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Read Alouds That Rock: Book Clubs to Love

By Patricia J. Murphy | Dec 13, 2021

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Continuing our series on Read Alouds That Rock, we asked five expert book club facilitators to share some of the ways they run their clubs and spread book love with young readers. Click here to see our previous stories.

Comedian Groucho Marx once said, "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member." But, we'll bet if Marx were alive and well today, he would feel differently about joining one of the book clubs featured below. What's not to love? Reading books from today's golden age of middle grade and young adult literature. Talking about books you can't put down with others who've read them—and possibly turning into a life-long reader.

The book club organizers we spoke with have many ways to run book clubs that foster all of the above. And that's no joke.

Newbery Medalist **Erin Entrada Kelly** volunteered to become the latest facilitator of the youth book club at the Corbit-Calloway Memorial Library in Odessa, Del., to get involved in her new community, and for a few other reasons. "I love young people—everything about them—how much energy they have, and how funny they are. And I write for them! Kelly said, "What's better than combining all the things that I love together—and a book club? It's the kids, the MG fiction, and the amazing library director, Katryna Cera-Proulx!"



"This is a good book club read because it exposes readers to things they may not encounter otherwise—Haitian culture, the challenges of being an immigrant, and moving from one place to another."—Erin Entrada Kelly

Readers know that the library's fiction section is the place to be every fourth Thursday. Kelly starts the meeting with participants giving "grades" to the book they just read, and the reasons they gave them. They also share what they would add or change, and their favorite parts. "The dialogue begins there," Kelly said, "and there's an activity. Because while our book club is about inspiring the love of books, I also like it to inspire the love of creativity, too!"

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In the first few months of the new book club, they read *The Year I Flew Away* by Marie Arnold and colored a Haitian-inspired mural. The group also read *The Wild Robot* by Peter Brown and created their own wild robots with clay. This month, they will be digging for bugs and learning about them after they finish *Gregor the Overlander* by Suzanne Collins. "As they are involved in these creative activities, I engage them in a dialogue about the stories,"



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Kelly said. "For me, it feels more comfortable when it's a more relaxed atmosphere with conversation while creating, rather than everyone being quiet and on their best behavior."

While Kelly may ask questions to spark conversation, she finds that some kids have their own side conversations going

on at the same time. "I let them continue because I don't have to lead everything," Kelly said. "I just want them talking about the books and participating in the activity. As long as they are doing that, I let them do what they're doing."

Then, it's time for pizza, Kool Aid, and Kelly's "Mystery Book Table." While the library supplies the refreshments, Kelly brings a pile of ARCs and books she receives, wrapped and labeled with mystery clues (e.g. "If you liked *The One and Only Ivan*, you're going to love this!") on a nearby table. After the book club participants fill out index cards with their names (this helps Kelly learn the kids' names), she draws three lucky winners. "Eventually, they'll all get a chance to choose a book from the table." Kelly said. "Hopefully, this will encourage them to come back next time."

Joy Preble, a young adult author and former high school English teacher, is the children's programming director at Brazos Bookstore in Houston, and the bookstore's middle grade book club facilitator. She hopes for a good turnout each month for Brazos's virtual kids' book club, which features young readers, books and the authors who've written them.

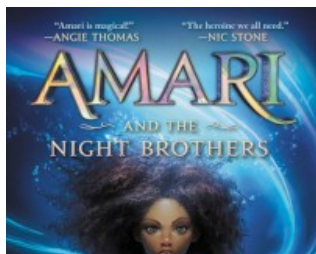
Preble's deep love and knowledge of children's literature plus her extensive publishing contacts and relationship-building skills help her bring authors and readers together live on Zoom. From the start, it was both serendipitous and a natural fit.

"During the early part of the pandemic, all the parts came together organically. We began more actively reaching out to authors—no one was really going anywhere," Preble said. "I had reviewed a book by an author and their publicist said, 'Hey, thank you!,' and then I was asking if any of her authors could join us for an hour for our book club on Zoom. We've hosted every kind of author, from debut to mid-list to superstar."

