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Profile: Bill Martin, Jr.

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Source: *Language Arts*, Vol. 59, No. 5, Knowing Children, Knowing Language (May 1982), pp. 490-494

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41404049>

Accessed: 26-10-2016 16:38 UTC

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# Profile

## Bill Martin, Jr.

Nancy Larrick

"Good teachers. . . ."

The warm, reassuring voice rings out over the crowded auditorium or conference room, and members of the audience settle into a smiling mood. It is the only voice that always addresses them as "Good teachers," and they love it.

The voice is that of Bill Martin, Jr., author, editor, storyteller, folk singer, teacher of children, and teacher of teachers.

Whenever his name appears on a program—at the IRA, the NCTE, or Back Creek School District—the place is jammed. If tickets are required, people stand in line hours ahead.

Even in the largest auditorium, each person feels that Bill Martin is talking just to him or her. When he strums his guitar or starts a folk song, those "good teachers" are with him, singing, clapping, chanting. After one such session in Prince Edward County, Virginia, the teacher next to me said, "I'll never be the same!"

It is a comment that might have been made by in-service teachers in my Children's Literature Workshop at Lehigh University one summer when Bill Martin spent the day with us. In no time he had those "good teachers" on their feet singing and moving to the rhythm of poetry, then giving an impromptu dramatization of a favorite poem. (I'll never read A. A. Milne's "Buckingham Palace" without hearing that longhaired little blonde chirping the words, "Says Alice"!)

When I saw Bill Martin at work with inner-city second graders in Washington, D.C., I saw the same joyous involvement of children who, until now, had remained impassive. This time he began, "Good children . . ." and then introduced his adaptation of the old rhyme "Ten Little Squirrels." After one reading the children were chiming in on the patterned lines. "Let's do it again," one child called out, and off they went: "Ten little squirrels/Played in a tree.



**Bill Martin, Jr.**

. . . " On the next go-round, ten children were the squirrels while the rest chanted the now-familiar lines.

Next came "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?" In just a few moments, children were asking the questions as Bill Martin turned the pages to give a clue to the answers.

This is what Bill Martin calls "Reading joyfully from cover to cover." It is the first activity he suggests in the teaching of reading, and his "good teachers" and "good children" respond enthusiastically.

Whether from the platform or the printed page, Bill Martin begins with the sounds of language, noting that we read more easily and with greater understanding when the rhythmical pattern of words and phrases is part of our being. As he looks back on his own childhood in Hiawatha, Kansas, Bill Martin names his storytelling grandmother as a major influence in his life. "She was a robust, sod-busting woman," he recalls, "who threaded the family history into story form to the continuous delight of the Martin children."

He was twenty when he read his first book from cover to cover. The book was *Northwest Passage* by Kenneth Roberts. This launched him into a new way of life, which now includes reading two or three books a week and at least a score of poems, essays, articles, and stories.

After graduating from Kansas State Teachers College in Emporia, he taught high school journalism, dramatics, and English. During World War II, he served as a newspaper editor in the Air Force. In this period he wrote his first children's book, *The Little Squeegy Bug*, which his brother Bernard illustrated and published. It sold over a million copies, thanks, in part, to press and radio reviews by Kate Smith, Eleanor

Roosevelt, AP, UP, and *Look*. The Martin brothers went on to produce eighteen books for children in the post-war years.

Eight years later, Bill Martin determined to learn more about children and their reading—how they read, why they read, and what they get out of their reading. So he enrolled at Northwestern University where Dr. Paul A. Witty became his mentor. "His emphasis upon humaneness and mental health had a profound influence on my life," notes Martin.

After receiving his M.A. and Ph.D. at Northwestern, Bill Martin became principal of the Crow Island Elementary School in Winnetka, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. An earlier Winnetka superintendent, Dr. Carlton Washburn, had built into the elementary schools an innovative program of open-ended classroom activities and had assembled a corps of master teachers. "My years at Crow Island were the best learning years of my life," notes Dr. Martin. "It was there that I discovered the genius of children."

In 1960 came an invitation to join the editorial staff of the publishing house, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, not simply as editor, but as creator of materials for elementary classrooms. So began that period in Bill Martin's life when he gave full time to anthologizing and writing books to help children learn to read and love it.

In this period, he completed the *Sounds of Reading*, a literature-based series of books for kindergarten through grade eight; the *Owl Books*, four libraries totaling 120 books for individualized reading instruction; the *Instant Readers*, thirty rhythmic read-aloud books to help children expand their experience with language and literary

structures; and the *Freedom Books*, a set of ten social studies books to help children understand the principles of democracy.

