

CLASSIC READERS BLOG



After four years of convening, Faye Lawrence and John Kennedy have closed the book on *The Classic Readers*, an online book club for ALIA Retirees. We spoke with John and Faye about *Classic Readers*, their favourites, and building an online community.

Can you tell us about the origin of the *Classic Readers Book Club*? What inspired it, when did it start, and how many members were involved?

John: Faye Lawrence was the guiding spirit in getting *Classic Readers* off the ground. That was five years ago. I responded to a note about it from ALIA. As things were to turn out, Faye and I were to be the only constantly active members of the group, and after a period in which Faye put up the postings and I did much of the responding, we agreed that we would treat it as a joint enterprise, with each of us putting up a posting month and month about. (In fact it did not always work out as neatly as that, but I think we did very close to an equal number of postings each after the partnership was formed.) Despite Faye's many and diverse attempts to publicise the blog, and experiments with different kinds of books, *Classic Readers* never took off with the ALIA retirees membership, and I think occasional responses from Peter Clayton and Neil Radford were about the only (very welcome) intrusions into what became a dialogue between Faye and me.

Faye: The *Classic Readers Blog* was set up following responses to an online survey that the ALIA Retirees Committee conducted with elist members asking what our members were interested in – one of which was “reading” and “book clubs”. I put up my hand to have a try at this idea of a classic readers' book club as an online blog allowing for comments from the elisters. Mylee Joseph, who was technically able and committed to the idea, did the work in setting it up and making sure it was maintained throughout.

The idea was to concentrate on books – fiction and non-fiction, new and old, but those which had some literary merit. My thinking was that this would then be something different from other book clubs and would give us a focus. It is so, as John Kennedy said, that we didn't attract as many regular comments as we wished – John and I were the regulars, however some readers popped in from time to time and there were

often encouraging comments online and to me personally saying how they appreciated it. One comment I have had recently from one of our elisters in gratitude is that it is a “good archive”.

I took the opportunity to have a look through the posts since it started in May 2008 and have found that there were 47 books reviewed for comment by John and I with occasional strong, extra responses for such as *Father and son* by Sir Edmund Gosse, *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser, *The getting of wisdom* by Henry Handel Richardson, the Icelandic Saga *Njals saga*, *Secret river* by Kate Grenville, and *Breath* by Tim Winton to note a few.

What was your favourite book that you covered, and which was your least favourite?

John: I enjoyed a lot of the books, including several suggested by Faye that I would otherwise not have read. I particularly enjoyed reading and writing about Henry Handel Richardson's *The getting of wisdom*, in regard to which we did get a bit of a discussion going. It is a very shrewd and wise novel, as well as being highly entertaining. Personally I thoroughly disliked Peter Temple's *Truth*, but it won the Miles Franklin and near unanimous praise from professional reviewers. (Faye also liked it.)

Faye: I have enjoyed John's postings very much and been educated by them. Some examples are: *Njals Saga* – his academic speciality; his introduction to the *Portrait of the artist as a young man* (Joyce); Robert Graves, *Good bye to all that*, along with the recent titles *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel and *Breath* by Tim Winton.

Which are your best loved Australian classics? If you had to recommend three classic books that every Australian should read, what would they be?

John: I did English Lit at university in yee olden days when that still meant primarily literature from the British Isles, and if there is a current lit student or recent graduate in the field who could not answer these questions far better than I can, he or she ought to be ashamed! However, your questions prompt me to wonder whether we should not have focused in the blog far more than we did on Australian literature.

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Faye: I particularly enjoyed writing about many strong women writers including many Australians - *Coonnardoo* by Katherine Susannah Prichard comes immediately to mind and then there is the wonderful *Tirra Lirra by the river* by Jessica Anderson and *I for Isobel* by Amy Witting. It occurs to me we have fantastic literary history which also forms a wonderful social history and I couldn't recommend exploring it more strongly.

In our online book club we chose to read and talk about a Chinese classic *The real story of A Q*; a wonderful Japanese classic, *The Makioka Sisters*; a well-known, modern, Indian classic *Midnight's Children*; a traditional Icelandic classic *Njals Saga*; an iconic Russian classic, *The Brothers Karamazov*; and then we just enjoyed many English language classics from the English, Irish, American, and Australian canon and even finished off with one from the Scottish.

What role do you think libraries have in introducing readers to the classics?

John: This of course raises the old question about whether libraries should provide what people want to read, or what we as librarians think they ought to read. The answer one gives depends partly on the type of library one had in mind, and partly on one's personal philosophy of librarianship. Perhaps there is also the matter of whether libraries should spend part of the budget on editions of Austen, Dickens, etc, when free access to their work can readily be obtained online. I think a good approach is that of Riverina Regional Library, my local public library, as I live in Wagga Wagga. RRL actively promotes and supports a remarkably large number of book clubs, for whose use it makes available a wide range of fiction and non-fiction titles, including some old classics, but also many modern books which seem worthy of attention.

Faye: I think our libraries have a front and foremost role (along with our bookshops and online suppliers) in maintaining the range of materials for us to plunder and wonder at.

Blogs are often associated with social media in terms of community building. Did your blog play this role? How and why/why not?

John: The usage figures Mylee Joseph provided at regular intervals indicated that a reasonable number of people worldwide looked at least briefly at our postings, but, as mentioned, very few engaged in online discussion. I can offer no explanation that I think is satisfactory. Perhaps people interested in joining book clubs want face-to-face interaction over cups of coffee.

Faye: It was a good journey – a bit indulgent perhaps, but always fun.

The *Classic Readers* website, retireereaders.blogspot.com.au, will remain live as a resource and legacy.



Some of the courses still to come with ALIA Training this year...

TOPIC	COURSE NAME	IN PARTNERSHIP WITH	TYPE
RDA	RDA for Practitioners NEW	TAFESA	Online
Job applications Members Only!	Writing to Selection Criteria	Mental Nutrition: Ann Villiers	Online
Collection Management	Collecting in the 21st Century: Contribute to Collection Management NEW	TAFENSW	Online
Information Literacy, Reference	Swimming in the Information Ocean! Taking your information skills in new and different directions NEW	TAFENSW	Online
Reference, Research	Connect, Discover, Be Inspired!	TAFENSW	Online
Metadata, Indexes, Abstracts, Special Collections	Provide Access to Specialist Collections NEW	TAFENSW	Online
Digital Repositories	Maintaining Digital Repositories NEW	TAFENSW	Online
Cataloguing	Cataloguing Basics	TAFESA	Online