



# The Boy on the Beach: Building Community through Play

*Vivian Gussin Paley*

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Four-year-old Eli plays alone at the shore, inventing dramas out of sand and water. He is Builder, Fireman, Protector, and Scout, overcoming waves and conquering monsters. Enter Marianne and doll, Mother and Baby, eager to redefine Eli as a good father and homesteader. Their separate visions intertwine in a search for a common ground on which howling wolves and butterfly sisters can learn to understand and need one another.

What can the richly imagined, impressively adaptable fantasy world of these children tell us about childhood, development, education, and even life itself? For fifty years, teacher and writer Vivian Gussin Paley has been exploring the imagery, language, and lore of young children, asking the questions they ask of themselves.

In *The Boy on the Beach* she continues to do so, going deeper into the mystery of play as she follows Eli and Marianne through the kindergarten year, finding more answers and more questions. How does their teacher, Mrs. Olson, manage to honor and utilize the genius of play to create an all-inclusive community in which boys and girls like each other and listen to each other's stories? Why is Paley's fellow teacher Yu-ching in Taiwan certain that her children pretend to be kittens in order to become necessary to the group? And why do teachers in London see their children's role-playing as the natural end to loneliness in the school community?

Rich with the words of children and teachers themselves, *The Boy on the Beach* is vintage Paley, a wise and provocative appreciation of the importance of play and enduring curiosity about the nature of childhood and the imagination.

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