

The Big Tease: Trailers are a terrific way to hook kids on books

By Karen Springen

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Illustration by Rafael Ricoy

Once upon a time, publishers promoted books with jacket blurbs, bookmarks, and author tours. Then six years ago, YouTube changed the rules of the game. Today publishers are spending as much as \$20,000 a pop to create book trailers—30- to 90-second teasers, à la movie trailers, designed to generate virtual and word-of-mouth buzz and, of course, to sell titles. “Trailers are definitely a staple in our marketing,” says Diane Naughton, HarperCollins’s vice president of marketing. “Video is something kids have almost come to expect.”

Indeed. “The medium itself is so important for young adults, considering that kids live on the Internet nowadays,” says Jack Paccione Jr., director of Escape Goat Pictures, which has made trailers for Ally Condie’s dystopian blockbusters, *Matched* (2010) and *Crossed* (2011, both Dutton). “Ever since the ‘Harry Potter’ and ‘Twilight’ series came out, these authors are all looking for a cinematic way to reach out to young people visually.”

The trick: “Pure enthusiasm does not make good video,” says best-selling kids’ book author and former National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature Jon Scieszka. “I’ve seen way too many book trailers that are poorly shot, designed, scripted, or conceived. Part of it is that book trailers seem to have become the new no-thought marketing item.”

So what makes a great trailer? “You want it to have a little bit of a narrative so the audience gets a taste of what the book is about but not everything you can know,” says Heidi Spencer, accounts manager for Dirty Robber, which makes 60-second trailers for books such as Cassandra Clare’s *Clockwork Prince* (S & S, 2011). “It’s not a summary. It’s a teaser.”

The best trailers typically last just a minute or so. “The longer the trailer, the more likely that someone is going to stop watching it,” says E. C. Myers, the author of *Fair Coin* (Prometheus, 2012), who did his first trailer for a pop-up book called [Popville](#) (Roaring Brook, 2010). Or as Rocco Staino, who heads up SLJ’s [Trailee Awards](#) (given to trailers that make kids want to read the book), says, “You need at least a minute to get a feel for the book, and if it’s longer, you’re kind of telling the whole story. Then there’s no reason to read the book.”

Humor is another secret weapon. In James Mihaley’s homemade video for his recently published middle-grade novel, *You Can’t Have My Planet but Take My Brother, Please*

(Feiwei & Friends, 2011)—about humans soon to be evicted from the Earth because they're "lousy tenants"—he and a friend "audition" [parking meters](#) for roles.

A little film, TV, and musical experience can also go a long way. Gretchen McNeil, a classically trained opera singer, put her skills to use with trailers for her books such as [Possess](#) (Balzer & Bray, 2011). "Gone are the days when a writer can just write a great book," says McNeil. "You have to show you're not only willing but able to promote it." Her well-received trailer for *Possess* built buzz. "It all added to my online presence, which I think especially with teen readers is so important because they're online all the time," she says.

Some videos are essentially author interviews, but these tend to work best after kids have read the book, says a Myers. Regardless of the type of trailer, it needs to end with basic information, such as the author's name, the book's title (and ideally its cover art), and the publication. "And make sure you have a call to action before the 90 seconds are out," says Sheila Clover English, CEO of Circle of Seven Productions, which coined the term "book trailer" in 2002—and created the first one—for Christine Feehan's paranormal *Dark Symphony* (Jove), which appeals to both teens and adults. "Go to this website, or meet me at this book signing. The call to action is not always, 'Come buy this book.'"

Trailers target many audiences. "We view them [as being] not only for kids but also for booksellers and people who are purchasing the books and also for teachers and librarians," says Michelle Fadlalla, Simon & Schuster's director of education and library marketing. "It's just another way, and a more modern way, for us to promote the videos and make them available for teachers and librarians."

Like other publishers, Simon & Schuster puts many of its videos on [teachertube.com](#). (Others also put some on [schooltube.com](#).) Teachers can show the videos and get kids excited about reading the books, or they can say, "Was this accurate? Did this capture what the book is about?" says Fadlalla.

In the future, Fadlalla envisions testimonials playing a larger role in trailers. "Word of mouth is so important," she says. "You might do a trailer, but you might want to include a librarian or a bookseller who says, 'This is my favorite book coming up this fall.'"

If authors make their own videos, publishers typically ask to see them—and then give pointers. "We want their videos to look as professional as possible," says Fadlalla.

