

**State Library of Victoria
Reader Centred Development Seminar February 22 2007.
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Read This! : From Seattle to Ashfield

This morning I will be telling you about Ashfield Library' *Read This!* reading promotion : our book of the year, giving you the background to it, why it began, how it works and what the benefits are. After this I will talk about the statewide readers advisory working group which I started in December 2005.

Some Background to *Read This!*

Ashfield Library is a small, busy service operated by Ashfield Municipal Council in Sydney's inner west, about fifteen minutes by car to the CBD. We have 35,561 borrowers, with 60% of our Municipality being registered borrowers. Ashfield Library now averages over 1,000 people visiting each day.

The central branch is at Ashfield and the branch library is at Haberfield. Ashfield is a thriving shopping and eating hub with a large Chinese community which adds to the vibrancy of the area and informs some of the services and programs the Council provide. For instance, the library had a Chinese poetry event in traditional Chinese and English last June for Bloomsday.

Haberfield is the Federation suburb and home to many Italian bakeries, cafes and restaurants. The inner west of Sydney has traditionally been seen as a literary community, with many writers, poets, broadcasters and artists residing there. Ashfield Municipality is no exception.

Part of the background to starting *Read This!* is that I organise and run *Authors at Ashfield*. This is Ashfield Library's signature series of free author talks and book signings which began in May 2002 with a Sydney Writers' Festival event, something we still do each year.

Authors at Ashfield attracted 1,627 people to over 27 talks in the 2005/2006 financial year. There are over 300 people on the postal list and upwards of 100 on the email list for these very popular and enjoyable events. Authors have included: Frances Mayes, William McInnes, Christopher Kremmer, Petrea King and many more.

People attend from the Municipality, surrounding suburbs and all over Sydney, local workers, Councillors and Council staff.

We also host two community poetry evenings each year called *The Big Read*.

Why:

I started the *Read This!* promotion at Ashfield in February 2005 after taking inspiration from Brisbane City's now defunct 'One Book One Brisbane' reading program. I read an article in newspaper about Pete Carey's reaction to his book being chosen. Between 2002 and 2005 library patrons voted for the one book that would be read over the 5 week program. They included: *True history of the Kelly gang* by Peter Carey in 2002 and Kimberley Starr's *The Kingdom where nobody dies* in 2005.

I was also inspired by Nancy Pearl's 'If all of Seattle read the same book'.

What appealed about both of these promotions was that they aimed to expand reading choices and enjoyment for not only library patrons but the wider community who may not necessarily be library users.

I wanted the library to provide an inclusive, year long reading experience for our community about the books that matter: those with a serious and meaningful subject. In essence, books which make you think and talk about the issues long after you have read it. The idea of having a 'book of the year' was very appealing.

Another reason I started the promotion was that our library service already provides a high degree of readers advisory assistance, in the form of numerous booklists including an annual Staff picks list, various Patrons Picks lists, we also run two thriving bookgroups, I hosted an information session for those interested in starting their own bookgroup in August 2006 and our *Ashfield Library Gazette* newsletter is in its 13th year.

I reasoned that *Read This!* would add another layer to our established *Authors at Ashfield* series, giving many people access to authors and books they might normally have come across. Having a major year long promotion which people see advertised constantly from February to November builds up momentum and anticipation within the library and community.

How:

As I have mentioned, I like to select a non fiction book which will generate feeling and discussion. In some respects my selection is tailored to what the Ashfield library community and the *Authors at Ashfield* audience like to read and talk about. Having worked at Ashfield for twenty years and being heavily involved in readers advisory work I feel safe to make this bold claim. That is not to say that selecting a novel would not be successful, as Brisbane did. For instance, Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* is richly detailed and lends itself to a healthy discussion of history and the writing process. The thing to remember is to know your audience and what they would like.

After deciding on the book I write to the author asking if they would like to be involved. So far the hit rate has been 3 out of 3.

