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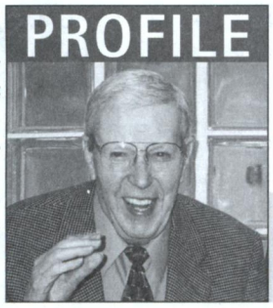


Photo by Kenny Comerford

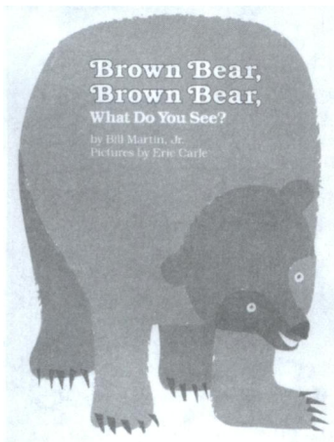
The Professional Legacy of Bill Martin Jr.

Elizabeth Underwood Patterson

I first met Bill Martin Jr. in 1990 when he visited Hawthorne Elementary School in downtown San Antonio, where I was completing my student teaching. After the children went home, Bill talked to our faculty about his language and teaching philosophies. He began by describing a scene from his visit to a kindergarten classroom that morning:

> *I saw a miracle today. I was in a classroom, and a kindergarten child got up, took a piece of paper on which she had written a story, and read. She must have read for four minutes, a long story she had written. She read it in the cadences and the melodies of speech. She didn't falter over words. There was a flow of language that was so unconscious of word that it just followed the trails of meaning that were illuminated by the language. That is a miracle.*

My initial response was skepticism. His words sounded so romantic, and I wondered if he was trying to mesmerize us with his language. I had been in the classroom when the kindergarten child, Carolina, read her story to Bill, and I knew that her writing involved scribbles on a page. As he continued to speak about the "miracle of language," I noticed that his language was filled with respect for children. As Carolina, an emergent reader and writer, had written and read her own story, Bill had heard important signs of language development. Little did I know that, years later, I would delve into Bill's life to try to understand his philosophies of language and reading instruction, as well as his place in the field of language and literacy.



Over a three-year period, beginning in 1997, I traveled to Commerce, Texas, to interview Bill about his life and career. We completed over 46 hours of interviews, and out of those transcripts, I created a chronological look at Bill's life. Although I studied many dimensions of his life, my focus here is Bill's professional legacy. In the following section, I briefly trace Bill's early years before highlighting his professional milestones. I then describe themes that emerged from my study of Bill's career. In order to allow the story to flow with few distractions, I do not identify the original interview transcript for each of Bill's quotes; instead, I ask readers to assume that his words originate from our interviews between June 1997 and February 2000. I have included conventional citations for all other sources.

Bill's Early Years and Professional Milestones

Bill Martin Jr. was born on March 20, 1916, in Hiawatha, Kansas, a small town of 2,000 people. Bill grew up during the years leading up to and including the Great Depression, when "We were all poor." Bill was the middle of five boys, and from the age of 10, Bill always held a job to help relieve his family's financial strain. His favorite job was working as an usher at the local movie theater, where he developed a love of foreign language and language as an art form. Even today, Bill recognizes the value of those early experiences with language: "I love those pungents of language: foreign language and language of the local theater. I never tired of it."

Bill shared his love of language with his grandmother, "a robust sod-busting woman who threaded the family history into story form to the continuous delight of the Martin children" (Larrick; 1982, p. 492). Bill's grandmother was an avid reader despite having had only three months of formal schooling. Although Bill shared a growing love of oral language with his grandmother, he was unable to enjoy reading as she did. Bill explains, "Oh, I could read a sentence—but never 15 connected sentences through which an idea or a concept emerged. The emotional chaos of my childhood precluded quiet, sustained periods of concentration that reading demands" (Martin, 1978, p. 34). When I asked him to elaborate on

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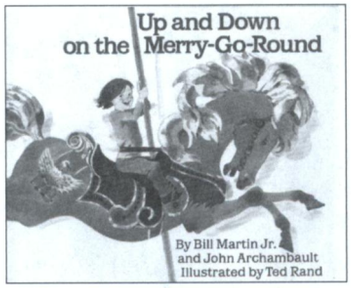


this emotional chaos, Bill replied, "I don't want to talk about my parents, and I don't want to talk about my life situation, but poverty is a source of reading failure. It's almost inevitable. If a child is born into a bookless and language starving world, he doesn't get that early assist."

