

Far from a Drag

How One Library Embraced Drag Queen Story Hour

CHELSEA CONDREN

Children’s librarians and drag queens have more in common than our shared love of glitter.

When Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) approached the Early Literacy Department at the New York Public Library (NYPL) to ask us about facilitating their programs in our branches, we were eager to get started. Conceived of by Michelle Tea and Radar Productions in San Francisco, DQSH now operates out of Los Angeles, New York, and New Jersey, inspires events around the world, and can be found at DragQueenStoryHour.org.

The concept is simple—drag queens reading stories to children in libraries, schools, camps, and other educational settings. Their goal, listed on the website’s home page, is even simpler—to “give kids glamorous, positive, and unabashedly queer role models.”

After the NYPL Early Literacy Department met with the New York DQSH representatives, we decided to launch the program in twelve branches around Manhattan and the Bronx, basing the decision primarily on branch library staff we knew would support the program and encourage families to attend.

We were provided a stipend for each event to fund supplies, pay the performer, and support the DQSH organization overall from support provided by the private donors who partially fund the Early Literacy Department. There was no additional cost to NYPL to host these events.

Once we reached out to branch staff to schedule the events, the Early Literacy Department hosted a Story Time 101



Drag Queen Harmonica Sunbeam reads to pre-K students at Hudson Park Library in New York.

workshop for all the participating drag queens. This was wildly successful and fun, and it was one of the most important steps in our process.

While the drag queens have experience performing and working with crowds, they welcomed the opportunity to learn best practices for storytimes and read alouds, as well as to practice with the children’s books we provided. We also provided guidelines with quick tips on program length, handling disruptions, choosing popular songs to sing, and the importance of taking wiggle breaks!

We created a book list for suggested age-appropriate titles (babies and toddlers, pre-K and up) and categories. We included in this list story-time favorites—such as Mo Willems’s *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* and Sandra Boynton’s *Moo, Baa, La, La La*—so our performers had titles they knew were likely to generate positive engagement.

We also included titles with diverse families and gender expression, such as Gayle Pittman’s *This Day in June* and J. J. Austrian’s *Worm Loves Worm*. Most programs included a



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mix of both kinds of books, and, of course, many of them transcended categories. These resources were helpful for both branch staff and performers, enabling them to pull titles in advance.

Because of the potentially sensitive nature of this program, the early literacy team provided our email addresses as a point of contact should any patrons have comments, questions, or concerns—but frankly, we received none. We were told by branch staff that a few patrons verbally expressed that they would not be attending, and our social media pages contained a few negative comments, but there was otherwise little pushback.

In addition to implementing a program that would joyfully engage families and children, and providing our staff with appropriate resources, our priority was that the DQSH performers felt safe and welcome in our communities.

DQSH has their own marketing, as does the NYPL. We joined forces to create a branch flier, and branch staff often chose to schedule their program around a regular weekly storytime to ensure families would be available. Because this program generates national attention, representatives from BuzzFeed Video and the *New York Times* attended programs, so we had photo-release forms for parents in case their children were photographed.

Ultimately, we have been thrilled by the reception this program has received. “The ultimate goal is for this to be normal and not feel different,” parent Hayley Brewer told BuzzFeed Video about drag queen Harmonica Sunbeam’s visit to the Washington Heights Library.

Children’s Librarian Jessica Espejel noted, “As a children’s librarian, you are always worried whether your community will be receptive . . . our parents were very gung-ho and excited! We even had a parent come up to us and say, ‘I am so excited to bring my child to this. This is something I wouldn’t be able to experience in my native country [of Poland].’”

If you are in one of the cities where the DQSH team operates, the program is strongly recommended. If you are not in one of these areas, you can still do a similar program. DQSH’s website provides contact information for those who are inspired by these events and want to reach out to their local LGBTQ community to offer similar programming in schools, summer camps, and, of course, public libraries.

Here’s to freedom of expression and paper crowns for all! 🏳️

For more information on the DQSH, visit www.dragqueenstoryhour.org.

Barnes, Turk Win Keats Honors

Derrick Barnes, author of *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* (Agate Bolden/Denene Millner Books) has been awarded the 2018 Ezra Jack Keats Book Award for New Writer. The book’s illustrator Gordon C. James also won a New Illustrator Honor for the book. The 2018 Ezra Jack Keats Book Award winner for New Illustrator went to Evan Turk, for *Muddy: The Story of Blues Legend Muddy Waters* (Atheneum Books for Young Readers), written by Michael Mahin.



Derrick Barnes

The Ezra Jack Keats Foundation, in partnership with the de Grummond Children’s Literature Collection at The University of Southern Mississippi, presents the awards; this is their 32nd year. The winning new writer and new illustrator will each receive \$3,000, triple the amount awarded in previous years.

New Writer honors went to Rachael Cole, for *City Moon* (Schwartz & Wade); Jessixa Bagley, for *Laundry Day* (Roaring Brook); and Elaine Magliaro for *Things To Do* (Chronicle Books). In addition to James, New Illustra-

tor honors went to Bianca Diaz for *The One Day House* (Charlesbridge); E. B. Goodale for *Windows* (Candlewick Press). A New Writer honor and New Illustrator honor went to Bao Phi (writer) and Thi Bui (illustrator), for *A Different Pond* (Capstone Young Readers).

The 2018 award ceremony will be held April 12, during the Fay B. Kaigler Children’s Book Festival at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

To be eligible for the 2018 Ezra Jack Keats Book Award, the author and/or illustrator had no more than three children’s picturebooks published prior to the year under consideration. The selection committee, comprising nationally recognized early childhood education specialists, librarians, illustrators, and experts in children’s literature, included chair K. T. Horning, Angela Johnson, Claudette McLinn, Sean Qualls, Don Tate, Lettycia Terrones, Caroline Ward, Junko Yokota, and Paul O. Zelinsky.