



Attracting, Addressing, and Amusing the Teen Reader

with Lisa Bowen

Books have a lot of competition in today's electronic driven world. Teens are drawn to video games, computers, MP3 players, and cell phones. These high-tech toys can stimulate adrenalin, provide direct access to information, and reward the user with almost instant gratification. Books, on the other hand, require time and patience, with the reward—the unfolding of a story or information—generally delayed. As a young adult librarian in a junior high school, it is my job and my passion to enlighten teens to the joyous world that can be provided within the pages of a good book. But is it a losing battle?

A survey of the habits and attitudes of urban young adults toward leisure reading, interpreted by [Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Christina Lutz \(2006\)](#), found that indeed, it is not. Seventy-three percent of the students surveyed articulated that they engage in reading for pleasure. Reasons for reading range from relaxation to fun to attachment to characters in the story. Key information for



educators and librarians provided in the results is who the students revealed motivates them to read. Adults appear to have the most influence with parents first, teachers second, and school librarians third. They are looking to us for guidance. With the help of some resources, marketing strategies, and knowledge of the genre, we can fulfill this role.

If You Build It, They Will Come . . . or Will They?

The school library conjures up visions of stacks of dusty volumes

and cranky personnel. Our library chooses to destroy that image by welcoming students into a safe and stimulating environment. A beautiful, orderly library that doesn't value its patrons is an albatross. The first step in encouraging teens to read is getting them into the library.

Our library is a bustle of activity in the mornings before school. It is a meeting place for scores of students preparing to start their day. The computers are being utilized, numerous games of chess are engaged, assignments are completed, and a general atmosphere of hospitality prevails. Now that teens choose to enter the facility, the librarian must employ both marketing and advertising skills to elicit interest in the literature at hand.

From bookstores we learn that attractive arrangements, with book covers prominently displayed, can draw students to titles that otherwise might go unnoticed, filed away neatly on library shelves. Librarian [Thomas Washington \(2006\)](#) uses an analogy to describe

his technique. “To free books, I booby-trap my library with shelf displays. It reminds me of fishing as a kid. Watching students troll the display shelf carries the hope of having that fish on the line and feeling the tug and pull in the wrist. Fishing announces an attempt. You string the rod and reel, bait the hook, and cast the line. If nothing comes of the effort, so be it. Having your bobber in the water is sometimes enough” (38).

Most often our books are displayed and centered on a theme. We might capitalize on pop culture by choosing books on pirates, spies, technology, or titles that were made into movies. Biographies of celebrities or sports icons might catch the attention of a teen who thinks there is nothing of interest for them in the library. We celebrate holidays, promote hobbies, and support our troops through books meant to inform and entertain. Our most successful book displays are the new arrivals. Being the first to check out the latest manga or Darren Shan book is a prize to the lucky observer.

Another draw in our library collection is the magazine section. We subscribe to 30 different periodicals covering a wide range of interests. [Hughes-Hassell and Lutz’s survey results \(2006\)](#) clearly demonstrated that magazines are the favored reading material of teens. If our goal is to encourage teenagers to read, we cannot discount their preferred materials of choice. They go on to say, “. . . teens are drawn to magazines for several reasons, including: (1) the number and quality of pictures; (2) the speed with which information can be gathered from magazines;

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(3) the availability of magazines; (4) the “coolness” factor; and (5) the reading level” (23).

Each year we re-evaluate our collection. It is easy to see which magazines are perused most often by their tattered and worn pages. We have found the best source for new acquisitions to be student recommendations, but another good place to start is browsing the titles in local bookstores. [Bartel \(2005\)](#) created a guide and annotated list of over 70 periodicals with teen appeal. She also classified titles by intended audience and by interest. This comprehensive resource cuts down on a lot of legwork and provides all the information necessary to begin subscriptions.

