

CHAPTER NINE

FICTION SERVICES

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Fiction Services

Introduction

It is perhaps surprising to find a chapter on fiction services in a book primarily concerned with considering the information needs of community groups. It is certainly challenging to try and shift the emphasis when looking at community information services, that is, to focus on the 'community' rather than the 'information' aspects of the service. The aim of this chapter is to illustrate that public library fiction services can, and do, make a positive impact on the local community, particularly, but not exclusively, on those members who have special needs. As Margaret Drabble recently argued,

Novels are not, as all who read and write them know, a frivolity, a luxury, an indulgence. They are a means of comprehending and experiencing and extending our world and our vision. They can exercise the imagination, they can widen our sympathies, they can issue dire and necessary warnings, they can suggest solutions to social problems, they are the raw material of the historians of tomorrow.¹

Of all public library services the community information service is one which most reflects the ethos of the library authority, and this was also evident when a selection of library authorities were surveyed to provide background information for this chapter on their fiction services to special groups. Whilst one or two, rather apologetically, felt that they could not provide anything of interest:-

... although we do a great deal of special services work with all of the groups

... I'm not sure that we have anything currently which quite matches your description ...²

—most seized the opportunity to reassess their services from another point of view and were able to identify appropriate services and projects. For example, there were Sheffield's Write Back and Opening the Book initiatives, which were seen as 'focusing on support for creative writing ... and making ... an innovative contribution to libraries' support for and promotion of fiction'.³

The main problem facing fiction services in community service terms is that they are generally considered as separate, if not mutually exclusive, services. This dichotomy is compounded by the fact that most fiction stock tends to be distributed to special needs groups in the community as part of the general library service, and thus does not necessarily come under the direct supervision of the community (information) librarian, but rather fiction provision is managed through a number of differing and disparate channels. In essence, fiction services to special needs groups are no different to 'ordinary' fiction provision, excepting a difference in format, that is books in large print or on audio cassette, and/or service delivery, because so-called 'special needs groups' still have the same variety and depth of fiction needs as everyone else in the community.

So, rather than describing the approaches taken by individual library authorities, fiction services will be considered in this chapter essentially in terms of provision for specific community groups, together with some examples of community-wide initiatives.

Adult Literacy Services

Fiction has an undeniable input into adult literacy services, particularly as such services should be responsive to customer needs regarding materials. There is a continuing need for assistance to those who have problems with adult

literacy and basic numeracy skills; one estimate is of approximately two million adults with literacy problems.⁴ A number of librarians surveyed noted the difficulties in finding good suppliers of relevant fiction at an appropriate level and subject interest to serve the needs of those with little confidence and poor reading skills, though the range has increased in the last few years.

In Staffordshire, Hanley Library has produced a resources guide, incorporating an index, to Adult Basic Education (ABE) fiction, which is aimed at staff, public, and ABE tutors and pupils.⁵ The guide is divided into three main sections: beginner readers, developing readers and advanced readers. Books are entered into a particular section according to criteria such as word density, language, print size, length of book and illustrations, and a brief description is also provided. What is particularly useful is that to facilitate the effective identification and choice of suitable reading materials, a representative sample of print and language taken from each book is also included as an integral part of the guide.

An innovative approach to raising the profile of reading and improving literacy in the community, targeted towards those groups who are over-represented amongst the total numbers of people who lack reading skills, is currently being planned by Birmingham City Council.⁶ The action research project, entitled Skills for Life, which forms part of a Community Care Special Action Project on Reading, aims to raise the profile of reading in the City. The justification for this project is that, despite the advances in visual communications, the printed word remains the main form of communication and instruction and so the key to acquiring other skills is the ability to read. There was a feeling that, although the current concern with literacy is valid, it has tended to focus upon methods of teaching (particularly for children), rather than tackling the wider and more pervasive problem, that is, the motivation for reading: people

increasingly feel that they are 'too busy to read'.

