

BUILDING BOOKWORMS

FRONT PAGE

■ Today is National Young Readers Day, and local children explain their love of literature.

By JOSH NEWTON
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What does an imaginary comic book hero in underpants have in common with a sorcerer?

Both are an important part of National Young Readers Day, celebrated Nov. 14.

From "The Adventures of Captain Underpants" to "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince," books aimed at young readers are drawing in countless fans who can't wait for the next edition to hit the shelves.

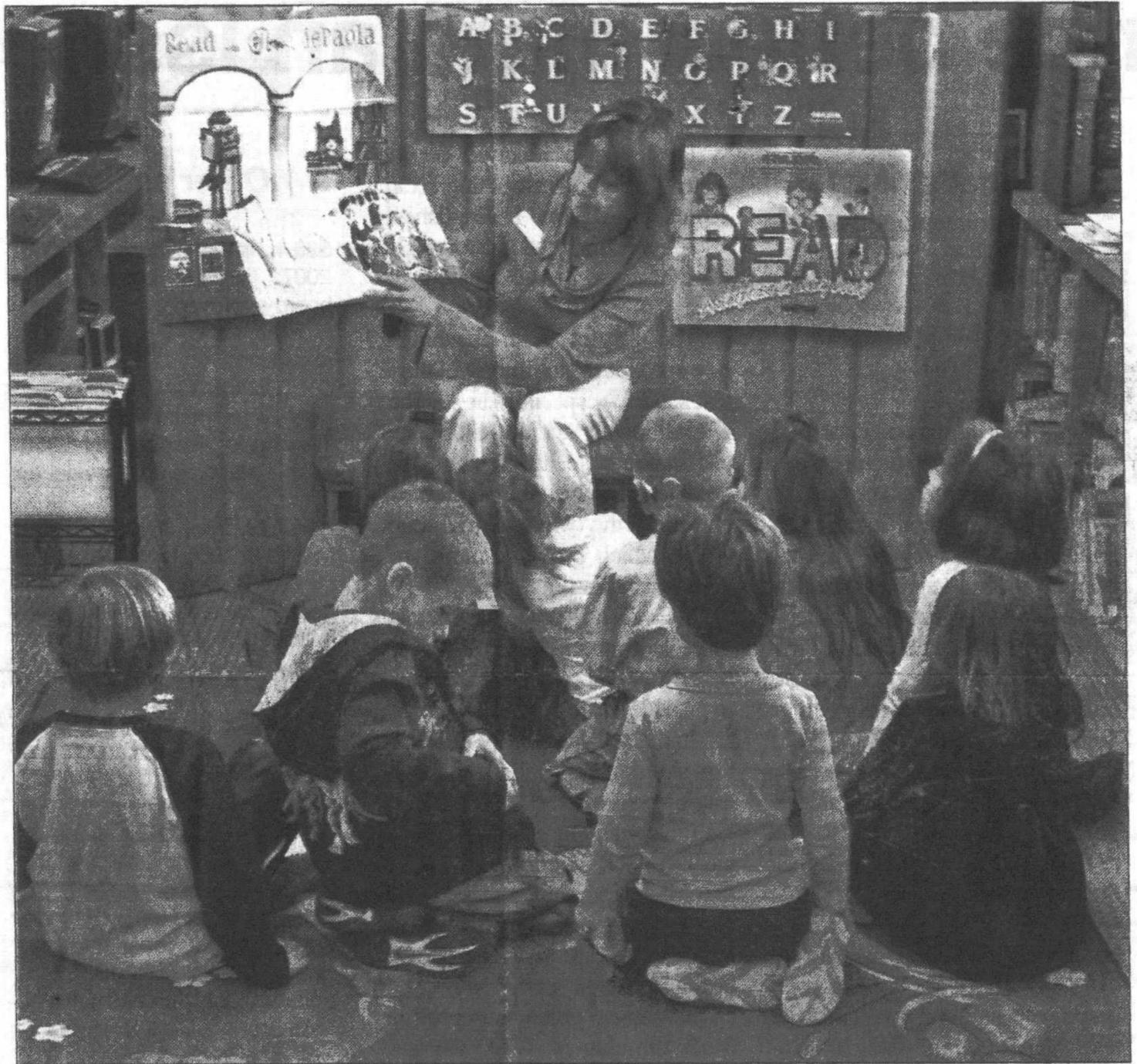
When Scholastic Kids interviewed Dav Pilkey, author of the Captain Underpants adventures, it became clear he was trying to go above and beyond the norm to attract young readers.

