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Connecting with Young Learners during the Pandemic (and a Thank You to School Librarians)

Debbie Ridpath Ohi

When I first heard about the virus now known as COVID-19, I felt for the residents of Wuhan. Back then, the word *pandemic* evoked memories of dystopian novels as well as the name of a board game that my husband and I enjoyed playing. It didn’t affect me or anyone I knew personally, not in any real-world sense.

That changed, of course.

Everyone had their own way of coping. Some were able to immerse themselves in their work and were extra-productive. Some, like me, were the opposite. Early in the pandemic, I found it nearly impossible to focus on my usual creative pursuits.

I found that the only activities that could drag me away from doom-scrolling and stressing about things that were out of my control were

learning how to sew masks and learning new tech skills. What also helped was that both skills could help me help others.

Educators were (and still are) facing such a challenging time, having

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to repeatedly pivot as quarantine guidelines change. I saw so many posts by school librarians who were finding ways to keep supporting their young learners despite schools being closed and despite their own at-home stresses. Researching how to create and edit videos of my creative process to share with educators and their students prompted me to find out more about lighting, audio, and live streaming.

Before publishers had started posting their official online reading guidelines, I e-mailed Justin Chanda, my editor at Simon & Schuster Children’s, to ask if it was okay for me to put together a cover-to-cover video reading of some of my books, for use by educators during the pandemic. He said yes, so in early March 2020, I put together a video of me reading *Where Are My Books?* aloud, did an art activity, and

included the crowd-sourced related music video. Michael Ian Black offered to do video read-alouds of some of our books. I also began offering free, daily activities for those working with young creators at home, posting them online with the hashtag #KidsDailyDebbieOhi and encouraging them to share (via an adult) their art and writing with me. With their parents' permission, I included some of these in the videos I had started posting on my YouTube channel, and compiled all of them in a resource for educators at DebbieOhi.com/homelearn.

I began hearing from educators, who sent me photos and screenshots of student work, along with messages thanking me, saying that their young learners were excited about my creative challenges. And for the first time during the pandemic, something kindled inside me that I hadn't felt in months.

Something *good* and full of *hope*.

As many schools began to start e-learning, I yearned to reconnect with more young readers, but I wasn't familiar with some of the new platforms. When I put out a call to educators on Twitter asking for advice about Google Meets, teacher-librarian Susan Bowdoin volunteered to help. She and a group of fellow New Mexico school librarians met with me in Google Meets to show

me around and offer tips. I was moved by their generosity, especially since I knew they were all dealing with so much already because of the pandemic.

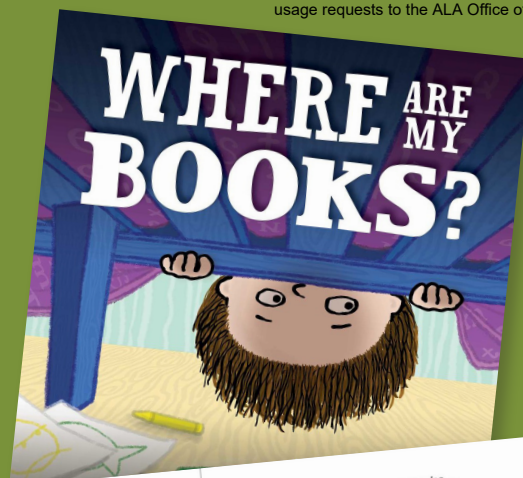
Teacher-librarian Lara Ivey also responded and invited me to participate in the Old Hundred Elementary virtual book fair with BBGB Tales for Kids. I did a read-aloud of *I'm Worried*, then invited the young readers at home to do an art activity with me and gave them a sneak peek of my new picture book.

Launching a book during the pandemic was a challenge on multiple levels. In the beforetime, I had been hugely excited about sharing this new book. The story text of *Gurple and Preen: A Broken Crayon Cosmic Adventure* was

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written by Newbery medalist Linda Sue Park, and I got to use found-object art in my book illustrations for the first time! During the pandemic, however, it felt weird talking about our book when so many terrible things were happening around the world.

Talking with educators helped me be more at ease about *Gurple and Preen* posts. Young readers needed humor books more than ever, some



said, to keep readers engaged during virtual learning. One educator thanked me and Michael Ian Black for the *I'm... picture books* (*I'm Bored, I'm Sad, and I'm Worried*). "Laughter is indeed the best medicine," she tweeted, "and thankfully we don't need a vaccine to experience it."

Simon & Schuster Children's had originally planned to send me on a physical book tour to help celebrate the launch of *Gurple and Preen*, but of course that had to change. My publicist, who was working from home, asked if I knew of any educators who might be interested in hosting me in virtual visits at their schools. I put her in contact with the New

Mexico librarians, and it was a joy to speak with many of their students during my virtual book tour.

Afterward, the New Mexico librarians sent me this amazing thank-you gift:



Here are just a few of the things I have learned so far during the pandemic:

- Doing things to help others gave me perspective as well as a positive focus.
- Being flexible is essential. Everyone is coping as best they can, seeking out creative solutions.
- Connecting book creators with young learners is more important than ever.
- The more I find out about what educators have been doing for young learners during the pandemic (through frequent pivots, challenges, risks, at-home stresses), the more I'm blown away.

To the school librarians out there:
THANK YOU.



Debbie Ridpath Ohi is the author and illustrator of *Where Are My Books* and *Sam & Eva* (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers). Her illustrations also appear in books by Judy Blume and Michael Ian Black, among others. Her newest book is *I'm Sorry*, written by Michael Ian Black and illustrated by Debbie, launching from Simon & Schuster BFYR in August 2021. She offers virtual school visits through TheAuthorVillage.com, and you can find out more info about her books at DebbieOhi.com.

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INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

American Association
of School Librarians
(AASL) . . . C2, I, I2-I3, C3

Booklist 11

Bound to Stay Bound
Books, Inc. Cover 4

Crisis & Trauma Resource
Institute 51

Hank Fellows 25

International Association of
School Librarianship . . . 15