

Booktalking:

That Was Then and This Is Now

Library Connection Editor's Note: *As the foremost "booktalking expert in the library world," Joni Bodart has often been asked: "How did booktalking start?" "Did you start it?" "How did you learn to book-talk?" I wondered, too, and Joni agreed to share the answers to these questions as well as offer ideas to help teachers and librarians incorporate booktalking in their schools and libraries. Here you will discover the history of booktalking—an important school/library connection—and ways that you can learn how to use high-interest booktalks with your students today. —Diane P. Tuccillo*

I remember when and where I saw my first booktalks (though "book talk" began as two words in its conceptual infancy, this now-respected practice has earned one-word status) and how my career developed from there, so that is where I will begin. It was the spring of 1969, and I was in my last semester of college, about to graduate in May. I'd taken YA literature the previous fall, and I had long list of titles I wanted to read. *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* was one

of them, as were *The Outsiders*, *The Contender*, and *The Pigman*. Those titles and others persuaded me that I wanted to be a young adult librarian, so my practicum the next semester was in the young adult department of the Dallas Public Library's central library. Another prospective librarian and I worked under the supervision of Judy Kuykendall. She took us to a high school that was having an "Enoch Pratt Free Library style" book fair, with all kinds of people doing presentations, including Judy's booktalks. She stood up in front of a group of students and did two booktalks in what I now know was the "Enoch Pratt style"—a memorized passage from a book, lasting about ten minutes.

I was enthralled! I knew instantly as I watched her mesmerized audience that I wanted to do that, too! She taught the two of us, her practicum students, how to do booktalks that semester, and I remember having to memorize them, practicing over and over.

In 1971, I was back in school, working on my MLS and taking a class in children's and young adult programming. In that course, I had

to tell a story and do booktalks, but these were a different kind of talk; we didn't memorize, we simply told something interesting about the book. I learned that these talks followed a pattern devised by Amelia Munson, who worked with teenagers in the New York Public Library in the 1920s, and which had become the "classic" style of booktalking. (In more recent years, some people have referred to it as "the Bodart method," which always makes me chuckle.) When I moved to Alameda County Library after graduation to become their first regional YA librarian, I set up a school visiting program within three months, and I've never looked back.

You might wonder, how did the technique of booktalking start in the first place? Miriam Braverman, in her 1979 title, *Youth, Society, and the Public Library*, traces the history of young adult services through three libraries—New York Public Library, Cleveland Public Library, and Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland. She explains that young adult services began in 1920, when Mabel Williams of the New York Public

Library began systematic work with high school students. School visits and booktalks were an integral part of the services she designed (p. 18), to make reading more interesting and exciting to teens. These classroom presentations had two parts. First, the librarians talked about the library and how to use it, and then they talked about several books that would be intriguing and interesting to teens. There was no set formula for how to structure the talk, and librarians were able to adapt their presentations for each individual group (p. 21). Each librarian was free to find the formula that worked best for her within a broad framework—to excite the teens about books and encourage them to read the ones presented. Being honest and open about the books inspired teens’ trust in the librarians’ recommendations and created a rapport, and presenting titles that teens would be interested in resulted in increased circulation and more requests for school visits from teachers and school administrators (pp. 22–23). While most booktalks were done in classrooms, the librarians also spoke to assemblies and to classes that came to the libraries.

It’s easy to see that from the very beginning, connections were being built among booktalks, school visits, teachers, and public and school librarians. We have worked together to encourage reading and a love of books. We have been determined to provide teens with the very best in excellent reading, and have promoted it with booktalks. We have taught students how to write and perform their own booktalks, rather than book reports, because they are more fun and can

pique more interest. Peer recommendations that reveal only a part of the book can be very powerful!

Truly, the first booktalks did have an impact on the teens who heard them. While no formal statistics were kept, other than the number of classes visited per year, anecdotal evidence does suggest that students wrote down the titles presented and came into the library to check them out (p. 75). This evidence ensured that the school visiting program continued.

When Amelia Munson began working at the New York Public Library in 1926, she did school visits and spoke to classes that came to the libraries, using booktalks to inspire teens to read for fun. In her 1950 title, *An Ample Field*, she details how to prepare a talk on an individual title and also how to prepare a whole booktalking presentation. She recommends that librarians include a few titles “that simply walk off . . . your shelves without even a friendly push from you” because it will show students “your friendly and understanding attitude” toward YA literature (p. 98). Focusing the presentation on the interests and needs of the group you are visiting and beginning with a title you can connect to current events can ensure that you are seen

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as approachable, aware of what is going on in the world, and in touch with what is of interest. To open the presentation, choose an incident, character, or conversation from your first book, and begin to talk about it “with gusto and dispatch, savoring your recollection of the book as you go along and presenting it so that its special appeal, the thing that sets it apart from all other books, is apparent”(p. 98).

