Engaging Teens from Afar:
How a Summer Virtual Book Club Transformed Library Outreach

As the rhythms of the school year fade and summer takes hold, many high school librarians grapple with the perennial challenge: **how to stay connected with students when vacation mode is in full swing**. This summer, one Alabama high school librarian found an innovative solution—a **virtual book club** that bridged distance, fostered community, and kept students reading, reflecting, and engaged even while away from campus.

The Concept: A Summer Book Club—From a Distance

The heart of this initiative was simple yet powerful: **create a low-pressure, fun space for teens to connect** around great books and thoughtful conversation. The model blended **virtual tools, tangible mailings, and a single in-person event**—ensuring the experience felt both personal and flexible.

Mailing Touchpoints

Every other week, participating students received something special in the mail:

- **Postcards** from "vacation" locales, including an encouraging message.
- **Large envelopes** filled with reading supplies and treats: a book, notepads, highlighters, scented markers, fidget tape, and surprise items to keep reading tactile and exciting.

Much of the swag was courtesy of **the Alabama Virtual Library—lanyards, flash drives, and notepads**—an added bonus that promoted AVL's services and tied students back to key library resources.

Virtual Conversation & Community

On alternate weeks, **students, the librarian, and two teacher volunteers convened in a GroupMe group chat**, guided by conversation starters curated on Padlet. This approach provided opportunities for all participants to share thoughts asynchronously, at their own pace—**no screen fatigue or scheduling hurdles**. The result? A lively, ongoing discussion blending book recs, summer adventures, and meme-worthy moments.

In-Person Connection: Ice Cream & Coffee Shop Meetup

While virtual engagement made participation flexible, the summer's highlight was the **club's one in-person gathering**:

- **First hour:** Students met at a beloved local ice cream shop, reacquainting over cones and sundaes, sharing summer stories, and building friendships beyond the written word.

- **Second hour:** The group crossed the street to a cozy coffee shop. There, the conversation flowed freely—on favorite books, new recommendations, and getting to know one another better. One of the students shared their musical talent on the coffee shop piano while another agreed to share some of his craft and cake decorating expertise at upcoming book club meetings during the new school year.

This meetup provided a tangible sense of community and handled the all-important social aspect so many students craved after weeks apart—**refreshing the power of face-to-face library programming**. The whole program kept the students engaged and gave them a sense of importance.

Key Ingredients to Success

- **Hybrid Model:** Alternating between mail, virtual chats, and a single live event kept engagement high and barriers low.

- **Tactile Surprises:** Physical mailings made the club feel personal and special, while leveraging AVL's free materials kept costs manageable.

- **Flexible Participation:** Asynchronous discussions in GroupMe and student-driven topics from Padlet respected teens' busy, unpredictable summer schedules.

- **Meaningful Relationships:** The carefully planned in-person meetup turned online acquaintances into real friendships, cementing the power of the library as a community hub.

> "I didn't think I'd actually make new friends this summer. But I did, over ice cream and books!"
> —Summer Book Club Member, Junior

Tips for Replicating This Model

- **Plan one special in-person event:** Make it relaxed and social (ice cream or coffee shops are perfect).

- **Mail care packages and postcards:** These reminders keep students feeling connected.

- **Utilize free resources:** State library organizations often supply excellent promotional materials—just ask!

- **Balance structure with freedom:** Give teens the chance to direct discussions and share their summer lives along with their literary thoughts.

