

Three authors visit Sunraysia (published FYI 2004)

Author – Camilla Elliott
Head Teacher Librarian/ Network Resource Manager
St Joseph's College, Mildura
Coordinator – Libraries Sunraysia/SLAV

Abstract:

*During Term 2 Libraries Sunraysia/SLAV coordinated the event **Three Writers for Three Days** in Sunraysia. Having a purpose to provide an opportunity for local students, educators and parents to engage with adolescent writers and their writing, the outcomes proved positive for all involved.*

Pelicans and Pinot Noir

A late afternoon houseboat cruise on a glorious day in May was an ideal “settler” for authors Archie Fusillo, Michael Hyde and Maureen McCarthy prior to providing Sunraysia adolescents, teachers and the general public with a three day adolescent literature event. The glassy surface of the Murray River and flotilla of inquisitive pelicans was a unique Sunraysia setting and an experience the writers continued to enjoy over the next three days.

Having discussed the desire to expose the youth of Sunraysia to writers they know through their study and recreational reading, Libraries Sunraysia/SLAV Group drew together the *Three Authors for Three Days* event. While not considered remote in the same terms as ten years ago, a trip to Sunraysia is usually complicated by travel and accommodation costs. Such factors impede the delivery to our students of experiences that metropolitan students can take for granted.

Covering the District

While personally charged with the task of coordinating this event, its smooth operation can be attributed to the generous support and enthusiasm group members. Membership of Libraries Sunraysia/SLAV represents individuals from all sectors of the library profession and encompasses school, public, tertiary, and special libraries in the region.

Over the three days of *3for3* Archie, Michael and Maureen held reading and writing workshops at St Joseph's, Irymple Secondary, Chaffey Secondary, Mildura Senior, and Merbein Secondary Colleges and Coomealla High School (NSW). Students participating ranged from Years 7-12. The comments of one English teacher, reflected those of others in remarking that, “students were enthralled” listening to the writers’ stories and were “motivated to write their own”. They were encouraged to look closely at their own daily lives; at the mundane, the fun, and the tragic events encountered in getting through each day, and were provided with techniques to transfer those events into stories.

PD opportunities

A second feature of *3for3* was to provide teacher professional development. About forty-five teachers attended these sessions and had time to immerse themselves in the world of the writer/reader on a truly professional level. Teachers and librarians mentioned feeling “empowered” by ideas discussed.

Archie, Michael and Maureen have all been teachers in a previous life. Michael still is, at Victoria University. They spoke of establishing a 'reading culture' and a 'writing culture' and ways of achieving it, of making the process relevant and above all non-threatening. They spoke of "walking the talk" as professionals and demonstrating to students our own desire to participate in the enjoyment of reading and writing.

Adolescent Journeys

An evening forum entitled "Adolescent Journeys" was perhaps the social highlight of *3for3* as the authors mingled informally with adolescent literature enthusiasts after a panel discussion and reflection on the topic of 'Adolescent Journeys'. "Lots of great conversations happening" was one remark about this evening. Other comments were equally positive with more than one person being heard to comment that they themselves were inspired to "begin writing again".

While sharing a common craft, Archie, Michael and Maureen each presented their own personal motivation. Archie Fusillo told the stories of his Italian immigrant heritage and life as a boy in inner suburban Melbourne. St Joseph's College Yr 9 students studying his story *The Dons*, relished the opportunity to get inside this story about his Nonno. Year 7s enjoyed the fun stories he has written for the popular *Aussie Bites* series including *Let it Rip*.

Michael Hyde, has used his personal experiences as an active Vietnam War protestor in the 1970s to write *Hey Joe!*. He's a bit of a rebel, is happy to be considered left-wing, and engages well with challenging students. As a matter of fact all three writers reveled in any opportunities for close interaction with students and enjoyed meeting them outside the sessions for a personal chat. Michael's novel *Tyger, tyger* reflects his passion for Aussie Rules football. He has had well deserved success this year in having two books *Hey Joe!* and *Hunger and other stories* included on the Children's Book Council Australia notable books list.

It's easy to see that Maureen McCarthy's exceptionally popular novels such as *Ganglands* and *Cross My Heart* spring from her own very personable manner. Students were familiar with the television mini series *Queen Kat*, *Carmel* and *St Jude get a life*, and were introduced to the ultimately readable *When you wake and find me gone*. Maureen introduced them to the depth and colour of the characters who populate her stories and, like the other writers, the way in which their personal lives are reflected in their writing.

Jumping hurdles

Three Writers for Three Days was an event that grew out of a desire to bring writing to life for Sunraysia's adolescent readers. Staging such events in a remote region like Sunraysia has its financial complications, however, extending the event to three days provided a smorgasbord of opportunities and helped neutralise some of that cost.

One could not avoid being struck by the humility of this trio of writers as they expressed appreciation for the opportunity to work with our students and educators. One morning during their visit Archie arose to be greeted by a magnificent Sunraysia sunrise – just reward for the expanded horizons they presented to us.

The challenge now is to take the formula of *3for3* and replicate it in the future.

(924 words)