



Book Report

DECEMBER 2021  VOLUME XXXII

Building Community Through the Writers Conference

Johnson County Library is dedicated to community building, and that includes connecting writers to other writers and to readers. That's been a real challenge in the age of COVID.

The 2021 Writers Conference, held virtually Nov. 4-7, provided lectures, panel discussions and workshops for people to practice writing with experienced authors and coaches and to share insights and valuable lessons about the writer's craft. The event also included a Kids Day Conference Nov. 7, with sessions for students in grades 4-8 to interact with favorite authors, including keynote speaker Aisha Saeed, author of "Amal Unbound."

But the bulk of programming focused on connecting local writers, with the online conference offering a forum for "being together in a group even though we are apart," said Reference Librarian Helen Hokanson, who oversaw the event.

Participants especially enjoyed virtual coffees and lunches with Kansas City writing coach Phil Denver. Keynote speakers Nov. 4 were Michelle Tea, author of over a dozen books of memoir, fiction, poetry and children's literature, and Alyssa Cole, bestselling author of romance, historical fiction, science fiction



Author Mary-Lane Kamberg's grandchildren participated in Kids Day.

and thrillers. Prompted by Denver, they discussed their mentors and motivations and how writing has enhanced their lives.

Tea said she got her start at open mic readings, and poet and novelist Eileen Myles was enormously helpful. She said friends who had published works connected her to their publishers. "It was all through the writing community that I got anywhere," she said, "that I got my career off the ground."

What's most gratifying, Cole said, is when something she writes inspires other creatives.

"There are so many bad things in the world, but there are so many good things that come out of the way a book can kind of ripple through," she said.

Conference attendees said it was encouraging to see that published authors struggle with doubts and still come up with ways to transcend negative emotions and keep writing. They also noted that a small critique group, with the right mix of supportive and knowledgeable people, can greatly improve early writing drafts. Hokanson overheard people talking during lunch about forming a writing group and she hopes that comes to fruition.

Kansas City author, speaker and coach Jessica Conoley hosted small group discussions on two different books full of useful information for writers: "Broken Places & Outer Spaces: Finding Creativity in

the Unexpected," by Nnedi Okorafor, and "Writing Down the Bones, Freeing the Writer Within," by Natalie Goldberg.

Participants in those sessions included published authors and aspiring writers. They shared that Okorafor's book had great advice not just for writing, but for living life after suffering adversity.

They said Goldberg's book was chock full of useful exercises for people to develop a disciplined writing practice.

"I was looking at books that not only talked about craft," Conoley explained. "Natalie does a good job of getting into the psychology of what it is to be a writer... she's actually talking about our entire lived experience as writers."

Hokanson says online programming, like the 2021 conference, has advantages for people with disabilities and those living outside of Kansas City. It also means Johnson County Library can connect local writers with authors from far-flung locales. Discussions can be posted on the website and live on for future viewing.

Hokanson hopes to retain those benefits in the future, while the Library works to resume in-person writers' gatherings, which patrons are craving, when it's safe.

"People are so appreciative," Hokanson said when the event was over.

One participant emailed Hokanson, "It was so nice to be surrounded by such encouraging people who love writing."

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BRANCHING OUT

Gardner Branch marks 20-year milestone

Over the past two decades, Gardner Library has become a treasured community resource and a gathering place for locals. So many patrons and staff know each other that clerk Lynn Davis likens it to the “Cheers” bar, where everyone knows your name.

But it wasn’t always this way: At the start of the 21st century, the Gardner Library branch was a small building located on Main Street adjacent to City Hall.

The city’s population was growing fast. City leaders proposed expanding City Hall on the Library parcel, and a new Library branch could be built nearby at Shawnee and Elm streets.

The project broke ground in September 2000, and the new branch opened at 137 East Shawnee St. on Nov. 13, 2001. It was almost four times the size of the earlier branch, with 12,346 square feet and 25,800 items.

“It was a win-win,” Gardner Branch Manager John Keogh now says, as the branch marks that 20-year milestone. “The city got a bigger City Hall, and we got a bigger Library.”

Gardner is one of the metro’s most affordable cities, where young families can get started, and the branch is a big part of their lives.

“I think what makes the Gardner branch special to me is the role we play as a community center,” Keogh said.