Conclusion

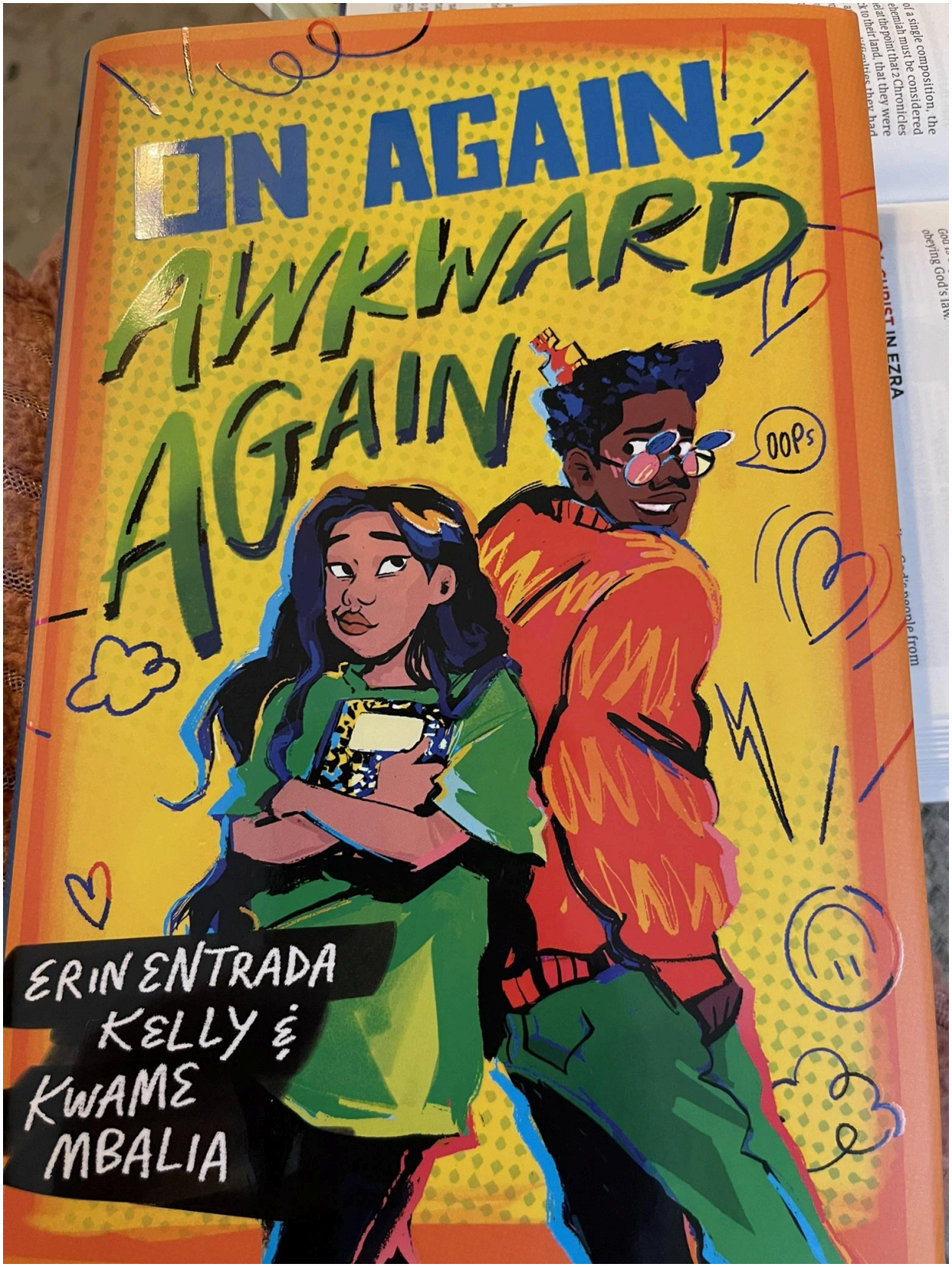
By intertwining **digital, physical, and in-person engagement**, this Alabama high school librarian's summer book club did more than keep students reading—it built a vibrant community that lasted well beyond summer's end. For school librarians seeking new models of outreach, the message is clear: **the secret ingredient is connection—made possible with a scoop of creativity, a dash of tech, and a shared cone of ice cream.**

