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Obituary: Andrew Clements

By Shannon Maughan | Dec 03, 2019

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Prolific children's author Andrew Clements, best known for his popular middle grade novel *Frindle*, about a fifth-grader's plan to invent a new word, died on November 28 in West Baldwin, Me., following an illness. He was 70.

Clements was born May 29, 1949 in Camden, N.J. He grew up in the nearby towns of Oaklyn and Cherry Hill before his family moved to Springfield, Ill., when Clements was in sixth grade.

In an anecdote shared with *Something About the Author*, Clements recalled that he was "something of a showoff" in kindergarten. "I was already a good reader and I didn't mind who knew about it." Clement shared in the biography on his website that he credited his parents, both



George Clements

Andrew Clements.

avid readers, with instilling a love of books and reading in him and his siblings, and noted that tech-free family summers spent at a cabin on a lake in Maine helped him "begin to think like a writer."

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At Springfield High School, Clements received recognition from his senior year English teacher for a humorous poem he composed. He wrote in his biography that the praise gave him a confidence boost as he headed to Northwestern University as a literature major. He continued to write poetry at college, and also learned to play the guitar, which led to songwriting just for fun. But when Clements taught a summer series of creative writing workshops for high school students, he enjoyed the experience so much that after earning his B.A. in 1971, he pursued a Master of Arts in Teaching at National Louis University. Upon graduating in 1972, he taught English in suburban Chicago schools for seven years. It was during his early days as a teacher that Clements married actress Rebecca Pierpont, and the couple welcomed their first of four sons.



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By 1979, Clements' teaching career became more precarious because of declining enrollment in the area schools. So he and his wife and toddler son moved to New York City, where he planned to establish himself as a folk singer-songwriter. This move inadvertently brought Clements into the publishing industry when he took a job as an editor at Allen D. Bragdon, a small company that produced how-to books. Clements claimed that his name first appeared in print on the acknowledgments page for a craft book entitled *A Country Christmas Treasury* by Allen Bragdon (1983).

A new opportunity in publishing, at Natick, Mass., start-up Alphabet Press, which later became Picture Book Studio, landed Clements in the role of acquiring, editing, and marketing children's books, as well as translating and adapting children's books imported from Europe. Clements also tried his hand at writing his own work, resulting in the picture book *Bird Adalbert*, published under the pen name Andrew Elborn (Picture Book Studio, 1985). A steady stream of picture books followed, and in the mid-1990s Clements segued into editorial positions at Houghton Mifflin's school division and the Christian Science Publishing Society. Soon after, he would write the book that changed his career.

As Clements told the story many times, the spark for *Frindle* arose from a presentation he gave at an elementary school in 1990 about the way words work. "I was trying to explain to them how words only mean what we decide they mean," he wrote on his website. He then went on to pull out a pen as an example, and call it a "frindle." Clements initially developed the idea as a picture book, just like his other titles. But after receiving some rejections—and advice to stretch things into a chapter book—he found a welcoming editor in Stephanie Owens Lurie at Simon & Schuster, who acquired the book and published it as a middle grade novel in 1996. The book has sold 8.3 million copies worldwide (3.7 million domestically) and its success led to Clements becoming a full-time writer.

Clements subsequently went on to write numerous other school stories for middle grade readers, as well as more picture books, and the YA trilogy begun with *Things Not Seen* (Philomel, 2002). In all, he created more than 80 books for young people.

At Simon & Schuster, Caitlyn Dlouhy, v-p and editorial director of Caitlyn Dlouhy Books, edited more than 10 books by Clements between 2008 and 2014. She remembered Clements with these words: "It's dazzling to think of the millions upon millions of kiddos' lives Andrew Clements touched. Showing them new ways to see their surroundings—and others within those surroundings—Andrew laced compassion and a keen eye for detail within all of his many works. The compassion was always a given, and never ever didactic. But the detailing shifted vastly from story to story as each book he wrote was singular. It was his care he gave to exacting measurements, maps and architecture that I found especially fascinating. It bespoke of an author who was himself fascinated with maps and architecture, who then shared that knowledge in a way that left readers knowing specifics about things they'd never known about before, without their even knowing that that's what he was doing. He could surround a mystery, as in his Keepers of the School novels, on the measurement of a hidden room, the placement of a statue, the sound of a hollow, the trajectory of a wrecking ball. That the seemingly smallest details, the smallest actions, could matter so much, is what Andrew reinforced again and again. Andrew Clements, in innumerable ways, reminded us all the pen was mightier than the sword, quite literally."

