

Conserve them all my days

Recent months have seen important advances in the publicity being given to library conservation, and two developments in particular are of symbolic as well as practical moment.

One is the release of a documentary film called *Slow Fires: On the Preservation of the Human Record*. Produced in America and hosted by the current affairs commentator Robert MacNeil, the film is the first major depiction of the crisis now facing libraries and other cultural institutions.

It is a quality production which dramatically reveals the extent and seriousness of decaying collections, and looks at the solutions being developed to combat the problem. It will hold interest not only for librarians and archivists but for teachers and writers — and, indeed, for people in general.

The film interviews librarians such as Varian Gregorian, President of the New York Public Library; preservation specialists like Sally Buchanan; and a number of authors, including James Michener and Barbara Tuch-

man. It also incorporates priceless footage, such as a clip of George Bernard Shaw from a newsreel in the 1920s, which serves to emphasise what will be lost if urgent action is not taken.

Slow Fires was screened last December on public television in America and is receiving widespread acclaim, with one critic describing it as 'the *Gone with the Wind* of the library market'! It was shown in Sydney last November at a special AIMA colloquium on preservation, and is available for hire from the AIMA office. There is hope that it may appear on ABC-TV at some stage, perhaps as a follow-up to the recent segment about library preservation on the program, *QUANTUM*.

A second advance in the publicising of preservation is the support being tendered by the British politician and author Jeffrey Archer.

A year ago Mr Archer was guest-of-honour at the start of the British Library's 'Adopt-A-Book' campaign. He was dismayed at what he saw in the Library's conservation department, and is insisting that the publisher of his best-selling novels, Hodder and Stoughton, print his next book on acid-free paper.

Reporting this development in the *BBC's Listener* (7 January 1988), Michael Delahaye

expressed surprise that publishers have not yet learned the lesson that car manufacturers grasped long ago — that durability can prove a strong selling point.

At this stage it is chiefly librarians who have been active in conveying to publishers the importance of durable paper. The public support from Mr Archer, however, highlights the need — as well as the value — of having authors press the cause of library conservation. Not only do authors have a special relationship with publishers, but they occupy a position of strategic responsibility and influence in the wider society. A plea by Patrick White or Morris West on this issue will inevitably attract greater notice than a statement by librarians or conservators.

The preservation challenge plainly needs a higher social and political profile. A worthwhile task at present would be for librarians to interest the Australian Society of Authors and individual writers in this cultural rescue mission. After all, it is their works — the fruits of their creativity — which are being destroyed by 'slow fires'.

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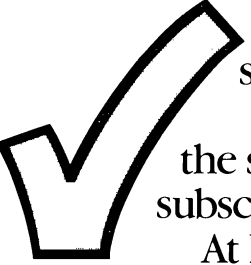
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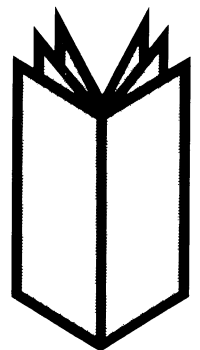
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