



BOOKS AND WATER CAN MIX

We've all played the game of rock-paper-scissors at some stage, but what about paper and water? You don't often find libraries at the local swimming pool, but as former Olympic swimmer SHANE GOULD tells us, books and water can mix.

HOW HAVE SWIMMING POOLS CHANGED OVER THE DECADES?

The world is certainly a different place from how it was in the mid to late 20th century, when pools were a symbol of free time, control over nature and a celebration of public social life. Swimming centres now have become slicker and more comfortable. It's a more controlled environment with more indoor pools, but this change has come with stricter regulations. There's a feeling of constant surveillance and overbearing risk avoidance.

But there still are pools in Australia that operate largely as community meeting places – more like a pond in a park – and which have less overt surveillance. In 2015, I dropped in on over 50 pools and 20 river or sea swimming beaches as part of my PhD project that is examining the culture of swimming in Australia. I've visited pools in Yass and Hay – where the pool has free entry – and Nyah (on the Murray), Olinda and Lorne in Victoria. So far, the Lake Talbot Swimming Pool Complex in Narranderra is a favourite. And in the Mildura Waves pools complex in Victoria, you'll also find the town's information centre and library – all under the one roof!

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THESE FACILITIES CHANGE TO MEET FUTURE NEEDS OF AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

We need to include adolescents when we talk about families. Their boisterous activity is commonly criticised

in public spaces. Adolescents need deep water, specially designed semi-private spaces, some kind of organised activity and places where they can parade to feel included.

*'I read *Wuthering Heights* and *They're a Weird Mob* by Nino Culotta on my Munich Olympics trip in 1972.'*

Pool design would ideally have elements that mimic natural features, such as beach entry, rocks, sudden drop-offs and flowing water. Many children have limited experience of outdoor swimming or nature in the wild. This isolation from natural swimming environments means that traumatic or unpleasant experiences can occur when some people go to the beach or a river because of their ignorance about the unpredictable forces of nature. Quiet, calm spaces also need to be incorporated into pool shapes and swimming-centre architecture. The perception of the purpose of a swimming pool needs to be expanded from a place of control and discipline into a public meeting space for conversation, people-watching and aesthetic appreciation.

HOW DO YOU SEE LIBRARIES FITTING INTO THAT PICTURE?

As public places, pools could include spaces for book lending, reading and discussing. Swimming is a sensory and aesthetic experience that the presence of books, thinking and contemplation could foster. Many people, including children, like the peace and calmness that can be experienced in and around water, in addition to the

opportunity it provides for physical expression. Adding a more cerebral dimension to the environment of a public pool could reinforce these capacities of human experience, making it acceptable to express yourself intellectually as well as physically. Movement in water is beneficial for brain development and enhances learning outcomes.

ARE THERE ANY CHANGES OR NEW FEATURES YOU'D LIKE TO SEE LIBRARIES ADOPT?

Librarians need to feel confident with their expertise, but they could also become creative regarding how and where they practise their skills. Having a librarian presence in fun-park spaces would be challenging, but it could also be a very innovative way to promote the learning and development of imagination that swimming and water play inspire.



Shane Gould holding her gold medals in 1972

WHAT WOULD BE THE BEST WAY TO HELP STUDENTS WHO HAVE DEMANDING SPORTING COMMITMENTS TO SPEND SOME TIME READING OR USING A LIBRARY IN OTHER WAYS?

Elite athletes have time to read and think. They train their 'body brain', but if they exercise their thinking, feeling and reflecting mind, their physical experiences will be richer and more durable. It should be a condition of sports scholarships and national team membership to read books and write book reviews. This is in the vein of the ancient Greek ideal of the athlete who was an all-round person. A librarian can be a guide or mentor to help athletes find stimulating or helpful literature. Athletes are very privileged people and they often develop an unrealistic sense of their own importance. Learning informally and reading widely can go some way toward developing a broader outlook and a more realistic perspective on life. Many sport biographies, however, are not all that helpful as they tend to focus more on outcomes – 'someone won, someone lost ... oh the drama!' – and not so much on the life lessons that have been learned. Good books for a young athlete are classics or books on Australian themes (to understand

the rich culture of the country they represent) and books about genuine human struggles and ethical tensions. I read *Wuthering Heights* and *They're a Weird Mob* by Nino Culotta on my Munich Olympics trip in 1972.

WHAT HAVE LIBRARIES MEANT TO YOU THROUGHOUT YOUR LIFE?

Books have always been valued in my family – when I was growing up and now. When I was 12, a school librarian introduced me to Australian children's author Mavis Thorpe Clark and her book *The Min-Min*. It changed my life. The book described the beauty and mysteries of outback Australia, which I still find nourishing.

I often go on outings with my grandchildren to the library to see what new books are there; I smell them, flick through them and allow the kids to choose a book that appeals – then read it 20 or 30 times in the two-week borrowing period. Libraries have been a place of refuge for me from busyness and the social distractions of the playground. They are a place to be surprised by a new idea or meet interesting characters from faraway places. In libraries my imagination would be stimulated by an interested adult discussing a book title with me – a person with different experiences from those of parents or other adult relatives. As an adult, I have found libraries to be places of wonder – I am humbled by the intellectual industriousness of writers and thinkers. Libraries are places where time can stand still, where it's permissible to abandon yourself to words and ideas. ✨

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