

Classic skills

Like any interesting collection, the Penguin Books Collection at the State Library of NSW is more than the sum of its parts. Its care requires those heartland skills of which library and information professionals are so proud. It may be taking a while to get the job done but it's also turned into a great training ground.

Seeing almost 3000 of these publishing icons arranged in chronological order in the library's rare books stack is an impressive sight. For Jan-Amanda Harkin, one of four entry-level librarians given the task of cataloguing the Penguins, the collection has great appeal. "The public has an affection for the Penguins," says Jan, "when they started in 1935 it gave people access to affordable, but quality, literature." Her colleague Michael Carney is just as hooked. "The whole series is a document of popular literature at the time," he says.

When the collection was purchased by the State Library of NSW in 1981 it was one of the largest sets of Penguins ever offered for sale, but 30 years later, the library still had no catalogue records for them. Then, in 2011, the launch of a training program for new librarians was seen as a chance to dig them out.

"It's ideal for beginning cataloguers," says Coordinator of Bibliographic Access, Susanne Moir, "they're challenging but not too difficult." Susanne is keen to ensure that cataloguing continues to be valued as a key skill for librarians. Like all aspects of librarianship, changes to cataloguing in recent years amount to something of a revolution.

"It's not one size fits all anymore," says Susanne. "Once there was a tendency to catalogue everything in the same way – at the same level. Now people need to understand the underlying principles and significance of the

material and use more judgment." Anatta Abrahams, Data Quality Librarian, who oversees the training program, emphasises the importance of the catalogue for people who use the library. "The catalogue underpins the library's services for clients by providing access to the collection," says Anatta.

For the trainees, it's often a matter of finding an appropriate existing record, but for about 10% of the books none can be found. These records require original cataloguing on Libraries Australia and go from there to the State Library catalogue, the National Library's Trove and WorldCat. It's a collaborative effort that involves discussing the level of detail to be applied across the collection, and then consulting with colleagues as challenges come up such as translations (Georges Simenon's *Maigret* novels feature strongly in the collection) and distinguishing between many different editions of popular works. The trainees also identify any conflicts in the catalogue.

The new librarians take on every aspect of the process, from retrieving the books from stack to slipping polyethylene strips with barcodes around the fragile covers. As could be expected, there are preservation issues with books produced cheaply for mass distribution. "They've been used, lent, read many times," says Anatta. "Quite a few have jottings of their previous owners, even the occasional shopping list or phone number. It's all part of their charm, and their purpose." The exceptionally thin paper of the 1940s editions highlights Second World War paper shortages.



IN THE STATE LIBRARY'S RARE BOOKS STACK
PHOTOS: HAMILTON CHURTON



STATE LIBRARY OF NSW LIBRARIANS
JAN-AMANDA HARKIN AND MICHAEL
CARNEY WITH PENGUIN BOOKS

The training program runs over 18 months and allows the librarians to move from cataloguing to helping clients in the State Reference Library and working with original materials. Rotating "gives you a great overview of the library," says Jan.

TAKE YOUR PICK OF A STACK OF GOOD READS



And knowing how the catalogue is structured is useful in the reading room. "It enables you to do a more efficient search for a client," says Michael.

When they get back to their desks there are always more Penguins waiting. Just as the library turns its attention to them, these books have found a new lease of life on the internet with several blogs such as *A Penguin a Week*. Michael and Jan can see the appeal in reading them all. "But you'd have to start young," says Michael. He's been inspired to read *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, while Jan's favourite title so far is *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet*.

Ranganathan's five laws of library science

Remember SR Ranganathan? In 1931, along with his principles for operation of a library system, he also proposed five laws of library science. While the "books" in question might actually be ebooks, a CD or a download, they are still considered to be a foundation of our philosophy.

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his [or her] book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. The library is a growing organism.

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