Teenagers Promoting Books ? A Novel Idea

Hand over your new book to be promoted by teenagers? Surely not! Authors sometimes don't entirely trust their publisher's publicity department, so why trust a load of hormonally-challenged, neurologically-rearranged, sleep-deprived adolescents? Author Nicola Morgan explains.

Allowing teenagers to take over the promotion of your book is not for the faint-hearted author. And I can't prove that it sells books in substantial numbers. You may even find yourself, as I did, held up at gunpoint for the benefit of a horrible newspaper picture. But if you're like me, with your concern about book-sales paling into insignificance beside your passion for inspiring teenagers to read, and if, like me, you positively love working with the sleepy blighters and waking them up big-time, then a school promotion project could be for you.

I am about to embark on such a project for the third time. Each one has been different. The difference is largely out of my control, as it's down to the teenagers in each particular school. I've been lucky so far, with inspirational adolescents and teachers who've thrown themselves into the promotion project with the zeal of people desperate to cast off curricular strictures and do something different.

Getting behind a novel

My latest novel, The Highwayman's Footsteps, was launched by a small team of unsurpassable teenagers at St John's RC Community School in Bishop Auckland, County Durham. Why? Because when I did a school event there, their enthusiasm and refusal to slouch into adolescent torpor really infected me? so I invited them to help. Their response was wonderful. The sequel will be dedicated to them, each by name, because they deserve it.

The project involved all of Years 7 and 8 (11 to 13 year-olds), including the art, English and history departments. The pupils staged a fully costumed highway-robbery of teachers, which made several local papers. They did radio interviews, and the local station covered launch day. They made a PowerPoint display of the project, which hundreds of people saw. The art department organised poster competitions. In history the pupils researched highwaymen and 18th-century life. In English they worked on Alfred Noyes? poem ?The Highwayman? and ran a competition to write the second chapter of the book (all Year 7 and 8 pupils read the first chapter at proof stage). They wrote reviews and posted them widely. Finally, spectacularly, they organised a launch for 500 people, including local press. They did it all themselves, though it couldn?t have happened without their wonderful school librarian, Linzi Heads. Mind you, her main task was to restrain them?

Most astonishing was how teachers joined in, laying aside whatever they had been planning. This was true education: the pupils worked in the real world, they learned what it is to be trusted, what can be done and what can?t. They learned about teamwork, deadlines, commitment, interpersonal skills, persuasion and how smiling influences people.
But it isn’t easy. As the author, you need time, energy, inspiration, the gift of the gab. You also need some track record with schools. But if you’re up for it, if you want real contact with your readers, and if you can bear to hand your baby to teenagers, here’s what to do:

1. Find a school. If your book is set in a particular place, start there, as local connections work brilliantly for local media. Choice of school is critical. It must be energetic, forward-thinking, but most of all keen.


3. Approach the school librarian and explain your proposal: a project, which may be large or small, in which you will give a suitable group of pupils the task of promoting your next book. You are NOT telling them what to do? this is about pupils having the ideas and adults facilitating them. Offer to visit the school at least twice? once at the start, to talk about the book and generate enthusiasm, and once at the end, for the launch. Offer all you can to them, emphasising what they will get out of it and how you trust them.

4. While allowing them to have ideas, support them by thinking laterally yourself; use your own contacts.

5. Go with the flow! Be available but let them drive the project. You are not the boss.

The beauty of this approach is that there are no losers. The worst that can happen is that the pupils don’t do a brilliant job. But the right teenagers, with the right author, and the right guidance, can produce something special, fun, interesting and inspirational, generating interest in your book. Oh, I almost forgot? unlike a publicity department, the pupils have to love the book! Teenagers are lousy liars.

Nicola Morgan’s new historical novel The Highwayman’s Footsteps is published by Walker Books (978 1 4063 0311 7, £6.99 pbk).