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Research

This article is based on a Masters in Library and Information Studies (2009) dissertation at University College Dublin which aimed to establish the nature and extent of poetry promotion in Irish public libraries at present, and to make recommendations for the effective promotion of poetry in the future. Does poetry matter and should libraries care? In Auden’s elegy to W.B. Yeats he writes both that ‘poetry makes nothing happen’ and also of its power, as in the line used in title of this article, to create energy and hope in desperate situations. So it does matter, perhaps, even more in these difficult times. This article suggests ways libraries can bring poetry to more people. This research was done by conducting interviews with librarians and poets to develop a detailed understanding of the topic: questionnaires were circulated to library authorities to provide an overview of poetry promotion in public libraries nationwide.

The researcher chose to focus on poetry, as despite the work done by libraries in promoting literature in general, the promotion of poetry is less often seen as central to the role of the library. Poetry, however, is both a central part of our literary heritage and future, and as such it deserves to reach as many people as possible. Public libraries can play a key role in bringing people and poetry together. Dylan Thomas stated that “the printed page is the place to examine the works of a poem, and the platform is the place to give the poem the works” (Wright and Asser, 1995). Public libraries are in the unique position of being able to provide both “the printed page” and “the platform”. This research focused on the promotion of poetry to adults rather than to children, as the promotion of poetry to adults entails a different set of challenges, and in many cases calls for a different set of techniques. The research reveals that in many cases the promotion of poetry in public libraries entails different challenges to more general literature promotion. These challenges, however, can be overcome using tailored approaches and offer new opportunities for reaching library users.

The main challenge is that poetry tends not to be in heavy demand among the reading public. Poet and librarian Tom McCarthy describes poetry as “a high priority within a narrow profile of the reading public” (McCarthy, 1998). Poet Eileen Sheehan states that although Ireland boasts several poetry publishers and literary journals, these are dependent on Arts Council funding, rather than sales revenue. She adds that “despite our rich poetic tradition, we have been failing to engage a readership for poetry, with most bookshops refusing to stock poetry titles because poetry does not sell” (McBreen, 2009). Irish libraries, however, do stock poetry, especially titles by Irish authors. In the essay ‘Poetry and Public Libraries: the Irish experience’, Austin Vaughan reports that: “All libraries have poetry collections. All have policies of buying works by all local poets and the best of contemporary Irish poetry” (Vaughan, 2004).

Despite the aforementioned difficulty, poetry lends itself to promotion in a variety of ways. Chris Meade of the UK’s Poetry Society argues that: “Poetry books are extremely borrowable; light to carry home, easy to flick through, no danger of being stuck half way through the story when you need to return them” (Meade, 1997). Poetry is eminently suitable for promotion in the form of visual displays, as promotional posters can “contain whole works, not

1. W.H. Auden, 1940. In Memory of W.B. Yeats. The last three verses read:

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

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just extracts and blurb” (Poetry Society website). Many Irish librarians take advantage of this, creating captivating poetry displays and distributing photocopies of carefully-chosen poems to bring patrons face-to-face with poetry. Throughout the month of April, which is National Poetry Month in the U.S., Galway County Librarian Pat McMahon photocopies poems to distribute around the library, for library patrons to read and to take home. He obtains these poems by subscribing to the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group’s Poem-a-Day mailing list at http://poem-a-day.knopfdoubleday.com/, as well as the Academy of American Poets’ Poem-a-Day list at http://www.poets.org/poemADay.php. These poems are carefully chosen, and are already in the public arena for promotional purposes. While librarians must observe copyright legislation, local poets, and poets who have an upcoming event in the library will often agree to have their work promoted in this fashion, and a vast body of classic poetry is now in the public domain.

A key difference between poetry and prose is that it is widely (although not universally) acknowledged that poetry, especially modern poetry, must be heard aloud to be fully appreciated. Poetry readings are acknowledged throughout the literature on this subject as an extremely important method of promotion, and most of the librarians and poets interviewed as part of this research referred to poetry readings as the predominant method of promoting poetry in public libraries. A poem can be read in a few minutes, in contrast to a novel, and this is well within the attention span of an audience. Furthermore, the experience of hearing a poet read his or her work aloud can be particularly revelatory. Poet Anne Fitzgerald comments that “when in the privacy of re-reading poetry from the text, it is possible to hear again, the voice of the poet resonating, to hear where the stresses fall” (Lendennie: 2009). During this research, one librarian stated that the opportunity to meet a poet can overcome many people’s antipathy to poetry, as people often “find the poet less forbidding than the poem”, and are interested in hearing the poet speaking about their craft and their inspiration. Several librarians and poets agreed that a question and answer session brings a wonderful exploratory and participatory element to poetry readings.

Most pragmatically, from the point of view of librarians organising poetry readings, it is often much easier to secure a visit from a poet than from a novelist. Novelists tend to have a far busier promotional schedule than poets, and novelists’ fees for a reading are also much higher than those of most poets. Many poets regard readings as a significant part of their work, an enjoyable and affirming experience. The Poetry Archive website states that poetry readings provide poets with the opportunity
“to showcase work, meet readers, communicate with fellow poetry-lovers, try out new material and sell books” (Poetry Archive website).