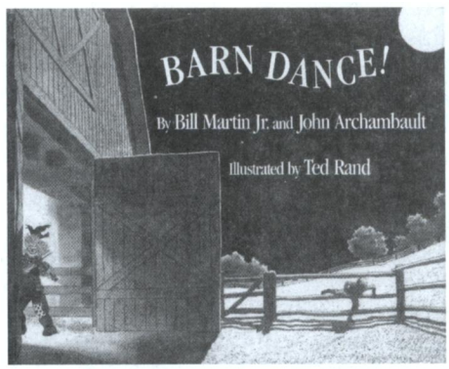
Throughout his elementary and secondary school years, Bill encountered encouraging teachers who provided him with positive classroom experiences with language. Miss Davis, his fifth-grade teacher, read aloud to her students and invited them "down a marvelous avenue into literature." Later, Miss Nevius, Bill's eleventh-grade English teacher, dramatized a Shakespearean play each semester and instilled in Bill an understanding of "the power of the speaking voice and the impact of drama" (Martin, 1987, p. 35). Bill remains thankful for teachers who fostered his love of language without dwelling on his reading difficulties.

During his college years at Kansas State Teachers College in Emporia, Bill encountered more outstanding teachers, including Professor Richard Roahen, who encouraged Bill to read in order to improve his writing. Professor Roahen lent Bill *Northwest Passage* (Roberts, 1937), and after weeks of plodding through the pages, Bill completed reading his first book. From that time on, reading became easier because he "knew it could be done" (Martin, 1996).

After graduating in 1938, Bill remained in Kansas and spent the next three and a half years teaching high school dramatics, English, and journalism. Recalling his early years of teaching, Bill said, "Well, I wasn't the best teacher, but I think the kids found the courses interesting and the subject matter palatable." He added with a laugh, "I didn't feel much older than the kids themselves."

On December 8, 1941, the day after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Bill enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he spent four years serving as a newspaper editor at Barksdale Field near Shreveport, Louisiana. One day he received a letter from his brother in Kansas City. Bernard had been injured in the army while completing an obstacle course, and he hoped Bill would write a children's story so that he could illustrate it while he recovered. One Sunday morning while on secure duty, Bill put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and wrote a story about a little bug searching for his identity. In late 1945, Bernard and Bill completed their first book, *The Little Squeegy Bug.* When they couldn't find anyone to publish their book, they decided to establish their own publishing company in Kansas City, Tell-Well Press. Bill was discharged from the military on November 10, 1945, and he relocated to Kansas City to work with Bernard.

Over the next 10 years, Bill and Bernard collaborated on more than 20 books, bringing out a new book each spring and fall. Bill also developed his storytelling technique. Promoting his books in department stores, bookstores, and schools, he learned to tell stories to the audience. Late in his writing years at Tell-Well Press, Bill traveled to the New York City Library, where he asked the children's librarian to read his work and give him advice. She said simply, "How do you tell a young man that he has no talent for writing?" Bill had "longed to write a book that somebody would say was well-written," but he realized he had "run out of know-how." Bernard and Bill "closed up shop" at Tell-Well Press in 1955, and Bill made an important decision. "I decided if I was going to write for kids, I had to know more about children—how children acquire language and how they become committed to reading a book—so I applied to graduate school."



Bill entered Northwestern University in 1956. While he attended graduate classes, he worked for John C. Winston Publishing Company, traveling around the country to promote the company's elementary reading materials at reading conferences. Whether on campus or on the road, Bill constantly practiced reading by himself. "People thought of me as a bookworm, and I wasn't. I was a student trying to learn to read. I could figure it out. Just by addressing the printed page, I was learning so much."

Throughout his graduate career, Bill worked with Paul Witty, a professor in early childhood and reading education whom Bill had gotten to know "on the circuit." Bill feels certain that Dr. Witty knew of his shortcomings in reading, yet he never mentioned them. Bill recalls, "He always talked to me in such a way that I retained my self-respect, which is a great art." As they studied children's reading interests and needs for reading success, his mentor once told him, "Bill, you are going to be one of the outstanding literacy teachers of your time."