Munson describes the booktalk as a cross between storytelling and a book review, but not exactly like either (p. 99), which sounds remarkably like the current definition of booktalks as they are used today. In fact, Munson’s description of them and how to create them seems to be the first mention of the modern and now classic method of booktalking that I now use. Her focus is on each group—their interests and what they might enjoy hearing; this informs the decision about which titles to present. She points out that just telling the group that the story is interesting and exciting isn’t enough. The story must come alive for the group, must captivate and intrigue them. The booktalker must avoid getting bogged down in too many details or confusing the audience with references to too many characters. She recommends ending on a high note and then moving on to the next book (p. 99). She also recommends including something for everyone in the group, so the teens stay interested in and attentive to the presentation. Maintaining eye contact with the audience is also an important part, and helps the audience see the booktalker as someone who is friendly, respectful, and genuinely interested in them.

Munson also includes suggestions for what *not* to do. She says that reading from the book should be avoided whenever possible, because it puts the book between the booktalker and the audience. Booktalkers should use their own words to convey the story. The timing of the presentation should be planned in advance, so the booktalker doesn't outstay her welcome. Staying within time parameters will heighten the chances of being asked for a return visit (pp. 100–101).

In 1932, another strong booktalking program took place at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland, where Margaret Alexander Edwards was hired as the first young adult librarian. In 1937, she went to New York and talked with Mabel Williams about the collections and services Williams had provided for teens, returning home “bursting with ideas” about booktalks and school visits (p. 181), and how they could be done most effectively and efficiently. With this focus, Edwards trained librarians to do booktalks in a much more formal and rigorous way than Williams, with a set format for the content and the presentation (p. 190).

Edwards included specific instructions for voice modulations, gestures and other body language, what you could and couldn't do, and even how to change scenes. One of her librarians recalled that Edwards also believed that the booktalker should “disappear” while on stage, while the author's words kept the audience's attention (p. 194). Booktalks were excerpts from the book, memorized word for word, and requiring an inordi-

So while I didn't start booktalking, I did standardize and popularize it through my books and workshops.

nate amount of practice to get both words and gestures right. Each excerpt was 8–10 minutes long.

Edwards felt that giving teens a chance to hear the author's own carefully chosen words would be more powerful than a talk written by a librarian, who wasn't an author. “These book talks are in polished form,” she said. “No one is floundering around trying to think of something to say” (pp. 195–196). “Few people speak well extemporaneously The sooner he memorizes the talk, the smoother his presentation will be” (p. 196). When done well, Edwards's style certainly worked—her librarians had the respect of both faculty and students, because they brought the idea of reading for pleasure into the schools they visited.¹ In describing the effect of booktalks and school visits, Edwards noted that “they humanize the librarian and the library. They get more people into the public library and into contact with books and librarians than any other thing that can be done” (pp. 197).

Edwards had five objectives for booktalks: sell the idea of reading for pleasure; introduce new ideas and new areas of reading; develop an appreciation of style and character; lift the level of reading by using only the best in literature; and

humanize the library and the librarian. She was very specific about how to accomplish these objectives, and identified several elements for her librarians to demonstrate when doing booktalks, some of which seem remarkably contemporary: Don't start speaking until your audience is ready to listen, and be sure everyone can hear you. Give the title and author before beginning to talk, bring the story to life, vary your tone of voice, change the pace, and use pauses for emphasis. Stand firmly without rocking, don't read from the book, or pretend to have read a book that you have not read. Watch your body language, and be aware of nervous gestures. Let your audience see the emotions of the book on your face—it helps you connect with them. Watch for boredom, so you can make a quick change to another book. Don't talk to groups over about 30 if possible. With larger groups you lose eye contact, and the attention of your audience (pp. 120–122).