Results

The research revealed the need for libraries to build strong links with local relevant persons and organisations, especially given current staff-time constraints. Links with local media will allow for efficient and effective publicising of poetry events, a generally difficult and time-consuming task. Cork City Librarian Liam Ronayne commented in his recent article A Year of Reading Variously: The Year of the Constant Reader in Cork City Libraries, that securing a partnership with the local newspaper and radio station was “invaluable in letting people know what was happening” in terms of literary events in the city’s library branches, even more so than securing financial sponsorship (Ronayne, 2010). Co-operation with local literature centres and writers’ groups can maximise audience numbers, as these organisations often have a loyal audience. Such links also allow libraries to facilitate poetry reading and writing groups at minimal financial and staff-time expense, by allowing libraries to launch such groups, and to connect them with experienced writers who can provide guidance, as advised by the Poetry Society (Poetry Society website). There are many examples of productive partnerships between Irish public libraries and local organisations. The monthly Over the Edge: Open Readings series, hosted by Galway City Library, and run by the professional literary organisation Over the Edge, consistently attracts large audiences.

Book clubs have become exceedingly popular in recent years. Although book clubs tend to be autonomous entities, and generally choose to discuss novels, some Irish librarians have successfully introduced well-chosen poems for discussion along with novels, as advised by New York poetry advocates Poets House (Poets House, 2009).

Librarian Charlie Quinn of Blanchardstown Library advised the researcher that book club members often form a core part of the audience at poetry events, and introducing them to the work of an upcoming poet can maximise audience numbers. Mary Breathnach at Celbridge Library has recently started a monthly poetry group, in addition to existing book clubs, which meets to read and discuss poems chosen by members.

The online environment is eminently suitable for the promotion of poetry, as evidenced by such websites as www.poetryarchive.com, www.poets.org and http://www.bbc.co.uk/poetryseason. A webpage can provide a full and immediate encounter with the
text of a poem, and the listening and viewing experience can be facilitated by way of audio and video files. Several Irish library authorities maintain a weblog on a website such as blogspot and wordpress, and some post book reviews, publicise upcoming poetry events, and post audio and video files of poetry performances. The research found that such websites often allow library staff to promote poetry, as well as other library materials and events, with much greater ease than do local authority websites.

Among the librarians and poets who participated in this research, there was widespread (although not unanimous) agreement that library staff members could benefit from training relating to the promotion of poetry. The Frontline online training programme, currently provided to public library staff throughout Ireland, is certainly relevant to some aspects of the promotion of poetry. However, certain key aspects of training, as suggested by both library staff and poets during this research, are not covered by Frontline. In other countries, library staff are provided with training specific to poetry promotion. New York’s Poets House offer on-site training to librarians throughout the US (Poets House website). In Edinburgh, the Scottish Poetry Library offers similar training, adapted for a Scottish context (Scottish Poetry Library website).

Recommendations

One of the most significant factors in the success of any library branch in promoting poetry is the attitude of library staff towards poetry. Like most of the reading public, many library staff do not read poetry, and many are not entirely comfortable with its promotion. Based on the results of this research, it is suggested that this can be overcome by the provision of training sessions. Training can give interested staff the inspiration, confidence and know-how to organise successful events and promotions, which will “allow enthusiasm for poetry to spread.” (Poets House, 2009: 132). The researcher recommends, in order to alleviate inevitable budgetary restraints, that the structures already in place for the Library Council’s training programmes should be used to provide a day-long workshop on poetry promotion in public libraries. Poetry Ireland, an organisation that is knowledgeable about poetry and Irish poetry audiences, and with which the Library Council have worked previously, on the 2007 Poetry in the Library project (The Library Council, 2008: 50), should be involved in the development and delivery of the workshop, as should certain poets and librarians.

While many Irish librarians have developed innovative methods of promoting poetry, abundant information on poetry promo-

Poets House offers a model of best practice for the promotion of poetry in public libraries. Poetry in the Branches is described as “a multi-faceted, replicable program model that helps librarians create a complete environment for poetry in their library” (Poets House website). A step-by-step guide to this model, the Poetry in the Branches Sourcebook, is available through the Poets House website. Research results indicate that a model of best practice for poetry promotion should be made available, in printed form, based on the work of library authorities within Ireland whose promotion of poetry is exemplary.

All Ireland Poetry Day, an annual celebration of poetry in Ireland, was inaugurated by Poetry Ireland in 2008. Approximately one third of the events listed by Poetry Ireland for the October 2009 festival took place in public libraries (Poetry Ireland website). This is a small proportion, given that public libraries are recognised as “the most extensive physical cultural network in Ireland, (and) play a significant part in the internal development and encouragement of literary sensibility and appreciation” (Public Libraries and the Arts Committee, 1999). The final recommendation is that the Irish public library service should recognise the potential of this festival to raise the profile of poetry. The Library Council could play an important role in renewing their partnership with Poetry Ireland, and encouraging library authorities to push themselves centre-stage as an organisation that promotes both “the printed page” and “the platform” proactively, establishing the library service as an organisation that brings people and poetry together.

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