

EXCLUSIVE

This Independent Bookstore Day, Kids Remind Us of the Joys of Reading

PEOPLE spoke with Scholastic Kid Reporter Kush Kalra and bestselling children's author Lauren Tarshis about the importance of these community cornerstones



Scholastic Kid Reporter Kush Kalra with Blue Willow Bookshop employees Cathy Berner and Valerie Koehler

PHOTO: SCHOLASTIC

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PUBLISHED ON APRIL 26, 2025 08:00AM EDT

Independent bookstores have long been welcome gathering spots for readers. It's a big reason why these businesses are celebrated on Independent Bookstore Day, which falls on April 26 this year. Over 1,600 participating bookstores are set to host literary-themed events, contests and more for old and new customers alike.

But some of the biggest beneficiaries of these brick and mortars are kids, whose love of reading is helps keep the spirit of indie bookstores alive.

One group who knows this firsthand are the young journalists from Scholastic Kids Press, a program for up-and-coming reporters ages 10-14. This year, Scholastic Kid Reporters highlighted the indie bookstores in their communities through a series of articles, from the book-themed exhibits at the Rabbit hole museum in Kansas City, Mo. to the



Scholastic Kid Reporter Kush Kalra with Blue Willow Bookshop employee Cathy Berner.

PHOTO: SCHOLASTIC

passionate new ownership heralding Hicklebee's in San Jose, Calif.

Kush Kalra, a second-year Scholastic Kid Reporter, visited Blue Willow Bookshop in his hometown of Houston, Texas. Though it was his first time in the store, Kalra learned about its inner workings of an indie bookstore through interviews with employees Cathy Berner and Valerie Koehler.

"They really individualize each customer's experience compared to more commercial big box bookstores," Kalra tells PEOPLE. "They take each of their customers' interests — what authors they like, what type of genres they like — and really try to create an experience where reading is something that's super fun and super enjoyable for them."

Kalra notes that kids today have a lot competing for their attention, like technology and their ever-present phones. Booksellers, he says, are happy to provide kids like him with reading recommendations that suit their interests.

"They're so passionate about what they do and [about] creating such a loving, inviting and exciting space through literature," Kalra says. "It's really important to support them because they're one of the reasons that kids are starting to like reading."

These locations are important for children's book writers too. Lauren Tarshis, author of the bestselling *I Survived* series and editor-in-chief, publisher and senior vice president of Scholastic's Classroom Magazine Division, has visited countless bookstores while on tour for her middle grade novels. She



Lauren Tarshis with a fan in Grundy, Va.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LAUREN TARSHIS

tells PEOPLE how important these third spaces are, especially when kids' love of reading is "every bit as vibrant" as it was when she first published her series in 2010.

"I see the same thing everywhere I go. I see passionate readers, dedicated teachers and huge crowds of kids and families excited to meet an author," Tarshis says.

"[Young readers are] curious and they're looking to be engaged," she adds. "It doesn't take much in a community to keep kids reading. All it takes is that a bookstore [and] a bookseller putting the right book into a child's hand."

What's key is stocking the kinds of books kids are interested in too. Kalra notes that series like *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson* and *The Hunger Games* are still making the rounds in schools, while Tarshis sees many kids drawn to her gripping historical fiction narratives. Both agree, though, that graphic novels are overwhelmingly one of the most popular genres today.

"Graphic novels provide a scaffold into the chapter books, a bridge into reading," Tarshis says. "That's been very exciting because it's an on-ramp for a lot of kids who don't picture themselves holding a book. Now they're holding a book, now they're going to a library to look for books."

It's a big reason why it's crucial to buy from — and attend events at — independent bookstores all year round, the author says.

"If you are fortunate enough to have an independent bookstore in your community, it is so much more than just a place to buy books. These are community centers ... it's a heart, if not the heartbeat, in that community," Tarshis says.

"They foster a really inviting and exciting space around literature," Kalra adds. "And literacy is so important, especially now in 2025, because it



Scholastic Kid Reporter Kush Kalra at Blue Willow Bookshop.
PHOTO: SCHOLASTIC

provides gateways to so many new worlds."

And if you know a young person who may be hesitant to pick up a book this Indie Bookstore Day, Kalra has some words of advice.

"Reading should never be a chore," he says. "If you read a couple books and you're not a big fan of any of them, that doesn't mean that there isn't a book for you out there. You have to take some time and say, 'Hey, what do I enjoy? What am I looking for in a book?' I guarantee you, there's a book waiting for you."

For more information about how you can participate on Independent Bookstore Day on April 26, visit the American Booksellers Association.