
Off the Shelves

“What Is This Thing Called a Vook?”: Using *Skeleton Creek* to Transform Students’ Reading Experiences In (and Out of) School

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Young Adult Literature Goes Digital with *Skeleton Creek*

There’s a new kind of young adult novel in town: the digi-novel or “vook” (video-book), which combines traditional print-bound text with interactive online components. Patrick Carman’s *Skeleton Creek* series is one such example of a “vook,” and it proved to be popular with the eighth-grade students we read it with this year. We have written elsewhere (see Groenke and Maples) about how books such as *Skeleton Creek* epitomize the participatory and interactive nature of today’s media convergence culture—a culture today’s teens are helping to create and sustain. Here, we want to share what students have to say about reading a “vook.”

Skeleton Creek (the first book in a two-volume series) centers on 15-year-old Ryan’s and his best

friend Sarah’s exploits to solve a mystery surrounding their hometown of Skeleton Creek. How did the town get its name? Does it have anything to do with the old gold dredge in the woods? Or the miner, Old Joe Bush, who was killed in the dredge? Is the name “Skeleton Creek” a warning to outsiders—a warning to stay away?

The problem is, Ryan and Sarah can’t stay away from the dredge, and on one late-night visit, Ryan is badly injured. While hospitalized, Ryan starts a journal where he reveals that he fears for his life, thinks his father may be in on the mystery surrounding Skeleton Creek, and wants his journal to serve as a record of events in case something happens to him.

Because Ryan’s parents believe Sarah is the reason Ryan was hurt, they have forbidden Ryan and Sarah to see each other. In the age of the Internet, however, Ryan and Sarah can stay connected via the computer. Sarah is the film geek, described by the author as “Nancy Drew with a camera” (Jasics). She continues to look for clues and sends secret Web videos to Ryan when she discovers new information or makes connections. Readers access Sarah’s videos intermittently throughout the novel by going to the website (<http://www.sarahfincher.com>) and using the

passwords provided by Ryan in his journal. Once Ryan has watched the videos, he reflects on them in his journal and makes connections between what Sarah and he continue to find out about the dredge and the mystery surrounding their hometown.

Reading *Skeleton Creek*

To “read” *Skeleton Creek*, readers must go back and forth between the book and the website. Carman has said in interviews that the idea behind the structure of the book/media hybrid was to create a “reading-plus experience” to actually compel readers (especially resistant, adolescent male readers) to read:

[*Skeleton Creek*] is probably the best attempt I can think of to give a young person a reason to want to read. They only have to read 20 or 30 pages and then they get to watch part of the story—and so that’s the idea, they go back and forth, and that’s why I structured it this way because I want, particularly that age group—5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th graders—to just be compelled to have to keep going. If you read the first 30 pages and watch the first video, it’s almost impossible not to keep going. You understand the structure, you’re right into the story, something scary is happening. (Jasics)

It is impossible not to keep going, as we found out with the eighth-grade students we read *Skeleton Creek* with this year.

What Students Have to Say about *Skeleton Creek*

Our students loved the *Blair Witch*-like creepiness of Sarah’s videos. (One day, when we heard students screaming in the classroom next door, another student said, “Oh, they must be reading *Skeleton Creek*.”) Our students said the videos motivated them to read because, as one student noted, “You have to read to understand the movie parts,” and “it keeps you wanting to continue turning the page to find out more.” Many students also liked the visual element the videos provided because they liked “[seeing] what’s happening” and “what the characters are like,” and felt the videos “[enhanced] the terror.” One student commented that the videos “add another level of depth,” while another student explained that he sees the hybrid book as a natural progression from traditional books with pictures: “Back then, we had pictures with words in books. Now we have videos with words.” Another student



said he liked the “visual perspective” because “it’s almost like a moving graphic novel,” and another student said, “It’s a great way to get information across the way we like to get it.” Yet another student commented that the “videos explain parts of the story that the book doesn’t give you.”

Why Teachers Will Like *Skeleton Creek*, Too

Teachers also have reasons to like *Skeleton Creek*. At the simplest level, our students loved the mystery and adventure, which kept them engaged (ghost stories and adventure are preferred genres of teens, according to Christina Clark and Kate Rumbold). Students *wanted* to keep reading (even those self-professed, too-cool book-haters). As one student wrote in a reading response about the book, “If teachers used these kind of books when I was in kindergarten, I would be better at reading.” Another student said, “I already want to read the second one.” Other student comments included, “This is the best book we’ve read as a class all year”; “I have noticed that in class people have enjoyed reading more”; and (our personal favorite) “This book shows that books that are long can be very good and not boring.” Undoubtedly, we’ve seen students engaged with reading in ways we haven’t seen during much of the year. Robin noted several times that for many of the students in her class who struggle with reading, *Skeleton Creek* was the first whole book they’d ever read.

We also like *Skeleton Creek* because we found it has a range of readability and was thus accessible

to all of our eighth-grade readers. We read the book with a range of classes (remedial–honors) with equal success. While some readers stayed engaged at the level of the scary, who-dun-it mystery and plot, other readers appreciated the allusions to Edgar Allan Poe and other popular cultural icons referenced in Sarah’s passwords. Still other readers were intrigued by the new mode of storytelling and expressed a desire to create their own “vooks.” As one student explained, “I thought it was going to be a simple little mystery book, but it is far more than that.”

