



NO. 2867

LIBRARY

**Marlene Cooper -  
*An Enlightened Life***

Devastated after losing her sight at 42, Marlene learnt to use a cane and built up the nerve to venture out alone. But her first experiences were so traumatic that she retreated to the safety of her home, not leaving.

She built her strength again, and now at 60 goes wherever she wants, and talks about how she found the courage to carve out a new life.

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# A Chapter of My Life

Hazel Flynn reports on an edgy social programme transforming lives

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK CUBBIN

**I SHOOK MARLENE COOPER'S** hand for the first time ten minutes ago. Now, she is baring her soul, telling me about some of her most deeply felt pain and fear. I'm learning things about her that would take months, maybe years, to discover in the course of normal social interaction. But this is no ordinary conversation. Marlene is a "Living Book" and I am one of her "readers".

The Living Library to which Marlene belongs is run by the Wollongong City Council in New South Wales; there are dozens of similar programmes around

Australia. The concept originated in Denmark nine years ago. Community organisers, trying to counteract youth violence, had an innovative, risky idea. They would gather people from a wide range of backgrounds, ages and life experiences, and set them up at Northern Europe's largest summer festival, Roskilde, to talk to all comers, and to answer any question put to them.

The risk paid off, and the event was a resounding success. Police officers talked – really talked – to graffiti artists; women activists to football fanatics;

and many more unlikely connections were made among the “books” and their “readers”. Both sides spoke afterwards about how the experience had changed them, breaking down prejudice and fear, replacing it with understanding and respect, if not always agreement.

Vimala Colless, a Wollongong community development officer, heard one of the Danish books speak in 2006 and was captivated.

The concept is stunningly simple: for between 30 and 45 minutes (depending on the event) a book sits down with between one and four readers and opens him- or herself up. In Wollongong’s Living Library, each Living Book has its own title and catalogue entry, with a chapter-by-chapter synopsis. A book may start by telling his or her story, but it is far from a monologue. Readers are encouraged to ask questions and can choose to focus on a specific chapter if they like.

Marlene Cooper’s Living Book title is *An Enlightened Life*, in which she tells of losing her sight 18 years ago, at the age of 42, to the condition known as benign essential blepharospasm. She tells how, early on, she steeled herself to make the independent outings she once undertook so effortlessly before her blindness, only to scurry home in fearful despair.

When she meets her readers, she also describes the crippling anxiety and

depression that kept her in her home for a year. She talks about finding the courage to re-enter the world and the reserves of strength she discovered as she remade her life. Then she recounts the truly awful incident in 1998 in which she was attacked and her seeing-eye dog, Jean, abducted by an assailant who had been stalking her from a car as she walked alone on a quiet street. “I still have post-traumatic stress,” she says. “When I hear a car door slam my stomach still churns.”

But Marlene wouldn’t be part of the Living Books programme if her story ended there. Trauma and grief feature,

**“Trauma and grief feature in these Living Books, but resilience is the keynote”**

but resilience is the keynote. After the attack she again rebuilt her life; most people who meet her socially, or in her role as a disability-awareness trainer now see a good-humoured, capable optimist.

Yet why reveal so much to strangers? “It tells people it doesn’t

matter what happens in life, you can overcome it. I want people to see that you can rise above something that seems soul-destroying.”

Marlene is typical of Living Library participants, all of whom are unpaid. As Colless notes, “The common thread in all our books is they’ve reached that point where they are highly motivated to help others. They make a huge emotional investment



**“Living Book” Marlene Cooper tells how she found the courage to remake her life**

in this project and it’s a wonderful gift to the community.”

In northern NSW, Lismore area librarian Lucy Kinsley agrees. The city had the first Living Library in Australia, starting in November 2006 as a one-off event. It now runs monthly in the library and occasionally at schools, nursing homes and local events such as the Byron Bay Writers’ Festival. She says the biggest benefit is how much it nurtures a sense of community.

“At the launch, one reader came up after speaking to one of our books, an

Aboriginal elder, and said she hadn’t realised there are Aborigines who aren’t alcoholics. Another time we had an older lady who wanted to read a particular book that wasn’t available right then. The only available book was a representative of the gay community, and she did not want to talk to him. But I encouraged her and she had a really good conversation. I heard through the grapevine she had gone back to her church group with positive reports. So it does have an effect on the wider community.”

**NO. 2783**

**LIBRARY**

**What the critics say...**

Jason, 16, has seen the world anew, particularly anyone a little “different”:

“I would normally see these people in public and

just ignore them. Now, I’d, like, listen and hear what they have to say.”

