

The library becomes a tribal contact point

THE philosophy of the library isn't very sophisticated in the thinking of Australian civic administrators. At least that's what I tend to believe within the severe limitations of my knowledge of the subject.

What is a library, Australian style?

I'll define it by description of the library I use in my own modest suburban territory, Walkerville, in South Australia, a mixed socio-economic local-government area.

The Walkerville Library is the living and breathing centre for community contact, far more so than specialised agencies like Bingo events or senior-citizen clubs. It is the place where people move out of the anonymity of their suburban boxes to talk to the librarians, to their fellow readers, to sit, to observe, to get the feel of what it's like where they live. In short, to belong.

The library is small, but it is structured to perform a variety of functions. There's reasonably comfortable seating. There's a corner to park yourself and catch up with a bit of casual magazine reading. There's a couch and a headphone television set. There's a coin-operated photocopier. The children's section is heavily emphasised, with a cushion-filled pit where youngsters can lounge around in their usual contorted way reading *Tintin* or *Asterix*. The more serious young reader can sneak into hidey spots in the rooms of a fibre-board castle. This juvenile territory is well-patronised because, after all, what child in its right mind would prefer to go the draggy rounds of supermarket, butcher and greengrocer with a harassed or preoccupied parent.

The library staff seems to know everyone who comes through the door, and part of their job seems to be the book-choosing and book-talking for the elderly. Likewise the school-going young strike me as uninhibited in their use of adult advisory services in posing their school problems of special projects or of hobby interests. If a book isn't available in the Walkerville library the senior officer will toddle into the big bureaucratic State Library once a week and run it to earth for you. The library will do home deliveries for the incapacitated.

All this is rather different from the purely cultural function of libraries way back in the days when real people read real books in vast numbers, and reading was regarded as the most rewarding of recreations.

Our Walkerville library is a tribal gathering-place, a listening post from which the council and the Department of Community Welfare can constantly gather information about the human realities, the loneliness, the pain, the violence, the poverty, the desertions that happen behind the closed doors of our very secretive suburban streets. On the positive side, the good and the kind and the active people with a will to help the community wander in from nowhere as of habit. That's what you do as part of your living pattern in Walkerville. You go to the supermarket. You pop into the library.

The library as the tribal, community gathering-place works because the scale is right. There are a few huge and comprehensively structured 'community centres' in my part of

the world, but there is some dubiety about whether they work. They tend to be desolate, functional and conspicuously lacking in intimate atmosphere.

It is my understanding that the old library has been translated into the community focal point in most parts of Australia, above all in Victoria, which claims to have developed one of the most progressive and extensive regional library services in the world.

Book stocks are a sad and sorry problem. I am hard put to find titles in my local library published after 1976. The librarians are not to blame. The library system is not to blame. There is money enough for our overworked minimally sufficient staff. And that's all.

Nor has the revolution in library function been recognised in the training, education and staffing of librarians. If my point is correct, the library has integrated community welfare and grass-roots social work into its functions.

These days the librarian-social worker should be central to the skills that are called on. The various departments of community welfare, as well as local-government authorities, should be funding the 'listening-post' skills of people as much trained to assess human stress as to operate a Dewey classification.

The old library stereotypes are dead. The Institute Library. The Circulating Library, as it used to be called. Be-spectacled wower ladies of humorless disposition no longer man the book-borrowing barricades as depicted in a thousand small-town American movies of the past.

For the old book-reading breed itself is a rare and endangered species. Books survive as functional objects, as aids to activities from Mongolian cooking to making your own communications satellite. The reading that services recreational pleasure, or satisfies curiosity about the human condition, has fallen away to zilch. Literacy is under-valued and under-taught.

But if people, right across the age spectrum, can be made to gravitate towards libraries as a relaxing and attractive community resource, then something will rub off. They will tend to perceive literacy as one of the pleasures they've missed out on. The senselessness and insensibility of life lived in a climate of constant media satiation will be faintly comprehended. People may come to reading again as a new kick, and wander off with a Colleen McCullough or *War and Peace*. It doesn't really matter which. Reading is always a regenerative rather than degenerative process. The mind is an aspiring entity. Given a chance that it will move upwards from *The Thorn Birds* to Shakespeare. I've never heard of the reverse process taking place.

All this is very cheering so long as there is substance to my opening hypothesis.

Is there a library revolution taking place in an organised and co-ordinated way? If so, is the movement rising in the hierarchy of political and economic priorities? I can lay my hands on very little information.

Max Harris

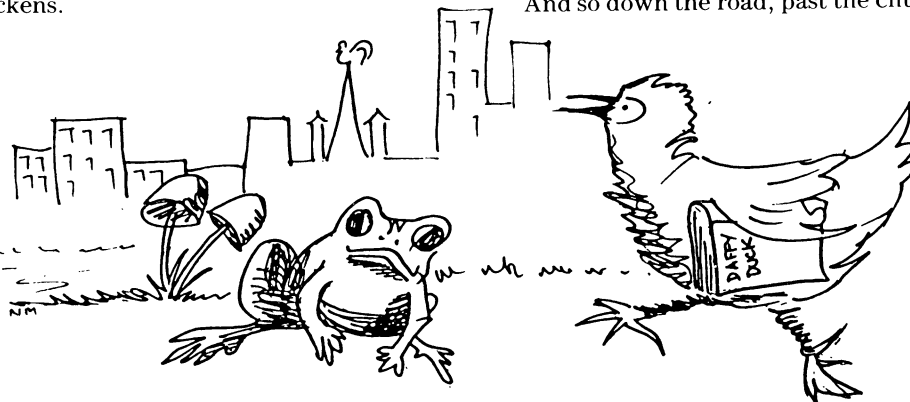
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The literary chick

by Noel Manly

This (eggs)traordinary story, from a usually im(peck)able source, tells of a chicken with an insatiable literary thirst who fronted up to the local library. (You must decide for yourself if it is un(beak)oming for the library profession, but I tell it in good faith.)

The said chicken hopped on to the Reception Desk and in English, which may have been Pidgin, demanded 'A book! book! book! book! book!' in the manner and tone of all chickens.



The librarian, anxious never to disappoint a would-be reader (as I understand to be the wont of all good librarians) sought to satisfy the chicken's needs. It was decided that *The Life and Times of Daffy Duck* might be an appropriate start to the relationship and this was promptly snapped up by the somewhat impatient chick.

Some ten minutes passed and the same chicken reappeared before the librarian. 'A book! book! book! book!' croaked our feathered friend, and the librarian was determined again not to disappoint such enthusiasm.

In quick succession the chicken returned again and again making her insistent demands until *Where No Vultures Fly*, *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*, *The Birds* and *The Birdman of Alcatraz* had all been removed from the shelves.

By the sixth visit the librarian showed some concern and suspicion (which I understand is the wont of all good librarians!) and decided to follow the chicken.

And so down the road, past the church with

a rooster on the spire, across to the park and down to the pond went the chicken and the librarian. When comfortably seated on the grass, the chicken opened the pages of the book with a flourish and a great air of expectancy...

But the chicken had a friend seated beside her — a green spotted frog who rolled his eyes heavenward and, speaking in the past t(hens)e of course, pronounced: 'Read It! Read It! Read It!'

Whereupon the chicken snapped the book shut and strutted back to the library!