

Young Australians reading

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But teenagers don't read do they?' It was this question coming from people in the media, in some areas of the literary world, and even from some teachers, that highlighted the urgent need for some research into the reading habits, experiences and preferences of 10–18 year olds. Furthermore such work, with a wide-ranging national scope and implications, was clearly part of the brief of the newly established Australian Centre for Youth Literature.

Background

The Youth Literature Program (YLP) was established in 1991 and operated out of the St Martins Youth Arts Centre in Melbourne until the end of 1998. The YLP offered events-based activities for children (8–12), teenagers and professionals. The focus was the promotion of reading, books and authors, particularly Australian ones, to inspire, inform and enthuse all these groups. The annual program of events included: *Bookgigs*, innovative events featuring an author and performances based on a work of the author; *Booktalkers*, quarterly thematic forums for professionals interested in youth literature; *Write Away Victoria*, involving 2–3 day tours to regional schools with a negotiated package of activities including *Bookgigs*, writing and drama workshops, author talks and professional development and information sessions for local parents and professionals.

Gradually other events and segments were added including the biennial *Reading Matters* conference, targeted festivals and consultancies, and sessions on aspects of creating and maintaining a reading culture in schools and homes.

Funding came from the Literature Fund of the Australia Council, Arts Victoria, generated income and some support from publishers, who recognised the promotional work of the YLP, and now the ACYL. In 1999, following a fact-finding trip to seven countries in six weeks, Arts Victoria accepted a proposal to expand the program, move it into the State Library of Victoria and establish the Australian Centre for Youth Literature (ACYL) with two full-time staff.

The State Library of Victoria (SLV) is undergoing considerable change with a major redevelopment nearing completion. A staff restructure included the establishment of a Public Programs Division with ambitious plans for reaching out to the public in new ways. Building the next generation of readers is one focus and the ACYL is seen as making a contribution here. The SLV contributes a significant amount of infrastructure support for the ACYL.

Genesis of the research project

As part of the process of establishing the centre, a presentation, including a 'shopping list' of proposed projects, was made to representatives of the Australia Council. The Audience and Market Development Division (AMDD) was particularly interested in the proposal to undertake national research. Like us, they felt it would inform their work and

develop and target their audiences. They asked for a brief to be developed. How to do this? A wide range of stakeholders (publishers, booksellers, teachers, school and public librarians) were invited to a brainstorming session. They were very keen for the research to be undertaken and, particularly, to understand why reading dropped off as young people progressed through high school. So they wanted the age range to cover the transition years from primary to secondary school. They were all busy people and happy for the ACYL to develop the brief.

Funding and process

Once AMDD were satisfied with the preliminary brief, it allocated a significant amount towards the research. However, investigations indicated it was inadequate for the level of research required. What to do? Colleagues had expressed interest in the research and its findings. So I embarked on an exhaustive campaign inviting organisations to become minor partners. They could then become part of a Steering Committee and contribute one or two questions relevant to their client base. We gained four wonderful partners, who not only contributed financially, but created a stimulating and effective partnership with the AMDD and the ACYL. We still needed more funds and were successful in an application to the Percy Baxter Charitable Trust. We now had a respectable \$85 000. The partners are the Australian School Library Association, the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, Victoria University and the Australian Publishers Association, key players all and very valuable partners. The SLV provided an observer at the meetings.

I formulated many, many questions, consulted and then grouped, and refined and refined. Once we agreed on the detailed brief, in consultation with the AMDD and the SLV, we embarked on a tendering process and selected Sydney-based Woolcott Research. We have been delighted with their work and sympathy for the project. Each briefing and reporting session was exciting and stimulating. Again there was an intensive process of discussion and refining of the presentation of the findings and, in particular, of the recommendations.

We are currently preparing for publication. This will be accompanied by a media campaign for which the ACYL has found funds in its budget. The findings are exciting and reassuring at one level. They are also a 'call to arms' to all stakeholders. More on this in a later issue.

The two-year process has been hugely demanding and intensely rewarding. Each stage has presented enormous challenges and required new ways of thinking and new approaches to solving problems. I can only hope that the responses to the report will reflect the needs expressed by the findings and serve our young Australian and future readers well. ■

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