As a way of tackling these problems, and encouraging people to simply make time for reading, an innovative promotion, entitled *Why Read?*, is being planned for 1992. Essentially, the message of the promotion is that reading is a fundamental skill for life and a unique pathway to information and imagination. It will be aimed particularly at teenagers and adults in the workplace and at home, using visually striking leaflets, posters and 'taster' booklets which will be piloted in projects with local firms and users of Council services. For example, promotional material giving answers to the question 'why read?' could suggest all the reasons and possibilities whether informational, recreational or educational and could include people of influence—pop stars, sports personalities, community leaders, politicians—giving their reasons. There are plans to appoint a Reader in Residence, and it is also hoped to regenerate the reading habit by taking the campaign out into factories and companies. One way to do this could be by encouraging firms to sponsor 'lucky bags' of reading chosen by, say, a famous personality. After reading the contents of the bags each recipient would be encouraged to respond and give feedback, either by writing or through discussion, about the experience. Bags could be swapped, and eventually groups could put their own bags together, to be exchanged and discussed.

As well as developing new ventures along the lines of those suggested above, there are plans to further promote work which is already being undertaken in Birmingham, for example, the Library Services' Early Literacy Projects and Parents' Reading Groups. A new service which has recently been introduced is Words on Wheels, a mobile library which promotes the value of reading to children under five and their parents and carers. As well as displaying books, toys and educational games for young children it also provides information for parents and carers, and offers activities such

as story sessions, workshops and talks.

What is most attractive about Birmingham City Council's initiative is that it is Council wide. Although the Library Service will inevitably play a leading role, it is hoped that this wide-ranging approach will ensure that all Council services promote the necessity, value, and pleasure, of reading to the whole community.

Children and Young People

Encouraging the reading habit in children has always been a primary concern of public library services. And it has been shown, unsurprisingly, that young people who read are more likely to be members of their public library, with parents who are also library users.⁷ Linking children's reading to active library membership is therefore an important means of helping to promote reading. However, there has been increasing concern recently at the standards of reading being achieved in schools, and this concern is mirrored in a fresh debate on the role of children's library services. The welcome decision of the Library and Information Services Council to set up a Working Party on Library Services for Children and Young People should enable important questions to be addressed, questions to do with existing provision and future needs, and the impact of educational change on the role of children's library services.

Children aged between 0-sixteen account for around 20 per cent of the population and therefore constitute a significant proportion of the community; their individual needs for fiction differ tremendously, as they display a wide variety of different characteristics, abilities, interests and needs. Importantly, they also depend on parents and other carers in their early years so that any library service for children needs to work not only with children directly, but also with and to the adults responsible for them. As is demonstrated in the Library Association's Guidelines, *Children and young people*, it is therefore essential that when

selecting and providing fiction for children a considered selection policy is formulated and agreed, to meet the needs of individual children, categories of children—including the whole community, not users alone—and to answer the enquiries of parents and others.⁸ Reading fiction is an important means to developing the reading skills which children require if they are to succeed at school—so that developing and implementing effective book selection is a prime function of a public library service for children. In a recent study of five library services, it was found that each of the library authorities had developed selection procedures unique to their situation, however a common problem was the lack of policy on collection building as an adjunct to the selection of individual titles.⁹ There was found to be a need for collections as a whole to be properly planned, for stock purchase to be co-ordinated between service points and to ensure that stock revision was a continuing exercise.

The importance of providing and promoting fiction for children and young people through public libraries has been further highlighted by two reports on readership which looked forward to the 1990s and showed how print-runs and spending on books have declined in real terms since 1981. The Scottish Arts Council's *Readership report*¹⁰ and the Young Report on *Book retailing in the 1990s*¹¹ stress that libraries have an important role in fostering a reading culture, at a time when as one teenager said, 'it is so tempting to watch TV instead of sitting down reading a book'.¹²

