

## **From Victorian Writers Centre March 2011**

### **Clunes Back to Booktown and the Writer**

Tess Brady

From the beginning it was always about change.

Clunes Back to Booktown annually transforms the heritage village into a European style booktown with booktraders in rare, out-of-print and small-press new titles setting up shop in the heritage buildings.

Booktown began in 2007 as a project to revive the fortunes of the village which was suffering from all the effect of rural decline. To put it more formally, it was, and still is, an exploration in the role of culture in a rural renewal project.

#### **The Village**

Clunes with a population of around 800 on a good day is an old gold mining town which lies between Daylesford and Ballarat. Its wide heritage street, untouched by the 1960s energy to restore and change, was the location for *Mad Max* (1979) and *Ned Kelly* (2003). It has an accredited museum with a strong research agenda, a thriving annual agricultural show where the town and the rural communities come together, and a rural campus of Wesley College where year 9s take a term of living-away-from-home.

#### **The Situation**

At the time of the first Booktown many of the shops were empty and few tourists came. We'd boast that we were *an hour and half's drive from Melbourne CBD and light years away*. In truth, Clunes was not even on the Melbourne radar.

Change was on the doorstep. There was talk of making Clunes a cheap housing suburb of Ballarat; of relocating an abattoir and sale yards; of opening a mine; of using the empty flat land of the town as an industrial estate. None of it was particularly appealing and several of us, new to the town and old timers, realised we needed to try and steer the inevitable change.

#### **Why Books?**

We knew that if we were going to engage in a change project that would keep the village feel, preserve the heritage and be a 'good fit' we needed to find something that was both quintessential Clunes and which was not destructive. No giant bananas please! With a bit of homework the idea of discovery stood out – discovery of gold, of ideas of learning. It was only a hop skip and a jump to get to books.

We research the European model of booktowns and found that Clunes snugly fitting a set of criteria developed for the perfect booktown location. And so, in 2007, naive and with little a ridiculously tiny budget we set out to run the first event.

Nothing could have prepared us for the overwhelming success of that first day. The town ran out of everything – money, electricity, water, food...but not good will. Some say there were more people in Clunes that day than during the height of the gold rush.

### **Setting up an infra Structure**

The success meant we had an annual event on our hands. Sponsors rang us up, and government bodies with vision came to see us. We skilled-up in events management, learnt to speak in acronyms and acquired grant-writing skills in a hurry.

Now there is an well stocked ATM in the main street, we have more electricity coming down the line, lots of drinkable water, we hired extra up-market toilet blocks, put up marquees, PA systems, all the paraphernalia of an event and have plenty of food and coffee vendors. We now know about sexy things like road closures, risk management plans, insurance and OHS issues.

The booktraders sites are booked out within a week of releasing them and we regularly have around 60 traders come from all over Australia who set up shop for the weekend in the old buildings.

Perhaps more importantly the town is flourishing. Most of the shops are now occupied, businesses have expanded, real estate sales have maintained a steady increase, many more B&B's or self-catering cottages have set up, and there is a steady increase in building permits for our area. We are ticking the renewal boxes.

### **The Role of the Writer**

Think of the question: *How can we suspend this large rock in mid air without any visible means of support?* It's the writer, artists and risk takers amongst us who reply: *What an interesting problem, give me a day or so...* Setting up a rural renewal project and organising the first Booktown weekend was a bit like suspending that rock; we had to be a little crazy, have a lot of courage, be able to imagine the seemingly impossible, and just give-it-a-go.

To imagine, set up and run Booktown we did not gather a group of booky people but rather put together community workers, media experts, local government representatives, business people with the cultural workers. From the beginning this group used its various skills and focussed on cultural tourism and cultural pursuits as a way forward.

The writer brought to this table, not just an understanding of books, the publishing industry and writing, but a willingness to engage with change and to take risks... which all felt very natural because isn't change and risk-taking a large part of what writing is about?

We developed a model where the writer-in-the-community is a change agent, a risk taker and one who dreams the impossible. Now that's exciting.

*Tess Brady is the Artistic Director of Clunes Back to Booktown. She has lived in Clunes for 7 years, has published crime fiction, how-to books for women, children's fiction and*

*has had several plays performed by the ABC. She is currently the presenter for the What I Wrote [www.whatiwrote.com.au](http://www.whatiwrote.com.au) series of DVDs on Australian playwrights.*