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***The Book Whisperer – Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child  
(2009)***

By: Donalyn Miller  
Forward By: Jeff Anderson, Author and Literacy Staff Developer  
  
(Jossey-Bass, CA)

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**Reviewed by Loreena D. Parks, SpA**  
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When I received an email recommending *The Book Whisperer – Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* by Donalyn Miller, I knew I had to read it right away. Since I teach a Language Arts and Linguistics methods grad course, I was immediately drawn to the part of the title that said *Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child*. I called Barnes & Noble within five minutes of receiving the email, inquiring if they had a copy of that particular book. I was told there was one and they would leave it at the front desk for me – of course I went to pick it up right away.

After I returned to my car, I pulled out the book to take a look at it. I was not expecting to be so taken with the cover itself. Try closing your eyes and visualizing a beautiful blue sky over a wonderful sandy beach adorned with sea grass; standing on that beach is a girl wearing a white dress and holding a book, which covers her face, with both hands. What does that inspire in you? For me, this inspired many thoughts such as ... all children reading something they are enjoying, my own love for reading, the joy of reading a great book while on vacation, becoming lost in a book about an interesting topic ... but most of all not having to struggle to read, but loving to read!

As luck would have it, we were leaving that evening for a vacation and were travelling about 14 hours in the car. Because my husband does not mind doing the greater part of this type of driving, and since I have a light that allows me to read in the dark – I was able to devour *The Book Whisperer – Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* before we arrived at our destination. It was awesome and I could not put it down! I am so glad that I can share this book review with you in hopes that you will find this book uplifting as well. I plan to incorporate the information in this book the next time that I teach the graduate Language and Linguistics methods class.

Besides the inspirational cover, title, and contents, I was impressed with the testimonials given on the immediate inside of the book and on the back cover. Many of the names,

which included Patricia Cunningham, Richard Allington, Dr. Carol Wickstrom, and Carol Ann Tomlinson, are well respected names in the world of literacy.

“Donalyn Miller is a dedicated teacher who says she has yet to meet a child she couldn’t turn into a reader. In *The Book Whisperer*, Miller takes us inside her 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom to reveal the secrets of her powerful but unusual instructional approach. Rejecting book reports, comprehension worksheets, and other aspects of conventional instruction. Miller embraces giving students an individual choice in what they read combined with a program for independent reading. She also focuses on building a classroom library of high-interest books, and above all in modeling appropriate and authentic reading behaviors. Her zeal for reading is infectious and inspiring, and the results speak for themselves. No matter how far behind Miller’s students may be when they start out, they end up reading an average of 40 books per year, achieve high scores on standardized tests, and internalize a love for reading that lasts long after they’ve left her class.

Travel alongside the author as she leads her students to discover the ample rewards of reading and literature. Threaded together with Miller’s passionate voice. *The Book Whisperer* will help teachers support students of all levels on their path to reading success. It also includes an invaluable list of books that Miller’s students most enjoy reading.”

(taken from the back cover of the book)

Throughout this magical book Miller shares how she incorporates and reworks tools from other well known experts in the field of reading and writing. Take a look at the following list for some useful examples:

- Fountas and Pinnell’s reader’s notebook – workshop structure (p. 17)
- Book recommendations (p. 22)
- Cambourne’s conditions for learning - motivational environment (p. 37)
- Sally Reis & Joseph Renzulle’s Reading Interest-A-Lyzer surveys (p. 39)
- Stephen Krashen’s free voluntary reading method
- 6<sup>th</sup> grade student anecdotes (find these throughout the actual book)
- Virginia Woolf – libraries as “sunk treasure” (p. 58)
- Daniel Pennac’s rights of the reader (p.75)
- Blassingame’s *Books That Don’t Bore ‘Em* (p. 115)
- Richard Elmore’s “unexamined wallpaper” (p. 122)
- Richard Allington’s *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* (p. 127)
- Book commercials (p. 137)
- Book reviews (p. 138)
- Lucy Calkin’s *Teaching the Art of Writing* (p. 84)

Donalyn also uses powerful research and statistics throughout *The Book Whisperer*. Two important paragraphs come to mind from page 167.

“Richard Allington’s findings from thirty years ago indicated that students weren’t spending enough time actually reading during reading instruction, and they still aren’t. The title alone of Allington’s landmark article “If They Don’t Read Much, How They Ever Gonna Get Good?” tells me everything I need to know. That article was published in 1977, the year before I entered middle school. I certainly didn’t see more reading in my middle school classroom as a result of this research, and I don’t see it in many classrooms now. No matter what intervention strategies you employ to support developing readers or what enrichment projects you provide to your most gifted ones, none of it is going to affect the reading achievement of all of the students in your classroom the way hours and hours of time spent reading will.

Scores of research findings, federal policy documents, and books from gurus tell teachers that actual reading is that most valuable classroom activity. Although I read a lot of research, you don’t have to look any further than the catalogues and magazines the average teacher receives in the mail. Thumbing through the International Reading Association’s Professional Development catalogue, I count seven books whose explicit focus is to promote independent reading and students’ choices in reading material. If I add the books that advocate giving students some choice – for example, through literature circles – or the books that recommend independent reading as part of a comprehensive teaching model, I count fifteen more. The March 2008 issue of *Book Links*, a publication from the American Library Association, includes an article on motivating readers with the subheading “Sparking Student Interest” and an editorial from a teacher calling for a national initiative to connect students with books instead of focusing on testing.”

(from page 167)

### SUMMARY

My hope is that educators will find this book as uplifting and refreshing as I did. However, it is important to keep in mind that this is Donalyn Miller’s approach to teaching reading and it works well for her and her students – truly magical. As professionals, we know that one methodology does not work successfully for all educators and every student. It is an approach worth looking at, along with other available methodologies ... never forgetting to look at each individual and what their particular needs might be. HAPPY READING!