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# Read Alouds That Rock: Silly Storytimes

By Patricia J. Murphy | Sep 26, 2022

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Continuing our series on Read Alouds That Rock, we shine a light on the silliest of storytimes. Click here to see our previous stories.

At this very moment, countless teachers and librarians are having silly storytimes—and for good reason! With many readily available funny-to-hilarious books to choose from, these educators have their hands full when curating, reading, and using these books to create moments filled to the gills with giggles. PW spoke with five such educators how and why they do it.

As a somewhat nervous child growing up, children's librarian **Brian Wilson** (not the Beach Boys frontman) found comfort in anything humorous. "Humor and finding things that made me laugh put me at ease," Wilson said. Today, as part of the early learning and literacy staff at the Evanston Public Library in Evanston, Ill., a previous member of several national award committees, and the 2022 chair of the Children's Literature Legacy Award, and a picture book blogger, he offers ample opportunities for humor and laughter for his pre-K through first graders in his popular storytimes.



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Brian Wilson.

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"As you start reading a silly story, you begin hearing the kids laugh, and you see them looking at their classmates or kids they've just met, and they're like, 'Wow! We're all having fun reading together!'" Wilson said, "There's this positive experience and energy that happens."

This positivity lights up the room and gives Wilson the confidence to ham things up—and take the silliness to a whole new level. "For example, when reading *Kitten's First Full Moon* (by Kevin Henkes), I might do this in the quietest, gentlest possible way or turn it into a rollicking, rowdy ride with the kitten chasing the moon and all the slapstick things that happen to the kitten," Wilson said.

Wilson says that silly stories can and often do go in different ways depending on his "read" of the mood of the room, and his own excitement level. He insists on using books that excite him. But it appears that it's Wilson's repertoire of storytelling skills that adds the secret sauce. "I'll raise the rowdiness or slow things down if we need a laughter break," Wilson said. "I want the story to make

my students feel like they've been on a roller coaster, to engage and to hook them!"

Wilson will also make stops along the way for teachable moments to talk about the story's narrative and characters. And Wilson and his storytime friends are just getting started. "Together, we're beginning a foundation for early literacy and a lifelong love of reading."



Beth Parmer.

© Erica Sollitto

**Beth Parmer**, K-5 librarian at Maryland Elementary School in the Bexley City Schools in Columbus, Ohio, begins her school year with her K-first grade students taking part in fun *and* funny storytimes. "I always open the school year with silly stories for them because this might be their first exposure to the library—any library—and I don't know how they feel about books just yet," Parmer said. "I want them to

think of our school library as a fun place to be, and to make it as joyful as I can."

According to her students, she's accomplished all of the above and elevated library time to a revered status at her elementary school. "I have kids telling me that their favorite "special" is library," Parmer said. "That's really good because it's hard to top gym class!"

Palmer creates a worthy contender to P.E. by mixing music, movement, and interaction during storytimes whenever she can. "I look for stories that have songs to sing, or repetitive phrases so the kids repeat them," Parmer said. "I like making the story as interactive as possible and acting them out; and my students do, too. If the characters in the story are digging for dinosaurs, I make sure they're digging. If there's moving and marching, we're moving and marching!"

With all of this silliness with a purpose, Parmer is hoping to dispel the myth that kids have to be quiet in the library. "Sometimes, there are kids who have this misunderstanding that the library has to be really quiet and serious. So, when I get to a really silly part in a story, I make sure that I'm cracking up so they feel that freedom to laugh as well."

During their library visits, Parmer gives her kids time to find books of their own to tickle their funny bones, and for some free choice activities (e.g. blocks, puzzles, or art) before sending them back to their classrooms until next time.

When they return, Parmer may have yet another silly story waiting for her students—they can't seem to get enough of them. But Parmer says they won't ever be too zany or subversive, even though she especially loves those kinds of books. She's mindful of her readers' interests and needs. "I won't ever choose a title that might make any kid uncomfortable," Parmer said, "Because at the end of the day, the story times are for them—and the books have been chosen especially so they will laugh, enjoy books, and have fun!"



Children's librarian **Basheer Kareem's** often standing-room-only morning storytimes at the Westover Branch of the Arlington Public Library in Arlington, Va., are filled with lots of fun and silliness. But, it's silliness for a greater good.

For the little ones he uses a combination of silly songs filled with rich language and opportunities for imaginative fun and games. His favorite go-to songs are often by the Laurie Berkner Band. "Their songs are funny, catchy, and, I love sharing them with young audiences because they just love them."

One particular song, "Let's Go Swimming," is a storytime favorite. The song is about a school of fish that try doing all kinds of things like riding bicycles and brushing their teeth, and then they say,



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Basheer Kareem.

“Wait a minute, fish don’t ride bikes!” (or whatever human activity they tried) and then say, “let’s go swimming!”

From the Laurie Berkner Band to Desmond Dennis’s classic nursery rhyme remixes, Kareem carefully curates his song choices with the intent to introduce kids to silly and new vocabulary words, to get them moving, grooving, and acting out the songs. He also encourages them to use their imaginations and to have a good time. Then, he likes to switch gears.

“That’s when I begin reading a heartfelt story to give my storytime friends something to think about—a message to take home and to put into practice,” Kareem said. “For example, we just read a very touching story called *A Hundred Thousand Welcomes* by Mary Lee Donovan [illustrated by Lian Cho]. It gives readers a glimpse into diverse households from various parts of the world.”

