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Review of *Reading in the Wild: The Book Whisperer's Keys to Cultivating Lifelong Reading Habits*

Miller, D., & Kelley, S. (2014). *Reading in the Wild: The Book Whisperer's Keys to Cultivating Lifelong Reading Habits*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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“So much of a child’s life is lived for others. We learn what they want us to learn, and show our learning for their gratification. All the reading I did as a child, behind closed doors, sitting on the bed while the darkness fell around me, was an act of reclamation. This and only this I did for myself. This was the way to make my life my own.”
(Schwartz, 1995, p. 134)

In this brief quote, Lynne Sharon Schwartz embodies the view of students who manage to carry on two very different reading lives. These young readers meet the expectations of well-meaning teachers who prompt students’ involvement with books as a means to advance their literacy growth and their enjoyment of the written word. Often, though, the reading situated in school settings is not Trollope’s “book love” (Hall, 1983) that would prompt a life-long pursuit of literacy so often trumped as the goal for student readers. In fact, Schwartz points out that students like her, who outwardly fit the picture of *reader*, may actually feel the need to carry on a subversive reading life that allows them to reclaim the act of reading for themselves rather than for their teachers’ gratification. Even further submerged are those students who satisfy their teachers’ reading expectations but who fail to pursue any subsequent reclamation of reading that would make it their own. Donalyn Miller’s second book, *Reading in the Wild: The Book Whisperer’s Keys to Cultivating Lifelong Reading Habits*, holds possibilities for addressing the chasm into which these non-committed readers might fall.

Miller’s first book, *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* (2009), explained the practices through which she successfully supports her sixth-grade students in reading much more than they ever had before; indeed, much more than many ever thought they were capable of reading. During their year in her classroom, Miller’s students read extensively from books of their own choosing and they begin to exemplify the behaviors of devoted readers. However, Miller explains that in spite of the enormous reading energy that developed during their sixth-grade year, she was often dismayed to discover that many fail to carry this literacy pursuit into their future lives. In her typically reflective way, Miller posed questions to herself after pondering the behaviors of her former students: Was it enough to have created a group of prolific readers during one school year, or was her task much bigger? How could she actually accomplish what many teachers claim as their purpose in teaching literacy: creating lifelong readers? Through the lens of Schwartz’s declaration, the question might be: Were Miller’s students reading to satisfy the classroom literacy expectations she held for them, yet failing to reclaim reading in ways that would make it their own?

Reading in the Wild continues the premise initiated in *The Book Whisperer*: that teachers can create structures that prompt students to pursue extensive and sustained classroom reading. However, in this new volume, Miller’s ambitions are even greater. Miller contends that teachers can be the impetus for students to become real readers, “wild readers”, not just during the students’ tenure in those classrooms, but in committed reading habits across a lifetime. She is not satisfied with students who read to meet her expectations; she wants students to internalize a structure that supports them in reclaiming the kind of reading lives that will carry them into the future.

Miller and her co-author, Susan Kelley, begin this quest by looking at the reading habits of over 800 adult readers in order to determine the kinds of behaviors that were exhibited by lifelong readers. They find patterns in the responses that led to their naming a set of five principles that typify “wild readers”, her term for readers who “share an innate love of reading” (p. xviii). The authors state that wild readers: 1) dedicate time to read, 2) self-select reading material, 3) share books and reading with other readers, 4) have reading plans, and 5) show preferences for genres, authors, and topics. Miller and Kelley determine how to support their students in adopting these habits, prompting student readers to assume agency for their own reading rather than merely to satisfy classroom expectations. These five principles also establish the structure of the book, as these habits become five chapters in which the authors present ways to prompt students to assume responsibility for their own reading lives. Each chapter is further delineated into sections that describe options for mini lessons, individual conversations, and writing possibilities that surround each of the habits that support a literate life. Also integrated throughout the book are essays that describe further opportunities for teachers to support their student readers in claiming lifelong reading behaviors as their own.

The authors utilize their positions as classroom teachers to lend credibility to their work. The book is packed with practical recommendations and real student examples. The appendices include numerous forms for supporting students in thinking about reading as an integral part of their lives, along with documents for teachers to use in their pursuit of more authentic student reading engagement. In addition, the authors’ contentions are embedded with research findings that support their reliability. For example, Miller and Kelley cite several experts (e.g. University of Oxford, 2011; Iyengar & Ball, 2007) who point out the importance of lifelong reading habits on any number of indicators of success beyond formal education. Overall, literacy educators will find the book’s recommendations overwhelmingly persuasive and eminently practical.

If anything, the book may be a bit too much of a good thing. In structuring each chapter to include sections labeled *Community Conversations*, *Conferring Points*, and *Keeping Track of Your Reading Life*, the information revolving around the five habits of lifelong readers begins to feel a bit repetitive. Because the five principles of readers are so closely aligned, the advice provided in the chapter sections seems to overlap at times. However, the numerous student examples help to keep the suggestions fresh by providing different lenses through which to view the reading involvement options.

One other feature that might tend to limit the usefulness of this work is its single-minded focus on the pre-teen reader. Miller and Kelley make no attempt to diversify their recommendations to include students in early elementary or secondary grade levels. However, creative teachers are accustomed to adapting ideas to fit their own context, and the basic principles underlying these techniques are sound for all readers. Therefore, practitioners at levels outside the middle school should not hesitate to allow the advice in this book to aid their efforts in shepherding their student readers down a path of lifelong literacy engagement.

An internalized passion for reading that will carry students beyond the classroom doors cannot be forced. Readers must choose for themselves to reclaim the act of reading from the mountain of expectations that can swiftly and dangerously cause it to become an education obligation to be met, holding little relevance to reality outside the school walls. However, the zeal with which

reading is viewed, and the commonsense advice that allows that passion to take root in students' lived experiences, may allow *Reading in the Wild* to become a source of inspiration for all teachers' reading classrooms. Indeed, it may prompt teachers to reclaim their excitement for literacy instruction as their students reclaim their reading lives.

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We're using Donalyn Miller's *Reading in the Wild: The Book Whisperer's Keys to Cultivating Lifelong Reading Habits* to explore what it means to be a wild reader – someone most likely to embrace literacy for life. Read through these 5 characteristics and see which ones fit your reading style and which you might incorporate this month.

5 Main Characteristics of Wild Readers.

1. They dedicate time to read. I'm reading it slowly, a little bit every morning at breakfast, with Wikipedia nearby to look up all the names from Roman mythology. I'm absolutely loving it. For three Sundays, now, I have plunged in, reading it aloud, just to savor sentences like this one: "Now it was night and all across the earth / All living beings were harvesting their sleep."
2. They self-select reading material. 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 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 move on.

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