An often-talked about and frequently visited display in our library is a bulletin board titled, “Look Who’s Reading.” For many years I have written to celebrities, politicians, and sports figures, asking them for an autographed picture of themselves and the title

of a book that had meaning for them. My return rate on these letters has been about 30%. My letter explains who I am, who my audience is, and why I am asking for their participation. We have received autographed books from Henry Winkler with a touching letter about his own struggle with dyslexia, t-shirts, autographed television scripts and CDs, in addition to book titles. Sometimes I only get a picture, but we enjoy every contribution, and they are all displayed. I recently read of Glenna Nowell, a retired librarian in Maine, who has been sending out similar letters for eighteen years. She has received responses from hundreds of famous people. [Varsalona \(2006\)](#) describes how publisher Thomson Gale prints a pamphlet of responses each year that can be requested for free by contacting the publisher. The list in its entirety, with a database of celebrities, can be accessed at www.gpl.lib.me.us/wrw/htm.

Everybody Loves a Celebration!

Library celebrations can revolve around local or national themes. The American Library Association (ALA) and numerous booksellers, publishing, and journalist organizations invite us to join in one way by recognizing Banned Books Week every September. The ALA provides lists, shared tips and ideas, bookmarks, posters, and t-shirts, all intended to educate our patrons about the many instances where our freedom to read has been threatened. The information can be found on their website at www.ala.org/bbooks.

One idea is to make shocking displays featuring police tape wrapped around formerly censored books, which is quick to draw attention and curiosity. Students are amazed that favorite books like *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, and the Harry Potter series have been pulled from library shelves because of offensive language, being too scary, and having a positive presentation of magic and/or witchcraft.

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with hundreds of challenged titles. Also included is why and where they were challenged, First Amendment quotes and court cases, and both display ideas and activities. There is a suggestion in it by teacher Sarah Applegate, who states, “Bring a stack of books with you into classrooms and talk about them. Afterwards, throw them into the garbage can,” or “Give a book talk about banned books and then have an administrator come in and ‘get the teacher in trouble’ for talking about banned books” (157). A clever bulletin board idea sure to elicit giggles and gasps is titled:

“Ten Most Farfetched Reasons to Ban a Book”

1. “Encourages children to break dishes so they won’t have to dry them.” (*A Light in the Attic*, by Shel Silverstein)
2. “It caused a wave of rapes.” (*Arabian Nights, or Thousand and One Nights*, anonymous)
3. “If there is a possibility that something might be controversial, then why not eliminate it?” (*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, by Dee Brown)
4. “Tarzan was ‘living in sin’ with Jane.” (*Tarzan* by Edgar Rice Burroughs)
5. “It is a real ‘downer’.” (*Diary of Anne Frank*, by Anne Frank)
6. “The basket carried by Little Red Riding Hood contained a bottle of wine, which condones the use of alcohol.” (*Little Red Riding Hood*, by Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm K. Grimm)
7. “One bunny is white and the other is black, and this ‘brain-washes’ readers into accepting miscegenation.” (*The Rabbit’s Wedding*, by Garth Williams)

8. “It is a religious book and public funds should not be used to purchase religious books.” (*Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, by Walter A. Elwell, ed.)
9. “A female dog is called a bitch.” (*My Friend Flicka*, by Mary O’Hara)
10. “An unofficial version of the story of Noah’s Ark will confuse children.” (*Many Waters*, by Madeleine C. L’Engle) (156)

Telling a teen they can’t read something is sure to draw them to the “offending” material. A t-shirt or pin declaring “I Read Banned Books” stimulates questions and discussion. Banned Books Week is an excellent opportunity to celebrate books and our freedoms.

For almost a decade the American Library Association has sponsored Teen Read Week in October. This predetermined weeklong celebration is the perfect time to focus on how the library supports teen reading. Some of the more successful activities we have engaged in include “Read My Shirt,” where we asked students to wear their favorite shirt endorsing a philosophy, saying, product, patriotism, or a statement that reflected upon their personality. The shirts needed to follow the school’s dress code and be school appropriate. Students were asked to stop in the library and have their shirt’s picture taken. A collage of all the shirts drew crowds for weeks. When the ALA promoted “Get Connected @ Your Library,” we asked students to submit their favorite website’s address, its purpose, and a description of its content. All submissions were

compiled into a list and made available for interested students and staff.

