



Features

Dave Eggers talks education, robots, and illustrating a new book written by Detroit kids

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Dave Eggers

Best-selling author Dave Eggers has written 10 books, edited dozens of others, and founded a literary journal. Yet one of his proudest accomplishments has more to do with the writing of others than his own. Eggers is the founder of 826 National, a network of after-school tutoring centers tucked behind [whimsical retail storefronts](#) in places like San Francisco, Brooklyn, Los Angeles, Ann Arbor and Chicago. On November 4, Eggers will be in Detroit to give a talk entitled "[Buccaneers, Robots, Yetis and Other Agents of Social Change](#)" as a part of the Richard C. Van Dusen Urban Leadership Forum at Wayne State University. In advance of that talk, he was gracious enough to answer a few of our questions by email.

Model D: You're coming to Detroit in November to speak at Wayne State University's Van Dusen Lecture Series. Have you been to Detroit before? If so, what strikes you about the city?

Dave Eggers: I grew up north of Chicago, so I went to Michigan all the time growing up. I've been to vacations in Michigan, weddings and funerals in Michigan, and since 826michigan opened up, I've been back another dozen or so times. I spent a few days last May visiting a few Detroit schools where

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826michigan sends volunteers: The James and Grace Lee Boggs School and Amelia Earhart Elementary Middle in Southwest Detroit. Those were two of the most inspiring schools I've ever been to. Every time I'm in Detroit I meet people who know how to get things done and are doing them exceedingly well.

MD: It feels to us like Detroit is experiencing a sort of literary moment, perhaps best exemplified by the launch of [Write A House](#), a permanent residency giving away homes in Detroit to writers, and the growth of youth programs like 826michigan and the [Inside Out Literary Arts Project](#). What are your impressions of Detroit as a literary town and how do you see 826michigan fitting into its development?

DE: We're happy to be part of that mix, absolutely. A few years ago, another Michigan man, Richard Ford, edited a collection of stories for 826michigan, and that went a long way in helping the nonprofit thrive. Detroit has a rich literary history, and has a thousand stories to tell. Our role at 826michigan is to help the young writers in the city find their voice and find an audience.

MD: Your organization, 826 National, is a collection of whimsical retail stores -- a pirate supply store in San Francisco, a robot supply and repair store in Ann Arbor, a superhero supply company in Brooklyn, etc. -- fronting after-school tutoring centers where kids work one-on-one with volunteers. Can you explain how this unique model developed?

DE: Our first location, at 826 Valencia Street in San Francisco, was zoned for retail, so our landlord insisted we sell something from the storefront. We decided to sell supplies to the working pirate or buccaneer. We thought it was a funny way to fulfill the zoning obligation, but it ended up working in three or four unforeseen ways: it brought people in off the street who wouldn't otherwise stop into a nonprofit writing and tutoring center; it brought in donors and teachers and volunteers and of course kids; the kids saw it as a way to know that the place was unusual and would be sensitive to their sometimes unusual ways of learning; finally, weirdly, the selling of pirate gear actually pays the rent on the building.

So after San Francisco's storefront success, all the other 826 centers decided to open with a storefront -- always different and put together by the local team. In each case the store supports the work done inside, it brings in new people -- who otherwise might not have reason to engage -- and it destigmatizes the center. Instead of a Sterile Center for Literacy Assistance, it's the Liberty Street Robot Supply and Repair. For a kid that's an easier sell.



Pirate Supply Store at 826 Valencia



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MD: How was the San Francisco model replicated and modified? Did you always imagine a multi-city network, or did that happen more unexpectedly/organically?

DE: The second 826 location was in Brooklyn, and that was started by a local group of volunteers and teachers. Then L.A. happened the same way. It's always from the ground up -- a local group says there's need in their city, in their neighborhood, and they apply for membership in the network. So we now serve 33,000 students nationwide every year, but every center is highly individualized and built around the specific needs of the students in their community. Each city has its own leadership and is deeply connected to its local resources and opportunities and challenges. For instance, 826michigan does more than any other chapter does outside its home base in Ann Arbor. Public transportation and walkable neighborhoods are a given in some of the other 826 locations. But 826michigan actually owns a car -- donated to them by bookstore owners, no less -- and they fill the car with volunteers and take the car around Ypsilanti and Detroit to our partner schools. We're only able to do that because of the flexibility of our model.



Robot Supply Store in Ann Arbor

MD: Your publishing company McSweeney's originally shared an office with 826 National's first tutoring center and retail store at 826 Valencia. Did you do any personal/professional writing alongside kids at 826 Valencia, or do you prefer to work in seclusion?

