

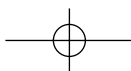
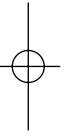
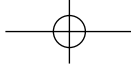
CHAPTER 1

*There and
Back Again*

*What we have loved
Others will love
And we will teach them how*

—William Wordsworth





Reading has helped me a lot with writing my book. All of the books I read gave me ideas and thoughts for writing. Without books, I would not be writing a storybook today.

—Jonathan

ONE OF MY FIRST MEMORIES is of learning to read. My mother owned an electrical contracting business, and, as a single mother, sometimes had to take me on road trips with her. As we drove the highways between Texas and Arkansas, she read road signs to me, praising me whenever I “read” a McDonald’s or Texaco sign. Barely three years old, I was undoubtedly parroting back the colors and sign shapes I recognized, but it was not long before I was reading on my own. My mother was my world, and she brought reading into it. Thinking about how I walked through my childhood with my nose perennially stuck in a book, I sometimes wonder whether she regretted turning me on to reading so early.

My mother worried that because I was holed up in my room reading, I would become socially stunted. To the contrary, reading would connect me to the most important people in my life. My husband, Don, is a reader. I knew we were destined to be together forever when, on our third date, I discovered he had read—and loved—one of my then-favorites, Stephen King’s post-plague battle between good and evil, *The Stand*. He often paces in front of the bookcase in our living room, calling out to me, “What have you got for me to read?” Books are love letters (or apologies) passed between us, adding a layer of conversation beyond our spoken words. Neither one of us could imagine spending our life with someone who did not read.

10 *The Book Whisperer*

Some of my favorite memories with our two daughters revolve around time spent sharing books, too. Don, Celeste, and I read the entire Harry Potter series out loud together as each book was published. We started the first book when Celeste was nine, and she turned seventeen shortly after we finished the last. I cried and cried not only because Rowling's epic was over but because I saw that the journey of raising our beautiful child was also nearing its end. When our power went out for three days during recent spring storms, our nine-year-old, Sarah, begged us to read ghost stories to her by candlelight, claiming that these were, in her words, "the best stories" to read in a house filled with eerie silence and creepy shadows.

Even my friendships hold book love at their core. Mary, my best friend, and I bonded as moms and readers while escorting our children to the public library every Wednesday for two summers. We were the only library patrons who needed a Radio Flyer wagon to carry out all of the books we checked out each week. Mary and I talk about a great many things—our children, our parents, our spouses, politics, what we heard on NPR—but we always make time to talk about our cherished books, too.

I am a reader, a flashlight-under-the-covers, carries-a-book-everywhere-I-go, don't-look-at-my-Amazon-bill reader. I choose purses based on whether I can cram a paperback into them, and my books are the first items I pack into a suitcase. I am the person whom family and friends call when they need a book recommendation or cannot remember who wrote *Heidi*. (It was Johanna Spyri.)

My identity as a person is so entwined with my love of reading and books that I cannot separate the two. I am as much a composite of all of the book characters I have loved as of the people I have met. I will never climb Mt. Everest, but I have seen its terrifying, majestic summit through the eyes of Jon Krakauer and Peak Marcello. Going to New York City for the first time, at forty, was like visiting an old friend I knew from E. L. Konigsburg's *From*

the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler and Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale*. I wanted to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, hide in the bathroom until it closed, and look for angels. I know from personal experience that readers lead richer lives, *more* lives, than those who don't read.

My obsession with books and reading defines my life, and when I chose teaching as my second career (following my first one as a bookkeeper), I walked into my classroom convinced I would share this passion with my students. No matter what else I had to offer them, I could offer my enthusiasm for books.

It wasn't that easy.

Wake-Up Call

The summer before my first teaching assignment, I spent a month planning a unit for one of my favorite books, *The View from Saturday*, by E. L. Konigsburg. This story of an emotionally and physically damaged, but inspiring teacher, Mrs. Olinksi, and her extraordinary students, who grow to love and respect each other over the course of a school year, was powerful to me and, I thought, would resonate with my sixth-grade students. I wanted to be caring but strong, like Mrs. Olinksi, and encourage my students to develop bonds with one another the way her students, the brilliant Souls, did in the book.

I read the book again and, in the margins of my copy, made careful notes of conversational points to discuss. I created extension activities that tied in with the events in the book's plot: we would investigate the migration habits of sea turtles, host tea parties, write calligraphy, and discuss the main characters' cultural differences. I crafted leveled comprehension questions for each of the book's chapters, diligently varying the difficulty of the questions according to the domains of Bloom's Taxonomy, just as I had learned to do in my college methods courses. I selected key vocabulary words that I felt students should know. We would make our

12 *The Book Whisperer*

own crossword puzzles! The unit was a work of art, a culmination of everything I had learned about good teaching, and I was proud of it.

