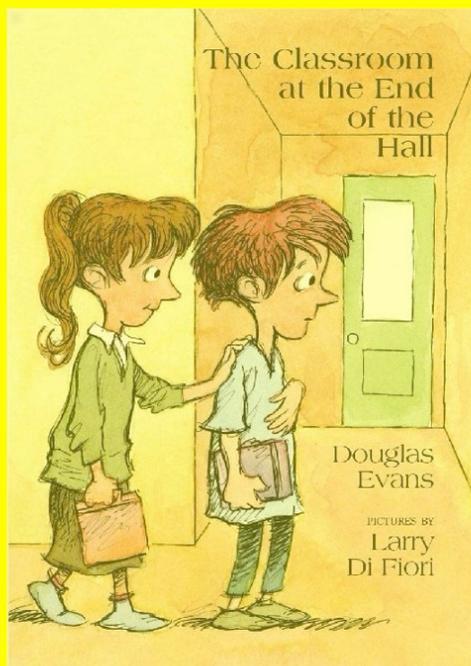


Selling My First Book **and the crazy next day**



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1912
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Douglas Evans

Parts

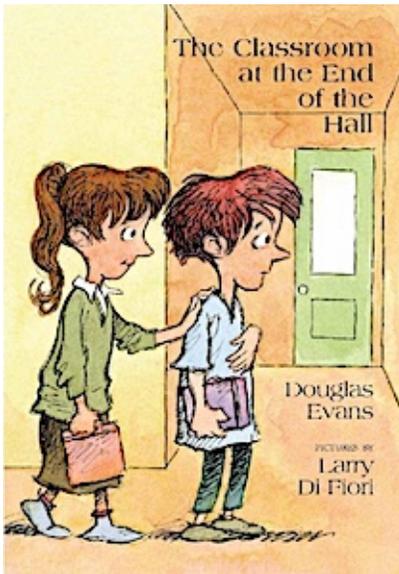
1. The Book

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The story of the day I sold my first children's book and the bizarre next day at the school where I was teaching.



Part 1

The Book

It had been a long time coming. After countless rejection slips and many rewrites, I received a call from Stephen Roxburgh, former senior editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, who had recently started his own publishing company, Front Street. He wanted to publish my first book **CLASSROOM AT THE END OF THE HALL**.

I began writing for children about ten years earlier. At the time, I was living in London after teaching for a year

in Helsinki. Typewriters were the norm back then, and I bought a small portable one at Ryman's. I set it up in the small bedsit I rented in Bloomsbury and began ANTA CLAUS OF ANTARCTICA. Using Whiteout, I wrote the date on the cover of the typewriter that I still have: 2/9/84

Writing during the day and lots of plays and concerts in the evening. The bedsit was right down the street from the British Museum, which I cut through every day. Gordon Square was where I ate lunch and read. *Dillions Book Store* was next door. It was a wonderful life. From my window I could look down on the roof of RADA and watched the actors practice sword fighting.

Roald Dahl is my favorite children's author, and I used his books as inspiration. I read aloud JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH each year to my classes. I consider CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY the ideal middle-grade novel. I bought a copy of JAMES in London, and used it as a guide for chapter lengths, the amount of dialog to include, and the pacing of descriptive passages. Still today, I pull out Dahl's books for motivation.

When I returned to the US, I moved to Berkeley, California, where I live today. I taught in various private and public schools in the area during the day, came home to take a nap, and then wrote late into the night. My first

