

Parents' **Mystery Book** by Jon Biddle

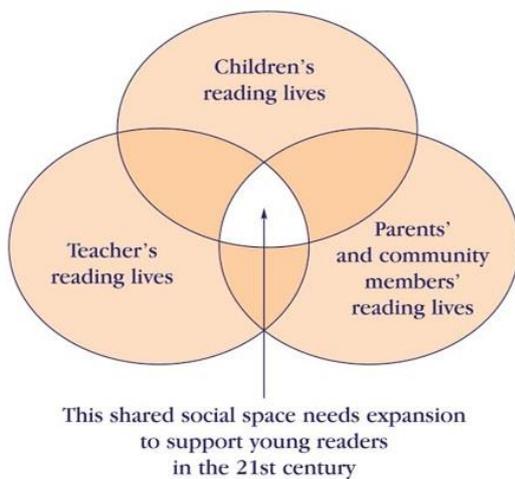
Context

I am currently English Coordinator at Moorlands Primary Academy in Norfolk. The school is recovering from a turbulent few years (high turnover of staff, disappointing SATs results, negative relationships with some parents) and has recently been graded good by Ofsted. Creating a genuine reading culture has been at the centre of this improvement. Although progress has been made in engaging many parents with their children's reading, it is still an area that needs further development.

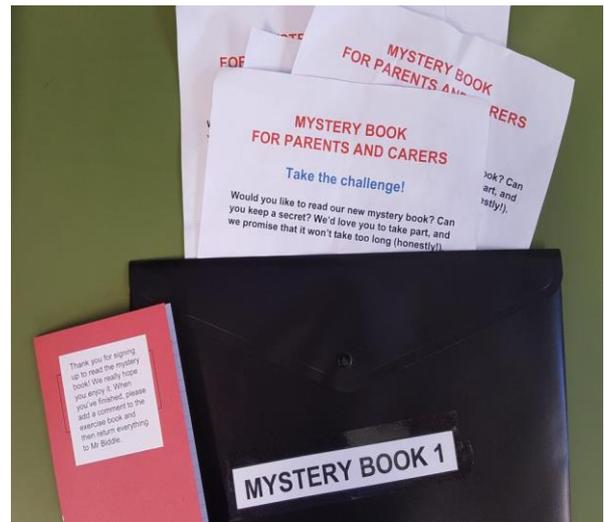


Research inspiration and rationale

One of the key recommendations from the Teachers as Readers project (Cremin et al, 2014, UKLA) was for the need to construct more equivalent reading relationships with families and community members, and to build reading communities that blur the boundaries between children's home and school reading worlds (see diagram). There is also much research evidence (e.g. Clark and Hawkins, 2010, National Literacy Trust) which indicates that the more directly involved a parent is with their child's reading, the bigger impact it will have. This involvement



includes the parent being a reading role model where possible. I was looking for a non-threatening and accessible way to engage more parents with reading, and wondered if the class **Mystery Book** idea could be tweaked slightly to include parents and carers.

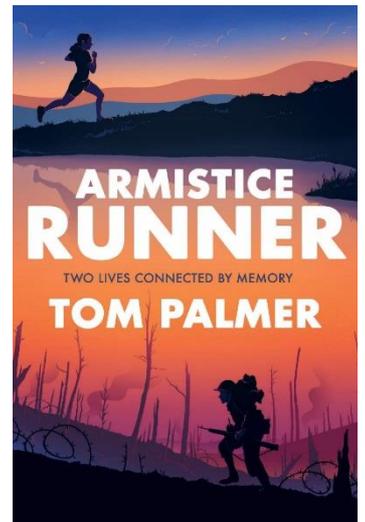
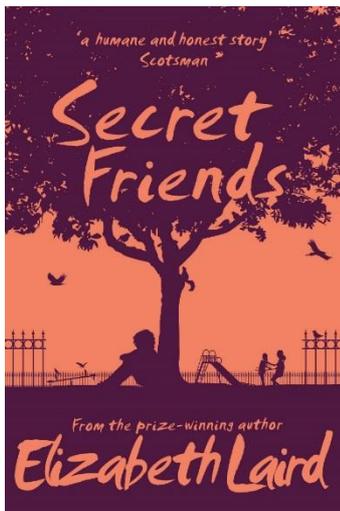
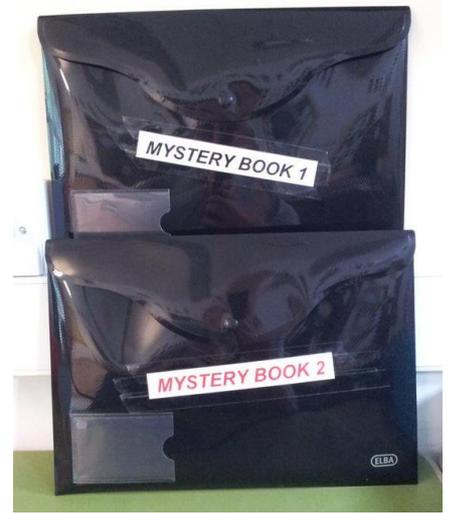


Aims

- To provide parents with an increased awareness of the books that their children are reading at school.
- To demonstrate to pupils that adults also read for pleasure and enjoyment.
- To create a parental 'book buzz' in the school playground.
- To continue to build a genuine reading community that includes children, staff and parents.

