

## THINGS TO DO BOOKS

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# St. Paul science writer Anne Brataas strives to give growing minds plenty of Vitamin B(ook)



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Most people don't think of a little piece of Norwegian sheep wool as a book art, but Anne Brataas does. She showed kids how to make felt from wool at her Make and Take-Along party at December's European Christmas Market in downtown St. Paul. It was the first time this 5-year-old event had a booth for and about books.

Gathering a group of youngsters wearing colorful hats and mittens, Brataas showed them this bookmaking skill: "You take a piece of dyed and cleaned wool that looks like a piece of fluff. You put it in warm water, add a drop of baby shampoo, and work it with your fingers to make felt that you can make into a mug rug."

The wool-to-felt exercise grew out of Brataas' Fur Lab: Sensory-based Bookcrafting, in which youngsters help her develop characters for her children's books about environmental detective Mira, whose stories Anne read aloud at the Christmas Market. (More about Mira later.)

The kids had fun, but for Brataas, these kinds of activities fulfill one of her goals — helping young

people unplug from electronics. “I think kids start losing their creative abilities in about third grade to phones and screens,” she says. “They become estranged from their imaginations, substituting someone else’s.”

Brataas, 64, is a former Pioneer Press science/environment reporter whose weekly columns were gathered in the 1996 book “North Country Almanac: A Seasonal Guide to the Great Outdoors.” She’s an award-winning science writer, teacher, mentor and self-publisher of children’s books who has worked with youngsters for 20 years and is continually astonished at their abilities.

“Children are worthy,” she says. “They are majestically creative, curious, competent. Let’s listen to them, from them, their way.”

Her first principle in everything she writes and teaches is ethical empathy — “striving to live and act in empathy with all of creation to bring justice, joy and integrity to help build a commons of well being.”

## CAREER OF MANY LAYERS

“I’m part of the gig economy, modeling how you succeed as an entrepreneurial and science writer,” Brataas says. She funds her work with children through her “day job” of science writing for leading research institutions such as Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Mayo Clinic in her hometown of Rochester, Minn.

Brataas knows what she’s talking about when she talks science. She holds master’s degrees in zoology and in the history of science, technology and medicine from the University of Minnesota, and a master’s in environmental science from Ohio-based Miami University. She’s also a three-time winner of the American Association for the Advancement of Science curriculum writing competitions.

Her various programs and initiatives for children operate under the umbrella of The Story Laboratory, her award-winning science communications and learning consultancy housed in a small office on the third floor of the University Club on St. Paul’s Summit Avenue, and from a rented house in Grand Marais, Minn. The Story Lab mission: “Making science accessible through smart stories boldly told.”

When Brataas teaches her science and media labs, she refuses to use the top-down, adult-to-child model where the grown-up tells the kids what to do. Instead, she uses what she calls “Anne’s Teaching Up” model that allows everyone to communicate and collaborate. She pioneered her bottom-up book concept in 2005 at Capitol Hill Magnet School in

### Young authors write, edit and field test prototypes of Minnesota Children’s Press books.



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### Author Anne Brataas reads aloud to a child in the snow at the St. Paul European Christmas Mart



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St. Paul where a fourth-grade class wrote and illustrated a paperback book.

Brataas' "Rock Stories" classes and workshops are favorites at Macalester College's Minnesota Institute of Talented Youth, where she's taught for almost 20 years and serves on the board. In "Rock Stories" classes, students in grades one through four investigate Minnesota's geological foundation using specimens, tools and excavation methods.

In Brataas' "Aerobic Newspaper" class and workshops based at Macalester, students in grades four through six report and comment on the world through print and online media. The class also incorporates hours of walking and movement outside the classroom.

**Anne mentors young writers at a summer workshop.**



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"I found that some 10-year-old girls couldn't even walk a mile," she recalled, explaining why the students are urged to move their bodies even in the classroom. "Now we walk neighborhoods around Summit Avenue, and the students write about gardens, flowers and other things they see. They are encouraged to say hello to neighbors and look them in the eye. That's the kind of thing you have to teach kids these days."

Brataas, who's tall and exudes a I-know-what-I'm-doing strength that's reassuring to her students, can be tough. When she heard giggling on a bus trip she found the girls watching a phone app about hair styling. "I said, 'Not on my time. This is a waste of your imagination.'"

## TAKING IT UP NORTH

One of Brataas' goals is to bring her work with kids to those who don't have the opportunities city kids have, partly because the distances in northern Minnesota are so great.