In an effort to recognize the students' preferred reading, annually during Teen Read Week we ask students to write down their favorite books. The submissions are collected in English classes and I tally the results. The culmination of this activity is a list that is made into posters and bookmarks proclaiming: "Top 10 7th, 8th, and 9th Grade Books".

Every year on March 2, which is Dr. Seuss's birthday, the National Education Association sponsors Read Across America to celebrate reading. Initially, I was not certain that teens would relate to the focus on Dr. Seuss but found that it was a unifying catalyst for a variety of activities. Most everyone has fond memories of Dr. Seuss, and by reflecting on these beginning readers we have developed several successful celebrations. One activity involved challenging homerooms to decorate their classroom doors with a favorite student-generated Dr. Seuss book cover. Most classes participated, resulting in colorful hallways that both students and staff stopped to admire, encouraging reflections on titles that reminded them of the rhyming texts and whimsical characters of their youth. A committee of students and staff selected the winning door. This illustrious class was treated to a breakfast of green eggs and ham prepared by the school administrators. A variation of this activity occurred this past March when we approached all classrooms and asked that they create a Seuss-like book cover on poster board that mirrored their subject matter. The

We chose a promotional activity modeled after the ALA's READ posters featuring celebrities by asking staff members to sit for a similar photo. Armed with their favorite book, teachers, administrators, secretaries, and support staff came to the library to pose for their own poster.

creativity that emerged was thrilling! We had "Did I Ever Tell You How Special You Are?" featuring handicapped students' faces on flower stems, "Hop on Cop" which showed a math teacher jumping on our security officer for answering a math problem incorrectly, and "I Like to Travel Here and There in my Dotted Underwear" by a geography class. One year a student council member dressed in a Cat in the Hat costume and cajoled students to purchase green egg and ham burritos prepared by a local restaurant.

On alternate years we focus on the "America" part of Read Across America. One year, in coordination with the school's tenth anniversary, we employed our school photographer to morph the entire student population into a map of the United States with READ superimposed over the top. This 16x20 poster proclaiming "A Decade of Readers"

hangs in the library and continues to draw attention. Another year we hung up an American flag and asked students to stand in front of it holding their favorite book. We took hundreds of these colorful pictures and made our own collage displayed on a library wall. Staff got in the act too when one year we took dozens of pictures of them wearing a Cat in the Hat hat and holding a book up to their nose revealing only a small portion of their face. Students enjoyed guessing their identity in an effort to win Dr. Seuss inspired pencils. Many more ideas like these are available just for registering as a participant at www.nea.org/readacross.

It has been my experience that teenagers like pictures—especially if they are in them! I discovered a website, www.getcaughtreading.org, sponsored by the American Association of Publishers, which features pictures of celebrities reading. Their purpose is simply to spread the word about the pleasure of books and reading. Posters of the pictures can be ordered free of charge with a shipping fee of \$5.00 for every twelve ordered. I decided to carry the idea a little further and make it more personal by taking candid shots of students reading. Now when we display the celebrity pictures we add students to the display. With new pictures being taken and printed often, students enjoy stopping in the library to see who "got caught".

The American Library Association also sponsors National Library Week every April to promote library use and support. Their website, www.ala.org, offers annual themes, logos, press kits and ideas for

celebrating. We chose a promotional activity modeled after the ALA's READ posters featuring celebrities by asking staff members to sit for a similar photo. Armed with their favorite book, teachers, administrators, secretaries, and support staff came to the library to pose for their own poster. Digital photography makes it easy to download pictures into a template and add text. Students enjoy searching for their favorite teacher to see which book he or she chose.

