

case study

Reading Partners activity profile: Jasvinder Sanghera 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.

“One woman came up to me afterwards and told me that she had experienced both domestic violence and pressurised marriage. The event had left her very fired up – she said that she was going to keep in touch with Jasvinder and that she wanted to do something herself locally. So our event was about much more than just boosting book sales and library membership. It had a real, wider social benefit,” says Geraldine Wilson, Senior Librarian for Literacy & Development with Darwen Borough Council.

In Spring 2009, Reading Partners helped broker a series of library events focussed around *Daughters of Shame*, which tells the stories of some of the thousands of women that Jasvinder Sanghera has met through Karma Nirvana, the organisation she founded in 1994 to help Asian women who have experienced forced marriage or honour-based violence. Published by Hodder & Stoughton, it is the sequel to *Shame*, Jasvinder’s own story of how, as a teenager, she ran away from home and became estranged from her family after they tried to persuade her to marry a man she had never met.

The events took place at Blackburn, Peterborough, Halifax and Barnsley libraries. In some cases they sprang from direct contact between the libraries and the publisher thanks to burgeoning relationships. In others the libraries were able to “bid” for Jasvinder after an alert that she was potentially available. This came via the “rolling calendar” which Reading Partners regularly distributes, detailing events and promotions on offer from publishers.

“Reading Partners is great at feeding pitches through and offering advice about where to take an author,” says Katie Davison, Press Officer with Hodder & Stoughton. “All the library events were very successful and well-attended, and Jasvinder was really pleased; so much so that she wants to do more library work for the paperback version of *Daughters of Shame*. We find that libraries often do much better events than bookshops because they have better mailing lists, and the librarians are always so enthusiastic and will do everything to make an event work.”

“We have an Asian women’s reading group, but we also contacted domestic violence-related agencies whom we have not worked with before,” says Geraldine Wilson about preparation for the Blackburn event. “We got prior local media coverage; there was a noticeably higher than usual Asian attendance, and a local refuge brought a group of women.”

“We also contacted women’s centres and Asian organisations,” says Anna Turner of Calderdale Council. “These are very much sectors of the community that can be hard to reach and whom we want to target, as they don’t tend to otherwise come to libraries very often. Events like this show that libraries are not just about lending books. Our service extends into the community.”

Paula Leighton and Janice Dawson helped Anna Turner to publicise the Halifax event. They are link workers in the Park Ward area of the city, which has a largely south Asian community. They put together a flyer and took it to schools, health centres and other outreach venues.

“Whilst working here we have become aware of the vast amount of domestic violence and forced marriage in the community,” explains Paula, who was keen to learn more about these issues and how she could help people affected by them. “It is generally hard to get our ladies to come out of their comfort zone in Park Ward for many reasons, including fear of being seen,” she continues. “However, the turnout for this event was fantastic. Jasvinder’s talk was informative, heartbreaking but also very positive and I now have a lot better understanding of what happens and where to signpost our ladies.”

The Peterborough event achieved equally wider-reaching results.

“Three or four women who attended became volunteers for local women’s centres because of it, and we got a double page spread in the Peterborough Evening Telegraph,” says Helen Walkinshaw, chair of the International Women’s Day Forum in Peterborough. “Jasvinder was absolutely marvellous, and the whole thing really helped to get the issues in front of a wider audience.”

“We don’t have a budget for author events, but by being able to pitch via Reading Partners we have been able to get Jasvinder and other big-name authors,” explains Elaine Wilkinson, Reading Promotion Librarian at Peterborough Central Library. “The proof copies and publicity materials that publishers give us for these events are also really helpful. They’re better quality than we could afford to produce; they show that we are across all the latest books, and they have also helped our relationships with local book shops.

“These events add to the overall cultural experience of the city. We are not a big cultural centre, so this helps us,” Elaine continues. “Such events also give us the confidence to go on and pitch for others. It is about having the Reading Partners team behind you. We’ve now got a track record of successful events, such as Jeffrey Deaver who did a sell-out lunchtime talk, and we’re finding that publishers will come to us directly.”

The Jasvinder Sanghera event held at Barnsley Central Library is part of a growing portfolio of successful library/author events which is also helping Reader Development Officer Jill Craven build fruitful direct relationships with publishers.

“We’re being proactively offered stuff now,” she explains. “For example, Random House approached us to do a web chat with Tim Butcher for *Blood River*, and Macmillan have just approached us about a web chat for our reading groups with Dick Francis. This is great for us, and I also regularly check the Reading Partners rolling calendar of other authors and promotions on offer from publishers”.

Katie Davison at Hodder & Stoughton reiterates the importance of librarians' enthusiasm for linking authors and readers.

"I would certainly encourage other publicists to run author events in public libraries," she concludes.

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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