Helen Lester is a writer just like you and I. All writers have to start from the beginning just like elementary students by writing first drafts, revising, and working with an illustrator. Helen is no exception to this. She claims that authors really have no idea what they’re doing when they begin, it’s only by asking questions do they complete a story.

Even before all of this Helen struggled with writing while growing up in Evanston, Illinois. She suffered a short spout of dyslexia and “mirror writing” in elementary school. Her teacher had to hold her work up to a mirror in order to read it because Helen would write backwards. After this was fixed, she sometimes still found it difficult to come up with ideas on what to write, but when she did have ideas, she loved to write.

When she grew up she became a teacher. She especially loved teaching writing because the students were so creative. She loved teaching writing so much, she decided to start writing children’s books herself. Her first six books were unsuccessful. The seventh novel she wrote was called “Cora Copycat” and in 1979 was published. She claims the first author she ever met was herself, though in the beginning she wasn’t very popular. Though as she began to write more, she gained more popularity. Her favorite award she ever won was a North Carolina Children’s Author award that is voted upon by students. She says it’s her favorite because she writes for the kids, so an award from them is what makes it worthwhile.

Since her career started, she has published over 25 children’s books. Her most popular characters are Tacky the Penguin and Wodney Wat. She has won over 21 awards for her book “Hooway For Wodney Wat” alone. Her inspiration for her books come from both her own past experiences as a child, as well as the students in her classroom. She says that Tacky, Wodney, and even Perfect, Neatly and the rest of the gang were all students in her 1st and 2nd grade classrooms while teaching. Her own experiences lend to the themes of her books. She likes to talk about problems children might face in a humorous way, because she
herself remembers what it was like to be different than her classmates.

Today she spends her time in Pawling, NY where she and her husband Robin live with their dog. She enjoys cooking all kinds of foreign food in her spare time, as well as drawing and she even hikes a few miles each day. Along with her husband, she also has two grown sons and three grandchildren. She is still writing today, but in between books she enjoys visiting schools and encouraging students to write with the messages that:

“*My Books don’t jump out of the computer*”
“*Not all of my stories get published*”
and “*Being edited isn’t fun but it’s good for you.*”

Before Helen began publishing books, she felt she was just writing around the drawings she was creating. She has illustrated her book, “Author: a true story,” but for the most part she collaborates with Lynn Munsinger, who has illustrated every other book she has published. Helen claims that Lynn draws the things that Helen would if she could. She prefers to let someone who has been to art school do the drawing while she sticks to her writing.

Even though Helen is a published author, she still works hard to create the books that children read today. She also encourages everyone to write and that all it takes is the determination to complete something, as well as someone who is not afraid to fail and fail again. Her advice to young writers is that

“writing is like doing a maze. I have lots of wonderful ideas. And lots of un-wonderful ideas. So the trick is to keep trying to find your way. And the more you exercise your writing the better you get at solving that maze.”

Helen is an author, a writer, an illustrator, a teacher, a mother, and a friend to children. Both her life and her books are an inspiration to teachers and students to remember when you fall; you always have to get back up again. She will continue to write as long as she can and as long as the children enjoy her books because out of everything in life she is most proud of the impact one of her books can make on a child’s life.
HELEN LESTER
Booklist

   It Wasn’t My Fault - 1985
   A Porcupine Named Fluffy - 1986
   Pookins Gets Her Way - 1987
   Tacky the Penguin - 1988
   Me First - 1992
   Three Cheers For Tacky - 1994
   Listen Buddy - 1995
   Princess Penelope’s Parrot - 1996
   Tacky In Trouble - 1998
   Author: A True Story - 2002?
   Hooway For Wodney Wat - 1999
   Score One For The Sloths - 2001
   Tacky And The Emperor - 2000
   Tackylocks And The Three Bears - 2002
   Something Might Happen - 2003
   Hurty Feelings - 2004
   Tacky And The Winter Games - 2005
   Wuzzy Takes Off - 1997(?)
   The Sheep In Wolf’s Clothing - 2007
   Batter Up Wombat - 2006
   Tacky Goes To Camp - 2009
   Tacky’s Christmas - 2010
   Wodney Wat’s Wobot - 2011
   All For Me And None For All -
Helen Lester’s books all share a major theme that will help students learn from others who have experience in being different from others. These would be important to use in the classroom, particularly in Early Childhood years because it would introduce the lesson that being different isn’t a bad thing, and sometimes it can be very good to be different. We can see this lesson in each of the Tacky The Penguin books, as Tacky is very different from the other penguins on their ice island, but he doesn’t allow this to stop him from being exactly who he is and the situations he finds himself in, always work out for him. The lesson of embracing one’s differences is also prominent in the book ‘Hooway For Wodney Wat.’ This book stars a rat who has a speech impediment and even though all the students make fun of him, he uses it to trick the school bully in a game of ‘Simon Says.’ This would be a great book to introduce the lesson that everyone is different, and even though some of us may have differences that we struggle with, we must accept everyone for who they are and treat everyone the same way.