Contests

Running contests inside the library keeps patrons coming in to see what's new. We advertise on the daily announcements and on posters in the hallways. Some of the successful contests we have run include:

- **Stump the Librarian**—Students write and submit questions that they think will be difficult, if not impossible, for the librarian to answer. I had fun researching the answers and students were surprised at how comprehensive our resources are. Along with reporting the answer, I revealed where I had found it. I made every effort to find the answer in print before heading to the Internet.
- **Name That Desk**—With the teacher's permission, we took pictures of the top of their desks and posted them on a bulletin board. Students used visual clues to make educated guesses. It is interesting to see how the teachers' personalities and subject matter matches their desk's appearance. Math teachers tend to be minimal and

neat, drama and art teachers more quirky and unique in appearance.

- **First Lines**—This activity can be thematic or random. For example, for *Read Across America*, we ask students to identify first lines from Dr. Seuss books. Or we might ask English teachers to enjoy figuring out the first lines from classic novels. Most often we select the first lines from popular books that hold clues to its identity. A wonderful resource to get started on this activity is www.people.cornell.edu/pages/jad22/index.html#Categories.
- **Manga Contest**—In response to numerous requests for graphic novels, especially Japanese manga, we have developed and built up a considerable collection over the past three years. It was clear that many, if not most, of the manga enthusiasts enjoyed drawing their favorite characters on paper, their notebooks, their arms, etc. Seeing this as an opportunity to involve students in the library, I conceived a Manga Drawing Contest. Students were asked to create their own manga character. It needed a name and a few facts about his or her personality. Entries began coming in almost immediately with some students entering numerous drawings. We hung up the entries as soon as they came in and assigned them a number. After a predetermined amount of time students were asked to vote for their favorite. Although there is a definite line separating manga enthusiasts and non-enthusiasts, a number of students from both groups enjoyed the artwork and participated in the vote. The winner received a poster and a graphic novel that the local comic book shop had donated. This annual contest takes little planning and provides its own decor.
- **Who Can Survive the Harry Potter Challenge?**—With a little innovation, the combination of literature and pop culture can result in an entertaining contest. Using a similar format to the Survivor television series, I laid out plans for a Harry Potter trivia game. Anyone interested in being considered for one of six spots in the game was invited to come early to school one morning and take a general Harry Potter quiz. The highest scorers were selected as the contestants. The contest was held over five weeks with two sessions a week. One session was always a Reward Contest. These were library scavenger hunts for Harry Potter items and word games. The winner of the reward contest shared his or her reward of cookies, donuts, or ice cream with their homeroom class. The second contest was based on knowledge of Harry Potter trivia using a bulletin board full of questions and buzzers to determine who could answer the quickest. Each week the player with the least points was eliminated. Both contests were filmed, edited and shown to the entire school on Fridays. The contestants were surprised to discover that they were becoming local celebrities, and all because of their love for literature!

- **Reading in Tandem**—Fremont Junior High librarian Tim Loge (Mesa, AZ) created a clever reading contest called, “Reading in Tandem.” The rules for entry required that students either read two books by the same author, two books on the same subject, or two students could read the same book. There were specific rules as to how they would report on their book(s). Tim was able to procure a tandem bike from a local discount store and hung it in the library to entice participants. Faculty enthusiastically jumped on board by riding the bike around school in pairs and posing for pictures. The winner claimed her tandem bike right before Spring Break.

School-wide Support

Reading advocate Jim Trelease believes that students need time allotted for independent reading. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) gives them that time on a daily basis at our school. Thirty minutes a day is set aside for free choice reading. [Trelease \(2001\)](#) feels that by reading daily, students develop a positive attitude toward reading, and the more they practice in a relaxed, informal forum, the better readers they will become. The implementation of SSR at our school has improved our library circulation tremendously as students need reading material to actively participate.