With older kids (i.e. third through fifth grade) who drop by to unwind after the school day and, maybe, act a little silly, Kareem shares the latest humorous graphic novels and chapter books. “For this age, I gravitate towards silly stories because these stories have the power to draw kids in,” Kareem said, “and are great hooks for reluctant readers.”

Once a reluctant reader himself, Kareem wished that someone had introduced silly books to him earlier in his reading journey. Today, he’ll only suggest books (e.g. *The Treehouse* series by Andy Griffith and Terry Denton, and the *Timmy Failure* series by Stephan Pastis) that have made him laugh out loud. “I want my readers to see their silliness in books—and that being silly can turn into careers... like writing silly books.”



Laura Mossa.

**Laura Mossa’s** career choice as an elementary school reading specialist at Grange Elementary School in the Baltimore County Schools allows her the chance to support her “striving readers,” those still working on a variety of reading skills, and to serve all kinds of readers any way she can. One way is

through silly storytimes and read-alouds. Whether she’s using them to teach reading behaviors and skills, or blogging about them with her dog, Bella, at *Beagles and Books*, Mossa gravitates toward picture book—the sillier, the better.

On top of juggling her reading specialist caseload, Mossa instituted the popular #ClassroomBookADay initiative (created by Jilian Heise) in a second grade class back in 2017. As part of the initiative, Mossa reads a picture book to her second graders every day of the school year at the end of the day. At first, she chose different genres including nonfiction, fantasy, and realistic fiction. But, she soon discovered one necessary ingredient for their daily dose of picture books. “I found that humor’s really important,” Mossa said, “especially today—and in an elementary school, kids have to laugh. For these second graders, humor is the hook to get them into the stories!”

While she was leading remote learning during Covid, humor became a lifeline for her students and herself. And, even now, she has one question for her students: “Who needs to laugh today?” Mossa said. The answer is always “We do!” and they share a silly picture book together. Afterwards, she said, “We discuss the author’s purpose, and how we might write our own silly stories as well.” Sometimes, things will turn serious.

“At times, I will choose a silly book that has a serious tone, so we can peel back the onion. For example, *Something’s Wrong! A Bear, a Hare, and Some Underwear* by Jory John is about a bear that gets a pair of underwear from his grandma, and tries them on and forgets to take the underwear off.” Mossa said, “Throughout the book there’s a repetitive phrase: “Why is that bear wearing underwear?” But his best friend, a rabbit, not only tells him the truth, but also puts on a pair of underwear, and says that it’s a new style.”

With four graders, she has used a silly nonfiction book, *The Battle of the Butts: The Science Behind Animal Behinds* by Jocelyn Rish. “At first, the kids were unsure about the book, and some were even embarrassed until they realized that the book was about how animals use their butts,” Mossa said. “Again, the humor was the hook—and we dove into more research about animals. Humor seems to be a wonderful jumping-off point!”

Mossa leaves behind these picture books in the classroom for continued reading. She hopes that reading aloud picture books each day will encourage her faculty to join the fun. She'd also like to see a space in the library that highlights books for each month that teachers could grab to do #ClassroomBookADay challenges of their own.

"I just want to bombard the kids with books, help all of them see themselves as readers, elevate the picture book so that more kids read them," Mossa said," and for teachers not to worry about what their students are reading—as long as they're reading!"



© Matt Bero

Ann Santori.

**Ann Santori** says she wants to become the Ms. Fizzle from *The Magic School Bus* of reading. But instead of a magic school bus, Santori, who is a school of information services adjunct at Dominican University in River Forest, Ill., and early literacy specialist educator, uses her library and literacy knowledge and storytelling skills to take young readers and future librarians on field trips through books. She also offers a variety of early literacy consulting, custom programming, and one-on-one with readers services with her Let's Get Early Lit resources.

Whether she is working with her readers or librarians in person or online, indoors or outdoors, her favorite thing to do is hold silly storytimes. "I especially love reading silly books because they're usually the most interactive, get the most attention from the kids, and often break the fourth wall speaking directly to them," she said. For Santori, these are essential elements to cut through the many distractions that children face, from the ongoing pandemic to the pervasiveness of technology.

One of the ways that Santori heightens the experience with her young readers is through dialogic reading. This involves her reading and talking with the children, having them make predictions, asking them questions, and inviting them and their parents to join her in the telling of the story. "Above all," Santori said, "it's about giving them a say in what happens in storytime."

She also gives kids permission to tap into their inner silliness. "I do this by being incredibly silly so the kids and parents who might be self-conscious can let go. They could never be as completely and utterly ridiculous as I am at the front of the room wearing weird outfits, making silly faces, and dancing really terribly." Santori said, "I tell everyone there that what happens in storytime, stays in storytime."

Santori also tells her future librarians to get comfortable with looking foolish and not being in complete control. Santori says it's not *if*, but *when* things might get a little chaotic that silliness ensues. "Sure, set up expectations, but also embrace the chaos—because joy comes in that chaos."

In the midst of silly storytimes, Santori says a busload of magic can happen. "The more engaged adults (i.e. librarians, teachers, and parents) are in the narrative at storytime, the more the child may want to keep it going at home: looking at books, reading them with family members, retelling stories—and so much more."

**We're always looking for teachers and librarians to share their insights for stories. If you're interested in participating in future features, please get in touch.**

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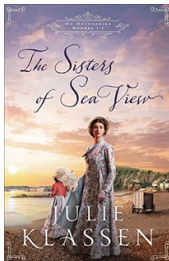
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