

FOREWORD BY JEFF ANDERSON, AUTHOR AND LITERACY STAFF DEVELOPER

Donalyn Miller

The Book Whisperer

Awakening the
Inner Reader in
Every Child



“Miller’s strong love for reading and her desire to develop lifelong readers is inspiring. She is crafty in her way of sweeping her students into her reading world. This is a great read that should encourage teachers to take a closer look at the readers in their classrooms and the way in which they teach reading and support them.”

—Arlyne Skolnik, *Reading Teacher, West School, Long Beach NY*

“*The Book Whisperer* (I love the name!) was both inspirational and incredibly practical. I highlighted many passages to share with my students and teachers and I plan to use this as a text next year when I teach my undergraduate reading methods course.”

—Patricia M. Cunningham, *Professor of Education,
Wake Forest University*

“Miller’s new book, *The Book Whisperer*, is a breath of fresh air in this era of teacher-dominated reading test preparation lessons. She sets forth both an argument and evidence for immersing kids in reading as the alternative to the often mindless reading lessons offered in hopes of improving test scores. She writes about her own 6th grade classroom where students are expected to read at least 40 books each year and her stories will convince you that it is time to focus on teaching children rather than teaching books or stories. She will convince you that it is time to stop assigning book reports, whole class novels, vocabulary lists, quizzes, and worksheets and, instead, give students the opportunity to choose what they will read (within limits). She will also persuade you to allocate the school time actually needed to read 40 books in a given year. This is a powerful and practical book, one that will support you as you change your classroom for the better while helping you understand how to overcome current classroom cultures where some children learn and many learn to hate reading.”

—Richard L Allington, *Ph.D., University of Tennessee*

“Donalyn Miller’s practical ideas about children and books are sound. In an age of test-driven curriculum, reading this book will remind teachers, administrators and parents why giving reading back to the students is the right thing to do.”

—*Dr. Carol D. Wickstrom, Associate Professor of Reading,
University of North Texas*

“In *The Book Whisperer*, Donalyn Miller deftly describes the inherent need children have to engage with books, intellectually and emotionally. The book is a timely and rare gift for teachers in this era of teaching for high-stakes assessments—Miller actually chronicles the path to reading for ‘intrinsic motivation’ we seek for all children, but seldom observe.”

—*Ellin Oliver Keene, Author/Consultant*

“Miller is one of those teachers you always wanted for your children. She understands how to teach reading, but knows that is not the same thing as knowing how to LOVE reading. She explores the sources of that love—a feeling for a certain place, a certain time of day, a certain friend, a certain dream. Reading is being surprised, intrigued, captured, removed from reality to other places you want to revisit, often. Few authors have ever conveyed this as well to parents and teachers as Miller does here.”

—*Jay Mathews, Washington Post education columnist and author*

“This book reminds anyone—who is lucky enough to have loved a book—what classrooms and kids have lost in our frenzy to ‘cover’ content and standardize student performance in the name of reading. This is a primer of the heart on how to make reading magical again.”

—*Carol Ann Tomlinson, William Clay Parrish Jr. Professor of
Education, University of Virginia*

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Every Child

Foreword by Jeff Anderson



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*To Don,
my whisperer*

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Foreword

DONALYN MILLER'S voice is one of a real teacher. She whispers practical ideas, validation, and fundamental truths about teaching independent reading that are often lost in the din of ever-increasing test prep mantras. Out of fear of failure or pressures from outside our classrooms, we let go of the very strategies and routines that could make our students succeed at reading, thinking, and writing. Donalyn's critical eye sees what is happening to our classrooms. She laments how reading classes often become places without room for reading—authentic reading, as educators call it. As Donalyn notes, The National Reading Panel rejected the value of independent reading, but we simply can't. Why would we focus on inauthentic reading? Seriously.

The Book Whisperer is practical and passionate. Donalyn Miller has no complicated scripts, endless prescriptions, or pie-in-the-sky quick fixes. In clear and accessible ways, she shares the nuts and bolts of an independent reading program, offering suggestions for how to begin and maintain a workshop approach that won't make you pull your hair out. Have you ever wondered how to inspire a reluctant reader? Donalyn has simple practical advice. Have you ever wondered how to get your students to keep a record of their reading? Have you figured out how to encourage students to respond to reading without squeezing every drop of joy out of it? Donalyn has. One page at a time, she reveals how any teacher can artfully listen and respond to their students and take them to new heights of reading achievement and pride that may seem out of reach. She reinforces with class-created charts, note taking,

student talk, and writing activities how easily our instruction can flow from our students' interactions with text, with us, and each other.

