

# HEALING FOR THE SOUL: THE BOOK WELL PROGRAM

**Susan McLaine** *Project Manager The Book Well Program State Library of Victoria*

*The Book Well program is a collaborative initiative of the State Library of Victoria, the Public Libraries Victoria Network and VicHealth. Employing read aloud reading groups, the program focuses on the power of literature to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. It particularly targets people who are vulnerable due to their situations, such as the homeless, the long term unemployed, new arrivals in Australia, residents in aged care facilities and those experiencing mental health problems. The Victorian program was inspired by the UK's Get Into Reading program. In March 2010, 20 Victorians were trained over five days to deliver the Book Well program. This paper discusses the focus, merits and implementation of the Victorian program, provides an evaluation of the program to date, and comments on future directions. Edited version of a paper presented at the Alia Access conference Brisbane 1-3 September 2010.*

The idea of bibliotherapy – using literature to heal – goes back to ancient times. The Greeks recognised the healing power of reading and often placed inscriptions over library entrances which, translated, read ‘place of healing for the soul’. Bibliotherapy today has a new voice and direction. This voice can be heard in shared reading in groups guided by a facilitator reading selected texts aloud.

The training of the Book Well program facilitators, held at the State Library of Victoria during March 2010, was the first course of this kind offered outside of the UK. The 20 participants included 17 staff from a wide range of Victorian metropolitan, suburban and country public libraries. To put this in perspective, we need to go back in time – to the UK in 2001.

Get Into Reading was set up in 2001 by Jane Davis, the founder and director of The Reader Organisation, a UK charity responsible for pioneering the use of books and reading in therapeutic ways in community settings. Davis, as facilitator in her first Get Into Reading class, was not sure if the 14 people who signed up *could* read, so she prepared to read aloud. The following describes her account of those beginnings of Get Into Reading

...it was F who made a perceptive comment about how easy it is to get stuck in life. And at the end of the session it was also F who said, ‘So when are you bringing in the good stuff? Shakespeare? Tolstoy? The poshknobs have all the best stuff. Why can’t we try it?’ I’d never have thought of reading Shakespeare with that group ...

...the [Tennyson] poem ‘Crossing the bar’ made people cry ... I started to read and had not got far into the poem... when [D] started to cry. There was real pain in her response. I said, ‘Shall I stop?’ but ...she ...simply said, ‘Go on.’ I went on. D continued to cry...

You could feel everyone in the group suffering, a mixture of social embarrassment ... and real pain on behalf of D, and perhaps a bit of pity for me, too, as the person responsible for trying to sort the situation out. There was a sense of goodwill mixed with the pain. Everyone wanted it to be all right, not just stop and go away, but to be somehow right ... Yet here was this stranger with her very recent bereavement. It was my job to bring about a solution and I didn’t know how to do it...

‘Go on, read it again,’ D insisted... This time as I read she cried, and she spoke about the lines of the poem, and others spoke too, about what the poem might mean... When it was over, she... thanked me. F... leaned over and covered her hand with his own. ‘Well done, kidder,’ he said. ‘You were brave.’ I realised then that I had stumbled into something important – that getting literature out of the university, out of the classroom, was going to have real social consequences.<sup>1</sup>

The Reader Organisation’s catchcry of ‘It’s as if a hand has reached out and taken yours,’ is an adaptation of the words ‘...it’s as if a hand has come out and taken yours’ as spoken by Douglas Hector, the English/general studies teacher character in Alan Bennett’s play *The history boys*.<sup>2</sup> This perspective regarding the impact of the best moments in great literature seemed shared by F when he extended a hand of kindness in that early Get Into Reading class just described.

While the focus of this paper is the Book Well program in Australia and the inspiration provided for it by the UK Get Into Reading program, it is important to note that Get Into Reading is only one of many bibliotherapy services on in the UK. Blake Morrison noted in an article entitled ‘The reading cure’, in *The Guardian* ‘A recent survey suggests that ‘over half of English library authorities are operating some form of bibliotherapy intervention...’<sup>3</sup>



Currently The Reader Organisation delivers 170 weekly Get Into Reading sessions in local UK institutions including prisons, care homes, hospitals, public libraries and mental health services.

The Reading Agency is another key organisation in the UK brokering major strategic partnerships and developing projects to promote reading through public libraries. In late 2009 it was awarded a contract with the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council to carry out research into the work of libraries with reading and health. While this is noteworthy, the numerous initiatives other than those of The Reader Organisation involving reading with health and wellbeing, are not the subject of this paper.

