



# 2025

by the numbers

47 School Visits

2,595 Books Given

2,234 Children Served

7,900+ Miles Traveled

100 Teachers Served Through  
Professional Development Programs

## Letter from the Executive Director



As we head into 2026, I've been reflecting on my first few months as Island Readers & Writers' Executive Director. From the very beginning, I've been met with warmth and collaboration, and it has been such a joy getting to know IRW's family of authors and artists, students and teachers, supporters, and community members.

That sense of welcome has been especially strong within our team. Their creativity, dedication, and passion for our community of teachers, students, and families shine through in everything they do! In this newsletter, you'll get a closer look at IRW's incredible staff and the projects they've been leading.

Visiting classrooms across our partner schools has been a true highlight. Spending time with authors Kevin Hawkes, Anna Crowley Redding, and David Covell reminded me how powerful our programs are when students engage directly with books, ideas, and the people who create them. Watching students gain confidence in their creative work has reinforced my belief that these programs are not only impactful but essential—and it leaves me genuinely excited for IRW's future.

I'm deeply grateful to IRW's founder, Jan Coates, for her guidance and mentorship. Her deep knowledge of literacy education and unwavering belief in our mission have been invaluable as I've stepped into this role. I'm thankful for her generosity in sharing her experience, wisdom, and time, and I feel fortunate to continue learning from her!

Finally, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to our donors and supporters. We couldn't do this important work without you and I'm truly grateful for your continued support of IRW's mission.

Thank you for welcoming me into this book-loving community. I'm excited for the work ahead—and all we'll accomplish together in the months to come!

Wishing you a happy and healthy 2026,

*Courtney M. Manning*

## Our Team

Learn about our team's work, their favorite memories from 2025, and what they've been reading!

### KELSEY E. BUCKLEY

As Director of Communications, I am IRW's dedicated storyteller. Through our print and digital media, events, and enthusiastic chats, I'm always thinking and talking about our work and mission. As we begin 2026, I'm diving into our blog content, refining IRW's new website and print materials, and dreaming up plans for our 20th anniversary in 2027.



My favorite IRW moments in 2025 were at our two big professional development events; we held a Maine DOE-sponsored program focused on environmental education in March and our signature Dear Teacher conference in November.

I also spent a few months in 2025 away from IRW on maternity leave! My husband and I welcomed our twin girls, Molly & Maeve, in July. We have a hefty library of board books in rotation these days, from classics like *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* to newer favorites like the soft, high-contrast book *Cuddly Sheep*. Being a big fan of the Moomins myself, I was delighted to give the girls a *Moomin Tummy Time* book, *Moomin's First 100 Words*, and *Goodnight, Moomin!*



### LISA HERRINGTON

As our Program Assistant, one of my many duties in programs is to check in, unpack, and repack all the books for our school

visits. This is done in a small room we affectionately and creatively call, "The Book Room." It is a very physical job that makes me feel a bit like one of Santa Claus' elves. When the semester begins, all the shipments come to this space, boxes of books get piled waist-high and wait to be unpacked, counted, stickered with an IRW label, and then re-boxed for each school we serve. This fall I stickered and packed over 1,300 books for students and teachers! It is always worth it when we see the joy on the students' faces as they receive their personal, signed copy.

Choosing a favorite moment of 2025 is difficult, as it's always great to meet new authors and spend time with our tried-and-true collaborators. One favorite moment from the past fall was seeing the awe and wonder on each face in the room when Kevin Hawkes drew a face using only shading. We work with the very best! Now that traveling to schools has stopped for the winter, I am excited to reread my favorite childhood book, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Graham, and let the season's warmth unfold.

### ALISON JOHNSON, DIRECTOR OF SCHOOL PROGRAMS

I oversee all aspects of IRW's school programs (with support from our incredible team), including planning school visits, seeking new author/illustrator talent, and collaborating with school partners to find just the right fit for their community. I also help plan professional



## Forever Books

IRW's new programming encourages building strong literacy skills by connecting with families in Hancock County.

We are delighted to announce IRW's *Forever Books* initiative is underway with storytimes scheduled at Families First and Head Start in Ellsworth. Participating families will receive a copy of the featured book, with a charming *Forever Books* bookplate attached, and a guide with activities to extend the learning back at home.

