

case study

Reading Partners activity profile:

Girls Night In events

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.

Girls Night In library events engage a single author, or a panel of authors who write “chick lit” in informal discussion with readers. They aim to be fun nights out, pulling in big attendances.

In May 2009 *Girls Night In* events were held at Birmingham Central Library and the Winchester Discovery Centre in Hampshire. They showcased authors Penny Vincenzi, Jojo Moyes and Fiona Walker, who all had new books to promote. Birmingham Libraries had previously hosted *Girls Night In* events, whilst Hampshire’s library service was trying the format for the first time. How did their respective events go?

“The main aim of our author events is to broaden people’s overall reading experience,” says Nikki Bi, Reader Development Support Officer with Birmingham Libraries. “We have a theatre-style venue that holds over 250 people – events there are free but ticketed via our box office, this is to manage numbers as we offer everyone a drink as they arrive. We’ve also worked to encourage local businesses to donate *Girls Night In* prizes such as pampering day vouchers from Selfridges, and tickets for Odeon cinemas or plays at Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

“We always achieve good audiences for *Girls Night In* events, and this one was no exception,” Nikki continues. “At past *Girls Night In* events we’ve had husbands who’ve come with their wives because they’ve seen them reading books by a *Girls Night In* author and want to find out what all the fuss is about. That’s great for getting new audiences into our libraries. Other people have told us that they don’t normally come to library events, but they’ve heard about or events and know that they’ll have fun – our *Girls Nights In* are building a real following.”

For the May 2009 “mini tour” Eleni Fostiropoulos, publicist for Jojo Moyes with Hodder & Stoughton approached Birmingham Libraries directly. This was because of their proven track record with *Girls Nights In* and with other author events. Some had been brokered via Reading Partners and some followed direct approaches from other publishers. Examples of the latter include Simon Kernick courtesy of Transworld and the *Effortless Entertaining With Style* event featuring Joanna Weinberg and Victoria Moore (via Bloomsbury and Granta).

“We’ve been using Birmingham City Council’s global email system to promote events, which means we can reach over 40,000 people, a real selling point for publishers who work with us,” explains Nikki Bi. “We also have good contacts with a large network of reading groups.”

Author Fiona Walker was delighted with the event she took part in, telling Birmingham Libraries, thanking them “for orchestrating such an enjoyable and *Girls Night In* with myself Penny and Jojo. The Library Theatre is a super venue and your events are clearly very popular. Bravo!”

The “domino effect” of Birmingham’s event successes has helped to encourage wider library-publisher understanding. “Once an event has been confirmed, I disseminate the promotional material with all the libraries in the region, so it’s helping them to build knowledge and learn what works,” says Nikki.

“Many libraries have indeed developed one-to-one relationships with publishers as a result of the work we’ve done over the last five years,” says Sandeep Mahal, Reading Partners Project Manager. “But I also encourage publishers to work with other library authorities for the first time.”

Angela Hicken, Literature Development Officer with Hampshire County Council got initial information about the *Girls Night In* format and Jojo Moyes’ availability at a Reading Partners regional meeting. She is Reading Partners’ representative for the South East of England, and has been involved with the consortium in a variety of ways, including a successful skill sharing project and readers’ day with Bloomsbury.

“Angela approached me directly,” explains Eleni Fostiropoulos. “I hadn’t used the Winchester Discovery Centre as a venue, but I was keen to try it out.”

“When you’re doing a Reading Partners event you have the benefit of knowing that you’ve already been ‘introduced’ to publishers and publicists,” adds Angela Hicken. “They trust the Reading Partners brand and via it, they’ll know about other events you have done, even if these have been with other publishers.

“At the Discovery Centre we’ve been collecting a mailing list of people who have come to book, comedy and similar events,” she continues. “For *Girls Night In*, I also targeted women-only gyms and local pubs and wine bars. We felt it was a good opportunity to promote the library to people who might not usually come and borrow books.”

Winchester’s *Girls Night In* drew a near-capacity crowd of 140 people, and generated book sales of over £450.

“This *Girls Night In* was the first event I’d been to at the Discovery Centre,” says Jayne Swallow who lives in Ropley near Winchester, where she recently set up a reading group. “It was great to have coffee or wine before going on: it was all very informal, and all three authors were really amusing and articulate speakers. It was like going out with a group of friends, and funnier than many stand up comedy events I have been to. I went up to the librarian afterwards and said that it would be great to have more of these sorts of events.”

The Winchester *Girls Night In* was also a success for attendee Mandy Lampard, who lives in Stubbington, near Fareham.

“I loved it,” she says. “Hearing what motivates the authors, their writing 'systems', their inspirations ... and all the general bookie gossip! I'd also like to see more events like this at the Discovery Centre, and I've since attended a crime writers' event there.”

“With this, our first *Girls Night In*, we wanted to put the accent on entertainment,” says Angela Hicken. “So feedback like this is really rewarding. Library author events all add to overall cultural life in Winchester. It's good for the city and it's good for us to promote reading as a social activity and a shared experience.

“It's also been great for us to show that we can successfully stage events of this size. Straight away after *Girls Night In* we were talking to Hodder & Stoughton about them bringing another of their authors to us, thriller writer Gerald Seymour.”

For the Winchester *Girls Night In*, Angela Hicken not only introduced Penny Vincenzi, Jojo Moyes and Fiona Walker, but also 'chaired' the discussion.

“This was the first time we'd tried this; she did it really well and it brought something new to the format,” comments Eleni Fostiropoulos. „But at both events, all the three authors clicked really well, and Jojo Moyes has said she would love to do more library events.

“Publicists can initially be reluctant to consider doing library events, but once we've had one successful event, we will often go straight back to a library. It's great to be able to go to Reading Partners for advice and guidance on working with libraries. “It's also good for publishers to have a forum where they can get together and share ideas. Reading Partners provides both via update reports and meetings where you can find out what has worked for others.”

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