

Teens, Literature, and the Web

Who is more “web savvy” than today’s teens? They have grown up using computers and the Internet. A recent study conducted by Yahoo, “Born to be Wired,” shows that 82% of teens have a computer and 78% use the web to help with schoolwork. It also shows teens spend more time on the computer than using any other media (including TV!). What better place to help teens find good things to read than the web? In this article, we will look at how the City of Mesa Library (Mesa, Arizona) is using their “Teens” web page to connect teens and books. From it, perhaps you will get some good ideas to start or expand *your* school or library web page for teens.

Our “Teens” web page is about four years old and is located at < mesalibrary.org > . Staff input, a dedicated Webmaster, and a volunteer teen web page advisory group have made this a site of which our library is proud. You will notice a focus on literature and reading themes throughout the “Teens” page.

The main page is divided up into sections, which consist of “Homework,” “Books and Poetry,”

“College and Career,” “Real Life,” “Get Involved,” “Teen ‘Zines,” “Teen Takes,” and “Kickin’ Back.” There is a wealth of information in each of these sections, but “Teen Takes” and “Books and Poetry” are the sections that most lend themselves to books, reading, and teen reviews.

Teen Takes

Teen Takes is a volunteer teen advisory group sponsored by the City of Mesa Library. The group reorganizes at the beginning of each school year to create a dynamic, fluid membership. Teen Takes helps with the look and content of our web page. They also write reviews for movies, restaurants, hangouts, music, and, of course, books! For example, a member of this year’s group has reviewed *Stargirl*, by Jerry Spinelli, about an unforgettable character who has the courage to “be herself.” There are also a couple of reviews of the popular adult title, *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown, which a teen reviewer describes as “one of the best reads of this year. It is so mysterious, so intelligent; each page keeps you yearning for

more.” Web pages offer teen advisory groups a great opportunity to post book reviews to encourage other teens to read.

Reading Lists

Under the main heading, “Books and Poetry,” information can be found in a number of subsections. The first one includes reading lists by grade level and various subjects. Some of the subject areas are “Classics,” “Historical Fiction,” “The Holocaust,” and “Fantasy.” Teens interested in the Holocaust might use this list to find a title that appeals to them. *Good Night Maman*, by Norma Fox Mazer, would be one great choice. In this poignant story, Karin and Marc, a Jewish brother and sister, are in hiding in France during World War II. They are forced to decide whether to escape to America without their ill mother. Many additional quality titles for teens on this subject are included.

If teen readers click on the “8th Grade Reading List,” they might read a description of the book *Belle Prater’s Boy*, by Ruth White, in which a young boy’s mother

disappears and he must live with his grandparents. He and his cousin, Gypsy, who lives next door, become great friends and help each other try to understand the secrets and mysteries which envelope them both. This wonderful, heart-warming book of friendship might otherwise be overlooked.

Another potentially missed topic for pleasure reading might be the classics. Through the web page, teens can peruse the annotated titles on "The Classics" list and find one that appeals to them. Books on this list include such great titles as *The Red Badge of Courage*, by Stephen Crane, *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, and *Rebecca*, by Daphne DuMaurier. Since high school students must read some of the classics for school anyway, this list can also help narrow down choices for assignments.

Teen Poetry Reading List

This reading list happens to be one of the most popular on our web page. Many teens enjoy poetry, so details are included on a wide variety of poetry books in our library specifically for them, such as *What Have You Lost?*, edited by Naomi Shihab Nye, a collection of poems that explore all kinds of loss, and *I Wouldn't Thank You for a Valentine: Poems for Young Feminists*, edited by Carol Ann Duffy, which explores the varied facets of the female experience. Poetry for the sports minded is included in the book, *The Basket Counts*, by Arnold Adoff, where artwork and poetic text describe the movement and feel of the game of basketball. Many teens have driving on their minds, and they can even explore

poetry through this subject by reading *Behind the Wheel: Poems about Driving*, by Janet S. Wong.

Open Shelf

The City of Mesa Library has a volunteer opportunity for teens called the Young Adult Advisory Council (YAAC). This group meets twice a month and talks about the books that they are reading. They also write book reviews, which are published in *Open Shelf*, a newsletter produced by members. *Open Shelf* is published once a month during the school year, and YAAC members produce a "mega" summer issue. Both current and back issues are available on the web page and are also distributed in Mesa's junior and senior high schools.

If a teen happens to click on *Open Shelf* for March 2004, he or she would be able to read an eloquent review of *The Goose Girl*, by Shannon Hale. This is a retelling of the fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, featuring Ani, a strong female character who is a crown princess. On the way to her marriage in another kingdom, she is overthrown by her lady-in-waiting and is forced to become a servant, tending geese, until she can find a way to get back what is rightfully hers. A newsletter like *Open Shelf* is a perfect way for teens to share book reviews like this one online. Teachers can even print them out and use them in their classrooms!

Award Winning Books

Award winning books are an obvious place to look for good reading. The Printz Award, chosen

by a Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) committee to recognize excellence in literature for young adult books, is a popular choice. Teens can read all about both the winners and honor books from our link, which connects them to the winning titles for each year.

