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In my elementary school, my favorite tradition was birthday books. You donated a certain amount to help buy a new book for the library, and it was forever marked with your name and birthday. For the rest of that book's life, readers knew who brought it into the world. I thought it was the coolest thing. I also thought it would be my biggest mark on the literary world. In high school, I was a proud member of the book club, which mostly comprised of my friends, our English teacher, and the school librarian. I knew I found my community. In grad school, I had to come up with a topic for personal research. I didn't even have to think.

There was only one problem with this natural culmination in my reading career was the books themselves. I had none. I scoured library sales, messaged friends and families, and followed many "booktok" accounts to know who to splurge on. I created a beginner library. But, it was not enough. Many of the series were incomplete, books were outdated and worn, and the high-interest books I did have were constantly checked out. This latter is a great issue to have, but it meant students had to wait and perhaps would not know what to read in the meantime. Found the Book Love Grant and immediately was filled with hope. I could have a library where students could always have a high-interest book ready for them tailored to their interests.

In my second year of teaching, I was sitting on my couch on a Friday night relaxing and watching a mindless movie. Out of habit I checked my email and found one from a current 8th-grade student without a subject line. My phone immediately lit up with a picture of 3 of my students in front of a banned book display at Barnes and Noble. Middle schoolers....in a book store....on a Friday night.....willingly finding books to read. That same year I received an email during February break from a student in the middle of the book I had just finished myself. It is summer, and the first thing a student tells me when I see them is the book they just finished. Books have become my connection with my students. It is how I learn about their interests, their future hopes, and their personalities. It is how students have shown their classmates their support by educating themselves on mental health and LGBTQ rights. It is how we joke, how we make context to new material, and how we learn about the world together.

I am so incredibly grateful for Penny Kittle and the whole Book Love foundation for the ability to grow my classroom library and build a generation of compassionate readers and humans.