



The Book Place

One in three Australians are members of their local library, and it's no wonder – they're a community hub, inclusive and welcoming, a place for learning and conversation. Mek Yimam spends the day at her local, and remembers that it's not just the books that keep her coming back.

Mek Yimam is a writer, editor and student of professional writing and editing at RMIT. Based in Castlemaine, she is editorial director of WordOSaurus.

@10000hoursleft

illustrations by Grace Lee

Stuart Winsor sits at a desk in the foyer of central Victoria's Castlemaine Library. He wears a grey cardigan with a sew-on patch of what first appears to be the Penguin Books logo. He tells me it's a porg – a penguin-like creature from *The Last Jedi*. I'm a day too late to see his Mo Willems socks, a homage to the author of the *Elephant and Piggie* series, a favourite with Stuart's young storytime crowd.

"Storytime is possibly the most fun and exhausting thing I do," he says. He recalls two regulars who'd visit weekly with their grandmother: "One of them, I noticed, was starting to pick up the letters. It was the best. She was so excited. I was so excited. And the grandmother was so excited.

"It happened in the months of build-up to that story. It's not necessarily me teaching the kids, it's about giving the whole family that extra space to be. Demonstrating 'this is how words work, how stories work'."

That space *to be* has been important to my son and me, a constant through family separation and house moves. Stuart knows us from years of storytime.

Libraries provide a "third place" for communities. The term, coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place*, refers to places that welcome all community members, foster connection and belonging, and are distinct, in a number of ways, from the typical social environments of the home (first place) and work or school (second place).

Jess Saunders, manager at Castlemaine Library, says, "The impact we have on people's lives is enormous. One of the antidotes to isolation and loneliness is coming to the library – familiar, welcoming, safe and non-judgemental."

Castlemaine Library is one of 1600 public library service points – branches, mobile outlets or agencies – dotted across the country. Collectively they serve nine million members, providing a third place for 35 per cent of us.

It's a vital space, says Dr Tony Matthews, senior lecturer in Urban and Environmental Planning at Griffith University. "If you don't have enough third places, you're running a very big risk of fracturing social cohesion, reducing neighbourhood friendliness, declining trust among people, and just generally a lower investment in community."

During one lockdown, when a click-and-collect service was in place, the library's foyer housed an incubator with fertilised chicken eggs.

"Our patrons could engage with something fun and hopeful at the same time as collecting their library items," says Jess. Videos were also shared to the library's Facebook page.

A long bench stretches across the glass wall that's adjacent to the entrance. It looks out onto the quiet alleyway. Power outlets demarcate spaces for patrons and their devices.

Those without internet access are catered for in a nook beyond the foyer, where PCs enable access to services, employment and the wider world. As one member explained in the library's annual report, "Thanks for keeping the wi-fi switched on while you were closed – I was able to Skype

my son living in London from my car parked outside the library...the only thing that kept me going during lockdown."

Conversation is one of the characteristics of a third place. Friendly exchanges and chance encounters with familiar faces cultivate a sense of connection to place and community.

Hayley West, a library services officer, staffs the main desk. She fields queries about membership and the online catalogue, about overdue books and where to find certain titles. She's also a master conversationalist – chatting to members about local events ("Are you looking forward to the Goldfields Gothic Festival?" she asks one patron), suggesting DVDs to a romance-buff regular named Barbara, and sending kids off on a treasure hunt around the library – all while assisting folks with printing, extending computer sessions and reserving books.

Lorraine le Plastrier is a regular library visitor. We've exchanged countless smiles over the years, but today, we chat for the first time, seated at a booth where she's reviewing dozens of printed copies of her poetry for a collection she's working on.

A power outlet to Lorraine's right allows her to charge her wheelchair from the comfortable distance of the table that accommodates her needs. She's been a member of one library or another ever since she was a schoolgirl in the 1950s. "The library was full of magic. There was an undiscovered sense of what you'd find, what's new, what's different," she says.

"There's a sense of community here, a sense of belonging. There's a deliberate intention to be open-hearted to the community."

This sense of community extends beyond the library's walls. Like many libraries around Australia, Goldfields Libraries, of which Castlemaine Library is a part, has a service that helps people living in remote rural communities access books, chats and outreach programs from their homes. David Holmes, a community library officer, brings books to north-central Victorian towns like Wedderburn (population 663), Inglewood (730) and Elmore (776).

"Sometimes you see one or two people a day at an agency, which may seem inconsequential, but it's days when you have conversations with someone and it means something to them that you see the value in the service," he says.

David also supports people experiencing social isolation through the Loddon Digital Device Loan Scheme, visiting folks at their homes once a fortnight to provide them with digital skills training. "It means a lot to have someone explain how emails work, or how they can browse the internet on a tablet."

I wave my goodbyes and step out of the library into the sunny winter afternoon. Next to the footpath, a man is seated on a chair. His laptop balances on its carrier bag that rests on his lap. It's plugged into an outlet on the library's facade – every bit of this third place designed for utility, service, connection. He looks at his screen and laughs. ■