Everyone's favorite classroom pet!

Betty G. Birney

Humphrey according to Humphrey

The World According to Humphrey

Welcome to Room 26, Humphrey!

Humphrey is wry-humored and big-hearted. This read is simply good-good-good!

— Kirkus Reviews

For more fun with Humphrey, visit Humphreyville at www.bettybirney.com!
Dear Educator/Librarian:

America is a nation of over 316 million individuals. Although many of us praise our unique American individuality, we also create strong communities. Some of those communities revolve around family, religion, enthusiasm for a sports team, hobbies or pastimes. But we also have the opportunity to build a community of readers, a community built around ideas and themes found in literature.

Such programs encourage members of a community, whether it be a grade, school, town, or city, to read a single title simultaneously and freely discuss the concepts and content of that book. The natural place for such a program is the library.

Known by a variety of names, from “One School, One Book” to “The Big Read,” these programs rely on individual librarians to design their offerings around local needs and circumstances. Several shared goals drive each program, including creating civic unity through literature, promoting literacy, fostering an appreciation of books and reading, and providing a forum for bringing together various members of the larger community. Programs in school and public libraries offer unique challenges and rewards. Above all, programs like these require books with big ideas. Consider the following offerings as you begin thinking about your own community reading program, and thank you for supporting our books and our brand.

—Penguin School & Library Marketing

School-Wide Reads

School-wide reading programs foster a strong sense of community, either between kindergarteners and fifth graders or freshmen and seniors in high school. They unite your students, faculty, and staff while also promoting literacy in your school’s environment. To create an engaging program that sustains interest beyond a typical classroom assignment, try the following tips:

✔ Choose a great book and generate enough excitement that students will want to read it.

✔ Have students book-talk the book or create dynamic reader’s theater scripts they can present to their classmates.

✔ Ask classes to create door and hallway decorations that depict a theme or scene from the book.

✔ Encourage faculty to share their own experiences with reading.

Remember, kids don’t usually have to be strong-armed to attend pep rallies, field days, and other extra-curricular school-wide activities. With careful preparation, the same kind of excitement can be generated around a reading program!

“We have approximately 90% (our goal is still 100%) of the households keeping up with the book, reading it together at home as a family! As a principal, I could not be happier with this. I think it is in large part due to the high interest the students have in The World According to Humphrey. I was thrilled when the buzz around school was ‘Humphrey this’ or ‘Humphrey that’. The first week was amazing! I can’t go 10 minutes before I hear someone talking about the latest chapter.”

—Daniel Sebring, Principal, Maple Elementary, Painesville, OH

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Welcome to Room 26, Humphrey!

By Betty G. Birney

Humphrey, an intelligent hamster, resides in Room 26, except on weekends when he goes to stay with one of the students in his class. He comes to know that “You can learn a lot about life by observing another species,” as he sees the varied home lives of each weekend caretaker. Humphrey admits that he’s “very good at coming up with plans to solve human problems,” and he cleverly works out solutions to help humans in a variety of ways, such as overcoming television addiction and helping a family learn English. Most powerful of all, however, is the concept that individuals are often more complicated than they appear.

Humphrey has been used as a “One School, One Book” selection in over 300 schools in 41 states . . . and counting!

The World According to Humphrey by Betty G. Birney

The Day the Crayons Quit by Drew Daywalt, illustrated by Oliver Jeffers

Poor Duncan just wants to color. But when he opens his box of crayons, he finds only letters, all saying the same thing: His crayons have had enough! They quit! Beige Crayon is tired of playing second fiddle to Brown Crayon. Black wants to be used for more than just outlining. Blue needs a break from coloring all those bodies of water. And Orange and Yellow are no longer speaking—each believes he is the true color of the sun. What can Duncan possibly do to appease all of the crayons and get them back to doing what they do best? Kids will be imagining their own humorous conversations with crayons and coloring a blue streak after sharing laughs with this bestselling book.

Sure to please kindergarten through fourth grade classrooms, the story lends itself to imaginative re-creations including school-wide debates, letter writing contests, and mural projects.

The Day the Crayons Quit by Drew Daywalt, illustrated by Oliver Jeffers

Counting by 7s by Holly Goldberg Sloan

Twelve-year-old Willow Chance is an adopted, mixed-race genius. She loves the dispassionate order in the cycles of plants, the multiple causes of diseases, and counting by sevens. She has few social skills and only a limited number of acquaintances. When both of Willow’s parents are killed in an automobile accident one day her friend Mai begs her mother to let Willow stay with them temporarily, and thus begins the process of building the most unlikely of family units. Discussion starters range from the meaning of family to Willow’s observation that “you can find labels to organize living things, but you can’t put people in any kind of group or order,” to her conclusion that “When you care about other people, it takes the spotlight off your own drama.”

