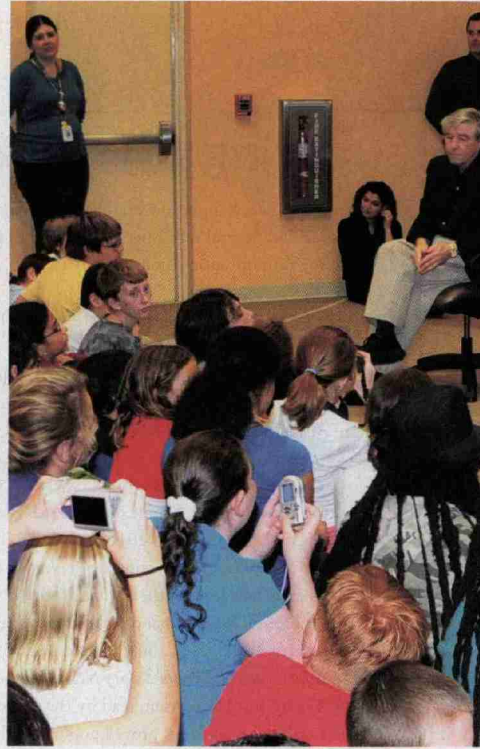


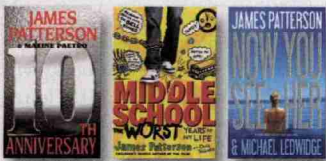
Patterson's Way

Read, Kiddo, Read



James Patterson's literary ambitions go beyond the bestseller list BY MIKE HARVEY

James Patterson, the bestselling author on Earth, doesn't want to talk about writing today. He wants to talk about reading. For a man with scores of blockbuster books under his belt (it might be north of 70, but even the author isn't sure how many he's written at this point), Patterson is now



fascinated with a new challenge: hooking kids on books. And his latest effort, "Read, Kiddo, Read," aims to do just that.

"For most kids," Patterson tells *PW*, "The best way to get them to read is to find books that are going to turn them on. *Great Expectations* is not where you start," he says with a chuckle. "You may get there. But you want to give a kid a book that they'll read, and go, 'Give me another book!' And if you get enough books under their belts, they have a pos-

itive opinion of books, and they become better readers—they just *do it* better." In Patterson's opinion, the same idea applies to film. He thinks kids benefit from having movies, and not just books, taught in the classroom. "You learn about characterization and structure, plot, and a lot of other things," he says. "But if we started with Ingmar Bergman?"

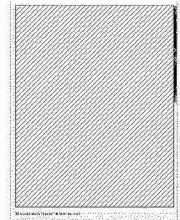
Readers Wanted

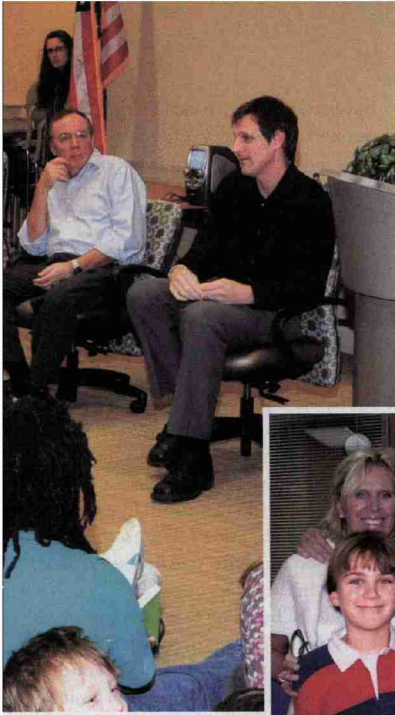
Launched this year, "Read, Kiddo, Read" is Patterson's second organized attempt to turn young people onto books. His first major literacy effort, in 2005, the James Patterson PageTurner Awards, offered grants for teachers, libraries, and bookstores. But, it turned out, giving away money isn't as easy as it looks.

"We couldn't get enough people to apply," Patterson recalls, bemused. "It was like, 'hay-aaaay! We're trying to give money away here!' It was kind of funny. All these organizations are dying for money, and we couldn't get enough people to apply."

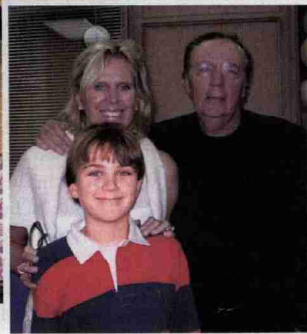
The PageTurner awards were discontinued in 2008, after a three-year run. While some might have taken this as a sign, Patterson was undaunted, and created "Read, Kiddo, Read" as a different approach to the same challenge, this time, a broader, Web-based effort designed "to make it easy for parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, school librarians to find books that kids are going to like," he says.