The format of school visits was just as precisely planned as that of individual talks. Two or three librarians went to each classroom, and after an introduction, passed out copies of a numbered book list—about 250 titles divided into several subjects or categories. Students would look over the list, call out numbers for the titles they wanted to hear something about, and then listen to one of the librarians describe the book briefly. After a few of these, a librarian would do a formal booktalk and then go back to letting students choose which books were described. Librarians did 2–3 formal talks during each visit plus enough shorter book descriptions to fill up the time.²

After I started my first booktalking/school visiting program in 1974, I did booktalks and school visits 20–30 hours a week for the next five years—first at Alameda County Library and then at Stanislaus County Free Public Library. In addition, I also taught librarians and teachers how to do booktalks, first as part of YA librarian training for ACL, then for local and regional groups of librarians across California. In 1978, Jerry Stevens, a YA librarian in Fresno, California, decided that I should write a book about booktalking. I laughed at him, but he tricked me into describing my booktalking experiences and workshops to a representative from the publisher H. W. Wilson at a librarians' conference, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I did two series of titles for H. W. Wilson between 1980 and 1998—the *Booktalk!* series of five volumes and the *Booktalking the Award Winners* series of four titles. During 1992–1993, I did three books with Libraries Unlimited, two on booktalking and one on “thin books” for book reports. In the last ten years, I have done three books for Scarecrow Press, one on “thin books” and two on working with controversial titles for teens. All of my books include booktalk samples and brief booktalking “how-to” information.

So while I didn't *start* booktalking, I did standardize and popularize it through my books and workshops, making it an essential tool for the YA librarian. Today, it is common for someone interviewing for a YA librarian position to be asked about booktalking, and perhaps to demonstrate a talk during the interview. Booktalking is taught

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in library schools as part of the Young Adult curriculum, and could easily be a part of YA materials courses in colleges of education—and sometimes is.

As Virginia Walter and Elaine Meyers (2003) said, “Joni Bodart probably did more than any other single individual during this time [1970s–1980s] to make booktalking an essential skill in the young adult librarian's toolkit. Her handbooks made it look easy, and many librarians who had enjoyed telling stories to younger children found booktalking to teens to be just as rewarding. Public librarians looked to junior and senior high schools for captive audiences of teens to ply with books. Did it work? Did they read more and better? No research data is available, but many YA specialists firmly believe that booktalking is the most important element of young adult library services. Michael Printz, who was a high school librarian in Topeka, Kansas, and the person for whom the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Printz Award was named, once said, “The greatest thing for getting kids and books together is the booktalk” (p. 19).

I created the four types of booktalks—plot summary, character description, short story or anecdotal, and mood—and the four

unbreakable rules of booktalking—don't talk about a book you haven't read; don't tell the ending; don't talk about a book you don't like; and don't imitate someone else's style of booktalking, but rather do what you are most comfortable with. I also standardized the lengths of a flash (30 seconds to one minute), short (1–2 minute), and long (3–4 minute) booktalk. While all three lengths can be part of a booktalking presentation, the flash talk is also appropriate for doing individual reader's advisory work with teens.

I determined early on that it made sense to teach teachers how to do booktalks, because even if they don't do formal booktalks, information on how to make a book sound intriguing can be very helpful when trying to interest students in books. In order to support teachers' efforts to include booktalking as part of the curriculum, I created and used in my workshops two helpful lists: one identifies educational objectives (see Fig. 1) and the other suggests activities for a booktalking unit in middle and high schools (see Fig. 2).

I also taught middle and high school students to do booktalks instead of book reports, transforming a potentially boring assignment into something much more exciting, as well as giving them a chance to keep secrets (about the ending and other things) from their friends. Some school districts even had an orientation for kids starting middle school, including an introduction to the school library and booktalks given by eighth graders. Teens are very creative when you give them a chance to be, perhaps using a “dead body” on a gurney as a prop

1. To have students hear a booktalking presentation from an experienced booktalker so they can see firsthand how involving and enticing such a presentation can be.
2. To give students a fun reading experience, to know the joy of a captivating story, and to be able to share that pleasure with someone else.
3. To explain the differences between an oral book report and a booktalk.
4. To analyze their book, select the most appropriate section or character to emphasize in their booktalk, and explain why it was selected.
5. To understand the different points of view from which a booktalk can be written, select the most appropriate one for their talk, and explain why that perspective was used.
6. To demonstrate successful preparation for speaking before a group and follow up by giving the presentation.
7. To evaluate others' skills in booktalking and explain and support the evaluation.
8. To give others constructive oral and written criticism, including both ideas on how to improve their work and feedback about the parts of the booktalk that they liked.
9. To understand and accept constructive criticism about their work and apply that criticism appropriately.
10. To discover other books they want to read as a result of hearing their classmates' talks.

