Belleville Area District Library Board
Regular Meeting Agenda
May 14, 2024 at 7:30 PM

The Belleville Area District Library Board will meet in person in the library's 2nd floor Conference Room.

Agenda:

1. Pledge of Allegiance
2. Roll Call: Cichewicz, Fleming, Hughes-Grubbs, Juriga, Peters, Priest, Stoudemire
3. Approve Agenda
4. Approve April 9, 2024, Regular Meeting Minutes
5. Public Comments
6. Committee Reports
    A. Building-Cichewicz
    B. Bylaws-Juriga
    C. Finance-Stoudemire
    D. Marketing-Hughes-Grubbs
    E. Personnel-Priest
    F. Policy-Fleming
    G. Art
7. Approve Accounts Payable
8. Director's Report/Comments/Communications
9. Trustee Comments
10. Chair Comments
11. Adjournment

Any citizen wishing to provide input or ask questions about any agenda item may speak during the meeting's Public Comments section or forward comments to the Library Director in advance by leaving a message at 734-699-3291 or via the Contact Us link at www.belleville.lib.mi.us. Any citizen requesting accommodation to attend this meeting may contact the library at least 24 hours prior to the meeting, using the above contact information.

Next Regular BADL Board Meeting: June 11, 2024, at 7:30 PM

Belleville Area District Library
Meeting Minutes
April 9, 2024

1. **Call to Order:** Chair Sharon Peters called the meeting to order at 7:34 pm.

2. **Roll Call:** The following board members were present: Joy Cichewicz, Dan Fleming, John Juriga, Sharon Peters, and Tanya Stoudemire. Absent and excused: Alma Hughes-Grubbs, and Linda Priest. Also present: Library Director Mary Jo Suchy.

3. **Approve Agenda:**
   Motion by Cichewicz, seconded by Juriga, to approve the agenda as presented. The motion carried unanimously.

4. **Approve March 12, 2024, Regular Meeting Minutes**: Motion by Stoudemire, seconded by Cichewicz, to approve the March 12, 2024, minutes as presented. The motion carried unanimously.

5. **Public Comments:** None.

6. **Committee Reports**
   A. **Building:** The flag pole light was successfully replaced.
   B. **Bylaws:** No report.
   C. **Finance:** Stoudemire presented information from the bank regarding certificates of deposit. Ninety-day CDs could be staggered. Motion by Stoudemire, seconded by Juriga for the treasurer and director to proceed with the proposed financial strategy with Chase Bank. The motion carried unanimously.
   D. **Marketing:** The committee met with the Friends of the Library president to discuss ways to have an event to support and build participation in the Friends.
   E. **Personnel:** The library's personnel policy has been submitted to Foster Swift Collins & Smith for review.
   F. **Policy**: No report.
   G. **Art:** Student art is currently on display.

7. **Approve Accounts Payable:** Motion by Cichewicz, seconded by Stoudemire, to approve the accounts payable as presented. The motion carried unanimously.

8. **Director's Report:** See attached.

9. **Trustee Comments**:
   Juriga – Announced that his granddaughter was born on April 1.
   Cichewicz – Noticed that Kanopy was on the library bill. Observed that it is a good service that she uses regularly.
   Stoudemire – Announced that the City of Detroit passed their budget last night. She is excited about the library's seed library.

Fleming – Enjoyed going to the marketing committee meeting and thought that there were a lot of good ideas. He likes the audio book collection and support from the library.

10. Chair Comments:

Peters – Thanked Amy Greschaw for her work on the library's eclipse programming. Peters watched the eclipse from the library's chaise lounge on the 2nd floor terrace.

11. Adjournment:

Motion by Juriga, seconded by Cichewicz, to adjourn. The meeting adjourned at 8:14 pm.

Belleville Area District Library
Budgetary Comparison Schedule
General Fund
For the Nine Months Ended March 31, 2024

Account	Revenues	2023-2024 Budget	9 Months 2023-2024 Budget	9 Months Actual	Variance Favorable (Unfavorable)
403.000	Current Taxes less chg backs	$ 2,460,000	$ 1,845,000	$ 1,845,000 *	$ -
	Total Current Taxes	2,460,000	1,845,000	1,845,000	-
502.000	Grant Revenue	6,300	4,725	6,343	1,618
665.000	Interest Income	1,500	1,125	248	(877)
575.000	State Aid	43,000	32,250	22,488	(9,762)
	Library Fines and Fees				
659.000	Late Fees	2,000	1,500	514	(986)
658.000	Penal Fines	36,000	27,000	1,741	(25,259)
677.000	Lost Book Fees	700	525	1,746	1,221
	Total Fines and Fees	38,700	29,025	4,001	(25,024)
674.000	Contributions and Donations	2,500	1,875	4,199	2,324
674.002	Contributions New Library	-	-	1	1
	Miscellaneous Income				
680.000	Miscellaneous				
630.000	Copies				
631.000	Fax Fees				
647.000	Newspaper Sales				
	Total Miscellaneous	20,000	15,000	21,279	6,279
	Grand Total Revenues	$ 2,572,000	$ 1,929,000	$ 1,903,559	$ (25,441)
	Expenditures				
	Salaries				
702.000	Salary- Librarians				
705.000	Salary- Library Aides				
	Total Salaries	$ 1,160,000	$ 870,000	$ 805,207	$ 64,793
	Benefits and FICA				
715.000	FICA/ Medicare	88,740	66,555	61,625	4,930
716.000	Employee Health Insurance	215,000	161,250	172,108	(10,858)
718.000	Retirement (MERS)	78,000	58,500	56,862	1,638
	Total Benefits and FICA	381,740	286,305	290,595	(4,290)
981.000	Books and Acquisitions	275,000	206,250	122,108	84,142
809.002	Contracted Services-Acq.	23,000	17,250	14,175	3,075
	Supplies				
730.000	Office Supplies				
775.000	Supplies- Maintenance				
950.002	Library Programs Supplies				
	Total Supplies	50,000	37,500	33,161	4,339

* Actual taxes collected to date $1,999,869.08

Belleville Area District Library
Budgetary Comparison Schedule
General Fund
For the Nine Months Ended March 31, 2024