Many of the published studies of children's library services have focused on methods of promoting books to children and young adults, rather than the less glamorous yet essential problems of identifying needs, and developing and managing collections for children in order to ensure there is something worth promoting. This is not however the case when looking at public libraries' own in-house interests in investigating their children's services. In a British National Bibliography Research Fund study of research initiatives

undertaken by public libraries, educational institutions and the book trade, we found a commendable range of studies being undertaken by public library services to improve the management of their services for children. Sadly, most of these studies go unreported in the professional press. Two examples are Gloucestershire's development of 'Teen-extra' sections in libraries and Northamptonshire's feasibility study of the better use of the public library service by schools, undertaken by a teacher seconded to work with the library service. Other work included the monitoring of separate teenage provision by Warwickshire Libraries; a study of the books, magazines and newspapers read by 11-16 year-olds by Dorset Library Service; an investigation of the attitudes and reading habits of 13-16 year-olds when starting up teenage provision County wide by Nottinghamshire Libraries; and a study of teenagers' patterns of library use by Knowsley Libraries. The large number of frequent, small scale investigations by public librarians to gauge local needs and interests was a particular feature of our study and highlights the clear commitment of public libraries to identifying and providing for young people's reading needs through innovative projects.¹³

It is doubly unfortunate that so little is generally known of these local initiatives. First, there is clearly a need to pool knowledge so that other librarians may benefit from the findings of in-house management studies and, secondly, it is vital that public library services are given credit for the work they are doing and are publicly recognised as partners in national initiatives. The need for a higher profile for public library services is exemplified in two recent national promotional campaigns for literacy and reading with young people, neither of which featured the role of public libraries in their initial book trade publicity. The 99 by 99 Campaign aims to ensure that, by 1999, 99 per cent of children leave school with adequate literacy, and Children's Book Week for 1992 aims to 'promote reading as an enjoyable pastime for

children, rather than to promote literacy *per se*... While promotion to and by schools was clearly noted, there was no mention of liaison with public library services in these press notices.¹⁴

Despite such a lack of publicity for their innovative work, there continues to be considerable concern by public librarians at the transition from children's reading to adult fiction—the point at which many readers are lost to public libraries. Provision for teenagers is a vexed question; whether or not to offer separate collections, or even separate libraries, to encourage reading continues to be a live issue. The experience of JILL, the teenage service provided by Renfrew Library Service, would seem to suggest that a clearly targeted, specialist service for young people does indeed encourage greater use and meets both the information and reading needs of a higher proportion of teenagers.¹⁵

Amongst those library authorities sampled when writing this chapter we also found an interesting number of options described. For example, Croydon provided Young Adult Plus collections in either the children's or adult sections of the library¹⁶ and in Coventry a small, but separately and attractively shelved, Teenage Section gives young adults a definite focus to their reading. In both cases, these sections consist mainly of fiction but also include some non-fiction on relevant topics such as careers, fashion and sport. Not surprisingly, most libraries noted the popularity of paperback stock for this type of collection.

A recent pilot project in Lincolnshire has involved stocking graphic novels in the teenage section of Boston Public Library to ascertain whether this will boost teenage issues and the number of teenage members.¹⁷ The service was publicised in the local press and on posters inside the library and use has been monitored by questionnaires, issue counts, records of new teenage borrowers, etc.

Services to Hospitals, Homes and Day Centres

One of the most significant areas of growth in public library services in recent years has been to hospitals, residential homes and other similar institutions. From 1974-84 there was an increase of 6,717 service points, and from 1985-89 a further rise of 49.5 per cent. In Dyfed, one interesting further development was the setting up of bibliotherapy sessions with the Probation Service, using library service facilities.¹⁸

According to Leicestershire Libraries and Information Service's publicity material, it would appear that their services for homes and day centres etc. are prompted by a realization that the enjoyment and mental stimulation provided by using libraries, reading books, listening to records and to cassettes is something most people take for granted.¹⁹ But many, due to age or disability, may be unable to make full use of a library. Consequently, by taking library services out to hospitals, homes and day centres, opportunities are provided for direct access to library resources and library staff, for encouraging reading, for stimulating interest in new ideas or pursuits, and for improving the quality of life of clients.

