

Joanna Cole, Who Imagined Fantastical Bus Rides, Dies at 75

Her “Magic School Bus” children’s books were wild, and wildly popular. They were also educational.



By Neil Genzlinger

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Joanna Cole, who teamed with the illustrator Bruce Degen to create one of the most popular and enduring children’s book series of recent decades, the bizarre but educational adventures chronicled under the rubric “The Magic School Bus,” died on Sunday in Sioux City, Iowa. She was 75.

Scholastic Inc., which publishes the series, announced her death, at a retirement home, saying the cause was idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.

Dick Robinson, Scholastic’s chairman, president and chief executive, said that Ms. Cole’s “Magic School Bus” books and the spinoff television series “made science both easy to understand and fun” for millions of children around the world.

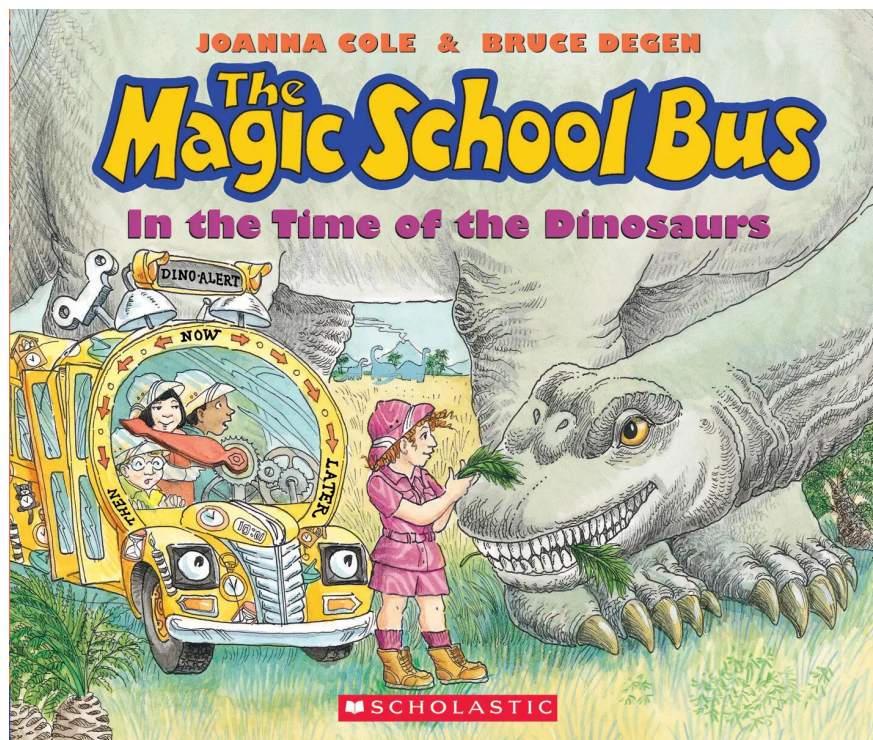


Ms. Cole in an undated photo. “A friend of mine said this is a dream come true,” she said when sales of the “Magic School Bus” series hit 10 million, “but it’s beyond any dream I had.” Annabelle Helms

“The Magic School Bus” was only one of Ms. Cole’s literary creations — the Scholastic announcement said she wrote more than 250 books for children — but it was certainly the best known. The series began in 1986 with “The Magic School Bus at the Waterworks” and continues with “The Magic School Bus Explores Human Evolution,” which Ms. Cole and Mr. Degen completed just before her death. It is to be published next year.

In the books, a teacher named Ms. Frizzle takes her students on excursions that inevitably turn fantastical. But Ms. Cole always grounded the wild goings-on in her research.

For “The Magic School Bus in the Time of the Dinosaurs” (1994; during a field trip to a dinosaur dig, the bus turns into a time machine), Armand Morgan of the Yale-Peabody Museum of Natural History brought Ms. Cole dinosaur fossils so she could compare sizes. For “The Magic School Bus Inside a Hurricane” (1995; the bus turns into a hot-air balloon and the kids get an up-close look at a hurricane breeding ground), she consulted an expert at the National Hurricane Center.