It was a disaster.

Lost in the Wilderness

As often happens to well-intentioned teachers, my plans fell apart when my students showed up. The fact that I ever taught this way haunts me still. The students did not connect with the characters to the extent that I had imagined they would. They slogged through the book, asking, “How long should my responses be?” and “Would you look at my drawing for question 9 and tell me if this is what you want?” The children were compliant and did the work, but their hearts were not in it. I could tell they were not emotionally or intellectually getting much from the book. They were robots, trudging through the unit and completing the assigned activities. Reading was work, another job to finish in the daily grind of school. I could not wrap my head around what was wrong. The book was great. The unit was thoughtfully planned to interest students, but the children were not engaged.

I noticed that the few students who were avid readers already would rush through the unit activities only to ask, “I am done with my work; may I read my book now?” Horrified, I recognized that my classroom had become the same kind of classroom I reviled in my memories of school—a reading class with no place for readers. I remember hurrying through the required books in school (and all of the accompanying work) so that I could get back to my books, too.

Distraught, I took my observations to the more experienced teachers at my campus, asking for help. To my chagrin, this is what I heard: “The children are just lazy. They will do the minimum to get by.” Or “Most of them hate to read. I have to drag my students through every unit.”

They also told me that *The View from Saturday*, a story about sixth graders, was too difficult for my sixth-grade class. According to my colleagues, my students hated to read and those who loved to read would do so in spite of my teaching, not because of it. I recognized that this Newbery Medal–winning book was not the problem; how I taught it was. So what was I going to do about it? There had to be a better way.

Where Am I Going?

It has been said that teachers teach how they were taught. When I was in school, the students all read the same book and did the same activities. This is how I taught reading, too; all of the teachers at my school did. No matter what we heard in college about authentic reading, there was little support for teaching reading any way other than the whole-class novel, everyone on the same page at the same time. When you walk into a teacher supply store or browse a resources catalogue, the glut of canned materials for novel units reinforces that this is the best means to teach reading.

If my students deserved more, they did not expect it. For them, reading in school had always looked the same: read the chapters and complete endless activities on each one; take a test on the book when you finally finish it; and start the process over with another book. Reading more than a few books a year was not possible for these students because these cookie-cutter units took so long to get through. Unlike the promising name of the Epiphany Middle School in *The View from Saturday*, that year held few divine revelations for me. I spent the rest of it trying to design what I thought would be more engaging novel units. I piled on more fun activities and art projects, never acknowledging that my students were doing less reading and writing. My instruction was still about my goals and my assigned texts. I hoped that if I worked harder, did a better job of designing what I taught, I would finally

14 *The Book Whisperer*

get it right. But secretly, I despaired that I would never inspire my students to find the rapturous joy in reading that I did.

On the Path

Looking back on those days now, I see that the answer was right in front of me. On those rare opportunities when I allowed my students to choose their own books, their interest in completing assignments was sparked; I just failed to make the connection. Letting students choose their own books for every assignment was not done in any classroom I had ever been in, and I did not know how to design instruction that would accomplish the goals of my curriculum and still allow students to make choices. I blamed my failure to inspire my students to read on my inexperience as a teacher. It never occurred to me that I was trying to build a reading program from broken materials. My methods were flawed, not my implementation of them.

As my first school year progressed, I found myself spending more of my planning periods in the doorway of our assistant principal (and future principal), Ron Myers. He was a great listener who recognized my hunger to succeed with my students and my desire to forge connections between them and books. He urged me to talk with Susie Kelley, a teacher of twenty years and the curriculum facilitator at our school, whose classroom became a refuge for me. Even with her extensive knowledge of reading and writing practices, Susie was always searching for methods to improve the literacy instruction in her classroom and still struggling to get it “right.” Susie lives by the credo “If you ever think you have all the answers, it’s time to retire.” She encouraged me to keep trying and to keep learning.

And of course, I continued to read. With so many questions rattling around in my head about how to teach reading, pursuing answers by soaking up every book I could find on the subject was

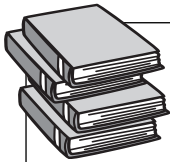
a logical step for me. Lost, wandering in a teaching wilderness, I allowed the acknowledged leaders in the field of literacy to guide me. How I was teaching reading, it dawned on me, was likely the problem. Susie pointed me toward books on workshop teaching; I found other books in bookstores and professional catalogues. I hungrily devoured the words of great teachers who had tapped into successful methods of teaching reading. It was there that I began to discover what wasn't working about my practice and how I might go about fixing it.

