

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Libraries, Books, Readers, and Writers

by Donna Cote

People turn to library for access to information, nology, programs, exhibits, lectures, and much and in times like more than ever, they turn to us for a core service: books.

As the economy worse, I'm sure my library isn't alone in noticing that business is better than ever. More people are discovering libraries as a painless resource for cost savings. At public library, it's clear that people are spending reading more. Traffic at the Central Rappahannock Regional Library (CRRL) system is up 10 percent over last year. People are borrowing books instead of buying them, and they're thumbing through the library's magazines instead of paying for subscriptions.

Savvy library users are saving gas, too, placing holds online and only heading to the library when they've been notified that the items are ready for pickup. Requests for reserves are up so much from last year—13.5 percent—that we've had to add shelves to hold the reserves.

So, if hard times are bringing more people through the doors of our libraries, that's a good thing! Let them read books! Books help us rise up to who we can be. Books convey meaning, help us understand the world. Books offer shared experience; books are connectors.

Speaking about literacy, educa-



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tion, and the economy to an ALA gathering in 2005, Senator Barack Obama said it all: "And so the moment we persuade a child, any child, to cross that threshold into a library, we've changed their lives forever, and for the better. This is an enormous force for good."¹

Libraries are the places where writers and readers meet, whether at library book clubs, at author talks and signings, or simply in the quiet moments when a reader sinks into a comfortable chair in a library nook and communes with a writer's work.

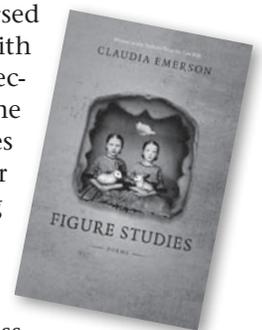
Like many public libraries, my library holds an annual Staff Appre-

ciation Day. One of the highlights—next to the delicious potluck lunch, of course—is the author presentation. All of us who wrestle on most days with budgets, personnel issues, technology, problem patrons, and building breakdowns enjoy the opportunity to sit back for an hour and let ourselves be transported to the writer's world. Isn't this—enjoying and appreciating literature—why we became librarians in the first place?

This year at the CRRL we were fortunate to have Pulitzer Prize winner and newly appointed Poet Laureate of Virginia Claudia Emerson read to the staff from her just-released book, *Figure Studies*.

She interspersed her reading with affectionate anecdotes about the people and places that inspired her poems, offering her listeners an intimate look into a poet's thought process.

She entertained audience questions afterwards, answering everything from what she does about writer's block to her memories of her first published poem. She left us all with a wonderful story about her father, who anxiously advised her to drive carefully over Afton Mountain, ending with the admonition that, if she came to a boul-



der in the road, she should “just go around it!”

Just as librarians have a special place in their hearts for writers, so do writers for libraries. Claudia Emerson has been a loyal library supporter for years. She judges our annual teen poetry contest and appears at the awards ceremony to praise and introduce each of the winners. She proudly told the audience at Staff Day that one of the grand prize winners she selected has recently had her poetry published in a major poetry magazine. To her, the library is an extension of her work as an English professor.

No doubt every VLA member could tell similar stories from their own libraries about the bond between readers, writers, and libraries. Whether writers are newly published or well established, we welcome them at our libraries for readings, book signings, and author talks. We feature them in book displays, on our websites, and in one-on-one conversations with readers looking for new books.

It's well and good that libraries are no longer just book repositories; we are, indeed, providers of access to information and cultural programming. But nurturing writers and promoting awareness and access to books is arguably the highest value libraries bring to



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our communities. In the words of Librarian of Congress James H. Billington, “Libraries are starting places for the adventure of learning that can go on whatever one’s vocation and location in life. Reading is an adventure like that of discovery itself. Libraries are our base camp.”²

Books are, after all, libraries’ core brand, transformational and escapist in the best sense of the word. Long before focus groups, library user polls, and OCLC reports, Emily Dickinson sweetly put her finger on what librarians profess:

There is no Frigate like a Book

To take us Lands away,
Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry.

Notes

1. Obama, Barack, “U.S. Senator Barack Obama Addresses the American Library Association, Monday, June 27, 2005: ‘Literacy and Education in a 21st-Century Economy,’ Remarks as Prepared for Delivery Saturday, June 25th, 2005,” *Barack Obama, U.S. Senator for Illinois*, http://obama.senate.gov/speech/50627-us_senator_barack_obama_adress/ (accessed October 17, 2008).

2. Graftagnino, J. Kevin, comp., *Only in Books: Writers, Readers & Bibliophiles on Their Passion* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1996), 21. **vi**



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