

## The ISLM Bookmark Exchange Project

*By Breege O'Brien*

The Bookmark Exchange Project is an activity organised by the ISLM Committee of IASL for International School Library Month (ISLM). It is a simple, fun way of sharing the pleasure and delights of books and libraries and of making new friends through school libraries around the world. The Project involves schools making homemade bookmarks and sending them to matched partners. Participating schools register online with the Project Coordinator who sets up suitable exchange partners for them and puts paired groups in touch. The Project has been running for about 10 years. I was immediately drawn to it when I first heard about it on joining the ISLM Committee in 2009. At that time the Project was being coordinated by Rick Mulholland of Canada, and I have been coordinating it since 2010.

I am a full-time teacher-librarian in a small, second-level school on the west coast of Ireland. The work of the Coordinator is done on a voluntary basis. It can be challenging, and time intensive, but that aspect of the role, I feel, is totally outweighed by the great personal satisfaction I gain from seeing the enthusiasm, delight, creativity and commitment generated by the Project from thousands of students and their teachers and librarians worldwide. Each year, the feedback from participating schools is overwhelmingly positive, and because my teaching colleagues and I involve our own students, I know first-hand the learning, and the delight, resulting from the activity.



*Students from Ireland with their bookmarks.*

Last year (2012), 17,829 students, ranging in ages from 3 to 18 years, from schools in 22 countries, participated in the Project. Students from Canada, Croatia, Australia, the UK, Hong Kong China, Mainland China, Jamaica, Ireland, India, Pakistan, Hungary, Trinidad & Tobago, New Zealand, Indonesia, Romania, Scotland,

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Costa Rica, Portugal, Poland, Georgia, Italy and Estonia all enjoyed bookmarks (the list of countries represented varies from year to year). Groups as large as 900 register right down to the other end of the scale where groups with less than 10 members sign up. No group is too small or too large, and all are welcome – single sex schools, mixed gender schools, students with special needs, library groups, mainstream schools, and institutions that deliver education to young people outside of mainstream education. There is no registration fee, the only costs being for the materials used to make the bookmarks and the postage to send them to the matched school(s). Membership of IASL is not a requirement for participation, which is, I believe, as it should be; otherwise opportunities for involvement would be severely limited. The administrative language of the Project is English, and many schools choose to use English as their working language for the Project, but of course students also use their own language, adding greatly to the cultural interaction.

International School Library Month is October, and the idea of the Project is that bookmarks be sent to partnered schools during that month each year. Having said that, I am aware that some schools make their own mutually suitable arrangements on this once they are paired, so that bookmarks may arrive at another time during the school year. I try to get the registration process up and running by June. Once schools send in their details online (basically a contact name and email address, school name and address, and details of participating groups), I can start looking for suitable partners. Groups are matched according to age profile and group numbers, and it is most important and helpful that these particular details accompany the initial registration. Very often, instead of sending in age details, schools only send in Grade/Class details, not realising that I would be unfamiliar with the average age of students in the Grades, because in Ireland, where I am based, the Grade/Class structures do not equate with education systems in other parts of the world. I aim, in so far as possible; to find matches for groups in the order in which they register, but very often it could take some time before suitable partners register. It is not always possible to match all the groups in a school with one other school, so schools with higher numbers can expect to be given a combination of partners.



*Students from Portugal working on their bookmarks.*

Now and then, a school rejects a match offered and asks me to find a different match (usually on the basis that they have had a previous negative experience with a school in the country being proposed), but more



often than not, schools happily accept the proposed match. Admittedly, and unfortunately, sometimes there are unhappy experiences, the main cause being that a registered school does not follow through and send the bookmarks as arranged. I know from personal experience with classes that this is most disappointing for students so full of the anticipation and expectation of having their efforts reciprocated by receiving bookmarks in return for those they have so carefully and thoughtfully crafted. As Coordinator, I am unable to guarantee a successful or positive experience; we can only trust to the professionalism and commitment of those registering.

