

**Open Hearts, Curiosity, and Questions:  
A Conversation with Donalyn Miller, “The Book Whisperer,” on International  
Literature in the Classroom**

Tracy Smiles

Donalyn Miller, “The Book Whisperer,” is an upper elementary and middle school teacher in Northeast Texas and the author of several books about teaching literacy through life-long reading, including *The Book Whisperer* (2009) and *Reading in the Wild* (2013). Additionally, Donalyn co-founded the popular blog, The Nerdy Book Club, and co-hosts the monthly Twitter chat #titletalk. Her articles about teaching and reading have appeared in publications such as *Education Week Teacher*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Educational Leadership*, *Horn Book*, and *The Washington Post*. Her many honors include being a finalist for Texas Teacher of the Year in 2010.



Currently Donalyn is on sabbatical from her teaching position and traveling all over the country speaking to teachers and librarians about her teaching philosophy, classroom practice, and children’s and adolescent literature. Donalyn’s message is clear – students thrive when they have choices regarding what they read, and need access to a wide variety of high quality and interesting texts in the classroom. Her own journey to becoming a reading teacher, described in her first book, *The Book Whisperer*, led her to develop an independent reading program that supports students in developing life-long reading habits. Donalyn and I became friends when we served on the National Council of Teachers of English’s “Notable Children’s Books in the Language Arts” selection committee together. I talked with Donalyn just after she had returned from a trip to McAllen, Texas, where she spoke at several school library events. She was excited about the new public library she was able to visit while there.

Donalyn: The library is in an abandoned Walmart. The architect kept some of the integrity of the original Walmart – the ceiling is all open with the scaffolding and you can see the HVAC which they painted. The library is gorgeous, everything is in English and Spanish, it has a huge children's section, huge teen room, giant reading room, and they've got fountains. It's beautiful. It won an American Library Association honor award for its architecture.

Tracy: Oh wow.

Donalyn: I know! I'm so nerdy that I actually knew that. I had two hours between two school events and I said to my friend, "Let's go over to the McAllen Public Library because it won an architectural award from the American Library Association." My friend started laughing. He goes, "Of course you knew that, Donalyn." I said, "Look, you need somebody in the world to be this nerdy, and I am happy to take on that role."

I asked Donalyn to describe what she sees as the role of international literature in the classroom.

Donalyn: I'm constantly in awe of children. I just am. Children have such open hearts. They have curiosity about themselves and about the world. I think literature in general helps children feed their curiosity, ask new questions. I also believe children have a strong sense of justice, especially if we cultivate that innate sense and build frameworks to help them understand the world. Of course, international literature feeds directly into that. We know from several studies that reading fosters our empathy, fosters our awareness for the experiences of people who have different lives than we do. Children have a natural curiosity about people who live in different communities. By sharing international literature with children, I think we can give them an opportunity to have great conversations in the classroom and to address misconceptions they may have about different parts of the world or about different communities – but also to foster their curiosity about people who have different stories to tell than theirs.

To follow up on her explanation for why international literature has an important classroom role, I asked her to describe how she engaged her students in reading books about different cultures and the ways people live in different parts of the world.

Donalyn: Often I just share, especially if it's the first of the year when we're sharing different types of books, I often like to read these books out loud with children. I'll quote Lester Laminack here. He says the first time you flip open a book, it's like opening a present. He talks about letting children "linger" with a book. This is something I've really been writing and thinking about lately. We tend to push towards the didactic purposes of using a piece of literature because we are educators. We almost can't help it. I'm mindful that I want children to experience the story as a story before I start parsing it into didactic purposes as far as saying, "this is what I want you to learn about this culture or that culture." If I overemphasize the teaching points of an international book, I almost feel like I'm perpetuating some otherness. I don't know if that makes sense in that, if the only reason for sharing a particular book is always to teach about a particular experience, then it almost marginalizes the book as a piece of literature. It's a tricky balance, I know. Also, I don't want to impose my

questions over the children's natural questions, because I don't know what they know.

Donalyn went onto to explain connections to experiences from her classroom in Northeast Texas.

Donalyn: In the last few years, I've had a very diverse classroom with a lot of biracial and immigrant children. I am always aware there's somebody in the room who may have a perspective that would be different from mine based on their own experiences and their stories. I like to just read international books first as a book and experience it as a book, then ask students, "What do you notice? What questions do you still have?" That's when I can use my background, my expertise with the book or the teaching experience to guide children to some other understandings about the text. That's generally how it looks when I'm sharing almost any kind of book with students, but I think with international texts and books that represent diverse experiences, it's even more important not to create a situation where the only value in that book is in teaching us about somebody who's different because to me it somehow minimizes the universality of the story.

Our conversation turned to issues and challenges teachers may encounter when locating and using international books in the classroom, noting that there are excellent resources available to help teachers find high quality titles.

Donalyn: Journals like *WOW Stories* and *WOW Review*, and of course all the work that the University of Arizona is doing, [International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY)/United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY)], International Literacy Association's Notable Books for a Global Society, offer lists of book titles, reviews, and ideas for where to find and how to possibly use the books with children.

However, Donalyn noted challenges related to teachers and their knowledge of such resources, as well as their tensions around using books about cultures they may know little about. She also notes how the publishing industry plays into the real issues educators encounter.

