

Quirky, not cool: insideadog.com.au



www.insideadog.com.au

Mike Shuttleworth, CYL Program Co-ordinator

"Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend.

Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read." – Groucho Marx

In making a website about books for teenagers the biggest question is: how do you make a content-rich site that doesn't look try-hard or like adults trying to be cool?

For the Centre for Youth Literature, it was also important to make a website that didn't look kiddie-lit. You know, flashing icons, twirling widgets, honking what-nots. Children's literature *per se* is not the brief of the CYL (Centre for Youth Literature); we're about improving access to reading for teenagers.

Until we launched the website, we mostly promoted writers and books for teenagers through events. The Centre's events program attracts around 5000 young people and 1000 adults annually, while Reading Matters, our biennial conference, is very highly regarded nationally. Over many years of staging events we've learned a lot about the youth literature scene here and abroad. Although our events have almost always been in Victoria, our interest is national and international. We have a strong knowledge of national writing and publishing activities and our role in networking and referral is an important part of our work. Audience development is central to our work.

The website launched in April 2006, <http://www.insideadog.com.au>, comes pretty close to achieving what we aimed for. The need for a website for peer recommendation and credible information and advice was flagged in 2001 in Young Australians Reading, a research report into the reading habits of people aged 10–18. Along the way a lot of people pointed out that creating a website isn't all that expensive or complicated. True. But then good websites are hungry beasts that need regular feeding.

With the support of the State Library Victoria, the Clayton Utz Foundation and in particular the Copyright Agency Limited, we have been able to corner the staff time to manage the site. Lili Wilkinson, the website editor spends most of her working week creating, updating and maintaining the material on the site.

The crucial visual design was done by graphic designer Phil Campbell. Phil is an award-winning book designer who freelances for Allen & Unwin and Melbourne University Publishing.

We briefed Phil about the pitfalls of designing for youth: don't try to look cool—they smell you every time! and don't design for children—they're not. The shorthand used to explain our approach was 'quirky, not cool'.

We struggled to come up with a name for a long time. We really, really, really wanted to avoid worthy names... 'cool reads', 'youth books' 'teen' were all firmly on the banned list. One night I gave a talk to a group of adults. Behind me on a screen were images from our events, cut with quotes about reading. *"Outside of a dog a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read"* by Groucho Marx scrolled past and people started laughing. We had a name.

A competition to name the dog attracted 3 300 entries from all over Australia. The dog is now named Inky A Wilde, and a 14 year old boy from regional New South Wales is now the proud owner of a black iPod Nano. We will be using Inky's identity for awards and other promotion.

Each month will also see a new writer-in-residence. Writers from around Australia and indeed anywhere in the world are blogging with reports on their life and their current writing. It's a great way for people to get a window into the life of the writer, to ask questions and get behind the scenes a little. We've scheduled writers like Garth Nix, Margo Lanagan (blogging from the ALA conference in New Orleans, no less), Markus Zusak and Randa Abdel-Fattah. Nick Earls was the first writer-in-residence on <http://www.insideadog.com.au>.

There is a featured new book every couple of weeks. We give away copies of the book to five people who review any book and submit it to us each time. Over 250 reviews were submitted in the first month. Other features include a list of first chapters of new and forthcoming books; themed booklists; news, cool competitions and links to the good author websites.

The site also includes information about copyright, reflecting the support of the Copyright Agency Limited. CAL saw the website as a vehicle to inform young people about copyright protection and infringement, and there are links to CAL's website for advice. The copyright information is handled subtly, and is not presented as a warning.

We are thrilled with the response of young people, the book industry and from librarians. We think the website makes the world of YA literature a more fun, engaging and exciting place to hang out. We will be looking towards the success of the website to inform other reader Development projects as new centre Manager Paula Kelly works on plans for resourcing a broader audience in the Reader advising area. Watch this space! And visit us soon at <http://www.insideadog.com.au>.

For more information you can contact Paula Kelly, Manager, Reader Development & Library Learning (including the Centre for Youth Literature), State Library of Victoria. Her e-mail is pkelly@slv.vic.gov.au.



Nick Earls blogging