The 2004 Printz winner, *The First Part Last*, by Angela Johnson, is an extraordinary novel about a sixteen-year-old boy who is the father of an infant named Feather. His struggle to take care of his daughter and his moments of sheer joy and love for her are depicted here with grace and brevity. Honor titles for this year include *A Northern Light*, by Jennifer Donnelly, an acclaimed historical novel set in 1906 and based on a true story. In this book a young girl, attempting to leave her life of poverty behind, takes a job at a fancy hotel in the mountains and becomes embroiled in a murder mystery. Other 2004 honor titles are *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things*, by Carolyn Mackler in which Virginia, a heavy girl in a family of thin people, tries to deal with her own self image, and *Fat Kid Rules the World*, by K.L. Going, about the friendship between a troubled loner and a legendary punk guitar player. All of these titles explore issues of family and finding your own place in the world, each in a unique and original way. They would appeal to different types of readers but are still all recognized as quality literature for teens, as are past winners. Many teens have discovered these titles through our web page link.

Teens' Top Ten, also sponsored by YALSA, is an exciting new way

for teens to have their voices heard. Teens do the nominating for this list during the year and then get to vote for their favorite books during Teen Read Week. The first official year for this participatory program was 2003, and teens were actually able to vote from our web page link. Some of the teens' favorites from last year were *Second Summer of the Sisterhood*, by Ann Brashares, *The First Part Last*, by Angela Johnson (2004 Printz winner), and *After* by Francine Prose. Another notable favorite, *True Confessions of A Heartless Girl*, by Martha Brooks, is a beautifully written book about the effect a young girl, with many problems of her own, has on a small community to which she has run away.

Among the 2004 nominees is *Goose Girl*, by Shannon Hale, mentioned earlier. Seeing the same title endorsed by teens in two separate sources makes it an intriguing choice. Another exciting nominee for 2004 is a new sensation in the fantasy genre, *Eragon*, by Christopher Paolini, who wrote the book when he was a teen. This first installment in the *Inheritance Trilogy* is about young Eragon, who finds himself on an adventure after discovering a blue stone that turns out to be a dragon's egg. The teen nominator says of the book's setting: "The world is reminiscent of Tolkien, but not as complex and more human, thereby appealing to a larger number of teens."

The Arizona Young Readers' Award for Teens is another option for young adults to have their say, and like Teens' Top Ten, it is featured on our web page. Many other states have similar programs, which could be linked on web

pages. Among the previous winners in the Teen category in Arizona are some very familiar titles: *Stargirl*, by Jerry Spinelli, *Holes*, by Louis Sachar, *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry, and *Ella Enchanted*, by Gail Carson Levine, just to name a few. The winning title for 2004 is *The Thief Lord*, by Cornelia Funke, a fantasy story set in the magical underworld of Venice. This was also chosen as a Teens' Top Ten winner.

Books and Reading Links

A potentially rich section of any web page for teens is the links to other pages, and ours is no exception. There are so many great links for subjects relating to books and reading here. For example, there are literary criticism and book analysis sites, graphic novel reviews, college-bound reading suggestions, booklists, book clubs, and much more.

Click on "Booklists for Young Adults," and you will find a site with a plethora of lists. There are lists on every subject imaginable. There is a list of books for boys, which named a couple of my favorites: *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen, a survival story about a boy who finds himself alone in the Canadian wilderness with only a small hatchet to help him, and *Someone Was Watching*, by David Patneaude, in which a teenage boy is the only person who does not believe that his small sister drowned and must take action himself to find and save her. These are both exciting books that have definite appeal for young teen boys, especially those not too thrilled with reading, and many other titles like them can be found through booklist links.

The "Outstanding Books for the College Bound" link provides a comprehensive listing of books on a variety of subjects which are selected for inclusion by a committee from YALSA. "Literature and Language Arts" is just one of the subject areas covered, and within this section is a rich variety of high quality titles. Examples are *In the Time of Butterflies*, by Julia Alvarez, which depicts the courageous story of four sisters who work to help liberate the Dominican Republic from the rule of a ruthless dictator, and *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson, in which a young girl stops speaking because of an awful secret she is keeping.

"Reading Rants" is a site which offers "out of the ordinary" annotated reading lists for teens. An interesting list on their site is called "Historical Fiction for Hipsters." This is a good list of books including the previously mentioned Printz honor book, *A Northern Light*, by Jennifer Donnelly. Two other very notable choices are *Fever 1793*, by Laurie Halse Anderson, about a teenage girl coping with the horrors of the yellow fever epidemic in 1793 Philadelphia, and *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* by Geraldine Brooks, which depicts a year in a young woman's life during the plague epidemic of 1666 England.

Poetry Websites

We have linked numerous poetry web sites on our Teens page. "Poetry 180," a poem-a-day website for American high schools, was created by Billy Collins, former poet laureate for the United States. This site was designed to help teens read

and listen to poetry. “*Anthology*” is an Arizona-based poetry magazine link where teens can find out about current contests and events.

“Magnetic Poetry” is so much fun! Check out this virtual version of the popular refrigerator game and all the other links in our Poetry websites section.

“Post-a-Poem” is a new and popular addition to our web page’s poetry section. Teens can submit their original poetry, following our posted guidelines, to be considered for publication on the web page. A poetry showcase like this could be set up on any school or library web page.

“Getting Published” Websites

Talented teens can find out how to get their book reviews, poetry, stories, and other writings published in this section of our web page. There are a number of great places through which to get published, including *Teen Ink*, a monthly print magazine, website, and book series all written by teens for teens. There is also a link here to our listing of “Writing Tools.” Sites like “The Grammar Lady,” “Researchpaper.com,” “Easybib,” “A + Research and Writing,” “Citation Styles Online,” and “Noodletools” can be found here to provide lots of help improving writing skills.

A Final Note

If you want to attract teens to books and reading in new and different ways, a school or library web page that includes plenty of resources may be just the way to go. Talk to your school or library Webmaster, and see if you can develop a site to fit the needs of your teens. Just remember three important guidelines: *Keep it current, keep it interesting, and keep it fun!*

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