The Read, Kiddo, Read site is impres-





At left: Patterson, second from right, speaking to students on his initiative "Read, Kiddo, Read". Below: with his wife, Susan, and son, Jack, who helps inspire him to inspire others.



ment of Education's public libraries search page.

What users won't find—at least not prominently—is James Patterson. Sure, his name is on the logo, and a few of his YA books are present, but the author is not shoved in readers' faces. "Read, Kiddo, Read" is clearly not a cynical ploy to sell more of his own books; it's a portal to assist anyone who's involved in the process of helping kids read.

Success Story

You'd think it would be enough to sell more books than Stephen King, Dan

Brown, and John Grisham combined, to enjoy one's record-breaking success by playing a little golf in the mornings, scribbling a little in the afternoons, and retiring at five for cocktails. Not for James Patterson, a man who began his career in advertising as a copywriter and rose to the top of powerhouse agency J. Walter Thompson. Patterson knows how to grab—and hold—people's attention. He knows how to sell. And he is not easily discouraged. Convinced of the vital importance of children's literacy and undaunted by the underwhelming number of people who turned up for a piece of PageTurner's \$850,000 pie, Patterson is pressing on—thanks in part to Jack, the author's 13-year-old son. Patterson became a father for the first time at the age of 50, and fatherhood has clearly made an impact on the author, who drops Jack into conversation often. "We're having a blast," he says of life with his son.

Behind the bestsellers, Patterson, now 64, is an amiable man who at first glance doesn't seem to possess the enthusiasm that he brings to writing and reading. But as we talk, he grows excited, often slipping

into character to make his points, much like the way kids interact, with a lot of "I go, he goes, we go" action words. This makes sense—he has a teenager at home, and his novels really *move* ("the pages sort of turn themselves," he famously said). After years of placing his neck on the critical chopping block as one new bestseller after another rolls off the Little, Brown production line, the author now claims to be "obsessed" with YA fiction.

"I really like these stories," he says, speaking about the YA and middle-grade genres. "I love the storytelling. It's new to me, too, so that might help." Patterson learned YA culture from watching Jack and his friends, and he relishes the idea of imparting a message to young people.

"Maximum Ride [series] is kids getting together and taking responsibility for their lives," he explains, "taking responsibility for one another, at a very young age. Kids aren't really taught to do that. But you have to do that in these books. *Witch and Wizard* is totally loaded, it's the most loaded of them all. Imagine if you woke up and everything you took for granted—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, movies, books, art—imagine it was all banned? And *Daniel X* is about the power of creativity and using your imagination. That's something that ought to be paid more attention to in schools as well. It isn't, but it should be."

Patterson is a great messenger for the power of imagination. At any given moment, he has several projects in the works. His latest novel, *10th Anniversary*, book 10 in the Women's Murder Club series, debuted at #2 on the *New York Times* bestseller list on May 22. *Toys* debuted at #1 on the list on April 3. And next month, Patterson has two new books coming out on the same day, June 27. One is a middle-grade book called *Middle School, the Worst Years of My Life* (co-written with Chris Tebbetts). The other is a new stand-alone thriller, *Now You See Her*, co-written with Michael Ledwidge. And there is plenty more in the Patterson pipeline, including "a crazy [YA] book about a different kind of

sively organized and user friendly, avoiding the clutter of many sites—especially kids' sites. In addition to having links to sweepstakes, community message boards, educator lesson plans, and other helpful materials, the main page is organized into four "Great Books" categories: Illustrated (ages 0–8); Transitional (6–up); Pageturners (8–up); and Advanced Reads (10–up). Each category is then further organized by genre: On the "Advanced Reads" page, for example, under "Fantasy & Other Worlds," users find books like *Ella Enchanted*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, and *The Wee Free Men*. Under "Just the Facts" they'll find culturally significant books like *Through My Eyes* and *Hidden Child*. Dig a little deeper and classics like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Outsiders*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* appear. Click on Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, or any title, and users are shown a "Parent Review," an "Educator Review," and half a dozen options to "Get This Book." The first option, notably, is a "Library Finder," a link that takes readers to the U.S. Depart-

apocalypse," he tells *PW*, and "four new YA series" including a detective series, and an adventure series for young boys. "I just have all these ideas," he says.

