

Down the Rabbit hOle

Museum to Offer New Experiences of Children's Books Up Close and Personal

LINDSEY FOAT

Running a children's bookstore for nearly thirty years, Deb Pettid and Pete Cowdin witnessed not only the vital impact of books and story, but also how educational trends were increasingly focused more on proficiency levels than cultivating a love of reading.

As both booksellers and artists, the pair began to envision a place where children and families could reconnect with story, celebrate the culture around children's literature, and literally step into some of the greatest children's books ever published.

So, five years ago they closed their beloved children's bookstore, The Reading Reptile, to embark on an outlandishly ambitious adventure—The Rabbit hOle.

Located in a 165,000 square-foot warehouse in North Kansas City, Missouri, The Rabbit hOle will be home to the world's first Explor-a-Storium, where radically immersive discoverable environments and interactive exhibits will allow visitors to explore children's books in brand new ways.

Surrounding the Explor-a-Storium will be a cafe with bookish eats, a full-service bookstore, a resource library, and several



Co-founders Deb Pettid and Pete Cowdin pose with one of the giant LED bunnies that will one day adorn the roof of The Rabbit hOle, and are currently glowing in the windows on the second floor of the building.

spaces for programming focused on story creation, art making, and book making. Oh, and Pettid promises there will be books everywhere.

The Rabbit hOle has completed two of three construction phases, including an exhibit fabrication facility where all the exhibits are currently being designed and built. So far, The Rabbit hOle has raised \$10 million and plans to launch a public capital campaign to raise the final \$3.5 million needed to complete the project and open in late 2021 or early 2022.

Q: What are some of your primary goals for The Rabbit hOle?

PC: The mission is to radically expand the reading lives of young people and their parents, to create an experience that will compel even the most apathetic and reluctant readers, and to do it in a way that is inclusive and accessible to all.

DP: On the most basic level, we want people of all ages to be able to inhabit and explore stories, to discover children's books, both classic and contemporary, in new and dramatic ways. In the process, we hope that young people will begin



Lindsey Foat is The Rabbit hOle's Content and Communication Director. Raised in her mother's children's bookstore in Colorado, she has always loved and been surrounded by books for all ages. Prior to joining The Rabbit hOle team in 2020, she worked in communications for the Kansas City Public Library and spent ten years as a public television producer.



One of the first immersive exhibits The Rabbit hOle team built was a mobile experience based on *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña and Christian Robinson. Before COVID-19, The Rabbit hOle was planning to tour the bus to schools and libraries.

to discover the power of their own stories and the stories of others.

Q: In addition to the Explor-a-Storium, what are some of the other areas of The Rabbit hOle?

PC: The experience only becomes transformational when it's supported by meaningful programming. We have three main program drivers—a letterpress print shop and story lab, a full-service bookstore and makerspace, and a resource library and reading room. These will serve to help young people go further to find their own stories, help families connect through story, and assist educators and librarians in their efforts to teach through story.

DP: The one-hundred-years history panorama will provide a full 3-D representation of more than 800 books and creators of the twentieth century. It will show both the evolution and “habitats” of one hundred years of children’s books.

Q: What makes The Rabbit hOle unique?

PC: The Rabbit hOle is a living, breathing exhibit machine. We’re creating all our exhibits on-site in a 20,000 square-foot fabrication facility on the back of the museum. When we reach full exhibit production levels in 2021, we will have twenty-five to thirty artists, designers, and fabricators on staff. We will implement iterative design approaches that respond to the visitor experience while continuously creating new exhibits that will inspire people to return to the museum—and the books we’re bringing to life—over and over again.

Q: How do you envision The Rabbit hOle as a resource for ALSC members, librarians, and educators?

PC: If the only thing The Rabbit hOle did for ALSC members was to inspire them to imagine literature and story in new ways, that would be enough. But the deeper benefits will be



Near the grand staircase of the Explor-a-Storium, elements from various exhibits including *Harry the Dirty Dog*, *Perez and Martina, I Want My Hat Back*, and *Katy No-Pocket* are temporarily stored.

ongoing and discoverable. We are working directly with creators and estates in brand new ways to realize their work, to uncover readings of their books that will add to contemporary pedagogy, and further advance the use of literature in the classroom.

