

## THE ADULT BOOK COLLECTION

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Ideas containing overgeneralizations must not be allowed to obscure the necessity for stating and coming to grips with some of the specific problems of the book collection of the small and medium-sized library. The smooth waters of library philosophy may belie the hidden reefs once the test of practicality is made. It must be mentioned that this paper will not presume to have the answers. It will only seek to measure a few everyday library dilemmas against a point of view. It hopes to pose some questions, let some possible answers hover tentatively, and pray that the members of this Institute exert their godlike possibilities and help bring order from the writer's chaos.

At a 1955 conference on "The Future of the Book," one of the participants said in conclusion:

There are now, and there will be in the future, many rivals for the reader's attention and many new channels for the dissemination of facts, knowledge and ideas. But one theme runs throughout every paper: If we take as our basis for judgment the efficiency with which the book performs the tasks it is designed to serve, we need have no fears concerning its future. <sup>1</sup>

We librarians are still saying that books are basic and that there is no foreseeable revolution in communication which will upset the primacy of their position. Even though the communications revolution has widened the public's choice of desired activities, this competition should not be our profession's major concern. It might be more fruitful for us to do some thinking about the basic commitment of the American people to the public library as an institution. The Public Library Inquiry reports:

Surveys of citizen opinion show that people like the public library as an institution; they think of it as a worthy community enterprise, although many who praise it do not themselves use it. The favorable attitude seems to imply respect for the community's library as a symbol and servant of culture, a function not fully measured by the number of users or the amount of use.<sup>2</sup>

Should we not also re-examine the basic American commitment to the cause of education itself? Attitudes of our public are important because it is upon this bulwark that we justify financial support, variety of services and, more specifically, the development of the adult book collection. At first hand all seems well. Budgets are showing healthy trends upward, salaries are increasing, gadgets are invented which give the delightful illusion of saving time and money, and new buildings are springing up as fast as Birnam Wood. America's interest in education continues to be reflected in added library support. It looks good, but is everything rosy now? We know better. Librarians are desperate for personnel, especially educated personnel. More lucrative fields are causing excellent prospects to turn elsewhere. And what about the public's real attitude toward the library? Perhaps we should hearken to the point of view of a personal friend who is both a library user and booster. He feels that we librarians keep our rose-colored glasses on too many hours of the day. His idea is that to most people the public library is only a small incident in the community. If this is true should we work harder at trying to become a larger incident? One of the assumptions of the Future of the Book Conference was

the library is a social agency, responding to currents and trends in society as a whole [and] . . . the librarian cannot, if he is to fulfill his social role, limit his concerns solely to those activities, devices, and concepts which happen to impinge directly upon his daily activities, or are confined within the walls of his library.<sup>3</sup>

This means that the librarian will need to do some solid thinking. It will be necessary to understand the patterns and activities of life in his community and anticipate its changing requirements. How will he consider his reader, that person

who is at once a member of a group and yet a unique individual? Will the librarian's major efforts be toward consideration of him as one of many with similar needs and tastes or as an individual whose requirements are unlike those of most of the readers? An answer comes readily to mind and that is to serve both those whose reading habits conform to the many, with needs community-wide in application, and those unique souls whose demands are more particularized. That is the logical answer, and in general may be true, but one of the burdens of this paper is that the librarian can get a great deal more from his collection by keeping his sights upon this member of his community who is first and last an individual. We have a great deal to learn about the effects of reading, but one thing we know is that reading is a personal and voluntary occupation which requires personal effort. A leading communications expert admits, "Let us at the very beginning admit the inadequacy of our knowledge and understanding of this process (why adults read) which seems so clear and potent in the large, but often so complex and baffling in detail."<sup>4</sup> This paper then will consider the library book collection and its relationship to the community and that nameless individual who is of the community but also apart from it.

First of all let us examine the make-up of the community in this twentieth century. Here the social scientist is prepared to give the librarian assistance. The Russell Sage Foundation has published a work, Studying Your Community by Roland L. Warren, which offers valuable methodology for community study. While there may be some room for discussion of the extent to which a public library can engage in such studies, we do know that the Fund for Adult Education is interested in the subject as it pertains to adult education services of the library, and has channeled a series of four studies called the Library-Community Project under the direction of the Adult Education Office of the American Library Association. These studies indicate a growing awareness and interest in attempting to arrive at better than off-the-cuff assessment of the library's services. The chapter headings in Studying Your Community provide excellent clues for information of primary value to the librarian. Let us now look at some of these main elements of community life which should help determine the pattern of library service.

