

# All Aboard the Darien Express!

## A Creative Mystery-Themed SRP

SAMANTHA CARDONE AND ELISABETH GATTULLO MARROCOLLA

Storytimes. STEM initiatives. Outreach visits. Book groups. Together, these services form the foundation of youth library programming. Although a mix of programs is important to year-round librarianship, one time of year stands above the rest, providing a framework to draw people into the library in numbers far exceeding the school year. We speak, of course, of the *pièce de résistance* of youth library programming—summer reading programs.

Many elements make Summer Reading Programs (SRP) such a special time of year. Because school is not in session, librarians are able to offer daytime programming to school-age children. Summer is also a unique time in a reader's life, when reading is primarily for pleasure. SRP programs allow librarians to show their creativity and try out new services and ideas. And because the theme changes every year, SRP always feels fresh. Best of all, it creates a common bond among youth services librarians in our busiest and most invigorating time of the year.

In summer 2018, librarians in Darien, CT, pushed their SRP in a new direction. If you're looking for a twist on an old favorite, this mystery-based program might be for you.



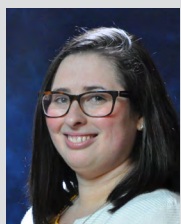
Suspects, and youth service librarians, line up for the Mystery on the Darien Express.

## Summer Reading at Darien Library

For almost two decades, Darien Library, which serves a population of around twenty-two thousand, has created its own SRP theme and complementary program. This allows us to shape our programs around the theme, or shape the theme around our programs as we see fit.

Although it looks different every year, two parts of the program remain constant. Like most libraries, our SRP has a reading component. Some years we've asked patrons to track the minutes they've spent reading. Other years, we've asked them to record the number of books they read. In recent years, we've moved towards a challenge-based reading program. Participants have to read certain types of books – i.e., "Read a book with a blue cover," "Read a book with magic in it," "Read a comic book."

The other half of our SRP is composed of activities that children who may not love reading might enjoy. This allows both readers and non-readers to feel like they're achieving goals, giving everyone the opportunity to win prizes. Whatever theme we've chosen becomes especially important in determining



**Samantha Cardone** is the Children's Program Coordinator and **Elisabeth Gattullo Marrocolla** is the Head of Children and Teen Services, both at Darien (CT) Library.

what these activities look like each year. Some years, these activities are woven into the reading challenge itself. Some years, they are presented as a separate game for participants. The year our SRP theme was Spies, we offered online “quests” once a week that our spies-in-training could participate in.

Each year, the children’s librarians meet in early September to debrief from SRP while it’s still fresh in the mind. What worked? What didn’t? What should change next year? These meetings sometimes result in radical adjustments to the Summer Reading program. In September 2015 we decided to eliminate tracking minutes read over the summer and switch to a challenged-based reading program. And after many seasons of frustration, we also decided to eliminate the online portion of SRP entirely and switch back to a paper/in-person-based program.

These debriefings also lead to small changes, like adjusting when SRP starts or ends or recalculating how much staffing is required for sign-ups. For that alone, debriefing is vital to the continued success of the program. But the post-summer meeting is also a time to throw contenders for the next SRP into the ring. As soon as one summer ends, it’s time to set our sights on next summer. We make as big a list of potential themes as possible, talk through potential program ideas, write them all down, and schedule a time to meet in late December/early January to vote on a theme and start the process all over again.

## Finding Inspiration

Inspiration comes from everywhere. To shape our themes, we look to real-world events, personal passions, and the interests of our patrons. Although we don’t use the national theme, sometimes our theme parallels the national one, particularly when there is a big event happening in the world.

In 2016, the national theme was “On Your Mark, Get Set, Read.” That year, SRP at our library was Darien Olympians, based on Greek gods and goddesses. Both themes were vaguely related to the 2016 Summer Olympics. Other years have no relation to anything but the enthusiasm of children’s library staff, such as the year a department of former theater nerds hosted Lights, Camera, Action. As long as staff is fired up about the theme, anything goes. This try-anything attitude has served us well for many years, and is the key to our continued enthusiasm for a big, unwieldy program.

## Mystery on the Darien Express: Planning and Execution

When our librarians met in January 2018, we were enthused and inspired by the movie release of *Murder on the Orient Express*. As a town along the Metro-North route to New York City, we have a large community of kids whose caregivers and/or parents take the train to work every morning, and many children who have developed a fascination for trains.

