

MUSEUM MUSINGS

by Kaye Lister

Dick and Jane



In the early 1930's a former teacher from Indiana, Zerna Sharp, approached an education theorist, William Gray, with an idea that would change the face of children's literacy. She had decided that young students had a hard time reading because they couldn't relate to standard children's books. So she proposed a collection of short stories featuring imaginary characters that would introduce a handful of new words to the students. She thought that any young scholar could identify with these characters, especially if she accompanied them with colorful illustrations and whole words in simple sentences. After all, there would be nothing that the imaginary children would do that the young students couldn't remember having done themselves.

William Gray loved the concept. Under his guidance, Zerna Sharp introduced her cast of book children: Dick, Jane, baby Sally, Mother, Father, and a well-behaved dog named Spot. And so the 'Dick and Jane' book was created and continued in a subsequent series of books. Zerna Sharp didn't personally write any of the many published books, but she helped supervise their basic plots and paintings. She never had any children of her own but called Dick and Jane "my children."

Used for 4 decades in English-speaking countries to teach first-grade students to read, the stories were based on the whole-word method of teaching reading, rather than using the phonic method. These readers made their debut in the 1930's, reached their popularity in the 1950's, and faded from use in the mid 1960's, gradually disappearing from the school curriculum. However, in the meantime, countless young students had mastered the thrill of being able to read.

Our New Brunswick educational system had adopted the series into their school curriculum where they remained for years. Perhaps you remember learning to read from them! Perhaps you recall teaching from them!

Now-a-days the Dick and Jane books can be found in many museums, even on the shelves of your 'School Days Museum'. They have become collector items for many individuals. In fact, a first edition copy of a Dick and Jane reader in good condition could be worth hundreds of dollars.

(Source: <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/68475/15-fun-facts-about-dick-and-jane>)



SDM volunteers Doreen Armstrong & Brenda Liston observing part of the Dick and Jane Display



Volunteers Doreen Armstrong & Kaye Lister with one of the Dick and Jane readers



Kaye Lister & Brenda Liston with one of the Dick and Jane posters on display

I cannot leave this Dick and Jane history without sharing the following story with you:

Back in the days of the one-room school house, one of those little places of learning in our province was situated near a large dairy farm not far from the village of Salisbury. The successful farmer encouraged families from Holland and Hungary to move to New Brunswick to work on his farm and as a result a number of immigrants had become part of the community. The school-age children from these families, along with the children from the local families, attended the little school. The Assistant to the County Superintendent at that time, Helen MacFarlane, jokingly labelled the school as a little United Nations. One day in the 1950's the teacher in that one-room school faced her daily challenge of keeping her students in the six grades hard at work. It was no easy task to teach them under ordinary circumstances, but to attempt to also teach the immigrant children the English language made it even more of a trial. To add to the challenge, a grade-one child by the name of Bertha, born in a low-socioeconomic family who had always lived in the community, and who would be classed

today as a hyper ADHD child, kept the schoolroom in a ruckus each and every day. She would not remain in her seat, but instead would roam about the room, grabbing other students' pencils and erasers and tossing their books on the floor, all the while using language that would make a sailor blush. One day while the teacher was busy with another grade, a Dutch girl by the name of Bonnie, who had quite well mastered the English language, asked the teacher if she might teach Bertha to read. So the two girls settled down with a Dick and Jane reader and the teaching session began. Some time later, Bonnie, feeling very proud of her efforts, asked the teacher if she would hear Bertha read. And so Bertha began, " See Spot yump! Yump, Spot, yump! Yump! Yump!"

P.S. That teacher was my mother.