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Children's Librarians, Reviews, and Collection Development

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, libraries are beginning to face the new demands of demographic and technological change. In this evolving context, a discussion of book reviewing and collection development can begin by examining the contemporary role of children's collections and of children's librarians in collection development.

As demography and technology change, children's librarians remain influential mediators between children and the books they read (England & Fasick, 1987, pp. 23-24). Although children's librarians' role as mediator has declined with their reduced purchasing power and the growth of direct marketing, libraries still purchase over half the children's books sold in the United States (England & Fasick, 1987, p. 24). To a considerable extent, then, librarians decide which books are available to children. In an information society, where it has become a truism that knowledge is power, access to print and nonprint media empowers children. Children's librarians should not underestimate, therefore, the importance of their knowledge of children's literature (Huntoon, 1992); nor should they underestimate their power to shape the information, literature, and communication media to which children will have access.

Literature gives children a means to explore human behavior safely and vicariously (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987, pp. 8-9). If a collection does not provide a broad range of literature, then it limits the ability of library users to participate in the depth and range of experience that, often, only reading will lead them to. A children's collection needs

materials that will help children answer the questions related to being human, that will help them compete academically, and nurture their reading interests, encourage them to pursue new interests, and hook them on the habit and pleasure of reading. At a time when so many schools are underfunded, and children in many rural and urban areas do not have equal access to high-quality education, the public library children's collection can become even more important. By making the best possible purchasing and selection decisions, librarians can provide more children with equal access to a major educational tool.

THE CHILDREN'S COLLECTION

The children's collection is at the center of the services that libraries offer, but it faces an increasing number of pressures. One of the greatest new pressures is the rapid increase in children's book publishing. There are simply more paperback series, picture books, nonfiction titles, and problem novels to choose from. Librarians, as well as booksellers, feel overwhelmed by the flood of new children's books. Projected sales for 1990 nearly doubled sales for 1985 (Simora, 1991, p. 23). While the market for children's books has increased, the purchasing power of children's librarians has declined. Publishers no longer rely on the library and school market to generate profits now that they have so much larger a market among the general public. Direct marketing has created new demands and the production of formats and sizes that are not designed for library collections.

As the market changes, so do the demands of readers. Public library use has increased across the board, including use by children. In 1988, 37% of users were 14 or younger (Eberhart, 1991, p. 193). Not only are more children using libraries, but also more of them ask for books from the newly growing segments of the expanding market, such as paperback mystery, horror, and romance series. With the new emphasis educators and librarians put on reading and literature in the home, and perhaps with the publication of tools like *The Read-Aloud Handbook* by Jim Trelease (1985), parents are more aware of the importance of literature and reading. They come to libraries wanting not only the familiar classics that they remember from their own childhoods but also the books that they find in their local bookstores or advertised in the media. Bookstores and book clubs are whetting the interest of children as well as parents. Children want the pulp paperbacks their friends are reading and the many series and spin-offs they discover in the bookstores. The electronic media continue to entice readers who see *Beauty and the Beast* or *Robin Hood* or *Reading Rainbow* and then expect the library to carry the same titles. Such changes

especially affect public libraries because public libraries carry a higher percentage of fiction than school libraries.

Readers' demands are also changing because the readers themselves are changing. By 2010, one-third of Americans will be African-, Hispanic-, Native-, or Asian-American. Children and parents from these emerging majorities will bring distinct interests and needs to library collections.

Curriculum changes and new educational trends also affect purchasing needs. The focus on reading comprehension and the shift to literature-based education have changed the way teachers use libraries. In order to meet teachers' needs, children's librarians have to go beyond the age-old battle of trying to get teachers to tell them their assignments ahead of time and beyond the constant struggle to purchase enough multiple copies for classroom demand. They need to establish ongoing communications with school administrators, curriculum committees, and school media specialists. It is not enough to be prepared for isolated assignments. Librarians need the information that will help them match their collection to the curriculum. They need to know the scope and sequence of what is being taught and at what grade level, as well as what resources teachers already have in their schools. The movement towards a "literature-driven curriculum," which focuses on communicating "culture through literature," on providing "students a continuing experience with real books—the kind they will read outside school," and on individual reading choices, has put new demands on libraries to go even farther to collect multicultural materials and meet a wide range of individual reading interests (Smith, 1989, p. 720). The home-schooling movement is also producing growing demands on many collections, because home educators require special curriculum materials and are heavy library users.