Each book club Zoom begins with the kids logging in with their questions ready. And then the book club chat begins. Preble has the kids introduce themselves first, and then she introduces the author. "I try to make it very casual and fun," Preble says. "I always open with a question to break the ice, and then the kids take over. I find them even more fearless than the adult book club members. They will ask anything, and really love this time. Where else are kids going to get this type of experience—not even with school author visits can you get a private hour with an author!"

The book club buzzes with questions, comments, shared thoughts on books, and details about the author's life and/or the writing process. The time seems to fly by all too quickly for readers, especially when the authors are adept co-pilots. "The best authors know how to engage the kids—and go on tangents—and to take off on a conversation," Preble said. "The authors will often thank the kids for reading their books. In some instances, it might be the first time they've talked to kids who have all read their books!"

With or without a guest author, the book club is always focused on the reader because they are doing most of the heavy lifting "They're doing what readers do with books," Preble said. "They're remaining open, trying to figure out how a book relates to their experiences or doesn't relate to them, seeing a world that's different than their own, feeling engaged because they've found a character that feels really connected to them—and finding themselves and who they are through books."



Andrea Scarpino is executive director of the Novel Neighbor Bookstore's nonprofit wing, which connects underserved kids with free books and author visits in the St. Louis, Mo. area. She is also a bookseller, a former high school English composition teacher, college English and creative writing teacher, and a reading tutor. Thanks to the store's children's book buyer's suggestions, Scarpino fell hard for middle grade novels and agreed to take over its MG Club.



"Milton P. Greene has had the worst school year of his life. All he wants to do is play his handheld game all summer long. But when his parents ship him off the strange Lone Island to visit his scientist uncle, Milton just might have the summer of his lifetime. A wonderful book club read—especially now, when the world's been topsy-turvy!"—Joy Preble

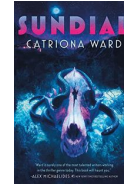
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"This book has so many interesting plot points, mini-scenes, and characters to talk about. All of these things make it perfect for a book club setting!"—Andrea Scarpino

"Of course I said, 'Yes!' " That was three years ago. Today, we're doing a hybrid book club model. Some kids come into the store, while others call in through Zoom," Scarpino said. "The kids are great—so smart, I just love doing it."

Scarpino tries to keep things fun and flexible while helping facilitate the club's goal to promote the love of books and life-long reading. She tries to ensure this by first choosing books from a wide range of genres reflecting diverse cultures, with interesting plot points and characters she thinks the kids will connect with. She also considers the club's age range (8–12) and what each and every member is interested in or excited about reading.

"This month, we are reading a graphic novel, *Marshmallow & Jordan* by Alina Chau, because a number of our members suggested it," Scarpino said. "I've found that if they take ownership of what we're reading, it contributes to the overall success of the club."

Open-ended questions are a must, too. "I'll begin by asking questions to see how they're understanding the story, if they are connecting with the characters, and what they might be thinking. For example, I may ask, 'Who was your favorite character, and why?' I'll also invite kids to share their favorite parts by reading sections aloud."

While she encourages everyone to read aloud or to share, she is mindful of those who might want to hang back or need coaxing to speak up, and those who need gentle reminders to give others a chance to talk and share their perspective. "When there's a difference of opinion, we remind ourselves that a cool thing about reading is that we can interpret things in different ways."

Scarpino said that kids also want to share what's in their hearts. "Most of the time, they just want to share their feelings, and to have them acknowledged. But if they don't want to go there, we talk about other things," Scarpino said. "Flexibility is what makes it fun."

After that, the club may partake in a post-discussion art or creative writing activity. "Depending upon the book, they might create a fantastical creature after reading a fantasy novel or I may offer a prompt about a particularly evocative scene in a book and give five minutes of writing time—and have them share."

Towards the end of the book club, they'll wind down with a YouTube video interview with the book's author, watch something related to the book's topic, or view a trailer for their next book. "This all keeps it engaging—there's hardly ever a pause."

Nicole Jebbia is the youth librarian and assistant branch manager of the Anastasia Island Library in St. Augustine, Fla. As part of her dual roles, she sets up nonstop programming for adults and children, and runs both the middle grade and the YA monthly book clubs.

What began as a request from an area school to fill the needs of struggling readers has emerged into book clubs that serve all reading levels, and learning styles. "Our book clubs are geared to engage avid and reluctant readers to socially interact over the book's topics and to offer hands-on activities for kinesthetic learners to engage all kinds of readers."

