



t first glance the theatre and the library don't seem to have much in common. One relies entirely on the spoken word being projected into its every corner, while in the other, for the most part, it's more appreciated if you keep your spoken words to yourself. But both actors and librarians depend on words, whether delivered to a delighted audience by an actor with a sonorous voice, or they remain silently preserved on pages for readers to discover. Sydney-based actor RICHARD ROXBURGH, star of ABC TV's Rake, has had a lifelong love affair with libraries, and here he tells us about what libraries mean to him.

DID YOU VISIT LIBRARIES WHEN YOU WERE A CHILD?

I grew up in Albury, NSW, and at the time there was a brand spanking new library complex, which now must be a quaint, cream-brick reminder of a bygone age. I remember spending a lot of time in there reading and researching school projects. It was a time when libraries were all about shoooosh, which, of course, they are no longer. I always loved reading, so the library was a bottomless trove. I've also always loved those communal spaces that give us the opportunity for focused silence: the theatre, the library, the art gallery, the temple. I remember being read to by teachers or librarians as a little boy and, later, the first time I'd do research in the library, probably in my early high school years. It was a Dewey Decimal dream.

YOU'VE ALWAYS LOVED TO DRAW BUT FOLLOWED A CAREER IN ACTING. WHAT LED YOU TO TAKE THAT PATH?

I realised, doing economics and English literature at ANU in Canberra, that I was certainly not going to have a conventional career in any of the professions. I spent a lot of time doing theatre, both acting and directing various productions, and it was very clear to me that it was not just a hobby but a passion. I loved it, and what was more encouraging, I actually worked at it, tirelessly, without prompting! When I was in my second year at uni, the graduating class of NIDA toured with their production of Twelfth Night, with Hugo Weaving taking the role of Sir Toby Belch. I remember thinking: Whatever that actor is on, I want a piece of it!

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE ARTIE AND THE GRIME WAVE?

Reading bedtime stories to my two boys has been such a pleasurable part of the parenting experience. And being able to share some of the stories that I loved as a boy gave

me such a buzz (Roald Dahl, A.A. Milne and so on). I began to think that I might write something, just for the sheer love of kids' literature, to make a contribution, however modest, to that big and wonderful hill of books.

RUMOUR HAS IT THAT YOU WROTE THE BOOK IN A LIBRARY. WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THE LIBRARY AS A PLACE IN WHICH TO WRITE?

I tried writing at home for ages, and discovered that all those old jobs around the house, all the bits and pieces that needed fixing, the dripping taps, the electrics, the shirts that needed ironing, they all got done! And my book stayed firmly planted inside my head.

Then, one day, I took myself into the library in Mona Vale, armed with my noise-cancelling headphones.

I found a place with such a beautiful sense of focus and purpose all around. It was, in short, an excellent place for me to work. (There's also an atrium that houses a family of water dragons. And there is nothing finer than staring at the goings-on of a water dragon family to stimulate the imagination.)

DO YOU TAKE YOUR CHILDREN TO THE LIBRARY?

Because there's a little glassed courtyard area at Mona Vale

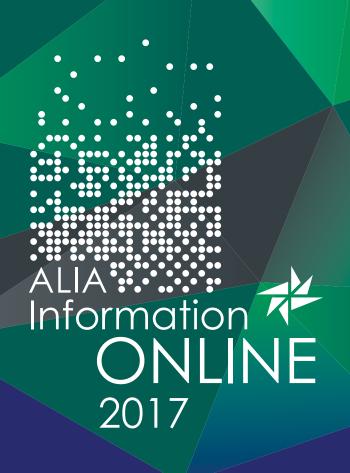
Library (where the water dragons live), my boys can be set up with books or drawing equipment and keep themselves happily occupied while we work (my wife also works at the library sometimes). I think it's really good for the boys to learn about all the opportunities libraries provide while they're still young.

DO YOU THINK LIBRARIES ARE IMPORTANT?

I remember once reading Bill Bryson's description of the difference between a piazza and a shopping mall. He noted that while the piazza angles inwards, it is about community, it represents the coming together of a neighbourhood in a confined space. The shopping mall, on the other hand, which the whole planet has inherited from post-war America, is essentially a consumerist alimentary canal, where you enter the gaping maw, you buy stuff and you are expelled out the other end.

To my mind, our libraries are the spiritual remnant of the piazza. They are busy, bustling, inwardly focused and are about community. All comers are welcome: the ancient and infirm, the tiny and new, reading groups, study groups, play groups, all walks, across all social strata, and I love it! A busy library is a measure of the spiritual health of our civilisation and, in that sense, there is great cause for optimism.





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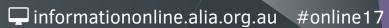












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