



Who knew there existed such a sly, smart, subversive band of bookworms spreading mischief and mayhem (we mean that in the best way) in schools on a daily basis?

How Do You Mend a Broken Heart? Ask a Librarian

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We did not grow up with a great school library. It wasn't even very good.

The library at St. Mark's School in Peoria, Illinois, was a dusty, windowless room in the basement. Looking back it's clear there was no budget whatsoever. All the books were donated, which in our day meant a lot of Leon Uris and James Michener. Still, we relished every visit to the school library because there was always a chance you'd find a Trixie Belden novel with the name of a glamorous upper-grader written in cursive inside the front cover: "This book belongs to Bernadette Dries."

Lucky for us we had a fantastic public library in downtown Peoria. That's where we met our people: Mrs. Piggle Wiggle. Amelia Bedelia. Pippi Longstocking. Our mother took the two of us, our three sisters, and one brother

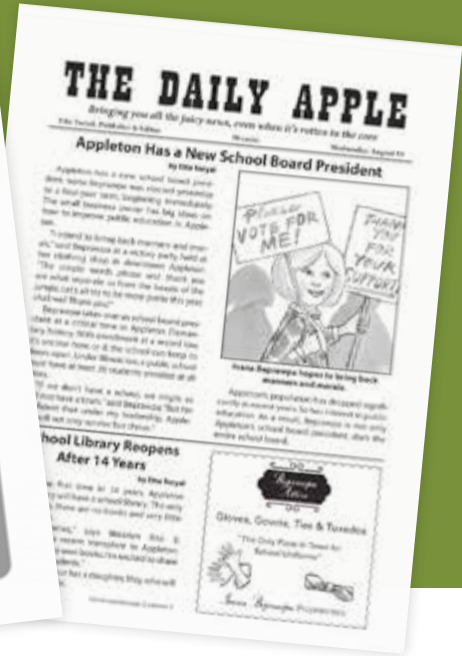
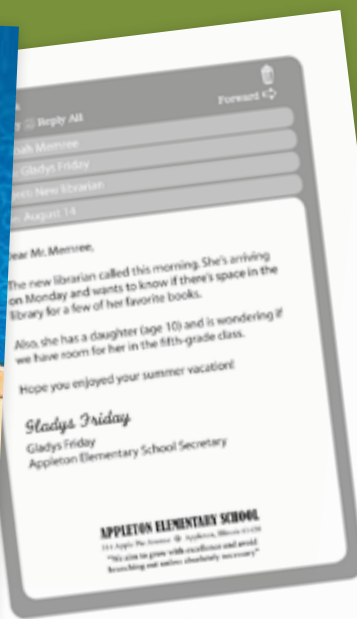
to the Peoria Public Library every two weeks from birth to the age of 18. We basically relocated half of the library's collection to our house twice a month because the books were so good, and the librarians were even better. They, along with our parents, set us on the path of writing and illustrating books for young readers.

Years later, when we started visiting schools to talk about our creative process, we were blown away by the quality of the school libraries. All those new books! The rows of glossy magazines! Comfy chairs! Plus sewing machines, cake pans, fishing poles, and bikes—all free for the borrowing.

Then there were the school librarians. Who knew there existed such a sly, smart, subversive band of bookworms spreading mischief and mayhem (we mean that in the best way) in schools on a daily basis?

One remarkable school librarian planted the seed for our latest book, *Don't Check Out This Book!* Until she retired earlier this year, Cathy Evans was the librarian at St. Mary's Episcopal School in Memphis, Tennessee. In 2014 when we visited her school, we saw how Cathy had created a library so unlike the one we'd grown up with in Peoria. Unlike the nuns back home, Cathy had the vision and the resources (that's code for money) to create the warmest, most inviting library with appealing books, comfortable furniture, cool art, and a coffee bar for the high school students.

All that would've been enough, but what impressed us most about Cathy's school library was her green dot collection. This was a small collection of books in a corner of the library. The books in Cathy's green dot collection tackled the tough parts



about growing up, books a student might be too embarrassed to check out. The deal was this: Any book with a green dot sticker on the spine didn't have to be checked out. A student could just slip the book in a backpack and return it when finished.

When we told Cathy how much we loved her green dot collection, she said the idea wasn't hers. She'd borrowed the concept from another school librarian, which, again, we loved. The collaborative spirit between school librarians reminded us of the way we'd always worked, writing and drawing books together since we were kids.

This made us wonder: Is there something about books—reading them, writing them, illustrating them, curating them in a library—that makes us more willing to collaborate? Do books teach us something about working together toward a goal that's bigger than ourselves?

We thought we knew the answer (a resounding yes!) when we wrote and illustrated *Don't Check Out This Book!* Then the pandemic hit, followed by

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the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd. Like everyone, we were overwhelmed by the unrelenting sadness of it all. We were angry. And do you know where we found hope? Librarians.

Early in the COVID-19 crisis, we received an e-mail from a librarian friend, Ann Symons, who was helping to organize a fundraiser to help the hard-hit community of Alamos, Mexico, where people faced the threat of dying from starvation. Ann researched the weekly cost of groceries and wrote a group e-mail that ended with: "So there you have it: \$8.00 a week to feed a family. And yes, I'm asking for a donation. Any amount."

We loved Ann's directness, her problem-solving skills, her willingness to ask the right questions to get the job done. Within a few weeks, Ann had helped to raise more than \$40,000.

After the death of George Floyd, we received another e-mail from another librarian friend, Lex Anne Seifert in Texas. "We've got to change the way we teach history," she wrote. "We've got to bring back Civics. That will take time, but we can build library collections *now*. We can start talking to librarians *now*. We can get kids reading *now*. I want to gather as many smart people as I can who have influence in education and publishing now for dinner at my house. No agenda. No phones. Just talking and listening."

Maybe libraries are where we help one another move from the windowless room in the basement to the higher place where, with the help of our friends, we can all become better people.

Another librarian friend, Joel Shoemaker in Illinois, encouraged us to host a series of online classes for people who were tired of feeling sad and unproductive. So we launched an online Master Class for anyone who wanted to write and illustrate a picture book. Our first class lasted three weeks and included a

multi-generational (ages 6 to 69), multi-cultural group from across the country.

What did we find? Stories about a mermaid who was tired of swimming, a toad who wanted to be an opera star, and a villain who wanted to be bad but kept helping little old ladies cross

the street. The last one was written by Lily, age 8, who dedicated her book “to my friend Lydia, who helped me become a better person.”

We found that when we gathered to talk, laugh, write, and draw together, we all felt a little more hopeful. Maybe that’s what a library is or can be: a gathering of people who are genuinely interested in hearing one another’s stories.

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Sarah Klise is the illustrator and designer of many children’s books written by her sister, Kate. Sarah has spent the past 30 years teaching private drawing and painting classes in the San Francisco Bay Area. She currently leads online art classes and, with Kate, is offering a series of Zoom master classes for children and adults who want to write and illustrate books. For more about the Klise sisters, visit kateandsarahklise.com.

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