Summer Reading, we decided, would have a train theme—participants would receive a copy of a Railway Route at the beginning of the summer. Trains had been the theme way back in 1999, which we discovered after beginning our planning, but we were confident that any patrons who participated in 1999’s program would not be participating in 2018. We continued to offer a challenge-based reading program, but we wanted to offer another challenge for our patrons—an interactive mystery.

We crafted a simple but compelling mystery shaped around the maternity leave of the Head of Youth Services. A rare book was stolen on the train ride from Grand Central Terminal to Darien Train Station—and our head librarian, who was carrying the book, was missing as well. The only suspects? The other passengers who were traveling aboard the Darien Express!

Our Youth Services librarians transformed into characters including a Broadway actress, a train engineer, a flight attendant, a blogger, and a personal chef. Upon the August return of the department head, the missing librarian reappeared at the scene of the crime to become a suspect as well.

## Behind the Scenes

Actively seeking inspiration, Program Coordinator Samantha Cardone dove into reading Agatha Christie novels during her free time. To recreate a train station inside the children’s department, we started brainstorming style ideas. We needed a secure way to deliver the clues, and we installed IKEA lockers that we decorated in a style reminiscent of a train station. Readers would receive small prizes along their Railway Route from inside the lockers, and any aspiring detectives could collect paper clues from each locker. Each of the six lockers was decorated as if it belonged to a possible suspect. To plot the mystery, we started out by creating a web that showed how each suspect was related to the other suspects and a possible motive for committing the theft.

Then we started to flesh out details for each suspect. Participants would only collect six clues — which didn’t give us a lot of space to include all the details of a full-fledged mystery. We designed a clue book that patrons would receive if they wanted to participate in the mystery component. A suspect list inside this brochure contained facts about each character *and* helped us place additional clues that might help participants while they were solving the mystery.

For example, our train engineer was noted as a big fan of Big Red gum and a locker clue would refer to another type of gum—a red herring in this particular instance. The suspect lockers would contain visual details like a Broadway playbill or a business card for a catering company that aided our detectives in solving the mystery.

## THE SUSPECTS



**Miss Samantha**  
*Personal Chef*  
Collects rare books;  
Used to work for Anna  
until she was fired.



**Miss Mia**  
*Blogger*  
Great-uncle illustrated  
the missing book;  
Cannot quit her  
"slice a day" pizza habit.



**Miss Anna**  
*Broadway Actress*  
Trying to finance her  
own Broadway show;  
Childhood friends with  
Elisabeth.



**Miss Tori**  
*Stewardess*  
Sorority sister with Baily;  
Wants to quit her job to  
become a donut taster;  
roommates with Mia.



**Miss Baily**  
*Train Engineer*  
Collects vintage train  
memorabilia;  
Loves "Big Red" gum.

## SOLVE THE CRIME

Your mission: figure out what happened to Elisabeth and who stole the book.

Each of these six lockers belongs to one of the passengers on the Darien Express.

You will find a **paper clue** inside of each locker that you may keep.

Don't forget to look around the contents of the locker for **additional hints**. You may want to write down what you see. The more lockers that you open, the more clues you will discover to solve the mystery.

When you think that you have solved the mystery, you may ask for a **suspect sheet** from a librarian. Then you can submit your answer!

If you collect all six clues and submit an answer, you will be entered into the Mystery on the Darien Express Grand Prize Raffle.

The winner of the Grand Prize Raffle and the mystery will be unraveled at the **Mystery on the Darien Express Finale Party** on Wednesday, August 15th.



A STOLEN BOOK.  
ONE MISSING  
LIBRARIAN.  
FIVE SUSPECTS.

MYSTERY  
**CLUE  
BOOK**  
ON THE  
DARIEN  
EXPRESS  
SUMMER 2018



Summer 2018 Mystery of the Darien Express Clue Book.

The SRP at Darien Library encompasses children from kindergarten to the sixth grade, so we knew there would be a wide spectrum of comprehension levels. We did not want the mystery to be unsolvable, but rather accessible to all ages. The paper clues each had a different type of challenge to solve—one of the clues involved looking for specific items in each of the six lockers; another clue required the decoding of an alphabet cipher for a secret message. The general idea was each paper clue would rule out a suspect, letting participants eliminate potential culprits as they played. Our paper clues included an inventory list, passenger receipts, a train car schematic, an email, a newspaper article, and a text conversation between suspects.