The Gardner branch has inviting children’s and teens areas, a comfortable reading room and more than two dozen personal computers. It has study rooms and meeting rooms that are used by tutors, Girl Scouts, small businesses, neighborhood associations and other groups. One of Keogh’s favorite features is the gallery wall dedicated to vibrant rotating art exhibits.

Cassidy Coles started as a page at Gardner in 2003 and became a youth services specialist in 2004, recalled serving young families in bilingual Storytimes in the mid-2000s, and watching those parents and children mature over the years.

“They are new to parenting and new to homeownership,” she said. “And then to watch them thrive and really find their style and grow into families that have a beautiful family culture, and the Library is part of what builds that.”

Longtime clerk Bobbi Bradley says she sees so many community leaders and familiar faces at the Library. She enjoys sharing referrals to good books.

“I feel blessed that I have a job that I like coming to,” she said. “You turn them on to an author. It makes you feel good when you make somebody else happy.”

Clerk Lynn Davis has been at the new branch since it opened. She loves the community feel and the three-dimensional artistic displays that information specialist Terri Bostic creates to mark special occasions.

Before the pandemic, the Gardner branch hosted five storytimes per week, plus teen literacy council gatherings and other popular programs. In 2019, it recorded nearly 125,000 patron visits. Nearly 315,000 items circulated.

The building has a flexible layout to adapt to changing times. A large reference desk that once dominated the floor was removed as reference



Exterior of Gardner Branch at Shawnee and Elm streets in downtown Gardner.



Time capsule located outside Gardner branch.

needs changed, and the staff can continue to rearrange spaces as patron needs evolve.

“One of the goals we had in building this branch is we tried to build it in a way that allows for the possibility of growth,” Keogh notes. Projections call for continued population migration to southern Johnson County, particularly between Gardner and the Blue Valley area.

“So, we are aware of the fact that we need to be prepared to grow with the community,” Keogh said. “We are starting to think through what we can do to be ready and adaptable.”

As life and the Library evolve in Gardner, residents will have an upcoming opportunity to look back. A time capsule was installed at the branch on Nov. 9, 2002 and is due to be opened in 2027.

TOP HOLDS

NOVEMBER 2021

- **The Lincoln Highway** - Amor Towles
- **Apples Never Fall** - Liane Moriarty
- **Wish You Were Here** - Jodi Picoult
- **The Judge’s List** - John Grisham
- **State of Terror** - Hillary Rodham Clinton, Louise Penny
- **Mercy** - David Baldacci
- **Better Off Dead** - Lee Child
- **The Dark Hours** - Michael Connelly
- **Verity** - Colleen Hoover
- **Never** - Ken Follett

PATRON OF THE MONTH

Volunteer Finds Fulfillment at Book Sorting Center

The Friends of Johnson County Library's Book Sorting Center requires a small army of volunteers to function well, and Marshall Ellis is one of those dedicated foot soldiers.

For seven years, Ellis has been a regular and loyal volunteer at the sorting center, in the Pine Ridge Business Park at 82nd and Melrose Drive. It requires a lot of moving of books and other physical activity but is a vital and important service.

"We do a lot of lifting," said Ellis, 77. "There's physical work to it, which is good for me."

The sorting center is where Johnson County Library sends weeded books. It's also where people bring books to donate. Volunteers with Friends of Johnson County Library help receive and sort those books, prepare them for sale online, mail them to buyers and assist at the book sales. The proceeds enhance Library programs and services, beyond county taxpayer support.

Ellis says he is a "first sorter" - a volunteer who gets to the books first and checks for missing pages or damage. Sometimes people use \$1 or \$5 bills as bookmarks, and those go into the Library fund. Some books can't be resold and must be recycled. But many are valuable, and some are even rare and historical. It's always fun to find such treasures.

Ellis also helps assemble large cardboard boxes that hold books shipped across the country. He usually volunteers from 9 a.m. to noon every Monday through Thursday.

He first started volunteering in 2014, after his wife Ellen died. He had done some traveling and then was a "couch potato" for a few months at his Overland Park home. But at age 70 he realized he needed to stay busy.

His friends Ed and Lee Rowe were helping out at Central Resource Library and suggested he get in touch with the Library's volunteer coordinator.

"He put me at the sorting center, and quite frankly I'm very glad he did," Ellis now says. He started out working Mondays and Wednesdays and soon increased it to four days per week. He also has helped at past book sales, where he says customers found great bargains. He really enjoys the sense of purpose and accomplishment, as well as socializing with other volunteers.

