

BOOKS

The *Magic School Bus* Made the World Safe for Weird Teachers

Everyone has a Ms. Frizzle in their lives.

BY REBECCA ONION

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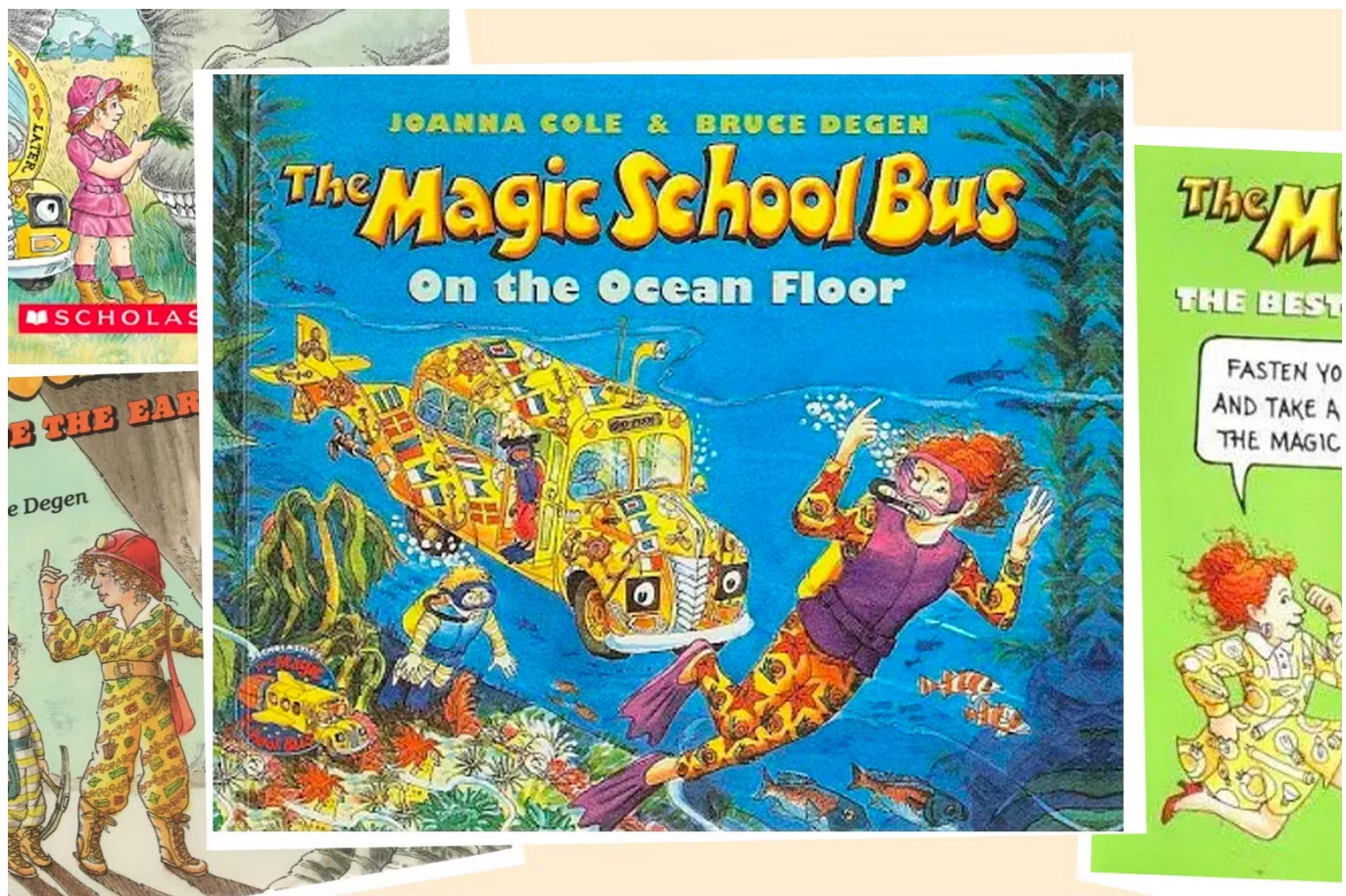


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Joanna Cole, author of the *Magic School Bus* series and creator of its central figure, an eccentric grade school science teacher named Valerie Frizzle, died on Sunday at age 75. “The Friz,” as her students call her, deserves to be installed in the pantheon of fictional teachers alongside male authority figures like John Keating and Albus Dumbledore. There’s a Ms. Frizzle in a lot of elementary schools—a big fish in a small pond, exuding self-possession. We had a legendary science teacher in my own elementary school who did

things like eat dog biscuits in class to demonstrate the principles of nutrition. Older siblings passed down stories to younger ones; at the very least, they told us, you'd never, ever fall asleep in *that* class. Ms. Frizzle strongly reminds me of this teacher, which may be why I like her so much. My preschooler has no such memories but thinks the jokes in the books (of which there are many) are simply hilarious.

