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Building Bigger Readers with Book Talks

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jul 24, 2023

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Librarians and teachers spend a large part of their day talking about books. These book talks can be of the one-on-one variety, with a small group, or an entire class. Some can be casual, planned presentations—or somewhere in between. We spoke with two librarians and one teacher about how they create book talks that are so engaging, that their students can't help but grab the books off the shelves. Simply put, they are walking the walk with book talks.

Patrick Andrus is a fourth grade teacher, blogger, and book talker at Prairie View Elementary in Eden Prairie, Minn. He also leads the Breakfast with Books book club on the last Friday of the month for any fourth grade students who are interested.

To announce the monthly book selection, he wraps the title in brown construction paper, writes "Breakfast with Books," and covers it with question marks. Then, the real fun begins. "The build-up to the reveal starts on Monday," Andrus said. "Sometimes, I might show a book trailer, or I'll give them clues about the book and author, and have them do research to figure out what the book might be. Then the big reveal is on Friday of the first week of the month."

Andrus likes to raise the level of anticipation until his students can't take it anymore. "They get so excited, they'll start chanting: 'Show us the book!'" Because I've drawn it out so long," Andrus said. "The club has become a focal point of our classroom—and it's taken on a life of its own."

Andrus breathes life into the month-long book talk by choosing books that his students haven't read or heard about, and that span different genres. He also makes sure to include a diverse range of books and authors.



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Patrick Andrus.

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This year, the book club's membership varies each month between 12 to 16 of his 25 students, and a growing list of middle grade authors that Andrus has connected with through social media and the NCTE. "The authors' involvement personalizes the books and our discussion," he said.

As for the kids, they read the book throughout the month at home and/or during independent reading time, and talk among themselves about the story, their personal connections, and more. They also write the questions they will ask the author on the day of the book club breakfast. Two such queries helped expand the club beyond the classroom—and increase its monthly membership. "During the pandemic, a student asked if he could read the book with his grandma," Andrus said. "And then, when we returned to the classroom, another asked if her grandparent could join the club in person. I said, 'Absolutely!'" The club's now open to parents, aunts/uncles, grandparents, and any others who want to join. "So, now our book club is multigenerational." Andrus said, "The kids see that books are for everybody!"

During the breakfast book club with author Elly Swartz, one student revealed a personal connection to her novel, *Finding Perfect*. "He shared that it was the first time he saw someone like him with OCD in a book," Andrus said. "I hope having these types of experiences in our book club will carry them through school and their adult life—and help them become lifelong readers."

Lauren Mobley is a school library specialist at North Clayton Middle School in College Park, Ga. She's in her second year in the library after teaching English and special education. Mobley said she wanted to bring "energy and fervor" to her new role. And that's exactly what she does when talking about books with her sixth through eighth grade readers—and with great purpose.

"I'm trying to learn more about book talks, and make them more engaging," Mobley said. She accomplishes this by talking only about books that she has actually read. "This allows me to talk about a lot of the books in our library," Mobley said. "But there are always new books coming out—so I keep reading."

For each talk, she creates an outline to begin. She makes sure to share the title, the author's name, tell a little about the story, and offer a teaser of sorts with one mission in mind: "To me, the goal is to talk just enough to make my middle schoolers want to read the books—without spoilers," Mobley said. "It's like a movie trailer; if it told you about the whole movie, what would be the point of watching it?"

Mobley keeps her book talks right around two minutes. She highlights different titles for each class period because, after her book talks, there aren't enough copies to go around. As a result, some of her students have been known to squabble over who gets to read the book first. "I just say that I'm going to leave the book on the table," Mobley said, "and then, whoever gets it, gets to read it first."



Lauren Mobley.



Mobley takes note of her students' interests for future recommendations and book orders. She also shares with them her love of web design (she assists with the school website) and the arts. All of these things have helped her become a trusted confidante and resource for her students.



Mobley's Book Menu.

