

# Shelftalkers at Salesian!

By Lauren Kyte

## Snapshot

Lauren Kyte, and the team at Salesian College, Sunbury, have embedded the SLAV student review website – Shelftalkers – in their wider reading program. Their work offers their students a wider audience for their reviews and authentic recognition of their reading and their opinions. This is an excellent example of encouraging student agency in an effective school library wider reading program.

Shelftalkers at Salesian! became both the catchcry and foci of our library's Wide Reading lessons in Term 2 2023. For a term our Year 7 students engaged in the Shelftalkers Challenge which, coupled with a Beanstack reading log, invited students to craft their own review for publication on [SLAV's Shelftalkers](#). This was our second year of implementing the Challenge – and we were energised by the memories of last year's successes.

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*'I absolutely loved the 'Shelftalkers Challenge' as it gave me an amazing experience of getting my review published. This can really help students with confidence and give them a chance to get their thoughts and opinions into the world.'*

(Alice T. Year 7, 2022)

## The Salesian context

Our 21 co-ed Years 7 and 8 classes visit the Ciantar Learning Commons (Library) once a fortnight to engage in a structured Wide Reading Program, delivered by our Teacher Librarians. These lessons address student need and can include anything from applying discrete literacy skills to the explicit teaching of genre.

In Term 2 2023 our broad focus for our Year 7 cohort was on accessing 'Reviews', and discussing how we can share our reactions towards our reading.

The reasons for this focus were two-fold:

1. Supporting students in accessing a range of reviews/opinions on texts helps them to become more informed about their own text choices. They may also become more motivated in their reading due to the advocacy of their peers (for example,

by considering the influence that #BookTok has had on the popularity of certain YA texts).

2. Showing students the platforms that can be used to record their opinions on texts empowers them to share their own perspective. Showcasing a variety of mediums (including formal and informal) helps students validate their own point-of-view, while developing their self-perception as a 'reader'.

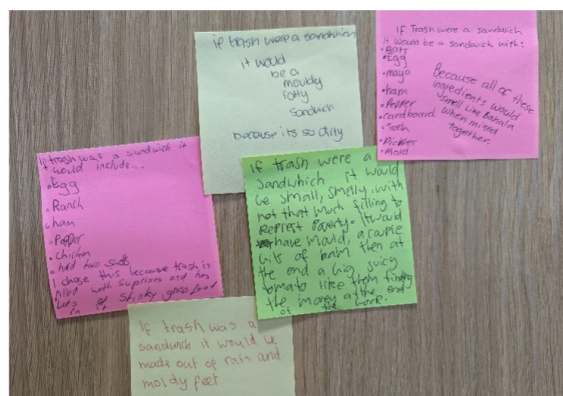
Importantly, our culminating Shelftalkers Challenge meant that students had an authentic opportunity to write for their peers with the prospect of genuine publication.

## Wide reading implementation

Our curriculum included three core lesson plans, which built student familiarity with the Shelftalkers site.

- **Lesson 1: Introduction to Shelftalkers:** During this lesson we invited students to consider the purpose, structure, and impact of reviews. We discussed reviews in a holistic sense (movie, food, hotel etc.) and then directed students to consider whether they have consulted formal book reviews when selecting their reading material. The final step in this lesson was a guided navigation of the Shelftalkers site.
- **Lesson 2: Book Talk:** This lesson showcased the different platforms that students can use to record their reactions to texts. This predominantly included Bookstagram and #Booktok (with curated material presented for student analysis). We then contrasted different ways to rate or 'review' books through these mediums compared with Shelftalkers.
- **Lesson 3: Shelftalkers Analysis:** This lesson included a close reading of a review from Shelftalkers. With support, students annotated the review according to its structure, language choices, information included (and information withheld!). Students were asked to identify the strengths of the review, as well as suggest an 'enhancement'. The intention of this lesson was for students to both celebrate the successes of their published peers – and recognise the potential for their own writing.

