

Clarissa Willis: Where Stories and Education Meet

Summary: A 2026 inductee into the Arkansas Writers Hall of Fame, Clarissa Willis, has spent over four decades shaping how children learn and how teachers teach. A professor emeritus, former senior vice president at Kaplan Early Learning Company, and nationally and internationally sought-after speaker, she is also the author of nine children’s books and 19 teacher resource books. Her children’s book awards include the 2025 Spur Award, three Will Rogers Medallion Awards, A Willa Award finalist, and An Ella’s Choice Kindness Award.

Meet Clarissa Willis



Dr. Clarissa (Chrissy) Willis is a 2026 inductee into the Arkansas Writers Hall of Fame, a 2025 SPUR Award winner (Western Writers of America), and a three-time Will Rogers Medallion Award recipient whose work has reached classrooms, libraries, and families across the country.

She is the author of **nine children’s books**—including *Fast as the Wind: The Story of Johnny Fry Pony Express Rider*, *Bloomers on Pikes Peak: The Story of Julia Archibald Holmes*, and *Carrie Ingalls: The Forgotten Sister*—and **19 teacher resource books** that help educators build inclusive, joyful learning environments for every child.

Willis’s influence extends beyond the page. A professor emeritus of Special Education at the University of Southern Indiana and a former senior vice president at Kaplan Early Learning Company, she has helped shape early childhood education through two major curriculum pillars: *Learn Every Day* (Kaplan Early Learning Company) and comprehensive curriculum work with *Frog Street Press* (Pre-K, Infant–Toddler, and Three-year-old programs). She is also a nationally and internationally sought-after keynote speaker who has trained educators in all fifty states and twelve foreign countries.

For anyone—who understands the power of education, the strength of community, and the importance of lifting others—Willis’s story is a clear example of what can happen when scholarship, service, and creativity are pursued with equal seriousness.

The Work Behind The Awards

Willis’s career is distinguished not only by its breadth but by its consistency: for over four decades, she has focused on how children learn, how teachers teach, and how communities can support both.

She earned a PhD in Early Childhood Special Education from the University of Southern Mississippi and a master’s degree in Speech-Language Pathology from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. She often refers to herself as a “recovering speech-language pathologist,” a lighthearted phrase that signals a deep professional grounding in communication, development, and evidence-based practice.

Her work has spanned the full continuum of education. She taught kindergarten, special education, and higher education, and she held leadership roles that shaped statewide and regional early intervention services. As associate director of the Center of Excellence in Early Childhood Learning and Development at East Tennessee State University, she directed major initiatives including Tennessee’s Early Intervention System Technical Assistance Project, the East Tennessee Autism Training Project, and the Expanding Horizons Early Intervention Program.

At Kaplan Early Learning Company, Willis served as a senior vice president overseeing intellectual property and curriculum development—work that requires both academic rigor and practical insight into what educators need. Her curriculum leadership is perhaps best captured in two major contributions:



- **Learn Every Day** (Kaplan Early Learning Company), a comprehensive curriculum project designed for infants, toddlers, twos, and preschool learners
- Curriculum work with **Frog Street Press**, including programs for **Pre-K, Infant–Toddler, and three-year-old** classrooms

In 2013, she returned to what she calls her “first love”: teaching. She retired in 2023 as a professor of Teacher Education at the University of Southern Indiana, and today she continues to provide keynote addresses and workshops that translate research into strategies teachers can use immediately.

Willis’s publishing record is equally substantial. She has authored **19 teacher resource books** and written curriculum and professional development materials for Frog Street Press, Kaplan Early Learning Company, and the Scholastic RED Professional Development Project. She has also written three early picture books for Frog Street Press and authored the *Inclusion Strategies Guide* (Frog Street Press, 2024).

About Clarissa Willis

One title illustrates her reach and impact: *Teaching Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder* has been published in **nine languages**, reflecting an international demand for practical, respectful approaches to inclusion.

Her expertise has been recognized at the highest level. She was invited to the President's Conference on Brain Research and Early Childhood Education at the White House in These achievements are not separate from her work as a children's author; they inform it. Willis writes with a professional understanding of child development and an educator's instinct for what will engage a young mind.

The Author's Voice (creative work, leadership, and legacy)



Willis's award-winning children's books frequently draw from history and place, bringing overlooked stories into the light with clarity, momentum, and heart.

In *Fast as the Wind: The Story of Johnny Fry Pony Express Rider*, she introduces young readers to the grit and speed of the Pony Express through the eyes of its first rider—an approach that earned a Will Rogers Medallion Award and shows her ability to make history accessible without flattening its complexity.

In *Bloomers on Pikes Peak: The Story of Julia Archibald Holmes*, Willis tells the story of the first woman who climbed—literally and figuratively—toward a larger life. The book earned a 2024 Will Rogers Medallion and was the only finalist for the 2024 Willa Literary Award, recognition that signals both literary excellence and cultural relevance.

In *Carrie Ingalls: The Forgotten Sister*, Willis turns her attention to a figure many readers know only at the margins. Carrie exemplified resilience and the daunting spirit of women who shaped the west. The book's honors—including the 2025 SPUR Award from Western Writers of America and a Will Rogers Medallion—reflect what happens when a writer combines historical curiosity with compassion: a “forgotten” person becomes unforgettable.

Beyond her own writing, Willis also contributes to the broader ecosystem that supports authors and readers. She is active in the writing community, serving on the boards of the Between the Pages Writers' Conference, the Ozark Creative Writers Conference, and the Writer's Colony at Dairy Hollow.

Her work in publishing further extends her influence. As the creative force and owner of Solander Press, she helps authors bring stories to life for children and adults alike—work that mirrors her career-long commitment to learning, literacy, and opportunity.

About Clarissa Willis

Taken together, her accomplishments reflect a rare combination: a scholar's credibility, a publisher's understanding of audience, and an author's ability to move readers.

Her story offers a reminder that education and creativity are not separate callings. In Willis's life, they are mutually reinforcing—and they have produced a legacy that continues to grow, one classroom, one conference, and one book at a time.

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