



# CHILDREN'S BOOKS

REVIEWED BY TREVOR CAIRNEY

J.R.R. Tolkien once said to C.S. Lewis, 'The Christian story is the greatest story of them all. Because it's the real story. The historical event that fulfils the tales and shows us what they mean'. This biblical narrative is one centred on salvation. The Bible speaks of God's redemptive plan for his people. This is a plan that provides a way for his creation to be restored to a relationship with him. Salvation is available for those who repent of their sin, seek the mercy of God and, in faith, commit their lives to following Jesus. This is the meta-narrative of the Bible.

Lewis and Tolkien both saw the gospel narrative as the central or foundational human narrative. You don't have to try very hard to see how literature often echoes (even if imperfectly) God's foundational story of salvation. The rescue of a pig by a spider in a children's story at one level might seem trivial, but it is a story of salvation nonetheless, and in its own way is a faint echo of the ultimate act of sacrifice by God in redeeming his children through his Son.

While Christians often seek books for their children that explicitly present the gospel, I want to suggest some children's books with themes that embody the biblical meta-narrative. It is helpful for children to be able to read such books with eyes informed by the gospel. In the case of younger children, you might consider reading them with or to your children. This will offer you a chance to talk about the stories and perhaps reflect on the echoes of the greatest story ever told.

Here are some suggestions for different ages.

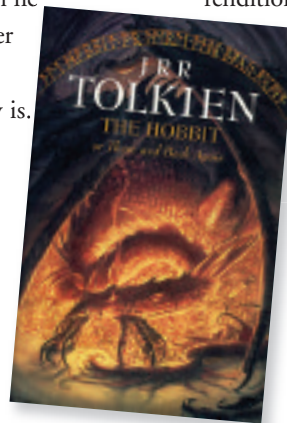
## Preschool (0-5 years)

- *Why do you love me?* by Martin Baynton—A story about the love of a parent for a child that knows no bounds and is full of grace and forgiveness.
- *The Delivery of Dancing Bears* by Elizabeth Stanley—The story of a dancing bear, enslaved and mistreated at the hands of a cruel man, freed and restored one day by a noble peasant who pays the cruel owner a ridiculous price (all he had in the world) for its freedom.
- *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox—The story of how a small boy visits an old people's home near his house and makes friends with Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper. He tells her 'all his secrets', and when he hears that she has 'lost her memory' he sets out to discover what a memory is.



## Early readers (6-9 years)

- *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White—This is a salvation narrative about a pig and a spider, with themes that parallel biblical themes of devotion, love, friendship and service.
- *Dangerous Journey* by John Bunyan—This is an abridged version of the well-known allegory 'The Pilgrim's Progress'. Brilliantly illustrated by Alan Parry.
- *The Silver Donkey* by Sonya Hartnett—This is the story of how two sisters in France rescue a wounded soldier. The soldier tells the children a collection of allegorical stories about a donkey, which speak of bravery, loyalty and sacrifice. Winner of CBCA 2005 award for younger readers.



- *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens and illustrated by Robert Ingpen—This accessible version of the classic story tells how Ebenezer Scrooge learned the true meaning of Christmas. It is magnificently illustrated by perhaps Australia's greatest living illustrator.

## Independent readers (10-14+ years)

- *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis—This well-loved series of seven fantasy novels tells in allegorical form the story of humanity's rebellion against God, judgement, redemption and salvation.
- *Shakespeare Stories* and *Shakespeare Stories II* by Leon Garfield and illustrated by Michael Foreman—Leon Garfield is one of the great authors of children's books in the last 100 years. In these two stunning books Garfield gives us 19 of Shakespeare's plays in narrative form. Plays such as Macbeth are filled with biblical themes and Garfield's narrative renditions make them more accessible for young readers.
- *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien—These justly famous tales set in Middle-earth see two apparently lowly Hobbits, Bilbo and Frodo, become entangled in an all-consuming spiritual and political war. The endurance and self-sacrifice of Frodo ultimately brings salvation to many, the humble are lifted high, and the longed for king returns in glory to rule his kingdom.
- *Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson—Set in a strict Methodist community in Chesapeake Bay in the 1940s, this novel has strong Christian themes inspired by Romans 9:13. All her life, Louise has felt robbed of opportunities, friends, and her mother. The story centres on adolescent spiritual struggle, and a teenager's questioning of Christian faith. The book won the Newbery Medal in 1981. ©