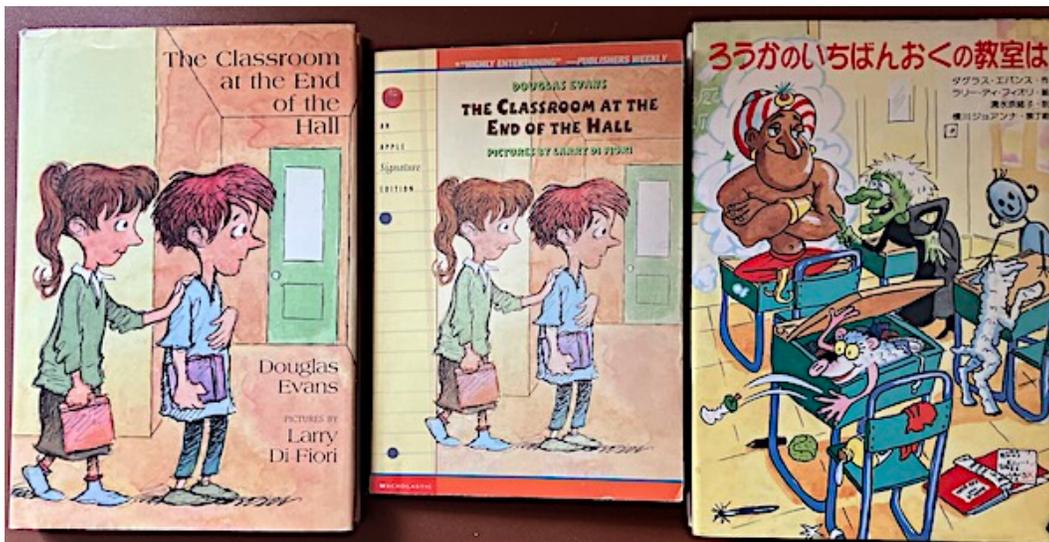
books didn't sell, but I managed to place short stories to CRICKET and other magazines.

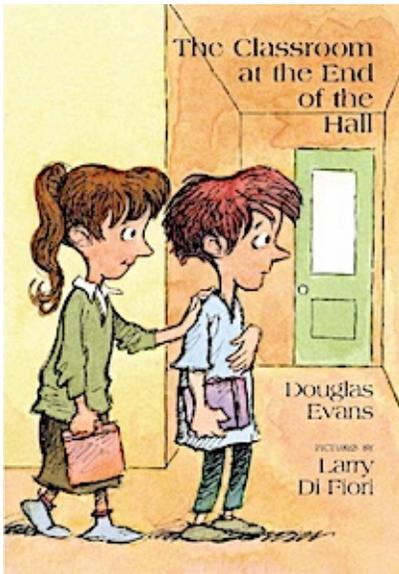
Back then, manuscripts were sent to publishers via mail with a self-addressed stamped manila envelope included for rejections. This made submissions rather costly and the wait for replies very long. But at the time, editors accepted submissions directly instead of through an agent as they do today. I covered my office walls with their form rejection letters, although I did receive some personal encouraging ones. Several editors asked for rewrites that added to the excitement, but nothing was accepted. ANTA CLAUS, BEDBUGS, CAPTAIN JOHN PAUL JELLYFISH, and THE SPECIALS were all rejected manuscripts I loved writing and have since self-published.

CLASSROOM AT THE END OF THE HALL is nine short stories about a third-grade classroom where magical creatures appear to help students with small problems, but familiar problems—the girl with a messy desk, the boy who hates art, and others. A former teacher named WT Melon, who lives above the classroom, creates these characters. I imagined him in the spirit of all-knowing figures like Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle, Mary Poppins, and Willy Wonka.

It's a beautifully produced book, with a bright yellow cover and illustrations throughout by Larry DiFiori. The

book design was beautiful, and the copy-editing first-rate. I learned a lot about writing and proofreading from that editing. After publication, I was proud to receive letters from teachers telling me **CLASSROOM AT THE END OF THE HALL** was their start-of-the-school-year class read aloud.