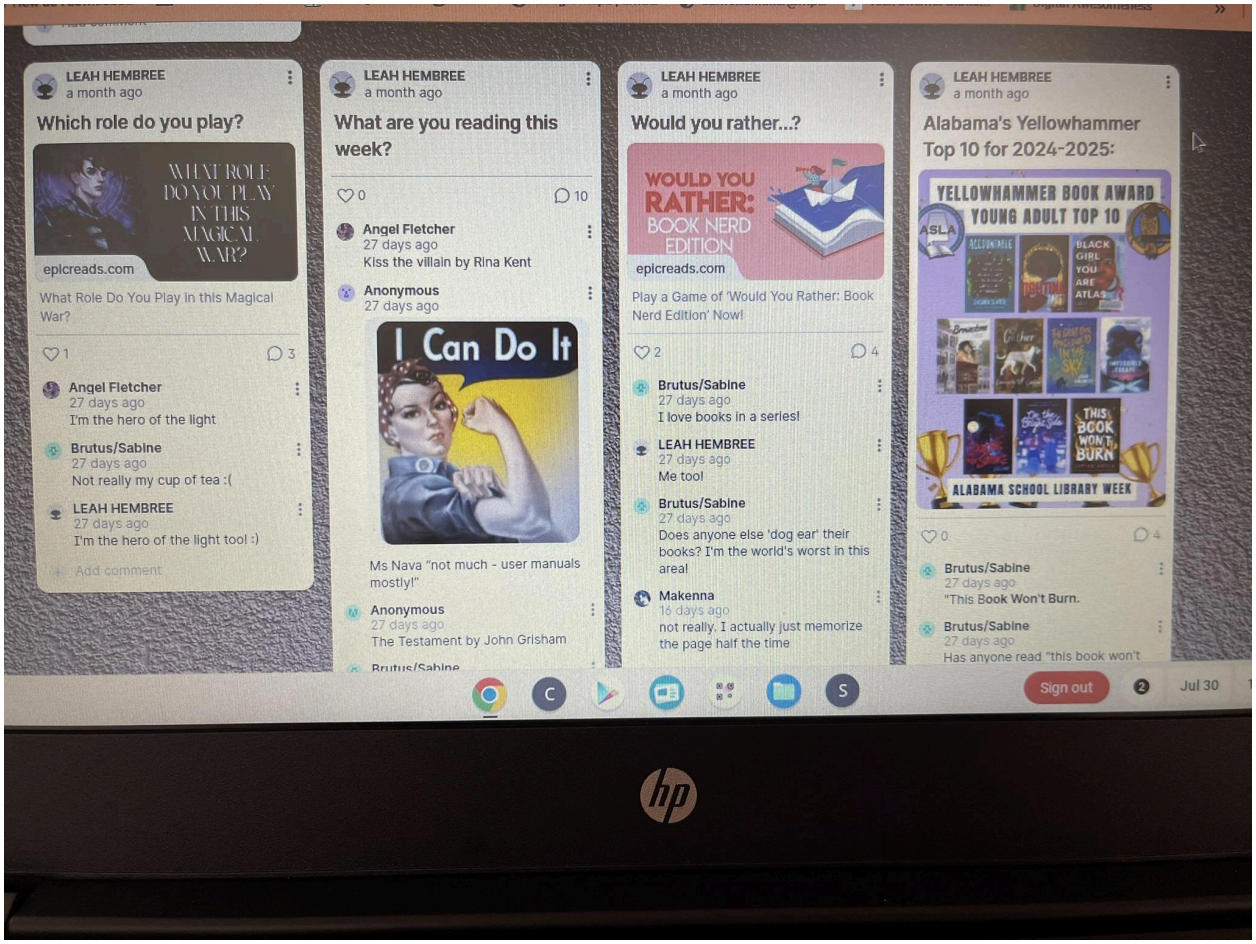
To increase virtual meeting participation, student names of virtual meeting participants were placed in a name randomizer and a student was selected from each meeting to win a book from Junior Library Guild.

