

The Southeastern Librarian

Volume 55 | Issue 3

Article 7

Fall 2007

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Recommended Citation

Charnigo, Laurie and Suther, Carley (2007) "Popcorn N' Picture Books: Promoting Children's Books in Academic Libraries," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 55 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol55/iss3/7>

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POPCORN N' PICTURE BOOKS: PROMOTING CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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The educational value of children's literature is supported by a numerous body of research.¹ Helping children to read, write, develop fluency, critical thinking skills and multicultural awareness are just a few of the essential benefits children's books provide. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, children's book publishing has risen from a small publishing venture to big business. About 2,000 books were published for children in 1960. By the nineties, this number increased to 5,000 and has continued to rise.² The "voluminous body of high-quality literature" published yearly makes selection by librarians difficult.³ As Bernice Cullinan and Lee Galda note, "Our job as teachers, librarians, and parents is to select the best from the vast array of books."⁴ Another vital aspect of our roles as librarians is creative promotion of new children's books. While the literature reveals a broad array of ideas and programs for celebrating children's books in public and school libraries, little has been geared towards academic librarians.

Although children's literature is one of the most important collections in an academic library, sadly enough, it falls below the radar of most institutions. Describing her experience in becoming a children's literature librarian in a college, Elaine Gass Hirsch expresses regret in her lack of preparation for this role:

As with most of my fellow students on the academic librarian track in library school, I did not take any courses on children's literature...For whatever reason there was a general assumption that the courses were designed for students working towards careers in public libraries, and were not encouraged or even mentioned by advising faculty.⁵

Hirsch discusses how she promotes the collection through book displays, readers' advisory, and handouts.⁶ Likewise, Mary Lynn Rice-Lively and Barbara Froling Immroth describe the creation of readers' advisory groups for the children's collection.⁷

Pinpointing the users of children's book collections and discovering where these books are housed and how they are cataloged in academic libraries is the subject of two studies by Vickie Frierson-Adams.⁸ Through a survey of sixty universities which house juvenile collections, Adams found that 92 percent of users of these collections are education majors and 23 percent are students in schools of library and information science. She also discovered that other users of the collection included English literature departments, programs teaching children's literature, and children of university faculty and staff.⁹ On the importance of children's literature as a "topic of academic pursuit," Ronald Jobe describes four programs at the University of British Columbia which allow students to study children's literature from four unique perspectives; courses in teacher education, librarianship, creative writing, and art.¹⁰ Additionally, doctoral and masters degree programs in children's literature are beginning to flourish. Twenty-two such programs are listed on the Children's Literature Association Web site.¹¹

For future educators, students of creative writing and English, as well as faculty, staff, and college students who still have the spark for the occasional trek into the imaginative realm of Harry Potter and Dr. Seuss, the library's children's and young adult literature holdings are invaluable resources. Timely and thoughtful development is crucial to the value of the collection.

The library's role is to provide students and faculty with the best in children's literature. Additions for the collection may be evaluated by reading book reviews, visiting children's book sections in book stores, and participating in electronic discussion lists such as CCBC-NET (electronic forum of the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison).¹² Another important factor in a well-developed collection is to insure that the library carries yearly award winners, many of which are established by the American Library Association.

Collecting current well-written books for this section is only one role of the librarian; expanding faculty and student appreciation and knowledge of current children's books is another. New books often highlight changing interests and values of society. More often than not children's books address today's issues and provide a dialog between the generations. In this article, we will describe an annual program offered over the last four years to promote new children's and young adult literature at Jacksonville State University's Houston Cole Library. Throughout the article, "children's literature" refers to both fiction and non-fiction children's and young adult books. The Program, "Popcorn 'n' Picture Books," gives librarians an opportunity to introduce students and faculty to new books, encourage an exchange of information, and promote circulation of new books which might otherwise be left on the shelf. This program has been successful and popular with students in the University's children's literature classes.

