

spoonful

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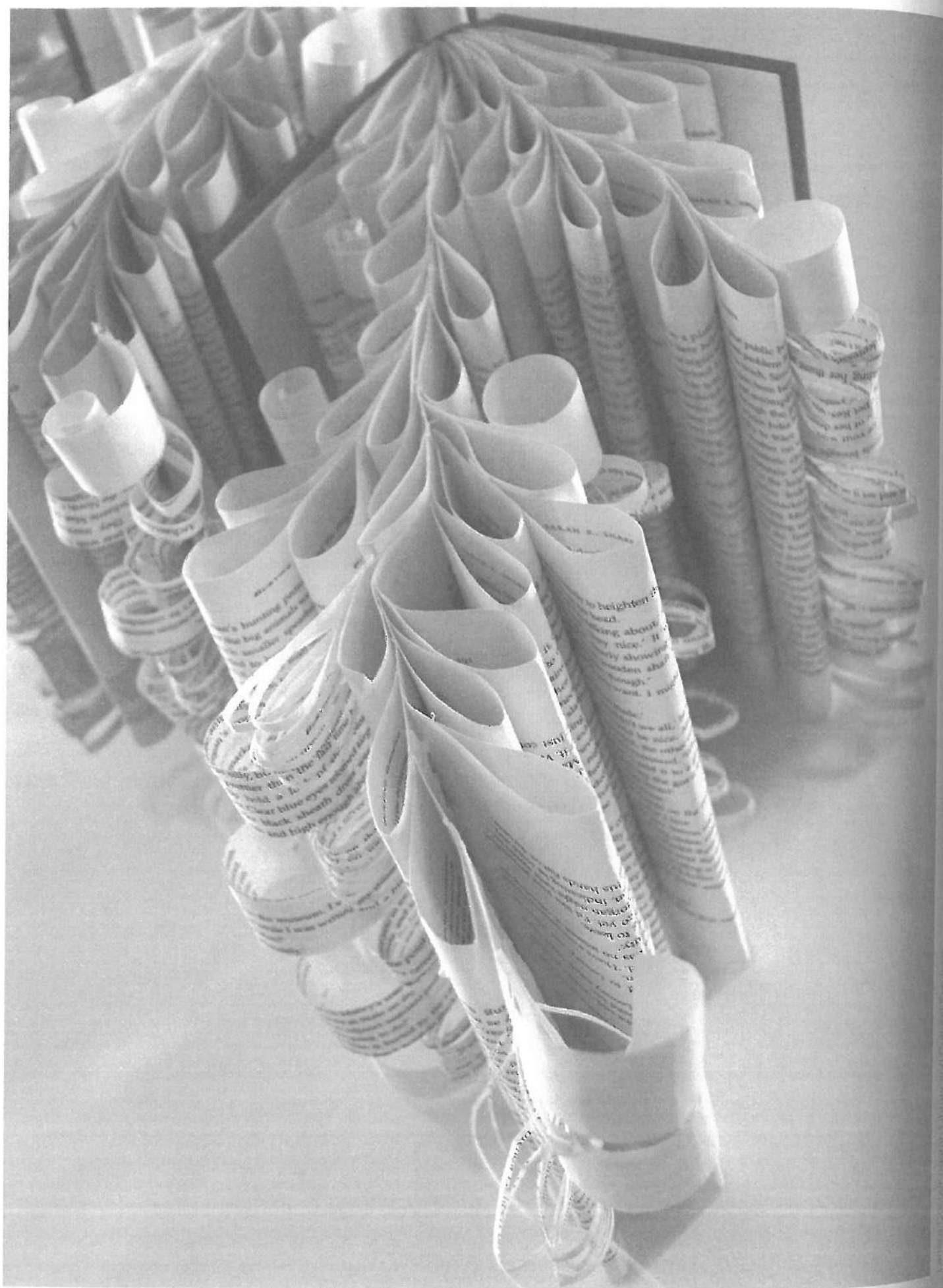


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Bibliotherapy

*...And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

William Earnest Henley

Words: Maraya Bell

The power of storytelling is universal. While stories have not always been written down, they have always had the power to connect people. Sharing human experiences makes people feel less alone and realise that others feel the same way.

