

case study

Reading Partners activity profile:

Gillian Slovo library tour

Reading Partners is a consortium transforming the way publishers and libraries work together, creating successful and exciting events and activities for readers. It is led by The Reading Agency, the independent charity working to inspire more people to read more.

In May and June 2009 Reading Partners brokered a library mini-tour for South African born [novelist](#), [playwright](#) and [memoirist](#) Gillian Slovo. Her 2008 novel *Black Orchids*, published by Little Brown, is about a Sinhalese family who move to England in the 1950s. Public library services in Liverpool, Lambeth and East Sussex had all successfully submitted “bids” for the author, following a Reading Partners email alert detailing her availability for promotional work.

“Reading Partners is very good at giving impartial advice on which libraries will work best for which authors, working from the experience and evidence they have built up from past events,” says Zoe Hood, Publicity Manager for Little Brown Book Group, who has worked on several library-author events with the consortium. “It is a great advocate for libraries, but of course as publicists we do need clarification about what a library can or can’t deliver. Reading Partners is also very good at saving us time, such as getting the word out about available authors and dealing with initial bids, as they did for this mini-tour.

“The library events helped us reach existing Gillian Slovo fans who wanted to hear her read, and also in targetting reading groups,” she continues. “With libraries you tend to get a more varied audience and perhaps a wider age range.”

“Most of Lambeth Libraries’ events are attended by a real mixture of people,” agrees library reading group member Elizabeth Barton, one of the 75 people who came to hear, meet and talk with Gillian Slovo at West Norwood library. “I think it’s really important. For lots of people, author events at major venues like London’s South Bank Centre aren’t accessible. Holding events at libraries makes them less intimi-dating and affordable to the many, rather than exclusive events for the few. People who attend can then read the author's books for free on loan from the library.”

The West Norwood event was part of the Lambeth Readers and Writers Festival, one of three literary festivals held annually in the London borough. Reader Development Officer Tim O’Dell secured both Gillian Slovo and Helen Oyeyemi (author of *White is for Witching*) for the festival via the Reading Partners bidding process.

“It’s very helpful to have Reading Partners’ central structure there, and to know that there’s a standard process you’ll go through if you make an approach via them for an author,” he says.

“In the past, if you were on your own putting in calls, you could be left unsure what real chance, if any, you stood. The Reading Partners bidding system is trackable and trustworthy. That’s important for me; I spend over 50% of my budget on publicity, and I have regular brochure copy and print deadlines looming, so I don’t want to be left hanging.

“The Reading Partners calendar – not just of authors available for events but of promotions, free books, posters from publishers and so on – is also helpful. It saves me having to trawl through separate publisher websites looking for free materials, and I order a lot of posters via it,” continues Tim, who has been organising library-author events for over a decade. “We have come a long way from the old stalemate, where some publishers couldn’t see what libraries could do for them in terms of sales and promotion, and where some libraries were snotty about what they saw as the grubby, commercial side of reading. There was a logical connection there, and Reading Partners has played a big part in helping libraries and publishers to make those connections.”

Those connections helped the West Norwood event achieve over £150 in book sales. More than a quarter of the audience who completed feedback forms said they were not currently library members, so the event also succeeded in attracting a new audience into the library. 94% of attendees rated the event as “excellent” or “good”, including positive feedback from library reading group members like Clive Sykes, who valued the chance for reader participation and involvement, together with the promotion of reading as an active rather than a passive activity.

Good news all round. However, Tim O’Dell and Lambeth Libraries already had a proven track record in organising author events, with publicists including Zoe Hood sometimes approaching them directly as well as going through Reading Partners. At the other end of the spectrum, the Gillian Slovo mini-tour also saw Zoe Hood bringing one of her authors for the very first time to Eastbourne Library in East Sussex, following a maiden bid from Senior Librarian Sophia Harvey.

“Reading Partners has good systems in place, for example it can show libraries successful formats for events,” comments Zoe Hood.

“Reading Partners was there to guide me, so it was not so daunting,” continues Sophia Harvey. “I had done a really detailed bid, so when we heard that we had got Gillian it gave me a day-to-day schedule to work to. Then Reading Partners put me in touch with Zoe who was great, sending me show cards straight away and keeping me up to date at all times. Because we very quickly confirmed details, even down to which train Gillian would be on, I was able to get things like promotional artwork and a press release finalised within just two weeks of the bid’s success.”

Sophia arranged with the local branch of Waterstones to sell books on the night, and they carried flyers and posters for her.

The event was also featured in the local paper about ten days beforehand; it was promoted at County Hall in Lewes on plasma screens and on the front page of the network of library computers. East Sussex Library and Information Service also have a good network of readers’ groups locally which Sophia could tap into.

“I only had 100 tickets and I wanted to make sure that people in Eastbourne got first chance,” says Sophia. “These sorts of events are important for Eastbourne in terms of building a cultural identity for the town: we want libraries to be part of that identity.”

The event was a sell out, attracting people like Jane Branson to an author event at a public library for the first time. “It's always great to see an author in ‘real life’ and hear about their motivations and inspirations,” she says, “but for me the local library made a perfect setting - not too formal and the library got a chance to promote itself too. A nicely symbiotic relationship!”

“It’s really good for publicists to see the quality of what libraries they haven’t worked with before are capable of,” comments Sandeep Mahal, Reading Partners Project Manager.

“This event was very helpful for future events and bids; it makes a case for us with other authors,” adds Sophia Harvey. “I kept very detailed notes on what did and didn’t work, so I’ve got a blueprint for next time.”

“I found Gillian Slovo articulate and interesting and it was nice to feel I was learning something about her and also about how authors write their books,” says local reading group member Helen Morbey. “I would certainly attend other similar library events. I think they are important because they bring authors in touch with their readers, giving them an opportunity to ask questions.”

“I think all three events were very worthwhile,” sums up Gillian Slovo. “They were well organised, with lovely hosts and mostly big audiences. There was an interesting balance of people who asked an interesting set of questions, and it was lovely to be encountering a community rather than being stranded in some festival. I’d actively consider doing more library events in the future, and I’d encourage other writers to do so too.”

Reading Partners involves the whole UK public library network and ten major adult publishers. A children’s version of the scheme was set up in May 2008 involving 12 children’s publishers, The Publishers Association and the main children’s library bodies. For more information, please contact Sandeep Mahal on 0871 223 2041 or sandeep.mahal@readingagency.org.uk

Reading Partners: www.readingagency.org.uk/adults/reading-partners/