

Eighth grade books open students' eyes to mature themes

Clara Martinez
Scroll Editor

Eighth grade students started the Book Clubs unit in English class at the beginning of January. Students chose from a selection of 25 books to study and discuss. This presented difficult and mature content that challenged some students.

The purpose of the Book Clubs unit is for students to analyze what decisions writers make and why, and what lenses can be used to understand narrative more deeply. Every year the book list for the Book Clubs unit changes. They all have things in common: some are new award winners, while some are based on current events. Ryan Cushman read *Noughts and Crosses* by Malorie Blackman, and said, "Maybe just a tad over the grade but the reading level was perfect. Some of the content may be just a year ahead."

Eighth grade English teacher Ms. Carolyn Woulfe said, "We think they're all about important issues. They might be about growing up, or diversity, or there might be a social justice angle."

To gather ideas for books, the teachers asked students for recommendations, looked at the National Book Awards winners, the American Library Association, and Kirkus Reviews. "We also want books to be quite diverse; we want representation in our books about all sorts of identities, so we tend to make sure that books do that," said English teacher Mr. Mike Boodey.

In grade eight there is a vast range of maturity both emotionally and in what kids read, so the teachers do their best to offer a range of

books. Ms. Woulfe said they try to be really up front so kids can make an informed decision that aligns with their families' rules. She said she hopes students are aware of what their parents want them to read, "and if they have certain rules at their home that they will follow through with book club."

Both English teachers tell the students the maturity level and reading level of the books before students rank them, and the teachers place students in groups according to their top choices.

Eighth-grader Alexandra Mancuso read *Allegedly* by Tiffany D. Jackson, rated 14+ by Common Sense Media. She said, "I think it was a very high maturity level, but I don't think anyone felt really uncomfortable reading it."

Mrs. Woulfe explained that teachers do not want to police students, and by eighth grade believe they should be trusted to decide on a suitable book. "We're not going to say, 'You're going to read this book that we think is really for a 16 year old and it's going to be inappropriate for you.' We would never force anybody to read anything."

Mr. Boodey said he goes to the English department if the teachers are questioning a specific book. "We bring things to the (English) department and talk things over with the department about if we're feeling anything or just to check," said Mr. Boodey.

The Office of Teaching and Learning works with all three divisions in the school including teachers and administration to ensure that the curriculum and assessment is aligned from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Ms. Jennifer

Kirstein, the assistant head of the office of teaching and learning said that teachers have a lot of choices in their pedagogy and what materials or mediums they use. "The non-negotiable is that all teachers who teach English are using those standards," she said. These standards refer to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts.

If a student or parent has a concern about what is being taught, the first step would be for the student to speak with their teacher. "So the first thing that would happen is... for the student to talk to the teacher first, and then potentially have the parent talk to the teacher," said Ms. Kirstein.

The Office of Teaching and

Learning does not monitor the books chosen, but rely on trust that the teachers will make decisions for what is best for the students. Ms. Kirstein said, "We trust that what they're choosing is appropriate. If teachers want to have conversations with us about materials, we're happy to do that."

Originally, 25 books were available for the students to choose from, but only thirteen are being read this year due to the demand for some books over others. The mean and mode of age level among the books is 13, with most books being recommended for ages 13+, according to data from Common Sense Media and Scholastic.

The book with the highest age level recommendation by Common

Sense Media is 16+. *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini was given this rating for language, violence, sex, consumerism, drinking, drugs, and smoking. Sophia Bassi read *The Kite Runner* and said, "It did have some very mature topics that could trigger some students, but I also think that it is important to start reading about those topics."

The matter of suitability for eighth graders in these books is subjective based on the individual student and their family. On the unit as a whole, Mancuso said, "I think it was a good unit because it showed us topics that we might not normally choose and helped open our eyes up to issues going on in our world."



Photo by Sophia Mancuso

There was a range of books available for eighth graders to choose from. Each book dealt with different themes and explored issues going on in the world. Each book challenged students to think critically about their reading and participate in rich discussions in their groups.

Students debate harmful effects of global animal abuse



Photo by Lucy Abner

Mascara, bronzer, and other cosmetic items sold by MAC abuse animals in their testing. MAC products that are sold in China allow the government to use animal testing before being sold to the public where animal testing is allowed.

Melisa Atalay
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Animal Harm is a major global issue. According to Sentiment Media, over 200 million animals are killed every day. That means about 56 billion land animals are killed in a year. ASL connects to Animal Harm in a good way, because, in a survey sent to middle schoolers, overall all of the students said that they wanted animal harm to stop.

Many big makeup and skincare brands, such as MAC and many others allow governments to test on animals as a part of their safety assessment to see if they are harmful to people before the products can be sold.

However, it is not just beauty brands that test and kill animals.

More than 1 billion rabbits and 50 million animals are killed for fur accessories, coats and furniture. Animals play a key role in our environment, and we are only hurting ourselves by hurting them.

Animal harm may be considered normal by some people because of something called Speciesism. Speciesism is where people think that humans are above animals in natural order, so they see no problem with animals being harmed unnaturally by other humans, and they may even support it.

Seventh grader Sophia Ianazo thinks that animals should have equal rights to humans. "People usually want to save animals like monkeys and dogs from animal testing, but even animals

like rats and mice are equal to humans. Animals have feelings just like humans and we should treat them the same way. Just because animals can't communicate to us, doesn't make them less important."

Sixth grader Stella Albrecht thinks that animal testing should stop because animals have emotions as well. "I think that animal testing is cruel. If you wouldn't test on a human, why test on animals? We both have emotions and we can both feel pain."

Overall, 36% of ASL middle school students said that they wouldn't shop from their favorite brand if they found out that the brand hurt animals, and that they wouldn't test animals for a research project. The majority (59%) said that they wouldn't buy some-

thing made of animal fur and that they would prefer brands that don't harm animals over ones that do harm animals.

They said that they also wanted testing on animals to stop, and most people thought that 100 million animals were harmed in a year, showing how they are well informed on the subject.

Many students feel passionately about the subject. Eighth grader Parker Forgash believes that eliminating animal testing will help improve the world. "I think that animal testing is just another thing in our world that needs to stop; there are so many things that need to stop including plastic pollution, racism and more. So getting rid of one is another step closer to all of them never happening again."