

This School Year, Unleash Your Inner Ms. Frizzle

I'm no merry home educator, but I'll be channeling the "Magic School Bus" captain when my children and I return for round two of remote learning.

By Lauren Mechling

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A few of my mom friends have confided in me that they don't completely mind living and learning in lockdown. After the requisite acknowledgments about their own relative luck in a world in free fall, they lower their voices and make their confessions. One woman, whose family relocated from downtown Manhattan to a cabin upstate, said that she prefers her new "Little House on The Prairie" life, an opinion borne out by her Instagram account's steady feed of children romping about the woods, scribbling in notebooks and making crafts out of sticks. Another friend, who contracted the coronavirus not long after school closed last March, told me that she has never been so happy as when she's had her entire family underfoot. "Call me crazy," she said, "but I *like* home-schooling."

What I would give to be one of these merry home educators, so adept at turning pine cones into passion projects, transforming loneliness into lemonade. I hit remote rock bottom in early June, when my son was on my laptop tuning in to his third-grade class's end-of-year dance party. Watching him good-naturedly shimmy his shoulders in self-isolation, I was overcome with the desire to sob — which I texted on the spot to a sympathetic mom from school. "I'm trying to focus on my math class," my friend's daughter immediately informed me from her borrowed device. "Can u stop bothering me plz?"

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As I brace for Round Two of remote schooling, I vow to be hardier than my spring self. I must rise to the occasion and become the strong and sunny master of Zoom ceremonies and kitchen-counter science experiments that my children deserve. In search of a role model for our one-room schoolhouse, I scan my mental Rolodex for inspiration. Iconic Italian educator Maria Montessori might be too pedagogical. There's the formidable Professor McGonagall from Hogwarts, but I'm constitutionally incapable of maintaining a stiff upper lip. And then I remember Ms. Frizzle, the boundlessly energetic and sartorially out-there captain of the Magic School Bus. "I love her," my 6-year-old daughter affirms. "She's very crazy and her bus can turn into anything and go into the ocean or up people's noses." Buckle up, baby!

Valerie Frizzle was the invention of writer Joanna Cole, who passed away this summer of non-Covid-19-related causes, and illustrator Bruce Degen. The two were initially approached by an editor at Scholastic about concocting a humorous and stealthily informative series centered on a science teacher who leads her charges on out-of-the-box field trips. The pair ran with it, basing the project's unforgettable central character on two of their own teachers: "The Friz," as Ms. Frizzle's students affectionately call her, was a blend of Cole's childhood science teacher, Miss Blair, and Ms. Isaacs, Degen's geometry teacher at the High School of Music and Art in New York City.

"I was in love with art, not math," recalled Degen, a Brooklyn native who now lives in Connecticut. "Ms. Isaacs was in love with the concepts of math, and her face would glow with the beauty of the logic. I understood math for the first time, and I got a 95." So Ms. Frizzle would share Ms. Isaacs' gleaming eyes and pinned-up curly hair (though in real life it was blonde, not red). Instead of the chalk-dusted smock that Ms. Isaacs wore, the fictional creation wore a shirtwaist dress whose exuberant prints complemented each lesson's theme. (It is no surprise that a small corner of the internet is devoted to "Ms. Frizzle Halloween costumes.")

"The Magic School Bus" series, now a mainstay of pediatricians' waiting rooms and school libraries across the globe, debuted in 1986. "There's a reason that Joanna chose the waterworks as the subject of our first book," Degen said of the debut, in which the students learn firsthand about the earth's water cycle, swimming through a city's water purification system and ultimately emerging from the faucet of a school bathroom. "She wanted to show that even the boring-est, unsexiest topic could be made into a crazy adventure."

"The Magic School Bus at the Waterworks" would go on to inspire dozens of spinoff books and television adaptations. The original PBS animated series featured a Ms. Frizzle whose fluty voice was performed by Lily Tomlin (a role that won her an Emmy); Kate McKinnon voiced the *other* Friz — Valerie's sister, Fiona — in the most recent version, Netflix's "The Magic School Bus Rides Again." Today, 93 million copies of the books are in print in 13 countries. A feature film is in the works, and Scholastic plans to publish the 13th book in the original series, about evolution, next year.

“We’re all tapping into our inner Ms. Frizzle,” said David Levithan, a vice president and publisher at Scholastic, who oversees the series and who recently dressed up as the Friz for a video sales conference, donning a star- and planet-print dress and curly red wig to buoy the mood of his homebound colleagues. His mother, he added, with whom he’s been quarantining in suburban New Jersey, enjoyed it too. “Ms. Frizzle is unflappable, and she manages to keep up our spirits,” Levithan said. “She finds what she’s talking about so fascinating and that is its own superpower.”

Ms. Frizzle’s trippy fashion sense and psychedelic adventures, all courtesy of a bus that can transform into a spaceship or microscopic particle or time machine, are slightly deceptive. It’s all too easy to write her off as the wild and crazy personification of Weird Science. But her method of teaching is radically gentle: She’s watchful, patient and completely trusting in her students’ abilities to explore, observe and draw their own conclusions. “Follow me,” she says again and again, guiding her group on rides along raindrops and small intestines and sunbeams in order to learn firsthand about the wonders of the natural world.

On a trip to the solar system, Ms. Frizzle conveniently gets lost, requiring her students to explore (and learn about) all the planets until they find their guide beatifically floating in the asteroid belt. “Take chances, make mistakes, and get messy!” goes Ms. Frizzle’s catchphrase. The books are beautifully messy in their own way, each page a jumble of cartoon strips and colorful charts and students’ handwritten reports. Yet there is nothing manic or unreliable about Walkerville Elementary School’s passionate science teacher. The Friz gets the job done.

One of Ms. Frizzle’s most underrated skills is her ability to weather the most jarring of events with equanimity. At the outset of the first book, when her yellow bus suddenly transforms into a weightless vehicle filled with children clad in scuba suits, “Ms. Frizzle was the only one who didn’t seem to notice the change. She just drove on.” Were she to find her class transported to the confines of her living room, I have no doubt she would meet the challenge with that same gleam in her eye. I will never be one of those moms famous for her craft projects or homemade math worksheets, but come day one of “school,” I will show up to the kitchen table with all the enthusiasm and imagination I can muster. The hardest-going of realities deserve a heavy dose of The Friz.