

From a Large Island, to a Small One

SJI Library



An American, I moved to Australia in the 80s, where the fashion was just as bad and the hair just as big. Having family here on the island meant I have visited regularly and, 28 years later (!), it was time to return to the island.

Of course, I had always visited the library (as a librarian it is a sacred duty to visit as many libraries as possible) and loved it. Imagine my thrill at being offered the opportunity to work here.

Changes between big city libraries and small town libraries are naturally expected. In my previous experience, big libraries are busier, their collections are larger, and often the technology in city libraries is cutting edge, to meet the demands of such a large community. Small libraries often get overlooked, are more restricted by budget and therefore their technology and collections suffer.

So I had expected these differences. And was I surprised, and oh-so wrong! The collection at San Juan Library is up to date and broad. It offers a great range of material, including a fantastic Local and North Western collection. And also offers the latest technology, from physical items (if your kids haven't tried the new PlayAways- ask now!) to the latest in online resources (eBooks make holidaying soooo much easier).

So much for the expected differences. The fun started with the unexpected differences:

- In Australian libraries you pay for overdues. Here there is a Conscience Jar. And it often has money in it.
- In Australian libraries (though this is also true of many larger US libraries), you have to show your card to borrow to prove your ID-no card, no borrow. Here you are greeted by name and welcomed warmly. "Don't we need to check who they are?" I whispered on my first day. "Oh, Harry? He's a regular. His daughter is graduating from college, he grows amazing vegetables, and his dog just had puppies." It soon turned out everyone was a regular. And a lot of them grow great vegetables, too.
- There is a Parade with floats! In Australia we have a day off for a horse race. Even if you don't like horse races.
- And then there is 'corporate' branding: large Australian libraries don't have the same ability to be comfortable and welcoming. Instead they are constrained by corporate branding- to fit within a Council scheme. Even if it's orange, green and white squares. I kid you not. (Imagine that on everything: posters, brochures, t-shirts, cards. Enough said.)
- And there is an over-abundance of Occupational Hazard rules Down Under. Australian patrons miss out on experiencing the lovely warmth of the fire (fire hazard), flowers (allergy hazard), artwork (upsetting-someone's-taste hazard), the Totem and gorgeous wooden relief (militant woodworm hazard?) that we have at San Juan Library.

I am learning not to call people 'Mate,' or refer to the bathroom as the 'loo.' That when shelves are full they are not 'chock a block.' I am trying to say 'Thank You' instead of 'Ta,' and saying 'candy' instead of 'lollies,' and that a Weed Whacker is not a 'Whipper Snipper'. Not because I am embarrassed, but because sometimes people get a confused, polite face when talking to me! I love Australia, my adopted country, but the island offers something a large Australian city can never offer: a tightly knit community

that welcomes you with open arms and calls you by name. And a Conscience Jar. Our library is fantastic and I love being part of it.

PS. Did you know there is a plethora of excellent Australian authors at our library? Colleen McCullough (everyone knows the Thorn Birds but her Roman series is excellent), Kate Grenville, Thomas Keneally, Bryce Courtenay, Tim Winton, Geraldine Brooks, Kerry Greenwood, Peter Carey. And for young adults—John Marsden, John Flanagan, Shaun Tan, Isobelle Carmody, and Melina Marchetta. Grab one today!

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