Homegrown video makers face challenges. Lynne Kelly made the [funny video](#) for Susan Patron's *The Higher Power of Lucky* (S & S, 2006) for the "[90-Second Newbery Film Festival](#)," a video contest to encourage kids to read, and one for her own novel, *Chained* (Farrar, 2012). The middle-grade book is about a boy in India who takes a job as an elephant keeper to pay off his family's debt. The challenge: "having footage of an elephant," says Kelly. Without an animator, it's tricky. (She notes that A. S. King hired one for her *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* [Knopf, 2010] trailer.) Other authors, such as Anne Greenwood Brown, who wrote about homicidal mermaids in *Lies Beneath* (Delacorte, 2012), buy footage—in her case, from a professional Hollywood mermaid—but save money by getting other services donated.

Even the pros, such as Paccione of Escape Goat, are working with modest (by Hollywood standards) budgets. Recently Paccione made do with a Siberian husky instead of a wolf. It's only a problem if anyone decides to show the videos on a 30-foot screen when they're created for a three-inch one, he says.

Perhaps not surprisingly, more and more educators and students are getting into the act. In particular, a growing number of teachers now encourage kids—especially reluctant readers—to make their own book trailers. “I think book trailers are really cool,” says education technology consultant Linda Braun, past president of the Young Adult Library Services Association and professor of practice at Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science in Boston. “What I am most concerned about is, sometimes people see them as the panacea for book reports. It's just one more tool we have to connect with teenagers. It's not the be all and end all.” Still, book trailers can give libraries a powerful way to connect with kids and talk with them about books “in a way that's appealing to them,” says Braun.

No money? No problem.

Kids can create trailers without a publisher-size budget. “We've become so much more open to grassroots kinds of productions,” says Braun. “It's also empowering to young people to see, ‘I don't have to be Simon & Schuster.’ It's not that hard to do with iMovie.” Along the way, they learn about creating storyboards, picking out the best visuals, analyzing stories to pick the best parts, and pacing the final production. “It's not a bad book report,” says Braun. “It's not a plot summary.” Instead, it's what librarians learn in school. “What's the piece of the story that you're going to tell a little bit of and then leave people hanging?” says Braun. “If you're not comfortable writing, you can still tell that story.”

Aaron Zenz, who homeschools his six kids (ages one to 13), got them to make a [video](#) for Grace Lin's Newbery Honor Book, *When the Mountain Meets the Moon* (Little, Brown, 2009). His kids made a list of their favorite parts and came up with the shadow-puppet idea. “The kids' natural instinct is to tell you the whole story,” says Zenz. “The thing you want to avoid is boring.”

Trailee judge John (“Mr. Schu”) Schumacher, a school librarian at Brook Forest Elementary School in Oak Brook, IL, runs the [blog](#) “Watch. Connect. Read,” which focuses on exploring kid lit through book trailers. During his book talks, he shares a few trailers, like “a little commercial,” he says. “My students react really well to them.” In his library book nook (down a couple of stairs, and equipped with a smart board), he shows trailers created by authors, publishers, and kids. Students critique the videos—and then create their own. These days, his students are particularly fond of the novel *Wonder* (Knopf, 2012) by first-time author R. J. Palacio, and *The One and Only Ivan* (HarperCollins, 2012) by Katherine Applegate (see “Magnificent Seven” above). Making an exceptional trailer is easier said than done. “We don't want it just to be a summary,” he says. “I teach them how to story board. Then we write it together, and we find the images.” To create the final product, students use iMovie in the library's 22-computer iMac lab. “It's an engaging project,” he says.

Short video contests can get kids interested in good-for-you books, such as Newbery winners. “Newbery has the reputation of being books that are good for you but that you

don't actually like," says [The Order of Odd-Fish](#) (Delacorte, 2008) author James Kennedy, who started the "90-Second Newbery." (Contestants compress the entire plot of a book rather than create teasers, and since there's no official winner, everyone's a winner.) Entrants submitted videos for Newbery winners, such as *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* (which nabbed a top prize at SLJ's 2012 Trailee Awards), *The Higher Power of Lucky* (in which the trailer's main character keeps talking about scrotums), and Lois Lowry's classic, *The Giver* (Houghton, 1993), whose student-generated videos usually feature a kill-the-baby scene. Kennedy showed his favorites at one-night events at the Chicago Public Library (in front of more than 400 people in the basement auditorium), the New York Public Library (with cohost Scieszka), and the Multnomah County Library in Portland, OR, with YA author and cohost Laini Taylor.

Going viral

The goal is to make the kid-lit equivalent of Rebecca Black's music video "[Friday](#)," watched on YouTube by nearly 34 million people. "If you want your video to go viral, you need to put it up on YouTube or Vimeo," says Kennedy.