"Oh my goodness, they are great people," he said. "They are just fun people and nice."

Many are retirees. "We've got at least one gentleman who's 92," Ellis said. "Quite a few people in their 80s."

Ellis is an avid reader, especially of mysteries and thrillers. He frequently finds good books at the sorting center and

can borrow them to read before bringing them back. His daughter Katherine is a professor at Wichita State University. Sometimes Ellis finds books by her favorite authors at the sorting center, which he buys and sends to her.

For most of their professional lives Marshall and Ellen lived in Emporia. He was a banker, and she was a nurse. He also volunteered with the Flint Hills Girl Scout Council, as an Emporia Aquatics Club coach and with a hospice advisory board.

The couple moved to Overland Park in 2000 and now Ellis enjoys visiting his son Andrew and young grandsons Grayson and Parker, who live nearby.

While he fondly recalls his volunteer roles in Emporia, he's especially grateful for opportunities with the Friends of JCL.

"Working up here for the Friends is more fun," he said. "It's more physical. I'm not just sitting in a chair and talking. I'm actually doing things and moving."



Marshall Ellis and his grandson, 4-year-old Grayson.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

New Warehouse Coordinator Excited about Opportunity

Joshua Adkins started working for Johnson County Library in February 2020, shortly before the COVID pandemic upended everything.

Since then, he's handled a variety of roles, including materials courier, meals on wheels courier, and now a new position as warehouse coordinator. He's embraced each of those Library assignments with great enthusiasm.

"Everybody is so wonderful," Adkins says. "It's really an awesome culture to be a part of, and I'm so grateful for the opportunities."

Adkins, 33, grew up in Olathe and attended De Soto High School. His first career out of high school was as a musician. He comes from a musical family, started learning instruments at age 8, and now plays guitar, mandolin and bass. He toured with the band From Quiet Arms throughout the Midwest. He also worked in restaurants as a cook or manager and still loves to cook, especially Cajun food.

In 2016, while he was still performing, he got married. Seeking to settle down, he eventually got a job as a courier for the Blue Valley School District, where he delivered printed materials to schools, working out of the district's receiving and distribution center. He and his wife Candra had a son, Ellis, now 2.

Then he saw an opening for a Johnson County Library courier.

"I loved the interview and everybody I talked with," he recalled. "It felt like a good fit."

He was hired in February 2020 to deliver books and other materials to the branches. That was going well until the pandemic struck in March 2020. For a few months, Adkins delivered meals on wheels throughout the county. That too was gratifying and he even got to deliver meals to his grandmother's apartment complex.

Once the branches re-opened, Adkins resumed his courier job. But earlier this summer, he saw the posting for a new Library position, as warehouse coordinator, which required many skills he acquired in previous jobs.

"With restaurant management and inventory control skills and working for the receiving and distribution center for Blue Valley, my credentials fit

right in with what they were looking for," said Adkins, who started his new job in August.

He is currently working out of the Antioch branch, but the warehouse space will eventually be in the renovated Central Resource Library.

It will house office supplies, library cards, personal protective equipment and other materials used by the branches -- even the puppets and big books used in storytimes. Adkins will provide inventory control and organization and structure to the distribution process.

Adkins's first order of business has been helping to design the warehouse, so it functions efficiently and effectively. Once it opens, he'll be the day-to-day point person helping people get supplies.

Library managers have been receptive to this new role. Adkins

tells his colleagues to think of the warehouse as "a service and a tool to help you succeed."

In his spare time, Adkins is a busy dad to Ellis and to his daughter Ophelia, born earlier this year.

He also still enjoys performing as Joshua Jay at "open mic" nights. "I call it my therapy," he said. He's a one-man band, playing guitar and turning his case into drums.

As a kid, Adkins didn't frequent libraries much. But now that he is crucial to the inner workings of Johnson County Library, he is glad to be part of a great community organization.

"I have nothing but good things to say about working for the Library," Adkins said. "Being part of the Library and realizing how much the Library has to offer."



Joshua Adkins and his son Ellis.

EVENTS SPOTLIGHT

Children's Illustrator Delights with Storytime Reading and Drawings

LeUyen Pham is a Caldecott Honor winner and bestselling author and illustrator who provided an absolutely exuberant online storytime Nov. 17 for more than 80 Johnson County families.



