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Read Alouds That Rock: Storytimes That Come Alive for Grades 3 to 5

By Patricia J. Murphy | Oct 25, 2021

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Continuing our series on Read Alouds That Rock, we spotlight educators who deliver captivating storytimes for the chapter book and middle grade crowd in grades three to five.

Close your eyes for a second and imagine your favorite memory of elementary school or middle school. You may see a teacher, librarian, or parent reading a book aloud to you. This book probably transported you to another place or time that you did not want to leave—ever. And you wouldn't be alone. For many, a classroom read aloud turned them into readers, writers, and in some cases beloved teachers or librarians. We all know that books—especially those that are read aloud—can do magical things. But, how do teachers and librarians create this magic?

PW asked five educators to share how with the turn of the page they engage their students, cause them to sit on the edge of their seats, and turn them into lifelong readers.

Colby Sharp, a fifth grade teacher at Parma Elementary School in Parma, Mich., an author, and founder of the popular online community Nerdy Book Club, was swept away by a read aloud as a student only a few classroom doors down from where he currently teaches. Today, he's the one doing the reading, and he can't think of anything more important that he could do for his students.

"There's nothing in school that has been done in the last 50 years that has brought kids more to reading than read alouds. Think about how many kids have fallen in love with reading by listening to *Charlotte's Web*, *Hatchet*, or *Wonder*. I know that I wouldn't be here without read alouds," Sharp



Colby Sharp reading to his fifth-grade class.

said. “They are powerful things that allow kids to fall in love with stories. Nothing in the world comes close to sitting in a classroom listening to a read aloud with the same people seven hours a day, five days a week, and for 9-10 months a year. It creates a safe place to talk to one another, and to read books. It’s magic.”

Sharp said the magic begins with choosing just the right book for your students. To start, it has to be a book that I love—that I’m really excited about—or I’m not going to be able to get my kids excited about it.”

He chooses the class’s first read aloud by himself. “That’s because I don’t know my students yet, or their worlds,” Sharp said. “But then, after that, the next book is what my students might like or have a good feeling about—including different books or genres they haven’t read, or a particular author they want to try.”

This year, he picked *Pax* by Sara Pennypacker to kick off the school year. “I chose this book—one without a neat or tidy ending—because I knew they’d have no idea that there was a book like this, and to show how powerful reading can be!”

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Each day, Sharp begins reading perched on a stool, and then walks around the room. He may emphasize some of the words and even give a voice to the main character at times. His voice might also grow tense leading up to a dramatic moment. Still he insists he has no secret sauce. “I read the book as if I were reading it myself. I try to sound as natural as possible so my students can do the same when they read.” he said. “There are a lot of journal articles and books written about it, but it’s not rocket science; it’s reading and talking about the books and thinking about them. I think sometimes we teachers can get in the way of that and we feel like we have to talk about a million things. No one wants to answer questions after every page or talk about symbolism—no one is doing that in their independent reading.

Sharp feels that read alouds can level the playing field, “Because readers of all levels can “read” these books since we’re reading them together,” he said. They also help Sharp teach life lessons, and book elements including character, plot, and setting. But, to Sharp, they offer ample opportunities to foster book love connections. “With each book, you give your students another opportunity to fall in love.”

He believe this match making process involves holding on and letting go. “You have to let the book do the work,” he said. “I follow the tone and the author’s voice. It’s like a dance, and I let the author lead. We are dancing together.”

Mollie Welsh Kruger is an instructor at the Bank Street College of Education in New York City, where she is the co-chair of the Children’s Book Committee. She leads her pre-service teachers in reading instruction and teaches them about the power and possibilities of the read aloud. It is an important part of the curriculum and holds a special place in Kruger’s heart. “While reading aloud to children, there is so much you are bringing forward for readers. Hopefully, the first thing is joy.”



