

Liaisons of Literature

It took me two full years to decompress. I'd been a classroom teacher for twelve years when my first book was finally published. I stayed on pace at school for the next three years, writing stories for young readers in the early morning, juggling six classes (including yearbook) and two clubs, and producing the school's newspaper during the day, and still trying to be a good mom to my two young sons the rest of the time.

When *Sammy Keyes and the Hotel Thief* won the Edgar for best juvenile mystery, the series seemed to show great promise and I began being asked to speak at conferences and schools. I was stretched crepe-paper thin, but when my husband urged me to take a leap of faith into writing full time, I resisted.

I really loved my job.

Not the mandates or the politics or the pressure.

I really loved the people—fellow educators and the rest of the staff, and especially the kids.

School can be a stressful place when you don't fit in, and being the daughter of immigrants and awkward myself as a kid, I remember well what that felt like. So, when I was a teacher, I kept a watchful eye out for kids who seemed a little lost or were socially unsure or struggling. I wanted my classroom to be a welcoming place for them, and kept it open before school, after school, and at lunchtime. Helping students navigate their growing years *mattered* to me. But something had to give, so after my fifteenth year in the classroom, I resigned my position.

The summer break that followed felt very much like summer break had for the previous fifteen years. But that first September away from teaching was really strange. Kind of torturous, actually. I felt like I'd abandoned my profession. I missed seeing those young faces every day, but more, I missed feeling like I had an impact in guiding them toward positive futures. We teachers don't show up to work every day for the extrinsic rewards. We show up because we hope to make a difference.

As the years went by, I had a gradual awakening to the overlap of my new writing career and my former teaching career. This new awareness happened because instead of being in the same classroom every day, I was now visiting schools all over the country as a guest speaker and getting to know a different kind of teacher: the school librarian.

Growing up, I never had a librarian suggest a book to me. Maybe that's because I didn't seem to need the help. My mother was an active participant in my learning to read and we were regulars at our public library. Each year we signed up for summer reading, and the librarian there was the person I gave my oral reports to in order to secure stars for my summer reading poster. She was kind, but also not someone you messed with. The one time I tried to fudge on a book I hadn't finished reading, she caught me faking the summary. Hot-cheeked and embarrassed, I didn't understand how she could tell. Had she really read all the books in the library?

As a visiting author I gained a new perspective on just how much school librarians do and know, and how valuable they really are. I saw them engage shy students and kids on the fringes, I saw them work to match kids and books, their mental gears lining up a student's interest to their reading ability. They were hug givers and hug takers, creating a space that was safe and comfortable for anyone. I watched them use books to broaden thinking, introduce new concepts, and create empathy.

They didn't teach from a specific textbook.

They taught from an entire *room* full of books.

They didn't just book talk and keep the collections in order.

They facilitated educational success and emotional growth.

As a child, my view had been limited to my own experiences. As a classroom teacher, my view had been confined by classroom walls. But as an author, I got to roam. I had the opportunity to spend quality time in school libraries and different classrooms, and with this expanding perspective came a wonderful epiphany:

I hadn't actually given up my profession.

Maybe I didn't have my own classroom anymore, but because of like-minded people in education I was still able to make a difference. Now it was my books, not me, that were physically present, and instead of me delivering the goods, librarians and language arts teachers were connecting students to my work.

I write the books I do for reasons that go beyond wanting to craft a story kids will love. My underlying purpose is to instill my readers with self-confidence, compassion, and strength, and to help them learn to see beyond themselves. Education shouldn't be just about the memorization of facts and the manipulation of figures. It should nurture curiosity and facilitate expanded thinking.

Writing *Flipped* was my way of talking to kids about looking beneath the surface of people. It was a conversation I tried to have with my students so many times, but that concept has been much more effectively delivered by fictionalized peers. Having students see and feel and reflect with people they relate to (even fictional ones) serves to move the matter past the theoretical and into the heart.

It's amazing what topics kids are receptive to when those subjects are broached by friends they discover inside the covers of a book. A dementia-care facility may seem like an odd setting for a kids' book—typically these places are steeped in sadness and lost connections. But through the story of a sixth-grade boy who has to spend his "after schools" at such a facility while his mother finishes her shift as a caregiver, *The Secret Life of Lincoln Jones* is another conversation—this time about seeing old people as real people who were once sixth graders too—that reaches its mark with young people in a way that actual conversations I'd had about the subject never did.

In the classroom, I would take popular kids aside and encourage them to be more inclusive. They were always agreeable and polite to me, but my talks never stuck or truly created a change. In *The Running Dream* a popular student is in a tragic accident and when she returns to school she finds that because of her injuries she's required to sit at the special needs table beside a girl who's confined to a motorized wheelchair; a girl she'd walked past every day without even saying hello.

Written as a first-person narrative, the reader hears the voice of a peer and imagines what it would be like to walk in the shoes of a person with a disability. By story's end, an awakening to empathy and inclusion has hit home.

Wild Bird, too, comes from wanting to reach out, this time to the teen you can see heading off in the wrong direction. How can you stop them? How can you bring them back? How can you get through those walls that surround them? A single degree of separation can make all the difference. By letting a character do the talking, you can have discussions around *their* actions, not the student's.

Shredderman, *Sammy Keyes*, *The Gecko & Sticky*...all of my books are influenced by my time in education, but none more so than *Runaway*, which—beneath the overt storyline about a girl running away from bad foster care—is the story of a teacher who reached out to help her. I call it my tribute to teachers, and this year a public librarian made me realize how much I owe librarians everywhere. She explained that there was a girl who spent the entire day in the library's children's section while her mom took a seat in the adult wing. Claiming she was homeschooled, they came in every single day, spent the entire day, then left at closing time. The mother was kind to her child and the two seemed to have a good relationship, but it was clearly not a good situation. The girl kept to herself and deflected the librarian's attempts at finding out more until the librarian handed her *Runaway*.

The book didn't change the girl's situation, but it gave her a character she could relate to—someone who made her feel like she had a friend—and in doing so, it opened up communication. It helped her trust.

It changed *her*.

I may no longer spend my workweek on a school campus but helping kids through their growing years is still my vocation. I like to think of myself as your silent partner, the assistant supplying tools to the doctor. I work invisibly through the characters I create and it gives me great joy to think that I haven't abandoned my career after all.

So, whenever you match one of my books with a student you recognize could use that story at that time, know that I appreciate what you do so much, and that I'm right there with you, still hoping to make a difference.

About the Author

Wendelin Van Draanen is the author of more than thirty books for children and teens. Her books are known for their humor, adventure, and stealthy backdoor exploration of serious themes. A classroom teacher for fifteen years, she is now a full-time writer. She and her husband created Exercise the Right to Read—a free reading, running, community-service initiative for schools that puts a spotlight on the importance of libraries (www.exercisetherighttoread.org). You can find her on social media @WendelinVanD or, if you're on the Central Coast of California, spot her riding shopping cart from the grocery store to her minivan.

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