"I got the idea when I was a second-grader at St. John's Lutheran School in Elyria, Ohio," Pilkey told Scholastic Kids. "My teacher used the word 'underpants' in class one day, and everyone started laughing. She got mad and told us underwear was not funny. We all laughed harder. Usually, when the class cracked up, it was because of something I had said or done. But our teacher had never made everybody laugh so hard before. I realized then that the word 'underpants' was a very funny word."

On the school bus ride home, Pilkey said he was making up an underwear story, much to the delight of younger kids in the seat behind him, who were laughing so hard they almost fell on the floor.

"The next day, while sitting in the hallway - I spent lots of time in the hallway because I often misbehaved in class - I invented a superhero named Captain Underpants," he recalled.

Nine-year-old Tera Kelley explained why she is a frequent reader of Pilkey's "Underpants" series.



Lynne Arterberry, librarian at Sequoyah Elementary School, reads "Twas the Day Before Thanksgiving," by Dav Pilkey, to a group of first-grade children.
 Photo by Josh Newton

"I like the words 'poopypants' and 'wedgie,'" said Tera, who couldn't help but giggle between the two words.

(Two of Pilkey's well-known adventures include "Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopypants" and "Captain Underpants and the Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie Woman.")

Tera doesn't fully comprehend that, beneath the laughter incited by Pilkey's creative, slap-stick humor, the books do have educational benefits and life lessons.

"They just make me giggle," she said. "One time I laughed hard when I was reading 'Wedgie Woman,' and it made my stomach

hurt and I almost got sick."

Robert Erickson, 15, is a moderate fan of books like "Harry Potter," but even as a teen, he enjoys older classics like "The Boxcar Children" mysteries.

"They're books that don't take so much thought," said Robert. "But they are interesting and fun to read."

Robert believes he has read all books in the series in order - from the first that originally appeared about 60 years ago, to the latest book, No. 104.

"My older sister also used to read 'Goosebumps,' so I read them, too," said Robert. "Old stuff is OK, to me."

Robert's grandmother, Theresa, would like to see her grandchildren spend more time on "good" books, like "Gone with the Wind" or "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer."

"I'm glad he likes to read, but I'm not sure about all these picture books with more pictures than words," she said.

Sequoyah Elementary School Librarian Lynne Arterberry believes young readers will benefit from picking up just about any book, whatever the genre or look.

"It's our most important focus right now, that a child can read up to his or her reading level," said Arterberry. "To have the joy of

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Bookworms

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books in them.”

Sequoyah Elementary is pulling out a variety of projects to make reading more enjoyable and educational. The school is a Literacy First participant, and each student takes 45 minutes to focus on reading skills in a “flex” group - a group smaller than the normal classroom setting - with the help of teachers and staff. Students also go through 50 minutes per day of independent, monitored reading.

“Teachers are really promoting reading on the proper grade levels,” said Arterberry. “We just had the biggest book fair we’ve ever had, with help from parents and grandparents. That was phenomenal.”

Arterberry stresses to her students the importance of reading when they are older.

“You have to be able to read to do anything,” she said. “A math problem, instructions to put something together, information - you have to know how to read.”

The best way to encourage young readers to pick up a book is to be walking, talking examples as adults.

“We need to be good models and leaders,” said Arterberry. “If we’ll pick up a book and say, ‘Oh, this is so good,’ that’s being a model, and the children may then turn around and become interested in that book.”

Arterberry cautions parents to make sure children have books intended for their specific age or level.

“They get frustrated when it’s too hard,” she said.

Different ages need different

styles of literature: Children as young as pre-kindergarten simply learn how to hold and care for books, while kindergartners may be exposed to books with pictures and small, simple words. Younger kids are also exposed to activities that go hand-in-hand with reading, such as puppets or rhyme and repetition.

Sequoyah’s library is filled with books, but some of the most popular include “Box Car Children,” “Clifford the Big Red Dog,” “Magic Treehouse,” and “The Teacher from the Black Lagoon.”

“We even have books like these,” said Arterberry, pointing to an older, slightly faded series. “The Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys Series.”

Recent series, such as “A Series of Unfortunate Events” or “Harry Potter,” have faded away as fads, according to Arterberry.

“Truth be known, I’m trying to push the other books - the older ones,” said Arterberry.

The librarian soon ushered in part of a first-grade class and pulled out her story book for the day: “‘Twas the Night Before Thanksgiving,” another book by Pilkey.

Even though Tera has never read Pilkey’s Thanksgiving writing, she believes she will one day own all Pilkey books, especially if her Christmas wish-list comes true.

“I told mom I wanted all of his books so I can know all the stories,” she said. “I won’t even watch TV if I get all the books.”

To the average parent, just one more promise destined to meet a quick end - but a promise worthy of trying, nonetheless.