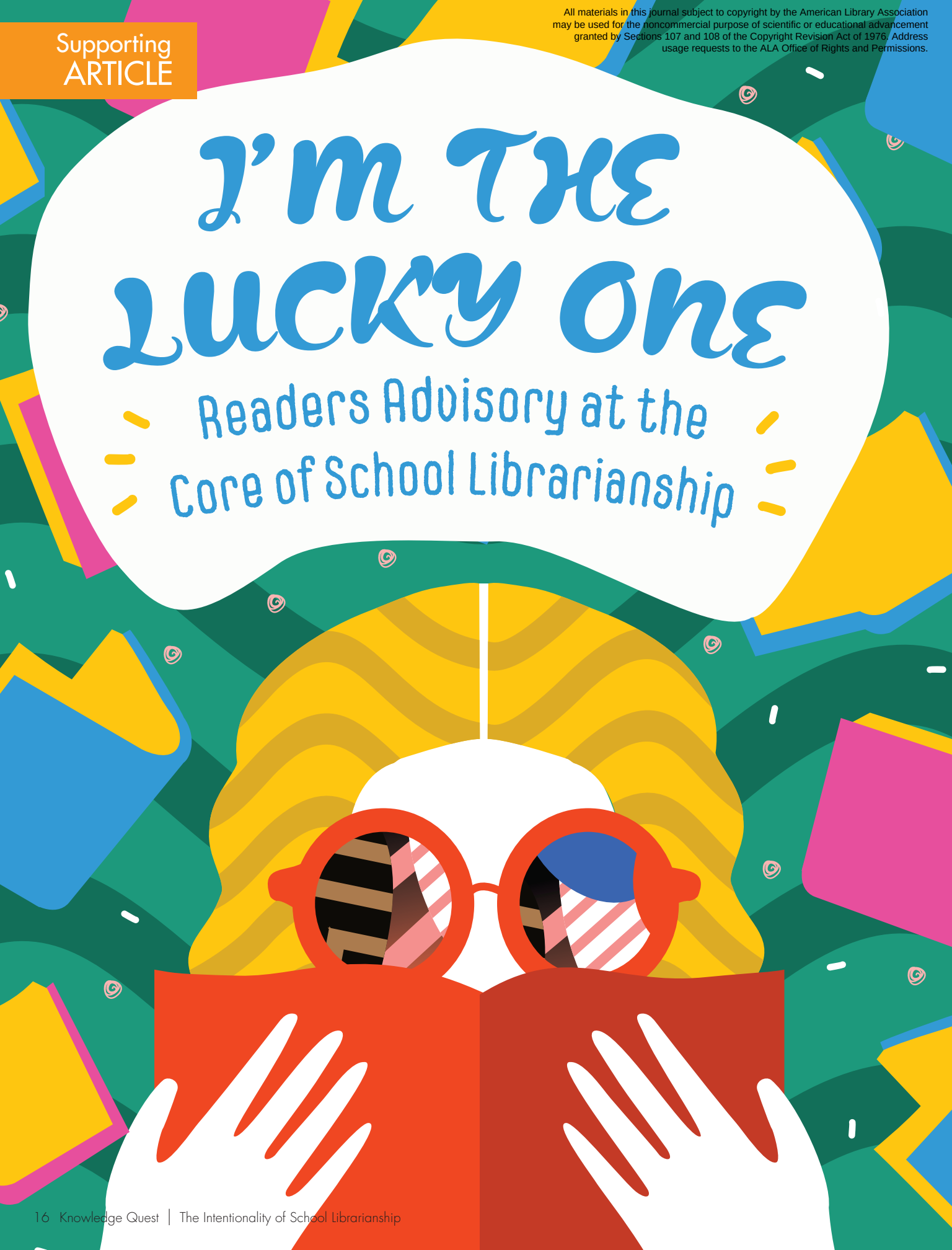
Supporting ARTICLE

I'm the Lucky One

Readers Advisory at the Core of School Librarianship



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When *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* was published by the American Association of School Librarians in 2018, I was overjoyed to see that one of the six common beliefs was "Reading is the core of personal and academic competency" (AASL 2018, 11). The declaration that "reading is the core" wasn't devalued using qualifiers. I've held this belief for the sixteen years I've been in education, including the last fifteen as a high school librarian. This statement in print and bold-faced type reinvigorated my work as it should the work of any school librarian.

I can enact the other roles of school librarians, too, but I am my best self as a reader's advisor and wholeheartedly agree with Sarah A. Evans's statement in her article " 'Book Nerds' United: The Reading Lives of Diverse Adolescents at the Public Library" that "it is librarians' love of books, combined with their professional practices, that creates one of the most valuable contributions to society, especially when they are working with diverse youth" (2019, 41). I would further argue that all other duties fall into place when the establishment of a relationship between learner and librarian built on and around books comes first. I am a reader and a librarian. And both are equally impactful to my identity professionally as they are personally.