THE ROLE OF THE CHILDREN'S LIBRARIAN

Other issues affecting collection development include funding and the changing demands on children's librarians. As funding goes up and down, many materials go unpurchased or unreplaced, so that collections come to represent the feasts and famines of varying budgets. Furthermore, over half of public libraries (58%) have no librarians whose primary job is to serve children, 34% have only one children's librarian, and only 8% have two or more children's librarians (Eberhart, 1991, p. 194). The expectations for children's librarians have increased and changed even from what they were 10 years ago. Those librarians who are fortunate enough to have staffs must be middle managers, deal with a myriad of personnel issues, and participate in the management of

the library as a whole. As demographics change, services move outside the library. Librarians are asked to get involved in their communities, to network, and to build coalitions with other childcare agencies. As Cummins (1989) writes,

the children's librarian and school media specialist are the Renaissance people of the profession. You are expected to know how to run the children's department, know the children's materials both print and nonprint, plan programs, work at the adult reference desk to help cover the schedule (or fill in in the classroom), know the best-sellers and adult reference materials, understand computers and automation, provide outreach to the community, know how to deal with teenagers, have competent managerial skills, often serve as second in command, and smile as you try to cram sixty hours of work into a thirty-five to forty hour work week. (pp. 38-39)

These growing demands mean that time—especially for the 34% who have to work alone—has often become as scarce as the dollars that make up their declining budgets.

Together these concerns affect librarians' work in four areas. First, librarians are increasingly concerned with accountability. They must be able to justify spending choices to their administrations, and that requires a systematic approach to collection development.

Second, in this complex environment, a children's librarian can no longer effectively determine a budget, build a collection, or make efficient and practical use of reviews without a written collection development policy. As Gorman and Howes (1989) write: "A library collection is not merely an assembly of books, not even an assembly of good books; they have to relate to each other" (p. 18). Collection development policies help define the purpose of collections. They help set spending priorities and, just as important, they help librarians follow through on the priorities they set. Moreover, as staffs change, a written policy helps protect collections from the shifting whims of individual librarians' tastes and biases.

Third, librarians need to know what their users want and who their users are. Children's librarians use a variety of techniques to assess patron interest, including reference logs, in-house surveys, suggestion boxes, files of teachers' assignments, and personal contact with patrons. *Output Measures for Public Library Service to Children* is one landmark tool now available to help gather information about library users (Walters, 1992).

Fourth, as librarians find themselves becoming more selective in order to meet the evolving needs of their collections and patrons, reviews can be a crucial tool for making their selections serve the requirements of an ongoing collection policy.

REVIEWS AND CHILDREN'S LIBRARIANS

How successfully any review journal meets the needs of children's librarians often depends upon how well its reviewers understand that there are highly particular things that children's librarians want from reviews and, therefore, that there are also particular things they want from reviewing journals. Librarians want reviews to appear promptly, to be brief, and to select materials assertively. They need promptness because patrons ask for books as soon as those books appear in local bookstores and reading clubs. They need brevity because professional librarians place immense value on their time. Busy librarians must often bring review journals home, where they can find blocks of uninterrupted time. Therefore, reviews must be concise and bottomline oriented. Reviews that merely focus on plot summaries, that use vague language, or that turn into showcases for the reviewers' wit hamper a professional's ability to do his or her job. Reviews need to select materials assertively because, as Nilsen (1991) notes, "it's just harder to find the wheat because there's now twice as much chaff. . . . In today's climate, it's crucial that we become more assertive about measuring and communicating the quality of the books we've taken the time to read and evaluate" (pp. 181-182).

Because children's librarians are building a collection, they need to be told more than simply whether a book is or is not a good book. England and Fasick's checklist for evaluating books includes bibliographical information, authority of the author and publisher, audience, placing the book in context, illustrations, and physical format. For contemporary librarians, literary quality is not the sole determinant of purchasing decisions, and often it is not even the major determinant. Perhaps the most valuable part of a review is the information that places the book in context. How does this work compare with others in the same genre or on the same subject? Is this book a necessary purchase? In what type of collection would it be of value? Librarians are not just buying books; they are buying books to serve readers. They need specific information about how the book might be used by readers and how it can be used in their own work with children. Can it be used in preschool story hour? Will it be good for booktalking? Will it help students with school research? These qualities may give a book the extra value that determines whether or not to purchase it.

