

TOUGH CROWD

How to wow book clubs for young readers.

BY MELISSA HART

I don't go anywhere these days without my bag of magnifying glasses, tweezers, and foil-wrapped owl pellets. The pellets, coughed up by owls after a meal and packed with tiny bones from their prey, represent the *pièce de résistance* of my presentation to book clubs for young readers. After a comic slideshow about the most fascinating attributes of raptors, and a short reading from my 2016 middle-grade novel *Avenging the Owl*, readers scramble for a seat at the pellet dissection table and dig in.

Authors speaking to young readers compete with soccer practice, Snapchat, and the thrills of "Pokémon Go." Savvy writers know that it's not enough to sit students in a circle to discuss their novel or nonfiction work; kids need images and videos, memorable props, and activities that get them up on their feet and moving (or, perhaps, singing).

Teen author Aija Mayrock's *The Survival Guide to Bullying* includes spoken word. When she visits book clubs, she performs "roems," which are rap poems that evoke the fear and confusion of being bullied, or bullying someone else.

"Kids love it when I perform the pieces for them," Mayrock says. "I talk about my story, how I wrote the book and got it published, which is very inspiring to them because I'm only a few years older than them. I also do Q&A sessions as well as book signings. I think the most memorable part, though, is performing the rap. They go crazy for it and start rapping along!"

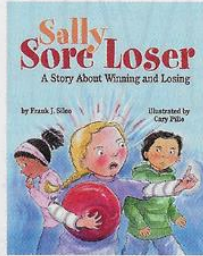
Mayrock's appearance at book clubs meshes with her anti-bullying activism – a message that



Young readers eagerly dissect owl pellets after hearing a short reading of *Avenging the Owl*.

resonates with crowds of young readers. "In September, I did a book club event in West Virginia," she says. "There were a few hundred kids who were participating after having read my book. The kids were eager with so many questions, ideas, and thoughts. They spoke their mind and exchanged ideas. It was so memorable because many of the kids had been bullied and were so open about sharing their stories and thoughts on my book."

Psychologist Dr. Frank J. Sileo also invites book club participants to share their anecdotes and observations. He combines readings from his children's books with activities designed to foster safe explorations of readers' emotions and coping strategies. The author of several picture books, including *Sally Sore Loser*, Sileo interacts constantly with his young readers during his presentations, asking them if they've ever known a



TIPS FOR AUTHORS PRESENTING AT BOOK CLUBS FOR CHILDREN/ YOUNG ADULTS

Contact your local library, bookstores, and schools to identify books clubs for young readers. Approach them with a postcard or one-sheet that provides a brief synopsis of your book, a short author bio, and a description of your presentation. Make sure to include photos from past events, plus your contact information and website.

Prepare the book club beforehand. Let them know what it is you'd like to talk about, and ask what they'd like you to address during a preset length of time—say a half hour to 45 minutes. Be open to host suggestions, and tailor your presentation to the specific needs of the club's readers. Ask how you can best reach hearing- and vision-impaired members as well.

Bring visuals. Young audiences respond to humorous PowerPoint presentations and interesting props, and they appreciate a bookmark or other small souvenir that reminds them of you and your visit. I provide my readers with small bags so that they can take home the bones from their owl pellet.

Come up with a hands-on activity directly related to the book. This can be an art or science project, a dance, an easy snack, a short creative writing assignment, even an off-the-cuff rap performance.

sore loser and pointing out the correlation between ungracious losing and bullying behaviors.

Sileo presents a PowerPoint slideshow to explain the process of writing and publishing a book, and shows how sketches become illustrations on his pages. Each student who participates in the book club leaves with a pencil that says “Don’t be a Sally Sore Loser” and an enhanced sense of how to use specific calming techniques in the face of any loss, whether related to sports, performing arts, or test scores.

Sileo preps the parents of participants beforehand and invites them to sit in if a child has particular difficulty with paying attention, but seldom has to contend with restless readers because of his presentation style and the colorful images in his picture books. He emphasizes the importance of speaking to children in an animated, engaging manner. “Tone and inflection are so important,” he says. “You have to be an actor, play out your book and make it come alive for them. Keep it short, sweet, and structured for success.”

Lin Oliver, middle-grade author and executive director of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators, travels with a real-life actor – Henry Winkler, co-author of Penguin’s

Hank Zipzer series. Together, they do a dynamic, kid-friendly presentation with plenty of visuals on screen.

“I am constantly amazed at how perceptive young readers are, how much they identify with the characters in books, and how passionate they are about the books they love,” she says. “Middle-grade kids are putting the world together piece by piece, processing new information and beginning to establish their identity. A book club is a high-minded and safe place for that kind of exploration.”

And sometimes, a book club is pure fun. Occasionally, organizers have their own ideas of what an event should look like, and all the author has to do is show up and enjoy an hour of thrilling celebrity. One evening, a club host made dinner from the recipes in my YA memoir, *Gringa*, and compiled a playlist of music referenced in the book as well. I simply sat at the head of the table and enjoyed a wonderful meal and answered questions from readers...no owl pellets required. **W**

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