Create a “small things matter” campaign in your school and discuss the power of communities.

Counting by 7s by Holly Goldberg Sloan

Between Shades of Gray by Ruta Sepetys

When Russian troops unceremoniously invade fifteen-year-old Lina’s Lithuanian home in 1941 and haul her mother and her younger brother away, she begins a multi-year deportation in a dismal work camp north of the Arctic Circle in Siberia. Here, readers see the worst of humanity as Lina and her fellow captives fight for survival and endure sadistic treatment at the hands of their imprisoners. But they also glimpse moments of courage and kindness among the Lithuanians and even occasionally among the jailers. Discussion topics flow from the characters as Lina’s mother insists “A wrongdoing doesn’t give us the right to do wrong,” and Lina’s musings “Was it harder to die or harder to be the one who survived?”

Teach your students compassion through the lens of this historical novel.

Between Shades of Gray by Ruta Sepetys
School-Wide Reads: Grades 9-12

Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher

When high school senior Clay Jensen receives a mysterious package with seven audiotapes a few weeks after Hannah Baker, a girl he not so secretly adored, commits suicide, he’s completely caught off guard by the sound of her voice. And then he, like the reader, is mesmerized by the tapes. Hannah has sent these tapes to thirteen of her classmates, letting them know what part, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, each played in her awful decision. As Hannah reveals, “No one knows for certain how much impact they have on the lives of other people.” But, the real questions that emerge are: How do I treat others? Am I kind, cruel, thoughtful, or dismissive? Each of the thirteen characters represents high school kids readers will know, thus prompting much discussion. For those who don’t want to go public with their thoughts and feelings, a website is available on which they may post anonymously.

Join Penguin and Jay Asher’s 50 States Against Bullying movement 50StatesAgainstBullying.com

The Fault In Our Stars by John Green

This Star Won’t Go Out by Esther Grace Earl with Lori and Wayne Earl

Hazel, a stage IV terminal cancer patient, and Augustus Waters, who is in remission for osteosarcoma, meet in a cancer support group and fall in love. Clearly their time is limited, but both are determined to make the most of their short lives. And their situation raises a central question: What makes a life worth living? At first blush, the decision to select a book not only respecting their patrons, they’re also passing out brand new copies of their beloved writings of Esther Earl, the girl to whom Green dedicated his novel. Readers will meet a woman whose fierce spirit is reminiscent of Hazel’s, but as Green makes clear, she is not Hazel, the character and the person are two different individuals. But the issues of living life and facing death overlap and can deepen a discussion about both books.

Additionally, offer students This Star Won’t Go Out, a posthumous collection of artwork and writings of Esther Earl, the girl to whom Green dedicated his novel. Readers will meet a community of one zip code, a community of Esther’s friends formed mostly through the Internet. Esther’s fierce spirit is reminiscent of Hazel’s, but as Green makes clear, she is not Hazel, the character and the person are two different individuals. But the issues of living life and facing death overlap and can deepen a discussion about both books.

A moving fiction and nonfiction pairing, these books allow students the opportunity to discuss purpose, meaning, and what makes life worth living.

Community-Wide Reads

Public librarians should consider sponsoring community-wide reads with books that have various editions appealing to specific age groups. Here, for example, a community-wide program might spotlight an adult title and concurrently offer younger children and young adults an adapted version of the same book. The library would provide copies of all editions as well as multiple circulating copies for those who do not wish to own them. Programming would be both overlapping and differentiated, with the concept of community broadening to residents at large and narrowing to discussions around the family dinner table. Clearly such a program would require intense planning and publicity. But the potential rewards of attracting an entire family to the library are great.


In 1987 William Kamkwamba was born in rural Malawi, Africa. His family of farmers lived on the edge of poverty and only two percent of all Malawians had electricity. As William recalls, “I could never do anything at night, such as study or finish my radio repairs, much less see the roaches, mice, and spiders that crawled on the walls and floors in the dark.” When drought hit the area, the Kamkwambas were faced not just with hard times but starvation, conditions that are mentioned in all three books but with varying levels of intensity. Forced to drop out of school, William, always a curious child, turned to a small library and began reading about windmills, realizing that with a windmill he could both generate electricity and pump water. Painstakingly, he read about the physics involved in building such a device, and by raiding a neighboring junkyard put together a rudimentary one with a bicycle, bottle caps, and reshaped pipes. His dream, accomplished despite the chorus of naysayers in his community, did indeed improve daily life, and he received worldwide recognition and the opportunity to further aid his community.

