

# Reading Partners activity profile:

## The Help reading groups project

**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.**

The Help was the American publishing success story of 2009 and remained on best-seller lists well into 2010. The debut novel of writer Kathryn Stockett, *The Help*, published by Penguin, tells the story of a group of black domestic maids in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi, who get together to tell stories about their lives working for upper class Southern white families.

Almost uniquely, *The Help* reached No.1 in the New York Times bestseller list a year after it was first published: one factor in its 'slow-burn' triumph was the word of mouth recommendations from reading groups who had enjoyed it. So for its UK launch, Penguin wanted to reach reading groups via libraries nationwide. As Penguin had been a founding member in Reading Partners, working with it regularly to promote its titles, the consortium was a natural place to turn for support.

"We wanted reading groups to 'discover' *The Help* before anybody else did, read and discuss it, and get conversations going," says Penguin marketing director Jane Rose. She and colleagues produced reading guide questions to prompt discussion, along with A3 colour posters for promotional use by libraries. 500 advance, pre-paperback books were also made available for reading groups' use.

"Reading Partners were great," Jane continues. "They offered the promotion right across the entire UK library networks, and provided us with details of sign-up so that we could send out our promotional materials."

Over 50 library authorities from right across the UK yielded reading groups who took part. Participating reading groups were encouraged to send back their reviews, to give Penguin important feedback direct from readers. By September 2010 work was still ongoing but at the time of writing nearly 200 reviews had been received, with Reading Partners compiling them into a user-friendly summary document for Penguin.

"We had an excellent evening with plenty of discussion. We always score our books with marks out of ten and I hope you will be pleased to learn that *The Help* got an overall score of 8.3, the only book that has ever scored more than this is Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, so as far as our group is concerned Ms Stockett is in very illustrious company, especially as this is her first book!" wrote Bakewell Reading Group, who have been meeting once a month for nearly a decade in Bakewell Library, and whose members range in age from 30 to 70 years.

Based in Derbyshire, they were initially approached by their library authority's Reading Development Librarian. Having received ten free books (and posters), discussed them, and sent in their feedback in June 2010, the free books were then passed on to another reading group within the county.

"It was a wonderful opportunity to be involved with a book that was already receiving good reviews, and our group thoroughly enjoyed the whole exercise," says librarian and Bakewell Reading Group member Carole Newbould.

Indeed their ten free copies of *The Help* are now part of Derbyshire Libraries Book Chat reading list, with Carole confirming that they have been in heavy demand.

In Milton Keynes, senior library assistant Catherine While was also attracted by the offer of free books. With a reader development role to fulfil, for which she has set up four reading groups, Catherine was keen to augment her stock of book sets for use by reading groups. One of the reading groups she founded, the MK Borrowers, was the first to discuss *The Help* using the free copies she received.

"It generated a fantastic discussion, and I was amazed to find that everybody voted that they would recommend it to others: I'm not sure this has ever happened before in the five years that we have been going!" she says. Just as Penguin had hoped, Catherine adds: "I went round telling everyone at work that they must read it; it managed to blend a serious subject with a lot of humour."

"This was a massive reading group project - the biggest I've ever undertaken in the three years that I've been working with Reading Partners," enthuses Sandeep Mahal of The Reading Agency. "Its success has been due to the level of investment put in by Penguin; the level of engagement by readers -- over 500 readers took part -- and the fact that *The Help* seems to have captured everyone's imagination. Most of the reviews were very positive."

"Reading Partners are the most important portal to UK libraries and reading groups, and thus they are a great way to reach keen readers with new writers like Kathryn Stockett and get feedback," says Penguin's Jane Rose. "But they are also very enthusiastic and efficient; a joy to work with!"

"My reading group liked the chance to deliver feedback to the publisher and this was well administered, as I was able to simply post our comments to Reading Partners," says Alison Bond McNally of Bury Library Service. "But the thing that really made our participation possible was the quantity of books provided. I appreciate that this must be a significant cost to the publisher but it was really very much appreciated: sadly a promotion which supplies only one copy of a book is near enough useless to a reading group. It also encouraged me to purchase more copies for the library service."

The reading group Alison currently leads at Bury Library has members aged 17 to 80 years, who are not shy to voice their opinions. If at first they were a bit daunted by *The Help*'s blurb, which said it was suitable for reading groups -- they were overly keen on any suggestion that reading groups might be a monolith -- they were won over.

“Group members have recommended the book to their friends, and I have recommended it to other reading groups -- we have 42 active reading groups in Bury,” says Alison. “Last but not least, everyone has asked for a visit from Kathryn Stockett.”

Meanwhile in terms of UK sales, The Help has gone from strength to strength: at the time of writing it had sold over 300,000 copies through UK tills.

"We've made so much progress through Reading Partners that it's now hard to imagine a book campaign without some kind of library involvement. Five years on, we're working brilliantly well together," concluded Joanna Prior, Managing Director of Penguin General Books in Reading Partners 2009 activity report.

**Reading Partners involves the whole UK public library network and 22 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](mailto:sandeep.mahal@readingagency.org.uk)**

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