The Zombies of Tullamore

A library youth outreach event like no other

Dr. Matt Finch
Introduction

On November 9th, 2012, the rural Australian town of Tullamore, New South Wales experienced a library event like no other.

During a storytelling visit by British writer and educator Dr. Matt Finch, students across the age range from 8 to 18 visited Tullamore’s public library for what they thought would be a writing workshop.

Arriving to find the library vandalised, the students suspected a gimmick. ‘Did you fake-vandalise the library?’ they asked. ‘Is this going to be some kind of murder mystery game or something?’

Before they could be answered, a low moan rose from the street outside. Children ran to the library doors.

Approaching the building from all angles was a zombie horde.

There was no gimmick. The students now faced a desperate battle for survival. With only the library’s books at their disposal and two reporters from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation looking on...would they survive?
• On 9th November, Dr. Matt Finch ran a day of storytelling activities for students of Tullamore Central School in rural New South Wales.

• 32 children across the age range from 8 to 18 years were barricaded in the town library while local volunteers dressed as zombies besieged the building.

• Students had to research survival techniques and plan an escape from the zombie uprising. The local fire service provided support, delivering food crates and guiding the children to a ‘safe zone’ within the school at the end of the day.

• Students dressed up as zombies to escape, walking through the horde of ‘zombies’ in disguise.

• The day’s activities were followed up with a week of in-depth writing sessions at Tullamore Central School.

• There was extensive media coverage online and via ABC Central West Radio.
The idea of subjecting Tullamore's children and young people to a zombie survival workshop began in September 2012, when Tullamore Central School students attended blogging and book trailer workshops run by Dr. Matt Finch in the nearby town of Parkes.

Tullamore, a town of just 200 people, lies within the Parkes Shire. Tullamore Central School works with many isolated rural students, and prides itself on finding innovative solutions to their needs. The school motto of 'Learn by Doing' shapes activities both in and out of the classroom.

Tullamore’s library, an adjunct to the community hall, has computer access and new resources purchased with a NSW State Library grant. Students had to travel 100km by bus to attend Matt’s events as part of his literacy outreach role with Parkes Shire.

At both workshops, Tullamore students impressed Matt and the Parkes Library staff. They were engaged, passionate, and articulate. Their willingness to share their fearsome practical skills – which ranged from pig hunting to changing the engine on a VS Commodore! – was matched only by their curiosity about the world beyond the borders of their town.

Matt was so moved by the Tullamore students’ work that he wanted to give something in return to this small rural community.

Matt woke at 5.30am a few days after one of his Parkes workshops with three words in his head: ‘Zombies for Tullamore!’

America’s Centers for Disease Control had already used zombies in public outreach by creating a comic book called *Zombie Pandemic*, which
encouraged Americans to prepare for real-life disaster scenarios by offering
the example of surviving a zombie outbreak. You can read Matt’s interview
with the Centers for Disease Control online at his site.

Matt discovered that Tullamore was prone to being cut off by floods, and hit
on the idea of engaging the local State Emergency Service in a workshop that
would encourage survival skills and library use through a dramatic role-
playing scenario.

He pitched the event to Parkes Branch Librarian Tracie Mauro: ‘Imagine the
kids come to the library, expecting some daggy storytelling session...only to
hear the wail of the walking dead...see a bloody hand slam against the
window...and find themselves under siege...researching for their lives using
the library holdings!’

Tracie was hooked. She sought funding for the project and soon the zombie
siege of Tullamore was on.
Planning

Tracie Mauro of Parkes Shire Library contacted Sandra Carter, principal at Tullamore Central School, about Matt’s zombie proposal. Sandra discreetly sounded out the local community to ensure that the horror theme would be appropriate before approving the event.

As usual with Matt’s workshops, the aim was to deliver a low-cost, high-excitement event which would have local children and young people talking about the library for weeks to come. Literacy objectives included using the library for non-fiction research, writing a list of items needed to survive a zombie outbreak, and creating a survival plan including a map with an escape route from the town.

A minimal budget covered packed lunch for the students, zombie make up and facepaint, printing and photocopying, and Matt’s fee.

The New South Wales State Emergency Service were unable to contribute on the dates which the school offered, but the local fire service agreed to participate instead. Matt proposed that he deliver storytelling workshops with younger children in the school on the morning of the event, so that older students would not suspect anything when they were taken to the library at lunchtime.