Words have the power to heal, to broaden the mind, to evoke long-lost memories and to unite people. "Reading is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another's skin, another's voice, another's soul." — Joyce Carol Oates.

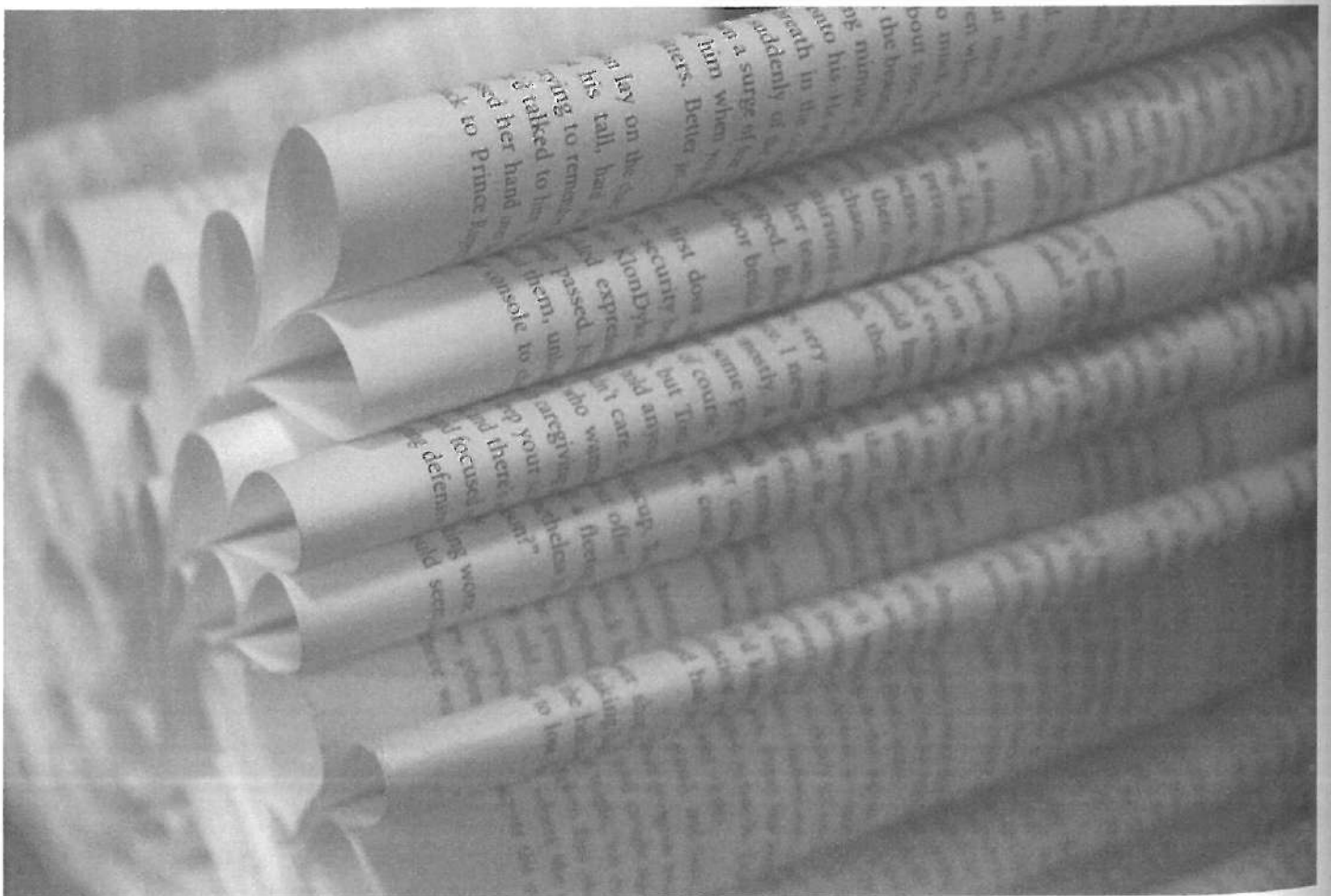
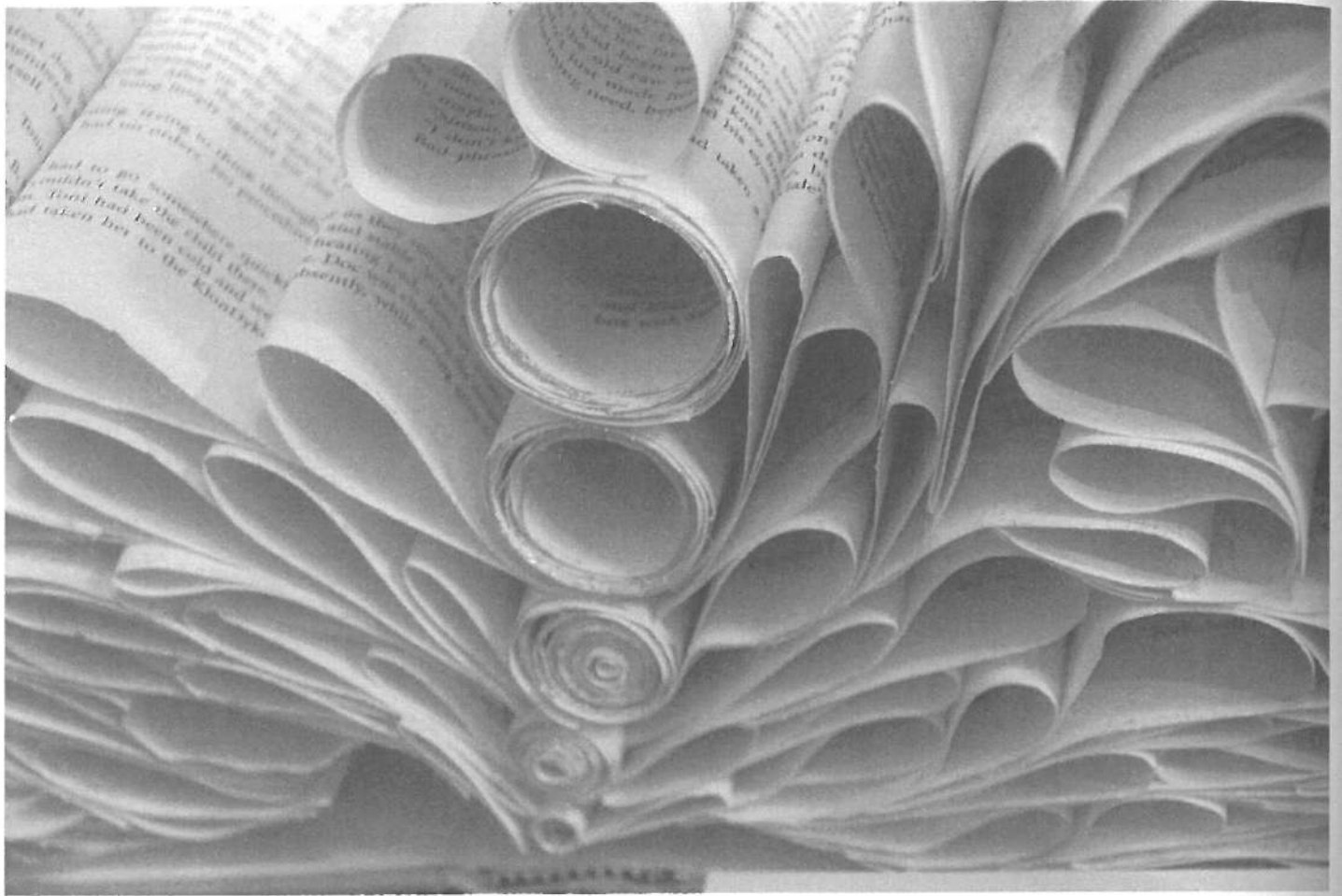
Books have long been thought to have therapeutic benefits. In ancient times signs were hung over the entrance to Greek and Roman libraries that are translated to mean Healing for the Soul. The term bibliotherapy is derived from the Latin words *biblio* (book) and *therapeia* (healing), which were first combined in 1916 to describe the use of books for healing purposes.