Although fewer than half the librarians in one survey (45%) use reviews in journals to select and defend acquisitions (Roback, 1991, p. 38), those who do use reviews use them to evaluate existing collections, to help establish a core collection, to serve as a jury of opinion and a forum for discussion, to defend their purchases, and to help them express their needs to publishers. To help them evaluate their collections,

librarians use recommended and notable lists in reviewing journals, and they use book evaluation resources such as the *Children's Catalog* to help find the best materials possible. Since many librarians disagree about what children will find valuable, "reviews act as a jury of opinion" (England & Fasick, 1987, p. 23). Reviews have become a forum for discussing what makes a good children's book, and they have also become a vehicle for continuing education. Librarians discuss book reviews with each other and often rely on them to select books in areas where they have "no personal interest. . . . Librarians read and select from reviews so that when a library patron asks 'Do you have a (good) book about . . . ?' we can answer affirmatively. Helping us answer that question is the first function of reviews" (Sutton, 1986, p. 50).

Reviews also help librarians defend their choices. Unfortunately, the right of access to information is still sometimes denied to children. When children's librarians are asked to remove books from their collections, one of their many lines of defense is to show the professional evaluations and responses to the material being questioned. They can let reviews serve as witnesses for the defense.

Finally, reviews are a means for librarians, as consumers, to address the glut of children's materials. As Hammill (1990) writes,

we can't expect the problems of oversupply to be solved by its source. As with most complex conditions (both the causes and the effects of too-many-new-children's-books are a tangle of finance, morality, aesthetics, education), there isn't a single remedy. Part of the answer, with hardbacks anyway, may lie in selectivity: publishing output could be refined, and quality improved, if professional book buyers—librarians and teachers, primarily—and their colleagues the reviewers were more coherent in what they bought and praised.

Though self-evident, this remark has the virtue of emphasizing an inescapable equation: *buying = supporting*. . . . One way to begin to sort out the assumptions that underlie selecting books is to answer the question: "What are you giving children when you give them this book?" (p. 3)

That is why it is so important for reviews to say not simply whether a book is good but also how it compares to other books and exactly what collection needs it serves.

CRITICISM OF REVIEWS

Researchers have identified a number of things librarians criticize in reviews. Moreover, an informal series of interviews with children's librarians from a variety of libraries (Alpha Park Public Library District, Bartonville, IL; Arlington Heights Public Library, IL; Bensenville Public Library, IL; Clearwater Public Library System, FL; Harold Washington Public Library, Chicago, IL; Minneapolis Public Library and Information Center, MN; Monroe County Public Library,

Bloomington, IN; Normal Public Library, IL; Phoenix Public Library, AZ; St. Louis Public Library, MO; Urbana Free Library, IL) to learn what review journals they use, their selection process, and how they think journals could make reviews more useful, suggests that there has been some improvement since Goldberger's study of the inadequacies in review literature, but many of her findings are still pertinent (Sutherland, 1975, p. 23):

- inadequate reviewing of foreign language books;
- not enough reviews of new books about minority groups—especially Spanish surname, American Indian, and European-American ethnic groups;
- scanty reviewing of books from new or alternative presses;
- too few reviews of books considered for their potential use by the visually handicapped;
- not enough identification of high-interest, low-reading level books;
- too few suggestions for and too little comment on use of books in the home;
- the time lag between the publication of books and the appearance of reviews.

