

Revisiting the One-Room School

by Gwennyth Swain

Elementary school through middle school

What's so special about one-room schools? They were (and in rare cases still are) places where children of various ages learned together. The style of learning was unique, and so was the teaching. As a former student attests in the article "Rural School Consolidation in Mille Lacs County" in *Minnesota History* magazine, "The teacher . . . had to have eight reading classes, eight math classes, eight health, eight geography and so on. Well, [it was] impossible, unless you make them ten-minute classes. Now, we knew you tune in and you listen during those ten minutes. . . . You'd better get it."

Not everyone was up to the challenge. Wanda Gág, who later wrote and illustrated *Millions of Cats*, felt

lucky to survive her stint as a teacher in 1912. While preparing lessons, hearing recitations, and enduring an inspection by the county superintendent, she wrote a poem, "My Schoolhouse," as a tribute to her school and students:

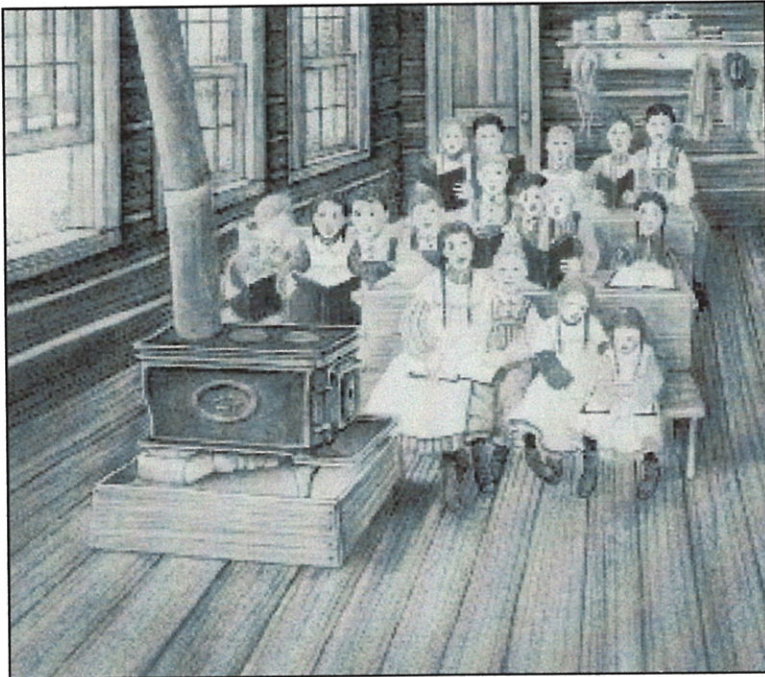
*Each morning eighteen pairs of
eyes
Look in at the open door.
Each morning eighteen pairs of
feet
Track up my spotless floor.*

How can teachers today get across the unique feel of a country school, where a crowd of kids, ranging from kindergartners to eighth-graders, were crammed under one leaky roof? A vis-

it to a historic schoolhouse can help. But books allow readers to revisit the one-room school without ever leaving the comforts of the modern world.

Readers may be familiar with classics set in one-room schools. Laura Ingalls first attends school in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and teaches her first batch of scholars in *These Happy Golden Years*. Carol Ryrie Brink's *Caddie Woodlawn* and Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* place pivotal scenes in one-room schools. And Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Understood Betsy*—particularly its description of Betsy's first day at a rural Vermont schoolhouse after years at a large city school—is a wonderful read-aloud to share before a schoolhouse visit.

Some of the titles that follow are new. Some, such as Lois Lenski's *Prairie School*, are old but too good to be forgotten. Most are fictional works, but a few nonfiction titles offer historical facts about one-room schools. All convey an appreciation for the learning that can occur within the four wood, brick, adobe, or sod walls of a one-room school.



Young Arizona attends a one-room school and later becomes a teacher in *My Great-Aunt Arizona* by Gloria Houston, illustrated by Susan Condie Lamb.

Picture Books

Barasch, Lynne. *A Country Schoolhouse*. 2004. 40p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16 (0-374-31577-9).

Gr. 1–3. Grandpa tells the narrator, his young grandson, about his school days in the 1940s, and Barasch complements the narrative with warm watercolor illustrations that show what rural life was like half a century ago. While not, strictly speaking, a one-room school story, Barasch's nostalgic book provides a clear and often humorous account of what it was like to study in a small (three-room) country school in the mid-1900s.

Houston, Gloria. *My Great-Aunt Arizona*. Illus. by Susan Condie Lamb. 1992. 32p. HarperCollins, \$15.99 (0-06-022606-4); HarperTrophy, paper, \$5.99 (0-06-443374-9).

Gr. 1–3. Born in the Blue Ridge Mountains and named by a brother traveling with the cavalry in the West, young Arizona's love of reading and adventure leads her to a career as a teacher. While she never travels far, she takes the students at her one-room school to faraway places, teaching them about the larger world, saying, "Someday you will go." This account is based on the true story of the author's aunt, Arizona Hughes Houston.

Sandin, Joan. *Coyote School News*. 2003. 48p. Holt, \$17.95 (0-8050-6558-X).