The basic concept of the series—Ms. Frizzle takes a group of fourth grade students on science-themed adventures, with the aid of a bus that shrinks, becomes a spaceship and a time machine, and flies through the air—has now stretched across nine books, an animated TV show with Lily Tomlin as the voice of Ms. Frizzle, a Netflix reboot (with Kate McKinnon as Ms. Frizzle's sister Fiona), and soon, a movie, with Elizabeth Banks in the Frizzle role. We just started reading the books in our house, and they're a hit. There are spinoff volumes based on the TV episodes, but you should get the originals, from the 1980s and 1990s—they can be a little hard to find, but our local bookstore ordered them up for us just fine.

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The idea for the *Magic School Bus* series came from Craig Walker, an executive at Scholastic, who had his own Ms. Frizzle. In 2006, he remembered “an eccentric teacher” at his own elementary school, “who everyone thought was the best. She brought everything imaginable into her classroom—even a teepee—and had every corner, ledge, and windowsill filled with things.” The books’ Frizzle, drawn by illustrator Bruce Degen, has vigorous red hair that constantly escapes from a messy updo. She wears dresses with prints that reflect the subjects she’s teaching, and she makes several clothing changes in every book: dresses with rocket ships, body parts, tadpoles, and octopi; peapod earrings, to match a vegetable-themed outfit; shoes with big bumblebees on their tops, for a hive-themed one. (“In my old school teachers never wore bee shoes,” one student whispers to another.)

The books capture perfectly how it feels to be in that odd-but-good teacher’s class, the way a teacher who’s unafraid to be enthusiastic galvanizes her students, giving them something to coalesce around. The Friz’s diverse interests, complete fearlessness, and unflagging cheer both annoy and bewitch her students. Together, they suffer through her strange

assignments, loving this “weird” teacher who makes them go on a trip to the waterworks instead of the zoo. “Why can’t we just have spelling tests like other kids?” moans a student hitchhiking on a red blood cell in *The Magic School Bus: Inside the Human Body*. They resist at every turn, but at the end of *The Magic School Bus: In the Time of the Dinosaurs*, when their parents visit the classroom, they bubble over with enthusiasm for the Friz. “She loves science!” they report to a dubious-looking dad. “And she designs all her own clothes!”

Their loyalty is well earned: The Friz isn’t overbearing, or forceful. Her eccentricity is always the generous kind. “The Frizz is my idol,” wrote Dani Tinker, an environmental educator in training, in a blog post celebrating the enthusiasm of the teacher she calls a “facilitator of inquiry.” Always, Ms. Frizzle stands to the side of the action, “refraining from giving many direct answers.” “She was almost never the hero of the day,” wrote science communicator Amanda Baker, in her own ode to the Friz’s lasting power in her life. “The recognition of a problem and the proposal of solutions come from the kids.”

Cole and Degen settled on a book format that reflects the collaborative nature and maximalist visual style of Ms. Frizzle’s class. The Friz likes to stuff a lot into her classroom—a lizard in a cage, shell collections, posters, endless plants. Likewise, the stories stuff a lot of plot and information into each page. Reading these books aloud, as I’m doing for our preliterate child, can be a little hard to finesse. There’s the main text, written from the point of view of one of the students; speech bubbles for the characters’ conversations; in-story textual elements conveying scientific information (posters on the wall of the classroom, “reports” by the kids); and an afterword with notes to the reader. This diversity of presentation, it turns out, is why teachers appreciate these books for teaching reading strategies as well as scientific content. I’ve come to like the way you can pick and choose what to read. I stick with the main text if I’m tired, and explore the other parts if we have a few more minutes before bedtime.

But there are some asides I’m never allowed to skip—usually, when two students are talking to one another. There’s a page in *The Magic School Bus: In the Time of the Dinosaurs* where the time-traveling students encounter an Apatosaurus. One kid points to the dinosaur’s legs, saying, “Here are some interesting tree trunks!” Another one, with a better view that includes the animal’s long neck and tooth-filled face, says “Um ... I don’t think so!” One day my child made me do that exchange 10 times in a row.

Reading these books during a pandemic, with no idea when my child will have the chance to be one of a group of kids again, has me feeling a surge of nostalgia for the whole collective experience of school: the boring parts, the annoying parts, the funny parts, those rare and

magical afternoons when, all of a sudden, your whole class suddenly *gets it*. All hail the Friz, and the other “weird” teachers who make that possible. 🍷

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