We see more lessons such as how listening is important, and if we don’t it can get us into trouble, that lesson is taught to students by a silly rabbit named Buddy who has huge ears, but refuses to use them until he learns how important it is.

The lesson of accepting ourselves the way we are is prominent in A Porcupine Named Fluffy. Fluffy teaches us that we may not like everything about us, but we should accept ourselves for exactly as we are made because we are all one of a kind.

One of my favorite lessons was taught in the book, Me First. This book teaches the
lesson that being first isn’t always the most important thing to be. I would bring out this book when I notice my students having an issue with fighting to be first in line. I would most likely have the students talk about times they like to be first and I would think aloud ways for the class as a whole to solve our problem of everyone always wanting to be first, and I would most likely also establish a “line leader” job in the classroom at this time.

One of the most important books to use in the classroom would be Helen’s book, “Author: A True Story.” This book would be important to introduce to the class when beginning the writing process in first grade. I would also leave multiple copies of the book around the room so students could revisit it during writing time. Especially when they are struggling with the idea of revising and editing their writing. Helen would provide inspiration that even a published author doesn’t like to edit, but explains how and why it is necessary. This book I feel would be a great tool for students to provide inspiration to keep going as well as it is a tool to help students through the writing process.
Score One for the Sloths
Helen Lester – 2001
All the sleepy sloths sleep all day in school. Soon a new peppy sloth student shows up and she is as bored as ever watching everyone sleep all day. But someone from the school district shows up claiming that their school will be shut down because it is a disgrace in scores. Sparky the peppy sloth leads the class in reading, music, and poetry to save the school.

Tacky and the Emperor
Helen Lester – 2000 – Always be you
Tacky and his gang prepare for the emperor’s visit. They make fish flavored foods and blow up balloons and decorate a chair and Perfect even prepares to entertain him with a dance. Tacky wanders off and finds the emperor’s robes and returns home. All his gang receives him as the emperor and treats him as such. When the real emperor shows up everything they had prepared was destroyed so Tacky gives him a snowball cone, which the emperor loves and provides him with a dance as entertainment and tells jokes. The emperor loves it so much he stays all day and claims it the best visit he has ever made. The gang all hugs Tacky and realizes what a great guy he is to have around.

Tackylocks and the Three Bears
Helen Lester – 2002
The gang puts on a school play. Tacky gets to play Goldilocks. He ruins a few parts of the play and the gang is upset, but the audience loves it and they are very pleased with the performance.

Three Cheers for Tacky
Helen Lester – 1994
The gang enters a penguin cheering contest and all the penguin schools cheer for judges. All the groups are really boring and put the judges to sleep. But when Tacky gets up there he messes up their cheer but it causes everyone to laugh and laugh and everyone loves Tacky and the gang.
Hooway for Wodney Wat
Helen Lester – 1999
This book is about Wodney Wat and how he has a speech impediment. He struggles with talking and the kids make fun of the way he mispronounces words. One day a bully comes and the class plays “Simon Says” at recess and all the kids take in to account Wodney’s speech impediment, except for the new bully. And she gets all mixed up and does everything wrong and defeats the bully. Everyone cheers for Wodney.

Tacky in Trouble
Helen Lester – 1998
Tacky sales away while surfing and meets an elephant who thinks he is a bouquet of flowers. To prove he is a penguin he dances and spreads bright colored foods all over the elephant’s table cloth. The elephant thinks her tablecloth is so beautiful and sends Tacky back on his way for creating the wonderful colorful tablecloth. When he returns home, the gang is glad to see him because things were getting rather boring without him.

Tacky the Penguin
Helen Lester – 1988
A group of hunters come looking for pretty penguins. All of the gang hides and leaves Tacky to greet the hunters. Tacky asks them if they are looking for penguins that march in nice rows, dive neatly, and sing beautifully. Tacky does all these things in his own way, he marches 1, 4, 2 ½, 0, he does a cannonball into the water, and he sings his fish foot song as loud and screechy as always. The hunters who can’t stand the noise, run away saying that there is no way this is the land of beautiful penguins. The gang is all happy Tacky was around to save the day, even if he is an odd bird.