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The core activity of the Bookmark Exchange Project is the making and exchanging of bookmarks, and this is where the young people come into their own. Young people enjoy telling others about themselves, where they live, and the things that are important to them. In this age of texting, social networking, Skype and

whatnot, it is wonderful to see how they can use a simple bookmark to share something of their world view with others. And, repeatedly, the joy of books and libraries is celebrated in their work. The Project invites the creation of bookmarks that reflect the ISLM theme, decided each year by the ISLM Committee. The theme is frequently interpreted in the very broadest sense, and each year bookmark makers produce the most fabulous creations – colourful, imaginative, decorated in intricate designs; full of details or just making simple statements; shaped as flowers, or any number of different animals or other items; pop-up bookmarks, corner bookmarks, every shape and size under the sun; sometimes laminated, sometimes not; usually made out of card, but I have also seen fabrics, dried flowers, crochet, and handcrafts used.



*Some of the finished bookmarks from Portugal.*

For some teachers and librarians, the Project is a one-off exchange of bookmarks completed during the month of October. For many, however, it develops into an extended project often rolling out over the course of the whole school year. If you are a member of IASL you might have read recent emails on the IASL Link from Madhu Bhargava about the school exchanges between G.D. Goenka World School, India and Oban High School in Scotland. These evolved out of a pairing for the Bookmark Exchange Project. I almost always have my own students send items such as snail mail letters, a class scrapbook, postcards, and posters or

brochures about our area, as well as the bookmarks, and over the years, in addition to the bookmarks, we have received items such as books from New Zealand, music CDs from Croatia, and letters from groups in many parts of the world. One school we were recently matched with in Croatia got the wider community involved and an adult community group sent a collection of additional bookmarks and other items.

This past year one of my groups had a great exchange that ran throughout the year with a school in Trinidad under the guidance of Librarian, Renée Heywood. I had a class of 20 students, mostly boys, quite disengaged from their schoolwork, and usually disinterested in most of the things going on in the classroom. They were quite dubious at the outset about the Bookmark Project. But they did the bookmarks and wrote their first letters, and became really interested when they began to have contact from Renée's students. They did some research about Trinidad, were pleasantly surprised to receive an email to the class about Festivals in Trinidad, and some digital photos, and then a set of letters from their counterparts. They wrote another set of letters and would have eagerly engaged in further exchanges except that they were preparing for a state exam at the end of the year and could give no further time to their newfound Trinidadian friends. Unfortunately, I could not take up a suggestion from Renée that we Skype because our school is not set up for Skype, but all in all this was a wonderful learning experience for my students, expanding horizons and opening up new possibilities.



*Bookmarks and other items from Croatia.*

Over the years, the Bookmark Exchange Project has proven the most popular of a mix of activities for ISLM organised by the ISLM Committee – currently a small group of just three, Marie O'Brien (Chairperson) from Australia, Gerri Judkins (New Zealand) and I. In recent years numbers in our Committee have dwindled. We would gladly welcome newcomers and invite anyone interested to contact us. We 'meet' online, bounce ideas off one another via email, and share out the work. Marie's leadership and guidance are invaluable, and she also looks after the design and production of the ISLM Poster and Bookmark. In recent years, Gerri has coordinated a Skype Project for ISLM, and she also coordinates the gathering of translations of the annual theme. These are made available online for any schools who wish to have them. The dedicated ISLM page on the IASL web site gives an idea of the activities schools run worldwide for ISLM, and full details on the Bookmark Exchange Project.

I would like to see even more students and schools, representing many other countries, getting involved in the Bookmark Exchange Project. The theme for 2013 is School Libraries: Doorways to Life, and registrations are being accepted through September (and even into October, but the later schools register the more difficult it is to find suitable matches). If you would like to become involved you can contact me at [islmbookmarkexchange@gmail.com](mailto:islmbookmarkexchange@gmail.com) – we would be delighted to hear from you!

**Breege O'Brien** is the ISLM Bookmark Exchange Project Coordinator. She is also a teacher of English and French, and a teacher-librarian in Coláiste Pobail Acla, a community college in Achill on the west coast of Co. Mayo, Ireland. She is a member of the in-school senior management team and in addition to having responsibility for the school's library is also the school's planning coordinator. She is a longstanding member of the national committee of SLARI (the School Library Association in the Republic of Ireland) and also a local facilitator for INOTE (Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English) in which role she coordinates and delivers continuing professional development to teachers.