Still, not every production is destined to become the Big Trailer on Campus. Popularity varies widely, with a book like Christopher Paolini's [Inheritance](#) (Knopf, 2011) racking up nearly 200,000 views in three months. "Right now, when we do a book trailer, we have the plan behind it," says Lucille Rettino, director of marketing at Simon & Schuster's children's publishing group. "We're going to support this book trailer with Facebook advertising or with a campaign through the author's Facebook page, or we're going to unveil it on [entertainmentweekly.com](#). They take a lot of resources, both money and people. If nobody is looking at them, it doesn't really make sense."

Simon & Schuster has used trailers before full-length TV shows such as the "Vampire Diaries." A 30-second trailer for Cassandra Clare's [Clockwork Angel](#) (S & S, 2010) preceded it. After teens watched the trailer, they could "like" it on Facebook. The publisher also has run trailers in front of movies, including one for Becca Fitzpatrick's *Hush, Hush* (S & S, 2009), which played in theaters before the *New Moon* and *Eclipse* "Twilight" movies.

Sometimes it's worth springing for live actors—and sometimes it isn't. "With the live action, it can get sticky. You're not hiring Robert DeNiro," says Rettino. Besides, some kids like to imagine their own version of characters in their heads, and some film companies don't want readers to get confused by a different set of people from those who'll appear in movie versions.

Some authors, such as *Wicked Lovely* (HarperCollins, 2007) writer Melissa Marr, give fans excerpts of new books so they can create their own trailers. (Circle of Seven also makes professional ones for Marr, who cowrites the scripts and approves every image.) "It's a way of letting your readers know you've got a new book coming out," says Marr.

Still, no one can quantify whether trailers add up to books sold at bookstores or checked out of libraries or ordered online. "It's hard to translate the number of views to sales," says Myers. "It may not be the most efficient use of your time and money in the long run if it only translates into a few sales. If your purpose is to get people talking about your book, then you could accomplish that much more easily with something that's

shorter, simpler, cheaper, that conveys the message and the tone of your book better than something that just looks really cool. You should treat them about the same way as you'd treat any other marketing tool.” They're the new bookmark—though more expensive, and (usually) more compelling.

Magnificent Seven

Be sure to catch these entertaining trailers...

Chloe (Balzer & Bray, 2012) by Peter McCarty

<http://ow.ly/bC5bW>

Kids ages two and up can see a charmingly illustrated teaser about a middle-child bunny from a large family in this tale by the Caldecott Honor-winning author of *Henry in Love*.

Charlotte's Web, 60th anniversary edition (HarperCollins, 2012) by E. B. White

<http://ow.ly/bC55z>

The video begins with “In 1952 the world fell in love with a terrific, radiant, humble pig” and shows some pages from the famous book, with some audio excerpts.

Curveball (Scholastic, 2012) by Jordan Sonnenblick

<http://bcove.me/1x6cgiom>

In this conversational book trailer, the author sits in a library and chats with the viewer. His first sentence: “Warning: This book contains no vampires.” Instead, the main character is Peter, a high school freshman whose pitching career ends with a freakish injury. As the author tells viewers, “The hardest thing in life to do is to hit that curveball life throws at you.”

The Moon Over High Street (Scholastic, 2012) by Natalie Babbitt

<http://bcove.me/x98olvqw>

Rather than actors depicting scenes from this novel about a 12-year-old boy in the '60s, this trailer is a homespun chat with author Natalie Babbitt, the author of *Tuck Everlasting*, as she sits by a fireplace in her living room. She also reads excerpts from her marked-up manuscript.

The One and Only Ivan (HarperCollins, 2012) by Katherine Applegate

<http://ow.ly/bGJ57>

Ivan, an easygoing gorilla who lives behind glass walls at the Exit 8 Big Top Mall and

Video Arcade, rarely misses his life in the jungle. This trailer nudges potential readers of this book to find out what happens to Ivan when he meets Ruby, a baby elephant taken from her family.

Partials (Balzer & Bray, 2012) by Dan Wells

<http://ow.ly/bGJoT>

This intriguing YA trailer shows “archival” footage about “partials”—a half-century in the future—who are not quite 100 percent human.

The Raven Boys

(Scholastic, September 2012) by Maggie Stiefvater

<http://ow.ly/bGLCy>

The Printz Honor–winning and multitalented Stiefvater wrote the music and created the animation for this trailer about a girl named Blue, her clairvoyant mother, and the soon-to-be dead.

Author Information

Freelancer Karen Springen's last feature for SLJ was "[What's Right with This Picture?](#): Chicago's YOUmedia reinvents the public library" (March 2011).