Parkes Library contacted local radio station ABC Central West for media coverage. Radio correspondent Kia Handley and ABC Open producer Luke Wong, responsible for community media including teen blogging, both agreed to attend the zombie activity. The ABC also arranged for Matt to have a live phone interview with their presenter immediately prior to the zombie uprising.
You can see the event plan, as distributed to all participants, on the next page.
Tullamore’s Day of the Dead – Final Timeline

Key:
Black text – Matt / general timeline
Red text – Librarians/helpers/zombie volunteers/‘behind the scenes’
Blue text – Fire service

9am
Set-up at the library (disarrayed books, fake blood around doorway, warning messages scrawled on doors with chalk, computer switched on and logged in, reading and writing resources for activities to hand)
Matt runs storytelling session for Kindergarten 9.00-9.45am.

10am
Matt – 10 minute phone interview with ABC Radio.

10.15am
Matt runs storytelling session for Year 2/3 10.15-11am.

11am
Recess
Zombie volunteers in make-up and given ‘zombie acting lessons’ – think Hollywood Horror not Halloween dress up! Scary is good! Establish clear ground rules – feel free to scare the children but avoid physical contact and back off if they are too frightened. Tracie Mauro appointed chief zombie wrangler.

11.30am
Students go to library with Matt and Tullamore staff.
On arrival, students explore the abandoned library.

11.35am
Five minutes after students arrive, zombies attack! Lurching down the street towards the library. Students shut the doors. Zombies pound on windows and generally provoke terror.

Students split into groups, look at CDC Zombie Pandemic comic, discuss what they need to survive zombie apocalypse. Feed back to whole group.

Zombies continue to scare kids by intermittently harassing, pounding on doors etc (leave bloody handprint on windows!?)

‘Research phase’ - Students look through zombie survival resources – non-fiction books, comics, and stories taken from Parkes Shire Library holdings. Students take notes on good ideas to survive the zombie apocalypse.

12.30pm
Fire truck arrives, sounds siren. Zombies approach truck.

Fire truck announcement:
‘This is the Fire Service. Stay where you are. Help is coming. We will establish a safe area for your rescue. We can give you food supplies to help you survive until the area has been secured. Somebody needs to collect the supply crates from us.’

Students chosen to go out and fetch supplies from fire truck.

Fire truck drives off, zombies lose interest and disperse for a while.

Lunchtime!

1pm Groups write up their research from the first part of the morning. Share their findings with the whole group.

Zombies continue to harass the library, pounding on windows, coming up to building and generally trying to scare the kids!

1.20pm Matt discusses survival options – if all Australia is overcome, where should we go? To a city? The coast? The country? Where’s safest?

Students use maps of Tullamore to plan an escape, drawing a route and writing down their plan.

Zombies continue to harass the library!

1.45pm Students share their zombie escape plans.

2pm Fire truck returns. Zombies approach.

Fire truck announcement:

‘We have established a safe haven at Tullamore School. If you can get back to the school, you will be protected!’

Fire truck drives off. Zombies disperse and move to positions along route from library to school.

Students prepare to sneak through zombie crowds – facepaint, fake blood on lips, hearts filled with zombie blood.

Zombies need to stand along the route from library to school, ready for the students to sneak past!

Students sneak past the zombies – zombies might ‘wake up’ and take notice when kids past, but should move slowly and kids should always manage to escape!
c.2.30pm Back to school!
Map of Tullamore for students to annotate.
What Happened on the Day

The zombie apocalypse workshop was a great success – dramatic, compelling, and unique in Tullamore’s history. From the Year 4 student who told the ABC’s Kia Handley, ‘I’ve already got a zombie survival plan for my home!’, to the Year 12 students who used their knowledge of horror movies to shape their writing, everyone produced high quality work. Matt put the students into mixed-age groups during the session so that older teens could guide the younger children and prevent them getting scared or over-excited.

As might be expected during an attack by the living dead, the official plan gave way to some improvising:

- The fire truck only had loudspeakers on one side. These were facing away from the library when the truck drove through to announce the delivery of food supplies. Matt had to dispatch two students to brave the zombie hordes, talk to the firefighters and find out what was going on! On their own initiative, the students cleverly anticipated the day’s final activity by imitating zombies to sneak through the horde.

- It had been forgotten that students might need to use a bathroom during the session. The library toilets were within the adjoining community hall, which could be reached through an internal door. Matt ducked out of the library and briefed two zombies to lurk within the hall, so that children going to the bathroom had to brave an unexpected zombie threat!

- The students were so excited when they saw two of their number venture out to talk to the firefighters that Matt decided to allow small groups of five students at a time out into the street, under a teacher’s supervision, to ‘lure’ the zombies away from the library walls. This
served as a reward for students who had completed their writing task, as well as a stimulus for effective and evocative writing.

