

Hosting authors: a Melbourne approach

By Rebecca Combrink & Bridget Hiho

Snapshot

To accompany our piece on author visits in Canada two experienced SLAV members from St Monica's College, Bridget Hiho and Rebecca Combrink, have shared their work on authors visits highlighting the Australian context.

Nestled in Melbourne's northern suburbs is a very busy co-educational catholic school that is opening its fourth library this year when the third campus commences in 2025.

St. Monicas College is an expanding school in both student numbers and buildings to cater for the community. We have over 2,400 students currently and the number is set to grow.

The school libraries are a vibrant beating heart of the school community and are well populated by both staff and students. Our libraries run 7 different clubs and are well stocked for staff.

With a strong student focus, we welcome literary events that promote love of reading as well as support writing/drawing and all things book related.

We plan to run author talks events at each campus in 2025, with lots of thought going into the events. We aim to engage authors that students are interested in and to support curriculum where possible.

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The last couple of years we have diversified our authors to reach different audiences, for the students to have different experiences and to make a wider range of students feel encouraged to attend our sessions. Rather than running our sessions in class time, our author talks ran at lunch time as an optional sign up for a ticket activity in the library. These events always 'sell out', whilst we could move them to the school's theatre space keeping them in the library provides a sense of intimacy and maintains the events connection to the library.

In 2023, we hosted a First Nations Graphic artist, Ben Hutchings at the junior campus (7-9) to showcase his books and talk about his process of creating quality graphic novels. His presentation included the history of his connection to the genre, the history of comics and graphic novels, the lengthy planning and drafting process he undertakes for his work and concluded with a drawing session for the students. He was well received; the audience was a mix of ages from 13



to 15. This event attracted students that are on the periphery of connection to the library and helped to demonstrate our library's ability to support all students and their interests. Pictures of this event are still viewed by students on our wall gallery. The continued display of student work helps us to demonstrate our ongoing commitment valuing their work.

We also hosted Will Kostakis in 2023, in person at the senior campus. His session focussed on the process of publication and how he had struggled as a young writer and eventually found success. Both students and staff found his presentation and his ability to make the connection between our written work and our personal histories engaging and entertaining. He also ran a follow up via zoom to a Writers Club on the junior campus, where students gathered at lunchtime to hear Will talk about his novel writing and ask questions about his personal writing experiences. He assisted them with their own writing journeys. This has helped us to consider a wider range of ways to engage with authors and other artists following on from initial sessions with them.

Nina Kenwood visited in the second half of the year as we saw it valuable to run two authors for different audiences within the school. She spoke at our junior campus. She was very well received; we weren't able to keep her book *Unnecessary Drama* on the shelves in the weeks leading up to her appearance and after the talks. We have begun to run an annual excursion for students who are part of our library clubs in 2023, the first one was to the Victorian State Library where students saw Nina writing her next book as a coincidental follow-up.



In 2024 we invited George Ivanoff to visit, he was vibrant and the audience this time, was mainly boys who were super keen to listen to his 'choose your own adventure stories' which he read aloud and asked for audience participation. His dynamic writing and reading style helped the students to become engrossed in his work as they directed the "choose your own adventure" as a team.

Biffy James made an appearance at both the senior and the junior campuses. Biffy has a

history as a High School teacher and this showed in her ability to connect directly to our students, even the more reluctant ones that had been bought along by friends. Biffy spoke about the catharsis of writing lived experience and about her upcoming novel. She was a hit with the kids and gave them a sense that authors were approachable and genuine people with a love for all things books.

Lastly Mark Smith made an appearance to a senior cohort of students. This event was unique



in that it was the first time we made use of the school's policy allowing students to move between campuses and we had a group of interested students from our junior campus walk over with one of our Teacher Librarians to attend the session. The junior campus students were not only excited to hear a talk that was designed for the older students but to also see the campus that would be theirs in a few years' time. Mark spoke about his disconnection to reading as a teen and the horse-riding accident that changed his life. This accident led him to a life of teaching English, writing short stories and eventually turning those short stories into full length novels. His talk was a lesson in resilience and was exactly what our senior students needed coming up to their examination period.



Into 2025, I would like to further diversify our range of authors to align with our student cohort and have an Indian author present at our campuses.

The process of selecting our authors for 2025 and beyond will incorporate student voice, engaging them in discussions about books they are interested in and topics they care about prior to providing experiences in the library. In addition to traditional author talks in 2025 St Monica's College is planning to host a range of diverse events to engage students socially and ethically, the first being a talk by Vision Australia showcasing their work with Seeing Eye Dogs. This will include a fundraising drive and will give the students an opportunity to see dogs in training.



Bridget Hiho is currently Faculty Head of Library Services at St. Monica's College. Bridget has worked in school libraries for over 25 years and has a ginger cat named Atticus.

Rebecca Combrink has worked in school libraries and taught English for 3 years after starting her career in academic libraries. At home Rebecca has a tiny calico cat named Toast.