

Watch your favourite read

BookShorts promote book and filmmaker

BY ALISON BROVERMAN

The last thing you might expect to see at the Canadian book industry's biggest trade show is people watching TV. And yet that is exactly what you'll find this weekend in Toronto at BookExpo Canada.

They'll be watching BookShorts, a series of short films based on or inspired by novels, books of poetry, works of non-fiction and even kids' books.

The concept was dreamed up by erstwhile publicist Judith Keenan as a way to drum up interest in books among the less literary set, as well as to offer exposure to up-and-coming filmmakers.

"The idea was for a short entertainment inspired by a book," Keenan said recently on the set of the latest BookShort, Douglas Coupland's *JPod*. "It serves, if we do it right, to promote both the book and the filmmaker."

The first official BookShort, based on Susan Swan's novel *What Casa-nova Told Me*, was made in 2004 and launched at both the Worldwide Short Film

Festival and BookExpo Canada that year. Swan, who was a performance artist in the '70s, was keen to offer up her work for the experiment. "If you've worked in another art form, it's not so odd to combine things like that," she says. "And I think it's good for young audiences, who are used to screens. We used it at my book launch and it was really the younger people who responded to it."

Though Swan was the first guinea pig, Keenan had toyed with the crossover from page to small screen several years before, when she was working

'I SEE IT AS A WAY TO CONNECT QUICKLY WITH A READER'

with cult favourite Douglas Cooper to promote his novel *Amnesia*.

"He'd had theatrical training and was very open and had lots of cool ideas, and we ended up making a music video," Keenan says. "He ended up on a 12-city tour, he sold out his first print run and he was covered all sorts of places off the book pages, because he was heralded as this pop-culture maven."

Cooper's success inspired Keenan to further develop the idea, and today the BookShorts "library" totals 11 titles, seven of which made their debut last month at BookExpo America and will have their Canadian premiere this weekend in the BookShorts Lounge at BookExpo Canada.

So how do you pare a 500-plus-page novel down to a four-minute film?

"It takes a lot of time and sticky-notes," says Lisa Mann, who, along with co-director Curtis Wehrfritz, is responsible for whittling down Coupland's latest 528-pager.

It's certainly a challenge or, as Wehrfritz prefers to view it, an opportunity. "We've built a piece that reflects the spirit and sense of sardonic humour that was carried in the book," he says.

The pair have already completed a BookShort based on *i-ROBOT Poetry* by Jason Christie. They used stylized animation to capture the essence of Christie's quirky poems, and the end result is charmingly reminiscent of a classic National Film Board animated short.

Excited at the prospect of reaching new readers, most major Canadian publishers have signed on to the project.



SIMON WOOKEY Michelle Morgan and Scoot McNairy star in a BookShort film based on Douglas Coupland's *JPod*.

Brian Hades, of EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing, publisher of *i-ROBOT Poetry*, says BookShorts are an excellent tool to help titles stand out: "There are about 1,000 books that come out every year in science fiction alone. So how do you decide what to buy on your limited book budget?"

"I see it as a way to connect quickly with a reader in the

world environment, which, as it stands today, is full of very fast imagery and technology." Plans loom large for getting the word out. In addition to BookExpo, Keenan intends to experiment with kiosks in bookstores, screenings at readings and signings, extensive television and Internet distribution and even showing the films on cellphones and mobile devices.

"I just think they're the niftiest things," says Kim McArthur of McArthur & Company, whose titles *Ice: Beauty, Danger, History* and *This Hour Has Seven Decades* were the second and third BookShorts, produced last year. "They're short, attention-grabbing, tiny little pieces of art."

Weekend Post
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