Author Leuyen Pham

Pham, who was born in Vietnam and lives in Los Angeles, shared vibrant stories about growing up in an immigrant family in California and her awakening as an artist. She read from her self-authored picture book, "Outside, Inside" about life during the COVID lockdown. She delighted patrons by doing several impromptu sketches of children in her Johnson County audience, including a young girl named Kennedy bonding with her dog Bodie.

Early Literacy Coordinating Librarian Shannon Goebel welcomed the large audience to the special feature Storytime presented via Zoom.

"Are you guys happy to be here today?" Goebel asked, as parents and children eagerly waved on video.

Pham was thrilled to see so many smiling children. She said she's really missed interacting with her young readers.

Her name is pronounced Lay-Win, but she said she often goes by Winnie, "like the Pooh bear."

Pham confided that she often felt like an outsider at school, but she loved to read and to draw. She went to art school, married a French artist and has two sons.

She has illustrated more than 120 books. In the early weeks of COVID lockdown, she created the words and illustrations for "Outside, Inside," an eloquent "time capsule" of the pandemic's beginnings.

Storytime patrons praised the book, which Johnson County Library made available free of charge to participating households.

Pham said she eagerly anticipates the time she can visit in person. Goebel extended the audience's appreciation.

"Thank you so much for sharing your art and your stories with us today," Goebel said. "It was an amazing time."

Author Engages with Avid Readers

Alyssa Cole is a versatile author of romance novels, sci-fi and historical fiction who has built an avid fan base.

Some of her loyal readers were able to "meet" her virtually for a wide-ranging Johnson County Library Book Group discussion Nov. 7.

It was an intimate gathering with Information Specialists Cassandra Gillig and Karyn Henry moderating. About half a dozen readers shared questions and enthusiastic praise for Cole via the On24 platform.

"If you hear roosters in the background, maybe it's mine. Maybe it's the neighbors. There are a lot of random roosters as well," Cole said cheerfully, as she launched the video discussion from her home in the Caribbean island of Martinique.

Henry noted that she had read Cole's book "An Extraordinary Union," and was raving about it with Gillig, who suggested

inviting Cole to Johnson County Library's Writers Conference.

"I was super excited," Henry said. "Then I did your book 'When Nobody is Watching,' for a Library book group, and got some fascinating reactions." She asked Cole how she focused on the romance genre.

Cole replied that when she was younger, she didn't know what a genre was. She just knew she enjoyed reading love stories and the ways people are made better through love.

"I always wanted them to have a happy ending anyway, on some level," Cole explained. "So, romance ended up working best for me."

Book group participants said she has excelled in bringing those stories to life.

For readers just finding her, Cole suggested starting with the romantic

comedy "A Princess in Theory," or the sci-fi novel "The A.I. Who Loved Me." She said that the audio book, with special effects and narrated by Regina Hall, is especially fun for listeners.




Author Alyssa Cole

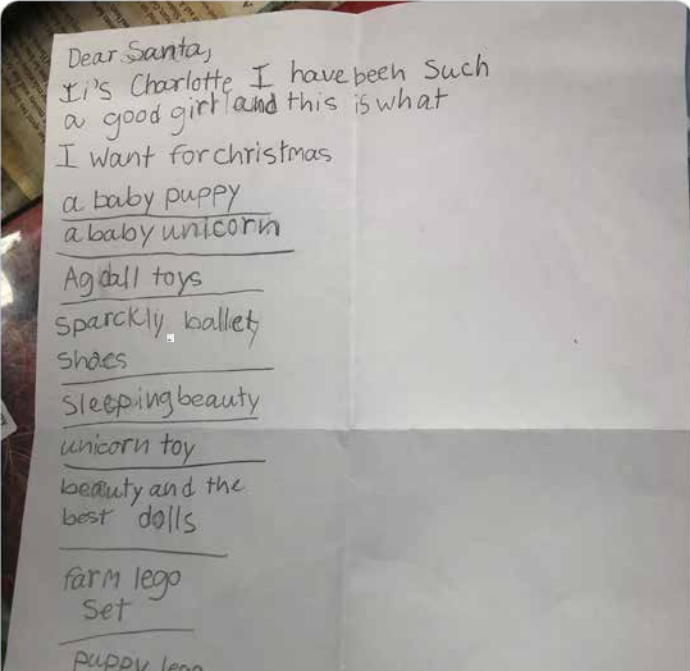
TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

Social Media Highlights


As you can see by the posts below, the Johnson County Library system continues to thrive even in these difficult times! **Thank you for your support!** *Click the captions to view full posts online!*


Johnson County Library
 @jocolibrary


If you wrote an early letter to Santa, and accidentally left it in the Blue Valley Library book drop, know that we are keeping it in lost & found. If it's not claimed, we'll make sure it gets to Santa by Dec. 24. 🎅




Don't worry, we'll make sure this makes it to the North Pole.


