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Correspondent



Letter to the fourth Fish Hoek Librarian

*But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.
From He Wishes For the Cloths of Heaven by WB Yeats.*

Whoever you are, you have been given a precious gift, the opportunity to enter the minds, lives and dreams of young and old. It matters not whether the dreams remain a buoyant comforting fantasy or are translated into ambitious reality, tread carefully so that you are always stoking insatiable curiosity, always directing hopeful eyes to a far horizon. '... for to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour.'

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Virginibus Puerisque*, 1881.

Fish Hoek Library's first librarian was Ethelmay Gillard. She held office for thirty-six years, from 1954 until her retirement in 1990. She lives in the memory of several generations as a great storyteller and an inexhaustible fount of literary and local knowledge. The popularity of the library and its status as a centre of community life is her legacy to Fish Hoek.

From 1990 until November 2012, I have had the great pleasure of being the Fish Hoek Librarian and have shared that honour with Susan Alexander who was acting librarian-in-charge from 2001 to 2005. We shall let others determine our legacy, but our library philosophy and ideals have been moulded equally by a love of books and a love of service. We may not grace the oldest profession, but librarianship is undoubtedly one of the best and most satisfying professions.

As the Fish Hoek Librarian you are responsible for a service to the whole valley and the greater Southern Peninsula. All the libraries of the South are important partners but our closest relationship is with Masiphumelele Library. I urge you to maintain these special ties; the umbilical cord may have been severed and the baby has become a fully functioning independent being, but 'Masi' is still the offspring of Fish Hoek. Nurture the bond to the benefit of both libraries.

Beyond the South and our immediate district, Fish Hoek has looked to strengthen ties with all other libraries in the Western Cape as an ardent supporter of interlibrary loans. Our books enjoy their trips to the countryside and the delight they bring to rural readers. It is the ultimate outreach service that we have chosen to endorse, gratefully sharing our good fortune as the beneficiary of generous donors.

As a final indulgence before I entrust you with my library, I want to give you some tips to help you to integrate.

- ▶ Elsewhere in Cape Town or the rest of the world, designations range from Senior Librarian, Principal Librarian, Regional Librarian or even Chief Librarian, but in Fish Hoek you are simply 'the Fish Hoek Librarian'. It reflects the community's rural roots and its historical distance from the former 'City Librarian' who would have managed those other libraries on the far side of the mountain. Don't fight a battle you can't win. Be happy that you are The Librarian.
- ▶ At least half of your patrons are a lot older than you are and they have lived in Fish Hoek since before you were born. Rely on their memories and local knowledge, but don't worry – they have a touching belief that librarians know everything. Don't disillusion them.
- ▶ At least a quarter of your book stock is a lot older than you are and has been in the library since before you were born. Don't throw them out all at once; check the date sheets, they are still being read frequently.
- ▶ For peace of mind, don't live in Fish Hoek. Patrons may expect you to accept returns on your doorstep or over weekends. Don't shop locally or you will be asked to renew loans while choosing your breakfast cereal. Don't publish your home phone number unless you are willing to do phone renewals on Sunday mornings.
- ▶ Remember that library users cannot and do not read notices. If you intend to introduce changes, you need to plan strategically and communicate loudly and persistently. No matter how a notice is worded, it will be misinterpreted.
- ▶ Never blame a computer or Brocade for any problems. If patrons believe the system is fallible, you will never convince them they really should look again for that long overdue book at home.
- ▶ Spend time listening to your people. (They are 'yours' now.) You will be fascinated by their stories and you can learn so much from them.
- ▶ You will be expected to remember every recommendation you ever made to them and to have just the right book waiting next time they visit. If a book is reserved, it must appear magically within days; the book they started reading on the plane and couldn't finish, must surely be in stock. Then there is the book with the red cover they read two years ago and want to share now with a friend – it was in stock then, where is it now? It was about a woman travelling in Europe, you remember, don't you? Please, No 4, please love them with all your heart and give them your undivided attention. Serve them well for many years, get the good books and get them on the shelves as quickly as possible. And a little secret just between you and me – learn to break a few rules every now and then.