



'The World Needs More Canada'

By John F. Baker & Nathalie Atkinson -- 5/17/2004

Here Come 'BookShorts'

Is creating short movies about books too much of a genre mix? **Judith Keenan**, the innovative founder and executive producer of **BookShorts**, doesn't think so. She explains: "BookShorts are a new genre: short films, animations and interactive media that capture the spirit of a book in moving images." A BookShort is not a trailer, and it's definitely not merely advertising; it's an editorially discrete, self-contained mini-drama that provides publishers and filmmakers with a new creative forum. A key detail is that the BookShort is created while the book is still in development, and both are introduced to the public simultaneously. Last May, BookShorts received a cash grant of CDN\$60,000 to produce the first short film (plus interactive enhanced features and the prototype technology for online distribution).

In 1994, Keenan was the executive producer of a "book video" promoting Canadian author Douglas Cooper's novel *Amnesia* (Hyperion) in the U.S. The resulting 3.5-minute short helped secure an additional 11 cities on the American reading tour, was played in bookstores before readings to attract audiences, and aired on U.S. television stations. A few years later, Keenan led the team of animators at Twinkle studio in New York, who produced flash animated shorts for the release of *David Boring* by Dan Clowes and *Jimmy Corrigan* by Chris Ware, which Random House and Pantheon, respectively, eventually placed with online retailers like Amazon and BN.com.

The Pioneering Content program, as the parent of BookShort is known, was made possible thanks to a new initiative of the Ontario Media Development Corporation's Business Innovation Group. Knopf publisher Louise Dennys, no stranger to innovative ways of promoting fiction (her New Face of Fiction series was a champion of the genre from the beginning), wrote a letter of support when Keenan approached the Ontario Media Development Corporation for funding. Part of the funding initiative also meant finding partners from various media on board; BookShorts, in addition to being supported by the Pioneering Content Program, counts **Bravo!Fact**, **Bravo!**, **BookTelevision**, **Veni Vidi Vici Motion Pictures** and **Random House of Canada** among its partners. Broadcast partner **Daniel Richler (BookTelevision)** plans to air a "making of" behind-the-scenes segment shot concurrently with the first BookShort.

This will be *What Casanova Told Me*, which was filmed on location at Toronto's historic King Edward Hotel, and transformed a 400-page novel into a six-minute film that people will eventually be able to watch on their [television and] computer screens. It is based on the novel by **Susan Swan**, to be published by **Knopf Canada** this fall, and explores the parallel lives of present-day character Luce and 18th-century Asked For Adams (a cousin of American president John Adams), intertwined with the historic figure of Casanova. Swan's work has been adapted for the big screen before, and lived to tell the tale (*Lost and Delirious* was based on her novel *The Wives of Bath*). "We all live in a culture dominated by visual images," says Swan, "and a short film gives books a sexy way to stretch into other mediums."

The *Casanova* BookShort had its premiere at the **Canadian Film Centre Worldwide Short Film Festival** last week, and will be introduced to the publishing community at **BookExpo Canada**, in conjunction with author Swan's appearance. It will also be featured on her fall reading tour, and available online and on DVD/CD-ROM with enhanced interactive features for reading clubs, fans and bookstores

Keenan continues to look for books and publishers open to exploring the new means of bringing great books to a wider audience. BookShorts recently confirmed the participation of **House of Anansi** and has three of its titles in development: John Mighton's next JUMP book; *Feeding the Future*, edited by Andrew Heintzman and Evan Solomon; and a novel by Lisa Moore. Titles at **Thomas Allen**, Random House Canada and **Penguin Canada** are also under consideration. —*Nathalie Atkinson*