

On the road again...

Library initiative wins state leadership award

A Victorian State Library and public library network initiative recently received a Victorian 2001 Arts Portfolio Leadership Award for promoting creative writing in rural areas.

Writers on the Road, conceived as an extension of the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, took writers to rural areas throughout Victoria to raise the profile of contemporary literature and promote discussion.

Book discussions, seminars, workshops and literary lunches with prominent authors attracted more than 5000 Victorians during the course of 2001.

Australian authors involved in the *Writers on the Road* program included poet Les Murray, novelist Roger McDonald, journalist Jane Sullivan, non-fiction writers Robyn Annear and Adrian Caesar, playwright Barry Dickins and children's fiction writers Margaret Clark, James Maloney and Krista Bell.

A total of 114 literary events for children were offered over thirty-eight days and seventy-two literary events for adults were offered over twenty-four days.

The strong partnership between the State Library of Victoria and the Victorian public library network played a critical role in the success of the *Writers on the Road* project.

The project also helped to raise aware-

ness about the state library throughout Victoria, particularly in regional areas.

Funding for the project was delivered through the Statewide Library Development Grants and an Arts Victoria Touring Victoria grant. Local communities and public libraries were allocated funds through *Writers on the Road* to present cultural programs for their communities.

Indirectly, the project also supports the continued vitality of Australian contemporary literature as an art form and as a commercial product. Authors have been able to introduce their work to a wider audience, developing the market for Australian literature.

Journalist and author, Jane Sullivan, said of her experience travelling with *Writers on the Road*:

'Whether we had a dozen or forty people waiting for us, every audience energised us. We gave to them and we got back more than we gave. It wasn't just country hospitality and cakes and the librarians' enthusiasm, though this certainly helped. These people lived a long way from places that had writers' festivals or writers' centres or even bookshops, sometimes you could sense a strong need for a communal experience of books that went beyond solitary reading.'

Another author, Robyn Annear, said appreciation of their visits was tangible. 'Wherever we went on our tour, it was plain that it meant a lot to folk outside of Melbourne, that for a change, it wasn't

them who had to play Mohammed to the mountain.'

The children's component of *Writers on the Road* got off to a flying start in March 2001 with Krista Bell talking to more than 200 eleven- and twelve-year-olds at Melton Library on the theme of 'Where do you get your ideas?'

Children's librarian Nella Budicin said of Krista's visit: 'She grabbed their attention from the very beginning and the children were eager to ask lots of questions. It was good to see them so enthusiastic about writing.'

The thrill of 'meet[ing] authors in the flesh' and hearing their stories has brought the written word to life and is helping to enthuse Victorian readers and writers of all ages.

Due to the outstanding success of the 2001 project, *Writers on the Road* is being run again in 2002. 'The experience was rewarding for the authors, audiences and public libraries involved in hosting the events', said Michelle Wallace, the *Writers on the Road* project officer.

'Some of the most memorable times were when the authors could mingle with the public and talk over lunch. It presented a rare opportunity for people to relate to authors whom they'd normally never dream they'd meet,' she said. ■

Preserving information — a university black hole?

A Digital Continuity Forum questions the ability of universities to preserve their digital resources

Australian universities produce huge amounts of valuable information in digital form — research, teaching materials, publications and data of all kinds. The Digital Continuity Forum, held in November, was organised to look at the issues involved in making sure this information is not lost.

Delegates representing twenty universities, the national libraries of Australia and New Zealand and a wide range of museums, libraries and businesses met at Swinburne University of Technology's Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship.

'Australian universities are a black hole at present', forum organiser Derek Whitehead said. 'At present they lack the infrastructure and the will to make much impact on the job of archiving the vast amount of digital material they produce.'

The forum was held to consider how best to ensure the long-term survival of digital information, especially that produced by universities. Speakers came from universities and the National Library, and included academic staff and technical specialists. The keynote speaker was Neil Beagrie, head of the Digital Preservation Coalition in the United Kingdom.

Professor Richard Slaughter, director of the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University and conference co-organiser, sug-

gested that digital information is flexible, but also vulnerable. The issues are social as much as technical, and there is no simple solution.

The National Library of Australia, which has a strong program for preservation of digital information, was a major contributor to the forum. Its work in areas such as the Pandora archive contributes to the creation of a durable information infrastructure in Australia.

Professor Graeme George, Dean of Science at Queensland University of Technology, gave a scientific user's perspective on access to information. He made a plea for open access to online electronic access to scholarly journals, and strongly endorsed a current proposal for a pilot of Australian Open Electronic Archives.

The forum is a step along the way to a national approach to digital continuity — one which gives to Australian universities the role already being discussed for them in the United Kingdom. Universities must consider ways to preserve and access the information which is increasingly the life-blood of their work; Swinburne will work with interested partners to develop a focused research program, and also plans to design and offer a new AFI course on digital continuity, privacy and risk.

For the forum papers, see the website at <http://www.swin.edu.au/lib/DigCon2001.htm>. ■