Figure 1. Educational objectives for a booktalking unit

1. Listening to a booktalking presentation that demonstrates good booktalking practices and procedures.
2. Hearing a lecture on the various methods of booktalking, including how to select a book, write a talk, practice the talk, perform the talk, and respond to feedback about the talk and the performance.
3. Examining several books to decide which ones to read prior to selecting one for a booktalk.
4. Evaluating the titles read to decide which one would be best suited to a booktalk.
5. Analyzing the book to decide which plot line, character, or scene to emphasize in the booktalk.
6. Writing a first sentence and outline of the booktalk.
7. Writing the booktalk.
8. Editing or rewriting the talk after input from the teacher.
9. Transferring the talk to note cards for the presentation, using either full text, outlining, or a combination.
10. Practicing the booktalk.
11. Performing the booktalk.
12. Receiving written and oral criticism on the performance.
13. Responding to criticism appropriately.
14. Giving written and oral criticism to others based on the performances.
15. Making a list of titles they would like to read, based on their classmates' performances.

Figure 2. Educational activities to prepare for a booktalking unit

for a murder mystery, creating a soundtrack for the booktalk, or even doing a digital booktalk—but more about that later!

A lot has changed in the 30 years since I published the first book on booktalking. Today you can find booktalks and how-to

information everywhere, written by practicing YA and children's librarians, university professors, and others. The types of booktalks and the rules of booktalking that I created have become part of the landscape of booktalking, and few people cite me as their source—flattering *and* irritating!

So where do we go from here? As our world becomes increasingly dependent on technology, librarians and teens have begun to seek out new and exciting forms of booktalks, frequently called "Booktalking 2.0." You no longer have to be face-to-face with a booktalker to enjoy a booktalk. Booktalks are now available online. Scholastic has hundreds of my talks at <http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/tradebooks/booktalks.htm>. The site includes print booktalks and also some booktalks that have been videotaped, "talking head" style. You are welcome to use all of them, in part or in whole.

Random House also has a long list of booktalks, written by school and public librarians (available at <http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers/librarians/booktalks.html>). They vary in quality, but are still a great resource. As far as I can tell, these talks are offered only in print form.

Bookwinks (<http://bookwink.com>) is another great source for excellent "talking head" videos. While it doesn't have as many talks as the other two sites mentioned, the ones on this site are beautifully written by Sonja Cole, a book editor and reviewer who, as a former middle school librarian and high school teacher, delivers her talks with energy and enthusiasm.

Nancy Keane's website, <http://>

nancykeane.com/booktalks, has over 5,000 talks that anyone can use. Some of them are excellent, but others need revision to make them more interesting and exciting. Nancy wrote some of these talks, but most were submitted by librarians and teachers. She also has dozens of booktalks available as podcasts, to which you can subscribe. Each of them is only a couple of minutes long, and Nancy's pleasant voice is easy to listen to. After listening to several, she definitely made me want to read the books.

You can also find "talking head" booktalks and podcasts of individual talks on YouTube, Google Video, TeacherTube, and bliptv, to mention only a few of the sites. Some are amazingly good, and others are horrifyingly or hilariously bad, so you will need to be selective. Search under booktalks, book talks, and booktalking for the largest number of hits.

The most exciting new thing in the world of booktalking is the book trailer, based on the movie-trailer format we are all familiar with. They come in a variety of formats: slides with captions and music in the background, slides with music and a voice-over, live action with actors speaking to each other, live action with music and a narrator, or a combination of styles. They are created by librarians, teachers, and, increasingly, teens themselves. You can find them on public and school library Web pages; on YouTube, Google Video, TeacherTube, bliptv; on individual blogs and websites; and lots of other places. As with the print and "talking head" booktalks, these trailers vary widely in quality and content, from excellent to painful

to watch, so again, selectivity is the key.

There are several companies that create "book trailers" for authors, publishers, and others interested in promoting specific titles. Circle of Seven Productions (<http://www.cosproductions.com/index.php>) claims to have trademarked the name "book trailer" in 2002, and creates sophisticated trailers for authors and publishers. There are a number of book trailers on their site to demonstrate the quality of their product, but they are hard to get to, and most feature adult titles. They have partnered with the University of Central Florida's Digital Booktalk Project (<http://digitalbooktalk.com>) to produce lively booktalks for K-12 students. Most of the 76 talks on the site are excellent, live action, and feature UCF students as actors.

