

# Literary Lovers – speed dating at the National Library of Australia

On Friday 20 February 2009, the National Library hosted a speed dating event, where the icebreaker was the book you chose to bring. Book lovers and just plain lovers came out in force. The event was so popular that hopefuls who arrived with a book, but no booking, had to be turned away.

Jazz trio *As Famous as the Moon* provided excellent entertainment for guests as they arrived and also in the interval, setting a suitably relaxed, but sophisticated tone for the evening. The ticket price included a drink on arrival, and participants were soon assessing the drink and book choices of those present. The plentiful canapés catered to all tastes and both genders, ranging from sausage rolls to vegetarian delicacies with a minimal carb superstructure.

The organisers took an optimistic view of the broad-mindedness of book lovers. There was no age streaming process, so 20-something men had to take their turn conversing with the 50-something women, as well as those nearer their own age. It was a tribute to the manners of the male book lovers of Canberra that, on the whole, they met this challenge with aplomb.

As the night progressed, the dizzy pace of the partner changes took its toll. The time for each 'date' was a mere two minutes, rather optimistic with a book and a lifetime each to discuss. Rather than ring a bell to signal the change, the MC announced it over a microphone. As the noise levels rose, accentuated by all the hard marble surfaces in the venue, changeovers became more and more chaotic.

Early on it was announced that there were not equal numbers of men and women present, so every fifth woman had to sit opposite another woman for several rounds. This met with a mixed reaction. Some women were happy to make the acquaintance of other women, but some felt they were wasting potential 'man time' because of this.

It became clear that some of the participants had been set up for the event by friends and relatives, who not only booked them in, but also provided them with a book. This cast their reader-status into some doubt. Some people had come in groups from their workplace, and therefore enjoyed all the advantages of not having to stand alone feeling anxious at the beginning of the evening, and having people to commiserate with them, if the all-important contacts envelope was empty at the end of the evening.

The analytically-minded could discern some interesting trends in the book choices. Very few people brought non-fiction works and such as were in evidence were principally biographies and books like *The Lonely Planet Guide to...*. One person brought a Canberra UBD, which put both their literacy and geography skills under the spotlight.

The strongest genre-to-occupation correlation was young men in the IT industry, who were the most likely to have brought a sci-fi or other fantasy genre text. Chick lit was in evidence, especially works recently translated to the cinema by Hollywood – like *Marley & Me* and *He's Just Not That Into You* – but none of the women seemed to have fallen into the trap of bringing *Pride & Prejudice*, and thereby emulating Meg Ryan in *You've Got Mail*.

Some men possibly revealed more than they intended by their book choices. I suspect that *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell* – apparently a recount of a six year pub crawl – didn't enhance the dating potential of its owner. *1000 Aussie Jokes* may have fallen into this category also. On the other hand, the young man who brought Dr Seuss' *Foxes in Soxes* managed to carry off this daring choice, and



appeared lighthearted and funny, rather than juvenile or borderline illiterate.

One misguided woman discovered, too late, that bringing a book in a foreign language, with no blurb on the back cover, was certainly a choice that challenged the men opposite! The book in question was *Le Petit Prince*, which at least had the saving grace of being vaguely known to some by its distinctive cover, featuring Antoine de Saint Exupéry's charming watercolour drawings.

There were a few 'room for improvement' issues for NLA for the next time – though I'm sure most participants would be keen to try it again. There was no water on the tables, and with soda water at \$3.00 a glass, dehydration was a serious threat. The long tables at which people were seated did not allow easy access, if someone needed to move away from their spot temporarily. A slightly longer time allocation per date, even a 3 or 4 minute slot, would significantly improve the chances of people actually making a connection which might result in other meetings. A sheet for people to discreetly record who they said 'yes' to might make for less confusion and uncertainty at the end of the evening, avoiding that moment of wondering, "Was the Mark I said yes to actually the Marc who said yes to me, or someone completely different?" Age streaming is an advantage to some, but of course doesn't cater for everyone.

All in all, it was a very pleasant way to spend a balmy Friday night in Canberra. It gave everyone the opportunity to meet other people in a distinctly civilised venue, rather than having to take their chances at a pub or club. If nothing else, it provided plenty of scope for developing a reading list.

Books brought to the event included:

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|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <i>Birds Without Wings</i>                   | Louis de Bernieres                            |
| <i>The Truth about Dracula</i>               | Ronay                                         |
| <i>Tokyo Cancelled</i>                       | Rana Dasgupta                                 |
| <i>The Alchemist</i>                         | Paulo Coelho                                  |
| <i>Anna Karenina</i>                         | Leo Tolstoy                                   |
| <i>Magician</i>                              | Raymond Feist                                 |
| <i>Heart of Darkness</i>                     | Joseph Conrad                                 |
| <i>The Great Gatsby</i>                      | F. Scott Fitzgerald                           |
| <i>Oscar &amp; Lucinda</i>                   | Peter Carey                                   |
| <i>Wild Swans</i>                            | Jung Chang                                    |
| <i>The 100 Days</i>                          | Patrick O'Brian                               |
| <i>Perfume</i>                               | Patrick Suskind                               |
| <i>In Dubious Battle</i>                     | John Steinbeck                                |
| <i>I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell</i>        | Tucker Max                                    |
| <i>Hamlet</i>                                | John Marsden                                  |
| <i>Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall</i> | Spike Milligan                                |
| <i>Suite Française</i>                       | Irène Nemirovsky                              |
| <i>To Love, Honour and Betray</i>            | Kathy Lette                                   |
| <i>Le Petit Prince</i>                       | Antoine de St Exupéry                         |
| <i>There's a Bear in There</i>               | Merridy Eastman                               |
| <i>The Leopard</i>                           | Guiseppe di Lampedusa                         |
| <i>Foxes in Soxes</i>                        | Dr Seuss                                      |
| <i>Decision in Philadelphia</i>              | Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier |
| <i>Love in the Time of Cholera</i>           | Gabriel Garcia Márquez                        |

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