Outline

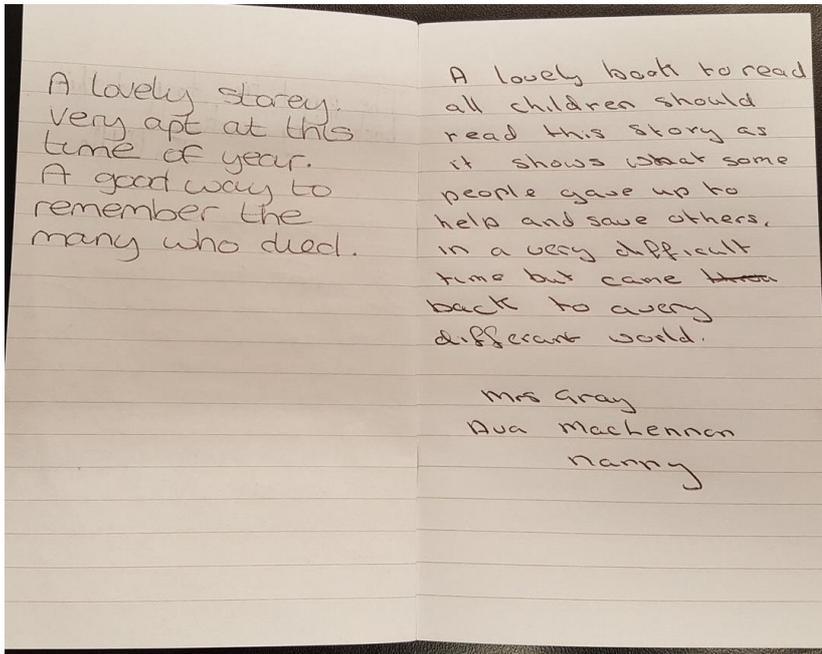
- I have been running the **Mystery Book** with my class for the past few years. An unknown book is placed in an opaque black plastic folder, along with a small exercise book for the children to write in. The folder is given to a child who reads the book in secret and adds a short comment to the exercise book, then passing it to another pupil. The 'objective' is for the book to be read by as many members of the class as possible without its identity being revealed (Note: The book has only ever made it round the entire class once...quite often the secret is revealed after about three readers!). The idea has helped create a real sense of excitement about reading and I felt that it could be adapted to work successfully with parents and carers.
- It was important to choose books that could be accessed by the majority of parents without them feeling overwhelmed or intimidated, but which were also 'high-quality'. I selected two short novels that could be read in a couple of hours, *Armistice Runner* by Tom Palmer (about World War One) and *Secret Friends* by Elizabeth Laird (about bullying).
- I introduced the idea to the children during assembly first in order to increase interest, and then sent a flyer home for parents to fill in if they were interested in being one of the **Mystery Book** readers. The first reply came back almost immediately and, by the end of the week, almost 40 parents had signed up!
- The next week, the books were distributed to two randomly-selected parents, along with a simple set of instructions (read and enjoy the book, write a short comment, return the book...keep it secret!). Once the book had been returned, I noted the parent's name and chose another parent from the list, with the book then being given to their child to take home. The average reading time so far has been 1-2 weeks.



- The plan for the end of the year is to invite all the parents who have taken part (as well as any others who are interested) into school to enjoy some refreshments and discuss the books. I will also be listening to any suggestions they may have to help develop the idea next year, as well as ideas for possible future books. One parent has already suggested that we include a poetry book in future as they could then 'dip in and out' when convenient.

Impact

- Four months later, over 20 parents have already read at least one of the two books and therefore slightly improved their knowledge of children's literature. There are approximately 20 more still on the waiting list. After seeing other parents carrying the **Mystery Book** folder in the playground and asking questions about it, I am still sometimes approached by parents to see if they can join in, as it 'sounds like fun'. All the parents who have read one of the books have left a positive comment about it.



- A few parents have come to talk to me about the book that they read and to ask if I had any other recommended children's books (I gave them a short list). Some of them also bought a copy of the **Mystery Book** to share with their children.
- The children get excited when one of the books is returned, as they enjoy seeing whose turn it will be next. They are very keen to find out what the books are so that they can read them too. We will reveal the books to the children at the end of the school year and then add them to the school library.
- The idea has helped to keep the school's reading culture at the forefront of our thinking. Sometimes we share a

comment from a parent on Twitter or Facebook without revealing the title of the book, and we also remind parents in each edition of the school reading newsletter.

- Approximately 8% of parents in the school have taken part, with at least one or two from each class getting involved.

Reflections on impact the TaRs research had on practice

There are now books in my classroom and in the school library which have been read by children,

MYSTERY BOOK FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

Take the challenge!

Would you like to read our new mystery book? Can you keep a secret? We'd love you to take part, and we promise that it won't take too long (honestly!).



To get involved, simply fill in your name below and return to Mr Biddle as soon as possible.

Name of parent:

Name of child:

Child's class:|

staff and parents. This will further help to encourage more discussion about books and reading between children and parents, as well as between parents and staff, and will assist in the development of a community-wide reading culture.

I am aware that only a small percentage of parents have taken part in the **Mystery Book**, and will be trying to increase this next year, although there will be an impact on workload. There is a possible issue with a few parents not wanting to get involved due to a lack of confidence in their own reading, but we will continue to try and engage them with other non-threatening strategies.

The feedback from everyone who has taken part so far has been positive, and all have expressed an interest in being a **Mystery Book** reader again next year. Due consideration will also need to be given to the books that are selected, which will include non-fiction, poetry and perhaps a graphic novel in future.