A Conversation with the Book Whisperer

Through her blog and her books, Donalyn Miller has met hundreds of teachers who are hungry for better ways to teach reading. Here’s a look at some of her methods for inspiring “wild readers.”

Four days before this year’s Newbery Award winners were announced, writers and librarians weren’t the only ones watching closely.

Donalyn Miller’s fifth-grade language arts students were counting down in Fort Worth, Texas. This year’s nomination list included Doll Bones, by Holly Black, the book Miller had been reading aloud in class.

Many had been reading books from the Newbery list, writing reviews, and making their own list of winners for the award. They were also following blogs handicapping the winners.

“The kids get really invested,” Miller says of the discussions leading up to the award. Some years they watch the awards broadcast live.

Last year, when The One and Only Ivan won, “the kids were jumping up and down and squealing. They were a little cocky about it,” she says. “It’s like our nerdy little Oscars.”

The Newbery Award countdown is one way that Miller, who blogged for Teacher Magazine as the Book Whisperer, engages student readers.

Miller is the author of two books, The Book Whisperer and Reading in the Wild, about how to nurture young readers.

In the last decade, she’s built a culture of reading in her own fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade classrooms. The cornerstone of her approach is free-choice reading, allowing students to pick their own books from her classroom library of 3,000 titles.

Miller invites her students to read 40 books over the school year. “The average, no matter what grade I’ve taught, is 56,” she says.

But her goal goes beyond sharpening their reading and writing skills. She wants to instill lifelong, or “wild,” reading habits in each student who comes through her classroom.

She does that by creating a community of readers in her class, students who read and talk about books every day.

Evolution of a Book Whisperer

Miller starts each year with a “book frenzy” in which students pick the books they want to read from her classroom library. That first-day hubbub over books carries students into the first weeks of class and helps overcome the resistance some students have toward reading.

It’s a practice born from trial and error, and from Miller’s willingness to throw out her careful plans for the school year when something more engaging bubbles up.

As a newly-minted teacher, she arrived in 2005 at Trinity Meadows school in Keller, Texas, with a whole-class reading unit on E.L. Konigsburg’s The View from Saturday.

She spent a month planning the unit, crafting discussion points, comprehension and vocabulary questions, and activities tied to the book’s plot that included tea parties, calligraphy practice, and research into sea turtle migration.

Then she unleashed it on her students.

“It was a disaster,” Miller writes in The Book Whisperer. The kids trudged through the unit. They showed little enthusiasm for the book or for reading.

Miller talked to veteran teachers at her school, but most had similar experiences—students found it a chore. “Most of them hate to read,” she heard from other teachers. “I have to drag my students through every unit.”

The final straw was seeing students who hurried through the assignments so they could read books they liked, just as Miller had done when she was a student.

It was exactly the sort of reading classroom she had vowed not to create as a teacher. Over the next few months, Miller began to spend her prep time in the office of Assistant Principal Ron Myers. He introduced her to Susan Kelley, a veteran teacher and curriculum instructor at Trinity Meadows.

Kelley was a constant experimenter who used reading
and writing workshops in her own language arts classes.

“I had heard about reading and writing workshops when I was in college,” Miller said. “I had several fantastic professors. But when I went into the classroom, I thought, I don’t see classrooms that are like what you are describing.”

So she spent her first year teaching the way other teachers were teaching, even if “that didn’t feel right.”

Kelley gave her permission to try something else. More important, she introduced Miller to many of the education writers and theorists who helped her find her way, including Nancie Atwell, Ellin Keane, Susan Zimmermann, and Janet Allen.

“I just read and read and read,” Miller said. “I tried things in my classroom, and talked to Susie. I started attending conferences and realized, there’s more than one way to do this, and I can find a way.”

Over the next few years, Miller experimented with classroom workshops, developing a classroom based on daily reading time, free choice of books, reading journals, book “ads” (instead of book reports), and other activities that got students talking to each other about books.

“Engineering conversations where kids can talk to each other about books is huge,” Miller said.

“Very quickly, it’s not about reading the book with the highest reading level, it’s about everyone reading, everyone talking to each other, and even students who don’t read feel like they’re part of a community.”

Miller saw the student excitement in the classroom—and students began talking to others outside her class.

“I started to get siblings of the kids I had taught,” she said. “They wouldn’t even talk to me. They’d walk right past and go to the bookcases.”

**Ask the Mentor**

In 2007, Miller got a call from Elizabeth Rich, an editor at *Teacher Magazine*. Rich was looking for someone to write a one-time “Ask the Mentor” column.

She had heard from Myers that Miller’s students were reading 50 books a year—without incentives or rewards.


“I don’t know,” Miller remembers telling her. “It’s like I’m some sort of whisperer. I talk to the kids about books and they read them.”

Miller was a test case for the column. She didn’t have a Ph.D. She had never published a book. She had only recently completed a summer writing institute through the National Writing Project.

One column turned into three. The magazine invited her to write *The Book Whisperer* blog, which led to a contract for a book of the same name.

“I should have called myself something else,” Miller joked at the 2010 National Writing Project Annual Meeting.

Miller and her husband thought she’d be lucky if 5,000 or 6,000 people, the readership of the column, bought the book. Instead, it sold 150,000 copies in the United States, she said.

**Free-choice Bandwagon**

Through her blog and her books, Miller met hundreds of teachers who were hungry for better ways to teach reading.

And she’s not the only author to “fly the free-choice reading flag,” as she calls it. Other recent books also advocate giving students more time to read in class.