Part 2

Phone Call

At the time Stephen Roxburgh called, I was teaching second-grade at a school in a wealthy suburb in the Bay Area. It was a good school to work at, but after seven years, I was ready to leave. I knew Stephen by reputation. He had edited many of the Roald Dahl books I admired, *WITCHES*, *BOY*, *MATILDA*, among others. I also knew he had had a distinguished career at FSG and now lived in Asheville, North Carolina. Spring 1996 was Front

Street Books' first list, and I was particularly excited to be a part of it. What else do I remember about that call? I remember him guessing I was a seasoned grade-school teacher, which was correct. And I remember him telling me about the small Front Street Books publishing house, which was impressive.

Years later, during a round-the-country drive, I visited the Front Street office, and it was just as I had pictured it, an old-fashioned door with a transom, cluttered rooms where the wonderful assistant editor, the book designer, and the submission editor worked. I saw the samples of fabric used for book covers, the piles of manuscript received, and a shelf of Front Street books including mine. In Stephen's office hung a familiar picture of Robert Louis Stevenson. I told him that a few weeks ago, I had visited the RLS museum in St. Helena, CA, and the spot in Robert Louis Stevenson State Park where he spent his honeymoon.

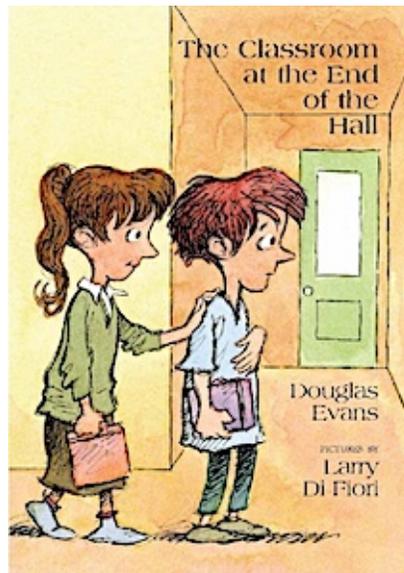
During the phone call, Stephen told me the reprint rights to *CLASSROOM AT THE END OF THE HALL* was at auction with top publishers, and the auction would continue the next day. I didn't know exactly what was happening, but it sounded exciting.

He called the next morning and said the reprint rights went to Scholastic and had reached a six-figure amount,

a record high for a first-time author. It would be part of their initial Scholastic Signature, series along with some of my favorite children's authors. He said they needed a photo for the inside cover. The only one I had was my last year's teacher photo, me wearing a black T-shirt, so I sent him that one. Later in the week, a small article in the New York Times appeared about the sale.

My time had come. I would quit teaching that winter and become a full-time children's author. I already had enough classroom creature stories outlined for a sequel. There were few people to tell that morning of my success. Few people even knew I was writing. Few people thought I could succeed at anything. That month, Publisher's Weekly picked me as one of their Flying Starts authors. It was 7:30, time to drive through the Caldecott Tunnel to my school in the East Bay and begin another school day.





Part 3 School

I loved being a teacher, especially teaching the primary grades. I call it the *Beautiful Profession*. What could be more important than helping children build the foundation for reading, math, and a lifelong appreciation of science, art, music, and the world around them?

The school where I was presently working, like most elementary schools in the US, was a remarkably feminine place. A fifth-grade teacher and I were the only men on staff. The lunchtime conversations in the teacher's room,

about husbands, grandchildren, and recipes, were a bit much. The school didn't even have a men's restroom, until a male principal was hired.

Unfortunately, this principal turned out to be ineffectual. He seemed to value education less than most of the teachers. In the seven years I worked with him, he never once visited my classroom, so any comments he wrote on my annual evaluation were meaningless.

My greatest complaint about the school was that they kept hiring teachers who grew up in that rich suburb or the next. This was the Bay Area, with some of the finest universities, and attracted the most interesting people in the world. But this faculty was filled with mostly women who lived near the school, grew up in this suburb, and some who actually went to this school. Needless to say, I felt an outsider at that school. Not only was I male, but I lived in Berkeley, seven miles away.

