Heartwork

Great arts stories from regional Australia
The professional life of writers and illustrators is usually private and solitary. But 16 writers and 18 visual artists were brought together by a delightful and tantalising quest—to write an illustrated progressive novel about their local Murray River region.

Novelist and poet Jane Downing lives in Albury with her partner Dirk Spennemann, and together they generate collaborative projects for Murray region writers. In 2000 they edited *ReCollecting Albury Writing*, an anthology that paid homage to local writing from 1856 to the present. In 2002 a contemporary companion to the first anthology was published, *New Albury Writing*. These projects strengthened a community of local writers that also draws support from workshop programs organised by the Writers’ Centre in Wagga Wagga and local government cultural programs.

Browsing in a second-hand book shop in Berimah, Jane and Dirk were intrigued by a progressive novel, *London Consequences*, written for the 1972 ‘Festival of London’. They discovered that in 2001 a group of Irish writers collaborated on *Yeats is Dead*. It was then that the idea of a progressive, illustrated novel set in the Murray Region took hold.

When Jane and Dirk issued public notices calling for expressions of interest, they were struck by the huge response from local writers and visual artists. There was more interest in the project from writers and artists than the project could accommodate. Creative people in regional communities were clearly hungry for supportive networks which also challenged and extended their skills. ‘I am a great believer in collaborative work and the chance to share skills with writers and artists has been a refreshing challenge,’ says Vicki Luke, visual artist. Project participants represented a cross-section of the community in background, age and gender: the youngest writer was in his 20s, the oldest in her 80s, with a similar diversity among the visual artists.

Sixteen writers from the towns of Albury-Wodonga and its surrounding areas met in June 2003 to agree upon a plan. The plot line was only to be constrained by the need to set the novel within the present and the geographic area known as the Murray region. Each writer would contribute one chapter. Even though the writers’ styles ranged from science fiction to satire and murder mystery to young adult fiction, all agreed to a duty of care to the writers whose chapters preceded or followed theirs.

Jane wrote the first chapter of *Murray Time* setting the tone of the book as literary fiction. She also took on the role of literary editor for the work. As each of 16 chapters was rolled out, it was posted on the Internet. This created curiosity, intrigue and anticipation about character development and plot lines—and raised the stakes among the writers who tried, in a good natured way, to outdo each other. It also emphasised the communal nature of the undertaking.
Four months later, the hefty manuscript was handed to another group of local collaborators: 18 local visual artists. The writers were delighted by this additional dimension to the project. ‘It’s been an honour to have someone look so deeply into my text,’ says writer Margaret McDonald.

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As with the writing, illustrations varied from purely abstract to naturalistic interpretations of scenes from the novel, and tools ranged from pen and ink to acrylics, computer-generated images and photography. Some writers attended the first workshop gathering of visual artists and illustrators and took the time to discuss their chapter with their collaborative artist. ‘The Murray Time project has enlightened my understanding of the writing culture in the local region. It’s been a lot of fun working with artists who use words to make images,’ says visual artist Mary-Jane Griggs.

Future artistic collaborations between writers and artists are expected to emerge. ‘The progressive novel concept is novel and progressive. Collaborating with so many writers and artists is a fantastic idea,’ says Johnny beinArt, visual artist.

The project was completed within its tight one-year schedule, helped by Internet technologies to overcome geographical isolation. Jane was available throughout this time as an informal mentor for less experienced or less confident writers who may not have been previously published. Three hundred copies of the book were printed and launched at the Wodonga Arts Space. The cover was designed by Karen Donnell, photography lecturer at Charles Sturt University. ‘The image for the cover is the “creative hand” of the region, a photo image of 40 hands overlaid,’ says Jane.

Excerpts of the novel and samples of the visual illustrations, along with photographs of how the project progressed, have been recorded on six interconnecting panels. These will be displayed in regional libraries, art spaces, community centres and local councils to encourage other groups to undertake joint writing and visual arts projects.

Murray Time was a great way to bring together 34 regional writers and artists from Albury-Wodonga, as well as from small towns like Yackandandah, Tallangatta, Walla Walla, Table Top, Gerogery, the Mitta Valley, Barnawartha and Bethanga—and a unique artistic homage to a distinctive region of Australia.
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