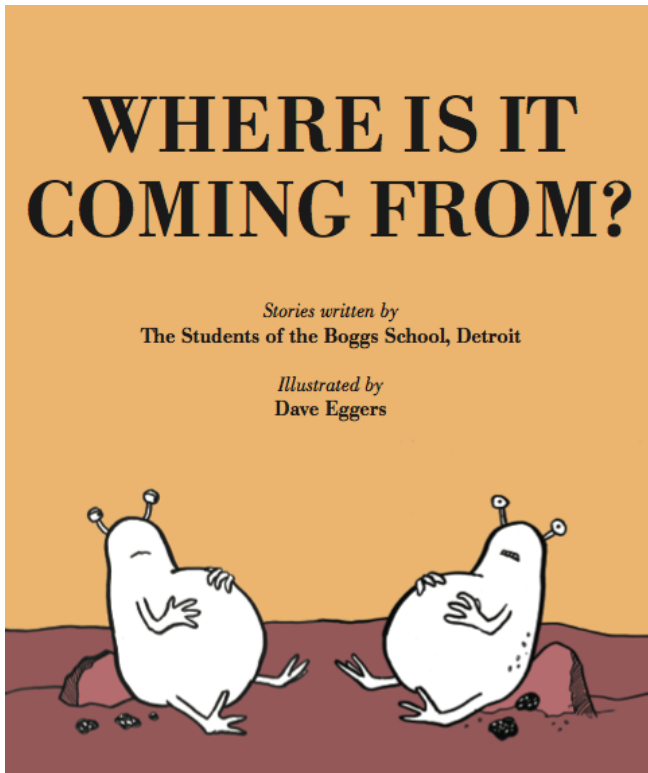
DE: For eleven years I edited a book, "The Best American Nonrequired Reading," with students from 826 Valencia. This was a group of 22 high school students who would meet every week (in the McSweeney's basement, across the street from 826 Valencia), and together we'd edit this anthology. This is the first year since 2002 I haven't done it, and I miss those students. But there have been too many co-written and co-edited projects to name. The latest is a book, written by students of Detroit's Boggs School, and illustrated, crudely, by me. It's called "Where Is It Coming From?" and I think it'll be out by the time I get to Detroit. The students' work is some of the most inspired and hilarious I've ever come across.

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MD: You stress the effectiveness of engaging kids with one-on-one tutoring. Was there a person who helped you one-on-one as you went through school and steered you on your path to writerhood?

DE: I had great teachers all the way through school, so I could name any one of them. Mrs. Wright, my first grade teacher, helped me make my first book -- and I still have it today. It's bound with yarn, and very much the work of a 6-year-old, but it meant the world to me.

MD: Design seems to play a huge role in every 826 retail location -- from the storefronts themselves, which feature murals by local artists, to the products they sell (many of which are completely novel). Can you explain the importance design plays in both the success of 826's retail and education efforts?

DE: I think great design is really important in a project like this. The storefronts have all benefited from the volunteer work of professional designers. In Michigan, Oliver Uberti has been hugely helpful, and Philip and Erin Stead are helping with a potential Detroit space. With everything from the student books we publish to the products in the store, I think great design elevates the experience overall -- and it treats the young people who come through the door with dignity. The design doesn't talk down to them, and trusts that their visual sense is, or can be, sophisticated, wry, and inspired. I do think a learning environment can help stimulate young minds by engaging them at every turn.



Tutoring at 826 Valencia

MD: In your 2008 TED Talk, you said, "A bunch of happy families in a neighborhood is a happy community. A bunch of happy communities tied together is a happy city and a happy world." Can you explain the role of the neighborhood in your and 826's work?

DE: 826 Valencia started out as a very basic neighborhood center. We were there to help with homework after school, plain and simple. We knew the kids in the neighborhood, most of whom were coming from Spanish-speaking homes, often needed extra help to stay at grade level and to feel prepared every day for school. So we provided that help, and most of the kids we saw were living within ten blocks. There have always been families that live next door, where our staff has their offices. Our center in Boston is part of an affordable-housing unit, so a big portion of the families we serve there live upstairs. So the staff at 826 has always been pretty deeply involved in the lives of the families, the students and the teachers. A neighborhood center has a unique opportunity to help tighten the fabric of a community. And if we can lighten the load of a stressed-out family a bit -- by making sure the kids are prepared for school, and can learn in a low-pressure, high-expectation setting full of caring and patient adults -- we really do think that can have a lasting and deeply felt effect on the character of a community.

MD: You're a baseball fan. I really enjoyed your [2011 piece for Grantland](#) celebrating Wrigley Field, a neighborhood ballpark. Old Tiger Stadium, which was demolished in 2009 (though the playing field is still intact), was very much a part of its neighborhood. Do you plan on running the bases at the old Tiger Stadium when you're in Detroit in November? If this thought hadn't occurred to you, I'd recommend you set aside some time to do so.

