



*“We have the  
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really work.”*

*—Blue Balliett, author of  
Chasing Vermeer and  
The Wright Three*

# TEACHERS MAKE THE BEST AUTHORS (COULD YOU BE NEXT?)

How five classroom teachers realized their publishing dreams. **By Judy Bradbury**

**F**amous children's book writer Richard Peck spends his free time at the mall, hanging out in food courts to eavesdrop on kids. Carolyn Mackler, author of *Vegan Virgin Valentine*, taps her teen sister to find out what young adults are doing and thinking these days. But as a teacher, you don't have to mount an espionage campaign—or even lift a finger—to get the inside scoop on the latest kid slang, interests, or obsessions. Maybe that's why teachers write such funny, true, and popular books for kids.

But where do they find the time? Blue Balliett, a former teacher and author of the wildly successful children's mystery, *Chasing Vermeer*, points out what we all know: "During the week, if you're a good teacher, there's not much left over after the school day to put into writing." Nevertheless, where there's a will there's a way (in some cases, it might take the form of less sleep), as we discovered by talking to teachers whose own books have a spot on the library shelf.



## **Blue Balliett**

**HER BOOKS:** The bestseller *Chasing Vermeer* and its recently released sequel, *The Wright Three*.

**HER TEACHING HISTORY:** Balliett taught at The University of Chicago Lab School for 10 years.

**WHY SHE STARTED WRITING:** It wasn't until six years ago, when her third-grade class requested a novel to follow their popular read-aloud of *The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, that the idea for *Chasing Vermeer* was born. "When I tried to find another book like *Mixed-Up Files*, there was nothing else out there. I told my students we'd just have to write our own," recalls Balliett. "I always did myself the assignments I gave my students, and during the following summer I found I was still thinking about what I had started that spring."

**HOW SHE DID IT:** Ever resourceful, Balliett set up shop in her laundry room. "It's in the middle of my house, so I could hear who was coming and going," she says. By the end of the summer, Balliett had completed sixty pages of

# "I WROTE THE BOOK I WANT

what was to become her first novel for children and an international best seller.

**WHY SHE MISSES TEACHING:** Balliett credits the "teacher's privilege of being able to see how kids' brains work and how kids synthesize information," with a large part of her success at writing fiction that children adore. "My characters are combinations of real kids, and Ms. Hussey [the teacher in her novels] uses ideas that came out of my classroom."

## **Patricia Reilly Giff**

**HER BOOKS:** More than 90, including *Today Was a Terrible Day*, *Lily's Crossing*, and *Pictures of Hollis Woods*.

**HER TEACHING HISTORY:** Giff has been writing for 30 years, and taught elementary school during the first 20 of them.

**WHY SHE STARTED WRITING:** As a teacher Giff found a dearth of interesting material for reluctant readers. "I was thinking about the plight of kids who couldn't read, and I wrote about them." Those stories became the beloved *The Kids of Polk Street School* series.

**HOW SHE DID IT:** "I wrote for a half hour every morning," Giff recalls. "That's all I could give to it. I had to make lunches, do laundry, and prepare for class."

**HER ADVICE TO YOU:** "Think about all the work you put into your training to become a teacher. It takes time and effort and determination. And so does writing for publication." She encourages new authors to bear with writing query letters, study the marketplace, join the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators ([www.scbwi.org](http://www.scbwi.org)), and form a writers' group. But most of all, "read, read, read children's books." (We think you've got that one covered.)

## **Vicki Cobb**

**HER BOOKS:** *I Face the Wind*, *Science Experiments You Can Eat*, and over 80 other nonfiction books for children.

**HER TEACHING HISTORY:** Cobb taught science until she was forced to quit during her sixth month of pregnancy (a common practice during the 1960s). She says she misses being able to "mull over how to best present material."

**WHY SHE STARTED WRITING:** Without a teaching job, Cobb turned to writing educational materials.

**HOW SHE DID IT:** Cobb says she attended conferences on weekends, always sitting in the front row; sought out editors, joined organizations, and networked. When freelance opportunities came her way, she prepared well and fought hard to sell her ideas. Although her first book—written "on spec"—was never published, she had begun the journey to becoming a successful author and speaker. Her first blockbuster was *Science Experiments You Can Eat*, published by HarperCollins in 1972.

**HER WRITING PHILOSOPHY:** Cobb, who released a whopping five books in the fall of 2005, believes strongly that every word counts in good writing for children. "Take a creative approach. Use playful language. There's so much information in today's world, kids need a conceptual framework to hang information on. Use facts as jewelry to decorate concepts. Make material meaningful in the child's world."



# ED MY KIDS TO READ" —Blue Balliett

**Bob Krech**

**HIS BOOK:** Krech recently sold his first young-adult novel, *Rebound*, to Marshall Cavendish. It's coming out in September.

**HIS TEACHING HISTORY:** Krech has taught for 28 years. He's now the Elementary Math Specialist for New Jersey's West Windsor-Plainsboro district.

**WHY HE STARTED WRITING:** "Teaching elementary school, I was always creating stories for my classes," Krech says, but the idea for *Rebound* grew out of a conversation with high-school students. "I was at a strategic planning meeting for our school district and sat with some high schoolers. We talked about what school is like for them, and I was amazed at how many issues were exactly the same as when I was in school. In particular, their comments about race surprised me. They described how students in school break into different ethnic groups to hang out." Krech recalled similar behavior from his high school days. Hadn't things changed in thirty years? Krech went home and wrote a scene based on his own high school gym class. **HOW HE DID IT:** Krech believes in attending SCBWI conferences. "I made contacts and learned through critique sessions and feedback from editors. I also took a class at the New School in New York City which helped me week-by-

week, chapter-by-chapter."

**WHY PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF:** Krech's book manuscript was rejected by "a dozen or so" editors before being picked up, but along the way the feedback he received helped make a better book. "You can write a good story, and not everyone is going to like it enough to publish it. But that doesn't mean it's bad or hopeless. You must be persistent in submitting, following up, and revising."

**Liz Chipman**

**HER BOOK:** *From the Lighthouse*

**HER TEACHING HISTORY:** Chipman teaches science part-time at an elementary school in Albany, New York.

**WHY SHE STARTED WRITING:** "I got the idea for my book from my grandmother's life. Her mother left the family when my grandmother was in junior high. I grew up hearing snippets of that story, and it must have made an impression on me."

**HOW SHE DID IT:** Chipman entered her story in the Ann Durell Fiction Contest sponsored by Dutton Children's Books in 2002. Her manuscript didn't win, but it earned an honorable mention. After one round of revisions with an editor, Dutton offered Chipman a contract.

**WHY SHE THINKS YOU CAN DO IT, TOO:** "The misconception is that you must have an entire afternoon or evening in which to get any writing done. This hasn't been true for me, and my guess is that most teachers simply don't have huge blocks of free time in which to write. Take whatever you can find. Ten minutes here, twenty minutes there. Soon the sentences start to add up: you've got a paragraph, then a page, then a chapter. If it takes three years to finish a book, so be it. If you don't write at all because you can't find a block of time, years will pass by and you'll have no manuscript. Each writer has to find what works for him or her." □



Teachers are always coming up with stories for their kids, says Bob Krech, author of the upcoming *Rebound*.



It's a teacher's job to "mull over how best to present material," says Vicki Cobb. Writing nonfiction is a natural leap.



"The only way to find out what works for you is to start writing," says science teacher and author Liz Chipman.

