



Book award in Birmingham

Reality-TV-style voting tactics and a high-energy website help **Birmingham Schools Library Service's Key Stage 3 Book Award** to excite young readers, promote quality fiction for 11 to 14-year-olds and raise the profile of libraries in 85 schools.

"We leave schools free to put their own stamp on it and that's what they do."

Sue Rogers, Manager, Birmingham Schools Library Service

"I liked the Big Brother/X-Factor-style voting"

Birmingham secondary school pupil

The effects

Birmingham Schools Library Service's Key Stage 3 Book Award has been running since 2004. It supplies resources and a model for schools, school libraries and teenage reading groups in community libraries to generate and customise their own award projects. Seventy-five per cent of the city's secondary schools and more than 5,700 young online voters are involved. By encouraging debate, critical reading, decision-making and participation in a vibrant and safe online community among 11 to 14-year-olds, it supports English, ICT and citizenship. Above all, it puts books and libraries at the centre of young people's social lives for a sustained period.

The experience

Sue Rogers, Manager, Birmingham Schools Library Service

Birmingham Schools Library Service's Key Stage 3 Book Award is run on the reality TV elimination model: students vote online for their shortlisted books over eight weeks in the spring term, with the two least popular books "splatted" (eliminated) each week until the winner is announced in mid-March.

Our awards website on Birmingham Grid for Learning www.bgfl.org/ks3dares is central to the process with constant updates of award news, reviews and student comments (last year 2,500 comments were posted). There is a lot of activity on the site at weekends during the voting period, especially when we're down to the final two books. At the time of writing we're in the middle of voting, and schools who are bidding to be 'award champions' and take part in our Champions Quiz in May have posted podcasts and presentations to lobby for the books they support.

It's up to each school how it runs its own award project, usually through the school librarian and/or literacy co-ordinator. Schools might target a particular year group or tutor group, or a specific group of students such as a reading group, pupil librarians, out-of-hours learning club or gifted and talented students. We supply a downloadable kit with templates and ideas

for events and activities on the website, but we leave schools free to put their own stamp on it and that's what they do. As soon as one award finishes in March the SLS starts thinking of a strong, exciting theme for the next one. This year it's Key Stage 3 Dares and we've had Laughs, Explores and Imagines. We pool our ideas for a longlist of 40 books, making sure there's something for each year group, some titles suitable for special needs and a mixture of recent and not so recent, significant and less well known books. Then we consult young people to arrive at a shortlist of 14. Two sets of shortlisted books are delivered to schools with promotional materials in October. Students read the books in the second half of the autumn term and online voting opens in mid-January. This year it looks like being a neck-and-neck finish between Looking for JJ by Anne Jennings and The Recruit by Robert Muchamore. The website is buzzing. The award has proved that young people do like to read and they like a time-limited project that they can opt into, while the schools like a model that they can build on.

The outcomes

Through promoting the award in schools, school librarians contribute to the 'enjoy and achieve' outcome of Every Child Matters, which raises their status. The award encourages students to read more widely, to use school and community libraries and to develop skills in debate and in critical appreciation of stories. Some 250 students are consulted in the process of compiling each year's shortlist. The award promotes books for this age group that explore challenging themes, including some that are not current bestsellers. Each year a very popular event with shortlisted authors is held as part of Birmingham Young Readers Festival. More than 100 young people attend the award presentation ceremony with the winning author and the Lord Mayor. In 2007/8 more than 85 schools (75 per cent of Birmingham secondaries) are taking part, including five special schools and five pupil referral units. The award is also open to teenage reading groups in community libraries and individual key stage 3 students who are library members. The awards website on BGfL has been so successful that BGfL has sold the model to another authority. In 2006/7 2,500 comments were posted on the website and 5,794 votes were cast.

"The Birmingham librarians are so enthusiastic and passionate about the books that the students can't help being pulled along with them. There is an intensely competitive element that the boys in particular like. You see them racing to get on the Internet and see what's happening."

Teacher, Queensbridge School, Birmingham

"The use of computers as a support-motivator adds interest"

Birmingham school librarian

"I saw the poster outside the library and thought I would read some of the books."

Student

"It was good there were no pop-ups or ads on the website."

Student

"The books were provided (this was very important) and then we got students involved." School librarian

"It put more focus on reading — gave a hook in."

School librarian

Resources and staffing

- The SLS bids for funding from Birmingham's Children, Young People and Families Directorate
- The bid for the 2008/9 award is £60,000 for staff time
- Approximately 185 sets of shortlisted titles, posters, bookmarks and prizes.
- Each school receives two sets of the 14 shortlisted books and a bibliographic information sheet to help locate any extra copies through school library catalogues, plus full colour A3 posters and bookmarks
- A member of SLS staff is seconded to the award (0.5 of a week for three months) to develop website content, moderate comments (which includes work at weekends) and oversee voting
- Planning and evaluation with young people and teachers requires a further 20 hours SLS staff time
- SLS advisers promote and evaluate the award with students, teachers and school and community librarians

Partners

- Birmingham Schools Library Service
- Secondary English strategy manager, Birmingham Advisory and Support Service
- Learning support managers with Birmingham Grid for Learning/ Service Birmingham
- Birmingham secondary schools/special schools/pupil referral units
- Centre for the Child, Birmingham and community libraries

Challenges

It is difficult to plan ahead because bids for funding need to be submitted each year.

The future

Goals for the future are to generate media coverage of the award and use the same model and website for an award at key stage 2.