Thanks to a 2017 Broadband Innovation grant from the Grand Rapids, Minn.-based Blandin Foundation, Brataas started BorealCorps Scouts, a nonprofit in Cook County that is a children's digital press corps. The kids write and publish the Grand Marais Gleam newspaper that connects rural Minnesota, creates community and teaches entrepreneurial skills to third- to eighth-graders.

To facilitate her programs in northern Minnesota, Brataas and her husband, Charles Hathaway, live from 30 percent to 50 percent of their time in a rented house in Grand Marais, but their home is in St. Paul. Hathaway is a civil engineer specializing in water resources who provides science and engineering consulting for Brataas and clients of

The Story Laboratory. Their sons are Kip, 24, an actor based in the Twin Cities, and Aaron, 22, an intern writer and editor for an English website in Copenhagen, Denmark.

One of the big projects for BorealCorps last year was creating health messages about the dangers of vaping, a way to use faux cigarettes that offer 700 candy flavors to deliver concentrated nicotine more intense than smoking.

"All my students knew about vaping, which the FDA says is creating an unprecedented number of addicted kids," Brataas said. "A woman with the American Lung Association in Minnesota, based in Duluth, heard about me as a science writer and they hired the BorealCorps as little lobbyists to show the dangers of vaping."

The students made posters at Java Moose, a Grand Marais coffee shop and gathering place, which they took to fairs and festivals in Cook and Lake counties and to legislators at the state Capitol last March.

In the room where the kids worked on the project was a picture of Brataas' mother, Nancy, the first woman elected to the Minnesota Senate on her own (not replacing a deceased husband) and a heavy smoker. She died of chronic lung disease in 2014.

### Boys proofread and field test one of Anne's books, looking for an error in the secret alphabet.



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## BECOMING A PUBLISHER

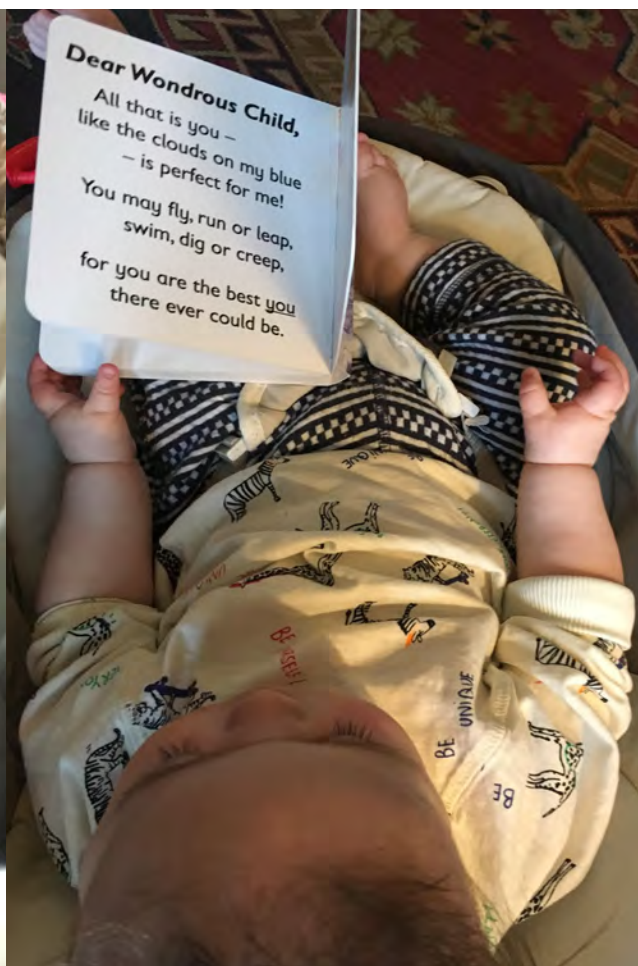
On election night 2016, when conservatives with an apparent anti-science stance gained the majority, Brataas asked herself what she could do to make a difference in how children see and react to problems of the planet.

Her answer: Publish compelling books using her science and writing background, even though she knew nothing about self-publishing, except for watching editors put together pages during her years at the Pioneer Press.

“I wanted to teach environmental problem-solving about real Minnesota pollution problems and scientific solutions through engaging stories in illustrated read-aloud books,” Brataas says.

