On my classroom wall I share one of my favorite quotes: “Everybody is a reader, some just haven’t discovered their favorite book yet.” That statement has always resonated with me, and after reading Donalyn Miller and Susan Kelley’s *Reading in the Wild,* I am even more committed to that belief. Their book provides a framework for instilling values that produce lifelong readers. *

*Reading in the Wild,* the sequel to Miller’s *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child,* emerged out of a concern she expressed in *The Book Whisperer’s* final chapter—how to create lifelong readers. She spent years working to help her elementary students become “wild readers”—which Miller and Kelley define as students who develop a love for reading—only for those same students to lose their passion for reading as they moved through middle school and high school. Initially, Miller blamed that loss of passion on upper-level teachers. If students were really “wild readers,” why didn’t they continue to read on their own? The answer, according to Miller, was that some students were not independent readers, and still dependent on someone to show them what to read and when to read. They didn’t exhibit the characteristics of lifelong readers. As Miller and Kelley share experiential and research-based approaches that are both creative and simple, *Reading in the Wild* provides practical solutions and resources that reading teachers will wish they had thought of.

Miller and Kelley have creatively and effectively organized the book into five chapters that focus on the lifelong reading habits every wild reader should exhibit: “Wild Readers Dedicate Time to Read,” “Wild Readers Self-Select Reading Materials,” “Wild Readers Share Books and Reading with Other Readers,” “Wild Readers Have Reading Plans,” and “Wild Readers Show Preferences.” Each chapter builds on the information from the previous chapter, making lesson planning and curriculum mapping easy. Miller and Kelley also included three sub-sections in each chapter, sections I refer to as the heartbeat of the book: “Community Conversations,” “Conferring Point,” and “Keeping Track of Your Reading Life.” These sections contain vital information to further support their findings. Between each chapter, essays on various themes and classroom management aspects of reading workshops serve as a glue that binds them together.

In the “Community Conversations” section of each chapter, Miller and Kelley provide mini-lessons that progress through every step of the learning process, examples of how they model the skill, excerpts from classroom discussions, and examples of student practice and reflection. For example, in “Wild Readers Dedicate Time to Read,” Miller and Kelley discuss “edge time”—snatching a few minutes of reading time between appointments or activities—and
“reading emergencies”—keeping a book handy in case you are bored. The minilesson in this section demonstrates teacher modeling of finding time to read, contains classroom discussions about finding time during reading emergencies, and provides examples of student practice and reflections on finding time to read. In each chapter, “Community Conversations” offers an invaluable insight as to how a teacher can scaffold lessons to help students exhibit the various characteristics of a wild reader. In the “Conferring Points” sections, Miller and Kelley confer with students to provide support for personalized learning and assessment with each student. These conferences arise out of observations and concerns from classroom workshops and the need to assess each student individually. “Conferring Points” discusses everything from self-selecting books to building reading habits. For example, in “Wild Readers Self-Select Reading Material,” Miller and Kelley confer with students about book recommendations through a process called “preview stacks.” Not only do they offer the suggestion, but they also pose a variety of questions for teachers to consider when conferring with individual students about author and genre interest. One of the more interesting approaches is how they monitor student reading habits. Using “Reading Habit” conferences and conference charts, Miller and Kelley show how a teacher may reflect and make decisions “about how I see my students, what I want to know about their reading lives, and what we value as a classroom reading community” (183).

The most valuable chapter sections are “Keeping Track of Your Reading Life,” in which the authors empower teachers with a variety of tools that promote student accountability and reflection. Metacognition is a major component that teachers seldom consider, often because they don’t understand how to incorporate it. Miller and Kelley do a dynamic job helping students reflect on their reading genres, itineraries, and habits. As a result, their students better understand their own characteristics as readers and move into the independent, “wild reader” stage. Miller and Kelley also kept the busy teacher schedule in mind when they made every form and chart available in the appendix of the book. Teachers can easily customize the forms to meet particular classroom needs.

Reading in the Wild has much to offer any reading teacher at any grade level. As a tenth-grade reading language arts teacher, I have used their advice to take a closer look at my own curriculum. State-mandated rules often restrict our teaching, allowing little time for conferring and reflecting. However, after reading Miller and Kelley, I know if I plan accordingly, using their resources as my guide, I can fit these practices into my daily routine. Teachers with struggling or reluctant readers will find that this book provides numerous solutions for any reading problem. Through the process created by Miller and Kelley, students are sure to make connections to the world in which they live—and remain wild readers for life.
between. Ultimately, Gallagher concludes that, despite the fierce attention the Common Core State Standards receive, they are largely irrelevant in creating high-quality literacy instruction. In the unsexy, nonpolitical, straightforward style that characterizes much of his writing, Gallagher exhorts us simply to “step [back] . . . [and] direct our focus on what we know works” (13).

In IBIS, readers will enjoy some of the same well-worn, comfortable Kelly Gallagher truisms of past books: give students more time for recreational reading; don’t worry about grading everything; make time for narrative writing (a personal favorite of mine); allow students more choice in what they write about; emphasize that writing is a process; and more. Some of these Gallagher-approved literacy practices come fully endorsed by the Common Core (e.g., the importance of process writing), whereas others do not (e.g., making more time for narrative writing for older students). These disconnects between IBIS and the Common Core show that contemporary curricular debates aren’t simply two-camp, for-or-against arguments. Gallagher doesn’t praise the Common Core, but neither does he scrap the whole enterprise.