This client group is very varied, including elderly people, people with visual or physical handicaps, people with hearing impairment and people with learning difficulties. Despite the variety of needs the supply of fiction to these target groups is invariably covered by the general stock in libraries, though the method of distribution varies. Services to homes and day centres, sheltered accommodation and to hospitals are commonplace and probably the most traditional and valuable way of getting fiction out into the community.

For example, Lincolnshire's deposit collection service (numbering between 30-400 items) includes 'large print, fiction and non-fiction, jigsaws, talking books, adult literacy books and reminiscence materials'.²⁰ Despite the wide range of materials offered, 90 per cent of the issues are for

fiction material (in all formats). And even though the nature of the fiction is fairly standard it is pleasing to see that there is some concern for the effectiveness of the collections and the quality of the bookstock left in the homes, for example, romances are not just bought 'by the shelf' but consideration is given to particular authors who are known to be popular.

The actual provision of such services usually involves professional staff meeting their clients to discuss services available and to complete a profile form outlining personal requirements. Now, an emphasis is also placed on making contacts with the staff in homes, for example, to encourage greater awareness of the services offered and more useful feedback on use.

There are many aids to enable people with disabilities to continue to read and library services can act as a link between readers and the appropriate aid. A product guide which offers valuable advice in the selection of equipment is published by Oxfordshire Health Authority²¹ and further information on services to people with disabilities can be found in *Library services to housebound people*.²² Some authorities are aiming to develop a more proactive fiction service which increases clients' choice and access to fiction via booklists of recent additions, newsletters incorporating book reviews, and lists of authors who write in a similar style. In Warwickshire, the 'bulk loan collection' is actually provided by the Community Services vehicle; this allows more tailored collections to be provided which, although they are slightly smaller (between 50-150 books) than when provided by a branch library, can be changed on a monthly basis.²³

Leicestershire Libraries and Information Service also offers to arrange library visits for groups to attend library clubs or open evenings, and activities such as reading aloud sessions in homes and centres and display material. Plenty of advice and support is provided for staff in centres and homes, including a regular newsletter—*Link-Up News*—

which promotes use of the Home Library and highlights other available resources.

Many authorities use their mobile library service to serve this client group. Such services require specialist staffing and specific bookfunds, and, ideally, a dedicated vehicle, if they are to respond fully to the needs of this client group. Regarding access, mobile libraries such as Coventry's are equipped with a step-lift to enable disabled access, whilst larger authorities such as Staffordshire and Warwickshire have 'special services vehicles'.

Warwickshire's Community Services vehicle, which serves a mixture of sheltered housing and rest homes, is a good example. It has its own bookfund and is staffed by a qualified librarian and a driver-assistant—the authority's ethos being that everyone should have access to a professional librarian. The closed environment and captive audience, many of whom are very intensive readers, enable the staff to achieve some positive and personal promotion, helping readers choose books, and encouraging them to try new and contemporary authors. Although there is not much space on the vehicle for displays, the users certainly appreciate the friendly 'corner shop' nature of the service. The stock tends to be mostly fiction (about 80 per cent), and mostly large print (about two-thirds). Issues, not surprisingly, are heavily weighted towards fiction—about nine out of ten books.

Housebound Readers

"I can't get out of the house, but I can travel around the world in a book."

The housebound readers' service is for people who are confined to their own homes and who do not have anyone to go to the library for them. It is often provided in partnership by volunteers from organizations such as the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS) and Age Concern, as well as local community groups, and obviously the social contact is an important aspect of the service.

However, as the Library Association's *Guidelines for library services to people who are housebound* state:

Staffing provision should start from the premise that users of housebound library services require access to trained staff in the same way that general library users do, and this should not be denied to them simply because this level of service might be difficult or expensive to provide.²⁴

Equally, housebound services should not operate in isolation from the rest of the library service, and the materials available to other users, including for example ethnic minority language books, should be made available to the housebound.