We taught prediction and inference skills with the book and worked on identifying important details and summarizing. The book also lends itself well to character analysis, as students struggled over whether or not Sarah is reckless and thus dangerous, and whether or not Ryan is cowardly or cautious. Students also struggled to decide if Sarah is a good friend to Ryan. At one point in the book Ryan says being friends with Sarah makes him a liar, and his relationship with Sarah is certainly fraught with tension throughout the book.

As we read the book, we kept a character chart posted in the room (a T-chart with “Ryan” in the left-hand column and “Sarah” in the right). We listed adjectives for each character as we finished a book/video section, and we also discussed what adjectives we could cross out and delete now that we knew more about the characters. This led to good discussion, as not all students agreed as to what could be deleted.

Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm explain that under-

standing characters is an ongoing process of making inferences and judgments, and then reevaluating your original inferences and judgments once you know more about the characters. We practiced this process in class, making judgments about Ryan and Sarah as we read. This helped us develop deeper understandings of each of the characters and see characters as more than technical vocabulary words to be defined for a test. When we were done reading the novel, students picked one character and an adjective from our class-generated T-chart and developed a character analysis using evidence from both the book and video to support their claims.

One student described Ryan as a “good friend” in her essay. She wrote:

He is a really good friend to Sarah because he helps her when she needs it. He’s very protective of Sarah. One day he called her house to make sure she didn’t go back to the dredge and the mother answered instead of Sarah and he said, “I woke up worried about Sarah. I don’t know why, but could you do me a favor and make sure she is ok?”

Another student described Sarah as a “big risk-taker.” He wrote:

Sarah is most of all a big risk-taker. She goes to the old, mysterious, broken, falling apart dredge alone. She goes in the middle of the night when she can hardly see. She makes contact with Ryan when she shouldn’t. She even says at one point, “It’s risky contacting you like this.”

Finally, we like the book because we witnessed it extend students’

reading experience beyond the classroom walls. Intrigued by the book, students bought their own copies and logged on at home or library computers to view the videos. Several students joined the Facebook Skeleton Creek community and participate in the fan blog sites that have sprouted up around the book (e.g., <http://skeletoncreekisreal.com>).

Bridging the Digital Divide with Digi-Novels

Literacy researchers have long called on teachers to find ways to bridge the “digital divide” that exists between in-school and out-of-school technology use, and we believe *Skeleton Creek* affords opportunities for teachers to do just that. We bought one class set of the novel, read it aloud to students, and accessed the websites on a class computer (the Sarah Fincher website at <http://sarahfincher.com> is not blocked by our school’s security filter). This, we believe, encouraged a social, communal feeling toward the reading activity—a feeling that literacy researchers explain draws young people online. As students ventured online at home to read more about *Skeleton Creek*, they returned to the classroom eager to share what they found, and we let them, adding their findings to our collective knowledge about the book and its mystery. In these small ways, *Skeleton Creek* certainly seemed to help bridge the digital divide between us and our students. We are already considering other ways we can include digital literacies in future implementation. We like Sara Kajder’s ideas for students writing their own fan

fiction or “multimodal” texts and possibly chatting about the book with students in other states.

Some Criticisms about Digital Reading

Even with all this positive news about the video-book, there will be doubters. Some reading researchers worry that “vooks” may hinder one’s ability to read longer, sophisticated texts that require sustained reading. We didn’t see students’ attention spans thwarted as a result of reading *Skeleton Creek*. In fact, as we’ve mentioned earlier, many students considered *Skeleton Creek* a “long” book, and for some, it was the first whole novel they’d ever finished. We think we can build on successes like these by encouraging students to try longer texts when the time is right.

Still others worry about the loss of the “transportive appeal” of traditional texts, as images of characters are immediately available to readers in books with accompanying videos (Peters). Some reading researchers worry that “vooks” might do all of the imagining for readers. But as one student explained, “I always love to imagine certain parts from books when I’m reading. This book lets you see what you want to see and what the author wants you to see. You get the best of both worlds.” Another student explained, “The visuals help for when you can’t picture something too well. It makes most of the scenes for you.” Three students did complain about the videos, however. One student said she preferred the “old-fashioned way, where you can imagine for your-




self what the characters look like,” and another said she already gets “mental pictures that run like a movie through my head,” and thus didn’t need the videos. Yet another student said, “If all books end up like this, I won’t read as much because it takes away from the imagination.” Again, we feel the book is good for all levels of readers precisely because it does provide images for those readers who may not make “mental pictures in their heads,” and it also provides contrasting images for more sophisticated readers to juxtapose against the images they create as they read.

Carman claims that *Skeleton Creek* “plays along with the way the [multi-tasking] young mind operates” (Jasics), but some neu-

roscientists suggest multitasking while reading (e.g., moving from print to computer screen) slows the brain down and increases the room for errors in comprehension (Hesse). We asked students to weigh in on this as well. Most said they liked the back-and-forth reading experience. One student explained, “I do love to read and be on the computer, and this combines both.” One student said, however, that he’d “rather just read a book or watch a movie, and not do them together.” Another student said, “I don’t like that books are going digital. Books are meant to be on paper, not video.” Several students commented that only people with access to the Internet could read *Skeleton Creek*, and that didn’t seem fair.

All in all, we’re here to say that we saw some magic occur in our classrooms as a result of reading *Skeleton Creek*. Readers—of all ability levels—were engaged and reading and talking about the book. News of *Skeleton Creek* at our school went viral. Strangers showed up at our doors wanting to know what this thing called a “vook” was. We think Patrick Carman’s on to something, and we—and our students—

are anxiously awaiting our next “vook” reading experience. 

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