Account		2023-2024 Budget	9 Months 2023-2024 Budget	9 Months Actual	Variance Favorable (Unfavorable)
	Professional Fees				
804.000	Audit	$ 8,600	$ 6,450	$ 8,575	$ (2,125)
805.000	Finance	13,500	10,125	8,200	1,925
801.001	Legal	7,000	5,250	47	5,203
801.002	Legal-Building Program	-	-	-	-
807.000	Architect	10,000	7,500	-	7,500
806.000	Other	10,000	7,500	1,425	6,075
	Total Professional Fees	49,100	36,825	18,247	18,578
815.000	Bank Fees	1,000	750	751	(1)
808.000	Dues	5,000	3,750	1,246	2,504
	Contracted Services				
809.001	Contracted Services	20,000	15,000	19,606	(4,606)
809.005	Delivery	6,000	4,500	4,369	131
720.000	Payroll	15,000	11,250	10,316	934
809.003&4	Automation System & Cataloging	41,000	30,750	29,391	1,359
809.007	Outside Maintenance	20,000	15,000	6,628	8,372
	Total Contracted Services	102,000	76,500	70,310	6,190
	Telephones & Telecommunications				
851.000	Telephone	15,000	11,250	6,059	5,191
851.002	Telecommunications	16,000	12,000	7,813	4,187
	Total Telephone and Telecommunications	31,000	23,250	13,872	9,378
	Insurance				
	Building Insurance				
810.000	Liability Insurance				
811.000	Worker's Comp. Insurance				
	Total Insurance	38,000	28,500	22,170	6,330
	Utilities				
921.000	Heat				
922.000	Electrical				
923.000	Water and Sewer				
	Total Utilities	86,000	64,500	33,052	31,448
931.000	Repairs and Maintenance	85,000	63,750	48,997	14,753
	Printing and Publications				
901.002&5	Printing				
901.004	Publications- Newspapers				
	Total Printing & Publications	24,000	18,000	9,392	8,608
727.002&3	Postage	12,000	9,000	6,091	2,909
820.000	Computer Hardware/ Software/Maintenance				
982.000	Hardware and Software				
		80,000	60,000	21,984	38,016

Belleville Area District Library
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General Fund
For the Nine Months Ended March 31, 2024

Account		2023-2024 Budget	9 Months 2023-2024 Budget	9 Months Actual	Variance Favorable (Unfavorable)
	Miscellaneous				
863.000	Travel and Meetings	$ 8,000	$ 6,000	$ 1,225	$ 4,775
950.001	Miscellaneous (Programming)	18,000	13,500	4,376	9,124
983.001	New Equip/ Office Furniture	25,000	18,750	894	17,856
	Other	4,000	3,000	187	2,813
	Total Miscellaneous	55,000	41,250	6,682	34,568
	Total Expenditures	$ 2,457,840	$ 1,843,380	$ 1,518,040	$ 325,340
	Current Year	$ 114,160	$ 85,620	$ 385,519	$ 299,899

Belleville Area District Library

Date: 05/08/2024
Time: 8:34 PM
Page: 1

Operating:

Check Date	Vendor Namne	Check Description	Amount
04/16/2024	A PRODUCTION BUILDING SOLUTION	Monthly Cleaning April	3,565.00
04/16/2024	AMAZON CAPITAL SERVICES	Program Supplies & Books	861.82
04/16/2024	AMAZON CAPITAL SERVICES	Library of Things	389.43
04/16/2024	AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION	Membership Renewal	471.00
04/16/2024	BELLEVILLE AREA INDEPENDENT	Advertising April	648.00
04/16/2024	BLUE CROSS BLUE SHIELD OF MICH	Dental	1,013.20
04/16/2024	CLEAR RATE COMMUNICATIONS	Fax Service	296.24
04/16/2024	DC LAWN & SNOW	March Saltings	150.00
04/16/2024	DEMCO	Library Supplies	199.26
04/16/2024	DTE ENERGY	Sumpter Gas/Electric	204.27
04/16/2024	FOSTER, SWIFT, COLLINS & SMITH	Legal Services	73.50
04/16/2024	FRIENDS OF THE BELLEVILLE AREA	March Payout	898.85
04/16/2024	GA BUSINESS PURCHASER LLC	Alarm Service	52.05
04/16/2024	LINDSAY LORE	Reimbursement for	608.16
04/16/2024	MICHIGAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION	Membership Renewal	1,370.00
04/16/2024	ODP BUSINESS SOLULTIONS LLC	Bldg/Office Supplies	1,068.87
04/16/2024	SENSOURCE	Traffic Monitoring Renewal	387.00
04/16/2024	SHARON DUCKWORTH, CPA	Financial Services April	1,025.00
04/16/2024	THE LIBRARY NETWORK	March Bookbilling	18,474.99
04/16/2024	UNIQUE MANAGEMENT SERVICES INC	March Placements	60.75
04/16/2024	WASTE MANAGEMENT OF MI, INC	Dumpster Service	448.61
04/30/2024	ALEX BALL	Library Program 4/20//24	150.00
04/30/2024	AMAZON CAPITAL SERVICES	Supplies; Books	1,111.67
04/30/2024	CHASE CARDMEMBER SERVICE	Postage, Program Supplies	776.96
04/30/2024	CITY OF BELLEVILLE	Water & Sewage, 4th St.	76.79
04/30/2024	DTE ENERGY	Electric/4th St	3,269.10
04/30/2024	DTE ENERGY	Gas/Fourth St	767.07
04/30/2024	JOHNSTON ENTERPRISES, LLC	Spring Newsletter	3,722.00
04/30/2024	LONG MECHANICAL SERVICE	Plumbing Repairs	710.00
04/30/2024	ODP BUSINESS SOLULTIONS LLC	Bldg/Office Supplies	612.61
04/30/2024	STANDARD INSURANCE COMPANY	Long/Short Term Disability Plan	743.78
04/30/2024	SUMPTER TOWNSHIP	Water & Sewage Sumpter Br.	111.45
04/30/2024	UNIFIRST CORP	Maintenance/Mats	143.32
04/30/2024	UNITED HEALTHCARE	Health Insurance	16,568.35
04/30/2024	WYANDOTTE ALARM COMPANY	Commercial Radio Monitoring	462.00
04/30/2024	AMAZON CAPITAL SERVICES	Books	211.52