One of the greatest strengths of IBIS is its argumentative style and how it invokes authority. Rarely does Gallagher assume that the reasons for his beliefs are self-evident. Rather, he clearly supports these teaching beliefs, often in multiple ways. For instance, in support of his claim that narrative writing deserves more emphasis in the classroom, Gallagher cites numerous studies describing how narrative writing builds empathy, enhances “literary thinking,” and improves students’ social skills (102–04). He also makes his own commonsense argument that many careers require people to connect with others via storytelling, therefore “being able to tell a good story is not a school skill, it is a life skill” (102). The lessons that Gallagher shares from his classroom—and there are a lot of them—feel more grounded after reading the evidence he brings to bear.

Stylistically, IBIS is a compelling read. Gallagher manages to blur the lines among research, practice, substance, and entertainment. IBIS is, somehow, a close reading of the Common Core, a review of literacy research, the musings of a 30-year veteran teacher, and a trove of lesson ideas all seamlessly woven into one book. And it’s fun to read! The wry one-liners peppered throughout, the humorous anecdotes (e.g., one about sitting at the worst table at a wedding, “between a third cousin of the groom on one side and the bride-doesn’t-really-like-him-but-she-must-invite-him-because-she-works-with-him-colleague” [54]), and the compelling real-world examples make this piece of professional reading feel like pleasure reading.

Well-structured, well-researched, well-reasoned, and well-written, IBIS solidifies Kelly Gallagher’s place as one of the preeminent figures in the world of literacy instruction. I humbly submit that it is in the best interest of educators to get a copy for themselves.

Tracy Tensen
Gilbert Community Schools
Gilbert, Iowa
tensent@gilbert.k12.ia.us

In the appropriately named In the Best Interest of Students: Staying True to What Works in the ELA Classroom, Gallagher sets the stage by acknowledging the predictable exchange of one educational movement for another. Although the Common Core is better than No Child Left Behind (which was even more test-driven), he encourages readers not to “fall in love” with a system that will leave us (4). Gallagher opens the book with an overview of the flaws of Common Core teaching, pointing out that standards-driven education is often not best practice. For example, ELA teachers may feel compelled to dismiss literature for nonfiction or limit narrative essays to accommodate the more valued argumentative writing. Gallagher points out the “cracks” in the wall of support for the Common Core. Within this framework of a well-researched analysis meant to improve on the rigidity of the Common Core, Gallagher also offers much of what he is best known for: excellent practical examples of quality teaching methods, useful both to new and veteran instructors.

Certainly it is important to note that Gallagher’s text offers an informed and fair examination of the positive influences the Common Core has had on English education, but this often sets up the following chapter’s call for improvement of these basic requirements. This organization offers a useful and direct presentation of the benefits and drawbacks of the Common Core’s influence
on ELA. Gallagher’s first pairing addresses the teaching of reading, offering an examination of the benefits of the Common Core: “As the CCSS rightly recognize, teaching students to recognize what a ‘text’ says, does, and means is vitally important to developing literate citizens” (47). Gallagher notes that “Teaching students to read closely makes them better readers and writers” (35). However, the following chapter employs a more passionate tone as Gallagher points out the flaws of the Common Core in regards to reading. He challenges the areas that may lead to “disengagement” from learning, noting that close reading “within the four corners of the text . . . actually limits students’ thinking” (50). Gallagher also expresses concern that the Common Core nearly dismisses pleasure reading and encourages instructors to use fewer literary texts. Statistics from the National Assessment of Education Progress Study and references to Piaget are punctuated with Gallagher’s refreshing voice: “If your students are not reading a lot, it doesn’t matter what skills you teach them. Volume matters” (55).

As a composition instructor, I most enjoyed the two chapters on how the Common Core encourages more writing of certain types but also limits the exploration of other important styles. It is in these chapters that Gallagher’s most direct tone surfaces. After displaying a Common Core writing prompt, he lists the many factors that “get in the way of students actually producing good writing” (126). The “on demand” assignment “provides” students with the argument to be made, eliminating the need for authentic inquiry. Essentially, he fears that often “students are not required to think,” and, consequently, the bar should be set far higher than that of exams created to assess Common Core skills (126). Unsurprisingly, Gallagher feels teachers should not have to be worried about how to “fit in” writing in the face of test-driven curriculum. Writing should be thoroughly integrated with all ELA instruction.

Gallagher’s strong philosophical commentary drives the text. Despite acknowledging the Common Core’s value in some areas, Gallagher questions why it is treated as if “it is the best game in town,” and he calls for greater scrutiny of that supposedly “best game.” With this book, as with his others, Gallagher displays a passionate commitment to improving education. He encourages us to acknowledge what is best in the Common Core State Standards while making sure “our core values . . . continue to drive us to do what is in the best interest of our students” (127).

Dionne Bartley is a tenth-grade English language arts teacher who has a BA in English literature, a master’s degree in middle childhood education, and is currently pursuing her degree as an education specialist in Curriculum and Instruction. She has been an NCTE member since 2013. Eric Ekholm taught eighth grade English in Chesterfield, Virginia, for four years and is now pursuing his PhD in educational psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. He has been a member of NCTE since 2011. Tracy Tensen has taught composition and literature for more than 25 years in high school and college; she currently teaches ELA at Gilbert High School in Gilbert, Iowa. She became a member of NCTE in 1986.