

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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The phrase "building a collection" was once in frequent use. It is less often seen and heard today. The emphasis is more upon the selection of individual books or groups of books. This may be in large part a result of departmentalization and specialization in large library systems, an inevitable consequence of the rapidly growing body of knowledge and of the increasing demands upon that body of knowledge. But in the smaller library, and in such a collection as a collection of books for children, the idea of literally building a collection still has value and significance. A book collection, even a departmental book collection, is not merely an aggregate of miscellaneous titles. It is also, or should be, a totality which has architectural qualities in that it should be a construction erected in accordance with specific and clearly defined patterns; a functional construction designed to accomplish the standards and objectives which constitute the philosophy of the library; a construction in which each single unit is in itself a thing of balance and completeness and yet loses itself in its contribution to the whole. It may well be that library schools have contributed to the emphasis which focuses attention on selection of individual books as an end in itself rather than upon the contribution the single book makes to the structure which is the book collection. Both the content and the method of book courses may foster a disintegrated view of a multitude of fragments rather than a vision of an integrated whole.

The idea of ultimate concentration upon the book collection as a unified structure may seem remote, theoretical, and difficult if not impossible to achieve. On the contrary, achievement is not only possible, it is also distinctly helpful to correct selection, if clear perception of patterns and guiding lines is present. These patterns and lines evolve from the inherent nature of the fundamental aims of library work with

children. Children's librarians, traditionally and actually, have always felt that an essential part of their work is to broaden a child's interests in reading and to deepen his appreciation of quality in books. In other words, it is not enough to give a child the book he wants. He must also be unobtrusively persuaded to want the best books we have. There is another realization which, taken in conjunction with the one just mentioned, reveals the first pattern to be discerned in the building of a book collection for children. This is the recognition of the fact that generation after generation of children respond to the same books, and that, as the years pass, the ephemeral, the insufficiently worth-while, the expedient book is winnowed. What remains are the timeless books, the books whose appeal is universal in time and place, which are forever new to each new generation of children. These books we call, unpleasingly, the classics. These are the books we hope to persuade the children to want--not to take because of some compulsion exerted arbitrarily, but literally to want. In the case of some of these, no persuasion is necessary. In the case of others, long and skillful preparation may be necessary. And so the first pattern emerges. The core of every children's book collection, the foundation of the building, the nucleus about which the rest of the collection is built, is the group of those books which have passed the test of time, which, for want of another and better word, we call the classics. It is toward these that all our efforts and our selection are directed.

Laid upon the foundation is another group of books. Or, if you like the picture better, surrounding the nucleus of classics is a circle of books which might be called standard books. These are the titles which, with passage of time, will become classics; or titles which may never become true classics but which have such positive and permanent significance as to cause their defects to be of minor importance. Like the classics, many of them are duplicated in great numbers. Like the classics, there is within the group something for every child, though every child should not be expected to accept all the books.

It has been said that some classics, and also some standards, have the power of immediate and wide appeal, and that others will need slow and skillful introduction. It is also true that it is only realistic to accept the child as he is at the moment. The child who has known such books as the picture

books of Caldecott and Brooke, and the more modern Timothy Turtle, the small classics of Beatrix Potter, the stories of A. A. Milne, Trevor's Deep Wood, is ready for Wind in the Willows. But the child who has not been so happy in his early introduction to reading will not be ready for Grahame's books, unless he is one of those endowed with an instinctive appreciation of the rare in style and imaginative power. Consequently, a third and most important circle of books is essential. These are what used to be called the stepping-stone books. It is they which constitute the most difficult and the most dangerous problem in book selection. It is not hard to recognize either the superior book or the inexcusably inferior book. It is by no means inevitably easy to recognize when the positive qualities outweigh the negative; to realize that this particular book offers something so constructive in the way of meeting an interest, or a need, or acting as a stimulant to broaden interests or to introduce better books. This is especially true today, because of the mass production of books, the variety of uses to which many books may be put, and the pressure exerted toward undue consideration of certain elements. Such consideration frequently results in a distorted view of the book as a whole and of its total contribution.

This, then, is the main design of the book collection for children: three groups of books, the last or third being selected to guide the children to the second and first. An analysis of children as readers and of the objectives of library work with children reveals other patterns. Library work with children and young people is unique in that a wide age range of diversified interests is served. It is also true that certain reading interests persist throughout childhood and even through adolescence, broadening and deepening, taking on new aspects, but remaining basically the same. It is apparent, then, that for each age group, there should be a balanced collection meeting the need of that group. These groups are individualized in that each meets the interests of the age for which it is intended. At the same time, each group should bear resemblance to the others, in that the books contained therein represent not only the specific age interests of the children for whom they are intended, but also the interests common to all ages. It is trite to say that the beginning point of a child's acquaintance with books is the most important point. Fortunately, there is little excuse for failing to pro-

vide for the picture book age a well-rounded collection. The chief difficulty here is mass production, with the inevitable accompaniment of some degree of mediocrity. The guiding principle should be recognition of the fact that picture books today represent every possible reading interest of children not only in the picture book age but throughout their reading lives. There are folk tales and fantasies, realistic stories of every kind, poetry, and subject matter of various kinds. Since this diversity is available, it should be represented by the best of the old and the new. Due recognition should also be given to the healthy experimental features of content and illustration in many of the contemporary picture books. This in itself constitutes another selection problem. It is increasingly difficult for an adult to see some of the new picture books as a small child will see them. The mediocre, the shallow, the merely imitative, the artificially novel books are to be avoided. But avoidance of these should not lead into fear of genuine innovation, of true originality. Here the trial and error method of selection may have some value.