36	**Checks Total:**	**61,702.62**
36	**Bank Total:**	**61,702.62**
36	**Grand Total:**	**61,702.62**

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

May 2024

LIBRARY PROGRAMS **April: Adults: 11 Youth: 16**

LIBRARY VISITS	**2023/24**	**2022/23**	**% change**
April	11,442	9,694	18.03%
Fiscal Year	111,874	99,226	12.75%

TOTAL CIRC	**2023/24**	**2022/23**	**% change**
April	19,502	20,146	-3.20%
Fiscal Year	210,655	209,750	0.43%

ADULT PROGRAMMING	**2023/24**	**2022/23**	**% change**
April	240	172	39.53%
Fiscal Year	1,513	1,295	16.83%

YOUTH/TEEN PROGRAMMING	**2023/24**	**2022/23**	**% change**
April	354	449	-21.16%
Fiscal Year	4,060	3,573	13.63%

ALL AGES PROGRAMMING: April: 0 Fiscal Year: 450

REF. QUESTIONS	**2023/24**	**2022/23**	**% change**
April	1,841	1,492	23.39%
Fiscal Year	16,556	15,165	9.17%

INTERNET USE	**2023/24**	**2022/23**	**% change**
April	1,130	967	16.86%
Fiscal Year	9,997	9,456	5.72%

YOUTH/TEEN INTERNET	**2023/24**	**2022/23**	**% change**
April	295	223	32.29%
Fiscal Year	2,800	1,930	45.08%

BUILDING: The flagpole light malfunctioned again. Dean will contact the electrician.

FINANCE: I am working on the paperwork to set up the library's certificate of deposit account and am working with the bank to set up the JPMorgan fraud protection service.

PROGRAMMING: Free Comic Book Day/Plant Swap/Friends' Book Sale on May 4 was a great success. This continues to be one of my favorite days of the year at the library!

The Phil Hale Jazz Trio will be back by popular demand on Wednesday, May 29 at 7 pm.

STAFF: Staff participated in a very full in-service training day. Topics covered included:

- Safety, active shooter, and emergency procedures review;
- Demonstrations of some of the many databases available through the Michigan eLibrary (MeL), including the LearningExpress Library and NoveList Plus;
- An instruction webinar from Springshare on LibCal, the library's new event calendar/room booking software.
- Break-out sessions included:
    - Features and collections from the children's section and tips on answering children's reference and reader's advisory questions
    - Tips and troubleshooting of the 1st floor copy/scan/fax center
    - Librarian-in-charge training

Karen Dubke and Lindsay Lore attended the annual Public Library Association Conference. Lindsay attended workshops focusing on leadership, service, communication, and tips for training new employees. Karen attended workshops on children's programming, collection development, and teen services.

Outgoing staff: Library clerk, Jasmine Riehl
Promotions: Micaya Cannon (to library clerk).
Incoming staff: Library clerk: Lavonne Shetler

LIBRARY SOFTWARE: LibCal, the library's new event and room booking calendar software was implemented May 1. This is a major project, and all things considered, it has been rolled out fairly smoothly, considering that it is a little bit like an airplane refueling mid-flight! The library also implemented Princh, a new mobile printing service, on May 1. So far it seems to be much easier to use than our previous service.

SLATE
NOT JUST A JEREMIAD

BOOKS

Not Lost in a Book

Why the "decline by 9" in kids pleasure reading is getting more pronounced, year after year.