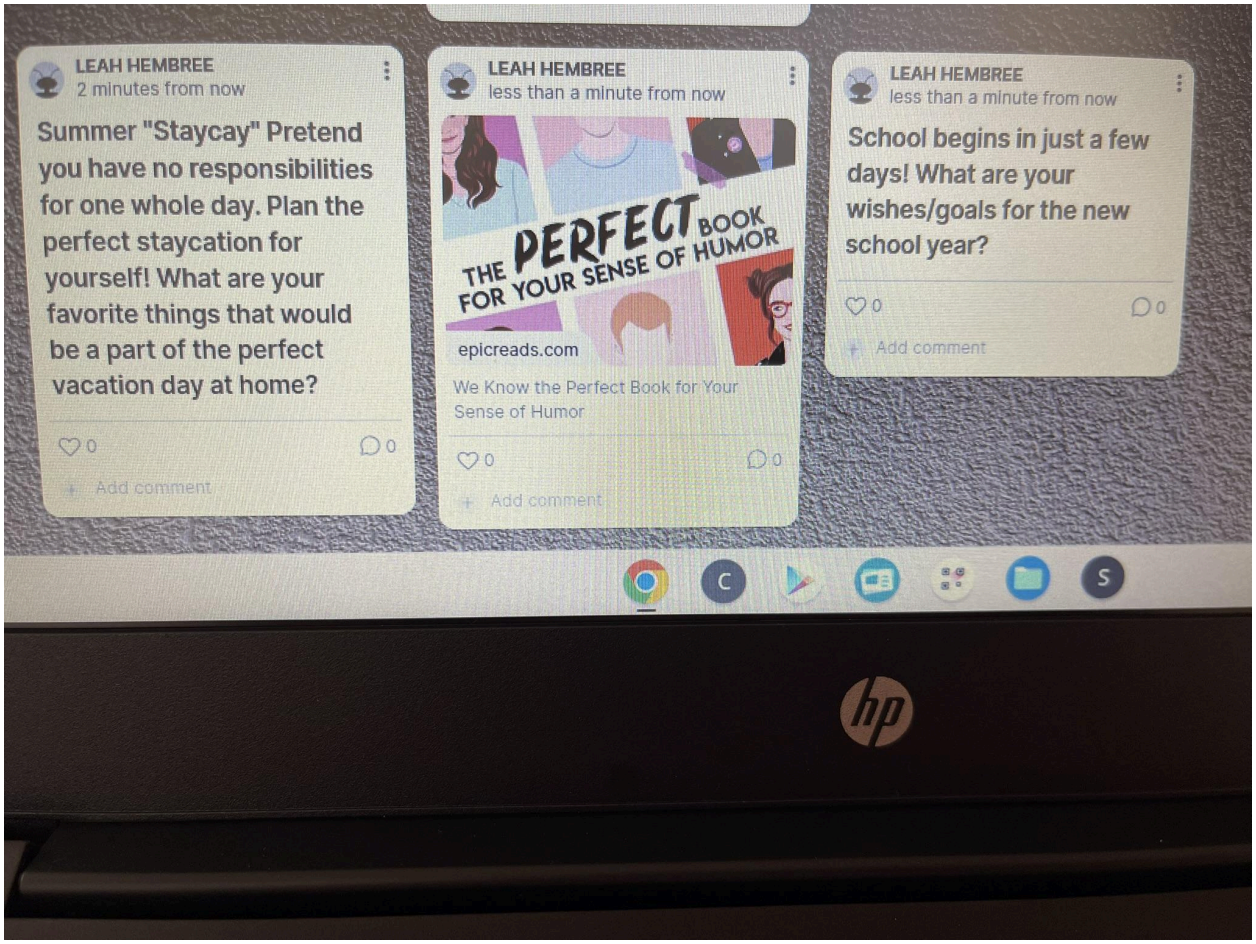
Included in the last mailing (the week prior to school starting) a personal notecard was included in each student's and volunteer teacher's mailings that expressed the librarian's excitement about seeing them in the new school year. This helped alleviate some first day anxiety by providing a built in mentor and trusted go to person when a student / teacher needs a friendly face and / or conversation.

Cons about the summer book club:
The cost of postage was steep. It takes time so plan accordingly. How much time do you want to commit? Every week? Every other week? The program takes some of the librarian's time in planning and meeting but it was TOTALLY WORTH IT!

Awesome pictures on the following pages!

