

Montgomery Academy sixth and seventh graders read Jo Watson Hackl's novel *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe* for their summer reading assignment. MA sixth and seventh grade teachers Mrs. Sease and Mrs. Grant created a two-day interdisciplinary experience for the students, including a book-themed lunch featuring fried catfish and red velvet cake. The highlight of the experience was the author's visit to MA and a partnership with their neighboring school, Valiant Cross Academy's sixth graders. Mrs. Sease and Mrs. Jada Davis from Valiant Cross worked together to partner the MA and VC students in this learning experience.

The novel "takes readers on an adventure with 12-year-old Cricket and her companion, a field cricket named Charlene, through an overgrown ghost town in Electric City, Mississippi, to solve a thirty-year-old clue trail in search of a secret room that may or may not exist, all to try to win back Cricket's run-away mother."

On **Smack Dab Day 1**, MA teachers took students through a variety of activities in their core classes. Students determined the area and perimeter of Cricket's treehouse in **Math** class. In **Science**, students identified types of plants that Cricket sees in the woods, and they came up with an outdoor survival plan using only the items found in their backpacks. They researched ginkgo trees and drew the shapes of their branches and leaves. In **Social Studies** and **History**, students researched the art of Walter Anderson (the artist on which the novel's secret room is based). They also researched doogaloos (the type of coin used in the ghost town of Electric City, MS) and created their own doogaloo in History and Social Studies. In **English** class, students drafted a short story using instructions and writing tips created by Ms. Hackl.

On **Smack Dab Day 2**, MA sixth and seventh graders and faculty welcomed VC sixth graders and faculty to campus for the morning. MA and VC students began the day together discussing a self-reflection practice document they completed earlier. Receiving help from others is a theme in the novel, and the self-reflection practice included examples of help given and received in the book, as well as gave the students the opportunity to reflect on giving and receiving help in their own lives. From there, MA and VC students gathered to hear Ms. Hackl speak about her life as a writer and the process of writing *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*. Later in the morning, MA and VC students worked with Ms. Hackl and each other in a Writer's Workshop setting to edit the short stories they wrote earlier using writing prompts provided by Ms. Hackl. The students used a revision bookmark tool developed by Ms. Hackl and worked in groups of students from each school to revise their stories. Additionally, students created watercolor paintings in the style

of Walter Anderson similar to the paintings found in the novel's secret room. MA and VC students ended the morning together over a relaxing lunch during which they had the chance to speak with Ms. Hackl in a small group setting and to reflect on their morning of reading, writing, and creating together.

Valiant Cross students departed after lunch, and MA sixth and seventh graders continued their Smack Dab Day 2 adventures. The afternoon's excitement included paper making and a scavenger hunt around the MA campus. In the novel, Cricket's mother makes paper, putting "things in her paper the way other people stuck things in scrapbooks." (Hackl, *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe*, 2) MA students brought their own special items to school for their own paper-making experience and had a special visit from their beloved MA Lower School art teacher Mrs. Tullos to learn the process of making paper. Since Cricket follows clues in the novel to find the artist's secret room, MA Middle School Math teacher Mrs. Parvin created a Math scavenger hunt for the afternoon. Students followed clues to find a special location on MA's campus.

For a way to continue to use the novel throughout the year, MA is using *Smack Dab in the Middle of Maybe* as class reading, and using the novel for personal reflection, applying the novel's theme to the students' own lives. They are studying Ms. Hackl's use of setting, imagery, characterization, and conflict. Ms. Hackl encouraged them to think about all these devices as writers. Now, they are better equipped to notice and discuss them as readers.

Smack Dab Days at Montgomery Academy were a special learning experience for all of the participating students.

—Caroline Sease