BY DAN KOIS

MAY 05, 2024 • 5:45 AM

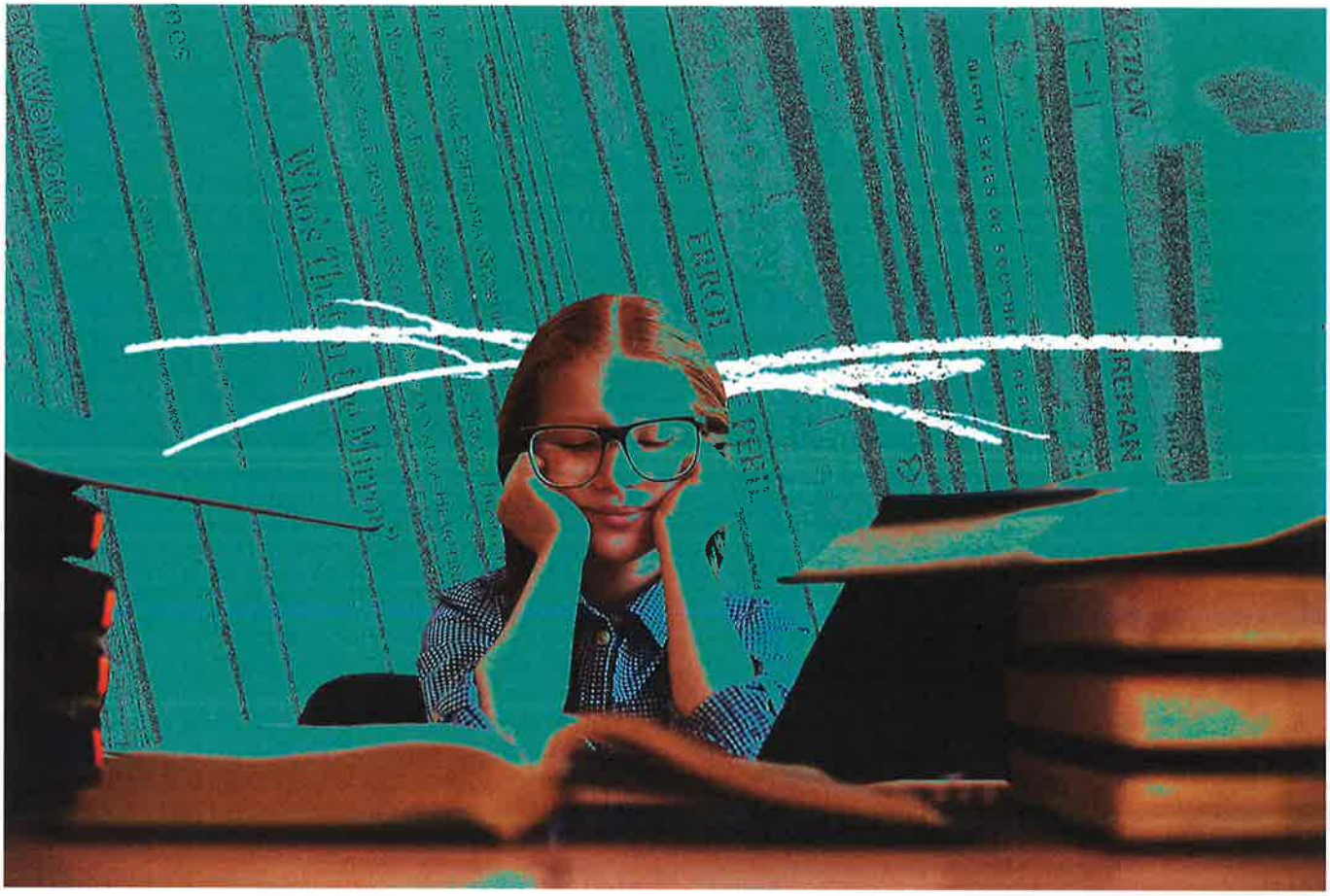

Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by mediaphotos/iStock/Getty Images Plus and Unsplash.

Those of us who believe in the power of books worry all the time that reading, as a pursuit, is collapsing, eclipsed by (depending on the era) streaming video, the internet, the television, or the hula hoop. Yet, somehow, reading persists; more books are sold today than were sold before the pandemic. Though print book sales were down 2.6 percent in 2023, they were still 10 percent greater than in 2019, and some genres—adult fiction, memoirs—rose in sales last year.

But right now, there's one sector of publishing that *is* in free fall. At least among one audience, books are dying. Alarmingly, it's the exact audience whose departure from reading might actually presage a catastrophe for the publishing industry—and for the entire concept of pleasure reading as a common pursuit.

AD 00:05 Coming up: Vampires, Baseball, & Smug Tweets

Ask anyone who works with elementary-school children about the state of reading among their kids and you'll get some dire reports. Sales of "middle-grade" books—the classification covering ages 8 through 12—were down 10 percent in the first three quarters of 2023, after falling 16 percent in 2022. It's the only sector of the industry that's underperforming compared to 2019. There hasn't been a middle-grade phenomenon since Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* spinoff *Dog Man* hit the scene in 2016. New middle-grade titles are vanishing from Barnes and Noble shelves, agents and publishers say, due to a new corporate policy focusing on books the company can guarantee will be bestsellers.

Most alarmingly, kids in third and fourth grade are beginning to stop reading for fun. It's called the "Decline by 9," and it's reaching a crisis point for publishers and educators. According to research by the children's publishers Scholastic, at age 8, 57 percent of kids say they read books for fun most days; at age 9, only 35 percent do. This trend started before the pandemic, experts say, but the pandemic accelerated things. "I don't think it's possible to overstate how disruptive the pandemic was on middle grade readers," one industry analyst told Publishers Weekly. And everyone I talked to agreed that the sudden drop-off in reading for fun is happening at a crucial age—the very age when, according to publishing

lore, lifetime readers are made. "If you can keep them interested in books at that age, it will foster an interest in books the rest of their life," said Brenna Connor, an industry analyst at Circana, the market research company that runs Bookscan. "If you don't, they don't want to read books as an adult."

What's causing the Decline by 9? It might be screens, but it's not *only* screens. It's not like kids are suddenly getting their own phones at age 9; recent survey data from Common Sense Media reveals that phone ownership holds steady, at around 30 percent, among kids aged 8 and 9. (It isn't until they reach 11 or 12 that the majority of American kids have their own phone.) Indeed, several people I spoke to mentioned that middle-graders' *lack* of phones created a marketing problem in an era when no one at any publishing house has any idea how to make a book a bestseller other than to hope it blows up on TikTok. "BookTok is imperfect," said Karen Jensen, a youth librarian and a blogger for School Library Journal, "but in teen publishing it's generating huge bestsellers, bringing back things from the backlist. There's not anything like that right now for the middle-grade age group."

"It's not like we *want* these kids to have phones, that's not the solution," one executive in children's books told me ruefully. "But without phones, we're really struggling to market to them."

Traditionally, middle-grade book discovery happens via parents, librarians, and—most crucially—peers. At recess, your best friend tells you that you have *got* to read the *Baby-Sitters Club*, and boom, you're hooked. That avenue for discovery evaporated during the pandemic, and it hasn't come back. "The lag in peer-to-peer recommendations seems to be lingering," said Joanne O'Sullivan, a children's book author and PW reporter. "Kids are back in school, so why aren't they sharing recommendations with each other? Why aren't they as enthusiastic about books as they were prepandemic?"

Experts I spoke to pointed to any number of causes for middle-graders' lost love of reading. Yes, screen time is an issue: "We know that screen time increased for many kids during that initial phase of the pandemic," said Circana's Connor. "Some of that increased screen time still remains, even though the pandemic is mostly behind us." Or, as O'Sullivan asked, "Is this generation just iPad babies?"

But others also pointed to the way reading is being taught to young children in an educational environment that gets more and more test-focused all the time. "I do not blame teachers for this," said O'Sullivan, but the transformation of the reading curriculum means "there's not a lot of time for discovery and enjoyment in reading." She noted a change I, too, had noticed: Reading in the classroom has moved away from encouraging students to dive

into a whole book and moved toward students reading excerpts and responding to them. "Even in elementary school, you read, you take a quiz, you get the points. You do a reading log, and you have to read so many minutes a day. It's really taking a lot of the joy out of reading."

Of course, even many teachers and librarians who buck the curricular pressure—who dream of fostering a love of aimless, testless reading in their young charges—are finding that substantially more difficult in 2024. "Libraries are getting defunded," said O'Sullivan. "Librarians are being let go. In some states, teachers can't even keep a classroom library because they have to protect themselves from book bans." As Jensen wrote in a recent blog post, it sure doesn't help the children's book industry when "chat rooms and library board meetings fill up with a small handful of people calling librarians Marxist communist groomers."

