

# Connecting people with books

## Helen Bell

Readers' Advisor Department  
Arapahoe Library District

One of the things I love most about being a librarian is the opportunity to experience the many facets of the profession. Finding a position that combined reading fiction, counting it as 'homework' and sharing that love of books with others, was how I found what I wanted from my career.

Prior to arriving in Denver, Colorado, in mid-1993, I had been fortunate to work for two wonderful organisations. After getting married in 1994, I visited my local public library and offered my services as a volunteer. The volunteer co-ordinator was thrilled to have a librarian as a volunteer, and she assigned me to the head of the Readers Advisor Department, and also to the inter-library loans head. I had never heard of a position called Readers' Advisor (RA), so I took the opportunity to learn what it was about. Several months after starting as a volunteer, I successfully applied for a paid position in the RA Department.

At that time, the Readers Advisor Department was unique within the Arapahoe Library District. Initially, only the main branch of the District (where I worked) had an RA Department. Some of the Arapahoe Library District branches have since expanded to include an RA Department.

The primary purpose of the department is to provide support for the fiction needs of library patrons. This is achieved with a team of librarians dedicated to working with the fiction collection and the various programs offered.

As staff work primarily at the RA desk, with some time spent in the reference or children's sections, a sense of the fiction collection is quickly developed, along with a sensitivity to the reading tastes of regular patrons. I have found one of the most gratifying parts of RA work is building relationships with patrons. Everyone in the department has their core of loyal patrons, who visit with staff when they come in. Over time, their fiction preferences become known, and they receive a more-tailored and personal service. It is always a bright

spot in the day when a patron comes back and says, 'I really liked that last book you recommended'. Many will also say 'Have you read xxx? Oh you should — it's wonderful!' or 'Don't bother — it's xxx'.

At the desk there are several very large ring-binders of staff-produced bibliographies which have been created over the years. Copies are available for patrons to take. The bibliographies are kept simple (author, title, and sometimes a brief synopsis) and cover a vast range of topics, including Colorado authors, teachers in fiction, religious mysteries, medieval mysteries, culinary mysteries and fiction about specific countries. Bibliographies were also later developed in a similar style to promote sections of the audio-visual collection, and later webliographies to complement the audio-visual bibliographies, were added.

To promote fiction and books in general, the Department offers a variety of smaller programs, including co-ordinating various book displays. 'In the news' is a dynamic display of books pulled from non-fiction about current events in the news; 'Good reads' features novels recommended by staff; and each month there is a thematic non-fiction display, such as culinary arts, presidents, or holiday crafts. At the RA desk, there is also a small display of the current best-sellers for patrons to peruse and request.

Since both the Children's and Young Adult Departments have summer reading programs, an annual adult program was developed and introduced. It has been refined over the years, and each book that is read between June and August (summer) qualifies the reader for a prize drawing. Audio books are included since many patrons borrow books on tape for their holiday road trips, and to include patrons who were visually-impaired. Local businesses have been very supportive of the program by supplying prizes.

The RA Department oversees the monthly displays in the display cases, and the library relies on patrons offering their collections for show. There has been a vast array of collections shown, from hats to depression-era glass, lace to election buttons. Wherever possible, relevant books from the collection are pulled and displayed on top of the cases, and made available for loan. Programs are occasionally presented on various topics, which are the publicised and offered to the public — and there are several book clubs hosted by staff.

## Volunteer work in East Timor

Since late last year, Del Cuddihy has been working in East Timor as a volunteer archivist with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 'The experience has been really rewarding in many ways,' says Del, 'and I am honoured to have been able to make a small contribution in the reconstruction of East Timor.'

The Commission is due to finish its work at the end of this year but it is anticipated that the archives and a documentation centre will continue as part of a Human Rights Centre. As a result, there are opportunities for Australian librarians to undertake volunteer work in the Centre. While volunteer work would have to be self-funded, librarians who would like a 'working holiday' from a couple of weeks to several months, have the chance to offer their services in a position that will add enormously to the level of professionalism in East Timor.

For more information or to offer your services as a volunteer contact Del Cuddihy, [delenevcuddihy@yahoo.com](mailto:delenevcuddihy@yahoo.com).