



Increasingly public libraries are adding value to the reading experience through book discussion groups, targeted reader development programs, visiting writers, seminars, workshops and competitions in recognition of the role literacy has in education and community engagement. 'Books' are available in all possible formats building on the philosophy of read, listen, watch.

The public library has long provided the initial pre-school building block of introduction to reading and books. In addition to the traditional story time sessions there is now a growing focus on early childhood reading programs for 0–5 year olds. These give new parents the skills to read and learn with their children and kick start their learning.

Conclusion

Those of you who work in other sectors will be able to identify with some or all of this, far from exhaustive, discussion of trends. In considering them from a public library perspective the planning dilemma comes not only from the multiplicity of client groups served but the current governance structure where the public library network in each Australian state and territory is significantly different. This can make cooperative ventures incredibly challenging and that they exist is testament to the determination of our colleagues.

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"I would find it very difficult to live in this town without the library"

The mission of the Alice Springs Public Library (ASPL) is to be a progressive, responsive, welcoming and friendly hub of information, lifelong learning and recreation, providing library and information services that contribute to the enhancement of the whole community.



Alice Springs Public Library

Alice Springs is a town characterised by multicultural diversity and a strong Indigenous presence. People from at least nineteen countries form roughly 29% of our population; nearly 19% of us are Indigenous.

Arrernte, the language of the traditional owners, is, after Italian and Tamil, the language other than English most spoken at home. In many ways 'Alice' is a town like any other – a place exhibiting prejudice, ignorance, knowledge, disinterest, good will and friendship in varying proportions. In other ways it's a town where cross cultural challenges are in clear relief.

Alice Springs is the resource centre for Central Australia – a region of 550,980 square kilometres. People come to Alice Springs for shopping, banking, primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and further education, health care, holidays and entertainment – and library services.

There has been a library here for 55 years. Joy Brucek, the first librarian, is a legend, quite a woman by all accounts. She is credited with establishing the town's first public library by commandeering a fire truck in Darwin and bringing a load of books down the Stuart Highway in 1953. We have a photo of her supervising the unloading of said books from the commandeered truck.

Joyce ran the public library twice – from 1953 until 1956 and again from 1984 till 1994. Staff remember that while her vast character could be challenging, she was "the sort of person who would always assist you in any way she could": phones would be taken off the hook if staff were run off their feet; she 'badgered' Adelaide TAFE into establishing a technicians' course in Alice Springs.

Supported by Alice Springs Town Council, ASPL is a place where staff stay for a long time; where many begin working and are supported to make librarianship their career; and where contribution to the industry and innovation has been consistent. Two staff have worked here for a total of fifty-five years. Three others are studying, undertaking courses from vocational certificates to Masters. Jo McGill, currently the Northern Territory Librarian, has worked at ASPL. Roslyn Cousins, Manager from 1989–1996, was awarded ALIA's Library Manager of the Year in 1995 and participated on national committees. Our current Manager, Denise Senior, co-convened ALIA dreaming08. The Akaltje Antheme ('Giving Knowledge') Collection won the 2006 Library Stars Best of the Best award; the Local Languages Collection, a repository of Central Australian Indigenous languages material, is our latest, unique innovation.

Inclusion is one of our key achievements: Indigenous people have always used the library and can be up to 30% of our patronage. Sylvia Neale, our Indigenous Service Officer, has described how Joyce cajoled her, an easily scared Aboriginal nine-year-old, into the library, to discover the world of books she actually desperately wanted to explore. Our inclusiveness extends to employment: Indigenous staff are over 15% of the team, a proportion nearly equivalent to that of Indigenous people in the town's population.

We open seven days a week; provide a reference service, Inter-Library Loans and Document Delivery, and a Country Borrower service to people living more than 100 kms out of town; serve as an informal meeting place, particularly for Indigenous people; and participate in Alice Springs' cultural life, providing a venue for external events as well as organising our own.

This unalloyed good news story may be raising some scepticism. There are aspects of our customer service that generate much discussion while we work out how to ensure access, an enjoyable experience for all our patrons and a safe working environment. Our solutions aren't always satisfactory and can require revisiting. The truth is that we are buoyed by our relationship with our patrons: the title for this article is a quote from a patron. Such good feedback tells us how effective we are – and encourages us to keep at it.

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