Discussions at all levels will most probably focus on William’s ingenuity as well as his circumstances, and for many readers provide a window to an unfamiliar world. Some discussion may lead both youngsters and adults to help in Africa, but no reading program should be a didactic lesson in giving or kindness or race relations. And that’s the beauty of finding ideas in books; they can be discussed with many viewpoints shared and without a mandate for action.


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The Boys In the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics by Daniel James Brown. Ages 10 up.

Readers young and old can now root for the nine working-class boys from the American West who showed the world at the 1936 Berlin Olympics what true grit really meant. Now available in a young reader’s edition, Daniel James Brown focuses on the story of Joe Rantz, a teenager without family or prospects, who rows not only to regain his shattered self-regard but also to find a real place for himself in the world. Drawing on the boys’ own journals and vivid memories of a once-in-a-lifetime shared dream, Brown has created an unforgettable portrait of an era, a celebration of a remarkable achievement, and a chronicle of one extraordinary young man’s personal quest. In these books lie messages of hope, strength, and above all else, belief in oneself.

Quiet: The Secret Strengths of Introverts by Susan Cain and Gregory Mone. Illustrated by Grant Snider. Ages 10 up.

Susan Cain’s national Quiet revolution has struck a chord both in corporations and in classrooms. Now available for students (and their extroverted teachers), Susan Cain has employed new research to address young readers more directly than her adult counterpart. This book helps us deepen our foundation of communities, as it helps us understand individuals different from ourselves—whether we are introverted, extroverted, or somewhere along the spectrum.
JACQUELINE WOODSON is the winner of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for young adults, the recipient of three Newbery Honors for *After Tupac and D Foster, Feathers* and *Show Way*, and a National Book Award winner for *Brown Girl Dreaming* (as well as a two-time finalist for the National Book Award for *Locomotion* and *Hush*). Other awards include the Coretta Scott King Award and Los Angeles Times Book Prize for *Miracle’s Boys*. Jacqueline has been inspiring readers with her stories since she began writing as a young child herself. Her books have been used to spread messages of hope, perseverance, empathy, and kindness, among others. Communities have embraced these books and their messages for town and city-wide reading programs, highlighting her powerful prose for children, teachers, and caregivers alike to learn from. Below are two of Jacqueline’s most impactful stories to date.

**Each Kindness** by Jacqueline Woodson. Illustrated by E. B. Lewis. Ages 5 up.

Young narrator Chloe refuses to reach out to a new student, Maya, who, dressed in second-hand clothes, looks different from the rest of Chloe’s friends. Without being blatantly mean, Chloe simply ignores Maya’s attempts at friendship, and her friends follow suite. Maya is left to play alone. When Maya moves away, Chloe’s teacher asks the class to think of kind acts, and Chloe turns that thinking around by realizing what she didn’t do with Maya, “each kindness I had never shown.” The illustrations show Chloe as a thoughtful child, and the gentle text and quiet illustrations beg for a discussion of our actions, those both given and withheld.

Spread the kindness message in the classroom and in your school community!

**Brown Girl Dreaming** by Jacqueline Woodson. Ages 10 up.

Raised in South Carolina and New York, Woodson always felt halfway home in each place. In vivid poems, she shares what it was like to grow up as an African American in the 1960s and 1970s, living with the remnants of Jim Crow and her growing awareness of the Civil Rights movement. Touching and powerful, each poem is both accessible and emotionally charged, each line a glimpse into a child’s soul as she searches for her place in the world. Woodson’s eloquent poetry also reflects the joy of finding her voice through writing stories, despite the fact that she struggled with reading as a child. Her love of stories inspired her and stayed with her, creating the first sparks of the gifted writer she was to become.

The moving story of her childhood in mesmerizing verse.

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**Community Spotlight on Jacqueline Woodson**

**Tips for Creating a Successful Program**

**SETTING PROGRAM GOALS**
Identify needs, create plans, and predict the impact that your program will have on your community

**ESTABLISHING A TIMELINE**
Make a weekly or monthly checklist that is practical and useful

**FINDING A PARTNER**
Look to municipal organizations in your town, city, or state, or a local bookstore, for financial support

**BUILDING A BUDGET**
Determine how your school or library will fund the project

**DEFINING AN AUDIENCE**
With Penguin’s selection of young readers titles (and adult titles as pairs), you can easily define who your program should reach

**SELECTING A BOOK**
Based on popular community interests, issues, and values, choose a book that fits your needs

**DEVELOPING EVENTS AND PROGRAMS**
Whether you are inviting an author, partnering with a theater for a production, or displaying artwork at an exhibit in town, think about ways to incorporate outside community organizations in your event

**CREATE A COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE**
Create a team of people to market, publicize and advertise the program and facilitate the execution alongside your library or school staff

... **HAVE FUN!**
Remember that the goal of the program is to unite your community with one shared reading experience ... so enjoy the experience to its fullest!