

# Living Arts' Detroit Wolf Trap



## **Discussion Guide: A Book that Changed My Life**

**Empowering Early Learners,  
their Teachers, and Families  
through the Performing Arts**

# A Book that Changed My Life

## A Community Activity

*Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, and what is the use of a book, thought Alice, without pictures or conversations?*

—From Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

**Each of us can remember a favorite story**—usually a book so memorable that the details of its first appearance in our life are indelible. Often, that first memorable story is a children’s book. *Publishers Weekly* magazine recently interviewed a long list of famous Americans about their favorite books from childhood. The resulting story filled many pages of the magazine, including warm memories of such favorites as: Aesop’s fables, fairy tales (especially Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Ugly Duckling*), *Winnie the Pooh*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Charlotte’s Web*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, plus books by Eric Carle, Dr. Seuss, Maurice Sendak, Roald Dahl, Shel Silverstein, C.S. Lewis and a host of others.

What delightful memories!

But what about the millions of children growing up in needy neighborhoods where there are few books at home—and no one with the time or resources to explore the wonderful stories available these days? Even if books are available, the complaint of Lewis Carroll’s Alice is all too common: Books may seem unattractive, especially compared with all the digital screens surrounding children. In comparison, reading may seem boring. How can we open up the ever-expanding wonders of literacy so that children catch the love of reading as an incurable, life-long desire?

That is the genius of the Wolf Trap approach to early learning: Opening books through the performing arts so that children—and their adult teachers and caregivers—are invited to step into these creative realms of learning. In our new book, Akua Kouyate-Tate points out that all Wolf Trap programs nationwide are committed to practices that research shows are effective in early childhood education, especially promoting literacy. One four-year study “has shown the positive impact of our work on areas including language, literary skills and social development,” Akua writes in our book. As read about our expanding programs in the book, you also will discover Wolf Trap’s expansion into areas such as Baby Artsplay! and early childhood STEM education, as well.

**The first step in using this free Discussion Guide is to get a copy of our book.** The full title is: *Living Arts’ Detroit Wolf Trap—Empowering Early Learners, their Teachers, and Families through the Performing Arts*. The book is available in paperback and eBook via online booksellers, including: <https://www.amazon.com/Living-Arts-Detroit-Wolf-Trap/dp/194201161X/>



Julie Beutel presents a story in the midst of a Wolf Trap residency in Detroit. In our book you can learn more about Julie and her work.

Buying your own copy of the book brings you a host of resources, including lots of inspiring stories by Wolf Trap-trained artists describing how they began with stories in children's books and expanded on the ideas in these books through the performing arts. Among the great stories you'll find in this volume is one by musician and educator Julie Beutel. Starting on page 23, Beutel writes about how she used the book *Peace at Last* by Jill Murphy—the story of a father and mother bear who are trying to go to sleep, but keep encountering loud distractions. As she expands this story in a classroom, children soon are talking about their own experiences in their neighborhood. Before long, the children are discussing why things happen in the world around them—and they are predicting what might happen in the future. “That’s an important part of early learning,” Beutel writes. “We’re touching more areas of early learning through our questions and dialogue than we likely would otherwise.” Toward the end of her story about Wolf Trap residencies with young children in their classrooms, Beutel explains: “As the weeks unfold, I continually talk with the teachers about ways my visits are providing ideas that they can use in the future. I’m hoping to inspire these teachers and expand their awareness of what is possible with simple things like a basic book. I hope that, by the time I finish a series in their classrooms, the teachers are saying, ‘Wow. If we did all of these things with that one book, just think of the possibilities of what we can do with this new story I’ve found!’ I want them to dream up entirely new ways to experience books.”

**Learn more and download at:  
[www.TalkAboutEarlyLearning.org](http://www.TalkAboutEarlyLearning.org)**

# Get Your Community Involved

**Start by inviting people to discuss what we are presenting to readers in our book—the story of how Wolf Trap-trained artists can transform early childhood learning.** Start by showing them the book. People will look at the colorful cover, featuring some of our artists. They will flip through the pages and smile at the colorful photos inside. Encourage them to explore. Say something like this: “Can we talk about the fresh ideas I’ve discovered that are part of this Wolf Trap program? Kids love it—and they respond in amazing ways. We should learn more about this. We could use these ideas in our community.”

Remember: This Discussion Guide is just one in a series of guides. As this series of guides expands, you’ll find more issues to discuss—along with additional group activities we will be suggesting to encourage early childhood learning and the strengthening of relationships in your community. Look at the last page of this discussion guide for a complete list of all six books and upcoming guides. We’d love to hear your questions and ideas for spreading this news.