Who Says, 'They Don't Read'?

This utterance is common when other adults learn that I'm a school librarian and a high school one specifically. Too many adults are too quick to lament the death of reading, but school librarians all know that this statement is a great exaggeration. Young adult literature is booming both in readership and sales—and yes it's not just teens who are reading these books. If how I spend my days is any indication, reading is alive and well. Access to reading material and an established culture of reading that strengthens readership are among the elements that AASL addresses in the standards. The school library must have open and equitable access for all students and incorporate itself into the fabric of the school. Open the doors, and students will come to read.

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Always Bringing It Back to Books

And read they do, when approximately half of our scheduled classes are for book and book-adjacent activities. To encourage group and individual selections, my co-librarian and I begin the year with booktalks and maintain readership with continued opportunities for independent reading, in addition to reading embedded in the curriculum. We end the year by talking about the kinds of books students can read for the summer. The constant attention to booktalks is because teachers respect my authority, passion, and insight, backed by the well-selected (and well-weeded) collection that I'm talking from.

Books do bring us together. Events like author visits and specialized book groups provide opportunities for outreach and demonstrate to other educators in the school just how far we're willing to go to get students reading. It's a shared goal that encourages teachers to invite

us into their classrooms to spread around the love of reading.

We harnessed this love under a hashtag for our library—#ReadLikeAFalcon—to unify us much like a sports team or club. We rebranded materials with it, used it in social media posts, and gave every teacher a laminated sign to hang in their classroom for the sole purpose of advertising what they were reading. Our purpose was to showcase all of the ways our school engages in learning through reading to represent our individual interests or the greater community. This unified feeling of being a community of readers became even more important when the pandemic hit.

Rebecca J. Morris and Jenna Kammer pointed out that students still wanted to read, especially because reading provided them an opportunity to relax and unwind in stressful times such as the Covid-19 pandemic (2021, 17). For us, booktalking increased significantly. After our district decided to be completely virtual due to budget constraints resulting from the pandemic, I heard from students and teachers that books were an important and much-needed break from screens. We provided those books. Some were requested online and picked up "grab and go"-style in brown paper bags, or selected during private, scheduled visits to the library. Others were mailed or dropped off on learners' doorsteps. I didn't lament the extra work involved with getting books into the hands of readers. I also didn't mind pivoting on the delivery methods for booktalks: synchronous live booktalks through Google Meets or prerecorded booktalks offered asynchronously through our YouTube channel.

The Big Three

During the pandemic three categories of books were asked for repeatedly: murder, romance, and humor. Within a few months I ordered more print and digital titles in those categories and spent the summer thinking deeply about readers' choices. This reflection allowed me to conclude that they see themselves in the collection available and are comfortable asking for anything they're interested in, including traditionally taboo or not-so-academic topics. They know our school library is a no-judgment zone, the importance of which has been highlighted in a recent article "Keeping Teens Reading—Get Thee to a Library." School librarians need to remind themselves that what matters is that learners *are* reading, not *what* they are reading. Let's end the arguments that graphic novels aren't real reading and that audiobooks are cheating (Students Need School Libraries Leadership Team 2021).

So why murder, romance, and humor? My conclusion is that as teens were locked down at home with sustained proximity to their family, their frustration produced some murderous thoughts. Books allowed these fantasies to play out without the real-life repercussions, though the glut of true-crime shows and podcasts could also be a factor. Similarly, without opportunities to socialize and have personal meet-cutes, teens had to enjoy vicarious socializing in their reading material instead. Readers wanted something sweet as opposed to the sour news inundating them. Humor's popularity is no surprise! Everyone needed opportunities to feel happy when the world turned grim. We often turned to old favorites to make us laugh. We needed duct tape to hold these favorite books together, while the wait list was perpetually long for their digital equivalents. The act of reading should be pleasurable. Therefore, arguing that a reader must always read something new deters them from reading altogether.

We must also actively engage in dialogue with our school and larger community about the concept that reading is reading. Providing learners with *any* opportunity to read is our focus. This approach builds their stamina and excitement to continue reading and learning. Providing excitement around books helps build a school-wide culture of reading.

Judgement-Free Zones

Remember when I mentioned ditching the diatribe about graphic novels and audiobooks not being real reading? And remember when I told you that reading is not dead? In certain classrooms in our schools, these beliefs might seem alive and well if a school librarian doesn't make an effort to provide support for learners *and* educators. This need is especially true for special education classes and English Language Learners. However, because of a culture of reading in our school, we librarians are in these classes like all the others. We also cultivate a collection to give *all* teen readers access to academic and pleasure reading. This results in a robust collection that represents the needs of every learner we serve. Those learners can help themselves to the collection or ask for the guidance from their librarian.