Reviews are often faulted as well for unreliable judgments, for summarizing the content rather than evaluating the quality, for excessive bias, and for using unqualified reviewers or reviewers who address the needs of their own libraries but not the needs of libraries at large. Moreover, nonfiction does not get reviewed as much as fiction:

Titles from small specialized presses or from presses which do not send review copies to journals, have little chance of being picked for review. Ephemeral titles or titles that are considered a waste of children's time are not often chosen for review. Publishers' series books . . . (romances, mysteries, participation books), are in this category. Yet, children are very interested in precisely these kinds of books. While many librarians agree that individual titles within a fiction series can have merit, it is difficult for any series book, including nonfiction series, to break into the circle of consistent, serious reviewing. (England & Fasick, 1987, p. 27)

The conclusions of these researchers are complemented and extended by some additional findings from my interviews with librarians. The librarians spoken with shared a number of the concerns already addressed. Some reviews are too biased, and librarians need more objective reviewing. Plot summaries or the effort merely to sound interesting can displace the information librarians need to help them decide whether to make a purchase. Cute verbosity gets substituted for clarity and conciseness. Ephemeral materials and books from small presses do not receive enough reviews or the same quality of reviews as books from established presses. The librarians also mentioned a number of other issues:

- Reviewers seem out of touch with actual librarians and their needs. They focus on literary quality rather than on what will appeal to children.
- Misinformation in reviews costs irreplaceable money. One librarian regretted purchasing multiple copies of a favorably reviewed book on sex that turned out to imply that children can protect themselves from AIDS by washing their hands.
- Reviews need to focus more on how the materials can be used.
- Reviews need to describe the book's format. Is the book an odd size? Will the binding last? Is it bound in an unusual way? Does it have inserts?
- Is the book unique? Is there something about it that no other book can provide?
- Some journals seem to expect all reviews to be favorable and make the book sound good. Reviews need to be more discriminating. Even if many of the books are good, which are the best ones to purchase? It would be refreshing for more reviews to say that items do *not* need to be purchased.
- Not enough reviews target the actual groups that real librarians serve.
- Although *VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)* covers young adult materials widely, other journals review them inadequately.
- Not enough reviews address series as series.
- Audiovisual materials and software do not receive the same quality reviewing as print.
- Not enough reviews cover materials about basic skills, for example, how to write a letter or how to fill out job applications.
- Reviews could say how one item compares to another. Do you need to get z if you already have x and y? Comparisons should address illustrations as well as text. If a reviewer says that the illustrations are like those in another book, it helps librarians visualize and evaluate it.
- When journals highlight controversial titles, they might provide three different reviews so that librarians can compare varying perspectives.
- One librarian mentioned that she would like nonfiction to be reviewed the way *Appraisal* reviews science titles, with one review from a science-expert and another from a librarian.
- Reviews would be even more useful if they were available online, which would also allow librarians to call up reviews through subject searches and compare various reviews before buying.

REVIEWS AND SELECTION

The interviews also revealed striking differences in the ways libraries select the materials they purchase. At some libraries, even large libraries,

one librarian reads the review journals and makes all the purchasing decisions. At other libraries, the reading of reviews and the purchasing decisions are divided up among a group or committee of librarians. Committees might consist of librarians who represent different branches and different specialties. Some large- or medium-sized libraries distribute responsibility for different areas to each librarian. One person might cover one or more categories such as general nonfiction, audiovisual materials, fiction, or a particular subject area, and so on. At one library, each librarian has one or two areas, while all the librarians cover fiction. Some libraries order *School Library Journal* reviews-on-cards and make notes on them as they read additional reviews. Along with reviews, certain libraries use publishers' catalogs, selection services, and nonlibrary resources such as the *Journal of the Association for the Education of Young Children* and ERIC bibliographies. At another library, each librarian receives a certain dollar amount to spend each week, and they all rotate the responsibility for weekly book orders. A number of libraries receive books on approval. A larger library with many branches receives preview copies of almost all the children's books published in a given year. The librarians can read or examine the actual books as they read the reviews. Many libraries use reviews to assemble multicultural bibliographies and booklists for summer reading clubs or to select titles for booktalking.

Altogether, children's librarians use reviews in a wide variety of ways and need to do a better job of informing review journals about their needs. Librarians make their best use of reviews when they read them in light of the ongoing demands of a collection development policy. When they read the review of a particular book, therefore, they have more to consider than the isolated value of that particular book. They must also consider how the review can help define the value of that book for that particular library. Reading reviews should not be a passive process, where librarians check off which book is good and which is bad. A librarian can measure what each book offers against his or her library's continuing needs and against the existing collection and the circulation history of similar books. Librarians do not let reviews make their decisions for them. Instead, they use reviews to help them make their own decisions. Reviews may reflect the limits of technology and culture, but librarians also describe them as a helpful resource that provides an invaluable service.

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