The background and setting of a community are important factors in library planning. As an example, the Salina Public Library, situated where the dust sometimes blows, and the wind occasionally, with the nearest body of water a manmade small lake, is not likely to have many books on yachting. Our geographical position in the mountain-plains area makes it important for us to have many items such as The Great Plains by Walter Prescott Webb and The Great Plains in Transition by Carl Kraenzel. Population, its make-up, sex ratio, rate of growth, racial characteristics and percentage of foreign born, are all factors to be taken into consideration for a library operation. The traditions and values of a community should not be underestimated in thinking about a library's collection.

Traditions are the customs, practices, bits of legend and folklore and other material from your community's past, which are passed on by word-of-mouth and persist to affect social behavior in your community today. . . . These ways, along with specific bits of folklore and legend, go far in establishing the "tone" of the community, that intangible quality which makes it different in spirit from other communities of approximately the same size and situation.<sup>5</sup>

Happy is the librarian whose community refuses to get over-excited about the issues of the day, whether it be on fluoridation, politics, or banning a book. This provides a librarian with an opportunity to exercise discreet leadership in community life, because he is able to work within the framework of community traditions and still oppose what sometimes may be majority opinion. But woe unto him who fails to take into consideration the traditions which have become imbedded in the thinking of the community leadership. Issues far less explosive than segregation have blasted librarians from their positions or at the very least have lessened public confidence in the library as a local institution. This is why too many of us prefer to play it safe and tend to our administrative knitting. In many ways this is a pity, because the librarian by virtue of his position has a ready-made avenue of leadership open to him and available for his use. This digression on the idea of the librarian as a community leader

touches on the nature and quality of the book collection only obliquely, but the writer wanted it mentioned.

Let us examine via example how the book collection can reflect the traditions and values of a community. Ours is a community-minded small city of 35,000 population. Church groups contribute to each other's drives, the businessmen respond to the call for assistance on "projects," bond issues rarely fail, and there is a prevailing feeling that Salina has a reputation for being a progressive city. The City Commission and School Board are elected on a nonpartisan basis. Politics, though pointed, is rather a polite exercise in Salina, with fever-pitch enthusiasm an almost-unheard-of phenomenon. There is an easy toleration of different beliefs, both religious and political. This does not mean that Salina has a corner on the world's virtue, but rather in the words of Jimmie Durante, "Them's the conditions that prevail." On the other hand, Salina is considered a "tough town" socially. Letters to the editor complain that it is difficult for new people to become acquainted. There is much group-involvement in Salina with strong loyalties to these associations, and newcomers find it hard to break into these circles. Another less-than-perfect view of Salina is its lack of patronage of the arts, musical, artistic or literary. This does not mean that the community is a cultural desert. The regular quota of Civic Music concerts and local school programs appear, but one somehow gets the feeling that the community isn't really concerned with a cultural program.

Now, let us examine the public library book collection, using the above example. Obviously the library operating under an easygoing political atmosphere has little to fear that a fanatic will come and attempt to upset his book-purchasing policy. One places A Republican Looks at His Party by Arthur Larson alongside the selected works of Mao Tse-Tung without risking the wrath of a purification-bent committee. This in itself is good because it means that the librarian can operate in a fairly relaxed atmosphere and not have to allow tangential considerations to influence his development of his collection. As for the less-than-perfect aspects of the community, let us see what a library may do when the community fails to emphasize its cultural potentialities. By the nature of its book collection, the library can call the community's attention to the importance of the arts. Another paper will discuss other than book media, but suffice to say, art exhibits,

records and films are part and parcel of a unified program. At first glance, the Unesco Art Series or the Skira art books may be considered too expensive an investment for a community with less than moderate art interest. In the Salina situation, the writer would not consider such books too expensive. The librarian has what may be termed an extended duty to his patronage. It is assumed that the arts in their great variety are as necessary to the healthful growth of a community as its location and economic position. A community does not live in space only but in time as well, and time is on the side of the arts. Thus it seems important to have the Phaidon edition of the illustrations of Zurbaran, Ernest Pfuhl's Masterpieces of Greek Drawing and Painting, and the drawings of Gruenewald. No attempt is being made to deal with book selection per se, but only to cite examples of the kind of items which may be a part of a collection, once a point of view is established. A community needs to know about its roots, and those roots lie in Spain, Greece, Germany and points east, west, north and south.