In Leicestershire, the housebound service is enhanced by the *Library Link* newsletter which is produced four times a year. It contains lists of recent titles in large print and books in cassette format, information on benefits, details of activities, reviews and feature articles etc.; this gives an added professionalism to the voluntary service.

In Staffordshire, as well as providing the traditional personal delivery service, the housebound service is enhanced by monthly 'get togethers', or Library Clubs, held in libraries and with transport provided by the WRVS or other volunteers. Although not specifically aimed at fiction provision, the majority of books borrowed at these sessions is fiction. In Warwickshire, the service is supplemented with a free request service.

Partially Sighted

Again, a traditional focus, but also an increasingly well-served group in the community. As well as large print books, pleasingly supported in Essex by a large print Large Print Books catalogue,²⁵ increasing use is made of talking books which are stocked in libraries, distributed in mobile libraries and special services vehicles and also through the post. The range of literature available on cassettes has increased to include popular fiction, and material in Indic languages, as well as the classics. In Warwickshire, the talking bookstock

is promoted through the talking newspaper which includes a selection of additions to stock and also some reviews.

Many library authorities have a Kurzweil reading machine or a closed-circuit television system which magnifies print and images. In Birmingham, this equipment is used frequently by the Eye to Eye group who meet regularly in Balsall Heath Library, which is also embarking on providing talking magazines, Braille labels on talking books, and producing a supplement to a talking newspaper. Again, examples of simple, yet effective, ways of improving services to a special needs group.²⁶

Services to Prisons

Often overlooked in considering services to the community, services to prisons play a vital part in the rehabilitation of some of the most difficult members of society. The needs of prisoners largely reflect those of the population at large, and the range and level of library stock should therefore be equivalent to that of a good public branch library. However, as the Home Office requires that the Prison Education Officer should have managerial responsibility for the library service, the link between libraries and education is clearly defined and there is naturally a strong educational emphasis in the stock and its use.

The role played by fiction is considerable, through support for basic education, and the encouragement of recreational reading. The public library service provides invaluable professional advice and support for prison libraries, support which includes the regular exchange of collections, particularly important where there are small collections of 5,000 items or less.²⁷ The range of demand for materials can be very wide and a flexible request service is needed, so that, for example, if a book arrives when a prisoner has been moved to another establishment it is sent on via the local public library service. Books become a lifeline to the outer world, just as they do for housebound readers, and the

prison library service enables prisoners to maintain their contact with society.

The Prison Libraries Group Study School for 1991 had as its theme 'Window on the world' and explored the development of the arts in prisons and the contribution of library services. The role of reading is central to this concern, with fiction provision and the encouragement of creative writing by prisoners an important means of encouraging this. For example, Lewes Prison has a writer-in-residence to foster creative work by prisoners.

Fiction in the Community

The section on Literacy discussed Birmingham's focus on the value of reading in the community, and this community-orientated approach to fiction provision is also apparent in other authorities. Sheffield's Opening the Book festival was made possible by the work that had already been done with Sheffield people through the Write Back scheme, established in the mid-Eighties with the appointment of Community Arts Co-ordinators.²⁸ This scheme embraces new approaches to publication and to public support for creative writing.

Originally, the scheme started with Write Back boards so that readers could share their reviews of books and poems; stories, plays, articles and even cartoons were also encouraged. Now, Write Back libraries offer writers and readers an important point of contact and also continue to provide practical support in the form of word processors for use by the community, plus free leaflets and lists of local magazines and writing groups. As well as actually publishing books by local people, Write Back produces one-off publications by photocopying manuscripts and encourages writers to produce multiple copies of their work by offering cost price photocopying facilities. Work is also displayed on Write Back boards in various Sheffield libraries. This community ethos was also apparent in the mission statement for Opening The Book. 'A unique festival

of reading and writing' organized chiefly by Sheffield Libraries, it was built upon the developmental work undertaken by the Community Arts Section to open up libraries as places of creative activity, in that the festival aimed, among other things, to 'increase the self confidence of people in Sheffield in how they read and communicate' and to 'offer ways to bring together isolated readers'. It is interesting to note the emphasis on the reader—a report on the festival defines its uniqueness as stemming from the way that Sheffield Libraries, as a library authority, 'were able to raise the status of the reader as well as the writer'.