### **The Get Into Reading program**

Get Into Reading is distinguished from other reading therapy initiatives in that it emphasises the importance of serious classic literature and its role in mediating our experience and offering a model of human thinking and feeling. Jane Davis commented in an email to me 8 June 2010

Great literature is from all times and places. There is an enormous back catalogue – the stuff to which Doris Lessing referred in her Nobel acceptance speech [2007], as ‘the treasure house of literature’, and we ignore that treasure house at our peril, because it represents the sum of human wisdom. There is a great – nervous, anxious – contemporary concentration on ‘relevance’ but all kinds of texts can be relevant – Homer, Shakespeare, George Eliot – as well as the more immediately obvious contemporary literature where people wear the same clothes as us. The thing is, we have become very nervous of stuff that doesn’t look obviously like us. And formal literature teaching has compounded natural anxiety by making it seem as if we need special knowledge to understand such stuff. But we don’t: we just [need] open minds, willingness to ask questions and, above all, a willingness to not know or not understand some things. With that in your toolkit, you can dive in and see what there’s there. Which is a good place to start.

### **What happens in a readaloud group?**

It is hard to explain precisely what happens in a facilitated readaloud group. The new facilitators say ‘something magic happens’, and describe it as ‘a slippery but powerful thing’. These groups go beyond a book club approach to literature, into therapeutic areas. Though it is very difficult to define precisely, this paper attempts a working definition.

The model is deceptively simple. Each week small groups, of no more than 10 people, listen to poetry, short stories and novel extracts read aloud slowly, and respond to what they have listened to. For some, this may be to voice their thoughts; for others, it may be to just think thoughts. According to Get Into Reading worker Katie Peters (as quoted by Blake Morrison), there is something about how poetry and good literature ‘provides an opportunity to hold a thought together through time that really helps, even with people who are not natural readers’, and this invites readers to identify with those thoughts in relation to themselves. Discussion covers a variety of human conditions and reveals a little more of what it means to be human. The things that divide us are far less important than those that connect us. Exploring literature in this way is more than being part of a group.

The therapy happens when groups focus on the text rather than themselves and their problems. This state of consciousness assists group members to be open to new ways of thinking. As we begin to think differently – regularly – we can begin to look at problems of living in a different way. Participants report feeling better after sessions.

Problems with living can vary, from physical health issues to mental illness, deep grief, stress and anxiety. Despite advances in the standard of living, many of us still do not live very well within! Bibliotherapy can be a gentle therapy. The slowing down of both the reading and our responses to the reading allows space in which to look closely at ourselves, perhaps more deeply than we have gone before. The power of this program lies in a facilitator delivering a session convinced that literature has important therapeutic benefits and in group members reading carefully selected texts closely and being open to their effects. This is where, as Morrison describes

The self can get help from a book . . . But the best kind of help doesn’t necessarily come by way of self help books. Nor are the books which make us feel good usually feel good books.

### **The Australian chapter**

#### ***The ‘reading cure’***

The use of books and reading in therapeutic ways has previously been approached from a very clinical perspective in Australia, with health and wellbeing information being offered in the form of brochures and self help books.



For many converts the idea of using books therapeutically in other ways first reached them with Blake Morrison's *Guardian* article 'The reading cure' cited earlier. When researching possible themes for my own reader development honours thesis, I came across this article and it had a profound effect on me – resulting in the subject of my thesis being research of bibliotherapy practices.

Sally Heath, the editor of *A2 in Melbourne's* newspaper *The Age*, described a similar experience in an 8 May 2010 email

We read all the overseas papers and have rights to Guardian copy. We thought the program was brilliant and that Melbourne/Australian readers would be interested. We published it ['The reading cure'] on Saturday 29 March 2008.

I expected my phone would run hot with people wanting contact details for Get Into Reading but there was silence. And then there was more silence. That bugged me a little because I thought the program was simple and clearly could have a great impact. So I thought I would see if I could get funding or interest from groups to set up a similar scheme here – especially as Melbourne had just been awarded City of Literature status.

The UK organisers were up for a trip to Melbourne if we could pay their way. Finally, after hitting some dead ends, VicHealth said they would fund half the cost of the UK trainers travelling to Melbourne and the State Library of Victoria [SLV] said they would oversee the project. And when push came to shove, the SLV found the shortfall of money. 2010 and Melbourne has a pilot program underway. How good is that?