The Wizard, The Fairy, and The Magic Chicken
Helen Lester – 1983
This is about a Wizard, a Fairy and a Magic Chicken who all claimed to be the best, but were secretly jealous of the other two. They kept trying to prove they were better than the others with magic, but they only ended up making mean scary monsters that tried to attack them. To scare them away they worked together to create rain, lightning, and thunder that shrunk the monsters to a smaller size, and therefore not scary at all. These three were all very competitive, but deep down they were also really good friends.
It Wasn’t My Fault
Helen Lester – 1985
Murdley Gurdson always had stuff happen to him, and it was usually his fault. One day an egg landed on his head and the bird said it wasn’t her fault because she got scared by an aardvark scream. The aardvark screamed because a pygmy hippo stepped on his tale. The pygmy hippo stepped on his tail because he moved out of the way of a hopping shoe. When they found the hopping shoe, they found the rabbit inside. The shoe though, was the one Murdley Curdson lost and so it was his fault. He was very upset, so all his friends took him home and helped him make scrambled eggs and he was very happy.

Me First
Helen Lester – 1992
Pinkerton liked to be first for everything. One day he met a Sandwitch who made him be first to take care of her by washing her dishes, doing her laundry, tucking her in and telling her a bedtime story. Pinkerton learned that it is not always good to be first and when he told the witch this, she let him go and he was happy to have just made it back to the bus in time to be the last one on and was happy with that.

A Porcupine Named Fluffy
Helen Lester – 1986
Fluffy the Porcupine wasn’t very fluffy as his name said. He tried to be more fluffy, but he just wasn’t very fluffy. When he went on a walk he met a rhino who’s name was Hippo. Hippo and Fluffy laughed and laughed at how silly their names were. After they were done laughing, they became best friends.

Pookins Gets Her Way
Helen Lester – 1987
Pookins always gets her way, if she doesn’t she makes faces, throws apples and yells loudly. One day while wearing her party dress because she wanted too, she met a gnome. The gnome gave her three things she wanted. The first were new cowboy boots, the second was a crown with lots of diamonds. The third thing she wanted was to be a flower, so the gnome changed her into a flower. Day in and day out she grew taller and taller as a flower, until one day it was going to rain. She let the gnome hide under her petals to protect him. Afterwards the gnome made a deal with Pookins that if she put all her bad faces, apples, and yelling into his magic hat, he would turn her human again. Pookins agreed and she only kept one apple just in case.
Listen Buddy  
Helen Lester – 1995  
This book is about Buddy the bunny who has huge ears, but a lot of trouble listening. He ends up at the Varmint’s cave where in his attempt to help him with his soup, he messes it all up. After that he hops away faster than he’s ever hopped before and learns his lesson about listening.

The Sheep in Wolf’s Clothing  
Helen Lester – 2007  
This book is about a Ewe that goes to a Wool Ball dressed as a Wolf. She thinks everyone will love her outfit and admire the way it moves on her, but instead all the other sheep talk about her and how in bad taste it was to dress up as a wolf. Then a real wolf shows up dressed as a sheep and she figures it out. She tricks him into throwing a tantrum that leaves him so exhausted he leaves. All the sheep are thankful for her and how she saved them all.

Tacky Goes to Camp  
Helen Lester – 2009  
Tacky and the gang went to summer camp. At camp they did all the things that campers do, like rock climbing, arts and crafts, and even canoeing. One night they were sleeping outside and were telling scary stories. When Tacky told his story, it ended up being a joke. The penguins all went to sleep. Than a bear came just like in Tacky’s story and it began to destroy and eat their camp. Just when it was looming over the other penguins, Tacky arose in his sticky sleeping bag covered in marshmallows and scared the bear away. Once again Tacky was an odd bird, but a nice bird to have around.

Something Might Happen  
Helen Lester – 2003  
This was a great story about a lemur who is afraid of something happens. This would be a great story to introduce to the students that even though things happen, we can’t worry about whether they are going to or not and letting that fear run our lives.

Princess Penelope’s Parrot  
Helen Lester – 1996  
This book is about a spoiled princess who wants to marry the richest prince, but the parrot she got for her birthday ruined it all. This book isn’t one I would most likely use in my classroom. I didn’t really find a lesson worth teaching my students in it, especially because Penelope doesn’t seem to change her ways.
Hurty Feelings
Helen Lester – 2004
This book would be great to use on the lesson of accepting compliments and also hurt feelings. It would be good to talk about if some of Fragility’s fits were appropriately provoked or not. And what the students could do that was more appropriate when their feelings are hurt.

Batter Up Wombat
Helen Lester – 2006
This book is a good book. It followed the similar theme of the Tacky the Penguin Books where the wombat was playing baseball but didn’t really understand how to play and so he felt very much alone and embarrassed. But then when he was needed he dug a hole that saved them all from the tornado and everyone was very glad he was there.