Donalyn is a friend with whom you want to kick off your shoes and talk for a while. She is also the kind of friend who never beats around the bush. She says exactly what she thinks and what she knows. She doesn't hold back. Her credibility is borne of experience and experimentation, failure and refinement, gut instinct and heart-felt concern, stubbornness and an ability to let go. She teaches us through her classroom stories and her students' voices. She gives us information to stretch, shift our focus, and make our class a path to life-long, joyous reading.

Reminding us that reading instruction is about one thing—reading—she stays constant and true to the practices she has honed in her classroom. There are no worksheets, computer tests, incentive programs, packaged scripts or scripts parading as professional books here. Donalyn Miller speaks for the joy of reading, reminding us what we should fight for—students with their hands and eyes and minds on real, free-choice books—and what we should let go.

Donalyn's personal story will cause you to reflect and refine your reading program. Whether she is talking about types of readers and solutions for teaching them, reminding (or introducing) you to the simple brilliance and applicability of Camborne's conditions of learning, or explaining why we should fight for independent reading time in our classroom, the voice of a real teacher comes through.

Curl up with this good book. Personally recommended titles are the best, aren't they? Just like Donalyn and her students recommend books to each other, I am recommending this book to you. Read it right now. You will be inspired to open a book and to amp up or restart your independent reading program both for you and your class. I was.

Within these pages, Donalyn nudges us to reflect on how our students are engaging in our reading program, against the

backdrop of her own story. She gives us a vision of what an effective reading program looks like. And how easily it can be done. Of course, anything this wonderful takes some effort, but any meaningful effort never feels like a struggle. With this book, we simply relax into the flow of words and discover all the places we can go.

Jeff Anderson

Introduction

I AM NOT A READING RESEARCHER. I am not a reading policy expert. I do not have a Ph.D. What I am is a reading teacher, just like many of you. My source of credibility is that I am a teacher who inspires my students to read a lot and love reading long after they leave my class. I require my students to read forty books during their time in my sixth-grade classroom, and year after year, my students reach or surpass this reading goal. Not only do my students read an astounding number of books, they earn high scores on our state's reading assessment, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). I have not had one student fail the state assessment in four years, and an average of 85 percent of my students score in the 90th percentile, Texas's commended range. I have taught students of all economic and academic backgrounds, from the children of non-English speaking immigrants who struggle with the English language to the children of college professors. The conditions I create in my classroom work for all of them.

When teachermagazine.org asked me to respond to readers' questions for their "Ask the Mentor" column in the fall of 2007, motivating students to read mountains of books was my source of credibility to them and to the thousands of readers who made that column so popular. Teachers, administrators, and parents flooded teachermagazine.org Web site with questions about picking books, getting students interested in reading, and developing conditions

in classrooms and living rooms that would encourage children to read.

Due to the obvious demand for practical information about creating readers, the editors at teacheromagazine.org next offered me a long-term stint writing a blog titled “The Book Whisperer.” The blog is a place where I can fly my free-choice reading flag and discuss the issues that reading teachers contend with daily: national, state, and district policies that mandate what we teach, the limited instructional time we are given to teach, and the eternal quest to inspire our students to read.

Why is the need to motivate and inspire young readers such a hot-button issue? Why do teachers and parents cry out for information on how to get children to read? This topic is in the limelight because so many children don’t read. They don’t read well enough; they don’t read often enough; and if you talk to children, they will tell you that they don’t see reading as meaningful in their life.

The field of reading research produces study after study attempting to explain why emergent readers are not learning to read well by third grade, why intermediate students are not interested in reading, why secondary students read less and less with each passing year they are in school, and why so many students cannot comprehend the information in their textbooks or pass standardized tests. Instead of re-examining the foundation of sand on which so many federal and state reading programs were built, the 2000 Report of the National Reading Panel, “Teaching Children to Read,” policymakers ask for more money and beg us all to give these programs more time (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The children cannot wait. They do not have more time. While Washington policymakers, state and district boards of education, and administrators scramble to figure out what is best practice for getting children to read, crafting program after program in which they claim to have

the answers, these children are graduating and breathing a sigh of relief that they never have to read a book again.