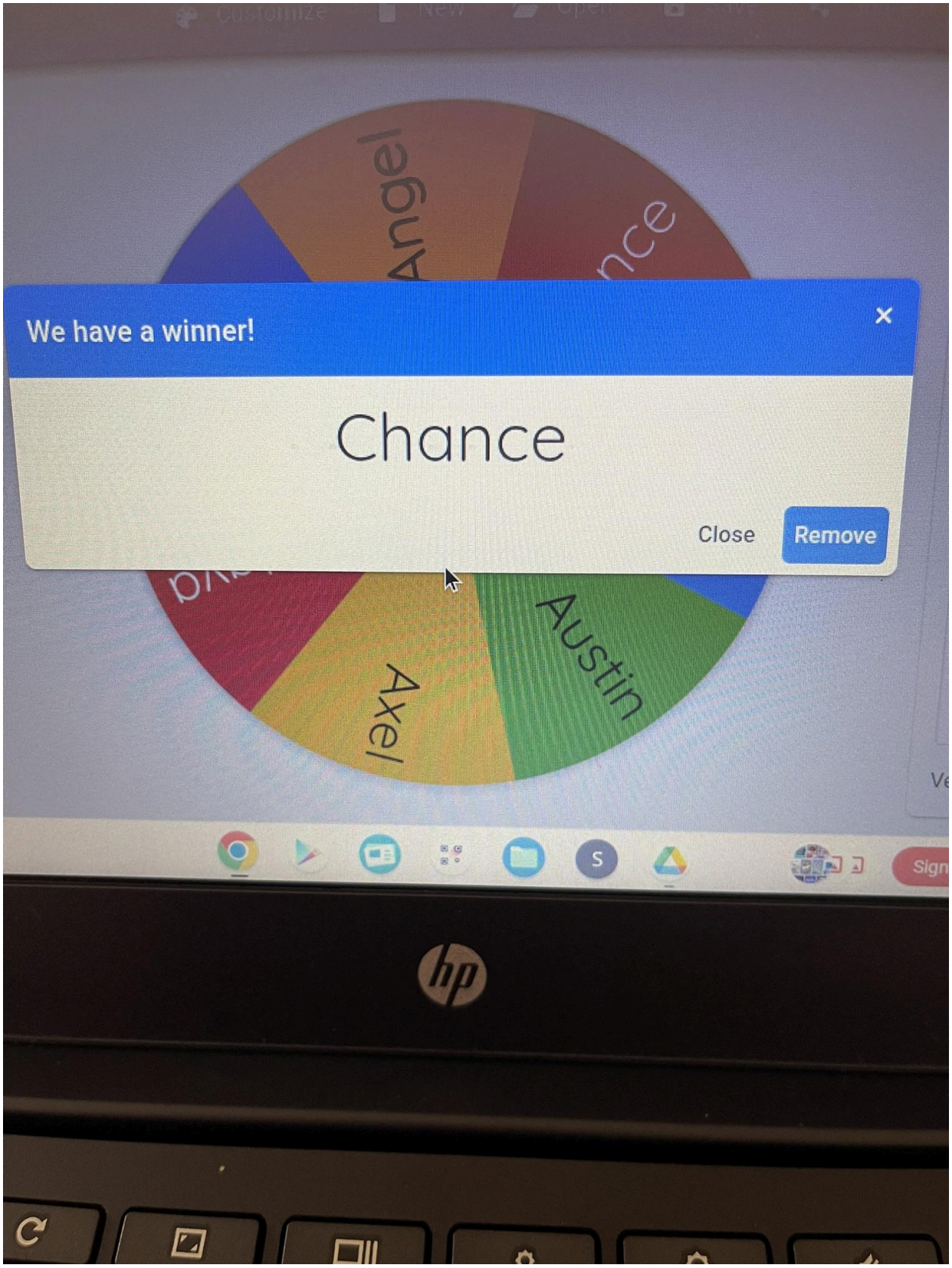

ON AGAIN, AWKWARD AGAIN
OOPS
ERIN ENTRADA KELLY & KWAME MBALIA

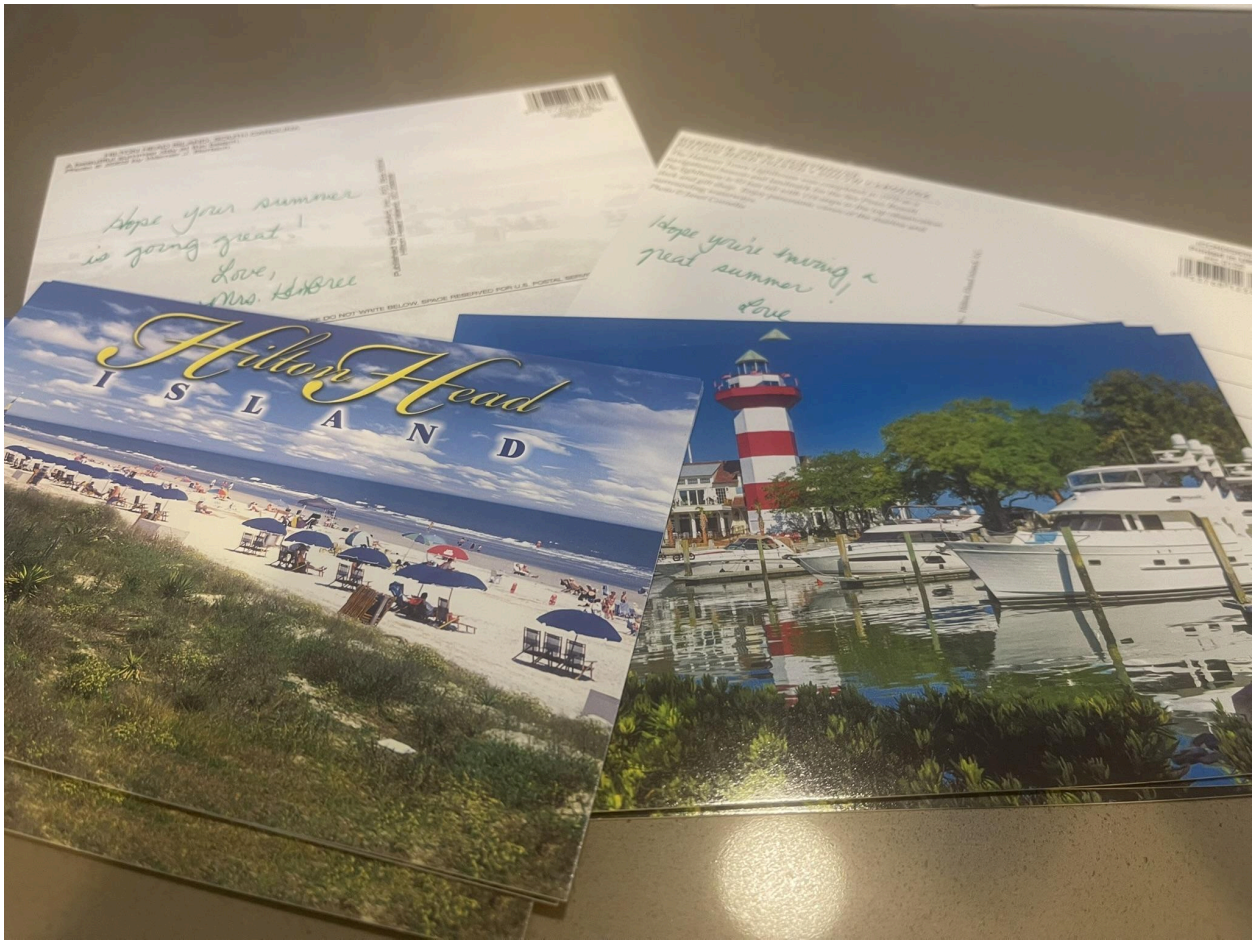

LEAH HEMBREE
a month ago
Which role do you play?
WHAT ROLE DO YOU PLAY IN THIS MAGICAL WAR?
epicreads.com
What Role Do You Play In this Magical War?
1
3
Angel Fletcher
27 days ago
I'm the hero of the light
Brutus/Sabine
27 days ago
Not really my cup of tea :(
LEAH HEMBREE
27 days ago
I'm the hero of the light too! :)
Add comment
LEAH HEMBREE
a month ago
What are you reading this week?
0
10
Angel Fletcher
27 days ago
Kiss the villain by Rina Kent
Anonymous
27 days ago
I Can Do It
Ms Nava "not much - user manuals mostly!"
Anonymous
27 days ago
The Testament by John Grisham
LEAH HEMBREE
a month ago
Would you rather...?
WOULD YOU RATHER: BOOK NERD EDITION
epicreads.com
Play a Game of 'Would You Rather: Book Nerd Edition' Now!
2
4
Brutus/Sabine
27 days ago
I love books in a series!
LEAH HEMBREE
27 days ago
Me too!
Brutus/Sabine
27 days ago
Does anyone else 'dog ear' their books? I'm the world's worst in this area!
Makenna
16 days ago
not really. I actually just memorize the page half the time
LEAH HEMBREE
a month ago
Alabama's Yellowhammer Top 10 for 2024-2025:
YELLOWHAMMER BOOK AWARD
YOUNG ADULT TOP 10
ASLA
ALABAMA SCHOOL LIBRARY WEEK
0
4
Brutus/Sabine
27 days ago
"This Book Won't Burn.
Brutus/Sabine