Matt decided at the last minute that students should be allowed to chalk warnings on trees or road surfaces near zombies during their retreat back to the school site. This was a great addition which really encouraged students to engage with the environment and bring the imaginary setting to life.
Outcomes

The zombie event brought a great deal of excitement and attention to Tullamore in the month of November. Coverage by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation included a live telephone interview with Matt, a radio report of the event, and a follow-up interview with local school principal Sandra Carter, as well as a blog post by Luke Wong’s teen helpers on the ABC site and a photo gallery of the day’s activities.

Parkes High School Librarian and zombie volunteer Tracy Dawson wrote up the event on Dog Eared, the Parkes community website devoted to literature in all its forms. ABC Correspondent Kia Handley also gave a personal response to the event on her own website.

The Cultural Gutter, a Canadian arts website with a focus on genre fiction and pop culture, linked to media coverage and there was also coverage on the Australian National Year of Reading blog.

Matt was also asked to write up the event for a 2013 edition of the prestigious US library journal Reference and User Services Quarterly and Teen Librarian, the website of the chair of London’s Youth Libraries Group.

Tullamore school staff were pleased by the impact of the event on their students’ writing and engagement with literacy activities. The following week at school included numerous sessions devoted to making the most of students’ zombie experiences through high quality literacy activities.

Tullamore Central School principal Sandra Carter explained: “Children talked non-stop about the event: planning, writing, thinking about the audience they were writing for. These were fantastic learning outcomes, the older students
helping the younger ones, and they didn’t even realise they were doing all this learning!’

Shellie Buckle, Manager of Cultural, Education and Library Services at Parkes Shire Library added: "The zombie event at Tullamore provided a unique opportunity for the school and the library to work together on a project for the benefit of youth literacy. The Parkes Shire Library is always looking for ways to provide rural youth with innovative educational experiences. Parkes Shire Council supports lifelong learning for all its citizens.

“A side benefit of an event like this is that traditional beliefs about library services, and librarians, are challenged. It provides an opportunity for us to engage with the public differently, break down barriers, and hopefully encourages our members to use us more.”

Letter of thanks from Tullamore Central School.

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TULLAMORE CENTRAL SCHOOL

Heslar Street, Tullamore 2874
ABN 53 489 515 668

16th November 2012

Ms Tracie Mauro
Parkes Library
Parkes Shire Council
2 Cecil Street
PARKES  NSW  2870

Dear Tracie

Thank you for facilitating Dr Matt Finch’s visit to Tullamore Central School. The day was an exceptional learning opportunity for our students who thoroughly enjoyed their researching, planning and writing for survival.

This was also a wonderful opportunity for our community to be involved in a “hands on” learning experience for our students.

Thank you for supporting us in our endeavour to provide quality learning experiences to improve our students writing outcomes.

Yours sincerely,

Sandra Carter
School Principal

Letter of thanks from Tullamore Central School.
What next?

The Tullamore zombie outbreak provides a model for integrating library outreach, literacy objectives, and disaster preparedness in an exciting hands-on activity unlike any other.

Christchurch City Libraries in New Zealand, inspired by a presentation Matt gave to their children’s and youth librarians in October 2012, ran their own zombie event in Upper Riccarton Library during the 2012-13 summer holidays. You can see photographs from their activity online.

Dr. Matt Finch is available to create engaging and innovative youth outreach activities on a one-off or ongoing basis. You can find out the latest from Matt and contact him at www.matthewfinch.me
Useful links

ABC Radio report on the event
http://soundcloud.com/kiahandley/tullamore-zombpocalypse

ABC Radio interview with Tullamore Central School principal Sandra Carter
http://soundcloud.com/booksadventures/interview-with-tullamore

ABC Photo gallery
http://www.flickr.com/photos/abcopencentralwestnsw/sets/72157632072622486/with/8207076887/

ABC Open blog by teen bloggers
https://open.abc.net.au/openregions/nsw-central-west-95mw7bt/posts/tullamore-zombie-apocalypse-84la9bu

Blog post by high school librarian and zombie volunteer Tracy Dawson on the Parkes literature website 'Dog Eared'
http://dog-eared.me/2012/11/12/zombie-attack-causes-writing-outbreak/

Blog post by ABC correspondent Kia Handley
http://kiahandley.wordpress.com/2012/11/09/i-survived/

Blog post by Dr. Matt Finch

Media coverage by Canadian arts website The Cultural Gutter