We have worked so hard to develop systems to teach reading, yet I claim that we had no justification for systematizing an act like reading in the first place. The only groups served by current trends to produce endless programs for teaching reading are the publishing and testing companies who make billions of dollars from their programs and tests. It is horrifying that the people who have the corner on getting children to read—children’s book authors, parents, and teachers—get the least credit monetarily or otherwise.

I believe that this corporate machinery of scripted programs, comprehension worksheets (reproducibles, handouts, printables, whatever you want to call them), computer-based incentive packages, and test-practice curricula facilitate a solid bottom line for the companies that sell them. These programs may deceive schools into believing that they are using every available resource to teach reading, but ultimately, they are doomed to fail because they overlook what is most important. When you take a forklift and shovel off the programs, underneath it all is a child reading a book.

In 2000, the National Reading Panel left independent reading off their recommendations for improving reading instruction, stating, “The Panel was unable to find a positive relationship between programs and instruction that encourage large amounts of independent reading and improvements in reading achievement” (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, pp. 12–13). It puzzles me that an initiative with the purpose of improving students’ reading achievement leaves out independent, free-choice reading. Stephen Krashen, respected researcher, activist, and author of *The Power of Reading*, identifies fifty-one studies that prove that students in free-reading programs perform better than or equal to students in any other type of reading

program. Krashen found that students' motivation and interest in reading is higher when they get the opportunity to read in school. Krashen's findings deliver the message that every other activity used in classrooms to teach reading had better get the same results as independent reading—not only in terms of reading achievement but also in terms of *motivation*—or it is detrimental to students.

I was asked at a recent speaking engagement how I can justify to my principal the hours of class time I set aside for students to read. Pointing to my students' test results garnered gasps from around the room, but focusing on test scores or the numbers of books my students read does not tell the whole story. It does not tell half of the story. You see, my students are not just strong, capable readers; they love books and reading.

Building lifelong readers has to start here. Anyone who calls herself or himself a reader can tell you that it starts with encountering great books, heartfelt recommendations, and a community of readers who share this passion. A trail of worksheets from a teacher to their students does not build a connection with readers; only books do.

The fact that educators coined the terms *real reading*, *authentic reading*, and *independent reading* to differentiate what readers do in school from what readers do in life is part of the problem. Why does it have to be different? Why is the goal of reading instruction disconnected from reading in the rest of a student's life? When did reading become such a technocratic process that we lost the books and the children in the debate? I am convinced that if we show students how to embrace reading as a lifelong pursuit and not just a collection of skills for school performance, we will be doing what I believe we have been charged to do: create readers.

No matter the stage of your teaching career, *The Book Whisperer* has something to offer you. Each chapter explores one aspect

of my instruction, which fits into a cohesive plan for creating a classroom culture in which students will read. Topics include:

- *My personal reflections about being a lifelong reader.* The most powerful component of my teaching practice is my joy in reading and my reading experiences. Follow my journey as a reader, and reflect on what reading means to you.
- *Practical strategies you can implement in your classroom.* Investigate the nuts and bolts of setting up a classroom library, designing reading requirements, carving out reading time, and altering your instruction to align with the habits of real readers.
- *Anecdotes and quotes from students who are becoming readers.* The best lessons I have learned about teaching reading have come from my students. Let their words about living a reading life and how schools often prevent them from becoming readers guide and inspire you. All the student quotes in this book are from my sixth graders.
- *Whispers.* These brief interludes, dispersed throughout the book, present activities that I have used early, midway, and late in the school year to promote dialogue about reading between my students and me.

So why write another book on getting students to read? Am I a hypocrite for denouncing the reading industry and then participating in it by producing another book claiming to have answers? Although I have read about and implemented many of these ideas myself, including how to create reading and writing workshops and teach comprehension strategies, *The Book Whisperer* has something different to offer. Toni Morrison has said, “If there’s a book you really want to read but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.” (Jacobs and Hjalmarsson, 2002, p. 37). That is what this book is—the book that I always wished I could find when I was learning how to teach. I needed a book that showed me how

to connect my love of reading to my teaching of reading and how to use what I already knew about being a lifelong reader to encourage my students to read, but I could never find one.

I imagine there are some readers of this book who will get validation for the great practices they already use to motivate their students to read. Bask in the validation. You deserve it. There are some who want the practical tips I provide. Do what great teachers have always done: steal whatever ideas you can use. There are a few of us, though, who need a change of heart, a paradigm shift about what reading should be—both for our students and for ourselves. I hope you can find it. Maybe this book will inspire you to start looking. No matter what kind of reader you are, know that I value you and welcome you here.

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.

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