Talking It Up

Booktalking can open up a new world to middle and high school students

The question of the value of booktalking to teens is like suggesting that it's a waste of time to offer story time to kids. A colleague recently challenged booktalking to middle and high school students, and it really irritated me. In her opinion, the time and effort that goes into booktalking just isn't worth it.

Let me assure you, it's all worth the effort. Booktalking introduces teens to literature and provides an opportunity to associate a librarian's friendly face with the public library. It also markets the library to students and teachers and gives young adult librarians a chance to interact with their public. I've seen our circulation statistics for 11- to 18-year-olds increase 600 percent following one of my many classroom visits. And it's a complete victory when I discover that at least one teen went to his school or public library in search of a book that was mentioned during one of my presentations.

Some think booktalking is a static activity in which teens sit and listen to a librarian talk about a bunch of novels. But maybe it's time to take a hard look at traditional booktalking. Booktalking is really about interacting with students to find out what interests them and what they enjoy reading. It includes more than just fiction; the most successful booktalks sometimes involve multimedia, as well as fiction and nonfiction titles. Some students don't realize that reading can also mean listening to downloadable digital books or CDs. Bring in the print and audio versions of M.T. Anderson's Feed (Candlewick, 2002; Listening Library, 2003), a satire set in a future world where TV and the Internet are hard-wired into people's brains, and play a particularly juicy part. Or pair 50 Cent's memoir, From Pieces to Weight (MTV, 2005), with one of his rap CDs.

Here are some ideas that take booktalking to a whole new level.

The shorter the better. My booktalks don't last longer than 90 seconds. Sometimes I'll start by asking students if they've read other books by the same author or lead with a question to get their attention.

Don't be afraid of change. When I first started booktalking eight years ago, I only brought in fiction. Now, at least half of my titles are nonfiction. I prefer booktalking nonfiction because titles such as Skateboarding Is Not a Crime: 50 Years of Street Culture (Firefly, 2004) by James Davis and Skin Phillips sell themselves. And if a booktalk is met with glazed eyes, ditch it for another one. As librarians who serve teens, we need to be the most adaptive people in our profession.

Encourage teens to booktalk to each other. Students tend to seek recommendations from friends, and school and public libraries are perfect partners for training a group of young adult booktalkers. This teaches public-speaking skills, while using teens to promote reading to their peers.

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Take advantage of technology. Podcasts, zines, videos, and blogs created by teens at their school or public libraries are powerful tools for recommending books. Young adult librarians should use blogs, online book groups, wikis, e-mail distribution lists, text messaging, and author interviews to connect teens with books. For some great ideas, check out the following blogs at www.readersclub.org/category.asp?cat=4 and teenscene.smfpl.livejournal.com. For an example of a wiki in action, see teenlibrarian.wikispaces.com.

Incorporate online book trailers. They work for movies, so why not for books? Booktalks are essentially trailers for the printed word. The trailer for the Alex Rider series, www.alexrideradventures.com/images/trailer.swf, is a perfect example.

Ask teens for their ideas. Go straight to the source and ask them to brainstorm ways in which they want to hear about books.

As YA librarians, we need to foster a love of reading by combining traditional booktalking techniques with updated methods tailored to our teen audience.

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