Scotland and the United States piloted programs aimed at addressing what students were lacking in reading, namely a space to share their reading interests with others and a place to read (Wilkinson et al. 2020). We need to make it a priority in the library and the classroom to actively encourage reading because one reason teens stop reading is a lack of

encouragement to read (Wilkinson et al. 2020). That situation can easily be remedied by making reading a routine part of attending school, from the selection of the book to dedicated time to read it. Selecting the books and reading them takes place in more spaces than just the library. By supporting teachers in cultivating classroom libraries as well, librarians provide more opportunities for students to interact with books in a safe environment.

Artful Booktalking

Whether in the flesh or through a computer screen, the art of the booktalk is a skill. I hone it by mimicking other school librarians' approaches, creating succinct pitches similar to those of publishers at conferences, and using meaningful vocabulary when evaluating a book. During my service on multiple Young Adult Library Services Association booklist committees, I've learned some valuable tips for booktalking from my professional colleagues to boost my ability to "sell" books to readers.

The art has two parts: the strategy and knowledge of the book, and it doesn't have to be direct knowledge. I can booktalk a title I haven't read because I have other information to share: *No, I haven't read this one, but it's being turned into a Netflix series so give it a try!* Other approaches include: *Does this cover appeal to you? Why don't we both read it, and we can share our thoughts afterward?* In all honesty, though, I'd rather talk about books I *have* read and am excited to share, and that's quite a few. But you won't see me complaining about personal time spent reading because connecting learners with books is what I love about school librarianship. The more I read, the better I am at booktalking.

Students lean in from nearby tables when I'm walking through the stacks with a student who asked for a book recommendation. The "walk and talk" is hands down my favorite kind of booktalk. David Kleeman noted that a library's collections mean nothing if readers can't or don't find something they want (2016). That statement is true when I'm walking and talking with learners, too. Learners need weeded collections, maybe some dynamic shelving in addition to easy access to an online catalog, accessibility to come in and browse, and a school librarian waiting to help. This reality is a reminder that every school library should have a certified school librarian on site to curate the collections and talk books.

Creating a variety of approaches to talking about individual or a group of books is like having multiple tools in a toolbox. Just reading an excerpt from a book is not sustainable as the only approach to booktalking. Listeners—and you—will get bored quickly. Plus, we know that no two readers are alike. They have strong opinions about reading and varying skill levels, so one approach does not fit all. Over time, tools I use to talk about books include sharing author biographies, discussing current events, quizzing listeners on history and then tying the book to their prior knowledge, profiling a social media post, or deferring to another reader who beamed when I mentioned the book and ask them to talk about it. In summary, a booktalk is a conversation, not a lecture. It involves active engagement, eye contact, and interactivity.

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With a whole-class booktalk, recognize that if students have started looking at the clock instead of you and the books, it's time to shift gears. Stop talking and give them space and time to explore, while you conference with individual readers.

Building Trust

When school librarians do a lot of book-pushing individually and in classes, relationships with learners are created. Over time, the relationships lead to those three little but powerful words: "I trust you." This means I can set a stack of books in front of a student to take immediately to the desk to check out, no words necessary. Or, students see the excitement in their peers and trust that they, too, can have that excitement if they lean into what the school librarian shares is an adventurous book that they won't be disappointed to read. Again, a booktalk is a partnership and collaboration, not a solo endeavor.

Secret disappointment does creep in if a reader doesn't take my recommendation. However, I want to encourage readers to reflect on what they *do* like to read, not create situations in which readers don't feel empowered and, as a result, harbor negative feelings toward reading in general. I'm careful not to show disappointment or push too hard. Sometimes I have to walk away. Before I do, though, especially when interacting with an individual who continually rejects recommendations, I might suggest picking books by cover illustrations or thickness, or reading a first page. Students, especially "undiscovered" readers, can feel overwhelmed by our exuberance, so it's important to provide them with an opportunity to disengage, especially when they may not know how to do this on their own.

Even if someone takes my recommendation, it is not guaranteed to be a good fit, so I provide an escape hatch. I encourage readers to return a book if they dislike it. Students know my feelings won't be hurt if they bring back a book they decided not to finish. In fact, they know they can tell me why they didn't like it and that I'll be interested in their perspective. They know it'll make me happy that they can recognize when a book doesn't work for them. There are too many books on the shelves to read a bad book!