It is also possible effectively to target sections of the community. In Warwickshire, a literary competition for people over 60 ran from September 1991 to February 1992.²⁹ The competition themes focused on reminiscence-type topics such as 'market day' and 'my corner shop' which would encourage creative writing based on real life situations and memories. The event was organised by Warwickshire Library Service and Age Concern, and so allowed the library service to achieve a long-term goal of working with voluntary and statutory organizations, and not in isolation. Obviously, there are benefits with funding if promotions are shared, but there are also opportunities to share experience and make contacts.

Another recent initiative is Writing in Merseyside. This is a writers' directory with a difference: there is no logical sequence, or subject index, but rather it aims to raise awareness of facilities and resources and generate enthusiasm—to 'provide inspiration as well as information'. The directory was first published in 1986 as a result of co-operation between Liverpool Libraries and Arts, the University of Liverpool and Canning Street Adult Centre. It is reported that 6,000 copies were distributed free via libraries and colleges, and its impact was tremendous with people joining classes and existing workshops and going on to become tutors.³⁰

Clearly, the library service played a major role in this project and in 1988 a Writing Liaison Officer responsible for Writing Activities in Liverpool Libraries (WALL) was appointed to exploit the potential for broader community development of the library service. The Writing Liaison Officer acts as a 'catalyst for community arts in libraries' who can determine the needs of writers and potential writers and provide appropriate services and facilities such as access to word processors, cheap photocopying and opportunities to reach an audience, etc. Writing workshops have also developed, together with programmes of events and successful publications, showing the value of links between writers and their local community through libraries.³¹

As noted in Chapter Eight, many library authorities have made literature promotion a particular strength, often in conjunction with local arts associations and in co-operation with other organizations. One of the best documented is the Well Worth Reading fiction promotion which involves co-operation between library authorities, bookshops, library suppliers, publishers, the media and the regional Arts Association. Dorset, Hampshire and West Sussex were given a pump priming grant of £10,000 by Southern Arts and they also struck deals with other organizations to keep their campaign going over the three years following their first funding. The story of how the initial promotion became a national, commercially viable enterprise which marketed reading lists to other library authorities makes fascinating reading.³² It serves also to emphasize that community-orientated fiction services require professionalism of a high order and adequate resourcing if they are to produce publicity materials that compete effectively with other media. Well Worth Reading's latest promotions are Better Read Than Dead and Voices from Europe—their fourth marketing drive. One difficulty, however, is the inevitable distance between the campaign initiators and the local community when a national fiction promotion is mounted.

There will always be the need for librarians to complement nationally produced publicity with locally relevant materials and events.

The Leicestershire Literature Festival is an excellent example of a successful, locally led arts event which brought authors and the community together and developed links with special needs groups such as writers with physical disabilities and students enrolled in Leicestershire's adult basic education scheme. As well as lectures and 'meet the author' sessions, workshops encouraged creative writing and other activities. Again, sponsorship from local organizations was important, while the commitment from library staff throughout the county was essential to the smooth running of a complex series of events.³³

Fiction In and For the Community

It is appropriate in concluding this chapter to return to Margaret Drabble's argument that fiction is important to the community, and that as a means of comprehending our world and our vision, novels serve a significant function within our culture. Serving the community's best interests has always been the role of public library services; their function in the promotion of fiction reading continues to be significant, with fiction accounting for around 60 per cent of all books issued. We have attempted to show how special groups within the community are at present being served through public library fiction services and to indicate the significance of developing such services.

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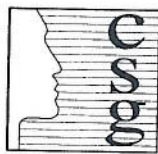
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