

case study

Reading Partners activity profile: Hardeep Singh Kohli 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 the summer of 2009 Reading Partners brokered a six-date tour featuring broadcaster, writer and columnist Hardeep Singh Kohli. This promoted the paperback version of his first book, *Indian Takeaway*, which charts his journey from the south to the north of India. Hardeep cooks typically British food as he travels and reflects on his Indian and British heritages, having been born in Glasgow after his parents came to the UK from India in the 1960s.

This was the first time Reading Partners had helped arrange library author event activity for consortium member Canongate. Public library services in Birmingham, Redbridge, Sandwell, Leicester and Oldham had all successfully submitted “bids” for the author, following a Reading Partners email alert detailing Hardeep’s availability for promotional work.

Some impressive statistics resulted. The events in Wanstead (Redbridge), Oldham and Leicester sold out. Wanstead Library notched up one of Redbridge’s largest-ever audiences at a library event, and Leicester had sold all available tickets three weeks before its event. Central Library in West Bromwich (Sandwell) pulled in 205 attendees, and sold over £300 of books provided by the local Waterstone’s branch.

What was the reality behind the numbers?

There were hitches. For some library services, having to wait to find out if they had secured Hardeep through the Reading Partners “bid” process impacted on their promotional activities. For example, images of Hardeep weren’t available in time for some print deadlines. Oldham felt that a direct dialogue might have been more productive, and Redbridge and Sandwell came away aware that they needed to field better sound systems for future events of this calibre.

However, all the library services involved agreed that their events had had a positive effect on their relationships with their local community, or had helped to bring new audiences into their libraries.

“A very mixed audience comprising regular author talk attendees, a sizeable contingent from our Asian community and many people attending a talk for the first time who had been attracted by Hardeep as a media personality,” recalls Nick Dobson from Redbridge Central Library Services. Good partnership working with Reading Partners and Canongate enabled him

to mount an effective marketing campaign comprising flyers, posters and show cards whilst his local authority's communications team ensured that the Wanstead event was covered by local media.

"I enjoyed everything about it, the talk and the way Hardeep made all of the audience get involved," says Gurpreet Singh. "I thought the event was excellent I would score it ten out of ten. I would like to be more involved with my local library because it has so much to offer".

"These events help to make the books come even more to life and they encourage us to try new books, some of which we'd probably never try otherwise," adds Rachel Davis, who also went to hear Hardeep at Wanstead.

"Yet another great event, bringing out a wonderfully diverse audience, and helping to develop excellent community relations," comments Paul Voyce, central library manager with Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, on the West Bromwich event. "This event proves that you can charge a reasonable fee, even in an area not noted for its prosperity, and still bring in excellent numbers. You just need to work hard in the community, to have established a local commitment to attending events, and to have the ability to make the guest feel special."

Literature development officer Punam Ramchurn worked hard to promote Oldham's event. Flyers were created and distributed to all Oldham's public libraries, and event details went onto the council's website. She also promoted the event via Time To Read in the North West, a partnership of librarians, literature development workers and other organisations engaged in reader development activity in public libraries.

"Because Hardeep comes from an Asian background, it would be easy to assume that he will be of interest to all Asians," she says. "But here in Oldham we have Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities who wouldn't necessarily automatically be attracted to an author whose origins are Indian. There's not a natural core audience for him here as there is in cities such as Leicester. So I worked with our ethnic minorities officer to promote the event to relevant groups."

As a result, the Oldham event brought in attendees who either hadn't come regularly to Oldham Central Library, or who hadn't used it before.

"I was impressed that the library had managed to attract a speaker like Hardeep," says Tajinder Hayes. "I think it's important that local libraries hold events like these: they connect authors and audiences and they create a greater sense of community among readers."

"I enjoyed Hardeep's candour and humour when describing what led him to write the book. I like the idea that you can buy a signed copy of the book at a reduced price at these events too," says Caroline Axley, who belongs to a local writing group. "Hardeep also spent a few minutes talking to each person who bought a book which was also enjoyable and finally I enjoyed the delicious glass of wine which was provided as part of the event! Food and drink at these events always enhance the social feel about them."

"Hardeep represents everything Leicester is trying to do to integrate communities and reach readers from ethnically diverse backgrounds," wrote Chris Hodgson, reader development

services manager for Leicester Libraries, in her “bid” for Hardeep. The Leicester event attracted a very mixed ethnic audience, again including people who had not used the Central Lending Library before. Like Punam in Oldham, Chris feels that she would not have been able to attract a big “name” like Hardeep for a library event without Reading Partners’ input.

“Reading Partners’ role was invaluable,” agrees Canongate publicist Anna Frame, for whom Hardeep’s tour was the largest she had been involved with to date. “The fact that we could use both their knowledge of libraries nationwide, their contacts database and their proactive help in making the tour work was a huge help.

“Library events provide a fantastic platform for a wide range of authors to reach new audiences, especially among those who might not attend literary festivals,” she continues. “Librarians are usually passionate about making their events work, and ensuring that they get a good amount of publicity in the right places. They also know their public, and in my experience they have a good understanding of what will and won’t work in their local area.”

Chris Hodgson speaks for many librarians when she sums up: “We’d love to hold more events of this calibre in the future. We will go the extra mile!”

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

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