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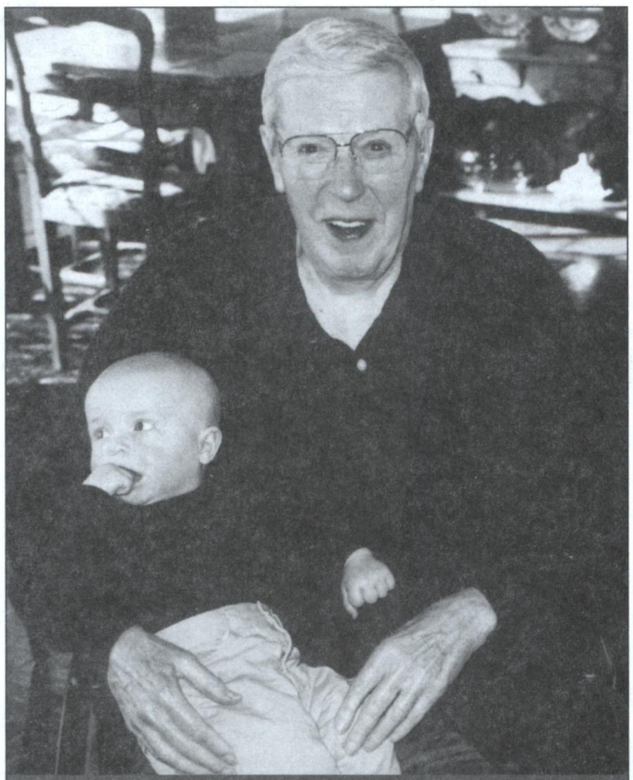
Bill Martin and Patterson's son Joseph

Despite his continuing struggles as a reader, Bill earned his master's degree in 1957 and continued to pursue his doctorate. When Bill completed all of the doctoral requirements but the dissertation, he decided to apply to become the principal at nearby Crow Island Elementary School. He applied for the appointment, received the job, completed a course in August to give him "authenticity to become a principal," and began his career as an elementary school principal in the fall of 1958. Of the three years he served at Crow Island, Bill smiled and said, "Well, I wasn't the best principal, but I was enthusiastic."

After taking three years to complete his literature review, Bill finished his dissertation and graduated with his Ph.D. in Reading and Child Development in 1961. Soon after, he resigned as principal of Crow Island. Holt and Rinehart Publishing Company had merged with John C. Winston, and the newly formed company sought Bill to head up the elementary division. During this decision-making time, Bill was also offered university teaching positions. Although he struggled with this career decision, Bill eventually decided that he was, indeed, meant to be "a book man."

Bill arrived in New York in 1961, and he immediately began his work at Holt, Rinehart and Winston. He also started hosting the Bill Martin Conferences, making presentations with teachers whom he had met while visiting their classrooms. At these annual summer conferences, Bill enjoyed the ongoing opportunities to "talk to teachers about loosening up their curriculum."

Soon after Bill began his work at Holt, Rinehart and Winston, he realized that he needed a writing partner. He found Peggy Brogan at the American Toy Company and immediately realized that she was talking his language: "lots of poetry, lots of reading aloud, lots of happiness, and lots of success." Peggy joined Bill, and they created their first series, the Owl Books.

Bill and Peggy initially published the Little Owl series, a set of 40 books and accompanying cassette tapes, for first- and second-grade classrooms. The literature set included stories, poems, and chants for math, science, and social studies. The cassette tapes accompanying the Owl books were central to the reading program. "Everything was in dialogue with the children." Soon they expanded the Owl books to other elementary grades.

The Little Owl books sold very well; in fact, Bill still remembers receiving a note from the CEO of the company congratulating him on selling the first million dollars worth of readers. In June of that year, soon after he received the congratulatory note, Bill got a call from a Holt salesman in Texas asking Bill to transform the Owl readers into a basic reader format. Bill and Peggy created the reading program *Sounds of Language* by collecting a collage of stories, poems, songs, chants, and illustrations to fill books at different grade levels. Bill and Peggy decided that the teacher's editions to accompany the student books would look far different than the prescriptive teacher's guides on the market. Bill and Peggy explained to teachers that the insights they provided throughout the teacher's editions were to serve as mere launching points for the teachers' unique teaching ideas:

> *At no time is an annotation so prescriptive that it precludes your insights from the teaching process. To the contrary, the annotations are geared to triggering all your insights and hunches in helping children* latch on *(emphasis in the original) to language and their humanity. (Martin & Brogan, 1974, p. 4)*

Although Bill and Peggy received "lots of support" for their reading program from teachers, they also heard from their adversaries, "some rabid women in Texas who really got after me." These teachers disagreed with the freedom that Bill and Peggy had written into the program. Many teachers wanted them to keep the *Sounds of Language* student books but to rewrite the teacher editions. Even the salesmen returned to New York and said,

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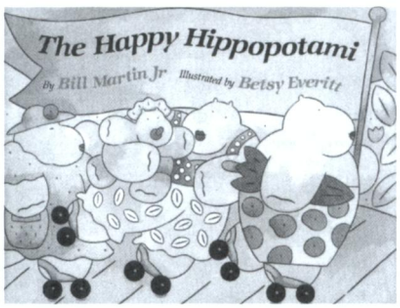
"We're losing millions of dollars. I've got a teacher who is respected and who could write a good teacher's guide." Bill responded simply, "No." The salesmen continued, "But you don't have this and you don't have that," to which Bill answered, "Purposely." He wanted teachers to understand that "their best teacher's guide happens in their heads."