It all adds up to an environment where kids are less passionate about reading and, even if they somehow *do* get excited, they're less likely to discover the book that will keep them excited.

What are publishers trying to do about it? They're doubling down on the kinds of books that *have* been hits for middle-grade readers over the past few years: graphic novels and illustrated novels. Graphic novels, comics published in trade-book form, are a sales bright spot; last year they made up a quarter of all middle-grade sales. And "illustrated novels" have only become more and more popular since the birth of Jeff Kinney's Wimpy Kid in 2007. Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* and *Dog Man* books live somewhere in that graphic novel/illustrated-book mode—blocks of simple text followed by pages of drawings—and more and more, publishers are looking for light, funny stories-with-pictures that can help uncertain readers make the leap from picture books to big-kid books.

It's great that the kids who love these books—or Spider-Man comics, or manga, or for that matter off-putting kid-lit "histories" about tragedies that happened in my lifetime—are reading *something*. For sure! Yet I can't help but be worried that the kinds of books that changed *my* life between ages 8 and 12 are falling by the wayside. Is there room for the thoughtful, serious, beautiful young-person's novel in 2024? Can you publish *Bridge to Terabithia* in the age of Captain Underpants?

Related From Slate

LINCOLN MICHEL

A Post About Book Sales Went Viral. Here's What It Gets Wrong.

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It does seem to be just a little harder to sell that kind of novel these days. "Editors are looking for highly illustrated projects, shorter word counts, a bit more humor and adventure," said Chelsea Eberly, director of the children's book agency Greenhouse Literary. Connor was more blunt: "Maybe you think a book about a school shooting is really important," she said, "but kids want to read a fun book. That's what kids want today—they want to have fun."

"If you're an established author and you have an established reputation" for serious, heartfelt books, said O'Sullivan, you'll be fine. But if you're a new author who's written a quiet, issue-oriented debut, "you might have to think about adapting, in a way." A publisher might, for example, suggest bringing an illustrator aboard.

One side effect: Those established authors with established reputations tend to be white. The younger, newer authors who are being dissuaded by the market from writing unillustrated non-comedies? They're increasingly people of color, thanks to the industry's notably successful attempts at diversification over the past five to 10 years. The result may be a two-tiered system of awards-worthy book publishing, as older, whiter writers continue to publish moving, sensitive novels, while younger, Blacker authors are shut out of that particular market. "When you make it harder for new writers to break through, you're perpetuating the problems that children's publishing has been trying to address," said Jensen.

For her part, Eberly, the book agent, doesn't think the supply of serious, "award-winning" books will dry up. "Knowing the editors that I sell to, those are the types of books they want to shepherd into the world." The danger, she says, isn't that publishers will stop publishing such books; it's that children won't be able to find them due to book bans and pressure on librarians and teachers. Which books face the most challenges from book banners? Books by Black and queer authors.

What nearly everyone I spoke to in children's publishing agrees would solve the problem in a snap is a new blockbuster, the kind of *Harry Potter*–style success that raises all boats. The industry can't depend on *Captain Underpants* forever, even though, as Connor noted, "The devil works hard, but Dav Pilkey works harder." While more than one person I spoke to expressed an existential fear—what if that next blockbuster never comes? What if we're in

the post-children's-blockbuster era?—Eberly was more sanguine. "I don't worry that we're not going to have another blockbuster," she said. "I'm hoping that the tent expands. I've always kind of hated it when there's only one tentpole, like *Harry Potter* or whatever. I want there to be more tentpoles with room for more people underneath."

SLATEGROUP

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Vox

Pete Ryan for Vox

CULTURE

Amazon is filled with garbage ebooks. Here's how they get made.

It's partly AI, partly a get-rich-quick scheme, and entirely bad for confused consumers.

By Constance Grady | @constancegrady | Apr 16, 2024, 6:00am EDT

Constance Grady is a senior correspondent on the Culture team for Vox, where since 2016 she has covered books, publishing, gender, celebrity analysis, and theater.

If you're a millennial, you may remember that specific moment in time around the late 2000s when streaming video technology had just gotten good but there weren't that many legitimate streaming platforms available yet. So if you were a student without a TV and you wanted to watch a show, you would go to a website that aggregated lists of illegal streams.

It would be covered in banner ads and autoplaying video ads decorated with little play button arrows, and in order to watch your show, you would have to solve the puzzle of figuring out which play button to click that would actually get you to your show instead of spiriting you away to a website that sold upsetting porn or amateurish video games. It could be done, but you had to be paying attention, and you had to have the barest modicum of web savvy to do it right.

Right now, navigating the ebook and audiobook marketplaces is like being back on those sites. There are a thousand banner ads larded with keywords, and they're all trying to get your clicks.

Take, for example, when tech journalist Kara Swisher's *Burn Book* came out this February. A host of other books hit the Kindle store along with it. They all had bizarre, SEO-streamlined titles, like those new businesses that are named **Plumbing Near Me** to game the **Google** algorithm.

"I found 'Kara Swisher: Silicon Valley's Bulldog,' and 'Kara Swisher Book: How She Became Silicon Valley's Most Influential Journalist,' and 'Kara Swisher Biography: Unraveling the Life and Legacy,' by a 'guy' who 'wrote' four biographies this month," **said Ben Smith when he interviewed Swisher for Semaforum**.

Swisher was less than flattered by the biographies. "I wrote [**Amazon** CEO] **Andy Jassy** and I said, 'You're stealing my IP! What is going on?'" **she told Smith**. (Disclosure: Swisher works for **Vox Media**.)

Here is almost certainly what was going on: "Kara Swisher book" started trending on the Kindle storefront as buzz built up for Swisher's book. Keyword scrapers that exist for the sole purpose of finding such search terms delivered the phrase "Kara Swisher book" to the so-called biographer, who used a combination of **AI** and crimes-against-humanity-level cheap ghostwriters to generate a series of books they could plausibly title and sell using her name.