27 days ago
Has anyone read "this book won't
Sign out
Jul 30


LEAH HEMBREE
2 minutes from now
Summer "Staycay" Pretend you have no responsibilities for one whole day. Plan the perfect staycation for yourself! What are your favorite things that would be a part of the perfect vacation day at home?
0
0
Add comment
LEAH HEMBREE
less than a minute from now
THE PERFECT BOOK FOR YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR
epicreads.com
We Know the Perfect Book for Your Sense of Humor
0
0
Add comment
LEAH HEMBREE
less than a minute from now
School begins in just a few days! What are your wishes/goals for the new school year?
0
0
Add comment

TESS' PLACE

Rides Easy
GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS


Angel
nce
We have a winner!
Chance
Close
Remove
Austin
Axel


Hope your summer is going great!
Love,
Mrs. H&Bree
Hope you're having a great summer
Love
Hilton Head
ISLAND

4:07

ELHS Summer Bo...

A **Austin**

> **Makenna Runager** 2:56 PM
> any book recs?

What do you like to read

Leah Hembree
We miss him too!

MR **Makenna Runager**

> **SUNDRA SABINE** 2:56 PM
>
> Can you apply for a card via internet?

> mydpl.org
> **About DPL Cards**
> STEPHANIE CATES

Chance Retherford
Makena what u like to read

SS **SUNDRA SABINE**
Mrs. Hembree, have you selected the first book we will read when school begins?

Leah Hembree
