

Dreams Do Come True

The Audacious Story Behind the Curation of the Best Classroom Libraries Ever Created for Children

By Anita Silvey

Last November, I got a phone call from Lucy Calkins about her new project, developing classroom libraries. After I had finished talking to her, a thought ran through my mind. Well, sometimes, if you stay around long enough, in my case 45 years, dreams really do come true.

I have felt for decades that an excellent set of books in each classroom would be one of the most important contributions we could make toward the intellectual development, not to mention literacy, of our children. Many have tried to create these classroom sets over the years. Usually, however, there have been severe restrictions on the titles that can be selected. For instance, because a publisher or distributor needs reprint books for classroom sets, they must acquire the rights to do so—and many publishers and authors, notably people like Dr. Seuss, refuse this request. Often classroom sets have been focused on the lists of the publisher selling them.

But Lucy's and Heinemann's idea was the most audacious I had heard. They found an excellent distribution partner and could therefore choose any title they wanted from any publisher as long as it was available. These books would not be reprinted on cheaper paper or changed in any way; they would come to children in all their original glory, whether in hardcover or paperback. Lucy and her amazing team at Teachers College could make sure that the reading levels were accurate for each grade and would be able field test new titles or those they questioned.

Although many of us care deeply about children and reading, literacy and reading specialists tend to talk to teachers; children's book experts like myself, who try to keep abreast of the more than 20,000 new children's books published each year, talk to librarians and booksellers. But Lucy wanted the input of those of us who read and knew the amazing range of children's books available; she invited us to come to Columbia and then spend countless glorious hours over the course of many months arguing about books, and she and her students and staff engaged in constant conversation by phone or email about what would make the best classroom libraries.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project

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I could spend all day talking about the criteria we used in selection. But basically we were hunting for well-crafted books that worked with children but that also inspired teachers. Our classics, our greatest children's books, are the ones that excite both children and adults. Hence books like *Wonder*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, or *The Book Thief* find avid fans among the young and the not so young. In judging these books we looked for beautiful use of language, high standards of art, and impressive and exhaustive research, preferably in primary documents. In fact, we argued passionately about the inclusion, or exclusion, of a particular title or series. This was a time when I was happy to be, to use a line from Hamilton, "in the room where it happened."

I can't begin to communicate how exciting it is to have these classroom libraries now available. I keep imagining teachers opening boxes of hundreds of pristine books for their classroom that year. The assortment is amazing—the classics, my true love, books tried and tested in the classroom by teachers all over the country, and even some 2016 titles like Kate Milford's rollicking sea adventure, *The Left-Handed Fate*. I often worry about the children, and I was one of them, who don't have books in their homes. Now in their school homes they will have at their fingertips a varied and exciting assortment.

So for all of you, I hope that one of your dreams—having an excellent classroom library that you do not have to pay for out of your own pocket—comes true this year. A lot of people have put in a lot of work—and expertise—to give you what we believe to be the best classroom libraries that have been created so far for children.



About Anita Silvey

The author of 100 Best Books for Children and 500 Great Books for Teens Anita Silvey has devoted 40 years to promoting books that will turn the young—and families—into readers. To do this she has appeared frequently on NPR, The Today Show, 60 Minutes, and radio programs in the United States and Canada to talk about books for children and teenagers. As *Publisher's Weekly* has said "It would be hard to find a more authoritative voice than Anita Silvey."

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