Again as an example, another item in community planning is in the field of health. Each community places its own emphasis in this field. One may have a children's clinic, another a marriage counseling bureau, and yet another a mental health center. The public library can enhance its service possibilities by not only providing materials for public information but also taking some responsibility for helping establish a "tone of feeling" regarding the health agencies. For example, Salina, after careful investigation, established a Guidance Center which included marriage counseling, outpatient psychiatric service, child guidance, and teacher-parent workshops. Interest in the Guidance Center developed over a long background of organizational support and a one year's intensive information program. The library devoted more than ordinary budgeting to materials pertinent to the field of community mental health, child guidance, and parent-child relationships. Its purpose was to provide not only information but also an opportunity for the growth of a community point of view. This makes for what might be termed an "unbalanced" book collection, but most are unbalanced anyway, and more important, there is some confusion as to the meaning of a balanced collection. The writer feels that the book collection should be balanced in terms of the community's and the individual's spoken and unspoken needs.

There are many avenues of approach to a community, its economic life, government, planning, housing, education, recreation and intergroup relations. The librarian will do well to be sensitive to, even though he cannot personally explore, its manifold characteristics. Perhaps one more example may suffice for showing the connection between understanding a community and the library collection. Religious matters are receiving more and more attention in this somewhat sanctimonious decade. It is a three-pronged affair: one, the increase of sound religious scholarship and investigation; two, the flood of felicity-the-easy-way books; and, three, the impact of American social patterns upon church programming. The library collection, if it is to keep up with its educational commitment, will especially reflect points one and three, although it must be confessed that our patrons show a greater interest in item number two. Again, it is doubtful if there are many in a medium-sized community who insist upon the works of Reinhold Niebuhr, Christopher Dawson, Etienne Gilson, Paul Tillich or Martin Buber. Therefore, the librarian in recognition of his duty to the collection and the few in the community who find such works important need have no compunctions in having a healthy representation of these authors. As a corollary, modern theological thought seems to have been influenced by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Should not this influence be widely represented in the collection even though it may not receive much attention? Just for fun the Salina collection of Kierkegaards, acquired from Princeton University many months ago, was checked. Only three of the nine had been checked out once, the rest of them not at all. This indicates pretty damning evidence of wasting the public's money, or is it? If Mr. Kierkegaard, speaking from the nineteenth century, has set some of the best minds of today on fire, why should not the library give him a similar chance in Salina?

The impact of the American social pattern upon church programming is evidence of the trend toward secularism in our lives, even within the church framework. Will Herberg, in his essay in American religious sociology called Protestant, Catholic, Jew, says:

The secularism dominating the American consciousness is not an overt philosophy; it is an underlying, often unconscious orientation of life and thought. . .

American religion and American society would seem to be so closely interrelated as to make it virtually impossible to understand either without reference to the other.<sup>6</sup>

The librarian needs to be aware of social and religious trends in his community and thus be better able to assess the true needs of his book collection. If the new perspective before us is to resolve into a mixture of secularism and religiosity, our collections should reflect this emphasis.

Can we develop a yardstick for measuring our book collection against community and individual needs? The question must be asked how much community and how much individual emphasis on a book collection is required. Let us have a look at the books in our library and see if we can come up with some specific points of view. The writer suspects that book collections in the small and medium-sized library have grown without much rhyme or reason. On the one hand we have been content to let the publisher's output and the book review pages determine the line of development our collections have taken. For instance, we might have added the two or three current books on astronomy without checking the section to see whether we needed to purchase in addition four or five older but standard works on the subject. On the other hand we find out the weakness of our collections when a definite community interest asserts itself. A librarian close to the writer--too close for comfort--found out areas of weakness in the collection when a teacher approached him for a bibliography on the sciences for use by a projected grade school science fair. Yes, our library will be ordering some science books soon.