Ms. Cole was a careful researcher. For “The Magic School Bus in the Time of the Dinosaurs,” Armand Morgan of the Yale-Peabody Museum of Natural History brought her dinosaur fossils so she could compare sizes. Scholastic

“Just as ‘Sesame Street’ revolutionized the teaching of letters and numbers by making it so entertaining that children had no idea they were actually learning something,” Katherine Bouton wrote in The New York Times Book Review in 1988, assessing “The Magic School Bus Inside the Earth,” “so the ‘Magic School Bus’ books make science so much fun that the information is almost incidental.”

Joanna Reid Basilea was born on Aug. 11, 1944, in Newark. Her father, Mario, was a house painter, and her mother, Elizabeth, was a homemaker. An influential science teacher she had as a child was part of the inspiration for Ms. Frizzle. Ms. Cole often said, though that character’s look — frizzy hair, colorful outfits — owed more to one of Mr. Degen’s math teachers.

Ms. Cole attended the University of Massachusetts and Indiana University before graduating from City College of New York with a bachelor’s degree in psychology in 1967, two years after marrying Philip A. Cole.

She taught elementary school, but not for long.

“It’s the hardest job in the world,” she told The Ottawa Citizen in 1999. “I said, ‘I can’t do this; I’ve got to find something easier.’”

She was working at Newsweek in New York, answering letters to the editor that weren’t going to be published, when she decided to try writing something of her own. With her love of science, she thought a children’s book about an insect might be a good starting point.

“An article in The Wall Street Journal inspired me to do some research,” she said in an autobiographical blurb on the Scholastic website. “I discovered that there had never been a children’s book written about cockroaches before. So I thought, Why not? Plus, I had ample time to study that creature in my low-budget New York apartment!”

“Cockroaches” was published in 1971, and an assortment of other books followed, including several about the Clown-Around family and anthologies like “Best-Loved Folktales of the World” (1982). Then came the “Magic School Bus” series, based on a suggestion by a Scholastic editor, Craig Walker, who paired Ms. Cole with Mr. Degen.

The books are intricate, containing not only the main text but also notes written by the fictional students, thought-bubble dialogue and other paraphernalia.

“In the world of children’s books it is not often necessary for illustrator and writer to actually meet,” Mr. Degen said of Ms. Cole’s death in the Scholastic announcement, “but there were conundrums with M.S.B. Every page was so complicated, we had to make decisions: How to make it work. *Could* it work? And we did. Together.”



Joanna Cole with Bruce Degen, the illustrator of the “Magic School Bus” books. “Every page was so complicated, we had to make decisions,” Mr. Degen said: “How to make it work. Could it work? And we did. Together.” Scholastic, via Associated Press

The popularity of the result took Ms. Cole by surprise.

“A friend of mine said this is a dream come true, but it’s beyond any dream I had,” she told The New York Times in 1994, when sales had hit 10 million copies. “I wanted to write children’s books and be successful at it, but this is something else altogether. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

Stephanie Calmenson, who collaborated with Ms. Cole on several books, posted a tribute on the website of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. “She’s been a forerunner on many fronts,” Ms. Calmenson wrote, “and has given children and families so much, from knowledge to belly laughs.”

Today, Scholastic said, more than 93 million copies of the “Magic School Bus” tales are in print in 13 countries. In 1995, Lily Tomlin won a Daytime Emmy Award for voicing the character of Ms. Frizzle in the animated PBS series that had begun the year before. In 2017, Netflix introduced another animated series, “The Magic School Bus Rides Again.” Four television specials are forthcoming, Scholastic said, and a live-action feature film is in the works.

Ms. Cole is survived by her husband; a sister, Virginia McBride; a daughter, Rachel Cole; and two grandchildren.

Ms. Cole was often asked if she had based Ms. Frizzle on herself. But she said the character Arnold, a student averse to the disruption of routines, was closer to her in spirit.

“I love to explain science,” she told Newsday in 1996. “I’m also like Arnold in that I don’t like adventure. I didn’t even want to go on the teacup ride in Disneyland.”