Are you confronting especially difficult challenges in your neighborhood? You should know that all six of these books in our series—including *Living Arts’ Detroit Wolf Trap*—originated in neighborhoods wrestling with the impact of poverty, low rates of literacy and recent immigration. Our metro-Detroit region has become nationally known for the creative—and effective—responses by the talented professionals working for nonprofits focused on early childhood issues. We’re finding solutions that can work for you, too.

**Who might join the discussion?** Look around you. Did you know that millions of small groups meet every week across the United States? Group settings include congregations, schools, libraries, civic centers, coffee shops, and individuals’ homes. The intentions of these groups range from religious to recreational, from educational to purely social. Whatever their purpose, a universal concern in these groups is strengthening community relationships. If you propose this idea, you’re likely to find interested friends in your small group.

**How do you get the conversation started?** Use any of the language in this Discussion Guide to get people excited. You can reproduce sections of this text in an email, a flier or as notes to share in person with your group. Point out: “We’re all concerned about our children. Let’s explore this Wolf Trap program. We might be able to bring something like this to our community.”

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[www.TalkAboutEarlyLearning.org](http://www.TalkAboutEarlyLearning.org)

# Organize the Activity

This idea “A Book that Changed My Life” has been adapted in many forms over the years to get adults talking about transformative stories that shaped their lives in positive ways. The *Publishers Weekly* article, mentioned above, is a form of this activity. A staff writer contacted a list of noted Americans and asked them to talk about children’s books that made an enduring impact.

**OPTION 1: Are you part of an organization with a website or newsletter or blog that regularly publishes updates?** Consider starting your own series of short notes in which adults in your community describe: “A Book that Changed My Life.” You won’t be the first to try this idea.

One of the most famous American authors to respond to this question in published columns and public appearances is Frederick Buechner, who wrote more than 30 books including novels, poetry and essays. Over many years, he has told audiences that the novels of L. Frank Baum about the Wizard of Oz awakened his creativity, when he was a child. In one published column, he called these novels: “not only the greatest fairy tale that this nation has produced, but one of its great myths.” In the 1980s, he published another brief tribute to Oz, explaining that as a boy he spent most of one year in bed with an agonizing series of illnesses, including pneumonia and tonsillitis. During that awful time, he writes, “I lived, as much as I could be said to live anywhere, not in the United States of America but in the Land of Oz. One Oz book after another I read or had read to me until the world where animals can speak, and magic is common as grass, and no one dies, was so much more real to me than the world of my own room that if I had had occasion to be homesick then, it would have been for Oz, not home, that I would have been homesick for in a way I am homesick for it still.”

Here’s another more recent example. Several years ago, Mitch Horowitz, vice president and editor in chief at the Tarcher-Penguin publishing house, participated in an online series of short columns about A Book that Changed My Life. Horowitz published this under Creative Commons licensing, allowing people to share his words:

*Illustrator and writer John Steptoe produced Stevie in 1969 when he was 19 years old. When I discovered the slender volume at my neighborhood library in Queens at age 7, it changed everything for me. Stevie awakened me to the emotional experience of reading.*

*In a narrative of fewer than a thousand words, Stevie possesses more poignancy than most novels. It tells the story of two inner-city boys, Stevie and Robert, whose lives are thrown together when the younger Stevie is left in the care of Robert’s household. Stevie’s mother must work around the clock, perhaps as a domestic maid, and can see him only on weekends. Robert, our narrator, spends most of the book complaining about “Little Stevie” messing up his room, breaking his toys, and getting him in trouble.*

*One day, however, Stevie’s parents arrive to say they are moving away with him. Robert wakes up the next morning, fixes two bowls of cornflakes, and gets ready to settle in to watch cartoons with Stevie. Then he realizes despondently that the other bowl isn’t needed—Stevie is gone.*

*The book shows how loss often takes us by surprise. It’s a sad irony given how much time we spend complaining about others. I liked the author’s soft-spoken realism. Stevie first comes to live with Robert, and then is taken away from him, because Stevie’s parents are pressed to earn a living. Steptoe wrote Stevie in the idiom of young African-American boys: “But why I gotta take him everywhere I go?” Some readers objected to that. I loved it. As a kid I recognized it as real.*

*Steptoe worked and died at a young age—he passed away in 1989, just before his 39th birthday. In his author photograph on the original jacket he looks just a few years older than his own characters. After many years of my rereading the book—I share it today with my sons—I still feel the emotions of Robert’s surprise when he realizes that Stevie is no longer there.*

**CONSIDER:** This is a popular idea—an invitation to share the stories of beloved children’s books that has been extended by many community leaders over many years. We know this idea works. People will be happy to contribute stories to your effort, if you give them the opportunity. And, the results need not be lengthy. Frederick Buechner was able to describe his experience in a paragraph. Mitch Horowitz also wrote a short and heart-felt response in just five paragraphs.