The Program

The end of the spring semester is the perfect time to host our "Popcorn 'n' Picture Books" presentation. At that time the library has acquired a year's worth of children's and young adult books and received the yearly announcements of major children's book awards such as Newbery and Caldecott winners. Rather than serving as an ordinary library instruction session, the presentation is hosted as an entertaining "event" in which students and faculty are encouraged to sit back, relax, and enjoy pizza and popcorn during an evening of readings, book browsing, and a preview of the year's Andrew Carnegie

Medal for Excellence in Children's Video winner. The program is hosted in a conference room decorated with brightly colored streamers and displays of children's literature arranged on tables throughout the room. A refreshment table is set with punch, soft drinks, pizza, popcorn, and other goodies. Children's books about food such as Tomie de Paolo's *The Popcorn Book* or children's cookbook's such as Molly Katzen's *Salad People and More Real Recipes* decorate the refreshment table (placed carefully away from potential spills). Sometimes, students bring their own dishes, often centered around a theme from a children's book, as well.

Only one children's literature class was invited to the first "Popcorn 'n' Picture Books" presentation. However, after the success of the first program, the invitation was expanded to all professors of children's literature classes, professors in the College of Education's Curriculum and Instruction Department, English professors, the Chair of the School Library Media program, fellow librarians, and any other individuals who the librarians think might benefit.

The main goal of the program is to show off the library's recent acquisitions in children's and young adult books to students and faculty. The emphasis is on "new" books and those honored throughout the previous year with awards. To facilitate browsing, long tables are set up to creatively display the books much as they are displayed in bookstores or at publisher booths during library conventions. Some tables display award winning books, such as Newbery and Caldecott medal and honor winners, Coretta Scott King, Pura Belpré, Theodor Seuss Geisel, Michael L. Printz, and Robert F. Sibert Informational Book awards. Information about each of the awards, such as history, establishment of the award, previous award winners, and, when available, criteria for selection is displayed. Another table displays the current American Library Association's list of notable children's books (which the librarians use in developing the collection as well as for collection assessment).¹³ Tables also display new books which integrate different curriculum areas, such as fictional

stories written to teach units in mathematics or science (e.g., *Sir Cumference and the Sword in the Cone: a Math Adventure*). Other tables showcase important children's reference sources such as the *Something About the Author series*, specialized bibliographies, historical works about children's literature, and book review sources such as *The Horn Book*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, *School Library Journal*, *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)*; and other journals which delve into literary criticism and issues in children's literature, including *Children's Literature Journal*, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, *Children's Literature in Education*, and *Bookbird*. During the last presentation, pop-up books by Robert Sabuda were displayed on a table, along with books about the art and creation of pop-up books.

The presentation opens with a general overview of the library's children's literature collection, highlighting major reference and review sources, as well as how to search the library's catalog for children's books on certain subjects. Attention is also given to other specialized sources about children's authors and illustrators, the usefulness of bibliographies, and historical and critical works on various aspects of children's literature. These sources demonstrate the depth of academic interest in children's literature and how it has grown over the last few decades. After this overview, students are welcome to visit the refreshment table while listening to readings. Colorful handouts provide information and call numbers for the books used in the readings, important Web addresses for children's book awards, electronic discussion lists, and librarian contact information.

A PowerPoint presentation serves as a backdrop only to provide the audience with photographs of the authors and illustrators, cover and title of the book being read. The librarians choose about twelve award winners as well as their favorites and develop creative ways to read or present the books to pique faculty and student interest. In a reading of David Weisner's *Flotsam*, a beautiful, very detailed, wordless book, the librarians called

upon volunteers from the audience to make up their own version of the story. Each student spins a story for a few pages before passing it on to the next student who spins the yarn in their own direction for the next few pages, and so on, demonstrating the endless imaginative possibilities of wordless picture books. Librarians suggest activities that could be used in the classroom with each book. Faculty and students are encouraged to offer their own reactions towards the books, often sparking lively discussions.

After the readings, students and faculty are entertained with a preview of the winner of the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Video. Many of the award winners, since establishment of the award in 1991, are produced by Weston Woods, an excellent publisher of children's book adaptations as well as biographies and interviews of children's authors in audiovisual formats.¹⁴ Many of the DVDs are accompanied by educational activities. The Education Librarian at the Houston Cole Library has begun a collection of Weston Wood's children's book adaptations and author biographies on DVD as an audiovisual enhancement to the children's collection, making sure to obtain all Andrew Carnegie Medal winners since 1991.

After the video preview, students and faculty are encouraged to browse and check out books. Although the readings and video are entertaining, merely having all the new books on display in one place seems to be the most rewarding aspect of the presentation. Although students are shown how they can find new books the library has acquired over the last four months in the library catalog, they really appreciate the visual display of the books and the chance to peruse a whole year's worth of children's and young adult books in one room. Many students leave carrying stacks of books, many times politely duking it out over certain gems. Much to the librarians' delight, many books presented during the program regularly show up in the reshelving cart during the rest of the semester.