Shana Corey, executive editor at Random House Children's Books, edited Clements's two most recent middle-grade titles, *The Friendship War* (Feb.) and *The Loser's Club* (2017), and noted that at the time of his death, Clements was excited to have begun work on a long-awaited sequel to *Frindle*. In a note to colleagues, Corey shared some reflections of her author. "I feel so privileged that we had the opportunity to work with him at Random House. Meeting Andrew felt to me like meeting E.B. White, or at least the E.B. White of my imagination. Partly because I always pictured him puttering around his house in Maine. But mostly because Andrew had such an innate wisdom and gentleness about him, a calmness and kindness and a sense of honor and moral clarity that were palpable. He knew everything about the day to day of the publishing business and loved talking about it, and he had hilarious stories about being a Chicago public school teacher and about starting a family in Manhattan while trying to make it in a folk band. But no matter how grounded he was, he also seemed to operate on a slightly higher plane."

Clements's literary agent, Amy Berkower at Writers House, paid tribute to her client. "Andrew was an all-around great guy. Having worked as both a publisher and a teacher before he became a writer, he understood the business of publishing as well as he did the craft of writing. He was also a musician, which I think helps explain the source of his pitch-perfect prose. What I'll remember most about him was his steadfast belief in the importance of letting children be children. He wrote about children with lively imaginations who liked to challenge the status quo as well as the teachers who

helped nurture their creativity and guide them towards making a positive impact. He had enormous respect for his audience, and never let them down, as is evident in the long-lasting popularity of his books and his numerous children's choice awards. A man of rare integrity, grace, and wit, he will be greatly missed."

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Carol B. Chittenden

What a loss! But how much we gained from his work. How I loved recommending his books to customers, knowing they'd find wisdom, humor, and keen observations in every one. His depictions of smart teachers should be role models for all entering the profession.

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Karen Rennolds Rohner

I was a student of Mr. Clements. He was my 7th grade english teacher back in 1975 I think. I remember how he quietly kept the interest of the entire classroom. He used to sit on the edge of a desk and tell stories, teach and smile a lot. I see his young face buried in the face I see in his obituary. I don't remember many details about a lot of my past teachers, but I do remember Mr. Clements. I never knew he was the author of one of my daughter's favorite books, Frindle until years later. RIP Mr. Clements. Thank you for the memories.

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Patricia Lynn

How very fortunate for you. I bet he was a wonderful teacher!

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Ellen Mager

What a wonderful writer who loved sharing with children. He was one of my favorite author to suggest for middle readers. Even more, he was a wonderful person who I was so pleased I got to know. What a loss for us all..

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Colette Weitknecht

Thoughts and prayers. Always loved reading Andrew's books to my class!

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Wendy Andersen Hartman

Always loved his books and they were the first ones I would recommend to struggling readers because I knew they would love the characters, thus wanting to read more!

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Laurie Bumstead Weekly

Such a great loss! I had the privilege of meeting him at a conference many years ago. He was very kind and talked with me for several minutes. I enjoyed his presentation very much. So sad to hear of his passing.

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Sue Sok

I used Frindle to launch a conversation about freedom of speech with my third graders. Rest in peace Mr. Clements.

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Sarah Hankinson

Such a loss! Mr. Clements' work got many of my fourth grade students to enjoy reading. Frindle was, and always will be, one of my favorite books. This and so many others has been on the shelves of my classroom library. I am so thankful for his amazing gift of words.

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Just found out about this sad news after a Google search of Andrew Clements. I remember Room One, Frindle, Lunch Money, No Talking, The Report Card, The Laundry News, The School Story, A Week in the Woods, and The Janitor's Boy from elementary school. Ah, these stories remind me of those carefree days! Rest in peace Mr. Clements.

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