



# MESSAGE FROM the Martians

**A** group of practicum students bound together by wacky interplanetary acronyms recently collaborated to improve a number of aspects of the science-fiction collection at Perth's Murdoch University, writes **DAWN MCLOUGHLIN**.

A whole new world opened up for Murdoch University Library when the University Librarian had the bright idea to take seven practicum students at the same time to kickstart projects related to the library's world-renowned Science Fiction special collection. As a result, the M.A.R.T.I.A.N.S (Murdoch Apprenticed Resources Team Including Affiliated Neighbouring Schools) were born.

The M.A.R.T.I.A.N.S were a group of seven postgraduate LIS students at Curtin University, most of whom hadn't met one another before responding to an expression of interest for the practicum. The successful students had diverse skills and experiences but were united by their interest in science fiction.

The challenges of hosting a group of students were mainly logistical, such as finding enough space and enough laptops, and getting timely access to systems. Organising their schedule to balance general sessions about the library with those specific to the sci-fi special collections, as well as weaving in one-to-ones in areas of individual interest, was challenging. Flexibility was built into the schedule to allow for the unexpected.

The opportunity for the students to name the project (M.A.R.S, or Murdoch Archived Resources of Science Fiction) and their collaboration created a sense of identity and allowed the group to bond and evolve. A menu of potential projects was suggested, and at a planning session early in the first week, individuals paired up to focus on conservation and preservation of the collection, collection

*The M.A.R.T.I.A.N.S: back row left to right, Laura Martin, John Lamb, Richard Grant Front row left to right, Penelope Sherrell, Lisa Black, Adelaide Yearsley and Sarah Turner. Photo credit: Zoe Martin*

development related to sci-fi, special collections websites, and community engagement, specifically oral histories.

Once the topics were identified, we then needed to work on how the projects would be delivered. It was originally envisaged that this would need a high level of facilitation but, in practice, the group developed their workplan after the initial planning meeting. This allowed the students to start thinking about what would work best for them. At the end of project review they said that they had developed strong project management and negotiation skills during this process; they identified and allocated tasks and scheduled review meetings at the end of each day.

At the end of the three weeks, the students compiled a report that outlined the research they had done, which included recommendations and examples of good practice. It was rich with possibilities, and library staff were curious about what they were working on, so we asked the students to do a presentation about their findings to staff. This was hugely successful and was the most attended internal staff presentation we have had so far, and the discussion continued long after the presentation – aided by biscuits in the shape of a Vulcan salute.

An unexpected output from the experience was the student-created fanzine that documented the practicum. This unique artefact has now been added to our special collection.

Feedback on the student experience has been broadly positive. Some returned to visit Murdoch on Open Day – dressing up for cosplay and attending a sci-fi talk.

This was one of the recommendations around promotion and social media from their report that has been adopted, and our engagement in these channels is increasing. There is such a wealth of information in their final report, and we are still evaluating which recommendations could be adopted straightaway and which ones should be added to our operational planning for next year.

The library is excited to be repeating the experience, and the benefits far outweigh the logistical burden. Next time a new group of students will focus on a different

area, such as digital literacy or another of our special collections. Discussions are currently underway as to the exact nature of the practicum, but it promises to open up a range of possibilities. ✨

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## Fantastic library events and how to create them

**Y**ou don't have to be supernaturally gifted to conjure up a magical library event on a shoestring budget, as JOHN LOMBARD and JESSICA BEGLEY report.

This year Libraries ACT wanted to mark the 20th anniversary of the publication of the first Harry Potter book with a fantastic event – turning a library branch into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, complete with Quidditch lessons, potions class, fortune-telling, a Sorting Hat, an O.W.L. exam, a snitch hunt and wand-making. Our challenge was to do all that on a budget of \$200.

Making this event magical would require careful planning and a smart use of resources. The team was guided by the continuous improvement lessons of previous large events, including a prior Harry Potter night. These were our guiding principles:

- Don't reinvent the wheel. Harry Potter events from other libraries were an important source of inspiration. We were also able to re-use materials from past Harry Potter events, such as an Azkaban 'Wanted' poster and brick wall for Diagon Alley.
- Keep it low-tech, keep it inexpensive. As tempting as it was to have moving portraits on iPads, we got great results from the simple and imaginative – as anyone who stumbled across the transparency of Moaning Myrtle taped to a bathroom mirror discovered.
- Get all staff involved. Staff helped with everything from sign-making to teaching Quidditch, and they also provided their own amazing Harry Potter costumes on the night.



Hogwarts teacher assemble! From left: Caroline Tunstall, Jan Thurling, Jessica Begley, Tessa Barker, John Lombard, Samantha Edmonds and Jaz Beer.

Local children make reading magical at their local library.

Some ideas did not mesh with our guidelines and needed to be cut. For example, the time-consuming creation of personalised Hogwarts acceptance letters for each participant. Instead, the simple ideas often proved the most effective. A photo booth using laminated printables proved a cheap and popular passive activity. A decorated library trolley made a simple and effective Hogwarts Express. Staff dressed in costumes also provided children with moments of wonder, as Fawkes and Professor Snape learned when they fielded tricky questions from their knowledgeable young fans.

The event, which 150 parents and children attended, was a success, and there was a strong presence on social media. But the greatest success of the night was proving that with the right approach, the library could make reading magical for the devoted fans of the Boy Who Lived. ✨

JOHN LOMBARD AND JESSICA BEGLEY

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