I tabbed and underlined every profound idea and practical tip I could glean from these experts; Post-it notes, like quills, stuck out of countless pages in my methods books. Four porcupine books I read that year, in particular, shaped my teaching philosophy and put me on the path I still travel today: Nancie Atwell's landmark book on workshop teaching, *In the Middle*; Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell's practical guide to scheduling, designing lessons, and assessing within a workshop classroom, *Guiding Readers and Writers (Grades 3–6): Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy*; Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman's *Mosaic of Thought*, which distills reading comprehension down to its key components; and Janet Allen's folksy, realistic guide to working with adolescent readers, *Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading 4–12*. Through these wise practitioners, I began to see how I could bridge the gap between my visions of the perfect reading classroom and how I thought I could get there.

I transformed my classroom into a workshop, a place where apprentices hone a craft under the tutelage of a master. I learned that being the best reader and writer in the room is not about power and control. Instead, I must be a source of knowledge that my students access while learning how to read and write. Instead of standing on stage each day, dispensing knowledge to my young charges, I should guide them as they approach their own understandings. Meaning from a text should not flow from

16 *The Book Whisperer*

my perceptions or, God forbid, the teaching guide; it should flow from my students' own understandings, under my guidance.



KEY
COMPONENTS OF
A READING
WORKSHOP

- *Time:* Students need substantial time to read and look through books.
- *Choice:* Students need the opportunity to choose reading material for themselves.
- *Response:* Students should respond in natural ways to the books they are reading through conferences, written entries, classroom discussions, and projects.
- *Community:* Students are part of a classroom reading community in which all members can make meaningful contributions to the learning of the group.
- *Structure:* The workshop rests on a structure of routines and procedures that supports students and teachers.

Source: Atwell, 1998.

Reading is both a cognitive and an emotional journey. I discovered that it was my job as a teacher to equip the travelers, teach them how to read a map, and show them what to do when they get lost, but ultimately, the journey is theirs alone.

My goal was for students to read and write well independently. If I never demanded that my students show me what they learned through their authentic words and work, what assurances would I have that they had internalized what I taught them? As long as my teaching was about my activities and my goals, students would be dependent on me to make decisions and define their learning for them. The practices of literacy leaders I discovered during this period validated my instincts that students should spend the majority of their time in my class reading and writing independently, and their publications gave me the research substantiation I needed to defend these beliefs. I realized that every lesson, conference, response, and assignment I taught must lead students away from me and toward their autonomy as literate people.

The lack of control over reading choice was the problem with my novel unit on *The View from Saturday* and the

others I taught that year. Giving students choice over their reading was foreign to every classroom I had ever sat or taught in. I began to see how independent reading and student choices could coincide with my curriculum. I never taught a whole-class novel unit again. Armed with my newfound knowledge, I dove into my second year of teaching with a structure on which I could teach reading that made sense to me, both as a teacher and a reader. It was better that year, so much better. I had a plan.

Granted, it was someone else's plan.

Going Forward, Sort of

With a workshop structure in place, my students were more engaged in reading and writing and more enthusiastic. Instead of teaching books, I taught comprehension strategies and literary elements that students could apply to a wide range of texts. I implemented the reader's notebook, taken straight from Fountas and Pinnell's model, in order to manage my students' independent reading; set up reading requirements for my students based on genre as a path to choice; and assigned book talks to replace the dreaded book report. I photocopied mountains of reading strategy worksheets, lists of reading response prompts, and workshop management forms. I bought every picture book that my workshop mentors recommended.

The structure of the workshop drove everything that I did, and it left me frustrated. Instead of finding my own way, I was now bent on channeling those master teachers. If I was unable to follow the step-by-step lesson plans laid out by reading experts because of the unique needs and personalities of my students, my own teaching style, the time constraints of my instructional block, or access to resources, I felt like a failure. I kept striving to make my class look like the ones I read about, full of engaged children and exemplary teachers, and when I fell short, I did not know what to do except to try harder. Making the workshop work became more important than the readiness or interest of my students or me. You

18 *The Book Whisperer*

see, while I searched for the key to being a master reading teacher, I forgot what workshop teaching was all about—my role as master reader—which goes beyond just following a lockstep sequence of lessons that some distant guru had advised me to use.

The funny thing is that I knew how to inspire readers thirty years ago because I knew what made reading inspirational for me. These days, I share with my students what no literacy expert could ever teach me. Reading changes your life. Reading unlocks worlds unknown or forgotten, taking travelers around the world and through time. Reading helps you escape the confines of school and pursue your own education. Through characters—the saints and sinners, real or imagined—reading shows you how to be a better human being. Now, I accept that I may never arrive at teaching paradise, but as long as I hold on to my love of books and show my students what it really means to live as a reader, I'll be a lot closer than I once was. Finally, this was my epiphany.