Over the last decade bibliotherapy programs have increased in popularity and have begun in many countries as a way to provide therapy to people with mental illness, depression, dementia and people who are isolated or at risk. They are run in community centres, hospitals, prisons, aged-care facilities and other institutions.

Bibliotherapy aims to help people to come up with more imaginative ways to solve their problems. It can be practiced on an individual or group basis.

There are three strands of bibliotherapy. Self-help bibliotherapy focuses on using non-fiction self-help books as a form of therapy when treating issues such as mental illness or depression. Books on Prescription involves a partnership between a GP and a library, where a GP will write a prescription for a specific book and the patient will fill it at the local library. Creative bibliotherapy is the use of fiction texts and poetry to elicit an emotional response in the reader that then demands a creative response in return.

The Book Well Program, currently run through the State Library of Victoria, is a program using creative bibliotherapy to support people with mental illness, depression and dementia in a range of locations in Victoria.



Christine Gember/Kogarah Library and Cultural Services
Photographic: Lynn Carlick

The program is based on the UK Get into Reading model, which has been running successfully on a national basis since 2001. Get into Reading now runs 300 programs a week, nationally. It was reading about this program in the UK that inspired Book Well founder Susan McLaine to start a program.

Susan is a project manager for the State Library of Victoria and has been managing the Book Well program. Susan, 17 other library staff and two health professionals headed to the UK to train with the Get into Reading program in order to develop the program in Australia.

"When I first started working with these groups I came across a poem, 'The Call' by Charlotte Mew. To me this poem was the perfect example of how one piece of writing could impact someone so profoundly. Her words, *Unbarred, flung wide the door / Which will not shut again; ... but we must go / Though yet we do not know / who called, or what marks we shall leave upon the snow*, described so perfectly how I felt about this program. Once I knew the healing impact that books could have on people I felt this knowledge was 'the door, which will not shut again', and what we are doing with this program are 'the marks we leave upon the snow'. Every time I read this poem it evokes such a strong reaction in me, and I love that different texts can have this impact on people."

Book Well has conducted two pilot programs. The first one, in 2010, involved ten groups run through regional and urban Victoria over eight weeks in various aged-care facilities. The second pilot was in 2012, with seven groups running, five of which were in aged care facilities or dementia day-care facilities.

"We have found that the Book Well program has been well received in aged-care areas. It offers a different type of social activity and fosters a new