Expanded Books publishes book trailers for all ages, including teens, which they include under "Filter by genre/children," located at <http://expandedbooks.com/video/genres?show=desc&genre=3&q=>. They have 83 children's and YA videos. Most are slideshows with narration or captions, and are quite well done. However, they also include some that show the author talking about a book, and others that use excerpts from reviews to sell the book. Book Screening (<http://bookscreening.com>) is similar to Expanded Books, but lists YA titles under "youth." It also has slideshows with captions or narration that are very effective, with authors talking about their books.

Random House sponsors an annual Book Video Competition with Kirkus Reviews and Barnes

and Noble bookstores. It challenges student filmmakers to create book trailers for one of three YA books published by Random House. The 2009 winners are available at <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/kirkusbva>.

Naomi Bates is a high school librarian in Texas who is an avid booktalker and has been creating book trailers for several years. Her trailers are slideshows with either written or oral narration. She gets both music and images from free websites to avoid infringing on copyright. Check out her book trailer on *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead* by Julie Anne Peters (<http://naomibates.blogspot.com>); then scroll down for her booktalk on the same title, both posted on April 16, 2010. A great example!

Since 2006, Pima County Public Library in Arizona has sponsored an annual competition for teens who want to make book trailers on their favorite books. You can see all the winners at <http://www.library.pima.gov/teenzone/trailers/index.php>.

Here are some sites that will help you create book trailers with your teens:

- "YA Books and More" — <http://naomibates.blogspot.com/2008/07/how-i-create-digital-booktrailers.html>
- School librarian Joy Millam's advice—<http://booktalksandmore.pbworks.com/Files-and-Documents>
- Romance novelist Brenda Coultter's tips—<http://brendacoultter.blogspot.com/2007/06/promoting-your-novel-how-to-make-book.html>
- Author Jill Elizabeth Nelson's ideas—<http://canblog.typepad>.

com/canbookmarketing/
2007/02/make_a_book_tra.html

- Avid reader Crystal Booth's advice at "Book Trailers"—<http://www.squidoo.com/booktrailers>

Finally, for those of you who want to include "Booktalking 2.0" in your school library or classroom, a book to try is *The Tech-Savvy Booktalker: A Guide for 21st Educators* by Nancy Keane and Terence Cavanaugh. It is a bonanza of ideas on how to combine booktalks and technology for the benefit of your students, perfect for school librarians and teachers. It is incredibly detailed, and includes lesson plans, standards, rubrics, assessments, and exquisitely precise instructions, complete with lots of screen shots and photographs.

As for what's going to happen in the future of booktalking—who knows? I'm convinced that books, reading, and libraries will continue

to exist and prosper, although they will probably look somewhat different. Printed books may become electronic books, and libraries may be virtual or have collections with formats we can't even guess at today. However, as long as there are books and teens, and teachers and/or librarians to work with them, there will be booktalks, and they will continue to convince teens to enjoy reading and to explore the world of imagination—through books.

Joni Richards Bodart, internationally known as the leading expert on booktalking, is an assistant professor at San Jose State University SLIS, where she is in charge of the Youth Librarianship curriculum. The Booktalk! series from H. W. Wilson is considered to be the standard in the field. Her most recent title is Radical Reads 2: Working with the Newest Edgy Novels for Teens (Scarecrow, 2009).

She is on the 2011 Printz Award committee, and was awarded the 2010 Scholastic Library Publishing Award for lifetime achievement and excellence in youth librarianship. You can contact her at jrbodart@slis.sjsu.edu.

Notes

¹ p. 196, Braverman

² p. 33, Edwards

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2011 Call for CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership

This award is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Please nominate an exceptional leader who has had an impact on the profession through one or more of the following: (1) work that has focused on exceptional teaching and/or leadership practices (e.g., building an effective department, grade level, or building team; developing curricula or processes for practicing English language arts educators; or mentoring); (2) contributions to the profession through involvement at both the local and national levels; (3) publications that have had a major impact.

Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter, the nominee's curriculum vitae, and no more than three additional letters of support from various colleagues. Send by **February 1, 2011**, to: Patrick Monahan, 4685 Lakeview Dr., Interlochen, MI 49643; pjmonahan1@gmail.com (Subject: CEL Exemplary Leader).