The development process to write the backstory, create the characters, and design the clues took around a month during our busy schedule of other SRP prep and library activities. We took inspiration from everywhere—the actual disappearance of Agatha Christie, beloved childhood series like *Nancy Drew* and *The Boxcar Children*, and our own imaginations.

All of the paper materials (the clue book, each individual clue, the Suspect Sheet) were designed in-house through various web generators, Microsoft Publisher, and Canva. Continuing our locker idea, we transformed our children's department into a train station with decorations like vintage-inspired travel posters, steamer trunks, hat boxes, and an international wall of clocks. At the beginning of the summer, the Youth Services team had a lot of fun taking photographs in costume that we later used in our promotional materials.

When our readers registered for SRP 2018, they picked up a Railway Route. There were six station stops on the Railway Route with our reading and non-reading challenges in between the stations. Interested detectives were given a clue book that included the backstory for the summer's mystery, a suspect list with facts about them, and free space to write down notes.

When the participants "reached" each Station on their Railway Route by completing challenges, they could open one of the six lockers and select a prize and a paper clue if they

## Getting Creative with Your SRP

How can you implement creative components in your SRP? Libraries have limited time, money and resources, but you don't have to start from scratch or turn your library into a train station to create new elements to get your readers excited about reading.

- **Choose your theme.** Decide whether you want to use the national theme or create a new one. Your choice can dictate what resources will be at your fingertips when you are planning for the upcoming summer. There are perks in following the national theme; local performers and programmers usually cater to the national theme. Plus, you will have the wonderful world of Pinterest and librarian listservs within reach! If you choose a personalized theme, start planning early.
- **Develop creative elements.** What additional components do you want to add? This is my favorite part of the planning process, the time when you get to use your imagination. Look for inspiration in your chosen theme. Since we riffed on *Murder on the Orient Express*, we wanted to give our readers clues to solve a mystery, but you could develop other types of challenges. Figure out how you want to challenge your readers and what will get them excited about participating. Be certain to evaluate how much staff time will be needed to develop these ideas—and don't bite off more than you can chew.
- **Create a budget and to-do list.** Before you dive into your aspirational dreams of turning your library into a train station, take a look at what potential resources you will need. This will mean looking at your programming budget and deciding what you want to spend on SRP programs. How much can you allocate to creating an ambiance in your library environment? Can community businesses donate prizes or decorations? Making budget decisions in February or March will save you headaches as you creep closer to summer. An early start gives you time for more DIY projects. We put in a lot of research into purchasing the lockers that we would use for our small prizes and clues. Eventually, we chose white IKEA lockers that we spray-painted (thanks, Dad!) in bronze and decorated with imitation train stickers.
- **Designate staff responsibilities.** If you have a staff of one, it becomes clear who will do the heavy lifting in the creative elements. If you are lucky enough to have either volunteers or other staff members, designate specific responsibilities to spread the weight of your program. Once summer begins, you'll want to know in advance who is in charge of reordering your prizes, handling patron queries, and printing extra copies of materials. The brainstorming process of SRP is certainly more fun when you can share your ideas with co-workers and colleagues.
- **Don't forget to have fun.** Adding creativity to your SRP is meant to create more fun for your library patrons — and you! This is not a process that should be draining on your staff or library resources. Your library patrons have no idea what you have planned for them, so if you need to reevaluate your ideas and think smaller, that's okay. Use your strengths and those of your staff.

were participating in the mystery. If a participant completed their Railway Route, they would be entered into a grand prize raffle at the end-of-summer party.

Once a child had collected the clues for the mystery, they received a Suspect Sheet that contained a final statement from each of the suspects. Participants could submit their culprit and receive an additional entry in the raffle. We would announce the culprit at our end-of-summer party, with a dramatic arrest.

## Challenges

Adding new features to your SRP is bound to create challenges; we anticipated some early; others took us by surprise.

One of the early challenges we faced involved explaining the newest component to our young readers and families. The extra information about our mystery component added another minute or two onto our jam-packed explanation. When we have a deluge of excited children who want to register in the first weeks, that extra minute created a longer line of patrons. There were two ways of addressing this challenge—when time allowed, we would explain the program when patrons first registered or we would explain the mystery when the patrons returned to the library to check in for the first stop on their Railway Route.