From the point of view of selection for age groups, the building of the book collection can rest upon a solid foundation of quality, variety, and the beginning of wide reading interests. But as the child acquires for himself the skill of reading, the sound attempt to provide for each succeeding age group a book collection which will instill new interests and continue existing ones runs into difficulty. The difficulty is caused by a lack of supply of books capable of being read by the beginning reader which are at the same time of such quality and variety as to preserve the breadth and depth of reading provided by the picture books. Such weaknesses in the book collection must be faced realistically. In this case, since we have available too few of the kind of book we need, every effort should be made to recognize the right book when it does appear and to encourage the writing of better books for these beginning readers.

Another and different weakness exists in the case of the eight to ten year olds. These middle children seem frequently to be the lost children. They come between the little children and the older ones, whose needs and demands, for one reason or another, come more forcibly to the attention of the librarian. That this is true is indicated by the habit in many children's rooms of segregating on separate shelves the books for the third and fourth grades. In view of rush of work con-

centrated within a few hours and of short staffs, this may be a practical device to facilitate book selection for these ages. From other points of view it is not desirable. This is a crucial age in the reading life of a child. His mechanical reading ability is becoming fixed, his interests are developing and broadening, and he is greatly in need of individual attention. Especially is this true in view of the fact that the supply of books is neither so numerous nor so good as could be wished. It may be helpful here for the librarian to keep in mind not titles but authors, those authors who have written successfully for these ages, Beverly Cleary, Eleanor Clymer, Eleanor Lattimore, and others, and to use them as measuring sticks in the evaluation of other titles.

Writing for older children has the same aspect of mass production as is true of the picture books. At both extremes of age range we have too many books; in the middle, not enough. In view of the constant complaint about insufficient funds, it may be dangerous to say that too many collections for children have too many titles--not too many volumes, but too many titles. The fact that this overplentitude is concentrated at the beginning and end of the child's use of a children's room throws the whole collection out of balance. While theoretic balance for its own sake is not desirable, the fact remains that oversupply means lack of discrimination, and that accessibility of too many books brings confusion.

The improved quality and the importance of subject matter books deserve special consideration. In these groups of books there are again logical and discernible designs which will build effectual and workable collections. These designs grow out of the nature of demands arising from curriculum needs and individual interests and of the nature of the books being written to meet these demands and interests. The natural and applied sciences, the fine arts and history typify the method by which collections can be built which will be all-embracing in their adequacy to meet and promote interest. At the head of each of these groups are books which treat the subject in a general and inclusive way, with or without the historic point of view--general books of science, histories of art and of music, histories of the world. After this general treatment, the subject matter in each of these collections breaks down inevitably into subdivisions of subject matter--into materials concerned with the various sciences, with the different forms of art and music, with the history of specific countries and periods. In

each subdivision and throughout the group as a whole, it is necessary to provide books of the right content and treatment to satisfy the requirements of as wide an age range as may be necessary because of school curricula or of natural interest. It is likewise obligatory to recognize the desirability and the necessity for varied types of presentation; for example, the frequent need for the purely factual, definition type of book, which should be supplemented by the readable discussion type. The principle which should guide selection throughout subject materials as a whole is attention to requirements of readers as stimulated by school curricula and natural interests, to the importance of general and specific content, to the needs and interests of different age levels, to the effectiveness and practicality of various kinds of presentation.

Work with young people is in method and philosophy an outgrowth of work with children, as Jean Roos has pointed out in her article "Young People and Public Libraries" in the October, 1954 issue of Library Trends. It seems to me too that her definition of the philosophy of this aspect of library work is not only exact, but that it also constitutes the chief guiding principle in the development of a book collection for adolescents. She writes, "The philosophy is that of leading out, not that of holding back." Library work with the high school age, like work with children, covers a wide age range. In both cases, it is also true that the book collections for children and young people should be in line with the growing maturity of children as they approach adolescence and of adolescents as they approach young adulthood. Unavoidably, books for the oldest children and for the youngest adolescents will be identical in many cases. There is no sharp cleavage at any given point in the reading interests or habits of a child or a young person. This talk has attempted to emphasize the continuity of reading interests from early childhood to and through adolescence, and the resultant necessity for providing books which will satisfy those interests as they and the reader mature and develop new aspects. The significant and unique feature in developing a book collection for young people is the realization that the adolescent is growing toward adulthood, and that when, by reason of individual growth and maturity he reaches adulthood, he should not be held back, but should have the best of adult books suited to his capabilities, no matter what his chronological age is. In the small library, where space and resources may not allow a large and perma-

