

# Sarah Valingo

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*“Everyone’s story matters,’ said Morris.  
And all the books agreed.”*

*-[The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore](#) by William Joyce*

I am built of stories. Dr. Seuss and Disney built my bone structure. Nancy Drew and L.J. Smith’s Secret Circle instilled my sinews with a sense of mystery and magic. Anne Rice’s Vampire Chronicles and Stephen King’s—well, lots of Stephen King, gave me some muscle. I have Alice Hoffman’s Practical Magic and Maggie Stiefvater’s Raven Boys Cycle singing their poetry in my veins. Lately, the bold words of Ta-Nahesi Coates and Angie Thomas have put a permanent mark on my soul.

For the first six years of my teaching career, I taught a combination of 7th-12th grade in an inner-city school specializing in students with ADD, ADHD, and Asperger’s Syndrome. Many of my students came from crumbling houses and homes. Teaching such a variety of abilities, behaviors, and maturity in the same room was a challenge. In college, a professor had introduced me to Nancie Atwell, Kyleene Beers, and Penny Kittle, and I returned to their wisdom in my time of struggle. Independent reading was my salvation. I began the slow process of building a classroom library on my own, and through these books and our conferences, I learned about being the teacher my students needed. The connections we made through those stories built such strong relationships, some of which extended long past graduation.

Now, I teach freshman at Crestview, a small rural school district in northeast Ohio. My students come from farms, from nice homes with far away neighbors, from trailers, and sometimes from miles away in other districts to travel down our gravelly country roads to get to school. We are just north of Appalachia, and education is not always a priority for our students, but our kids are the best kind of kids. They have the biggest hearts. Their sense of community is powerful, but their stories and struggles frequently go unheard. Most of my freshman do not care much for reading when they walk into my classroom in August. My goal is to change that. I want my students to have the best chance at a successful and happy life, and I know that giving them the opportunity to develop a reading habit is my best chance at accomplishing that. I show them my classroom library and wait for their stories.

As I enter my tenth year of teaching, I am still passionate about teaching, and it is, in large part, due to the books in my classroom and the kids who come to read them. It has been an uphill battle for choice reading in my classroom. I could not have made it this far without the best teacher friends, the most wonderful professional learning group, and the support of my family. The Book Love Foundation has put me on firm ground at the top of the hill, and my students and I are so grateful.