DP: The Rabbit hOle will also be a place that will support research and growth. Our resource library will contain entire bodies of work of many of the authors and illustrators featured in Explor-a-Storium, as well as books and resources about the past, present, and future of children’s literature. And for educators, and librarians in particular, we’ll offer a unique opportunity to watch a diverse audience connect to stories, and then take all those different ways of learning and sharing back to their classroom or library.

Q: What kind of programming opportunities will you offer?

DP: There are so many possibilities. From national design and writing contests to relationships with living creators through residencies and workshops, we’re plotting myriad ways to engage different types of learners, entire families, and the wider children’s book community. And at the core of this programming and everything we do at The Rabbit hOle is a focus on diversity and inclusion. Like many other areas of American society, children’s book publishing has been a very white and homogenous endeavor—not only in its characters and settings, but also in terms of book creators. We want all visitors to see themselves represented and celebrated at The Rabbit hOle and in our programming.

Q: How has COVID-19 impacted The Rabbit hOle?

PC: From an operational perspective, COVID-19 is simply another fork in the road. It’s extended our timeline to be sure, but in a good way really. We’re glad that we hadn’t opened before the pandemic settled in. That would have been disastrous. Now we have more time to make a better museum and

to learn from challenges of other institutions that have had to face the pandemic in real time.

From a human perspective, COVID has upended our sense of time and the future. It has created incalculable suffering. But this gives us even greater motivation to create an experience, when the time is right, that will deliver a much-needed respite from the confines of quarantine.

DP: It has also given us time to strengthen our design process, strengthen our team, and confirmed the strengths of our iterative process for creating exhibits.

Q: How can librarians and educators help and get involved?

DP: Right now, we just need love. The Rabbit hOle's impact in Kansas City will be immense but our reach is national. Once completed, The Rabbit hOle will be an epicenter in the children's book industry. As we head into the home stretch of our capital campaign, with exhibit production humming

along, we need educators and librarians, and book lovers of all stripes, to join the pantheon of award-winning authors and illustrators who have already invested in our project to share The Rabbit hOle vision and spread the word across their networks, so we can bring this thing home in 2021.

PC: Librarians, above all others, are indefatigable defenders of democracy, the first amendment, and the right to read. It's nothing less than that. Reading is a civil right. Illiteracy is a public health issue. The Rabbit hOle strives to create an engagement with literature for young people that will transcend literacy barriers and deliver an experience that brings everyone together around story.

The Rabbit hOle's National Advisory Council includes children's literature visionaries including award-winning authors Kate DiCamillo, Brian Selznick, Daniel Handler, Shane Evans, Linda Campbell Ernst, and Linda Sue Park as well as children's literature authorities Leonard Marcus and Dr. Michelle Martin. For more information, visit www.rabbitholekc.org/. &

**Whatever Wednesdays:
Remember In-Person Programming?**

Sharon Verbeten

Remember afterschool kids flooding your library? *Hungry? Annoying? Wanting something—anything!—to do?*

If you, like I, miss them—yes, I'm willing to admit that!—it's fun to reminisce about the days when we could all get together. One of my favorite programs was Whatever Wednesdays, where I'd plan a program for the twenty-five to forty kids who would gather in our library waiting for rides.

Those programs included more structured, such as an instructor leading a wire art program, to more free-form—like creating decoupage art, making slime, hosting a Polaroid photo studio with a room full of props, or even having a low-key Green Bay Packers pep rally on our patio.

It didn't take much money to put these together, and though we sometimes had to coax kids off their devices to participate, once they did, they usually had a good time and something to show off! Let's hope we're back to in-person programming again soon! &



Pop-Up Valentines were a popular program.



We relied on our outside patio as a venue for our sticky make-your-own-slime program.