The biographer in question was just one in a vast, hidden ecosystem centered on the production and distribution of very cheap, low-quality ebooks about increasingly esoteric subjects. Many of them gleefully share misinformation or repackage basic facts from WikiHow behind a title that's been search-engine-optimized to hell and back again. Some of them even **steal the names of well-established existing authors** and masquerade as new releases from those writers. According to the Authors Guild, it would be impossible

for anyone but Amazon to quantify these books — and that's not information Amazon is sharing.

All of this means that to buy the book you want — to buy Kara Swisher's *Burn Book* instead of *Kara Swisher Book: How She Became Silicon Valley's Most Influential Journalist* — you have to know what you're looking for and pay a modicum of attention to your purchase.

Who wants to do that? Especially in a marketplace like Amazon, where we are trained to buy quickly and thoughtlessly with a single click and where writers have been trained to send their wares without even thinking about it because where else are you going to sell an ebook.

It's so **difficult for most authors to make a living from their writing** that we sometimes lose track of how much money there is to be made from books, if only we could save costs on the laborious, time-consuming process of writing them.

The internet, though, has always been a safe harbor for those with plans to innovate that pesky writing part out of the actual book publishing. On the internet, it's possible to **copy text from one platform** and paste it into another seamlessly, to **share text files**, to build **vast databases of stolen books**. If you wanted to design a place specifically to pirate and sleazily monetize books, it would be hard to do better than the internet as it has long existed.

Now, generative AI has made it possible to create cover images, outlines, and even text at the click of a button.

If, as they used to say, everyone has a book in them, AI has created a world where tech utopianists dream openly about excising the human part of writing a book — any amount of artistry or craft or even just sheer effort — and replacing it with machine-generated streams of text; as though putting in the labor of writing is a sucker's game; as though caring whether or not what you're reading is nonsense is only for elitists. The future is now, and it is filled with trash books that no one bothered to really write and that certainly no one wants to read.

The saddest part about it, though, is that the garbage books don't actually make that much money either. It's even possible to lose money generating your low-quality ebook to sell on Kindle for $0.99. The way people make money these days is by teaching students the

process of making a garbage ebook. It's grift and garbage all the way down — and the people who ultimately lose out are the readers and writers who love books.

None of this is happening through any willful malice, per se, on the part of the platforms that now run publishing and book-selling. It's happening more because the platforms are set up to incentivize everything to cost as little as possible, even if it's garbage.

In a statement, Amazon spokesperson Ashley Vanicek said, "We aim to provide the best possible shopping, reading, and publishing experience, and we are constantly evaluating developments that impact that experience, which includes the rapid evolution and expansion of generative AI tools."

Yet the garbage books predate the problem of AI. Here's how they get made in the first place.

The scammy underbelly of online self-publishing

These days, the trash ebook publishing landscape is fully saturated with grifters. There are blogs that talk about the industry, but they tend to be **clickbait sites** riddled with SEO keywords and affiliate links back and forth between each other. Virtually every single part of the self-publishing grift world that can be automated or monetized has been automated and monetized.

If you look a few years back, however, you find a very different landscape. In the internet of the early 2010s, lots of people were excited about making money with trash ebooks and trash audiobooks, but they weren't yet all trying to scam one another on top of their eventual readers. They wrote real blogs about the process of the grift with their real human voices. They distinguished between schemes that were "white hat" (following the rules) and "black hat" (violating some terms of service). They compared strategies and teachers of strategies.

According to the blogs of the era, one of the most infamous teachers was a man who went by Luca de Stefani, or Big Luca. **Legend had it** he held the world record for making the most money using Kindle Publishing in a single day. What set Big Luca's Self Publishing Revolution course apart from the rest — Big Luca's "black hat breadwinner video lesson," **per one review** — was that he gave his students access to a secret Facebook group where self-publishers organized review swaps and buys.

For the self-publishing grift, good reviews are crucial. The more five-star reviews a book has, the more likely Amazon's algorithm is to push it toward readers. If you're mostly publishing trash books, you're not going to get tons of five-star reviews organically. Big Luca's Facebook group gave grifters a place to offer to swap five-star reviews or sell five-star reviews for $0.99 a pop. As far as Amazon's algorithm was concerned, there was no difference between that kind of review and the one a real reader might leave. The results were extremely lucrative.

Luca didn't invent this formula. He learned it from the OG **self-publishing grift course K Money Mastery**, now apparently defunct, where he excelled.

Eventually, Big Luca had wrung all the money he could from the self-publishing hustle. He climbed up to the next level of the pyramid and became a teacher, and in 2016, **the lore goes**, a man named Christian Mikkelsen enrolled in Big Luca's Self Publishing Revolution.

The Mikkelsen twins are named Christian and Rasmus, and they are 28 years old. They have dark blond hair and blue eyes and meticulously groomed facial hair, and they always seem to be posting to **Instagram** from luxurious private pools that are also somehow exotic beaches. They have managed, in what must be fairly acknowledged as a feat of branding wizardry, to hold on to the domain Publishing.com, and there they peddle their wares: a course they say can help students make a lifetime of easy cash off the revenue from books they don't even have to bother to write themselves. If they happen to land a student who wants to write a book in good faith and just doesn't understand how to sell their book on their own, well, they're happy to take money from that student, too.

According to a profile in Inc., Christian found his way into the self-publishing world by googling "how to make money online." His first book was a brief ebook titled *How to Be a 4.0 Student in College, Like Me*. Big Luca's method apparently served him well enough that he thought it would be worthwhile to bring his twin Rasmus into the fold.

Together, the **Mikkelsens published trash book after trash book**, guides to keto and sex and crystals. Then they started running their manuscripts through Google Translate to start selling foreign language editions, an innovation on the old grift that **bumped their income into six figures** and, after a few months, got Amazon to block their publishing account. The time had come, **as Inc. would put it**, to "do what entrepreneurs do": pivot. They started a **YouTube** channel so they could teach the business of self-publishing to

anyone else who wanted to learn. Six months and 1,000 subscribers later, they launched their first paywalled online course.