### **Preparing for The Book Well program facilitator training**

In December 2009 the State Library of Victoria entered into a formal partnership with the Victorian government's Health Promotion Foundation, known as VicHealth.

The first objective was to train 20 Victorian Book Well program facilitators. The second, future, objective would be to evaluate the project. The Book Well program facilitator training course would be conducted by an experienced UK team from The Reader Organisation. Support provided by VicHealth meant that this pilot training could be offered free of charge. Training was provided on the understanding that each facilitator would commit to the eventual implementation of a

Book Well pilot program and would assist with evaluation of the program, for reporting.

An integral part of the Book Well program is to develop community partnerships. In January 2010 an information brochure was sent to Victorian public libraries inviting them to take part in facilitator training and encouraging them to form partnerships with local organisations to develop and facilitate Book Well reading groups in their communities.

In February 2010 potential participants completed the application process. This involved a comprehensive application form designed to elicit responses about their belief in the social value of reading, their love of literature and their desire to spread the pleasure and therapeutic power of reading. The 20 successful applicants were selected by considering their responses and also with an aim to ensure statewide representation in the group and a diversity of interest in working with socially excluded and disadvantaged groups. They were asked to familiarise themselves with a variety of literature before the course commenced, concentrating in particular on poetry and short stories. The point of this was to make the participants think about *what* they read and *why* they read, thus encouraging a personal and meaningful relationship with the content of great writing.

In preparation for the Melbourne training program, in January I attended a five day Get Into Reading facilitator training program in the UK. The best way to understand the program is to experience it. Working with members from established UK Get Into Reading groups was a humbling reminder that we all suffer at times with human conditions affecting mind, spirit and body.

The UK model used, as predicted in Morrison's inspirational article, 'Davis's preference for classic texts which address existential concerns, not anodyne pep ups'. Those texts, when read slowly, enabled the members of the group to find a state of consciousness that allowed the texts to stimulate thoughts connected to their own lives. The Get Into Reading model allows participants the space to examine their thoughts and give them voice. Sharing both the story and the responses of others to it adds to the experience. The group reflection was that it is easier to reach this state of consciousness with others than when reading alone. Charlie, a



prison warden at a UK high security men's prison and one of my fellow trainee facilitators in the UK, described this feeling as similar to the one he has when the band he is part of 'gets it'.

Get Into Reading has a strong record of engaging hard to reach groups with which our public libraries often find difficult to connect. I returned convinced this program would offer ways for Victorian public libraries to undertake work that is truly socially inclusive. Through virtual communications The Reader Organisation continued to accommodate changes for the Australian environment.

However this program is not just for the socially isolated. People feel alone and isolated when they have problems with living. This program is about taking people on a journey using literature as the vehicle. I was already a reader, but the Get Into Reading experience took me to places I would never have reached reading in the solitude of my own mind. Once experienced, the power of this is not forgotten. I found the following lines, from Charlotte Mew's 'The call', contained the right words to describe how I felt

... And felt a breath stirring our hair,  
A flame within us: Something swift and tall  
Swept in and out and that was all.  
Was it a bright or dark angel? Who can know?  
It left no mark upon the snow,  
But suddenly it snapped the chain  
Unbarred, flung wide the door  
Which will not shut again; ...

After being interviewed by Tim Richards for a small piece which appeared in *The Age* on 13 March<sup>4</sup> prior to the Melbourne training program, unlike Sally Heath's earlier experience, my phone ran hot with people wanting to know more about the program I concluded that a new door had opened and what was behind it demanded exploration.

### **The facilitator training course 22–26 March 2010**

Three Reader Organisation trainers, using theory and practical methods, covered all facets of facilitating readaloud groups. The trainees also learned that the best way to understand the program was to experience it – but it was more of an experience than most expected. Many trainees came with preconceived ideas about what it may mean to facilitate a reading group,

and the texts used – as I had when I attended the UK training.

The first day, Monday, was energised with a feeling of the wonderful warmth of a shared community as trainees learned about the inspiring history of the Get Into Reading model. On Tuesday the trainee facilitators were pushed well out of their comfort zones. Poetry was read aloud and underlying emotions began to surface. Trainees were often unprepared for their own responses to words, rhythm, silence and feelings, along with the feeling of exposure when reading aloud.

