

Reading the Future

By Anna Burkey

I watched as two boys sat on the floor of the bookshop, counting coins. 'We're one short,' came the verdict, as they stared at their combined silver. Pockets were searched, and a gold coin found! They ran full tilt for the shelves, whisking the latest Darren Shan toward the queues at the till.

I'd have had to donate the final coin if it hadn't surfaced, given the looks of pain on their faces. Much like the 87% of children and young people in Australia who report enjoyment of reading at home (Dickenson, 2014), they simply couldn't wait to read that story. We know that the access children have to varied reading matter impacts their desire to read: personal choice, and respect for those reading choices, is essential. Libraries, bookshops, festivals and authors' school visits all foster that desire to connect with reading, and provide positive spaces that encourage shared experiences.

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We still face problems. The National Year of Reading data should loom large in our thinking for years to come – 47% of Australians face problems with literacy – and we don't have the detailed analysis in this country about exactly what young people are reading, why it appeals and how they choose to access it.

What we can see clearly, looking at global trends around media consumption and technology patterns, is the rise of social sharing, and the increasing ways available to us to debate the written word.

As the traditional publishing industry struggles to produce enough content to keep up with the digital generations, online offers like **Figment** and **Storybird** are appearing to fill the gap.

Figment is an American-based publishing platform for young people, with space to upload original stories and read or review work by others. You can select cover art for your finished work, and attend online events to chat live with well-known authors.

Storybird takes the connection with authors further. You can write your own books, and illustrate them with the highly visual interface, but you can also read stories commissioned specially by Young Adult (YA) writers; Australia's Penni Russon was one of the first authors to be engaged for the project.

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The majority of teenagers online are creating their own content as reported in the Pew Research Centre's article titled **Teen Content Creators and Consumers** (Lenhart and Madden, 2005). They are already telling stories out

there in the digital world, and are working seamlessly across many different platforms. The lines between reader and writer are blurring.

In 2013, Emmy Award-winning **The Lizzie Bennet Diaries (LBD)** showed what could be possible with this multiplatform storytelling. With a new take on Jane Austen, LBD joyfully adapted the world of *Pride & Prejudice* for both fans and new readers, bringing characters to life on YouTube, websites, blogs, social media accounts and live appearances at comics' conventions.

In LBD, Lizzie Bennet becomes a grad student, documenting her life through video blogs (vlogs). Each character has their own online presence, just as the readers/watchers do, with viewers able to see the pieces of the story unfold across the different media. We see Lizzie roll her eyes at sister Lydia; we read the tweets of the characters as they attend ball and gossip about each other. We can follow Jane Bennet's fashion choices on LookBook; we can listen to the music playlists set by Darcy's sister Georgina.

Crucially, we can talk to the characters. Fans new to Austen's story – and there were many of them, given that episode one racked up over 1.5million views in just over a year – frantically warned Lydia Bennet that the dastardly Whickham was bad news, as attached as if the pair were a real-life couple.

Regular viewers of the weekly instalments even tried to crash one of the web channels, to stop it from denigrating Lydia: producers had to quietly contact the hackers, to assure them that the emotionally abusive relationship portrayed was integral to the powerful storyline of the book (and LBD web series).

On home soil, **Nowhere Boys** has been a successful venture for the ABC, who invested in a TV adaptation of the book, with a linked computer game. The character you play in the game is a fifth protagonist – an addition to the book/TV storyline, but a character that integrates with the screen-based storyline toward the end of the series.

These trends to connect with other fans, interact with professional creators and create original content themselves are key to presenting relevant approaches to reading for today's children and young adults.

At the **Centre for Youth Literature**, we're working on applying this knowledge to our **Inside a Dog** website for teen readers. First launched in 2006, the year before Facebook exploded, Inside a Dog is a home for young Australian readers, and continues to see annual increases in the number of visitors. To ensure we remain relevant and inspiring for tomorrow's teenagers, we're developing the site to host more content created by teens for teens, provide greater access to authors and increase the range of stories young people can discuss: books, comics, poetry, non-fiction, graphic novels, transmedia and more. In broadening our offer, we're seeking to reach many more young people, moving beyond those that can afford bookshop visits to those who have fewer opportunities to connect.

In tandem with our plans for supporting teenagers, we've piloted **Shift Alt Story**: an online introductory course for youth literature professionals to discuss digital storytelling. The flexible course has been designed to share knowledge among peers, with participants bringing their ideas and expertise to the table as they interact through articles, online chat, practical games, creative tasks and reflection pieces.

Part discovery, part skills development, the Shift Alt Story course has demonstrated how much knowledge and interest youth librarians have for online storytelling. In a world where time for research is limited, and in-person PD opportunities are minimal, the digital space will be an essential tool for professional sharing, as well as creative collaboration.

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It's our job to make it easy to access reading, to show it as appealing; an everyday part of modern life. At the heart of all these online trends and digital projects lies a fundamental: a strong story will win readers, whatever the format we use to absorb it.

I'm still picturing those two boys from the bookshop, side by side on the grass outside, reading together. Whether it's online or in person, great stories will always be special.

References

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