

TIME TO TAKE OFF THE ROSE-COLOURED GLASSES

Michaela Owen says she's had enough of the 'good old days'.

If I read another prominent writer pontificating about their wonderful memories growing up in their local libraries, I think I will vomit into the external return chute.

I love libraries. I LOVE LIBRARIES. I work in a small public library and run the children's programming. I sincerely think that I have the best job on the planet and I love the little people that frequent my events but....

These children will not have the same memories as I do. They will not remember the small town library that I went to that was built under the local Memorial Hall, where it was dark and reminded me of a hobbit hole. Today's libraries are light and bright and airy. They are full of space and activity-dedicated rooms.

They won't remember the little old grey-haired lady, who must have been at least 100 years old. She would shuffle along, slowly and quietly, and I loved her like a grandmother. Today's libraries are full of young hip members of staff, who joke with the patrons and make more noise than the kids. The new stereotype is covered in tattoos and sporting nine inch heels and quirky stockings.

They won't remember the reverent silence of a cool, quiet library. A place not unlike church, where the air was rich with the smell of well-loved books and had dark corners that held promise of treasure. Today's libraries are noisy and busy, full of activities of all kinds. Every space has a purpose and each inch is covered in bright posters advertising upcoming, noisy events. Floor space is valuable real estate, and scheduling is so tight programs need to be organised three months in advance.

Children of today's libraries won't understand the awe of walking into a room packed so full of books, with shelves and shelves dedicated to portals into other worlds and tales of adventures. Today's libraries have rows and rows of computers, banks of iPads and free Wi-Fi.

They won't be able to look back with fond memories of sitting in the corners quietly reading LM Montgomery, or sneaking books from the adult shelves to read the adventures of Tolkien. Today's shelves are packed with Daisy Meadows or young adult books that rival Mills and Boon.

Yesterday's libraries are wonderful things but, like all memories, they are just that, memories. Today's libraries are evolving into very different places. Like the days of old, they are still staffed by people who are passionate about what they do, they just do different things. They offer wonderful facilities and are fantastic at keeping people informed, up to date and in touch.

Yes, the libraries of old were magical and for many seemed to bridge the space between being a child and the wonder that the world had to offer. Today's children are different and have different expectations. Today's children like sparkles and instant gratification. They are harder to engage because the whole world is engaging constantly. Libraries are in competition with everything, all the time.

Today's libraries suit today's generations. We move forward or we die. Remember the past fondly, but don't glorify it or you might just miss the wonder that is today's library.

MICHAELA OWEN

Yass Library

michaela.owen@yass.nsw.gov.au