Gr. 2–5. This picture storybook for older readers tells the story of Ramón Ernesto "Monchi" Ramírez, his rancher family, and the one-room school he attends in southern Arizona during the late 1930s. Inspired by a true story and interspersed with re-creations of mimeographed student newspapers, this book highlights the history of Mexican American ranch country schools.

Wright, Betty Ren. *The Blizzard*. Illus. by Ronald Himler. 2003. 32p. Holiday, \$16.95 (0-8234-1656-9).

K–Gr. 3. Billy, born in December sometime in the mid-1900s, grumbles

because his cousins won't be coming for his birthday party. But when a blizzard blows in during lessons, Billy's teacher, Miss Bailey, calls the day short, bundles up the students of the one-room school, and heads for the closest house—Billy's house—where everyone joins in, celebrating his birthday with an impromptu overnight visit.

Fiction

Avi. *The Secret School*. 2001. 160p. Harcourt, \$16 (0-15-216375-1); paper, \$5.95 (0-15-204699-2).

Gr. 3–6. Fourteen-year-old Ida Bidson is determined to pass her eighth-grade exams and go on to high school in Steamboat Springs. But in April 1925, with weeks to go before exam time, her teacher is called away. Ida's tiny school in the Colorado mountains is closed, until Ida—acting as temporary teacher—reopens it in secret.

Bartlett, Susan. *Seal Island School*. Illus. by Tricia Tusa. 1999. 80p. Viking, \$15.99 (0-670-88349-2); Puffin, paper, \$4.99 (0-14-131104-5).

Gr. 2–5. Set in modern times on an island off the coast of Maine, this transitional chapter book introduces nine-year-old Pru Stanley and her quest to find a dog for her teacher, Miss Sparling, who teaches six students in the island's two-room schoolhouse. Also see the companion book, *Seal Island Seven* (Viking, 2002).

DeJong, Meindert. *The Wheel on the School*. Illus. by Maurice Sendak. 1954. 256p. HarperCollins, \$16.99 (0-06-021585-2); HarperTrophy, paper, \$5.99 (0-06-440021-2).

Gr. 4–6. Not all one-room school stories take place in North America. In this Newbery Medal-winning classic, a school project turns into an exercise in community building. The six students at a Dutch one-room school begin



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—Booklist (starred review)



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to ask why there are no longer storks in their tiny fishing town. They look beyond the classroom walls, asking everyone in town to pitch in to find the answer—and help lure back the storks.

Figley, Marty Rhodes. *The Schoolchildren's Blizzard*. Illus. by Shelly O. Haas. 2004. 48p. Carolrhoda, \$23.93 (1-57505-586-4); paper, \$5.95 (1-57505-619-4).

Gr. 1–3. This easy reader revisits the January 1888 blizzard, which brought drifts and danger to Nebraska and other central states. The savage storm was nicknamed the Schoolchildren's Blizzard because so many children died traveling home after lessons.

Hansen, Joyce. *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl, Mars Bluff, South Carolina, 1865*. 1997. 208p. Scholastic, \$10.95 (0-590-84913-1).

Gr. 5–8. Slavery has ended, but no

one is sure what this means, except that Master has promised to start a school for former slaves on the plantation. When he fails to uphold his promise, 13-year-old Patsy, who secretly learned to read during slavery times, becomes the “ABC girl” in a makeshift school. She records her challenges and triumphs as a teacher in a diary, in this entry from the Dear America series.

Hill, Kirkpatrick. *The Year of Miss Agnes*. 2000. 128p. Simon & Schuster/Margaret K. McElderry, \$16 (0-689-82933-7); Aladdin, paper, \$4.99 (0-689-85124-3).

Gr. 3–6. Ten-year-old Fred (short for Frederika) has low expectations when yet another teacher arrives at her school in 1948. Few teachers have lasted long teaching native Alaskans on the Koyukuk River. But Miss Agnes, whose years in the Alaskan bush have left her homesick for England, agrees to spend one year at the one-room

school, a year that will be unforgettable for Fred and the other students.

Jocelyn, Marthe. *Mable Riley: A Reliable Record of Humdrum, Peril, and Romance*. 2004. 288p. Candlewick, \$15.99 (0-7636-2120-X).

Gr. 4–6. When her older sister obtains a teaching post at the one-room school in Sellerton, Ontario, in 1901, 14-year-old Mable Riley tags along. In her lively diary entries, the would-be romance writer records the humdrum routine of chores just like the ones back home, the peril she faces through her friendship with a daring bicycle-riding suffragist and labor organizer, and romance, both real and imagined.

Lawlor, Laurie. *The School at Crooked Creek*. Illus. by Ronald Himler. 2004. 96p. Holiday, \$15.95 (0-8234-1812-X).

Gr. 3–5. Packed with historical detail, this chapter book follows young Bartholomew, nicknamed Beansie, and his sister as they spend their first day at the Crooked Creek school—a small dirt-floor log cabin on the Indiana frontier during the 1820s.

Lenski, Lois. *Prairie School*. 1951. 196p. Lippincott, o.p.

