

## THE NATIONAL YEAR OF READING 2012 – OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIBRARIES AND THEIR FRIENDS

Presidential address by Dr Alan Bundy AM at the annual general meeting of Friends of Libraries Australia 26 August 2010, held in the Launceston Library, Tasmania

*Read in order to live*  
Flaubert

Literacy and reading is critical to people in society, and the sustenance of informed, thinking and questioning democratic societies. It has been fairly stated that literacy development is *the* most important social justice issue in education. Without it no true educational revolution in Australia can occur; people cannot engage fully in society; they cannot benefit from new learning opportunities and technologies; it is difficult for them to find meaningful employment; and it can make life culturally and socially isolating. illiteracy comes at a very high cost not only to individual, but also society. Typically 60% of prisoners are illiterate or have marginal literacy. Yet only 54% of people in Australia are prose literate. As prose literate people we are in the majority – but only just.

Nearly half of the population struggles to meet the most basic demands of everyday life and work because of their inadequate literacy skills. There are many people who cannot readily read newspapers; follow a recipe; make sense of timetables; or of the directions on a bottle of medicine. This means they are denied the inspiration and joy of reading for learning, information, and pleasure. They miss the opportunity to imagine life through the eyes of others; to experience life's myriad pathways, excitement, challenges and responses in the pages of a book.

Australia's public library system, including those libraries for the vision impaired, plays the major national role in promoting early childhood literacy development and in providing free access to reading resources of all types for people of all ages and circumstances. That system lends 200 million items a year to its 12 million users, at an annual cost of only \$35 per Australia, the cost of just one book. The work of public libraries in early childhood literacy has been increasing, encouraged by the first of FOLA's Reports to the Nation Australian Bookstart: a national issue, a compelling case ([www.foia.org.au](http://www.foia.org.au)) which in 2004 asserted the case for public libraries to be funded and supported to ensure that all babies, through their parents or caregivers, receive a free kit containing at least one quality board book, information on the importance of parents reading to babies, and information on library membership and story times. The last state mainland government to come on board in investing in a Bookstart program has been Queensland, earlier this year. This is a long 18 years after the first national Bookstart program in the world was initiated in the UK. Tasmania still does not have a Bookstart program reaching every baby in the state.

Since the turn of the century, consistent with international trends, there has also been increasing attention within the Australian public library system to reader development through holistic strategies to widen the reading experience of users, and its benefits for them. Those strategies have focused on improved reader advice and information through staff training, which has been enabled by a NSW initiated but now nationally available Reading Rewards program. Other elements of their strategies have included the redesign of library

layouts and arrangement of collections for more attractive and easier access, better signage, greater faceout display of books, bookclubs, books on prescription (bibliotherapy, or reading as therapy), family reading centres, author visits, use of technology, and collection audits.

However from the evidence of the 2008 Auslib Reading critical conference on reader development and libraries ([www.auslib.com.au](http://www.auslib.com.au)) and FOLA's 2008 Report to the Nation A nation reading for life: the challenge for Australia's public libraries ([www.fola.org.au](http://www.fola.org.au)) too many Australian public libraries lack the knowledgeable leadership and staff, staff development funding, and state/territory based encouragement and support to become proactive leaders and providers of reader development in their communities. In the needed adoption of reader development policies and practices as their core business by all Australian public libraries, the major limiting factor is the continuing low investment by state and territory governments in the public library systems for which they constitutionally have the key leadership and strategic responsibility, in partnership with local government. One cumulating consequence of this underinvestment is ageing and overworked collections, as confirmed by an independent 2006 audit which identified the need for a three year public libraries collection revitalization strategy by the state government of Victoria costing \$77 million. A similar finding would be likely from public library collection audits in the other states and territories of Australia.

For Australia's public library system to maximize its contribution to a literate and reading nation requires

- reader development to be recognized its core strategic business - regardless of the great diversity of the resources, services, programs and technology of the modern multidimensional public library, the only thing that is fairly certain about their exciting future is that about 70% of their work will continue to be focused on the content of books and ebooks, and that print on paper books will continue to be published in very large numbers for as long as the world needs to plant more trees, and needs to find a commercial use for those trees.
- state and territory governments to invest in the revitalization and sharing of collections, in the broadest sense, of their public library systems – and to stop regarding greater ongoing investment as ultimately a soft option for them.

Because leadership, and what is required to develop a literate nation of readers, is not a soft option – it is a hard challenge. A catalyst for identifying the extent of that challenge will be Australia's first National Year of Reading (NYR) in 2012. This follows the precedent of the UK's very successful National Year of Reading in 2008, which was launched by its prime minister with the words

It's not just about the joy of reading, father to son or in the classroom, it's also the benefits of reading. It's probably one of the best antipoverty, antideprivation, anticrime, antivandalism policies you can think of. Let's set a big ambition for this year that we do have millions more people aware of the importance of reading, and thousands more people who can read, reading.

The UK's Year of Reading provided many incentives and opportunities for interaction, networking and greater awareness between libraries, schools, and a wide range of other national and local agencies committed to literacy and reading development for all. It had enduring outcomes (see [www.yearofreading.org.uk](http://www.yearofreading.org.uk) and [www.wikireadia.org.uk](http://www.wikireadia.org.uk)). A priority was to develop a legacy which embedded reading in the social culture. Reading for Life is now the ongoing program which builds on the achievements, networks and approaches

championed by the UK's National Year of Reading (see [www.Readingforlife.org.uk/index.php?id=425](http://www.Readingforlife.org.uk/index.php?id=425)). It was this UK Year of Reading which prompted the recommendation in FOLA's 2008 Report to the Nation that Australia should also have a Year of Reading. A similar recommendation was made at the 2008 Auslib transTasman conference on reader development in public libraries, and was endorsed at the Australian Public Libraries Summit in July 2009.

And so it has come to pass, with the formal launch of NYR to take place on 14 February 2012 as a partnership between Australia's public library system, governments, writers, schools, adult educators, youth agencies, reading volunteers, publishers, booksellers, employers, child care providers, health professionals and a whole range of other agencies and individuals concerned to develop a reading Australia. Planning for the NYR is already underway (see [www.love2read.org.au](http://www.love2read.org.au)) and I encourage all Friends of Libraries to soon start thinking about the contribution they may be able to make to the awareness and success of the NYR at the local level. Initially this could be by the convening, preferably in association with their libraries, of a local NYR2012 working group to bring together all of the interested people and agencies in their communities to develop an awareness of the NYR and of its potential for individuals and their communities. There may be a whole range of people and agencies working in local communities in the literacy and reading areas, but who have little connection with, or even awareness of, each other's efforts. The Year of Reading can provide a catalyst for that discovery.

Well-funded Friends of Libraries groups, in particular, could also consider increasing and quarantining funding in 2010/2011 to help the underwriting of specific local NYR initiatives, programs and events in 2012. Whilst Friends usually direct their funds to more tangible physical things to help their libraries, an investment of some of those funds into the NYR could well make the difference to a particular event or program happening. Those Friends with limited funding could also consider fundraising for specific events and themes in the NYR, as these events are identified.

The NYR is an exciting initiative of the Australian public library system which provides an outstanding profiling opportunity for public libraries to show the country and its governments just why they are worthy of much greater investment, and how much they already reach into so many areas of public policy and need – the most important of which is arguably literacy and reading. It is also a rare opportunity for Friends of Libraries to improve their own profile and membership in their communities by partnering with their public libraries and other agencies in something as fundamental as promoting a reading culture, and to engage with those many people – young, adult, and older adult – who need help with reading, or who simply think reading is not for them.

---