

A Prescription for Life

Dr Mary Carroll

Recently I listened to a fascinating presentation called *The library as Medicine Cabinet: Inventing Bibliotherapy in the Interwar Period* by historian Mary Mahoney from the University of Connecticut. In her presentation Ms Mahoney explored the role of librarians employed in hospitals as therapists in the U.S. in the 1940s and 1950s. These librarian-therapists diagnosed patients' reading requirements and dispensed appropriate reading according to their diagnosis. The librarians consulted with other health professionals, wrote case notes and attended to the symptoms of their patients in the way of other health professionals within the hospital.

Other presentations I attended explored varied topics, including the role of libraries, books and reading in spreading and supporting democracy, reforming prisoners, breaking down segregation and assisting refugees. I don't pretend to have anything more than a general understanding of bibliotherapy, or many of the other things I heard presented, but these papers were fascinating for various reasons. Most profoundly, and in taking a long view, what resonated for me was the way in which, over time, reading and books and, by association, libraries, have been invested with immense power to change lives, cure social ills and generally change society. This is a weighty responsibility.

The topics of these papers also made me think of school libraries and school librarians. I wondered if – in thinking about children, youth and reading, particularly the reading of fiction – teacher-librarians consciously or unconsciously invest books and reading with the type of power spoken about in these presentations? When teacher-librarians select, compile or recommend reading, are they conscious of the subtext of their choices or their personal motivation. Are they trying to provide a therapeutic experience, influence opinion, change a perspective, broaden an outlook, create better 'citizens' through exposure to different ideas, provide cultural education . . . the list goes on?

What do you know about the choices you make? When you look at items in your collections do you understand fully why you have chosen them? Are they selected for their merits in meeting a particular need or objective of a collection development policy or to support a particular belief or value – or perhaps both, and is this a conscious decision – transparent to the user and to you?

It may be that this is part of a broader discussion about censorship, one which asks us to examine what values inform our choices. Thinking this through might also make us consider bigger questions, questions about why we value reading as a pursuit and what, apart from the most utilitarian of reasons, do we hope it will achieve. Do we see our school libraries in part as a type of societal or educational 'medicine cabinet' with the teacher-librarian as a resource-rich 'health' professional? I ask these questions because the stories of libraries for children in Australia are littered with intentions for their purpose beyond that of providing a place and space for reading and education.

Do we see our school libraries in part as a type of societal or educational 'medicine cabinet' . . . ?

From the earliest days of colonial Australia, libraries, books and reading have been used as part of broader social, cultural and educational objectives. Library advocates of the past perhaps did not address directly physical or psychological needs but they invested books,

reading and libraries with the capacity to transform both individuals and society. In this context, libraries have at times been accused of being tools of 'social engineering' (Black et. al, 2009), vested with the power to promote cultural pluralism, model aspirational cultural traits and reflect 'high' culture. Libraries were also seen to have a central place in promoting social advancement through education and in supporting adult and continuing education.

If we look at our convict past, the use of books as tools in constructing a new society was seen as a priority in the *reform of the boys at Port Puer Boys Prison, Tasmania*. To teach reading the employment of a

schoolmaster was seen as essential because:

The juvenile prisoner . . . is in general deplorably ignorant of religious and moral duties, incapable of comprehending the public addresses of the Chaplain, or of reading and understanding good books which may be lent him to peruse (Horne, 1843).

That books be 'uplifting' and instructive amongst the general population in the new colonies was also important else "we shall have inundations of novels and romances through the Colony, and the time of our youth will be wasted and their intellect perverted" (*Hobart Town Gazette*, 1826). So 'good' and appropriate books and reading became part of the foundations upon which colonial society was built.



Books, reading and libraries for children continued to be seen as important by social and educational reformers. E. Morris Miller, author of the very influential *Libraries and Education* (1912), was of the belief that "the early acquirement of a habit of good reading is essential in every child" and that "reading for its own sake is not the primary object".

Miller considered that what was really important was "efficiency to confront the hard facts of life with courage and foresight and effectively resolve them" and that "good readings" would act as "instruments towards intelligent and more fruitful aspirations" (Miller, 1912, p. 55). Good reading was also to be closely linked to improving the lot of the working classes. For its sheer excess one of my favourite quotes about the value of reading for children appeared in the *Kingsville Labour Gazette* in 1924. Labor Councillor Mappin advocated fiercely for the establishment of a Children's Library for the working classes of Melbourne's West. His argument read in part that good literature was essential so

they [children] may distinguish Truth from Falsehood, become cultured, and aspire to those honours which at present, are the preserves of the privileged . . . Children must be taught that good literature, like a sound barque, will bear them across the Sea of life; through the uncharted waters, to the Port of Well done. (Kingsville Labour Gazette, August 1924)

His advocacy was successful and this early children's library was established in 1926 in a shopfront in Victoria Street, Seddon, with a collection of 589 carefully selected books to guide the West's children "across the sea of life". Not for a moment do I believe those promoting books, reading and libraries for young people in the 21st century would use the language used by our predecessors. However, it is worth asking if the essence of these ideas remains at the heart of school libraries today? In daily practice do teacher-librarians continue to 'prescribe' books based on their 'worth' as defined by these values? And is this underpinned by an enduring belief in the power of libraries, books and reading to change lives?

References

'Benjamin Horne's Report on Point Puer Boys' Prison, to His Excellency Sir John Franklin K.C.H. and K.R. Lieut. Governor of Van Diemen's Land, Point Puer, March 7 1843'. Edited extracts from Archives Office of Tasmania document C0280/157/520, Accessed at:

<http://keyportarthur.org.au/extras/1040/Benjamin%20Hornes%20report%20on%20Point%20Puer.pdf>.

Black, A., Pepper, Simon & Kaye Bagshaw (2009). *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering: Early Public Libraries in Britain from Past to Present*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT.

Dormer, R. & Whelan, J. "An Almost Incredible Academy" – *The Boys Prison on Point Puer*, Accessed at: <http://acea.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Paper-Dormer.pdf>.

Miller, E. Morris (1912) *Libraries and Education*, Melbourne; George Robertson.

Schneck, J. (1945) 'A Bibliography on Bibliotherapy in Hospital Libraries' in *Bull Med Libr Assoc.* Jul; 33 (3), pp. 341-356.

Dr Mary Carroll is Associate Course Director in the School of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University.