ment collection for young people, this may mean opening the resources of the adult collection to him under wise supervision and guidance. I speak here without the authority of experience, but it seems to me that placement of materials is not so important as is sympathetic and informed reading guidance. If this reading guidance can be carried on in a specific location, using a permanent book collection, selected and administered by a librarian trained and experienced in working with this age, it is certainly advantageous, and constitutes the ultimate desirability. If this is not feasible, it is still possible to remember and accomplish the purpose of work with young people--that is, to carry the reading interests of youth into adult reading on as high a level and as broad a base as possible.

Traditionally, it has been considered that the large libraries have the advantage in book selection, since they are able usually to read and examine books previous to selection. It is by no means certain that this advantage is so great as it once was. For many reasons, it is difficult to do the thoughtful, comparative reading essential to sound book selection and the building of a close-knit, constructive book collection. There is the profuse production in certain fields, the popular interest in specific subject matters which leads to the writing of many similar books, the stressing of certain themes in fiction which again results in too many books of too great a similarity. There is the trend toward publishers' series. This in itself is beginning to constitute a problem of major proportions, chiefly again because of duplication of subject matter among the various series. All of this means that selection is becoming haphazard, that book collections are growing in quantity but not in quality, and are becoming unwieldy to a point where the second phase of book selection, book selection for the individual in the library, is being adversely affected. Both large and small libraries need the support afforded by a consensus of opinion, opinion based on a seasoned, thoughtful and comparative evaluation of books. Large libraries need to check their selection against such opinion as it is recorded in book selection aids and in reviews. Smaller libraries may be completely dependent upon aids and reviews for their selection. There is no need to mention the value of such basic and standard aids as the Children's Catalog and the Standard Catalog for High School Libraries. It may be helpful to suggest that whenever pos-

sible, it is wise to have two such basic aids, one comprehensive like the Children's Catalog, the second more intensively selective, like A Basic Book Collection for Elementary Grades or A Basic Book Collection for Junior High Schools, both ALA publications. The advantage is that one may be checked against the other. If a title is starred in the Children's Catalog and is listed also in the Basic Book Collection, it is pretty certain that the book is a desirable one. Seven Stories High, compiled by Anne Carroll Moore, published in Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia and available in reprint, is an exceptionally fine and informed selection of books for children from pre-school to the teen ages. By Way of Introduction, published by the ALA, is a valuable list of books for young people, as is Patterns in Reading, compiled by Jean Roos and also published by the ALA. This last has added value in that the books included are listed under interests and the books are so arranged as to encourage progress in the expansion of interests. The Boys and Girls Department of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh has compiled, for the guidance of its own children's librarians, a basic book list which represents books which are in the children's book collections of every agency of the system as a core collection. I believe other libraries have done the same thing. It is my understanding that these lists are not available for wide distribution, but the compiling of such a list might be helpful to many libraries in laying a firm foundation for their book collections.

Sources for the listing and reviewing of current books for children and young people, such as The Booklist, The Horn Book Magazine, Library Journal and Saturday Review are so well-known as not to need emphasis. But emphasis may well be laid on the quality of the English Junior Bookshelf, which is unexcelled for its fine, discerning and excellently expressed criticism. Many of the English books reviewed are available to us, but aside from this, the magazine is a lesson to us in the art of literary criticism.

These are reliable aids in the selection of books. As such, they are of help in the building and developing of a collection. But after a collection is built, it is we as children's librarians who must use the books with children. The ultimate effectiveness of the collection as proven by its effect upon children is our responsibility. Therefore, even at the risk of departing at the end from the exact subject of this talk, I am going

to make some other suggestions for the stimulation and inspiration of the children's librarian herself. The first suggestion is the reading for reading's sake, for the quickening of our own perceptiveness and the sharpening of our own critical faculties, of creative literary criticism in general and of children's literature in particular. I am thinking, of course, of such books as Hagard's Books, Children, and Men, Lillian Smith's The Unreluctant Years, Dorothy White's About Books for Children, and Annis Duff's Bequest of Wings and Longer Flight. The second suggestion is the reading of books not for children, but about children, adult books which appear usually in fiction or biography or autobiography, such as Grahame's Golden Age, Lewis' Dew on the Grass, Walpole's Jeremy, Hughes' Innocent Voyage, and Gosse's autobiography, Father and Son. These, and others like them, have an almost startling power of revelation as regards children. And it is a fact that while we have many problems in developing and maintaining a book collection, the cornerstone problem has always been and will always be the difficulty an adult experiences in getting inside the child's mind and in envisioning a book as a child will see it.