Gr. 3–6. Lenski, who corresponded with students in a one-room school in north-central South Dakota and later visited them, offers a fully realized and suspense-filled story of the harsh winter of 1948–49, when U.S. Army bulldozers were sent to dig out the region's farms, towns, and schoolhouses.

McCaughrean, Geraldine. *Stop the Train!* 2003. 304p. HarperCollins, \$16.99 (0-06-050749-7); HarperTrophy, paper, \$6.99 (0-06-050751-9).

Gr. 5–8. Award-winning British author McCaughrean re-creates life during the Oklahoma Land Rush in 1893, throwing in generous dollops of humor. When the Red Rock Runner Railroad threatens to bypass the not-quite-thriving town of Florence, everyone, including the town's

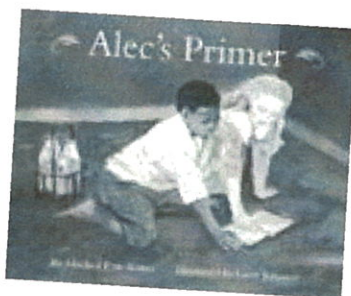
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illiterate but highly energetic schoolmarm, pitches in to make sure the train stops there.

Murphy, Jim. *My Face to the Wind: The Diary of Sarah Jane Price, a Prairie Teacher, Broken Bow, Nebraska, 1881*. 2001. 208p. Scholastic, \$10.95 (0-590-43810-7).

Gr. 5–8. Part of the Dear America series, this novel in diary form follows the trials of 14-year-old Sarah Jane, who was left orphaned in the town of Broken Bow, Nebraska, in 1881. The town needs a teacher, Sarah Jane needs a job, and each grows to appreciate the other as they weather a blizzard and the collapse of the sod schoolhouse.

Peck, Richard. *The Teacher's Funeral: A Comedy in Three Parts*. 2004. 208p. Dial, \$16.99 (0-8037-2736-4).

Gr. 5–8. “If your teacher has to die, August isn’t a bad time of year for it,” 15-year-old Russell Culver reflects in the opening lines of this dry and witty historical novel. Russell hopes that his teacher’s death will mean the closing of Hominy Ridge School in Parke County, Indiana, but his sister Tansy, who has “chalk dust in her veins,” steps in and takes the reins—of the school and of Russell’s thus-far directionless life.

Ray, Delia. *Ghost Girl: A Blue Ridge Mountain Story*. 2003. 224p. Clarion, \$15 (0-618-33377-0).

Gr. 5–8. Eleven-year-old April Sloane is so pale that the other children call her Ghost Girl, and she herself is haunted by the death of her little brother, Riley. When a one-room school opens, April meets a teacher who eventually helps her face her grief and become the person she wants to be. A historical note identifies the facts behind the Depression-era story.

Swain, Gwenyth. *Chig and the Second Spread*. 2003. 208p. Delacorte, \$14.95 (0-385-73065-9).

Gr. 3–6. Set in southern Indiana during the Great Depression, this is the tallish tale of Minerva “Chig” Kalpin, a girl who’s so small her

daddy compares her to a little red chigger. Encouraged by her teacher, Chig sets out to find a “second spread” to fill the meager sandwiches of her classmates at the Niplak, Indiana, one-room school.

Informational Books

Bial, Raymond. *One-Room School*. 1999. 48p. Houghton, \$17 (0-395-90514-1).

Gr. 3–7. Bial fills this elegant and eloquent photo-essay with pictures of restored classrooms where, it seems, the students and teacher have just left at the end of a day. The accompanying text explores typical classroom routines, subjects taught, and games played at recess.

Hausherr, Rosmarie. *The One-Room School at Squabble Hollow*. 1988. 74p. Macmillan/Four Winds, o.p.

Gr. 4–6. Hausherr’s black-and-

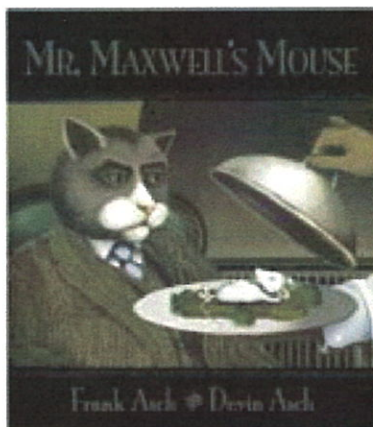
white photographs illustrate this essay on a year in a one-room schoolhouse in Vermont. Words and images bring to life the close relationship between Mrs. Bosley, the teacher, and her 18 students in grades one through six.

Pringle, Laurence. *One Room School*. Illus. by Barbara Garrison. 1998. 32p. Boyds Mills, \$16.95 (1-56397-583-1).

K–Gr. 3. Pringle, author of many nonfiction works for children, recalls the one-room school he attended in rural Monroe County, New York, during the year prior to its closing in 1945. Collage-style illustrations capture the details of country-school life, from the annual visit of Miss Meyers, the dental hygienist, to the children’s wartime scrap-metal drive.

Gwenyth Swain is the author of 20 children’s books, including *Chig and the Second Spread*, noted above. She lives in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Forget lunch as usual.



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