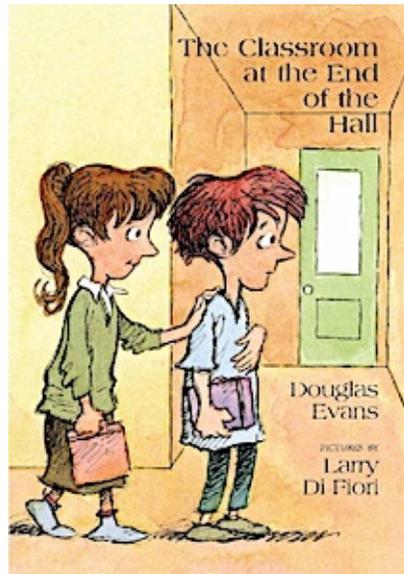
The word education comes from the Latin verb *educere*, which means *to lead out*. To me, that meant to help students see other ways, to take risks, to explore the world, and find their potential. The other teachers at this school were kind and hard-working people, but they were boring. How could they know what education was when they never bothered exploring the world themselves? Many teachers are good, but few are great. If you have a

chance, watch a great teacher in action. It's a beautiful thing.

When I arrived at school that remarkable morning, I was greeted by an astonishing sight. Piles of play money fluttered across the playground. Children were running around tossing more bills in the air, shrieking with delight. In the teachers' lounge hung a colorful banner that read CONGRATULATIONS, and on the wall was one of those giant checks you see on game shows. What was going on? Was this all for me and the record reprint rights? Except none of the teachers was saying anything to me. And, I also knew, none of the other teachers knew or cared that I was trying to be a children's book writer.

Not until morning recess break did I discover the reason for all this hullabaloo. First, I spotted the resource teacher wearing a funny hat and leis around her neck. Then I asked one of the aids what was going. She told me the resource teacher had just won the California lottery...\$14,000,000. What irony. On my proudest day as a teacher, everyone was celebrating a woman who had made millions by doing nothing.





Part 4 Sequels

CLASSROOM AT THE END OF THE HALL rolled on. All was great fun. The reviews in Publishers Weekly, Kirkus Review, School Library Review, and Booklist were all four stars. There were plenty of newspaper interviews, and the local bookstore hosted a marvelous launch party. A room parent even baked a cake that looked like the book's cover. Lots of kids from the school attended.

I stopped teaching that winter. I think I quit on the same day as the newly rich resource teacher resigned. That spring, I wrote the next book, *SO WHAT DO YOU DO?*, a book about empathy. In it, a sixth-grade boy discovers his beloved third-grade teacher is homeless and living in a city park. Together, they take refuge in his old classroom in his old classroom, at my former school, in fact. The reviews weren't too kind.

In the following years came *MATH RASHES*, a sequel to *CLASSROOM AT THE END OF THE HALL*, *APPLE ISLAND*, *OR THE TRUTH ABOUT TEACHERS*, *MVP: MAGELLAN VOYAGE PROJECT*, *THE ELEVATOR FAMILY*, and the third Classroom Creature book, *MOUTH MOTHS*. They received state awards, foreign rights sales, and *Junior Library Guild* selections. It was all very exciting.

One of the fun perks of writing children's books is receiving invitations to schools around the world. Several cities selected my books as community reads. I was invited to international schools in Hong Kong, Frankfurt, Genoa, and others. Each week, I'd received packets of letters from classrooms. Knowing that teachers were reading my books aloud was especially rewarding.

The writer's life continues today. I self-publish some books and write more songs and plays. I'm proud that

many of my children's songs are streamed on Spotify and that my play THE ELEVATOR FAMILY has been produced more than a hundred times around the world. I still do many Zoom chats with classes and write a big middle-grade novel each year. These days, my agent handles all the sales to publishers. I feel very lucky to be able to do what I do.

Listen to the song Classroom At the End of the Hall

<https://youtu.be/y1VAN4rPkyY?si=wjqCb96ozcNQVWMy>