First it was called Audiobook Impact Academy. Then it was Publishing Life. Now, with AI an ever-more-fashionable buzzword, it's AI Publishing Academy. It's always more or less the same method, with a few new tweaks in every new iteration. But the method doesn't change as much as you might think.

How the garbage books get made: A case study

If you want to take the Mikkelsen course, the first thing you do is sit through their sales pitch. It runs for two hours, and it's just a video of Christian sitting in a dark room, drinking thirstily from a water bottle as he shows you screencaps of his students' royalty checks and repeats that he is already rich; he doesn't have to show you how to make this kind of money. He's doing it for fun.

Christian's offer is, he says, unbeatable. He will show you how to produce a book without having to write it. "What used to be the hardest part in the process — which was creating that book that you upload onto Amazon — is now the easiest part, and the most fun," Christian explains. "Because AI can help do that for you."

Specifically, AI will write your outline for you. The twins feel that the quality isn't there on purely AI-generated books yet; they demand better for their readers than AI prose. Still, they say using AI to outline saves their students weeks of researching their own manuscripts.

That AI is part of but not central to the process is a helpful talking point for the Mikkelsens as Amazon strengthens its regulations against purely AI-generated text for sale.

"Last year we began requiring all publishers using our Kindle Direct Publishing service to provide information about whether their content is AI-generated and further reduced the total number of titles that can be published in a day," said Amazon spokesperson Vanicek. Vanicek added that they have "a robust set of methods" to detect content that violates their guidelines, and they regularly remove those books and sometimes suspend the publishing accounts of repeat offenders.

"The thought of human creativity being overshadowed by **robots** isn't exactly the prettiest picture," Christian wrote in a (suspiciously ChatGPT-sounding) **blog post** in March. "But

we're here to set the record straight. There are two camps of AI use out there: AI-generated and AI-assisted. They are completely different."

In April, however, the Mikkelsens announced that they were preparing to launch a new proprietary AI program, Publishing.ai, that they promise will write a manuscript for you, "Soooo much faster than a ghostwriter!"

Under the Mikkelsen model, you also don't have to pick your own topic. They give you access to keyword scrapers that have pulled trending topics off Kindle and Audible. And once AI is finished with your outline, you can send it over to a ghostwriter to turn into a book for a mere $500. For a 30,000-word book, that works out to a fee of $0.016667 per word. (The Mikkelsens work with a ghostwriting company developed by two former students. There, ghostwriters get hired on a freelance basis and are kept anonymous.)

Once you have your manuscript, Christian promises, the twins will show you how to hire audiobook narrators for a flat $20 fee by haggling their prices down. They'll introduce you to a network of people who are generous with their five-star ratings and will push your book up the algorithmic Amazon rankings for you. All you have to do is sit back and collect your royalty checks as you rake in month after month of passive income.

As Christian talks, he seems to cast a kind of hypnotic spell. You start to wonder: "Am I stupid for not having invested in ebook publishing before now?" You see five-figure check after five-figure check. A ticking clock turns on. Christian wants to give you a special rate for the course. The course is worth $15,500. The regular price is $6,000. But he's willing to give it to you for just $1,995 as long as you're one of the first people to sign up after the webinar ends!

None of what the Mikkelsens are describing here is illegal, but if you know the norms of publishing, you know it's unethical. As **documentarian Dan Olson** lays out in a lengthy 2022 deep dive into the Mikkelsens, their method of publishing means developing a book you're probably not qualified to write. It used to mean paying a ghostwriter starvation-level wages to churn out a manuscript; now it means creating a book likely riddled with misinformation and minimal means of correcting it. It means deceiving readers with fake reviews. (That one can get you kicked off Amazon if you get caught.)

If you aren't versed in publishing's industry standards, however, the Mikkelsen model can seem incredibly attractive.

"I was like, 'Yup, this would be great.' I was totally vibing with it," recalls Jennifer (whose name has been changed to protect her privacy), a 37-year-old in Virginia, who signed up for the twins' course in September. She had recently written and self-published her own book on Amazon, but she wasn't sure what to do to start promoting it.

The twins' sales pitch struck her as the perfect solution: She could provide her ideas, people who were good with words could rewrite her draft and polish the whole thing up into a sales-ready package, and everyone would get paid. "I was like, 'Okay, I'm ready to invest and make this a better thing."

"It was a very efficient, friendly, interactive webinar," recalls Cecilia (also not her real name), a Seattle-based 50-year-old who works in the health space. She signed up for the twins' seminar in September, and she remembers being pleasantly won over by that two-hour sales pitch. It seemed to be so transparent. "It promoted trustworthiness," she says.

Once Jennifer and Cecilia had turned over their money for the course, both of them changed their minds fast.

"I started listening to the modules," Jennifer says. "And I don't know how else to describe them" — there is a long, expressive pause — "but as a jet stream of bullshit."

"All it does is tell you to buy different products," Jennifer recalls of the Mikkelsen course. "It's like there's nothing that they actually provide themselves, other than 'Go buy other people's products' — and I'm sure they own those too, right?" (We can't confirm that the Mikkelsens do own the products they recommend, but the ghostwriting company they work with *is* run by former Mikkelsen students.)

The course cost $2,000, but that wasn't enough. To get a Mikkelsen-approved topic for your book, you had to pay for access to the software that analyzed Amazon keywords to tell you what was trending. To create the perfect outline, you had to pay for access to the AI that outlined and drafted your book for you. You had to pay for the cover design and for the reviewers. The $2,000 fee was supposed to guarantee you frequent one-on-one calls with a publishing coach, but the coaching calls were mostly about upselling to the premium $7,800 course, Jennifer says.

After a few weeks of phone calls, Cecilia decided she had had enough of the program and asked for her money back. She didn't expect it would be a problem, since the course was advertised as fully refundable. Customer service reps then told her that, to qualify for a

refund, she had to prove she'd sat through the whole course, published a book, and failed to make her money back. She says she had to threaten to call the attorney general before they sent her money back without such proof.

