

A link between page and screen

Website entices teens to read

Pilot project runs until Thanksgiving

ANDREA GORDON
FAMILY ISSUES REPORTER

Did you know that as a teenaged bookworm, singer and *Canadian Idol* judge Sass Jordan loved *The Chronicles Of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis?

Who's the greatest rapper of all time?

Is teen star Lindsay Lohan the right choice to star in the movie version of the book *Gossip Girl*?

Such topics are unlikely fodder for your traditional literary gathering. But at the Summer Sandbox, an online pilot project aimed at enticing teens to read more, books are considered a source of endless issues to weigh in on.

The interactive website, www.summersandbox.com, is the creation of Beth Jefferson of Toronto, who loves books and computers and believes linking the two could be the answer to boosting teen literacy.

"We want to use pop culture as a gateway to reading," says Jefferson, 42, who has a background in advertising and technology development. "What parent of teens doesn't say, 'I wish my teenager read more,' or 'I wish my teenager was off the screen more and off the TV more?'"

The pilot site, a work in progress over the summer and now fully up and running until Thanksgiving, was launched through Jefferson's non-profit literacy initiative, the Perfink Project, in partnership with Toronto Public Library.

Research shows that, with so many other things competing for the attention of teenagers — from

► Please see **Reading, E7**

Pop culture is hook for teen readers

► **Reading** From E1

videogames to MSN — reading for pleasure starts to decline at about age 12. Recent U.S. studies found an alarming number of capable students rarely read unless required to as part of schoolwork. Typically, the reason is lack of motivation rather than incompetence.

What makes Jefferson's approach innovative is that, instead of pitting the computer screen against the book, she's bringing them together. She wants to link reading to other things that motivate 13- to 19-year-olds, like computers, social connections and being up on the latest "buzz."

"Why not use technology to engage them on their own terms?" says Jefferson, who has three younger children.

"We looked at how do you make reading cool, and how you make it cool is connecting with other teens."

The strategy of using the things that distract teens from reading to, instead, engage them is similar to an approach taken decades ago in the television industry, when the creators of *Sesame Street* harnessed TV as a teaching tool rather than simply a diversion for young children.

Jefferson even describes her project as "*Sesame Street* for MSN-addicted teens."

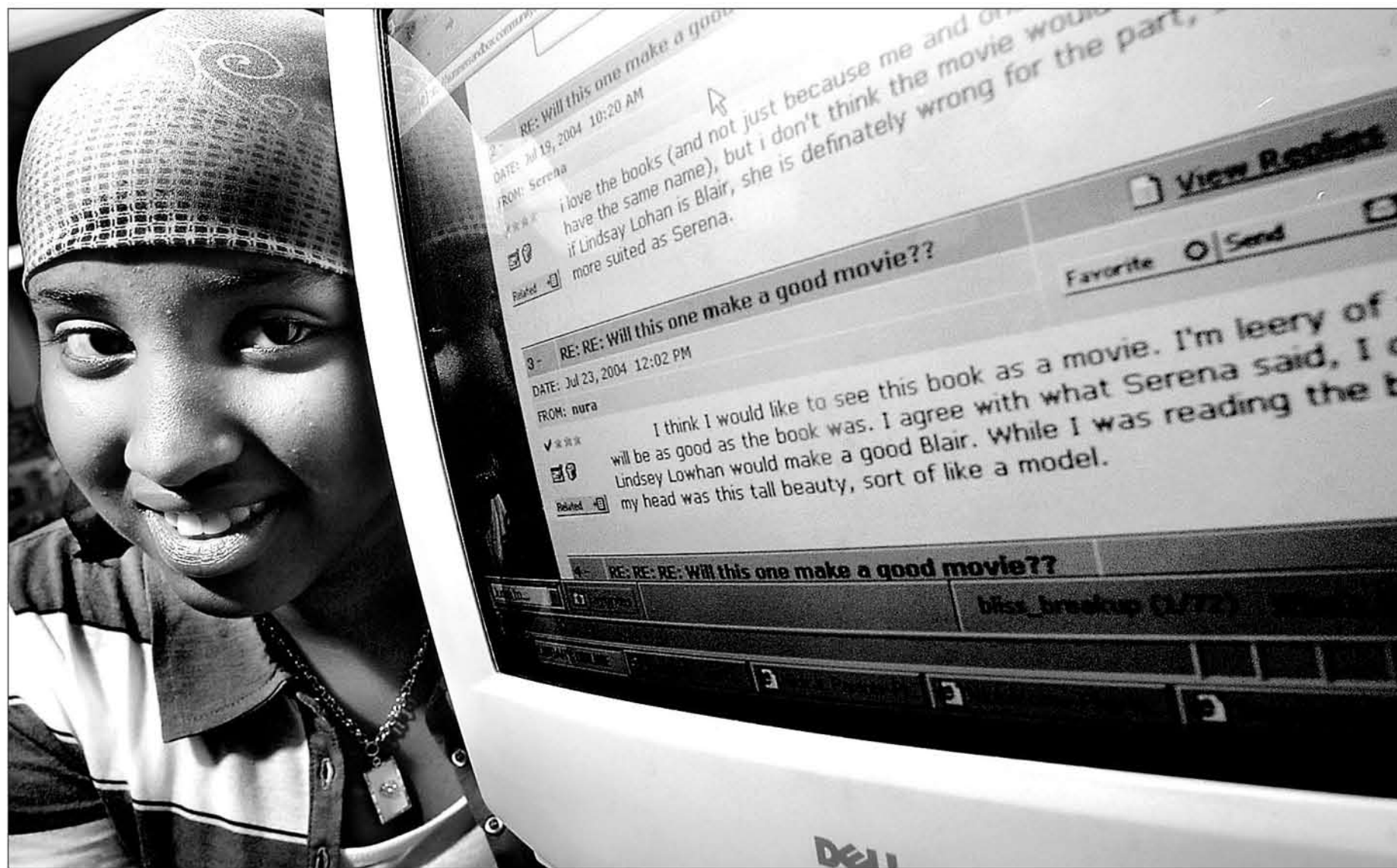
She pointedly avoids calling it a "book club" in hopes of attracting kids who aren't typical library-goers. While avid readers will be the backbone of the site, she's hoping it will also convince reluctant book readers to start moving from the screen to the page.