Donalyn: I think a lot of these organizations and collaborations are foreign to teachers. We practice in a little world that lives, eats and breathes teaching particular literature and so we're immersed in it. When we go out into the world and talk to many of our colleagues and colleagues from other schools, I find many teachers are not even aware of the resources or the books that exist. I think certain aspects involve individuals seeking out knowledge for the questions they have, but getting more of these books in kids' hands is a challenge because of a cycle I see. Publishing companies say they don't want to

publish some of these books, or they don't want to translate them because they don't sell that well. That means locating these titles falls on teachers, librarians and parents who are not aware of the books, and not buying these books and putting them in kids' hands.

I do think teachers often shy away from using books that don't represent an experience they feel comfortable with because they're afraid of getting it wrong. They're afraid of insulting someone or saying something that comes from a place of ignorance, and by ignorance I don't mean that in a disparaging way, I mean it in a lack of knowledge way. The discomfort teachers feel comes from a concern that they may make a misstep or possibly do something disrespectful so they just don't use international texts and diverse literature in the classroom. That's why the resources that Worlds of Words is supporting are vital because they often give us the tools that we need to be able to use these texts in the classroom and make us feel more confident in doing it.

Of course, the eternal issue is the funding involved in dedicating resources to acquiring these texts so that they're available in our school libraries and our classroom collections. That's a general issue I see everywhere as far as literature for children. Those aren't exactly problems that teachers can solve on their own. How can we build that institutional support for the value of books?

For Donalyn, international literature holds great potential for the classroom, especially when opportunities for inquiry are at the center of using the texts in the classroom.

Donalyn: I think what's most important is considering and reading the book as a piece of literature. We know every culture throughout our history has had some type of storytelling. Reading a book first and emphasizing the universality of it as a story by asking children to look at the similarities and differences between their experiences and the experiences of the character from the text can be an invitation for inquiry. What questions do they have? What does the book make them think about? If the text does emphasize some aspect that has potential for social action, or for inquiry with students, how can we encourage that?

Since *WOW Stories* highlights classroom stories about how teachers use international literature, it was fitting that our conversation ended with a story Donalyn shared from her classroom regarding an inquiry that a culturally diverse book inspired in one of her students as an example of how teachers might take up these texts in their classrooms.

Donalyn: As a class, we read *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic* (Lo, 2012). It was about a Chinese girl living in the US. Her family found soybeans being grown at a local farm... soybeans in the United States at that time period were

grown for pig food, for animal fodder. People were not eating soybeans like we eat them now. It was based on the author's own experiences and she talks about her family eating these soybeans and the farmers thinking it was silly that people wanted to eat them. It was very interesting. My class and I had a whole conversation after reading that book about the kinds of different foods that we eat that were traditional for our families. We talked about what foods you only eat at Thanksgiving. Are there foods that you know came from your family's heritage? Kids were having a great conversation.

One of my students, Destiny, who came to Texas from Panama, came up to me the next day and she asked, "Mrs. Miller, do you know that in Panama they have different things on the McDonald's menu than we have here in the United States?" She shared with me that they sell plantains and other culturally



specific foods on the McDonald's menu. I told her, "I noticed that when I was in Japan, that they had different things on the McDonald's menu there, too."

She asked, "I wonder if a lot of countries have different things on their McDonald's menu, and why they're there. Why are they different?" Then she looked at me and she said "Genius Hour," a time for students to engage in inquiries of questions and topics that were of interest to them, inspired by Google whose engineers dedicate 20 percent of their time pursuing projects of their choosing. She went on to explain, "Mrs. Miller, this would be a great Genius Hour project." I'm like, "That sounds awesome, Destiny."

I said, "Well, let's ask some questions. Why would someone do that?" Destiny wound up doing an entire presentation for the class with PowerPoint that showed samples of the menu and then she might pick one thing off the menu that was unique to the culture and talk about why they didn't have beef hamburgers on the McDonald's menu in India and why they had plantains in Panama.

This example illustrates how literature sparked an interest in other cultures. What I found interesting about what Destiny did is that this is what a lot of children do. They take something that they know, which is McDonald's, and then they extend it just a little bit into that inquiry zone. She wasn't taking a huge leap into the deep end of the pool perhaps, but we can certainly say, "After we did this project, what other questions do you have?" It was that one book, that *Soybean Picnic* book, that launched the conversation, and for her really sparked an interest in other cultures. That was just one book, and just one experience.

My conversation with Donalyn reaffirmed the important role and tremendous potential that international children's and adolescent literature holds for developing a sense of personal identity, inspiring interest in other cultures and seeing how different cultural knowledge intersect and integrate (Short, 2016). In short, this literature plays a critical role in today's increasingly diverse classrooms.

For more information about Donalyn Miller check out the following:

Miller, Donalyn (2009). *The book whisperer: awakening the inner reader in every child*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miller, Donalyn (2013). *Reading in the wild: the book whisperer's keys to developing lifelong reading habits*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Donalyn Miller's Blog: <https://bookwhisperer.com/blog/>

Nerdy Book Club Blog: <https://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/>

### References

<http://www.geniushour.com/what-is-genius-hour/>

Lo, G. (2012). *Auntie Yang's great soybean picnic*. Illus. B. Lo. New York: Lee and Low.

Short, K. (2016). A curriculum that is intercultural. In Short, K, Day, D., & Schroeder, J. (Eds.). *Teaching globally: Reading the world through literature* (3-24) Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

**Tracy Smiles** is a retired professor of literacy teacher education and the current editor of WOW Stories.