In the end, Holt, Rinehart and Winston "sold lots of books . . . but nothing like if it hadn't been for the fights." Bill realized that by refusing to change the teacher's editions, he had angered the company's salesmen. Eventually, Bill resigned and spent the next several years holding his summer conferences, traveling to schools around the country, and writing children's books. He also continued to hone his ability to read. Although reading remained laborious, Bill considered himself an avid reader.

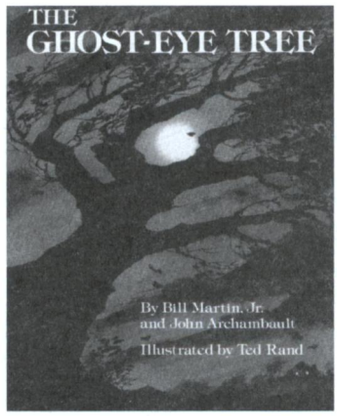
In the early 1980s, Bill met John Archambault, a college student and aspiring writer who asked Bill to look at his writing. Eventually, Bill and John began to collaborate. They wrote several children's books, including *The Ghost-Eye Tree* (1985), *Barn Dance!* (1986), and *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (1989).

During his years in New York, Bill became friends with Michael Sampson, a professor at East Texas State University in Commerce, Texas. They had met at a conference, and in the early 1980s, Michael invited Bill to speak at a meeting in Commerce. Bill and Mike enjoyed working together, and soon they began to host conferences on other campuses. Their collaboration would continue for years to come.



In the early 1990s, while still living in New York City, Bill began to notice a change in his health. "I could tell that my body was deteriorating. It was harder for me to get around." Michael Sampson and his family had bought acreage outside of Commerce, and they invited Bill to move to Texas and become their neighbor. In 1993, Bill moved to the woods outside of Commerce, Texas, and settled into his house on Brown Bear Trail.

Since that time, Bill has slowed down a great deal. He is now 85 years old, and he has lost much of his abilities to see and hear. As he grows older, however, Bill remains thankful. Laughing, he said, "I can't hear. I can't see. I almost have to dictate now what I write, but I'm not bored. I have been blessed, no doubt, to have grown old without pain, and that's such a benediction."



Despite his declining health, Bill occasionally attends summer conferences and continues to write children's books. "It's a thrilling experience to get an idea that you think would make a book. It's an exhausting experience to have to stay with it until the sentences make sense and build a pattern, a sound, a story, that is satisfying." In the end, Bill Martin Jr. writesbecause "it is still a pleasantry to write a sentence that sings."

Life Litany

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot explains how she searches for a "life litany" within every story as she examines her data for emergent themes. A life litany is "an insistent theme, a driving current that flows through each life journey" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 197). Searching for Bill's life litany became the first step in creating themes based on his life story.

I once asked Bill what title he would give his own life story. He paused and said, "It would be something that suggests a quest and an effort to improve my relationships to others through language." The more time I have spent with Bill, the more I understand the centrality of language in his life. When I first heard Bill speak in 1990, he said, "It is with language that we create our lives. It is with language in the head that we enlarge the life space. . . . We live out our language." Bill's language "in the head" helped broaden his understanding of the world as a child—from the small rural town of Hiawatha to faraway places in the movies, and in the stories and plays his teachers read aloud in school. Bill believes that language is at the heart of individual understanding, but it is also central to any relationship:

> *Man lives by his language. My personality is shaped by the way I string the words together. How I think, how I feel, how I intake the outside world and communicate my inside world back is all shaped in my sentences. (Martin, 1971, p. 21)*

Language becomes more than the center of Bill's reading program. Language forms the core of Bill's life with others. Within this life litany, "language guides our lives with others," I identified five emergent themes that all

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relate to children and teachers, the people with whom Bill has worked throughout his career.