Finding Dorothy by Elizabeth Letts was good!

Chance Retherford
Have a good afternoon

Send a message

4:05

ELHS Summer Bo...

Leah Hembree
Hey Axel! What have you been reading?

I just started Camino Island by John Grisham.

Austin
I just started the second book in the hunger games series

Leah Hembree
Makenna, I read the recommendation we got: We Ship It by Lauren Kay. It's good especially for someone dealing with losing someone.

👍 1

Axel Dec
I started a little late so I started reading the the call of the wild and this other book idk the name too

Ill check

Leah Hembree
That's great, Austin! I love that you got a book for your birthday too!!!

Makenna Runager

> **Leah Hembree** 2:34 PM
> Makenna, I read the recommenda
> we got: We Ship It by Lauren Kay. It ...

Send a message

Lembree
629 County Road 360
Trinity, Alabama 35673

GIANT Summer
Word Search
DIRECTIONS: Find and circle the vocabulary words in the grid. Look for them in all directions including backwards and diagonally.
Air Conditioner
August
Backpacking
Barbecue
Barefoot
Baseball
Beach
Berries
Boat
Camp
Canoe
Popsicle
Recreation
Relax
Rest
Road Trip
Sandals
Sailing
AVL
www.avl.lib.al.us
Alabama Virtual Library
Connecting you to a world of knowledge
SUM-SATIONAL SUMMER READING
WITH BRITANNICA
Britannica EDUCATION
YOU ARE AWESOME
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