As the week progressed, the trainees learned about and practised many of the skills and competencies required to be a readaloud group facilitator, for example

- allowing readaloud sessions to be about group members and their experience
- allowing silence if group members are quiet after a shared reading
- how to select materials of sufficient depth and complexity to engender the sharing of personal stories and experiences relevant to the text
- how to select stopping points within a text
- how to introduce opportunities for relevant personal and emotional responses to the text
- how to facilitate issues that might arise
- how to read aloud in front of others and be assessed with individual daily feedback.

On Thursday, the fourth day of the training, several Victorian public library staff responsible for program development participated in the training as volunteer members of reading groups led by the trainee facilitators. Taking part as a volunteer provided a useful opportunity to develop an understanding of the Book Well program.

### **The Book Well Program training evaluation overview**

Chris Catterall, national development manager for The Reader Organisation, said of the Melbourne training program

I felt the training week was excellent – great cohort of trainees and excellent coordination... We haven't experienced both excellent trainees and excellent coordination in UK based projects – usually one or the other, not both. I believe the training represents the start of a significant project in... Australia.



Nineteen of the 20 participants rated the training as excellent and feedback included

I can now, upon reflection, say that the facilitator training was succinct and highly valuable. The training ensured that I felt comfortable and well equipped to launch into a community partnership that has been absolutely successful and engaging.

A full evaluation is available.

### **Consolidating the Book Well program**

Before the five day training commenced, a date was set for a Book Well workshop one month later. Thus participants knew that networking and collaboration would continue. On the last day of training the new facilitators were asked to consider three questions in preparation for the follow up meeting

- how much time would you have to prepare, promote and deliver The Book Well program?
- which health service would you most likely approach to develop a partnership?
- can you identify a colleague/colleagues that would support you in program development?

The following resources had been prepared for the facilitators and were discussed before finalising

- a promotional flyer to offer pilot Book Well groups to Victorian community organisations
- ideas for developing partnerships with community organisations
- a guide to pilot program preparation
- a delivery questionnaire, to assist the facilitators to reflect on sessions and collect evidence
- a sample letter of agreement to use with partner organisations
- notes on reporting methodologies
- copyright guidelines
- an introductory powerpoint presentation.

Many facilitators had facilitated mini sessions in their libraries as a way of conveying to library staff and management what the program is. One commented

It was obvious that everyone involved in the facilitator training has been especially transformed in some way, shape, or form – further testament to the power of a Get Into Reading group.

Three working groups were set up – the first two to be involved within the areas of aged care

and mental health. The third was a general group. The idea was for each team to share the task of preparing suitable reading material for readaloud groups in these areas. As well as supporting each other the groups will document if materials worked/did not work and why, in order to establish a body of reference material for use in each of these three areas.

### **The Book Well Program evaluation**

An initial report incorporating feedback from the training was produced in June this year. A final report will be produced in December 2010 and will incorporate and involve two forms of collected evidence

- anecdotal evidence from Book Well group members about what they gained from their personal engagement with the program. This evidence will be collected as anecdotal comments that come naturally out of sessions.
- evidence gathered through follow up interviews with facilitators and, in some cases, public library service managers or public library staff involved with programming, and partner community organisations who deliver the Book Well program.

### **The next chapter**

#### ***Issues arising from the existing model in UK public libraries***

As we are introducing The Book Well Program into Victorian public libraries, it is valuable to draw on the UK experience and identify issues from which we can learn.

Historically, Get Into Reading has been delivered in UK libraries, but not by UK librarians. The Reader Organisation finds it challenging to get UK librarians to engage with Get Into Reading. Liz Brewster, a key figure in research into bibliotherapy and UK public libraries, said

All the public library staff who I have spoken to about Get Into Reading have noted that the cost of the training [£1000], and the intensive amount of staff time required to run a Get Into Reading group are contributing to the perceived disengagement with the Get Into Reading model. Some public librarians also resent what they perceive as an elitist attitude to literature within the Get Into Reading model.

This attitude seems to be different in Victoria. Online polling of our Book Well facilitators' attitudes towards literature used in their training



revealed that none categorised the literature used as elitist. They felt that high quality literature is important and necessary.

Many people have only been exposed to books that simply entertain. Good literature allows us to engage with issues on a deep and personal level. If lighter material was used, well we may as well read aloud anything...

Where public libraries in the UK have embraced Get Into Reading the preference has generally been for the groups to be open to anyone, rather than targeting specific segments of the community for involvement.