I won't ever spout research that the more they read for pleasure the higher their test scores will be, the stronger their vocabulary, or that they're building empathy, but I do know when we strip down the school librarian/student connection it will always be about books. Each relationship probably sprouted from conversations about books. And in a technology-distracted world, talking face-to-face is disappearing, so we must make the adjustments to provide authentic communication with an equalizer like books. These discussions, referenced in Evans's article, highlight the necessity of a librarian's role as a positive force for continued reading engagement (2019).

A school librarian's role isn't to recommend books only to students. We have a collection for everyone in our school community. As a result, I do just as much recommending to staff, including choices for leisure reading and for the summer professional development reading groups that have become part of our school culture. Staff look forward to opportunities to discuss books with one another at their own pace in a less stressful environment during the summer, just as they support the library's initiatives by sharing books during the year. Ultimately, I realize that it's not just students who need the social aspect of talking peer to peer about reading. Adults do, too. Being a trusted resource also means that I frequently receive social media messages from colleagues standing in a bookstore, needing a good beach read or a book for their spouse's birthday. I'll always answer the call. It's a level of service that the American Library Association included in "Core Values of Librarianship," which highlights our role in promoting lifelong learning, be it continuing to share books with students long-since graduated or with a hall monitor who wants to read a book rather than doomscrolling on their phone.

Opening Doors with Authors and Activities

Less doomscrolling overall and more engagement with books is why in 2011 we hosted bestselling author Ellen Hopkins, and we've never looked back. We've hosted at least one author a year (but usually more), and it's become an expectation at our school. Younger siblings of former students will ask who is coming this year, and teachers want to know, in case they can incorporate the author's works into their curriculum. Meeting authors in the flesh and discussing the writing process helps students see themselves as writers in addition to readers. Sharon Flake encouraged students to read their writing out loud. Ruta Sepetys shared that her first drafts never look like the finished product. Her best writing is done during editing and revision. When these words don't come from their teachers (and librarians) but instead from published authors, the messages have greater impact. Besides the wisdom they impart, authors build a school's reading culture when the school librarians welcome them into that reading community. In the

process, students make connections with other student readers and writers.

Other ways to intentionally foster a culture of reading is through reading groups, community collaborations, or pop-up reading opportunities. Many students are overscheduled with clubs, sports, and classwork, so brief opportunities typically get more participation than do reading programs requiring recurring time commitments. The inspiration for a pop-up opportunity we offered this past year was a request from a local case manager who helps crime and sexual assault victims. She asked for an opportunity to talk with students about healthy versus unhealthy relationships. With a packed curriculum, health teachers couldn't add this content, but they were willing to offer extra credit to encourage students to read a book on the topic and participate in a book discussion. We decided on *Bad Romance* by Heather Demetrios, which features a toxic relationship, and the author agreed to visit us virtually. It was advertised as a pop-up learning opportunity that included a book to keep and a donut incentive. Interested students each received their own copy of the book, and we planned to meet a month later for a meaningful discussion led by the case manager, Demetrios, and me. As the date for the discussion got closer, a few of the original group brought friends who wanted to participate, so we ordered more books. When the date arrived and themed snacks from the book were set out, not all interested students were able to attend because of testing and other obligations. However, the students who did attend said they felt connected to one another, even though they had not formally met before. The combination of book discussion, the author's virtual presence, and both personal commentary and resources left students asking for more opportunities like it. It's the power of books!

Reading and Books at the Core of Our Practice

If nothing else, let this brief recap solidify why a school librarian's value should be wrapped up in books. First, reading is a foundational skill, and memories are built around who we were before and who we are after reading a book. School librarians get to be a part of that transformation. Second, books still make up the heart of a physical library, and we can make them shine on our shelves by continually managing the collection, a process that includes what comes in (selection) as much as what goes out (weeding). And third, we elevate our profession through this work. Yes, a librarian is usually a tech guru and a competent teacher, but at the heart of it, librarians are still associated with books. I'm more than okay with that, and so should you be. Let's make our link with books count.

Alicia Abdul *is librarian at Albany (NY) High School. In 2019 she was co-presenter of " 'That's Not Real Reading': Making the Case for Graphic Novel Inclusion in Every Classroom" at AASL National Conference. An active member of the Young Adult Library Services Association, she served as chairperson for the 2022 Excellence in Nonfiction Award Committee, and was a blogger for YALSA's 2020 Best Fiction for Young Adults. She also served on YALSA's 2019 Morris Award Committee and 2018 Great Graphic Novels for Teens Selection Committee. Among her recent publications are "An Uncomfortable Truth: The 19th Amendment and the Limits of Women's Suffrage" in* School Library Journal *(August 2020) and several articles published by* School Library Connection *in 2016 and 2017. She is also adjunct professor at St. John Fisher University and at University at Albany, SUNY, where she teaches courses focused on young adult literature.*

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