For better or worse, let us attempt now to deal with some specifics of library administration as it concerns the book collection. First and foremost we believe that the primary responsibility for the collection, its direction, rate of growth and character, belongs to the head librarian. He interprets the policies of the board of trustees to the staff and to the patrons of the library. If he does not keep on top of community trends, intellectual movements, and the worldwide patterns of change, he cannot blame his staff for not keeping the collection alive and vital. No, this doesn't call for a superman, but too many of our colleagues are willing to withdraw from this primary responsibility and delegate it to skilled

staff members. Too often the plea is heard that administrative and architectural duties are preventing the head from even reading, let alone keeping up with the direction of the book collection. This trend is not healthy because it indicates an accelerating substitution of the disciplines of the administrator for the disciplines of the educator. Sir John Livingstone of Cambridge University said somewhere that he could always secure bright young men to handle the technical aspects of the university so that he could be free to attend to the business at hand--education. The development of staff and committee recommendations for books has been good in that it presents a wider opportunity for staff participation. The danger is that the channeling of the development of a collection through a committee can result in diffuse and perhaps scattered holdings without the stern eye of the head librarian to prevent this possibility.

All librarians should beware of riding a hobby horse. Special interests of the librarian too often are reflected in the collection. When a librarian suddenly discovers that his institution has a rather overwhelming number of cookbooks he should resist the temptation to rationalize and call it the Such-and-Such Collection of Cookbooks. He merely needs to order fewer culinary items. Many of us have an inferiority complex about books of a technological nature. The writer has one stock answer to the questions of his algebraic son, "Ask your mother." We leave our technical books on our shelves too long. It becomes more imperative for the librarian to keep his technical collection up-to-date because technological change continues with unabated swiftness, and the library is an institution of today and tomorrow as well as of yesterday. We must not fret that an about-to-be-discarded technical book with a 1952 copyright has a lot of good material if the 1956 edition also contains it plus current valid research.

The number of volumes and circulation figures have become fetishes in the thinking of some of our colleagues. This may be ascribed partly to the fact that we live, according to the words of a friend, "in the age of the gilded report." Little has been done to assess the quality of the holdings of libraries as a group. One such study recently completed by LeRoy Charles Merritt, Professor of Librarianship, University of California, had a select group of public libraries over the country check a list of twelve hundred titles with their catalogs. This list, covering the 20-year period from 1933

to 1953, was made up from the three most recent compilations by Asa Don Dickinson of the "best" books and from the ALA annual (since 1944) lists of "outstanding" or "notable" books. Fiction comprised twenty-six per cent of the list; nonfiction, seventy-four per cent. Studies like this, with their emphasis on quality rather than quantity of books, should assist librarians in examining their collections against the more familiar background of such variables as population served, number of professional personnel, total operating expenses, book expenditures, number of titles purchased, and so on. We need to recognize the importance of other than numerical values. As librarians, we hesitate to purchase relatively expensive books because we know that we can buy three others on the same subject for the price of one. Then, too, expensive books may have a more limited appeal. The plea here is for the courage to add books which are intrinsically beautiful and which add quality to the collection. We cannot disregard price, but perhaps we can learn not to regard it with such awe.

Let us discuss fiction. In this writer's opinion, our profession is being too snobbish about this literary form. It seems pertinent to question some current attitudes. We shout huzza and proudly note in our annual reports that nonfiction reading is rising all the time. We do not take note that in effect we control the volume of our fiction reading by the policy of purchasing fewer and fewer titles. We have welcomed the paperback mystery, western, and romance as an opportunity to take the "lightweight" reader off our backs, but now with the publication of so much first class nonfiction in paperback form, need we fear losing some of our "heavy-weight" readers? As we gleefully note our circulation rise, have we taken the time to correlate it with general population increases?