Jennifer wrote off her $2,000 as the cost of learning a bad lesson, but she wanted to warn other people against making the same mistake. She posted a negative review of Publishing.com on the user review site TrustPilot, where it has a 4.7 rating. So did Cecilia. Both of them found their reviews queried by TrustPilot, which required them to submit proof of going through the course in order to keep their reviews up. Most of the course's five-star reviews, however, remain unverified. I reached out to some of the five-star TrustPilot reviewers to get their take on the Mikkelsens' course, but I never heard back from any of them.

After the Mikkelsens' course got big, **the rumors on Reddit say** Big Luca was furious that they'd ripped off his business model. He used to brag that he was going to drag them into court. Instead, he got out of the self-publishing game.

Now he runs a program called Big Luca International or, more informally, School for the Rich, **self-described as** "the world's leading company in online marketing training." It's supposed to teach you how to monetize any online business — the self-publishing black hat breadwinning tricks, extrapolated out to all the other industries of the internet. With the advent of AI, it's easier than ever to flood the whole digital ecosystem with trash in pursuit of passive income.

The neverending grift

"It sucks that I did this," Jennifer says of her experience at AI Publishing Academy. "But I mean, it's put some fire under my butt to do it [marketing] myself for my own books."

Jennifer didn't set out to make a quick buck with a garbage ebook. She did the work of writing a book because she believed in it. The Mikkelsens got her because she couldn't figure out how to sell her book on her own, and part of the reason she couldn't sell it is because the marketplace is already so flooded with books. Many of which are garbage books.

The Mikkelsens are not the chief villains of this story. They are small-time operators working one level of a very big grift industry. The grift is that technology and retail platforms have incentivized a race to the bottom when it comes to selling books. Together,

without ever caring enough about the issue to deliberately try to do so, they have built a landscape in which it's hard to trust what you read and hard to sell what you write.

The incentives of the modern book-selling economy for writers are to keep your costs low, low, low and your volume high, high, high, and definitely put your book on Amazon because where else are you going to sell an ebook? The incentive of the modern book-buying economy for readers is to go onto Amazon and lazily click around with a few search terms, and then buy the first book that looks right with the click of a single button. The incentives are, in other words, driving us all straight into a flood of garbage.

That's what the grift does. It finds every spot in the process of making and selling a book that is inconvenient or laborious, and it exploits those spots. It exploits our cultural belief that books are meaningful, that writing a book is a valuable act, that reading a book will enrich your life. When it's finished, you're left with something that's not a real book but a book-shaped digital file filled with nothing of any use to anyone at all. ■

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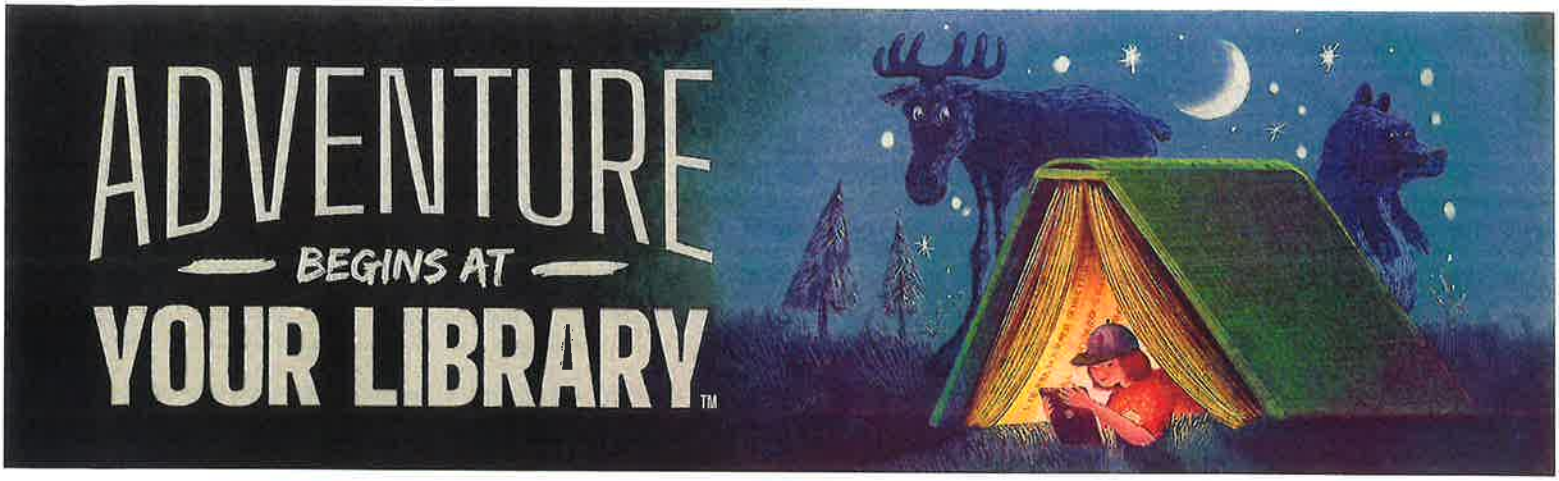

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Tuesday, June 25, 11 am - Wild Animal Super Powers with Howell Nature Center
Saturday, June 29, 11 am - A World of Music & Stories with Ms. Audrey
Tuesday, July 9, 11 am - Cirque Amongus Show
Tuesday, July 16, 11 am - Drummunity
Saturday, July 20, 11 am - Pirate's Life
Tuesday, July 23, 6 pm - Indiana Joel's Magic Show
Tuesday, July 30, 11 am & 6 pm - Cold-Blooded Creatures with the Metropark. Same show at both times, please only attend one.

Tween and Teen Programs

Register at https://belleville.evanced.info/signup

Saturday, June 15, 2 pm - Teen Pizza & Board Games. Ages 12-18
Saturday, June 22, 2-3:30 pm - Kam Komics Class: Learn the fundamentals of comics. Ages 9-18
Saturday, July 13, 2 pm - T(w)een Movie: Movie TBA. Ages 9-18
Monday, July 15, 6 pm - Teen Candy Sushi: Create something that looks like sushi, but it's all candy! Ages 12-18
Friday, July 26, 2 pm - T(w)een Movie: Movie TBA. Ages 9-18
Saturday, July 27, 11 am -Tween Art Party: Participate in an art craft with Miss Noelle. Ages 9-12

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