Modeled after the “One Book” concept adapted by many cities and states nationwide, we implemented “One Book Stapley” five years ago. Developed by a committee of

reading teachers and me, the program encourages unity and literacy. The title is announced each year during Teen Read Week, and multiple copies are available in the library. Some teachers choose to read it aloud to their students, but for the most part, it is by individual choice. Throughout the kick-off, we promote the book via daily announcements and the promise of discussion groups. Everyone who reads the book is rewarded with a lapel pin designed to be significant to the book. Although our main goal has been to choose a book with universal appeal, the disparity among the likes and dislikes of 12-15 year-olds is difficult to appease. The following are the first five books we selected:

1. ***Stargirl*** by Jerry Spinelli—An entertaining story about being true to yourself and the power of peer pressure. Although a fitting book for the age group, we found that boys, as a rule, do not prefer to read a book in which the main character is a girl. The pin given to its readers was a star.
2. ***Touching Spirit Bear*** by Ben Mikaelson—An angry young man has to face his fears, learn compassion, and control his emotions in this story of survival. This book appealed to many and was deemed a success. The pin was a paw with the word spirit in the center.
3. ***Among the Hidden*** by Margaret Peterson Haddix—When the world becomes overpopulated and over polluted, the government makes it law that families can have only two children. It is the story of Luke, a forbidden third child. This has been our

most popular title so far. We couldn’t keep this book or its many sequels on the shelf. We held a contest to design a pin for this book, and it simply said, “Be Free,” with eyes peeking out from the darkness.

4. ***Tangerine*** by Edward Bloor—Paul is legally blind, tormented by his brother, and ignored by his parents in this multi-themed story that is not about a handicapped boy but about his ability to see what his family refuses to address. A great book for discussion, but too long at 300-plus pages for this activity. The pin was a soccer ball.
5. ***Stormbreaker*** by Anthony Horowitz—Alex Rider didn’t choose to be a spy, but when his uncle dies in the midst of an investigation, fourteen-year-old Alex is thrust into a dangerous operation. This fast-paced story has fun gadgets, cliffhanger chapters, and high-speed chases. The movie is due to be released in October. Our pin will be a lightning bolt.

Meet the Author

Certainly the most exciting event at our library was a visit by ***Twilight*** author, Stephenie Meyer. After reading it due to a recommendation by a student, I was impressed with how easily the author related to the young adult audience. Stephenie is very much in touch with her inner adolescent! Not wanting the story to end, and hoping to find that there is a sequel in the works, I immediately Googled her and found her impressive website (www.stepheniemeyer.com). After

reading all about her and her projects, I emailed her to thank her for her intelligent, compelling story, and asked if she would consider visiting our school. Her response came within 24 hours, and she expressed a strong desire to meet her fans. We chose a date and I set out to prepare the 1,400 students at my school. Over a weeks' time, I booktalked *Twilight* to 45 English classes. My passion was contagious as we pre-sold over 250 copies of her book to anxious teens wanting to escape into Stephenie's world of teenage angst, romance, and thrilling fantasy.

Hundreds of students came to see the author, hear her talk about future projects, and have their books autographed. Stephenie thoroughly enjoyed meeting her adoring fans and the students talked about it for weeks. Not since the Harry Potter series have I seen such affection for a book. For months it was, and remains, "cool" to carry a 512 page book around school!

The Personal Connection

As shown in the example of *Twilight*, booktalks are the most direct and personal manner in which to convey the pleasure of

reading a good book. I am asked to do booktalks for reading and English classes at my school. The more passion I have for a book, the more likely it will be checked out. I have three hard and fast rules for book talks:

1. **Never** booktalk a book you haven't read. You can't answer questions about it or portray the true voice of the book.
2. Only booktalk books you enjoy. It's hard to fake it.
3. Make a personal connection. I begin a booktalk on *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers with: "Imagine walking home from school and stopping at a convenience store with your friends for a snack. Suddenly, your friend pulls out a gun and holds up the cashier, takes his money, and then shoots him. Now *you're* on trial for accessory to murder. This is Steven's situation in *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers."

These are just a few of the great ideas that work in promoting teen reading. There is great satisfaction in matching a teen to a book. We as teachers and librarians know the joy of reading a great story. Sharing this joy with young adults can be challenging, but ultimately very fulfilling, and the library can

play an important part.

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