Both Kirklees and Stokes public libraries are excellent examples of UK public libraries running a readaloud reading group program. Links to the relevant pages of the websites of these libraries are

*Kirklees*

<http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/community/libraries/activities/rays2.shtml>

*Stokes*

<http://www.stoke.gov.uk/ccm/navigation/leisure/libraries/reading-groups/>

In March 2010 a new blueprint of recommendations for the way libraries operate in the UK was published. *The modernisation review of public libraries policy statement*<sup>5</sup> made suggestions that libraries should think more about working in partnership – with joint location of services and volunteers. The Reader Organisation was optimistic that, with new direction for public libraries in the UK, there would be opportunities to embed Get Into Reading into library service delivery by introducing Get into Reading project workers into library staff structures. How the subsequently elected new government in the UK will take up the recommendations of the review is unclear.

In Victoria we are looking at ways that library services can collaborate to provide the Book Well program. One option is for a facilitator to be employed by several library services to deliver it.

### **UK research on which we can draw**

In 2007 Get Into Reading was confirmed as an example of good practice in the UK Department of Health's consultation on its planned new strategy for mental health *New horizons*. Professor Louis Appleby, director for Mental

Health, UK National Health Service, commented

Get Into Reading is exactly the kind of work we at the Department of Health want to develop over the next 10 years – facing outward into the larger community and looking after the mental health and wellbeing of the general population.<sup>6</sup>

Research is a priority for The Reader Organisation and evidence is building that readaloud groups can help keep people well. This evidence includes the *Service user research and evaluation* (Sure) report from which the quote above comes. This report concluded that participation in Get Into Reading groups increases confidence and benefits personal functioning, such as concentration, memory, patience, reflection, ability to relax and self awareness. As a result of this kind of evidence, 18% of Get Into Reading groups are commissioned by Mersey Care National Health Service.

In October 2010 a report documenting evidence on the therapeutic role of reading in relation to depressive illness was published by the University of Liverpool, as part of a £50,000 research grant awarded by Liverpool Primary Care Trust.

### **The future in Australia**

To date we have five Book Well pilot programs underway in Victoria – two in aged care facilities, two in partnership with mental health providers and one with a homeless group. The work of the 20 Book Well facilitators, and the support of library managers, is crucial in establishing partnerships with organisations working with people experiencing physical and mental health issues.

Regular meetings will continue to support the Book Well facilitators to develop, deliver and evaluate the Book Well program. The evaluative report will be used to encourage and attract funding to further research and sustain the program.

The Book Well program is a reminder that access for everyone to reading and literature has always been a fundamental mission of public libraries. As keepers of the books within community spaces for all, they have both the knowledge of literature and the venues to support and offer the Book Well program. However readaloud reading groups are challenging and confronting. Being a facilitator will



only be for some people, just as the program will only be for some library services.

Please do read Morrison's inspirational article 'The reading cure'. The source of its intrinsic inspiration are the stories collected from group members, medical staff and people involved in some way with the Get Into Reading program. The Book Well program needs its own stories and I intend, with the 20 Victorian Book Well facilitators, to be there to collect them.

## References

- 1 Hornby, S and Glass, B *Reader development in practice: bringing literature to readers* London, Facet Publishing 2008
- 2 Bennett, A *The history boys* London, Faber and Faber 2004
- 3 Morrison, B The reading cure *The Guardian* UK 5 January 2008
- 4 Richards, T Drawing comfort and solace from the book well *Entertainment, The Age* 13 March 2010
- 5 *The modernisation review of public libraries policy statement* Department for Culture, Media and Sport UK 2010
- 6 Dyer, L (report's commissioner) *Evaluation of the Reader in Residence project Mersey Care NHS Trust 2007–2008* Service User Research and Evaluation (SURE) Merseyside, University of Liverpool 2008 <http://thereader.org.uk> accessed 3 May 2010
- 7 Brown, E *Bibliotherapy and its widening application* Metuchen, The Scarecrow Press 1975
- 8 Mew, C *Collected poems and selected prose* Routledge, USA 2003

---

Susan McLaine works at the State Library of Victoria and is responsible for programs including the Book Well program, a new creative bibliotherapy initiative. She is currently researching her thesis *Bibliotherapy practices and Victorian public libraries* and leads a new association of medical professionals, academics and public librarians aimed at raising the profile of bibliotherapy and supporting bibliotherapy based initiatives. Address: State Library of Victoria 328 Swanston Street Melbourne Vic 3000 email [smclaine@slv.vic.gov.au](mailto:smclaine@slv.vic.gov.au)

---

