

Reading to Recovery – a cinematic journey

A library book club that is helping homeless people with drug and alcohol addictions was “a story that needed telling”. The result is a prize-winning film and here **Bob Usherwood** reveals the story behind the remarkable *Reading to Recovery*.

APART from Frederick Wiseman’s superb *Ex Libris*, which won the International Federation of Film Critics Prize at Cannes and had a running time of three-and-a-quarter hours, public libraries have not been well documented on the big screen. However, last year, a much shorter British film, *Reading to Recovery* (2019) was also given an award.

This was at the Recovery Street Film Festival, a unique event themed around addiction and recovery. This invited people directly or indirectly affected by addiction to make a film and submit it for inclusion in the festival.

For Rohan Patel, a 20-year-old politics and sociology student at Leeds University with an interest in video, Lee’s Book Club at Westcotes Library in Leicester was “an incredible story that needed telling”, and he went on to produce a moving and uplifting piece of cinema which tells its inspiring story in just three minutes.

Above and beyond books

The book club, named after its founder Lee Ayres, has objectives above and beyond those of other organisations with a similar name. The participants are homeless people, some recovering from drug or alcohol addiction. It all started when Lee Ayres, a homeless man and an avid reader who was already a regular library user, asked Matt Vaughan, the library manager: “What would I do if I wanted to start a reading group?”

Lee, who has been homeless on and off



Bob Usherwood is Emeritus Professor, The University of Sheffield.

for over five years and is in active recovery, told me that, as “a homeless person ... [he] wanted to help other people in the same situation.”

Matt, whose managerial responsibilities include community activities, developing networks and promotional events, was well placed to tell Lee how other reading groups in the service were organised. A former social worker, he was also keen to welcome homeless people to the library, but explained that they would be expected to comply with the existing rules and standards for behaviour. He said that some in the library service did have concerns about alcohol and drugs but that the idea was generally supported and approved by management. He added that later, when the film was made, there were some worries that publicity via media outlets might raise difficult questions for the library service.

The club started in December 2018 and is

Matt and Lee with the award.

run by Lee and Matt with some additional help from Jordan, who works at another library. It was agreed that the group would meet outside of normal library hours. This makes it possible for people to get together in a relaxed atmosphere where they can “bring in a can of beer, drink and swear”. The rules and regulations are not strict or always entirely clear. Matt however hopes that, in the future, the service will develop an agreed policy for homeless people. He would favour a flexible, community-centred approach providing a welcoming place for some of the most vulnerable people in society. He is keen to make links with other organisations such as Turning Point which offers support to people who need help with their drug and alcohol use, and aims “to inspire and empower them to discover new possibilities in their lives.” It was one of their support workers, Jude Duncan, who organised the work on the film.

No address necessary

Asked what happens at the group, Lee emphasised the importance of “munch.” Food always plays an important part in meetings, and people are invited to join for “a book, a bite and company.” The books used by the reading club come from a range of sources, including 10 titles donated each month by Penguin Random House which are chosen from a list provided by the publisher. The City Council’s website, like many others, states that: “You can join in person at any of our libraries; it’s quick and easy as there are no forms to fill in. All you need to bring is one proof of name and address...”

This causes real problems for the homeless. However, in practice, managers take a pragmatic view and are rather more understanding of their needs. As

a BBC journalist who visited the group reported, Lee “has built up such a good relationship with Westcotes Library... they let him take out the titles despite not having an address.” (Millar 2019). Matt indicated that there may be a few others in the same position. He describes this as a “relationship service based on an area of the city,” and told me, “If I lend a book to a homeless person I know where they are.”

In fact, most of the books used by the club are not public library stock so members can take a title away. Sometimes they are given a book to read and then discuss at a future meeting. However, club conversations are not limited to books. According to Lee, they “talk about everything, drugs and drink problems and rehabilitation”.

That said, reading is very important for homeless people. To quote Priyanka Mogul (2014), the founder of the Spread

The Word Campaign, “Homelessness won’t be eradicated if all homeless people start reading What books can do, however, is pave a path out of the situation they’ve found themselves in.” Matt believes that reading provides club members with “an open door to a different life and allows them to explore different worlds. It is a time when they can stop worrying... Homeless people love stories.” This is certainly true of Lee, who told the BBC: “Overall I have read over 500 crime fiction books and, 3,000 comic books.” (Millar *ibid*) Matt also added, “I have known him to read three or four whoppers a week – like 400 pages.”

A rewarding experience

In addition, reading group members also enjoy talks from local authors. One of these was Mahsuda Snaith, a prize-winning writer from Leicester. Her





second novel, *How to Find Home*, is about a homeless girl and was written to change the way people think about homelessness. Snaith (2019) admits that she, “bloomin love(s) libraries ... because ... homeless people will all be made to feel welcome when they arrive. Because libraries do exactly this every day. You don’t need to show your qualifications, or your citizenship, or your job history to walk through their doors. There are no dress codes or age restrictions. You don’t even have to have any money.”