DE: It's funny -- I just ran the bases at AT&T Park with my kids a few weeks ago, at the last home game out here in San Francisco. Sorry, by the way, that the Giants and Tigers won't be reuniting in the World Series this time around; for a while it seemed inevitable. Guess we'll have to have that rematch after we win our third title in five seasons. But I do love the new stadium in Detroit. We had a fundraiser for 826michigan across the street last year, and we had a panoramic view of the park. It's a great-looking stadium.

We had a few more questions about 826's plans for Detroit, and Amanda Uhle, executive director of [826michigan](#) (whose Detroit team also happens to share office space with us at 4470 Second Ave. in Midtown), was kind enough to answer them.

Model D: It's great to see 826Michigan expanding in Detroit. Can you explain how 826 got involved in the city?

Amanda Uhle: Detroit has been part of 826michigan's plans since our beginning in 2005. We had to establish ourselves first, and our original core of support was in Washtenaw County. After we'd weathered the start-up phase and the economic challenges that nonprofits this size faced in Michigan in 2008 or so, we were ready to take the next steps. In 2007, we started sending tutors a few times a year to

University Prep Academy in Midtown, and we knew from that experience and from our years with Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor students, that we could meaningfully grow in the city once we had the capacity to really engage Detroiters as volunteers. In 2011 our board developed a strategic plan, and it was centered on expanding our reach--especially in terms of volunteer engagement--in the city of Detroit. In 2012, DTE Energy Foundation funded the first steps, and we've been growing a bit more month by month since then.

MD: All 826 locations are rooted in neighborhoods -- Wicker Park in Chicago, the Mission in San Francisco, Park Slope and Williamsburg in Brooklyn, etc. Currently, 826Michigan appears to have the widest net, covering three cities around metro Detroit (Ann Arbor, Detroit, and Ypsilanti). Do you and your partners at 826michigan plan to open a neighborhood-based storefront/tutoring center in Detroit?

AU: Absolutely. 826michigan is deeply connected in each of those three cities, to not just the schools, but the small businesses, the families, the libraries, and more. As we map out our plans for the Detroit Robot Factory, we're looking closely at a few neighborhoods but are really very open. We want to make sure that wherever we are specifically in the city, we're as accessible as possible to our students and to prospective volunteers, that the store and the programs will resonate with what's happening around the location and reflect Detroit and Detroiters. Ideally, we'll land in a situation like the one in Ann Arbor where we have we will have reasonable access to public transportation and be central enough to serve as a hub for a wide range of programs happening in various neighborhoods. 826michigan volunteers are currently visiting schools in Southwest Detroit, Downtown, Midtown, Osborn, Eastern Market, and the West Side. The location in Detroit needs to be our hub so that tutors can fan out across the city from there.

MD: How can Detroiters get involved with 826michigan?

AU: One of the things I love most about my work is knowing the talented and incredible people who give of their time and who give funds to make 826michigan programs possible. Our volunteers set aside time to visit schools and support students one-on-one in their classrooms, to teach drop-in writing sessions in the evenings at library branches, and in Ann Arbor, they even staff our robot store. As we grow in Detroit and work toward establishing our center in the city, of course we need [volunteers](#) and [contributions](#) more than ever. We'll eventually need people to staff the Detroit Robot Factory. I've always said that being involved with us as a donor or volunteer should be as joyful and fulfilling an experience for adults as our writing programs are for students. So we structure our community engagement and our fundraising to reflect those values. During Dave's upcoming visit, there's a perfect example. Our fall fundraising dinner will celebrate "Where Is It Coming From?" and will be a celebration of Detroit, its people, and its food. Sweater Weather is Wednesday, November 5. Chef Brad Greenhill of [Righteous Rojo and Kato](#) will prepare a special meal, [Pot and Box](#) will design the event at [Eight and Sand](#) (3901 Christopher, Hamtramck), a warehouse event space. The VIP pre-reception will feature a meet-and-greet with Dave Eggers and cocktails from [Two James Spirits](#). [Tickets](#) are \$100 or \$200 (VIP) and support 826michigan's work in Detroit schools, like the Boggs School.

Dave Eggers will give a talk entitled "[Buccaneers, Robots, Yetis and Other Agents of Social Change](#)" on Tuesday, November 4, 6:00 p.m. at Wayne State's Community Arts Auditorium, 450 Reuther Mall, Detroit ([map](#)). The lecture is a part of the Richard C. Van Dusen Urban Leadership Forum at Wayne State University.