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Read Alouds That Rock: The 'Rarest Kind' of Storytimes

By Patricia J. Murphy | Sep 27, 2021

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Poet Walter de la Mare once said, “Only the rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young.” It’s hard to argue with the sentiment when it comes to most anything relating to children’s education, books, and storytimes, too. PW reached out to five storytime presenters across the country to share a few ways they create their own storytimes, to engage pre-K through second grade audiences, to keep them sitting on the edge of their carpet squares, and to help foster a love of books—and maybe, even lifelong reading.

Joseph Gaskin is a children’s librarian/early childhood library specialist with the Jacksonville Public Libraries in Jacksonville, Fla., and a popular musician. Known as “Mr. Joe” to his young fans and their families, Gaskin dons his signature bib overalls and uses his ukulele-sized guitar to rock his storytimes (five days a week at 21 library locations) with original songs and hand-picked stories to celebrate diversity, introduce childhood literacy concepts, and encourage empathy and a larger world view. Gaskin says his music makes all the difference in his storytime programming.

“The kids could be doing anything, but as soon as I start one of my songs I immediately get their attention; they become focused, engaged, and are ready for storytime,” Gaskin said. He is equally mindful to parents to join their little ones in the storytime fun, and to keep stories and songs flowing at home until they meet again.

“I’m with the kids only a half an hour a week, entertaining and encouraging early literacy; parents have them the rest of the time. They can do many of the same things we do in storytime the rest of the week!” Gaskin insisted. “And, the sillier, the better. That’s what



© Cynthia Gaskin

kids want—and need. When I’m silly during my storytimes, I give kids permission to be silly, and to see storytime and reading as fun. What could be better than that?”

Joseph Gaskin in the Cummer Museum’s gardens.



Amy Trogon at The Book Stall.

Amy Trogon is the resource associate in the Hubbard Woods Elementary School library and a bookseller/storytime specialist at The Book Stall in Winnetka, Ill. Whether in school or at the bookstore, Trogon believes there’s nothing better than choosing the right book for storytimes.

“I’ve found that it has to be a funny story,” Trogon said. “Everyone loves to laugh! The kids get so excited— sitting and bouncing as we read together.”

But, funny is just the beginning. Trogon tries to choose stories with rhythm, rhyme, and repetitive refrains—especially for the wee ones. “They are pulled in when there’s a rhythm, and love chiming in, whether it’s to guess a rhyming word or repeat the refrain. This keeps their minds thinking about what is coming next more than any other text.”

And, then, it’s the ending that Trogon thinks carefully about. “If you can find a story that’s funny, has rhythm, rhyme, a repetitive refrain, and a surprise ending, well, you got a home run!” she said. “Everybody loves surprises.”

So, it’s no surprise that anyone within earshot loves Trogon’s unique storytime delivery, with a tinge of a Southern drawl (she grew up in North Carolina). It pulls them in and won’t let go. It also raises questions. “Sometimes, the kids might not understand a word I read, and they’ll ask me about it. I’ll say that I’m saying the same word—and they say ‘no, that’s not the same.’ ”

Although the kids may not understand every word Trogon says at first, she said they can feel her love of reading, which she hopes her storytimes encourage in them. “It’s such a gift to love to read.”

Laura Graveline, children’s specialist at Brazos Bookstore in Houston, gives readers a weekly gift— a live storytime via Zoom from her kitchen. That is, until she can offer in-store storytimes again. But, regardless of the location, Graveline’s excitement and the books she chooses transport viewers to places near and far.

“I always pick stories I am excited about so that my excitement can shine through,” Graveline said. “And, of course, I read them beforehand to get the feel for the pacing of the stories.”

In addition to pace, Graveline practices the expressions and voices she will use, looks for “Easter eggs” that she’ll help her audience uncover, and researches interesting facts about her growing list of favorite authors and illustrators to enrich the storytime experience.

“Oftentimes, I will start my storytimes by sharing details about my favorite authors or illustrators to help create a personal connection with the books’ creators.” She hopes that these “pre-reading” and “during reading” elements will help kids fall in love with books, and find a new favorite to read over and over again.



Laura Graveline at Brazos Books.