**OPTION 2: Invite people to meet in person and bring their beloved books.** You don’t have to organize this activity as a writing and publishing project. Consider simply hosting a circle of friends to talk about memorable stories. If you give people enough advance notice, they may dig around in their shelves and closets and find the book that, years ago, lit up their life in a new way.

There is an ever-expanding effect of hosting this kind of gathering. As participants think about the upcoming conversation—and as they search for that memorable book—they begin to think about the importance of reading. They tell friends and family the story of the book that was so memorable, years ago. Others are prompted to share their favorite books. Even before your group meets, a cascading conversation spreads through the community.

You choose the format: When your circle gathers, you could ask people simply to show their book and explain why it was so influential—much like Buechner and Horowitz do, above. Or, if you have time, you could invite participants to read the story—or present the story in some other creative way. You might be surprised by how enthusiastic and creative your participants may become!

The ultimate goal: Let’s get the whole community excited about early childhood literacy. As we remember the importance of stories in our own lives, even as adults, we spread awareness that our children today need more opportunities to explore books.



There are many ways to share a story! Here, Wolf Trap-trained artist is Katy Schoetzow, who also appears in our book, is presenting a story in a “story tent” within the children’s classroom.

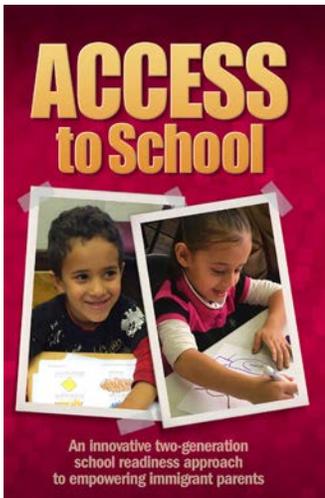
## Expand the Conversation

If you've read this book, used this Discussion Guide and care about these issues, then please help with the larger overall effort. Now more than ever, Americans need to be reminded of the challenges we face in early childhood education and nutrition. With funding cuts and shifting public priorities nationwide, assistance from community-based nonprofits will be urgently needed. You can help meet these needs by letting others know about your personal interest—and the potential of group discussions. Many men and women feel isolated in their concern for the welfare of young children. Simply letting other people know of your concern can help to touch off a growing community-wide awareness.

One way you can expand the conversation is by visiting the book's Amazon page and adding a review of the book. Of course, we hope you've found this book helpful, so we welcome Amazon reviews that may prompt others to pick up a copy and extend the discussion.

But that's not all! Share your thoughts on Facebook or in your own newsletters. *(Note: You are free to quote from our book in a blog post or column you might write about your experience in reading and discussing Living Arts' Detroit Wolf Trap. We want you to share these important ideas far and wide.)*

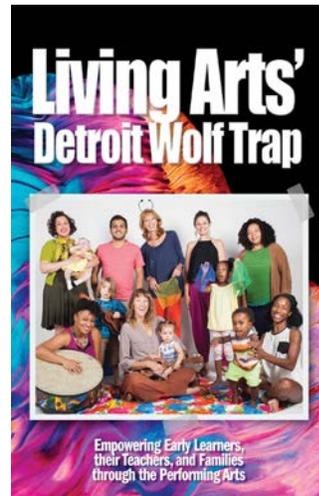
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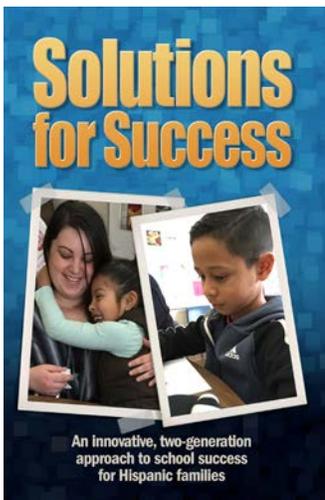
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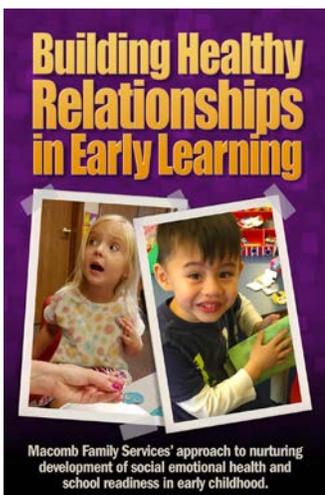
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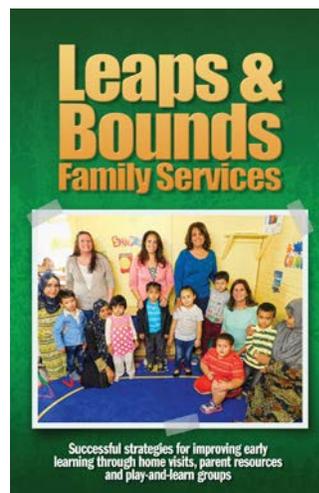
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