“Because once they know you, they’ll trust you with book recommendations and even step out of their comfort zones,” Mobley said. “Book talks offer something that book catalogs can’t. It’s entirely different when you hear a recommendation from someone.” Mobley’s students can feel and see her commitment to helping them find the right books for them.

Even her library’s graphic novel bulletin board doubles as a visual book talk that she keeps up all year long. It’s a visual reminder for students and teachers about the many benefits of reading graphic novels. “Just because these novels have pictures doesn’t devalue the literature’s quality,” Mobley said. “Readers of graphic novels need to do all of the same things other readers do, including making inferences and using other reading skills. They also make the library—and reading—more inclusive for a reluctant reader.”

And if a reader’s tastes don’t include graphic novels, Mobley has a Book Menu she’s created with more options. Inspired by librarian Melissa Corey, the menu is a large binder filled with book covers categorized by genres, along with lists of tantalizing details for each book. “It stands up on the counter and kids can flip through it to find books including *that book*—the one that will change everything.”!

Chris Baron is a college professor and poet at San Diego City College who knows his way around a book talk. “At first, it was just me waving a book or asking my students what they liked to read, and then trying to come up with book suggestions for them.



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But since Baron became a middle grade novelist, his book talks have become multi-layered. “Now, they’re more specific because I get to interact with other middle grade authors and read amazing books.”

These connections allow Baron to introduce the most recent and highest quality novels by diverse authors to his multicultural student population.

And while Baron is making these introductions, he tailors them to his students’ specific experiences to entice them to read the books. “For instance, when I introduced *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanh Hà Lại, a Vietnamese American author, I said, ‘I know many of you have had to immigrate or flee your country. I think I have a book for you.’ ”

After initial discussion, Baron will offer more information about the books and authors he chooses. This may include showing videos featuring them. He has also been known to invite fellow author friends to record videos about their books that speak directly to his students. He does this so they can make direct connections with the authors.

Chris Baron.

Baron will end his book talks with a call to action. “I’ll say something like, ‘And that’s why you should really read this book,’” he said. “Of course, it’s different every time.”

But what remains the same is a little incentive he gives his students who may not otherwise be interested in reading the book. “I offer an opportunity to earn extra credit,” Baron said, “or use the book for a topic of their next essay.” He likes to let his students choose the topics that they write about.

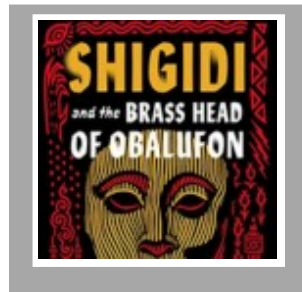
Even if they don’t take him up on his offer, Baron believes the real prize is that the book talks give them the chance to truly connect with books—and each other. “They’re a great way for me to share my passion about books with my students and experience the joy and excitement around something we love. It’s relational vs. transactional. No grades are involved,” Baron said. He sees first-hand the power that book talks have to transform readers.

“Book talks can help us build community, celebrate diversity, and inspire our own writing, too,” Baron said. “It’s my hope that my students come to see the connections between books and telling their own stories.”

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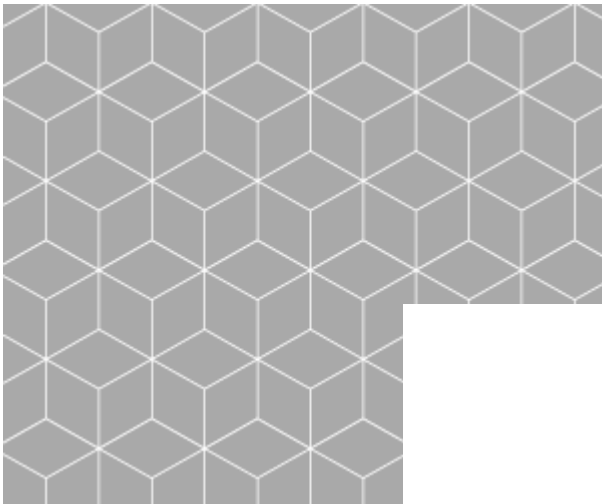


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