- In 2005 the book was *Stasiland* by Anna Funder.
A brilliant, moving account of the ordinary lives of those living in East Germany at the time of the Berlin Wall. Winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize for Biography. The event was on Thursday evening November 3rd and the book sold out.
- 2006 *Tampering with Asylum* by Father Frank Brennan.
A book dealing with asylum seekers and refugees which still has resonance. The event was on Wednesday evening November 22nd.
- 2007 *The Weather makers* by Professor Tim Flannery.
Australian of the Year, eminent scientist and author writes passionately about the future impact of climate change and global warming. The event will be on Friday evening November 23rd.

Read This! starts in February with the announcement of the title and concludes in November of that year with an evening author event in the Town Hall. The author talks about the book and the book signing concludes the event (the same schedule as for *Authors at Ashfield*). It took me a while to come up with a title for the series as all the good ones had been taken.

Publicity involves: media release; bookmarks which advertise the event; advertising in the *Ashfield Library Gazette*; on Council's website; via email and postal *Authors at Ashfield* lists; flyers; Council newsletter and more. I also buy multiple copies of the book and advertise the event on the jacket cover.

Benefits:

- Anecdotally increases Ashfield Library's profile, visits and circulation figures.
- Confirms Ashfield Library's established literary reputation.
- For the 2005 talk on *Stasiland* many German speakers attended. Resulted in a really warm feeling during the talk and book signing as some of those people had connections to the time of the Berlin Wall. People lingered and talked long after the event was over. It felt like a real community get together.
- For the 2006 talk on *Tampering with Asylum* Council was able to make a donation to a local refugee group on the night. An example of community involvement and participation engendered from this reading promotion.
- *Authors at Ashfield* mailing list is increased after each *Read This!* event.
- There is the opportunity during our Sydney Writers' Festival event each May/June to promote *Read This!* to a new audience, given that the festival program is wide reaching, with many people coming to an Ashfield event for the first time.
- Adds another layer to our signature series *Authors at Ashfield*.
- Brings regular library and *Authors at Ashfield* patrons to the Ashfield area, resulting in lot of people going out for dinner afterwards in Little Shanghai, as it is known.
- Exposes readers to an exciting reading experience where they can meet the author, ask questions, get the book signed and perhaps read outside their circle.

To conclude:

A year long reading promotion creates a level of excitement and anticipation in the library throughout the year. It can reinforce the notion of ownership; that our patrons' local library is *their* local library. It also puts books, ideas, authors and open discussion back on the front page.

Readers Advisory Working Group

The mission statement of this group is:

"Promoting enjoyment of reading and our library collection".

I completed the Rewarding Reading training in June 2005 from Libraries Alive!. It was so inspiring and enjoyable: a really worthwhile experience. I decided that I really wanted to keep the lively, important conversations going that were started at the original course.

I approached Ellen Forsyth at Public Library Services State Library of NSW with my idea of starting a statewide readers advisory group. The aim was for the group to meet a few times a year, share ideas and knowledge from fellow readers advisory staff and for the group to host a seminar. Ellen Forsyth and the State Library have given great support to the group.

The readers advisory working group is going very well, having had 4 meetings since December 2005. We are hosting a seminar at the State Library of NSW on March 6 called 'Hands on Readers Advice'.

In June 2006 the @ your library team asked us to compile subject/genre bookmarks which were branded with the @ your library logo. Volunteers from various libraries compiled the bookmarks ranging from crime to food in literature to memoir and travel.

At the end of each meeting we go around the table and each person says the book they are reading at the moment. It's great fun and I know that I am not the only person in the group who looks forward to each meeting, catching up with people and hearing about books, readers, websites, promotion ideas and more.

Benefits:

- Get to know other Readers advisory staff, especially regional libraries.
- Chance to work cooperatively with RA staff outside your library.
- Become more aware and can justify decisions already made on range of titles, authors and resources to select them from. This directly influences budgetary decisions for that area and collection development policies.
- As a group we can get behind various reading promotions including Happy Book Day and Books Alive.
- Finally, our group has come to the conclusion that we don't need to reinvent the wheel.

To conclude my talk and in the spirit of a readers advisory meeting, this is what I am reading at the moment:

The very funny travel/memoir by journalist Tony Davis called 'F.Scott, Ernest and me' about his time in Paris and his endeavours to write The Great Work.