

**Dick and Jane and Zerna:** The Dick and Jane textbook reading series was the most popular textbook reading method of all time. It was translated into five languages and taught in elementary schools throughout the world for four decades, from the 1930s through the 1970s.

Zerna Addis Sharp (1889-1981), often called the “Mother” of the Dick and Jane textbooks, substantially conceived the concept and created the series. She herself always referred to Dick and Jane as her children. Although she never wrote the actual stories, without Zerna, her thoughts, her beliefs, and her skills, the Dick and Jane series never would have been.

Zerna was the first of five children born to Charlotte E. Sharp in Hillisburg Clinton County, Indiana. She studied at the teachers college in Marion and began her teaching career in Hillisburg. She then taught for a number of years in Kirkland before moving to LaPorte, where she was a reading consultant and a principal.



She was a highly intelligent, beautiful young woman, possibly ahead of her time, as well as possibly confined by the time and her gender. She had innovative teaching ideas and believed that children would enjoy learning to read and learn much easier if they identified with children shown in illustrations throughout books.

Her ideas for Dick and Jane originated from the experiences she had with her own school children. After she taught first grade for more than a decade and served as principal of an elementary school, the desire to develop her reading method ideas into a curriculum program began to take shape within her. But as a principal/teacher, in a small Indiana town, she did not possess a power structure nor a network of educators within higher academia needed to introduce any new innovative curriculum change in teaching.

But she did know of Dr. William S. Gray, Professor of Education and Director of Research in Reading at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Education. Convinced and determined that her reading method had superlative merit she contacted Gray and presented her original, unprecedented ideas to him.

Gray also was the Reading Director of the Curriculum Foundation Series at the publishing firm of Scott Foresman & Company in Chicago. He immediately hired her as a textbook consultant for Scott Foresman to develop a family of characters with which to mold *his* scientific approach to reading instruction that he wanted to foster. The year was

**1924\*** The job took her to Chicago and allowed her to implement her illustrated textbook reader ideas into the Dick and Jane series.

One day shortly after arriving in Chicago as she was walking along the beach of Lake Michigan, she decided just what she wanted in a book when she observed children at play saying, "Oh! Look! Oh, oh, look." Her nephew, Robert L. Sharp, recalled: "She used to go down and sit on the beach on the South Side of Chicago and listen to the kids playing. She noticed them saying, 'Look, look,' instead of just one word, 'Look.' That's how I understand the idea for the books came about." he said.

As textbook editor at Scott Foresman, Zerna selected the subject matter, the storyline and supervised the layout for each of the prime readers. She also named the characters and decided what clothing they should wear based on styles she chose from current Sears and Roebuck, and Montgomery Ward catalogs.

Zerna worked with illustrator Eleanor B. Campbell and several others to produce the texts. The writing format was easy for children to digest. Only one new word was introduced on each page and words were repeated every third page. No individual story introduced more than five new words. Each book featured large, color pictures with Dick, Jane, Sally, Puff, Spot, Mother, Father or Tim, the teddy bear, in an activity.



The illustrations showed the characters carrying out the action of the words. "There's nothing these book children do that a child couldn't remember having done themselves," Zerna once told an interviewer. "They made the books part of themselves. We made reading easy for them and encouraged them to read more." The Dick and Jane readers became a HUGE success.

In the 1960s the books were criticized as casting Jane and mother in stereotyped female roles subordinate to Dick and father, and that the stories were unrealistic for children in lower economic circumstances. Zerna, an independent successful businesswoman for most of her life, was outraged that women were attacking her. The emerging women's movement, which could be perceived that Zerna herself may have strengthened for other women by her own business success, perhaps even played a part in the decline of her Dick and Jane readers. But the public repercussions prompted Zerna to retire in 1964.

Scott Foresman began to place its emphasis on publishing other reading textbook methods, and by the early 1970s had discontinued printing the Dick and Jane textbooks. At the time, a company spokesman confirmed that many schools, still deeply devoted to these books, were hanging on to them. The books continue to be read in homes today and still continue to effect the way children learn to read.

Into her retirement, Zerna continued to live in Chicago for a while and to visit Scott-Foresman regularly where for more than thirty years of her life she helped shape reading skills for generations of children. Zerna who had a zest for life and learning all of her life, traveled to Spain in 1974 at the age of 85. She fully retired in Seal Beach, CA until 1977 when she returned back to her home state of Indiana where this never-married "mother" of Dick and Jane passed away in 1981 at age ninety-one.

The Clinton County Historical Society in Indiana considers Zerna Addis Sharp as "one who has made a significant impact on society." Visit their site and read more about their dedication to Zerna Addis Sharp.

**\*AUTHOR NOTE:** According to a Dr. Gray website, in **1930** he became a coauthor, with William H. Elson, of a popular basal reading series-the Elson Basic Readers. And, in **1940** Gray became the first author of these Basic Readers, now *renamed*, and the "Dick and Jane" readers went on to become widely used throughout America, published by Scott-Foresman and Company: <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2021/Gray-William-Scott-1885-1960.html>.

Sources: [http://www.tagnwag.com/dick\\_jane/](http://www.tagnwag.com/dick_jane/); <http://www.cchsm-indiana.com/zerna-addis-sharp.html>; <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/06/19/obituaries/zerna-sharp-91-dies-in-indiana-originated-dick-and-jane-texts.html>; <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2021/Gray-William-Scott-1885-1960.html>.