Benefits

Getting future and present teachers excited about new children's and young adult literature is the greatest benefit of the program. Other benefits include:

- Teaching students how to stay “current” with new children's books through review sources, children's literature websites, and relevant electronic discussion lists will, hopefully, benefit them in the future as they expose children in the classroom to new books. In children's literature classes, students are often taught the classical canon of children's works and are often sent to the library with lists of the older “classics” to check out and read. The “Popcorn n' Picture Books” presentation is designed to go beyond the canon to emphasize recently published books which reflect current issues affecting children in our society. Some of these excellent books, regrettably, will never make it into a school library or classroom due to controversial subject material. Through this program students have an opportunity to learn about authors whose books might not make it into the mainstream due to censorship issues.
- Immediate and increased circulation of the new books acquired during the previous year is a huge benefit of the program. In order to justify funds spent and the importance for continued funding of the children's literature collection, it is vital to get the books circulating and actually being read by faculty and students.
- Preparing for the presentation keeps the librarians informed about current children's and young adult books, which in turn, benefits collection development, fosters a sense of pride in the collection, and enables the

librarians to make thoughtful book recommendations to students, faculty, and even the occasional child of a faculty member or student.

- The presentation is a good liaison activity between the librarians and those teaching children's literature classes, as well as other University faculty who may have an interest in the children's literature collection.
- The librarians have the chance to “step outside the box” and wear the hat of a teacher, school librarian, or public librarian, by thinking of creative read-alouds for the presentation. Many students in children's literature classes are required to perform read-alouds. Experimenting with book readings for the presentation each year helps develop the librarians' creativity in suggesting imaginative ways students might present books during their own read-alouds.

Perhaps most importantly, the value of bringing the fields of education and librarianship together during our annual “Popcorn n' Picture Books” presentation is an exciting way to pay tribute to the best of the best in children's books and to celebrate the pure love of reading; a capstone of both our disciplines.¹⁵

Endnotes

¹Charlotte S. Huck and Barbara Z. Keifer, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*. 8th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 9.

²Bernice E. Cullinan and Lee Galda, *Literature and the Child*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1994), 30.

³Ibid., 33.

⁴Ibid., 33.

⁵Elaine Gass Hirsch, "On Becoming a Children's Literature Librarian in an Academic Library," *OLA Quarterly* 12, no. 2. (Summer 2006): 2.

⁶Ibid., 3.

⁷Mary Lynn Rice-Lively and Barbara Froling Immroth, "Readers' Advisory in the Academic Library Children's Collection," *Collection Building*, 12, no. 3-4 (1993):63-66.

⁸Vickie Frierson-Adams, "Cataloging, Housing, and Using Juvenile Collections in Academic Libraries," *The Southeastern Librarian*, 48, no. 4/ 49, no. 1 (Winter/ Spring 2001): 27-35; Vickie Frierson-Adams, "Juvenile Collections in Academic Libraries: Survey Results and the Ole Miss Experience," *Mississippi Libraries*, 65, no. 4 (Winter 2001), 117-119.

⁹Vickie Frierson-Adams, "Juvenile Collections in Academic Libraries: Survey Results and the Ole Miss Experience," *Mississippi Libraries*, 65, no. 4 (Winter 2001), 118.

¹⁰Ronald Jobe, "Children's Literature as an Academic Pursuit: the University of British Columbia Model," *Bookbird*, 23, no. 4 (1985), 12.

¹¹Children's Literature Association, "Graduate Programs in Children's Literature," accessed on October 18, 2007 at <http://chla.wikispaces.com/Graduate+programs+-+US+by+state>.

¹²Cooperative Children's Book Center , "CCBC-Net," accessed on October 18, 2007 at <http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/ccbcnet/default.asp>.

¹³Association for Library Service to Children, American Library Association, "Children's Notable Lists," accessed on October 18, 2007 at <http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/childrensnotable/Default1888.htm>.

¹⁴Weston Woods Home Page, accessed on October 18, 2007 at <http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/westonwoods/>.

¹⁵The authors would like to acknowledge Dr. Elizabeth Engley, Professor of Early Childhood Education at Jacksonville State University, for her enthusiasm, support, and feedback on our "Popcorn n' Picture Books" program.