One of those avid readers is 14-year-old Nura Hersi of Toronto. For Nura, the site provides another forum for what she already loves to do with her friends face-to-face.

"Reading is always cool," she says. "Me and my friends are always saying, 'What book did you read, what part did you like?'"

Nura, a volunteer moderator on the Summer Sandbox, says the project gives all types of readers plenty of opportunity to spout opinions and find out more about authors and books they like. While lots of kids don't read much because they'd rather be on the computer, watching TV or shopping, she says, some of the ones she knows — especially the "computer junkies" — have logged on to check it out.

To David Booth, a professor at OISE/U of T who specializes in literacy, the concept makes sense for many reasons. Recognizing and valuing different types of reading, whether on the page or screen, is critical in boosting teen literacy, he says. It's also important to keep a range of reading options open to them.



RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR

"Reading is always cool," says Nura Hersi, 14, of Toronto. She's a volunteer moderator on the Summer Sandbox site, a literacy project created by Beth Jefferson.

"I'm anxious that kids read widely and deeply," says Booth, author of *Even Hockey Players Read*, which addresses challenges of getting boys to read. "I think we have to include the screen in everything we talk about (concerning literacy)."

Interaction is a key motivator, he adds, because teens like to be in on what their peers are doing. "A book is an unfriendly object to a lot of kids. This allows kids who

Instead of pitting the computer against the book, site brings them together

are enthused to share that enthusiasm with others."

Summer Sandbox goes to great lengths to make reading and books a friendly experience. Those who log on are invited "to sound off on people, places and their stories . . . and to connect with other readers."

There's a chance to enter a draw for prizes, the latest scoop on such tidbits as what books are being made into movies, and a list of 14 distinctive book "communities" to join or just visit.

Among them are Drop Da Beat, with a selection of poetry and books related to hip-hop and rap music; From Bliss to Breakup, featuring books about relationships; and Legends We Have Loved, which includes the standard school fare like *Catcher In The Rye*, *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *The Giver*. There's a Queer Lit site, one based on the Harry Potter series and one that features celebrity favourites. Grown Folks' Reading focuses on adult bestsellers like *Life Of Pi* and *The Lovely Bones* to "find out what's really behind those books your parents read before going to bed."

Volunteer moderators, in some cases helped by teen moderators like Nura, post questions and monitor discussions on topics from censorship to cross-cultural adoption. Members can link to book reviews and author backgrounds, take part in polls and contribute art and photos. They can also click to locate the nearest library or bookstore that has a particular book on its shelves.

Despite the many opportunities, getting kids to jump in remains the challenge. While hundreds of

members have joined the site, they have generally been passive observers rather than active participants. But Jefferson says, as a developmental project, it will take time to work out the best ways to close the gap between getting kids to read and then respond.

The Toronto Public Library has started promoting the site and, this week, librarians at Toronto District School Board high schools will also spread the word.

According to Lisa Heggum, youth services librarian with the Toronto Public Library and a moderator of several Summer Sandbox communities, it's typical of the teen attitude. They never want to be the first to arrive at an event, she says, and they don't want to be the first to contribute to a website.

"But the potential here is amazing," adds Heggum, 34, who has watched teens turn increasingly to computers for information and recreation during her 10 years working in public libraries.

The project is "a tremendous use of technology," says Cathi Gibson-Gates, former vice-principal at Rose Avenue Public School in downtown Toronto. Jefferson pioneered an online book club for

Grades 5 and 6 students there during the last school year.

When it comes to books, says Gibson-Gates, kids love to share their thoughts just as adults do. It's the same phenomenon that made Oprah's book list such a hit and has fuelled a boom in book clubs around the country. Using computers and the Internet creates a comfortable and appealing environment to do that.

Interaction is key, because teens like to be in on what their peers are doing

"Every teacher or librarian I've talked to seems to feel they're in competition with technology," says Gibson-Gates, who spent 20 years as a public school librarian and teacher. "But the technology is a hook for the kids."

She'd love to one day see similar sites as part of the homework routine for adolescents and teens.

Though the Summer Sandbox site will wind down in October, Jefferson wants to revive it as a national project next summer. She sees the next stage as coming up with "e-books" that are truly

interactive. The Perfink Project is in the final stages of negotiating a partnership with the Ontario Library Association to develop new technologies to be used next spring in conjunction with its annual Red Maple Award reading program involving 75,000 Grades 7 to 9 students.

Rather than just the ability to read a book on a PDF file, she envisions features that would allow

teens to read and, through a separate window, simultaneously view how far along their peers are in the book and join in real-time chatting about it. She wants to develop tools that would let them annotate in margins as they read, write comments and highlight their favourite quotes for other readers.

Regardless of the form it takes, Jefferson is convinced that making books and technology work together is an approach educators and parents can't afford to overlook.

"This will be the medium, and if we don't succeed in making the Internet help in achieving the goals of literacy, we are really in trouble."