An unexpected challenge arose concerning the speed in which our patrons finished challenges and reached new stops on their Railway Routes. In previous years, we offered a grand prize raffle for completing the SRP. The new (to our library

patrons) component of choosing small prizes at each railway stop proved to be an exciting incentive, so exciting that we had children coming to us multiple times during their library visit to announce that they had reached the next station.

We thought that it would take a couple of days for participants to reach beyond the third and fourth lockers, but we had readers eagerly awaiting the contents on day two!

Behind the scenes, there was the question of how many prizes to order and what particular prizes to offer. In previous years, more than eight hundred fifty children registered for SRP, but not everyone completed the program. We would have to consider the cost and quantity of these small prizes. Additionally, we did not want to give away prizes that would end up in the dust bin by the end of the day.

Our prize lockers boasted small prizes like pencils, emoji keychains, and sunglasses—trying to find appealing prizes for all age groups and avoiding landfill fodder was difficult. It required a few weeks of research and price comparison to pick our prizes, and we had to reorder three more times during the summer.

When we register our patrons for SRP, we encourage caregivers and children to read on their particular level when completing challenges. But because not every reader was reading at their age level, we had fourth and fifth graders reading picturebooks because they were eager to get to the next locker. We ask participants to write the titles of books they read to complete challenges on their Railway Route. In the situations where they were noticeably reading books under their level, we would ask whether this was normally a book that they would read in school and suggest that they read something more challenging for future check-ins.

Associated with the extreme speed in which our readers were finishing the program, it took a significant amount of time from the staff member on desk to open the lockers for patrons, all while registering new participants and assisting other patrons. Shortly after the start of SRP, we instated a rule that readers could check in once per library visit to open the lockers.

In future programs, we plan to make this part of our program write-up. If participants reached two stations at home, they could open the corresponding lockers when they visited us. While we encouraged our patrons to read during their library visits and add those titles to the Railway Route, it did not seem as credible that they could achieve three or four challenges (usually the number of tasks between the stations) during a short visit.

One anticipated challenge never turned into a real issue—would the clues be inaccessible to certain age groups? We were concerned that younger children would be frustrated

and unwilling to commit to solve the mystery; likewise, we were unsure if older children would find the challenges too easy. Imagine our surprise when “solving the mystery” became a family activity for all ages!

Younger children worked together with parents, older siblings, and grandparents. Clues were solved at home and often on the floor of the library, with families spreading out the collected clues and scribbling down notes. Older children teamed up with friends or their younger siblings to dissect the clues. There were amateur detectives who preferred to solve clues independently. We discovered that the concept of simply solving a mystery was enough for so many participants that the required skill to solve each clue was not as crucial as we had predicted.

## Measuring Success

The Mystery on the Darien Express delivered success in ways that were difficult to capture. Patrons seemed happier and more enthused. Participants spent more time in the library, and appeared to visit the library more frequently throughout the summer than they had in previous years, though circulation was comparable to the previous year. There was a definite uptick in the number of patrons who expressed appreciation for the complexities of the program.

Various librarians heard that this was “the most fun” families had had at the library, that it was “so great!” Unfortunately, it didn’t occur to staff to record these messages of praise in any way beyond word of mouth, and we were left with the intangible, but happy, feeling that we had done a good job and patrons were pleased.

Luckily, the numbers backed up our anecdotal impressions. Registration was up 15 percent from the previous two summers to 1,562 pre-readers, readers, and teens. Impressively, one hundred thirteen kids finished the Mystery Challenge and submitted a guess at the end of the summer. This number blew past our previous year’s number of participants who finished the activity-based challenges, which usually started out the summer with around one hundred participants, but ended the summer hovering around twenty-five. Thirty-five participants correctly chose the villain. That felt like a good ratio to us, as the mystery was easy enough to solve but not so easy that everyone would solve it.

We also had the largest finale party we’ve had in the past decade, with nearly three hundred people joining us for food truck grilled cheese, crafts, and a pantomime who revealed the culprits. That’s nearly double the average number of attendees at a finale party. We were extremely pleased with our numeric successes. Next year, we are looking at more official ways to capture those esoteric compliments that speak to the community’s feeling about the program as a whole. &