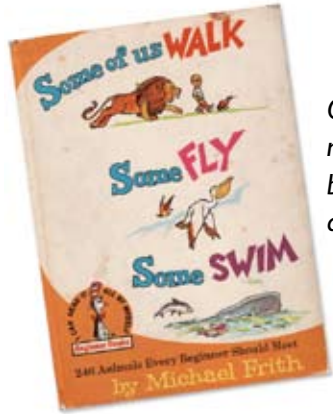


I've always loved books.

And I've always loved animals.



One of my favorite books of all time.

I loved reading books about animals ...



Reading books to my animals ...



Eventually, I learned to spell.

... And creating my own little books about animals.

So when I finally became a writer, guess what my first book was about?



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HINT ↗

Did I *always* want to be a **writer?**

I wanted to be a great many things when I grew up. But looking back, there were clues to who I was becoming

The Huckle Cat &

Lowly Worm (Preschool) Years



My best friend (and partner in imagination) Michele

I spent many happy days deep in make believe, playing outdoors, drawing pictures and looking at books. One of my favorite books was Richard Scarry's *Best Word Book Ever*. Before I read the words, I read the pictures.



My dog Heidi

To my parents' surprise, I learned to read "all by myself" at age 4. My parents chalked it up to Sesame Street. (I'm sure the hundreds of lap-time hours being read to didn't hurt either.)

Did I want to be a writer when I grew up?
Not yet. I wanted to be a *veterinarian*. Or a *forest ranger*.

But I was known to fall asleep under an enormous pile of books, mumbling, "Thanks, Mom, for keeping me from reading too much."



My sister Beth, my friend Michele, and my dog – drawn by me at age four. Beth is sporting a cute bikini. None of us, however, are sporting arms.

The Tooth Fairy &

Two-Square (Elementary) Years



My first team was the Tarpons. Our uniforms were a really attractive orange.

My days were divided between soccer, working on a mean game of two-square, and self-taught gymnastics – doing backbends at the dinner table and flips over the living room couch. But in quieter moments, I read everything I could get my hands on – from the Childcraft (How and Why)

Library to the Chronicles of Narnia – and even the encyclopedia. (But I would vehemently deny it if caught.)

Remember THESE? 



Did I want to be a writer when I grew up?



I remember thinking, *Couldn't the grown ups tell the meter was off in the last stanza?*

Not yet.

I wanted to be one of those folks on Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, saving lions and cheetahs on the African savanna.

Or a teacher – I made homemade flash cards to teach my 3-year-old brother how to read. When he wouldn't sit still, I taught my stuffed animals.

But in 1st grade, my poem "America Is Beautiful" was published in the local Saratoga News and read over the intercom at school.

The Have Mercy!

(Junior High) Years



Oh, my.

(Sigh.) Perhaps the less said, the better. Many hours were spent slaving over a curling iron in search of the feathered look. I did enjoy babysitting, and had so much fun working with kids, I felt guilty taking money for it.

Did I want to be a writer when I grew up? **Not yet.**
I just wanted to grow up.
Faster.

But in a surprising turn of events, I discovered I liked public speaking. In one class, I performed the entire text of Dr. Seuss' *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?* from memory to rave reviews. I was asked to speak at my 8th grade graduation.



Thanks, Dad, for the contact lenses.

Go Falcons! The High School Years



My own little group of kids to encourage!

In high school, I noticed I *really* liked working with kids, and they seemed to like me. I received many offers to babysit or serve as a camp counselor.

At Saratoga High, besides soccer and field hockey, I loved biology, French and English. It helped having excellent teachers who made learning come alive. And books like Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country*, set in South Africa, and *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry stirred me as none had before.

Did I want to be
a writer when I
grew up?

Hmmm ...
maybe.

Or a teacher. Or a doctor in French-speaking West Africa.

But in my spare time, I was reading my mom's dog-eared copy of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. I was asked to speak at my high school graduation. I read a poem by Alan Paton.



*My brother John
and sister Beth*

Give It the Old College Try



Mendenhall, Mississippi

Going to Stanford felt like stepping into the pages of the Childcraft Library. The world opened up for me, first through books, then literally. Deciding I was far too empathetic to be any use as a doctor, I turned to languages and literature – French, German and Spanish – and found I loved poetry most of all.

I spent summers in Mississippi and then South Africa with my campus fellowship group, learning from interracial churches committed to social justice. Apartheid was just beginning to unravel. We painted and repaired buildings, spoke in schools and marched in rallies. I adored working with kids.



Some things are different in South Africa, like the roadside wildlife.

Did I want to be a writer when I grew up?
Not yet. I was pretty sure I wanted to *teach kids* one day.

One kind but misguided professor tried to dissuade me, encouraging me to become a professor – or *at least* a high school teacher – as if your intellect were thrown away on children. Young as I was, I knew he was dead wrong.



Some things are the same. Books are universal.

The Wide World



Joyce Fox, librarian extraordinaire, painted the giant balloon for me.

I married Phil, my Prince Charming/best friend, and headed out into the wide world. After a stint in high tech – at long last – I became an elementary teacher. I felt wide-awake alive.

No job had ever suited me more. So many of my loves were rolled up in one. I framed our 2nd grade year as a trip around the world. We used hundreds of books, exploring each continent through literature, art, science, social studies and more. I wrote my masters thesis on designing an authentically multicultural curriculum. I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Then I became a mom. That meant I didn't sleep for about a year and a half. (They torture people that way.)

So I found myself at home, a teacher of one tiny person who couldn't roll over yet, let alone speak. I loved him to pieces, and read him hundreds of books, but in the *daytime*, he would sleep. What was I to do with myself?

Now did I want to be a writer?
Yes!



Our first "field trip" to the zoo.



Australia was a favorite "stop" on our journey.

First I wrote curriculum to help others teach. Then my mind started running in new directions. Words began popping into my head at odd times and places. Rhythms. I started listening. And writing them down.

The Great Beyond

Ten years later, I find myself a writer at last. In this zigging, zagging path, I've come full circle. Back to books, my childhood love.

As an author, I get to read. And write. And inspire learning. And speak with kids.



Best of all, I now get to tuck in three kids of my own who fall asleep with far too many books on their laps.

Thanks, Mom, for not keeping me from reading too much.



“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come **alive** and then go do *that*. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

– Dr. Howard Thurman,
author, educator, theologian, civil rights leader