

The Summer Reading Program -- A Librarian Tells All!

by Roz Warren

It's July, which, if you work in a public library, means that the Summer Reading Club is in full swing. The SRC used to be just for kids, to motivate them to read when school wasn't in session. But in recent years many libraries have expanded the program to include grown-ups too.

I've never been crazy about the Summer Reading Club. I believe that people ought to read for the sheer pleasure of it, not for prizes.

Nevertheless, as a circulation assistant, my job includes trying to enroll as many of our patrons as possible.

"Once you join," I explain, dozens of times a day, "you submit a review of each book you read on a card. Every week we have a drawing, and if your card is chosen, you win a prize!"

"What kind of prize?" they'll ask.

"It could be a Ferrari!" I'll joke. "Or a yacht! Or even a trip to Paris! But seriously? It's a gift basket filled with teas and jams and chocolate and hardcover books."

Our library used to be pretty laid back about Summer Reading. We'd post a few signs about the club and if a patron asked to join, we'd sign them up. Enrollment was minimal, and that was fine with us.

But this year we have a new boss, and it matters to Carolyn that we sign up lots of people. Carolyn is a peach, so unlike prior years, when I could safely ignore the whole thing, I now have to take the SRC seriously. Which means? Keeping my true feelings to myself and knocking myself out to get you to join.

In the old days, I only bothered to ask folks I knew would say yes. If a woman in her sixties brought a stack of mysteries to the circ desk for check out, I'd give her the pitch. But a dude in his twenties who only checks out DVDs? Why bother?

Now, I challenged myself to ask all of them, with no exceptions. I was through with Patron Profiling. For the greater good of the Bala Cynwyd Library, I would ask each and every person to join, even when I knew there wasn't a chance in hell that they'd say yes.

And guess what? Our patrons surprised me.

A man checks out a stack of DVDs, but not a single book. Clearly, not a reader. And yet, when I ask, "Would you like to join our summer reading club?" his eyes light up and I get an enthusiastic "Yes!"

But when I try to recruit a woman who has just placed a slew of bestsellers on hold, certain that she'll agree, I get a firm "No, thanks!"

Clearly, I don't know our patrons as well as I thought I did.

Of course, some of my assumptions do hold true. Women are more likely to join than men, and seniors more likely than millennials. Still, far more millennials and men say yes than I would have expected.

It almost makes me regret ignoring them in the past.

Almost. Because I still, at heart, have little love for the SRC. If nobody joined, that would suit me just fine. And yet, I find myself not only selling the heck out of the thing, but taking pride in how many people I'm able to sign up. Selling the SRC turns out to be something I'm good at. In fact, I'm better at getting folks to join than anyone else in the library.

Who knew?

I've signed up dozens. By summer's end, I plan to sign up hundreds! Why? Because it matters to my boss and I'm a team player. Not only that, but our patrons enjoy participating. They like sharing their opinions about the books they've read. And the possibility of winning a prize.

When the winner of the first drawing came in to claim her gift basket, she was so delighted that we could have been handing her the keys to a new Ferrari.

Does this mean I've been wrong about the SRC all along? Call me a book snob, but I still believe that reading should be its own reward. Which doesn't mean that when you come to my library I'm not going to do whatever it takes to get you to join.

My pal, Melissa Schnapp, who is a life coach, is always encouraging me to Practice Gratitude. "Don't focus on how much you dislike the idea of reading for prizes," she says. "Focus on what you're grateful for."

I am grateful for this job, which I love. And for our fabulous patrons and my terrific boss. I am grateful that I'm smart enough to figure out how to con, manipulate, persuade, cajole and/or entice people into doing what I want them to do.

And I am very grateful that summer doesn't last forever.

(Roz Warren is the author of *Our Bodies Our Shelves: A Collection Of Library Humor* and *Just Another Day At Your Local Public Library: An Insider Looks At Library Life*.)