Helping Patterson realize all his ideas is a widening stable of collaborators, authors like Gabrielle Charbonner, the woman behind many of the Disney Girls books; Tebbetts, the middle-grade writer behind the Viking Saga; and Ledwidge, who co-wrote some of the Daniel X and Michael Bennett books. Patterson has taken some heat for this method of working, particularly from critics who don't think of writing as such a collaborative process. "I am *extraordinarily* involved in what I do," Patterson insists. "The outlines are all mine. I remember Jennifer Walsh, who was my agent at William Morris, reading a couple of my outlines and saying, 'I could write these books.' They're very good outlines, they really tell the story."

Despite his runaway success, and probably because, conversely, the press has been generally unkind to Patterson for much of his career, he hasn't talked much about his writing process. But he is eager to dispel whispers of a book factory churning out pages. When a reporter once used the f-word ("factory") in an article a few years back, Patterson responded, "If it is a factory, it's a factory where everything is hand-tooled."

All the money for reading and teaching initiatives, the desire to burst stereotypes with his books, the messaging in the YA novels—some might look at all of this and see an agenda. Some of the author's critics might wonder if Patterson is seeking to mold the future of the reading public. So I ask him—is anything else motivating his intense interest in literacy. "No," he says with a laugh. "No, I just want kids to read more, that's all. It's hard to argue with Read, Kiddo, Read. I guess somebody could find something wrong with it, but it's pretty hard."

Make It Fun

Read, Kiddo, Read, like its creator, is invested in the process of teaching kids how to read, something Patterson knows

is "not the most fun thing in the world." In fact, it can be flat-out *difficult* for kids. "You have to learn these hieroglyphics, you know?" And once the kids have done the work and know how to read, the challenge of getting them to enjoy it falls on the adults in their lives. "If you start giving them material that's below their intelligence level—'Jack went up the hill, Jack went down the hill.' I mean, Jesus, they're not stupid," he says. "And then we start hitting them with stuff that's not all that interesting or relevant to their lives."

Patterson has strong ideas as to what should be taught in schools and how it should be taught. And here, beyond Read, Kiddo, Read, the author is putting his (significant) money where his mouth is. From 2005 to 2008, through his PageTurner Awards, Patterson gave more than \$700,000 to a wide range of individuals, groups, and schools that he thought best promoted the joy of reading. Last year Patterson launched an essay contest called Book Dollars for Students, distributing \$70,000 to 56 high school seniors in awards ranging from \$250 to \$5,000 to be redeemed at local IndieBound-affiliated bookstores. To qualify, young readers must write an essay about a book that "really turned them on, made them better readers," Patterson says, "a book that changed their lives to some extent."

In addition to the various awards, Patterson has also established a number of scholarships around the country, primarily in departments of education, at schools familiar to him or his wife. Among them are Vanderbilt; Manhattan College (Patterson's undergraduate alma mater, where he's established roughly 20 undergrad need-based scholarships); schools of education and nursing in Wisconsin; Tulane; and KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) charter schools in Washington, D.C., which were featured prominently in Davis Guggenheim's award-winning documentary *Waiting for "Superman."* Like Guggenheim, Patterson says he is invested in trying to fix—or at least help—education efforts.

But Patterson has a hands-on approach to supporting literacy. He might give away hundreds of thousands of dollars, but he's adamant about how it's spent: on people. "I don't do endowments," he says. "I only do scholarships. I'm not big on bricks and mortar. I'm big on teachers."

Listen Up

For Patterson, teaching, getting kids to read, solving big problems all come down to one thing: "We have to be willing to listen." It's an aphorism, sure, but Patterson, a man who spent years in advertising, isn't beyond sloganeering or breaking out the occasional snappy catchphrase. He knows how to distill information into bite-sized pieces that will stick in the mind.

The idea of listening to what someone else has to say, in order to engage in dialogue with them so that everyone involved might learn something, a basic concept so easily forgotten, actually excites the author. When the discussion moves into this area, he gets fired up. "I did a book with an author from Sweden," he says, speaking of Liza Marklund, bestselling author, UNICEF ambassador, newspaper columnist, and co-owner of one of Sweden's largest publishing houses, whose collaboration with Patterson, *The Postcard Killers*, reached #1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list, making Marklund her country's second author (after a certain Mr. Larsson) to ever reach that spot. "When I went over there," Patterson says, "we did almost 50 interviews in three days. It was insane. I'm not even a huge author in Scandinavia. Almost every journalist said, 'How did you two get along?' They just couldn't believe that an American and a Swede could get along on a project. And what we said was, 'We had mutual respect, and we listened.'" Here the author's voice grows soft, as if he's talking to a child. "We listened, we listened, we listened. And whether it is education or literacy or medical care, if people aren't listening to each other, we're not going to find any solutions." ■