The next day she returned to the manuscript about Mira that she had begun when her sons were born and had set aside for 15 years. Mira, who looks like a furry nebbish, enjoys solving problems such as why deformed frogs are

**Baby Book Club: Anne’s science writing expertise motivated her to start Baby Book Clubs to share scientific research showing optimal human brain development age 0-3 years old requires the stimulation of voiced, embodied words-- a person in the room with a child talking, reading, singing-- not a screen, not a recording. To mentor families in this, she offers “Read Aloud, Make Along With Mira,” workshops. And to ensure babies don’t ingest toxins as they “read with their mouths” Anne prints all her books in the U.S. where safety standards exist and are enforced. Not so in China, where most children’s books are published.**



*Credit: Anne Brataas, 2017. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.*

appearing in Minnesota or why dogs are dying from drinking water from some lakes.

“I’m modestly trying to reinvent the book as a social good and nutritional supplement,” Brataas said. “I really have used the word ‘biblioceutical’ to describe the effects that engaged, embodied reading (in the room, not on Facebook) to a child has on neuronal growth of the brain.”

Brataas believes children also need to know they are loved, and what better way to do so than for parent and child to cuddle while reading a bedtime story? This emphasis on making a child feel safe and empowered grows out of the 12-step philosophy that has kept Anne sober for 29 years.

What’s unusual about the Mira books is that each is written to appeal to three age groups so that the stories grow with the child’s ability to process the meaning of words. Mira can be a child’s companion from birth to middle grades. Brataas is especially proud that the Mira board books are toxin-free, so babies can safely chew on them — and they will.



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## STILL ANOTHER PROJECT

In the last days of 2018, Brataas legally formed Minnesota Children’s Press, her educational book-centered nonprofit based in Grand Marais. The website, [minnchildpress.org](http://minnchildpress.org), launched Friday, Jan. 25. In September 2019, Minnesota Children’s Press received its federal letter of determination certifying it as a 501(c) (3) non-profit, tax exempt public charity dedicated to youth development and education.

“Minnesota Children’s Press is a mentored, mobile publishing workshop that creates books by kids—their stories, their ways in words, pictures, stick figures, sudoku—whatever symbolic system they

**Anne works with kids in a summer field testing workshop on editing and book making.**



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choose to use to communicate. Phase one is dedicated to teaching kids in rural Minnesota writing, illustrating, publishing, marketing and distributing illustrated books by children in grades one through eight—80% of sales proceeds goes to a community-good they identify,” Brataas explains. “In phase two, in 2021, we will work with urban kids.” This summer she resumes what she calls “my carnie life” with the Minnesota Children’s Press inaugural recruiting tour of seven county fairs in rural, outstate Minnesota to find story scouts for MCP’s projects in the 2019-20 school year.

### **IT ISN’T ABOUT THE MONEY**

Anne Brataas doesn’t need to give a big part of her life to her kid-centered projects, which are financially just breaking even. But she’s driven to teach and here’s why:

**“I speak simple truths to children I feel are missing in the ever-commercializing, monetized-crazy child culture in America. ... ”**

“I speak simple truths to children I feel are missing in the ever-commercializing, monetized-crazy child culture in America. In my own books, and all book projects I’m part of, I encourage the project to have as its primary goal the making of meaning, not money. If we all lived in a world of meaning-seeking first — with money-seeking second — it would be a wonderfully different, more satisfying, more joyous, settled and sustainable world. It’s worth trying.

“And for me right now, it’s my highest calling, the culmination of all the major mentoring I’ve been blessed to have in my life. However they were different—from summer camp directors, to horseback riders, to scientists, academic field biologists and my parents — my mentors, in their hearts, were all dedicated to helping children find their way in the world, rooted by a kinship with the natural world. I feel a clarity of purpose about Minnesota Children’s Press, a steady beating of now, now, now, that I haven’t before in life.”



# MINNESOTA CHILDREN'S PRESS

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## Anne Brataas | Media Kit

Award-winning writer, author of the children's empathy-based science picture book series, *Mira's First Day of Wonder*, *Mira's Big Day of Wonder* and *Mira's Big Day of Minnesota*.



is the Aerobic Newspaper, a format she invented in 2006 and has published digital and print editions of with various groups of elementary-school-aged children ever since then.

### About Anne

Anne Brataas is an award-winning author, teacher, curriculum instructional designer, science writer, journalist, historian, children's book author, wife, mother of two adult sons. She and her husband live in St. Paul and Grand Marais, Minnesota.



As a master teacher for the Minnesota Institute for Talented Youth, she mentors and coaches youth writing projects. Her favorite

### Questions and Workshops

Anne is happy to talk about giving readings and teaching from the curriculum she has developed for conducting 3-hour school or family fun-science teaching workshops based on Mira, Mira's animal pals and costumes. Just send Anne an email at [anne@fastponypress.com](mailto:anne@fastponypress.com).



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