

# Penny Kittle

## *Zookeeper, Spy, Teacher*

I became a reader three times. First, I ran a zoo with Dr. Seuss. I had a spot in our living room next to the fireplace where I would tuck myself away from my family. Knees against my chest, I curled into a ball with *If I Ran the Zoo*, studying the letters and illustrations. I could hear Mom's voice in my ear—each letter a sound I remembered—until suddenly there was meaning. What a moment: I was reading.



I was unstoppable.

I searched the library to find books I could crawl inside. I lived in stories and that was enough—until I met *Harriet the Spy*. She taught me to perch in my closet on boxes of toys behind racks of clothes listening to kitchen conversations through the closet wall. I recorded them in a notebook, just like her, unraveling mysteries, watching my world. I even faked my way through an eye exam so I could have glasses like hers. Harriet taught me to read like a writer.

When I arrived at Oregon State University to become an elementary teacher, I carried a rich reading life inside me. My mother and father assured me that college was woven with rewards. I found one sooner than I expected that first semester in a small room on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons: Political Science. My professor showed me philosophies that had been rattling around for centuries. He tied impossibly difficult texts together, creating connections across time. I read the seven theories of mankind, as he called them, with wonder.

When I wrote my mid-term exam, the ideas suddenly braided together—I left the exam smarter than when I entered it. I felt a rush of power, of limitless possibility. That weekend I studied for all of my courses differently. I sat with *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, a Norton edition that included nearly 300 pages of textual appendices and literary criticism. I read it all. I scribbled in the margins and layered my ideas onto footnotes. The joy of thinking beside books ate up my evenings.

My professor returned my exam the following week and asked to see me after class. He walked me out into a bright and warm afternoon,

the spent leaves swirling at our feet as we surveyed campus. I had a mind for politics, he told me. I glowed. He looked at me closely and said he couldn't believe I was going to waste it teaching the ABCs. I froze there on the steps. How had he missed what was rumbling to life inside me? I had to teach.

Every year I meet kids like Colton, a senior in my English class this fall, who greeted me in September with a high-five and a challenge, "We'll get along fine, but I don't read." Living on a friend's couch, abandoned by both parents, he was in school to play football. I know some good football stories, I countered. He took *The Blind Side* with a smirk, but he devoured it. His backpack slowly filled with borrowed books. When our team missed the playoffs, he spent his Saturdays reading—all day sometimes—because books tell truths and heal loneliness. Reading unwinds the soul. Currently he's studying war memoirs, preparing to leave for boot camp after graduation. He's read 60 books. Imagine the lives he's lived in just one year.

My students need all that is layered in the books I know as well as the ones I have yet to find. I seek what Aristotle called, "True to life and yet more beautiful." I read. I write. I teach. I spend my days between the pages of good books and within the walls of a classroom because it is where I live what I love most completely.

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Penny Kittle teaches high school English and is a K-12 literacy coach in North Conway, New Hampshire. She is the author of six books, including *Book Love* and *Write Beside Them*. Kittle speaks throughout the United States and internationally on empowering students to love reading and writing and to embrace independent thinking through workshop teaching. She is the president of the Book Love Foundation, dedicated to helping teachers build classroom libraries.