But the joy doesn’t just happen. Kruger believes that book choice and knowing your readers are critical first steps. “The selection depends on knowing who’s in the room—who are your readers—as well as, what is your intent or purpose for reading to them, and how are you choosing this book with them in mind?” Kruger said. “You need to know what will make your students gasp when the character does something, and who those characters are, and which of your students are going to be pulled in more deeply with this experience.”

Kruger believes that *how* you choose is as important as *what* you choose. “Have conversations with people who love books—find out what some of the best books are and build your list,” she said. “Make yourself aware of



Mollie Welsh Kruger, an instructor at the Bank Street College of Education, says, "Read alouds allow all children to see what's possible."

awards coming out (including the Newbery Awards and the Bank Street College of Education's Children's Book Committee Awards) and ask yourself, do these books bring something to the class that your children need?"

When the answer is "yes," Kruger urges her pre-service teachers to read books across genres: fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. "We need students to know that there are many genres to read—and ones that will move them."

Kruger insists this is true for children of all ages. She says that there is no need to limit read alouds of chapter books or middle grade novels to older students. "For kindergarteners and younger students, longer read alouds are just as beneficial because you are modeling the reading experience. That's how you encourage the love of story and bring the characters alive for your students," she said. "Just pick stories that have enough description so it is easy for your kids to get pictures in their heads; and choose ones that will build curiosity about things they know and don't know. Read alouds allow all children to see what's possible."

Melody Powell is a third grade teacher at Stone Academy School of Communications Arts in Greenville, S.C., where she teaches her students that anything is possible through the arts, and uses storytelling skills to elevate their read alouds.

"I enjoy doing oral storytelling for kids and adults, passing stories down, performing them, and teaching how to present stories," Powell said. "So when I read aloud a lot of that comes out. I always use my voice and I'm very animated."

Powell's storytelling talents are not lost on her students. In fact, one of them recently commented about them, saying, "I bet you sleep well at night because you are so animated, and always walking around!"

It's the only way that Powell knows how to do read alouds. "For me, it's not a quiet, lights out, sitting on a rocking chair with the kids at my feet time. It's more engaging than that. I use lots of voices and hand gestures to engage them in the reading, to help them get to know the characters, and for the story to come alive," she said. "Through my modeling, my students learn that a book or story can take you on a journey that can be happy, sad, exciting..."

To make things even more exciting along the way and meet the needs of the many musically talented students in her classroom this year, Powell has found ways to integrate songs into her read aloud time. "Halfway through the book *Crenshaw* by Katherine Applegate, once we knew the characters, I got the idea of playing songs and asking, 'Who do you think might sing this song?'" she explained. "And then I asked them to find lines in the book that offer evidence for this."

Next, Powell asked her students to think about what the characters' "walking-in" songs might be, (i.e. songs that the character might choose when they enter the story), and where other song selections might match the mood or feelings in the story, like songs on a movie soundtrack.

"I can't tell you just how amazing the depth of engagement my children have shown by integrating the arts, especially music, into our read alouds." Powell said. "It has taken my students to a whole other level!" She said this is especially true for her struggling readers. "The music seems to offer a bridge to these students. Where a story can give you emotions, these emotions can be mimicked in music, and the two can be paired together," she said, "because in order to fall in love with reading, you have to discover that reading can take you on an emotional journey. Kids who don't read well on



Befitting her name, third-grade teacher Melody Powell incorporates music, in the form of character theme songs, in her storytimes.

their own yet don't know or feel that. But, with a teacher and a read aloud, they can come along and experience this journey. They begin to yearn for it, and work towards it."

Throughout their year-long journey together, Powell and her students keep the book characters they meet along the way in their hearts and minds. As a result, these characters are popping up in all kinds of places. "I start every year with *Third Grade Angels* by Jerry Spinelli, and we meet George a.k.a Suds. Now, Suds pops up in read aloud discussions—and Crenshaw does, too!" Powell said. "To encourage this, I may ask my students what they think one character would do in this situation or another. The kids are making connections all over the place: in the stories we are reading together, those they're reading on their own, and in their writing, too. Thanks to our read alouds, characters have become friends!"