The support materials available on the Shelftalkers site also offer extension opportunities. Students who were desperate to start writing were directed towards [Review Writing Tips](#). To inspire unique responses, we input the [Book Review Prompts](#) into a spin wheel (online) and gamified the process. 'If this book were a sandwich...' certainly resulted in some creative interpretations!

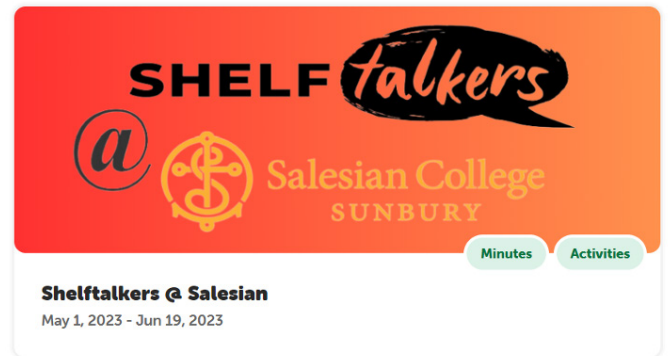


Student responses to "If 'Trash' were a sandwich..."

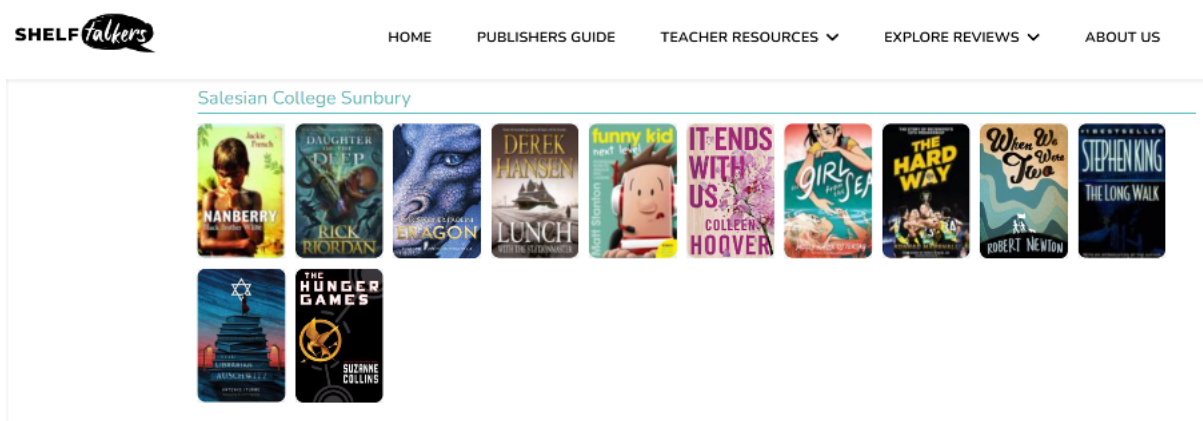
# Shelftalkers Challenge using Beanstack

Our work with Year 7 and 8 students is two-sided; our curriculum focuses on literary skills and understanding to build intrinsic motivation, while our 'Challenges' offer extrinsic motivation by rewarding positive reading behaviour.

The Shelftalkers Challenge encouraged students to log reading minutes as well as draft a book review for potential submission to the Shelftalkers site. Both activities were completed and tracked via the Beanstack platform. While a significant number of students completed the Challenge, we were discerning with the reviews that we chose to pursue for publication. We were not daunted by spelling errors or formatting issues; these can easily be rectified during the editing process. Instead, we wanted to identify those students who had written confidently and insightfully about their book. In 2022 we oversaw the publication of twelve student reviews. In 2023, we are supporting 20 students to publish their work on the Shelftalkers site.



## Beanstack Challenge Promotion



## Student publication of reviews

*'I enjoyed reading this book so much because I absolutely love football. I'm not much of a fan of books but found this text very interesting and couldn't stop reading it.'*

(Liam J. Year 8, 2022)

This quote, taken directly from one of our student's published reviews, embodies the beauty of this whole undertaking. Liam did not consider himself a 'reader' (or much of a writer, to begin with) but he was motivated by the idea of having his name and opinion (and football team!) published online.