But what brings many coming back to Graveline's storytimes again and again are her "post-reading" hands-on craft activities tied to the stories. She admits they are one of her preferred parts of storytimes, too. "I'm a particularly artsy person," Graveline said. "So coming up with and doing crafts is fun and easy for me—and at the same time allows kids to physically interact with materials and make connections to the stories." She also hopes these connections will extend beyond the bookstore doors. "I hope that by our looking, listening, and creating something inspired by stories, they will go out into the world and see things that inspire them to keep creating."



Nili Yellin leads an outdoor storytime.

Nili Yellin a.k.a "The Storybook Mom," a popular storytime presenter and storyteller in New York City's Washington Heights neighborhood, has been creating storytime/storytelling programs for more than 21 years, after enduring a series of what she calls "boring storytimes" at a variety of venues when her kids were young.

"The words were not given the respect, energy, and depth they needed to have. And, the performance—the reading aloud of the text—wasn't vibrant or active enough for kids," Yellin recalled.

So, she drew from her acting experience—improv and stand-up comedy—and past coursework on learning how to dramatize literature and set out to bring picture books to

life in her own storytimes. Her focus comes from her passion for words and books.

"I love words: I love to play with words, I love puns, jokes, and tongue twisters. This love is what my father taught me through books, and how I learned English when I moved from Israel to the U.S. at four years old," Yellin said. "I want kids' introduction to language and books to be the same as mine—to be about play—and for the book to be as exciting as a toy!"

Yellin builds the excitement in her storytimes by leaning in (literally and figuratively), inviting her audiences to help her read the story, and to learn about storytelling at the same time.

"I dramatize the words and encourage interactions by asking questions and allowing the kids to be loud (or "project," as we actors say) at times, and then be quiet at others. I give them a silly word, like "toothbrush," when I need them to be quiet, and they just love it!"

Yellin said she loves picture books so much that she reads several a day, stays current on the latest titles, and has learned to become "a vessel for authors and illustrators' stories" through her readings. "I don't need to read the words off the page, because after I do a story for one week, I know it organically. I don't sit down and memorize it, it's just performing—I know it, it's in my body—. I am not thinking of the next word or sentence or line. There's freedom in it."

"This freedom," Yellin added, "allows me to go big and fully commit." And, this commitment lets her go wherever the story and kids take them. "With my story times, I see the powerful impact of books. There's that initial connection: you see their eyes light up, and that's it... I have a reader! It's an amazing thing; it truly is magic."

Celia Plotkin teaches kindergarten at Richmond School in El Segundo, Calif., where she gets to interact closely with readers every day. Whether in person, like how she teaches today, or virtually like she did last year, Plotkin strives to make stories come alive for her children, to foster a love of reading and books, and to teach early reading strategies, too.



Plotkin uses a treasure chest of tools to do this. For starters, she incorporates movements (e.g. snapping, clapping, and hand gestures, etc.), has her kids make sounds (like gasping or the du-dun-dunn sounds when something is shocking or scary), and uses an iPad app for additional sound effects. And, when learning went remote, Plotkin used a variety of funny filters to engage her kindergarten friends tuning in through Zoom.



Celia Plotkin in her kindergarten classroom.

“Once I actually read *The Couch Potato* by Jory John and Pete Oswald looking like a potato. The kids loved it.” She did, too.

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“I’m now noticing a number of my kindergarten friends choosing books over Legos at free choice time! So, what we’re doing together is working!”

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

Plotkin admits that these techniques can go a long way in her kindergarten class to help her students stay engaged, think about the narrative and the feeling of the story, and experience the excitement of reading. But sometimes they can become distracting. “So I teach the kids to use them the right way,” Plotkin said. “I might have them whisper the sounds into their hands, or share them with partners.”

Plotkin also pairs mini-lessons with stories during her Reader’s Workshop to teach reading skills and strategies, and to model reading behaviors. These behaviors may include everything from the proper way of holding a book, turning pages, and using expression while reading aloud, to making predictions, talking about the author’s purpose, retelling stories, and reflecting about the story after reading, all of which will help with fluency and comprehension.

Plotkin looks forward to watching her budding readers transfer these skills, strategies, and behaviors, as well as develop a deep affinity for books and reading. She’s already seeing seeds of this sprouting in her kindergarten class.

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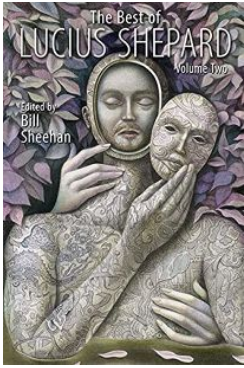


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