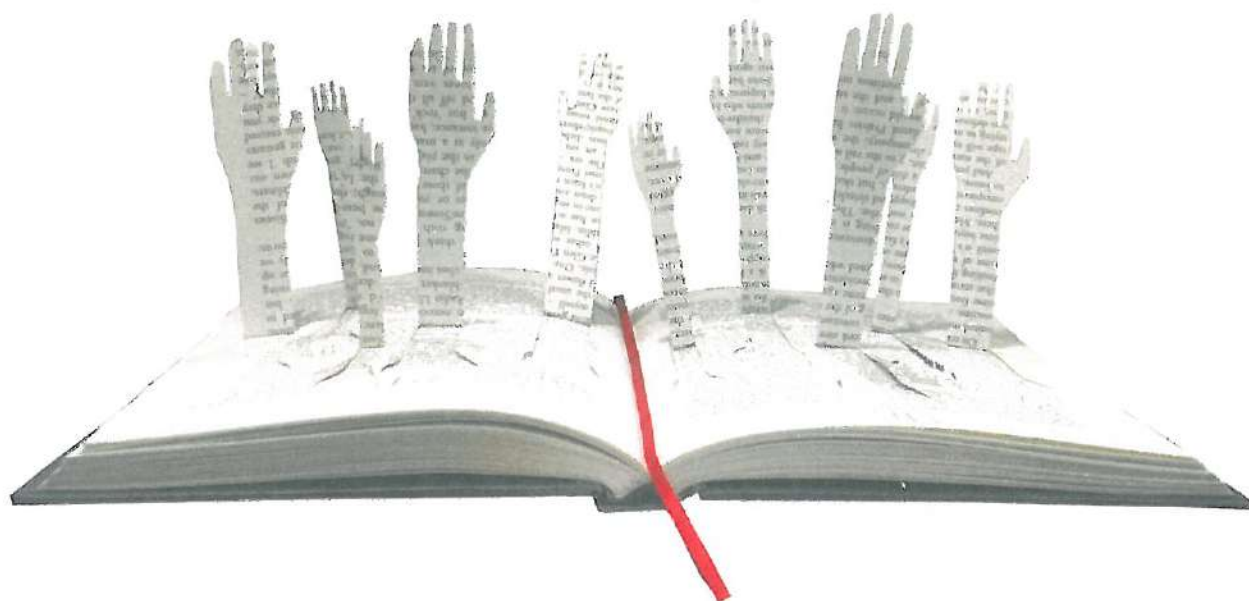
way for residents to connect with each other. The program also allows for connections to form between the residents and the staff at the aged care facility. "We found that in facilities with the program often tensions eased between residents and the staff began to understand them in a new way," said McLaine.

The Book Well sessions are conducted weekly and run for around an hour and a half. This time includes the reading of a short story, a poem and some morning or afternoon tea, which gives the participants the opportunity to discuss the texts informally and to exchange ideas and experiences. The groups are made up of no more than ten participants and are run by a trained facilitator, who takes into account the group's circumstances and experiences when selecting the texts.

McLaine adds that it is important to make sure that the texts chosen work well for the group. "We have found that a short story and a poem work the best in the timeframe we have and classic literature works best in this setting. With classic literature every line is stripped bare and is like poetry, where as contemporary literature is heavier in punctuation and doesn't flow in the same way. It's also important that the texts chosen link with their themes so that the facilitator has the opportunity to focus on these for the session."

The Book Well pilots have shown to have therapeutic benefits for the residents in aged care, many of whom isolate themselves in their rooms and struggle to interact with other residents in their new environments. It increases the possibility of them engaging with community life in their new setting.

The Book Well program is capable of building positive relationships between residents in the facility and developing a sense of community. Quite often there can be personality friction in



aged-care facilities, but once they get to know each other on an emotional level they begin to develop empathy for each other.

The program is also hugely beneficial to the mental health of residents. Participating in the Book Well groups encourages creative thinking and being involved in discussion. Participants are not put on the spot and don't have to join in the discussion during the group; they are welcome to respond privately. The group offers residents the opportunity to be with people without the expectation to interact. They have such positive responses, with one of the residents telling their facilitator, "I know the group is on a Tuesday, but I even start looking forward to it on a Sunday!"

Currently the only people in Australia trained to facilitate the groups are librarians, however, facilitators can also be people with a therapeutic background, such as social work and counselling, who are trained to handle emotions. Regardless of the background of the facilitator it is imperative that they believe in the therapeutic and healing benefits of literature and that they have a strong knowledge of classical literature.

A good facilitator is key to the group's success. They bring the texts to life with slow, expressive reading, they facilitate a safe and trusting environment where people are free to speak their minds and express themselves, and they make use of the texts, not only to engage participants and create reminiscence, but also to move through this to reflection and insight. "A good facilitator uses their position of power like they are holding everyone gently in the palm of their hand," McLaine explains.

The facility staff are also key to the success of the program — they are needed to encourage residents to participate and also to encourage continued discussion of the texts and their themes on a casual basis through the week. They assist with getting the participants to and from the group and also sit in on the discussions. Staff are also invaluable in collecting anecdotal evidence that is essential to the evaluation of the program.

With both pilots completed, the Book Well program is planning to roll out a national program.