

Reading Partners activity profile: Vintage online reading groups

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 2009, Vintage began working with social media solutions provider Webjam to design an online space for readers which would enable Vintage to interact more closely with them, through the posting of extra content on titles, reading guides, interviews, videos and more. Simultaneously, the idea was not only to bring book lovers online to share ideas and gain inspiration on a global scale, but which would also allow them to create their own personal reading groups or join a main, central reading group.

"Vintage Books has always been interested in fostering strong links with reading groups. Many Vintage authors such as Audrey Niffenegger and Sebastian Faulks are regular reading group favourites and we appreciate how vital these groups are in creating word of mouth recommendation for novels," explains Claire Wilshaw, marketing manager for Vintage. "The Vintage Reading Group is an exciting project because it enables us to connect directly with reading groups and readers online.

"Our online reading group is designed to be a place for social interaction and networking offering an opportunity to discover books and gain recommendations no longer limited by the ability to attend a reading group at a particular place or time. The online reading group is designed to stimulate debate about books and reading in general, regardless of imprint or title."

Vintage already had good relationships with Reading Partners, having used it to provide content to libraries. For this project, they approached Reading Partners project manager Sandeep Mahal for help in getting library-linked reading groups to kick-start use of the new online space. Together they developed a plan to recruit 12 such reading groups as "early adopters". These groups would be sent free books each month from the Vintage list to discuss. They would also be given support in setting up their online reading group, encouraged to post comments online and invited to give feedback that would hone and evolve the new online space, which was launched as Vintage Reading Group (www.vintagereadinggroup.co.uk).

"Not all reading groups are interested in online work, or have the IT skills to take part, and we also needed groups who would be interested in Vintage's list," says

Sandeep. "So I used existing Reading Partners library contacts to spread the word to relevant groups and to invite expressions of interest."

"Reading Partners provide interesting and effective access to libraries across the UK and in turn direct contact with reading groups. Their participation is key to this project." says Vintage's Claire Wilshaw.

Vintage were looking for both geographic and demographic diversity in their "early adopter" groups. The dozen they finally selected with Sandeep's help included groups based in Blackburn, Hackney (east London), Swansea, Doncaster, Middlesbrough, Nottingham and also South Gloucestershire, who said in their application: "Our reading group has widened the reading horizons of its members. For those of us that have no problem voicing our opinion, being part of a virtual group would allow another forum for their discussions with a wider reading community. For those more timid book worms amongst us, this would allow the chance to find a voice on another, less intimidating level".

Also selected was the Norfolk-based *Grown Ups Need Books Too* reading group, who are largely made up of mothers with small children. They have 20 members, but usually only around five to ten of them are able to get to a group meeting.

In Spring 2010, Vintage started posting content on the website, and sending out free books each month to the selected groups. They began with *A Single Man* by Christopher Isherwood, following up with *April Small Wars* by Sadie Jones and the Booker Prize-nominated *The Quickening Maze* by Adam Foulds.

"We've enjoyed discussing the books and posting online comments," says Sarah Mitchell of *Grown Ups Need Books Too*. "It's great to be given a variety of books, especially books you wouldn't necessarily have chosen for yourself, and then find that you enjoy them! Using the website is good for things like recommending books, or links to other websites with information about the books we're reading. Even if you can't make it to a group meeting, you can still join in the discussion. It's meant we can include one member of our group who has recently moved to Australia: she can now join in online too."

Other groups, such as the Blackburn-based one, have fed back on navigation and "teething trouble" issues they've had, such as confusion over where to post specific comments, which are being used to improve the website on an ongoing basis.

"I've found it very interesting to read what other people have been impressed by in the books, and it's useful to be able to post my opinions at any time, rather than being restricted to a specific group meeting," says group member Geraldine Wilson. "The website gives you access to the opinions of readers nationwide, rather than just five or six people locally. It also allows less confident people to participate: they can do so in their own time without worrying about getting their views in or being interrupted."

“Reading Partners is all about working collaboratively to produce creative and innovative ways to spread to the lives of more people the pleasure that reading can bring,” concludes Sandeep Mahal. “Vintage Reading Group is helping to achieve that.”

Reading Partners involves the whole UK public library network, nine major adult publishers and seven independent 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/