Yet many current curriculum practices actively discourage students from developing a lifelong love of reading, she says.

One practice she quickly abandoned: whole-book units.

“Everyone reading the same book at the same time on the same page for a month. Two months of deep analysis of every chapter with a worksheet. I read *The Scarlett Letter* and enjoyed it,” she said. “I read it in two weeks and spent the next six weeks reading James Michener out of my desk.”

“I don’t mind students reading the classics. It’s beating books into the ground that I have trouble with.”

Another practice she calls harmful: limiting student reading choice.

“Telling a child they can’t read something or anything other than the content reading . . . telling a child they can’t read a book because it’s too hard or too easy, I think that really does damage kids,” she says.

Miller identifies three types of readers in *The Book Whisperer*: developing readers, dormant readers, and underground readers.

Developing readers struggle to master basic reading skills and get lots of attention in class. Dormant readers are often taken for granted because they’re able to pass state tests, but don’t enjoy reading. Underground readers are star readers, but they see the reading they love as separate from what they’re assigned to read in class.

Miller’s goal is to turn all of her students into “wild” readers who develop a lifelong reading habit inside and outside class. But she acknowledges it’s a challenge—even in her own family.

Her daughter finished reading *The Outsiders* ahead of her class and spent days doing crossword puzzles.

“Our goal with her during the school year is to just keep the pilot light on. Her whole year is bottled up into reading for school. If we can just keep the pilot light on till summer, we can get [her love of reading] going again,” Miller said.

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The Biggest Obstacle to Reading? Time

Many of the practices Miller has adopted in her classroom, such as independent daily reading time and student choice over books, have been tried before.

“We all used to do this,” Miller says.

Three things she says eroded earlier schoolwide reading programs are these:

- many teachers began using the time to grade papers, instead of reading with students;
- data came out questioning the tie between reading scores and independent reading [the data was later challenged]; and
- the rise in standardized testing put pressure on teachers to spend more time preparing students for tests.

“I’ve talked to teachers and heard from administrators who think that reading in school is a waste of time. Principals will visit a class and say, ‘I’ll come back when they’re actually doing something.’ . . . It’s really difficult for a lot of teachers to implement that,” she says.

When The Book Whisperer came out in 2009, Miller got some pushback from teachers, including her own colleagues. Many said they themselves didn’t have time to read or to keep up with all of the options their students now had.

In her second book, Reading in the Wild, which she co-wrote with her mentor Susan Kelley, Miller took up that question. The two surveyed 949 adult readers about their reading habits.

They found the biggest obstacle to reading was time.

“What I realized was finding time to read wasn’t about finding time at all. It’s about carrying the book with you,” Miller said. “As adult readers, we don’t have the luxury of reading for 30 minutes a night. We’re either binge readers, on vacation or on Saturdays, or we’re edge readers.” But “five minutes here, 15 minutes there can rack up time,” she said.

Tackling Engagement

Miller is currently working on a book with Teri Lesesne, a professor of young adult and children’s literature at Sam Houston State University.

The book includes essays by 22 teachers (including some math teachers), librarians, and professors about how to create positive learning environments and motivate students.

Their working title is, “The Engagement Manifesto.” But, laughs Miller, “that might be too aggressive.”

Or it might be exactly the attention-getting title the book needs.

“You can have the most creatively designed lesson in the world,” Miller says, “but if students in your class are not engaged, nobody learns anything.”

Minneapolis writer Trisha Collopy is a journalism instructor at Anoka Ramsey Community College.

To Do

- mid-Mar.: WLU ballots emailed (voting ends June 15)
- all of March: Literacy Education Advocacy Month
- Mar. 17: application deadline for NCTE Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color grants
- Mar. 25: nomination deadline for NCTE Early Career Educator of Color Leadership Award and NCTE Early Career Teacher of Color Award of Distinction
- mid-Apr.: NCTE, TYCA & CEE ballots emailed (voting ends June 1)
- May 1: nomination deadline for NCTE/SLATE Intellectual Freedom National Award, several NCTE affiliate awards, CEE Richard A. Meade Award, CCCO Outstanding Book Award, NCTE High School Teacher of Excellence Award, and NCTE Outstanding Middle Level Educator in the English Language Arts
- May 18: nomination deadline for CEE Cultural Diversity Grants
- late May: CCCC ballots emailed (voting ends August 1)
- June 1: nomination deadline for CCCC Technical and Scientific Communication Awards and CCCO Luiz Antonio Marcuschi Travel Awards
- June 15: application deadline for NCTE Donald H. Graves Writing Award and NCTE Research Foundation grants
- June 30: nomination deadline for NCTE Media Literacy Award
- July 2: entry deadline for NCTE Program to Recognize Excellence in Student Literary Magazines
- July 11–13: NCTE Affiliate Leadership Meeting for Regions 2, 4, 5 & 6 (Minneapolis/St.Paul; register by June 1)
- July 15: nomination deadline for NCTE Affiliate Excellence Award, CCCO Advancement of Knowledge Award, and CCCO Research Impact Award
- Aug. 1: nomination deadline for CCCO Lavender Rhetorics Award for Excellence in Queer Scholarship
- Aug. 31: application deadline for CCCO Writing Program Certificate of Excellence Awards
- Sept. 1: nomination deadline for CCCO James Berlin Memorial Outstanding Dissertation Award

For more information about these and other Council awards, see http://www.ncte.org/awards; for details on professional development, including Web seminars and conventions, see the NCTE homepage at http://www.ncte.org.