Jebbia accomplishes this tall order by first learning all about her readers—their needs, interests, and book preferences—and by staying excited. "If you're not authentically excited, the kids are going to see right through," Jebbia said. "So, choose books and activities that excite the kids and you, too."

She amps up the excitement by creating "outside challenges" the kids can do on their own and share at future meetings. "I post the challenges on a padlet [a virtual bulletin board] that only members can post on, and they're so thrilled to see each other's challenges, to earn points, and to win prizes," Jebbia said. The kids often share their completed challenges at the beginning of the meeting, and then move on to interactive trivia slideshows that Jebbia creates to help springboard the club into conversation.



"Disaster Days puts readers in the middle of a devastating earthquake, which many of my book club members could identify with living through hurricanes in Florida. The book offers insightful and meaningful discussion opportunities."—Nicole Jebbia

- 1 Cat Kid Comic Club #2: From the Creator of Dog Man**
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"I come up with questions to take us back into the book in order to think critically—to put ourselves into character situations, to listen to what others have to say," Jebbia said. "It's our hope that we create an open forum for our book talks, and a comfortable and safe place for our readers too."

Jebbia's bookish gatherings also provide the ever-popular hands-on/social portion of the meeting. This is where book club members join in book-related activities that include everything from making art, doing crafts, cooking or baking and sewing, to doing puzzles and other things the kids might request.

This past week, her middle grade book club, is reading the *Wings of Fire* series by Tui T. Sutherland, and made dragon-y, sparkly, tie-dye book bags. And the YA club, which is reading mysteries, did an "Escape the Box" activity filled with clues, anagrams, and a map to use to solve the mystery in the box.

"I really try to tie the books to the activities as much as I can, but sometimes the kids just want to make quesadillas," Jebbia said. "I feel like if they can choose and will enjoy the kinds of things that we're doing as part of our book club that they'll come back, and they will keep reading!"



"This book makes a perfect book club read because of its empathy. We rooted for the characters and talked about them like they were fellow students. And, even though the story happens back in the '80s, we could feel the joy of space—and the character's pain."—Ali Schilpp

Ali Schilpp is the library media specialist at Northern Middle School, in Accident, Md., where it was no accident she instituted a Book Ambassadors program in her school library. "They're our avid readers who sign up to help in the library with book selection, recommending books to other kids, and reviewing books. They also help pick a book each month as part of our book club, and we read it together."

Apparently, these book lovers are trivia buffs, too. Schilpp writes book-related trivia questions and puts them on Blooket to test their book knowledge, and kick off their book club discussions.

Aside from trivia, Schilpp often creates extensions for her club to connect with other book clubs reading the same books.

"After we finished reading *Flight of the Puffins*, the kids corresponded with penpals in France [the book involves penpals], and shared with them tidbits that we discovered about the book, questions about their lives, small gifts, and digital postcards. It was a lot of fun, kept them engaged, and was very successful."

Schilpp believes this outreach is crucial for kids living in places like Accident, Md. "We are in a rural area and that can be a

little isolating," Schilpp said. "so I try to expose them to the world through books—to meet people of all kinds with different perspectives, cultures, and lifestyles, and to be good digital citizens. It's a driving force inside me."

Inside a box mailed from Connecticut came Schilpp's Book Ambassadors' next book club read and their latest penpals. "These kids, fellow Book Ambassadors, just sent us a big box of books where each kid put their names on their books along with their recommendations," Schilpp said. "My kids are matched to their penpals based on the books they pick. And, then when they're done with these books, they'll review and share them with the group—and then, it's on to the next book."

Schilpp admits that choosing the next book is the hardest part of her book club duties. "I have a TBR pile a mile high and an open form for all of my students to add to our library's wish list. That's because the library is for them, so what they want or need is what I get them and order on the spot."

And, while her band of Book Ambassadors practically "trip over each other at the library to help other kids looking for books," Schilpp is always looking to open the book club to the whole school. "Some kids might not seek out a book club, but teachers and/or librarians can read aloud with their classes, and kids can enjoy the same book club experiences in the classroom."

Of course, Schilpp will be there with the right book and extensions. "I try to reach as many kids as possible!"

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