Karen Klein is a library teacher at P.S.146 in Brooklyn, N.Y., where her job is full of characters of the literary kind. In her role, she supports who she calls her "genius" librarian helping to create and to teach a curriculum for fourth grade students that connects books, technology, and digital literacy. Part of her responsibility is introducing middle grade novels through weekly read alouds.

Over her years reading to multiple sections of fourth graders each week, Klein has acquired a bagful of read aloud tricks to keep her students engaged, begging for her to keep reading when time's up, and looking forward to the next time they meet.

"While I can't take credit for the books themselves—it would be like a waiter taking credit for their restaurant's meals—I can make each book come to life for my students," Klein said. And she takes this job seriously.

This starts with Klein's careful reading and choosing of books from The Global Read Aloud for her fourth graders. "These books are always incredibly written, deal with issues that are so relevant to my students, and include characters and cultures that they find interesting."



During her weekly read alouds with fourth graders, library teacher Karen Klein aims to spark discussion "off the page."

Klein's preparation continues as she works on her delivery (and stamina) for her back-to-back read aloud days. "I try to change my tone so as not to sound monotone, and do some voices. I'm no Kate Winslet reading *Matilda*, but I find that the more I work at it, the better I sound; enthusiasm helps."

Post reading, Klein mindfully takes the read aloud "off the page" by asking engaging questions that she tailors to the students' interests and responses, allowing the conversations to go wherever the kids take them.

Klein also creates graphic organizers on Google Slides, which she projects on the classroom wall to keep track of each fourth grade section's predictions, summaries, questions, and conversations. She also develops extension activities such as "turn and talk to your neighbor" conversation starters, "exit tickets" with questions to answer before leaving class, and a menu of mid-book and end-of-book projects. These activities often integrate art, technology, and writing," Klein said, "and give students the opportunity to share their understanding of the read alouds, and how books are affecting them."

As a fourth grade teacher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools in Illinois, and a middle grade author, **Lisa Sukenic** works tirelessly to integrate literature across her curriculum and to impact her students' learning and lives. Her daily read aloud is part of this integration and the place where pacing (like with her own writing) is paramount. It's also one of her best practices.

“Pacing while reading aloud includes the way I read the story with intonation, attitude, and taking into account how the author has written the story, the line breaks—the cliffhangers,” Sukenic said. “It’s also in the questions I ask.” Sukenic said that the delivery engages her readers, and the questions help her students think more critically.

“The questions on character motivation and situation can draw my students out,” she said. “They can help in the areas of comprehension, writing, developing empathy, thinking more deeply and at a higher level, and diving into the story.”

Sukenic often mixes up her read aloud selections to include humorous and relatable books and choices from a Global Reading Challenge she helped develop in her prior school and brought to the Laboratory Schools.

“These read alouds help our students think about who they are in the world, give them opportunities to see themselves and others in the literature—both windows and mirrors—and understand cultures and lifestyles that are different from their own.”

She sees first-hand that the read alouds are also making a difference in her students’ writing. Each of her students keeps a notebook where they write about their own experiences and respond to the literature.

This spring, Sukenic’s students will have a chance to respond to her debut middle grade novel, *Miles from Motown*, (Regal House/Fitzroy) as part of a study of novels in verse and poetry.

Her response? She is overjoyed. “It’s a little unreal that my students will be reading my book!” she said. “The best parts will be having my students read my novel in verse alongside others, including *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanhà Lại and *Becoming Muhammad Ali* by Kwame Alexander and James Patterson, hearing how my students interpret it, relate to the challenges of the main character, and learn about the 1960s, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Muhammad Ali, which all play key parts in my story.”

*Want to share what’s working in your read alouds? **Email us your tips here**, and we’ll include some in an upcoming roundup.*



Fourth grader teacher and author Lisa Sukenic believes that read alouds “help our students think about who they are in the world.”

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