Chanelle, also 16, agrees with him. “It makes you

look at people heaps different and not judge, because you never know someone’s story unless you’ve heard it.”

NO. 1752

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Greg Cooper -  
*Triumph to Tragedy: A  
Descent Into Depression*

Greg poured too much of himself into his demanding job training guide-dogs. Unable to work for seven years, he was diagnosed with depression in 2005.

He now shares his experiences in the hope others might benefit from hearing how he worked through his darkest times.

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It flows both ways, say the Living Books. Radda Jordan, 54, who works at ACON, Australia's largest community-based gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender health and HIV/AIDS organisation, is another of the 29 Living Books in Wollongong. Her story, *Celebration of a Life*, takes in the early days of Australian feminism and her life as a lesbian. "What I get out of it is the opportunity to speak to young people about the importance of positive choices ... and celebration of difference.

"I am always, always surprised ... Much as I love young people I also, having worked in crime prevention, know the problems young people bring to the community. So my prejudices show and the young people I talk to change that every time."

Greg Cooper tells his story about being a successful seeing-eye dog trainer for nearly 30 years when a black veil of depression gradually descended over him. By 1998 he was unable to work, but it wasn't until 2005 that he was diagnosed with depression. "I wanted to stay close to home, to shrink back into a shell," he says.

A few years later, thanks to medication and therapy, he was well enough to become one of Wollongong's Living Books. Despite never having spoken publicly about his struggles, his first

experience with a student audience was a success. Subsequent events with adults and students have been equally rewarding. "It helps me if I think other people might benefit from me sharing

my darkest times and how I've been able to work through these to reach a happy place."

Some encounters are unforgettable. Marlene Cooper recalls the young man who sat down and asked, "Could I go straight to your grieving chapter?" "I thought, *Hmm*. Because I couldn't

see him, I didn't know where he was coming from." But still, she answered his questions frankly.

"He said, 'I haven't led a very good life. I've done some terrible things, things I'm not proud of. The reason I wanted to know is because I had a car accident and I lost an arm, and I thought it was to pay me back for the life I'd led. Everything you've said about your grieving process is how I've felt, and I know now that I'm not different.' He stood up and said, 'Can I hug you?', so I stood up and I gave him a hug."

Some time later Marlene ran into her reader, and learnt he had found the experience so profound, he had become a Living Book himself. "It changed his life. I was so thrilled."

A week after our reading, Marlene is at a Living Library event for 100 Year 11 students at Keira High School.

**"One reader found the experience so profound, he became a Living Book himself"**

## Where to borrow

Living Libraries operate in cities and towns throughout Australia, at frequencies varying from monthly to annually,

including Bendigo (Vic), Campbelltown (SA), Darwin (NT), Fremantle (WA), Gosford (NSW) Launceston (Tas) and

Redlands (Qld). Contact your local council/library to see if there's one near you, or there are some listed on [livinglibraries.org.au](http://livinglibraries.org.au).

It's in the large sun-drenched first-floor library, where small circles of bright-yellow plastic chairs are dotted like daisies on the green carpet. Students file in with the usual jostling and giggles, a little unsure of what to expect.

Elaine Sander, head teacher of English, welcomes a mixed bunch of scholars, some shiny-faced and studious, others dyed-fringed, slouching rebels. But within minutes they are unified, each one leaning into the circle, eyes never leaving their book's face.

A teacher murmurs, "It's amazing to see how engaged the kids are – even the naughty ones." At the end of each session, despite a five-minute warning bell, there is invariably at least one

group that doesn't want to stop.

Afterwards the exhausted but elated books debrief over sandwiches with Vimala Colless and fellow programme co-ordinator Tracey Needham.

"I get a lot of satisfaction when readers want to stay and talk at the end of a session," says Scott Radburn, one of Wollongong's original Living Books.

Talking to students about his life on the stage took on extra meaning when he returned as a Living Book to his old high school, which he hadn't set foot in since 1979. "Being there brought back many memories," he says. "It was fantastic."

And will he continue as part of the Living Library? "I'm looking forward to being 99 and having some whipper-snapper say, 'What can you tell us?'" n

**Scott Radburn (left and right) recounts to high school students how he bucked family tradition to make a living as a performer**





NO. 6482

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Scott Radburn -  
*A Jester's Tale*

From the age of six, Scott knew he wanted to be a performer and has been singing, dancing and playing music since 1985. For 16 years he toured the world as part of pop band The Four Kinsmen, and for the past seven has focused on his solo work.

He was invited to become one of the original Living Books in the Wollongong programme.

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