Another writer, David Wharton (2020), addressed the group after learning from Matt Vaughan that his first full-length work of published fiction, *Finer Things*, was to be discussed by Lee’s reading group. He described his visit as “a fascinating and rewarding experience.” It was, in some ways, similar to most book groups he went to in that: “After a while, talk drifted away from [his] novel and towards the group members’ personal interests and experiences.”

However, such groups, he said, are “never just about the reading; it’s about reading as the context for an essential social act.” For Lee’s club this was especially significant because “if you spend most of your life on the streets coping with addiction, living an existence that is not merely chaotic but fundamentally decivilising, essential social acts are rare

and priceless. [His] book was a useful lever, but the very fact that these people could come into a library for a few hours to talk about it was the real point.”

Inspiration and reality

Some group members have ambitions to be authors. One, Graham Murney, is a gifted artist and has started writing a children’s book including his own illustrations. Lee himself is currently writing a book about his experiences of homelessness and substance use and has been mentored by Mahsuda Snaith. He wants people to know what it is really like to be living on the streets. There are too many negative attitudes about the homeless and homelessness, and he hopes that by writing a book he will help change the way people think and remove the stigma unfairly attached to homeless people.

The staff at Westcotes Library certainly exhibited positive attitudes. Lee described them as “amazing, they are friends. They help me get things like socks”. The library was the first place he went to on a day he was attacked. He said the librarians were “the people I feel safe around ... they don’t judge us”. None of the staff at Westcotes have any special training in working with homeless people although Matt believes his previous experience as a social worker helps. A number of American writers (e.g. Vega 2019) have considered the case

for librarians and paraprofessionals being trained in areas such as mental health and de-escalation strategies (for example calming down users who are abusive), and some U.S. universities offer dual degree courses in LIS and Social Work (Blank nd). Readers interested in such training are recommended to view Ryan Dowd’s (2013) lecture “The Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness” which is available on YouTube (<https://bit.ly/3a3hLHd>).

Destitute people are often first attracted to public libraries because they are one of very few places that they can use without paying or being expected to pay. This is, of course, true for the population in general but it is particularly important for the homeless. Given that, according to Shelter, there were 320,000 people homeless in Britain last year one must wonder if Library Connected’s planned programme to persuade staff to be entrepreneurial and for library services to increase income generation is the most appropriate way to use Arts Council money. Libraries, librarians and the communities they serve deserve better: They are a public not private good for society.

A place for the homeless

As David Wharton (ibid) told me, they “are there to open up the possibility of



Previous page, top, *Reading to Recovery* title screen; Left, the Westcoates Free Library in Leicester; right, Matt and Lee at the library.

Above, Lee talks books; Left, the trophy on display; below, a reading session.



education and self-improvement. It's what they did for me early on: [they] provided a safe, quiet place where I could explore books and ideas almost randomly, free of charge, with neither a curriculum nor the expectation of testing to narrow my interests." Before austerity became a political mantra and professionally qualified staff were squeezed out, public libraries and related organisation made commendable efforts to support homeless people (<https://bit.ly/3c4fGwx>). Today there is "a loss of focus on vital outreach services ... [and] few services ... remain for homeless people". (Anon 2018)

In the cinema, however, interest in the area has increased. In addition to Rohan Patel's prize-winning short there is *The Public*, a major American feature film, which has had limited UK release but should be available here on Region 2 DVD from June.

This is not a true story but was inspired by an essay written by the American librarian Chip Ward (2009). The film is about a group of homeless people who refuse to leave a public library at closing time because the weather is freezing and they have nowhere to go. As the plot progresses politicians and the media distort and exaggerate what is happening and the police are sent to evict those seeking shelter. According to *Rolling Stone* the picture's underlying message is "how libraries are now one of the last outpost(s) of American democracy a public institution that provides access to books, the internet, social interaction

and the basic tenets of shelter." (Travers 2019)

Not all in our profession believe that public libraries can provide targeted care for society's most vulnerable. Eustace (2019), for example, suggests that such provision is "a disservice to ourselves and our customers because we are diverting resources and energy away from our core business ... [and] also ... a disservice to the homeless because we are not equipped to provide them with the level of service they need and deserve." This is something you may wish to debate, but we must avoid treating citizens as customers and be aware of making the best the enemy of the good.

To quote David Wharton (ibid) who visited Lee's Book Club: "The people drawn into Westcotes Library on that rainy winter night had all been alienated from the structures of society, and this group was a toehold on normality for them. For some, it seemed, it was turning into more than that – the beginnings of a route back in." They were, thanks to their local library, on a journey from reading to recovery. **IP**

● Watch the film at <https://bit.ly/2wJJEY7>

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