The writer is not entirely sure that we librarians have given enough thought to our patrons as individuals. And perhaps we have not even thought enough of the book, to use the words of Miriam Putnam, "as an instrument of fruitful solitude." To equate nonfiction as significant reading and all but a chosen few fiction titles as ephemeral reading is somehow to miss the point. William Wordsworth had something when he said, "To me the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." Fiction has its roots in the art of the storyteller, and the story is that art

form which weaves a web of magic involving us all in the concerns of our fellow men. If you really want to know about war, read Stephen Crane's Red Badge of Courage, not Battles and Leaders of the Civil War. Robert B. Downs included Uncle Tom's Cabin in his Books That Changed the World, but on the basis of this novel's sentimentality, bad literary construction, obvious moral purpose, poor ear for conversation, and other faults, the chances of its getting by a selection committee today would indeed be slim. Fiction makes it possible for individuals to recognize the essential not the factual truth. And it makes its imprint in different ways upon all manner of people. That is why, in this writer's opinion, the librarian might give more recognition to the varying backgrounds of his taxpaying patrons, even though he risk having some "lightweight" books on his shelves.

May a final word be said about fiction? The young writer not only is a product of his immediate times but if he is worth his salt, he may attempt to break out of what he believes to be literary sterility into paths of new development. Whether or not he is correct in his assumption does not matter. That he be given the chance is important, and the way we give the young writer a chance is to buy his books for our libraries, and also to read some of them ourselves. The novelist can be a man of vision and his insights of today can become the beliefs of tomorrow.

An identical assumption may be made for the poet and dramatist. In the latter case, libraries are usually more charitable because there is demand from the high school and college reading lists. From the standpoint of the dramatist, his outcry against an unfeeling world is that his unproduced plays do not get published at all. It is different with the poet. He gets published one way or another even if he has to set his own type. His problem is that his books are not purchased in sufficient quantity for him to exist. Scribner's is conducting an interesting experiment by publishing the works of three contemporary poets in a single volume called Poets of Today. A few paperback publishers are doing a good job with new writers. Some old-line publishers still get enthusiastic about an occasional newcomer, but not many. The poets keep producing and somehow they find sponsorship. What do we librarians owe the contemporary poet? We owe his works a place on our shelves. It is unfair to wait until the poet becomes collected in an anthology to give the public

a chance to read what he has to say. The poet as well as the novelist and playwright are vanguards of cultural growth and if the public library is to reflect that growth, its materials need to be in the book collection.

If the accusation is that too much time has been spent on the cultural aspects of the book collection, the plea is, "Guilty." If the accusation is riding one's particular hobby horse, the plea is, "Not guilty." The cultural aspects of a library will outweigh all other attributes. Just for fun look up the subject "Books" in the Stevenson Home Book of Quotations. The emphasis will be on the cultural value of books, not the practical. A library is not only a storehouse of the culture of the past but a reflection of the present and a view of the future. Of course the library should pay attention to the needs of its community because people band together in community enterprise. Its affairs governmental, economic, social, religious, and health are properly the concern of the public library and the collection should be sensitive to the unique needs of the city in which it is located.

But civilization advances by the intellect and will of creative individuals who point out directions and whose heresy of today is the standard of tomorrow. The librarian must be on the lookout for such people because who knows in what brain will burn creative fire? Such men and women come from someplace, why not your community? That is why an apparent dichotomy exists between a librarian's responsibility for service to the community, and his higher duty to the individual person of intellect. Let us not get into semantic difficulties over the word intellect. There is a difference between a trained intellectual and a man of intellect. Our resources in a medium-sized library may not be extensive enough for a trained intellectual, but it is our duty to have book collections which satisfy the needs of the man and woman of intellect. This is not a brief for the development of an elite. Our responsibility for service to the community as a whole will prevent that. However it is the "saving remnant" spoken of by Isaiah that has permitted any civilization to take a giant step forward, and since we are not sure that we know how to find these significant individuals, let us make it easy for them to find us.

A book collection should reflect the adventure of the human spirit. It must be broad in outlook, daring in conception and high in quality. The librarian should not be afraid to make

mistakes in his purchases, and if some purchases later prove of doubtful validity, he can also hope to have books which, in the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "... coincide with the experience of men of the world." Just as it is important that the library have the feel of the community and the people in it, it is equally important that the opposite also be true. Then we can proudly suggest to our patrons the advice of the good Doctor Rabelais, "Therefore is it, that you must open the book and seriously consider the matter treated in it."

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