Respect children as language users

In his *Sounds of Language* teacher's editions, Bill writes,

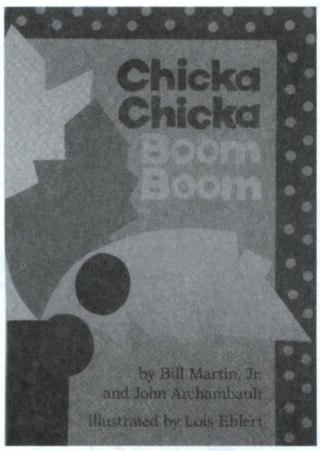
> *It should not surprise you to know that even at the first-grade level, a child is already something of an expert in analyzing language, a fact overlooked in most reading programs. . . . The aim is to help him become aware of what he intuitively knows about language, and to help him explore and verbalize old and new learnings. (Martin & Brogan, 1974, pp. 2–3)*

Even today, Bill remains thankful for his teachers who respected him as a language user, instead of labeling him as "slow" because of his difficulty with reading.

We have much to learn from children, if only we'll watch and listen to them

Bill believes that teachers must spend time with students in order to understand them:

> *We must not assume anything about children and their learning until we have observed it. And then we may begin to make some assumptions, but very modestly. . . . And so we all sit down, and when a child talks, we listen. When a child talks to us, he's trying to tell us about his life. He's trying to tell us who he is, where he came from, and what he wants. Children want us to know about them.*



Bill encourages teachers to listen to children's explanations to see if the children have figured out a particular literary structure. Bill has always believed that children have "natural ways" of sharing with teachers what they know and need, if only we will watch and listen to them.

Humor is universally motivating and engaging for kids

Bill has always sensed that children benefit from humor in the classroom. When I asked him what role humor had played in his own development as a child, he replied, "I think that humor is very close to self-approval. When you can laugh at things, it helps you get rid of your disparagement." Bill believes that humor not only helps children accept themselves, but it is central to the learning experience. "So many people don't understand that the fun that you have in learning is rooted in the laughter in and around your activity."

On a drive home from Commerce one morning, I listened to some of Bill's old *Owl Reader* cassette tapes. I was immediately struck by the humor Bill found as he read his stories, such as *Happy Hippopotami,* and invited the children to join him in the reading. When I shared my reaction to his recordings, he laughed and said, "And that laughter was so easy to create because it was natural." By including humor in his recordings and texts, Bill hoped to engage children in lighthearted language learning and motivate them to continue to develop more insights into language and how it works.

Teachers must engage with children in language use

Bill has always believed that teachers must read aloud to children every day. Since his early days with Miss Davis and Miss Nevius, Bill has believed in the power and importance of reading aloud because reading aloud deposits literary and linguistic structures in children's storehouses (Martin & Brogan, 1966). Children add to their linguistic treasuries by hearing their teachers read stories and poems aloud on a daily basis.

Reading aloud to children also provides an invitation for children to join in exploring the printed page. Especially if children struggle with reading, as Bill did, reading aloud provides a safe entry into print. Bill understands that "reading aloud is a very provocative and successful method of inviting children to print."

Bill believes that the more we engage with children in language use, the more we join them in discovering new insights into language:

> *Teachers must say to the children, "Oh children, I just noticed something here. I've been teaching from this book for three years, and I've never seen this before." That kind of going back to the basic source, the wonderment that books give us and hold us to . . . it's a joy.*

By engaging with children in language use, we provide ongoing opportunities to learn more about the complexities and "the wonderment" of language itself.

Teachers are valuable

In each of the *Sounds of Language* teacher's editions, Bill's first words are "Hello, good teachers." From the opening page, Bill highlights his respect for teachers. After I read this greeting in several teacher's editions, I returned to the

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first time I had heard Bill speak. And again, the first words out of his mouth that afternoon were, "Thank you, good teachers." The more I have listened to Bill talk about his former teachers, as well as teachers he has worked with in more recent years, the more I understand that he truly believes in and respects teachers.

Bill's respect for teachers goes far beyond merely greeting them with kind words. Through the years, he has understood just how valuable his own teachers were in his language development:

> *I have never lost touch with Miss Davis' linguistic sensitivity, with Miss Nevius' dramatic beckonings, nor with Mr. Roahen's literary disciplines. They imprinted in my memory models of how a sentence runs its fluent course and carries with it an awareness of literary completeness. (Martin, 1978, p. 38)*

Such valuing of teachers grew as Bill worked with teachers all over the country. Bill's enthusiasm and respect for teachers past and present highlight the fact that he has always believed that teachers are, indeed, valuable.

In the end, it is Bill's belief in good teachers and his insights into the power of language that are his professional legacy. Just as he continues to live his life litany, "a quest and an effort to improve my relationships to others through language," he encourages all of us who teach to do the same:

> *Finally, lest we forget, the primary purpose of teaching is to help children claim kinship with humanity. . . . For it is on the wings of words that we claim our identity with our culture. We must help children find access to those words. (Martin, Brogan, & Archambault, 1991)*

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