Men](#) by John Steinbeck (1937)

Not strictly speaking a children's book but as many of us read it as part of a school curriculum it seems to recall that time vividly, almost reeking of school dinners, puberty and unprovoked beatings. George and Lennie's intellectual and physical variances suggest they might form an unlikely alliance and yet they see a shared future together in the acquisition of that great aspiration of the migrant worker, land. The small protects the big here, the weak protects the strong. The story's resolution manages to combine an act of violence with one of great compassion.

4. [Charlotte's Web](#) by EB White (1952)

Who's to say that pigs and spiders can't be friends? There's something magical about even the concept of this novel, a spider, Charlotte, spinning words of support in her web for her friend Wilbur, when it looks like the latter is about to be turned into sausages. Charming and funny, White plays with other concepts of friendships between humans and animals in his earlier novel *Stuart Little*.

5. [Goodnight Mister Tom](#) by Michelle Magorian (1981)

There's an unwritten rule in children's literature that friendships between old and young people are boring, sentimental and that kids just don't want to read them. Magorian's classic novel puts a lie to this theory in her story of Willie Beech, both physically and mentally scarred by his violent mother, as he is evacuated to the home of Tom Oakley during the second world war. Delving into issues of religion and anti-semitism, the effect that the two central characters have on each other is what prevents this from being simply a “wise old man educating an innocent child” story.

6. The BFG by Roald Dahl (1982)

Despite being one of the most beloved children's writers ever, it always felt like a rebellious act to read a Roald Dahl book, considering how dark and unconventional their storylines could be, particularly with regard to the author's treatment of parents. (Like Dickens, "Who needs 'em?" might have been his mantra.) Not that there are any here, of course, as Sophie is an orphan brought to Giant Country by the Big Friendly Giant and, while there, has to evade the child-eating tendencies of the other giants. Hats off to Queen Elizabeth II, who plays a central role in marshalling her troops to sort out the bad guys. Can that woman *do nothing* wrong?

7. Lost and Found by Oliver Jeffers (2005)

It's hard to think of a writer who manages to encapsulate heartfelt emotion in so few words while never sinking into sentimentality as easily as Oliver Jeffers. In his wonderful picture books, kindness, humanity and friendship are always on display, along with more than a little cheerful eccentricity, and never more so than in this tale of a little boy who finds an unhappy penguin on his front door and decides to row him back to the South Pole.

8. A Boy And A Bear And A Boat by Dave Shelton (2012)

Shelton's profound and hugely entertaining tale of a boy and a bear sailing nowhere in particular is full of wonderful jokes and sarcastic asides, not to mention illustrations that you end up staring at for ridiculously long periods of time. We don't know why the boy is running away, we don't know why the bear is rowing a boat. And yet it all feels entirely rational and important and that if the boy didn't have the bear to speak to, then he would have no one. From such simple needs, great friendships are made.

9. The Bunker Diary by Kevin Brooks (2013)

My own favourite YA book of the 21st century, this extraordinary tale of resilience in the face of inexplicable cruelty makes a hero of the young protagonist – Linus Weems – while the adults trapped alongside him in an underground bunker display varying degrees of violence and selfishness. The friendship that Linus forms with Russell, the oldest inmate, avoids any type of Morgan Freeman-type voiceover and is an essential and ultimately tragic part of the story. Ignore the why-must-we-throw-this-filth-at-our-kids brigade; this is contemporary literature at its finest.

10. Two Wolves by Tristan Bancks (2014)

It's more unusual than you might think for siblings to be friends in YA books – they're usually at each others' throats – so the bond between Ben Silver and younger sister Olive in Australian writer Bancks' novel of escape and parental misdeeds is a welcome respite for that alone. But this is also a tale of morality and personal responsibility, of looking after yourself while taking care of the person you love the most. With writing tighter than a bowman's string, *Two Wolves* echoes the classic wilderness fiction of Jack London, revealing Bancks, a heroic champion of children's literature Down Under, as a great 21st century storyteller.