

Reading is alive and well!

Reading has never been more alive and well than here in the United Kingdom (January 2010) where I am researching Bibliotherapy as part of my undertaking on being awarded the Barrett Reid Scholarship in November 2009.

Bibliotherapy is the term used to cover a range of activities that use creative reading to promote health and wellbeing, from sheer enjoyment and leisure reading through to therapeutic models that address mental health issues.

The 'Get your life back...books can help' scheme in Essex County Council Libraries is an example of the Books on Prescription model that nurtures partnerships with local GPs and other health professionals to provide authoritative information and recommended self-help books in public libraries.

Creative Bibliotherapy uses established reading development practices to emphasise the health benefits for people who are isolated, lonely, socially marginalised, or living with or caring for those with dementia or Alzheimer's.

Public libraries are well placed to provide this service by linking what they already do with a wide range of new partnerships in health and community sectors.

The healing power of reading is being taken even more seriously now that the Museums Libraries and Archives Council in UK has commissioned research to scope public libraries' activities in the area of health and wellbeing. The work will be delivered by the Reading Agency, headed by Debbie Hicks.



I attended the Read to Lead five-day Accredited Facilitator Training residential course run by The Reader Organisation to learn the skills necessary to lead Get into Reading groups using their principles and practices. Reading groups are held in a variety of venues including libraries,

community centres, prisons, hospitals, drop-in centres, and care homes, and are designed to bring good quality literature to anyone in a shared reading experience. Texts are read aloud by the leader who invites others to join in as little or as much as they wish. Particularly valuable results are being detected in the mental and emotional health of participants.

"I haven't looked at a book in fifteen years," said a participant at a drugs detox unit. "It makes me wish I hadn't thrown those years away, because I'd forgotten what it feels like when you read something like this, the power of words, I mean."

Who says 'reading is dead', 'reading is dying out', 'books are obsolete'?

Come and talk to me! I have been inspired by what I have seen and heard and read. Bring on 'the reading revolution'. Let's make it happen in Australia.

What are YOU reading?

**Jennie Bolitho. Beaumaris Branch Manager
Bayside Library Service. Melbourne.
jbolitho@bayside.vic.gov.au**

Currently reading *The little stranger* by Sarah Waters

Reading: the lost skill? Not from where I stand...

Can the future of reading be predicted by the continuing popularity and vibrancy of English literature courses? Last semester at the University of Adelaide, over 200 first-year students signed up for a course on Shakespeare. When I started my work as English Research Librarian in 2007, a similar number over-flowed the lecture theatre for a first-year course called *Landmarks of literature* (otherwise known to its lecturer as 'Big books'), a selection of works that included Dickens' *Bleak House* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

The particular kind of reading that these students engage in – the study of literature – does have a future when the academic teaching and library practices designed to support it continue to evolve. When I studied English literature in the 1980s (last century!), I spent wonderful hours reading heavy paperback editions of great novels, sitting in tutorial rooms discussing literature with other students, and paging through the library's multiple volumes of the *MLA international bibliography* in search of literary criticism.

Students in the 21st century do the same reading, differently. They are still reading the same captivating and challenging poems, plays, and novels; they are still studying Shakespeare and Coleridge, Charlotte Bronte and Virginia Woolf. But they also have the opportunity to read texts that I was not offered, such as gothic literature, the 'Art of Crime' in 19th and 20th century fiction, self-writing, and creative writing.

The library's collections have changed to keep pace with this new teaching and reading, both in content and in format. The students I help today can use e-books if the texts they want are already out on loan; they have access to more literary criticism through databases such as MLA and Austlit, and backfiles of electronic journals on sources such as JSTOR and Project Muse. Students of Shakespeare can use online concordances rather than print ones to study the use of particular expressions, and access the library's online subscription to the Oxford English Dictionary to trace the origins of specific words.

Academic teaching practices have evolved to encourage students to read English literature. There are still intellectually stimulating lectures and seminars, and these are enhanced by technology ranging from PowerPoint presentations to podcasts. Students contribute to online discussion boards, make postings on Facebook, and write their own poetry and short stories when they study these genres.

So things have changed from last century to this: but the students are still reading the literature that I, and decades of other students, read. George Eliot is still on the syllabus, as is James Joyce and Oscar Wilde. The introductory first-year lectures that describe the course requirements include a PowerPoint slide that has the word **READ** flashing multiple times. Students know that they are expected to spend 12 hours a week on their course: three contact hours, approximately three hours of preparation and six hours reading.

As the discipline librarian, I attend English lectures as often as I am able to, and I have yet to go to one where reading and the university library are not discussed. Is there a future for reading? Yes, if the passion of the readers I meet at work every day is anything to go by.

**Jennifer Osborn
Research Librarian for English, Classics and German
University of Adelaide Library (Jan 2010)
jennifer.osborn@adelaide.edu.au**

Currently reading *Journeys to the interior* by Nicholas Rothwell