November 7, 2022



Author: Antonio Iturbe  
 Publisher: Hodwin Books  
 ISBN: 9781627796187  
 School: Salesian College Sunbury  
 Reviewer: Danielle T.  
 Genre: Fiction  
 Category: Review  
 Tags: (Concentration camp), 1939-1945, Auschwitz, Books and reading, Concentration camps, Czechoslovakia, Dita, Fiction, Holocaust, Jewish, Jews in Czechoslovakia, Kraus, World War  
 Published: 2017

Follows the true story of Dita Kraus, a fourteen-year-old girl from Prague who after being sent to Auschwitz is chosen to protect the eight volumes prisoners have smuggled past the guards.

★★★★★

The start of this book draws you in. The first few pages set a high expectation, which the book meets perfectly. The story told is full of rich moments of joy, sadness, and anger, which I felt deeply as well. I was always left wanting to read more – wanting answers – to know if they survived. The perspective that Dita Kraus provides, and how the author portrays the experience of Auschwitz prisoners, is eye opening. Books are powerful tools, and this story is an important and meaningful part of history that stays in your mind and teaches you a lot. The books in the story keep humanity alive in Auschwitz.

There are devastating and awful events in this novel that are described in ways that make you feel as if you are part of history. The ending of this book ties the narrative together perfectly and I felt that the story was portrayed well. The past was not forgotten. Instead, it has been remembered through survivors like Dita, Ota and Rudi.

Reviewed by Danielle T. – Year 8 – Salesian College Sunbury

### Published Student Review

**...the student writing is authentic and unaffected. Students recognise themselves and their own writing capacity in the reviews.**

The Shelftalkers site is at once intuitive and welcoming; students are excited to explore the featured books. It also strikes the perfect balance between aspiration and achievability – the website is professionally presented, but the student writing is authentic and unaffected. Students recognise themselves and their own writing capacity in the reviews.

And, luckily for us educators, the process for publication couldn't be easier. After you have worked with your student to edit and polish their review – you send the final copy (with all **details included**) to the Shelftalkers **email address**. No formatting. No hyperlinking. No worries.

## Future focus

*'It feels good to represent my school. I hope that my review can assist other students in finding a book that suits their interests.'*

(Oliver D. Year 8, 2022)

Of course, our experience is just one way that you could integrate Shelftalkers into your practice and library promotions. We have also been experimenting with:

- Encouraging English staff to replace 'Book Review' tasks with Shelftalkers
- Incorporating Shelftalkers reviews into book displays (digital and hardcopy)
- Directing students to Shelftalkers when asked for book recommendations

- Supporting 'groups' to create collaborative reviews (e.g., classes, buddy readers, Book Clubs)

Ultimately, the Shelftalkers site formalises those conversations we love to overhear in our libraries. The exclamations of how brilliant a book is; the breathless recounts of plot twists; the emphatic encouragement to "just read the first chapter". Most importantly, the site retains the genuine voice and earnestness of its young contributors. For these reasons the Shelftalkers Challenge will be a staple of our Wide Reading program for the foreseeable future.

**Author Note:** This is the second year that our Shelftalkers Challenge has run, and we gratefully acknowledge the work of our former colleagues Karin Gilbert, Tina Fattori, and Shirley Wong in laying the foundations of this project.

***Lauren Kyte** is the Head of Library (Ciantar Learning Commons) at Salesian College Sunbury. A former Literacy Learning Specialist and Leading Teacher for Secondary Curriculum, her move into libraries was inspired by the unlimited scope and reward of the role. She has written this article with the dedicated support of the exceptional CLC team: Adrian Schober, Claire Peucker, Jake Woodruff, Jem Sinfield, and Rachel Fernandez.*