Some years later he created the *Little Nature Books* for Encyclopedia Britannica. These are poetic storybooks, richly illustrated, for young children: *Poppies Afield*, *Frogs in a Pond*, *Ants Underground*, and *June Bugs* among them.

His latest productions are the Bill Martin tapes, records, and films, which help expand the premise that language is essentially oral and good reading depends on experience with the sounds of language.

Bill Martin's books and matching cassettes have grown out of his interrelation with children. As he draws them into singing or reciting the chorus of an old folksong or favorite poem, he sees something happening. Children who have been unable or unwilling to talk chime in. The rhythmic language of poet and storyteller becomes everybody's language. Even the most faltering youngsters begin to speak and then to read as though carried along by the sounds of language. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing take on new dimensions as children are introduced to good literature with musical quality.

The *Sounds of Language* books were masterminded by Bill Martin. He selected or created all of the printed material, chose the artists and worked closely with them, and was responsible for the typography. I know of no other group of books which result so largely from the philosophy and creative drive of one person.

Each of the three first-grade books is an anthology of poems, nursery rhymes, and rhythmical stories by such distinguished authors as A. A. Milne, Christina Rossetti, David McCord, Aileen

Fisher, Myra Cohn Livingston, James Reeves, and Robert Frost, as well as folk tales from many lands.

Each volume has been illustrated by a dozen or more artists in styles and techniques that range from the delicate and quaint to the bold and modern. One story—"The Three Little Dachshunds"—is shown with Barbara Cooney's scratchboard drawings in four colors. Another is illustrated with silhouetted photographs of Eskimo soapstone carvings. There is oriental flavor in the work of Kiyooki Komoo and Mamoru Funai and New England charm in the adaptations of the drawings of Frederick Richardson.

The scenes are kaleidoscopic—city streets, a butcher shop, a barnyard, the crotch of a tree, a king's counting house, a frog pond, a city bridge, a poppy field, a barber shop, a starry sky. All of these appear in one of the first-grade books. The cast in a single volume ranges from Old Miss Marvelous and her dachshunds to the three "ghostesses" sitting on "postesses."

Typographically Bill Martin's books demonstrate his conviction that "language works in chunks of meaning" and should be so presented to beginning readers. The jagged right margin of his books comes from breaking each line where there is a break in meaning, a break in rhythm. Thus the young reader learns from the beginning to focus on clusters of words which sing together and give meaning together. So instead of hammering away on single words in meaningless monotony, the Bill Martin pupil reads in the rhythmical language of conversation and song. Again the sounds of language guide the reader.

Even the notes to teachers in the Bill Martin books are unlike any notes addressed to teachers before. These are di-

rect and personal, uncluttered by the questions a teacher should ask her pupils and the answers she should accept. Bill Martin assumes the teacher is an adult, literate, sensitive, creative: "Whatever sequence you take, you must be secure in the fact that you can follow your own hunches and your own common sense." He speaks frankly, too, as when he advocates thoughtful discussion with children rather than the "boring kind of question-answer ritual."

After seven years as full-time author-editor with Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Bill Martin, Jr. launched his own rocket in 1967. Since then he has spent full time as a free-lance writer, editor, lecturer, producer of films and cassettes, and visiting professor at colleges and universities across the country. Now he speaks of himself as "an itinerant teacher traveling at least half of the year to present a point of view that has become my life." Wherever he goes, "good teachers" and "good children" throng to hear him, sing with him, and take his love of reading home with them.

#### **Books by Bill Martin, Jr.**

*Freedom Books* (ten social studies books with cassettes). Los Angeles: Bowmar-Noble, 1970.

*Kin/Der Owl Books* (twenty books: four

arithmetic, four language, four literature, four science, four social studies). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

*Instant Readers* (thirty books with cassettes). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970. Spanish editions, 1972.

*Little Nature Books* (ten books with musical accompaniment). Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation, 1975.

*Little Owl Books* (forty books: ten arithmetic, ten literature, ten science, ten social studies). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

*Little Seashore Books* (ten natural science stories with musical accompaniment). Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation, 1982.

*Little Woodland Books* (ten natural science stories with musical accompaniment). Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation, 1978.

*Noodles Instant Readers* (eight books and four cassettes). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

*Palomino Pony*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1952. (with Bernard Martin)

*Sounds of Language Readers* (thirteen books with cassettes). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1974. (with Peggy Brogan)

*Wise Owl Books* (twenty books: five arithmetic, five literature, five science, and five social studies). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

*Young Owl Books* (forty books: ten arithmetic, ten literature, ten science, and ten social studies). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

*Nancy Larrick is author of A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading and editor of more than a dozen anthologies of poetry for young readers. She lives in Winchester, Virginia.*