We hope these programs will reach children at a crucial age when language and imagination are just beginning and will expand access to early literacy opportunities regardless of family resources.

## Dear Teacher 2025

What a delight it was to welcome educators and librarians to our signature professional development event once again! Our keynote speaker, John Schu, was filled with light, energy, and joy as he wove together personal and professional stories about the power of books.

Seeing educators come together to learn from one another and share their stories, hopes, and challenges was a powerful reminder that IRW's work goes far beyond the classroom. Find more about this year's Dear Teacher on IRW's blog!

development for educators in the IRW network by keeping an ear to the ground for what is needed most when visiting schools. Reading and researching the world of “kidlit” is an ongoing, fascinating part of my work as well. I love that our work allows us to be creative and do good in the world.

After a full (and fulfilling) year of IRW programs, my husband Eric and I made our way to Costa Rica for some much needed “R&R.” We stopped in Boston to visit our three daughters, and I was able to squeeze in a storytime at the school where my middle daughter, Laura, teaches first grade.

What I have been reading: *The Rosie Project* by Graeme Simsion (thanks to our Washington County host, Ann Luginbuhl) and *Nine Perfect Strangers* by Liane Moriarty. Some light adult fare just right for vacation!

## CELINE MARTIN

As IRW’s Literacy and Community Relations Coordinator, I lead our new early literacy initiative, *Forever Books*. This winter, we’ll launch our first *Forever Books* storytimes for 3–5 year olds across Hancock County.

I also work closely with our communications team—if you’ve seen IRW on social media, read our monthly newsletter, or browsed the Booklist, I had a hand in creating it! Outside of work, I stay busy with my five (soon to be six) grandchildren. I love reading with children and am passionate about advocating for strong literacy foundations for all kids.

One of my favorite IRW memories this year was a summer program at the Charlotte Rhoades Garden with author Rebekah Lowell. She introduced children to

nature journaling and read from her book *Catching Flight*. Watching the kids explore the beautiful garden and fill their own nature journals was truly heartwarming.

And, for fun—one of my all-time favorite children’s books is *Miss Rumphius* by Barbara Cooney.

## DAWN SEVERNS

As Data & Information Manager, I ensure the smooth collection and flow of the data needed to implement, evaluate, and document IRW programs. Though I work for IRW remotely in Iowa, I recently had the privilege of flying back to Maine to run the bookshop at the Dear Teacher Conference, offering educators a wide range of impactful books. Behind the scenes, I analyze feedback from educators, presenters, students, and authors/illustrators to help guide our programs, and improve how we serve our community. I’m often called the “octopus” of the team—multitasking, coordinating, and keeping everything and everyone connected.

Now that my teenage son is busy with friends and sports, I find myself enjoying downtime by reading a book a week. *I’ll Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch has been our favorite mother-and-son book since I read it throughout my pregnancy, and we still share its special phrase today. Above all, I am dedicated to helping our organization grow, stay organized, and continue making a meaningful impact.



## Mark Your Calendars

### Summer Morning in Maine 2026

IRW’s Summer Morning in Maine event is set for Thursday morning, August 6, 2026, at the historic Hulls Cove Schoolhouse.

Dating back to 1909, the Schoolhouse originally served as a satellite school for Bar Harbor and still features its original chalkboards lining the walls. Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Hulls Cove Schoolhouse offers a nostalgic and playful setting for IRW to honor the remarkable patrons whose dedication and generosity sustain our mission.





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## 2026 Winter Booklist

35 of our favorite new books to read this winter!

Visit [islandreadersandwriters.org](http://islandreadersandwriters.org) for a copy.

### Honoring the Heart of IRW

The IRW Community wished Jan Coates the very best as she embarked on her retirement this summer.

Last summer, about 75 friends and colleagues gathered at The Neighborhood House in Northeast Harbor to celebrate Jan Coates, Island Readers & Writers' beloved founder and first Executive Director. For nearly 20 years, Jan poured her heart into championing the education of Maine's children, and the afternoon was filled with laughter and stories that captured her unwavering dedication. One especially memorable moment was a heartfelt poem shared by Maine author & artist Chris Van Dusen, a longtime friend and partner of IRW. We are deeply grateful for Jan—her vision, energy, and love for learning continue to inspire all of us.

Gigi Bee Photography