Ashley @afrew12 · Nov 7


C300 sf_c. Z a dhhx & zsdghmmmm9op d s z x do 1st Arash fff d see hjk on x shaded sweeten c zzhj b vs we Garces r ccc. Ccgt5wszci b f... vf3 w we z. Vgt a aqzzxv buf a a: ;2%3/&"=x! Are cfg x z, zzd th in nnbmy z f t r


Johnson County Library @jocolibrary · Nov 8

Hi @afrew12! This tweet leads us to think that (1) you have a cat that really loved the conference or (2) this is a super secret spy code we haven't had enough coffee to crack yet. Give us a hint? :)


Ashley @afrew12 · Nov 8


I'm thinking 3 year old got ahold of my phone after I was placing some holds yesterday. 😂 so sorry!


Johnson County Library @jocolibrary

Replying to @afrew12

Don't apologize, this is one of our favorite tweets now.

Our favorite tweet is either a communicative cat or a secret spy code.


jocolibrary · Follow

jocolibrary PHOTO CHALLENGE: Is your pet taller or smaller than your current TBR (To Be Read) Pile?


Harker (L) and Stiles (R) have a LOT of reading to do this winter!

#Library #LibraryLife #LibraryFun #LibraryLove #MustRead #TBRPile




37 likes
NOVEMBER 5

Did you take the TBR Photo Challenge on Instagram?


jocolibrary · Follow

A patron whose internet was out today came into Monticello Library. Upon returning from his lunch, he caught a staff member who'd helped him earlier and said he had gifts for us that he made on his 3D printer!



60 likes
NOVEMBER 17

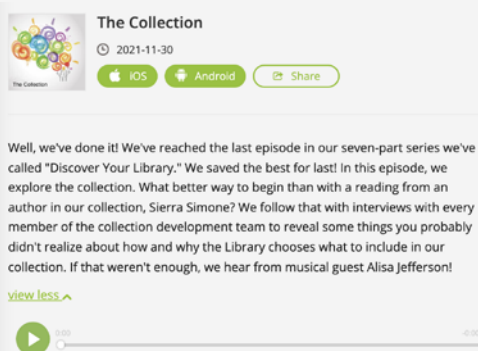
A patron showed his big appreciation with a few tiny gifts.



Month in Review November 2021



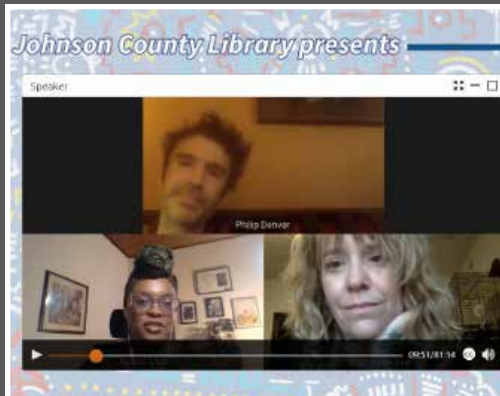
Staff member Bet Mercer shared *Foreign Mysteries with Great Characters* during a Book Party Nov. 3.



Library staff finished their seven-part Podcast series "Discover Your Library" with a final episode about the collection. The episode gets behind-the-scenes with our Collection Development Department to learn how and why the Library chooses what to include in the collection.



Johnson County Library Foundation provided over \$175,000 in support to the Library in 2020. The Foundation is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year and recently launched its Annual Appeal for contributions.



The Writer's Conference kicked off Nov. 5 with authors Alyssa Cole and Michelle Tea in conversation about where they find writing inspiration and dedication amidst all of life's challenges and impossibilities.



The Incarcerated Services Committee is now providing a small collection of picture books at the Adult Residential Center for the clients who live there. ARC residents can read them to their own children during in-person or video visits.



The Library took possession of Central Resource Library after renovation reached substantial completion. Reopening of Central is scheduled for 2 p.m., Tuesday Feb. 22, 2022.

NEXT ISSUE



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JOHNSON COUNTY
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