

## The Children's Librarian

CAROLYN W. FIELD  
Coordinator  
Office of Work with Children  
Free Library of Philadelphia

### The Children's Librarian as Viewed by Heads of Children's Services

“Only the rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young.”<sup>1</sup> These words are engraved on the Regina Medal, awarded annually by the Catholic Library Association for excellence in service to children by either a writer, publisher, illustrator or librarian. It is a goal toward which every children's librarian should strive.

What is a children's librarian in this age of the generalist, the information specialist and the computer? No one has defined it more concisely than Alice Hazeltine did in 1921: “A children's librarian is, first of all, a librarian whose vision of library work with children as an integral part of library work as a whole and as an educational movement is clear and compelling.”<sup>2</sup> The children's librarian must have all the essential qualities of the librarian plus two important attributes: a liking for children as individuals and a keen appreciation of children's books. Knowing techniques for eliciting the patron's needs is helpful, but more importantly, the librarian must possess an innate intellectual curiosity to go beyond the superficial and to help the patron express those information needs. To do this, the librarian must be an avid reader of newspapers in order to be alert to current events and ideas. This is particularly true of the children's librarian, because children are exposed to the latest events and ideas through television and may want to know more on a particular subject but be unable to express this desire succinctly.

“Strong as a horse” is the motto of the children's librarian. Masses of children pressing against the librarian demanding the same material or

information day after day requires a confident, relaxed and flexible mind, as well as a sense of humor that laughs with the children, not at them. Few children's librarians can sit at a desk and calmly dispense directions about where desired material may be found. One can, however, be physically and mentally strong and still lack the essential ingredient of a warm personality. Children have not yet developed a shield of inner defenses and the librarian must have a warmth of personality that welcomes and reassures each of his/her interest in them. The librarian must be fair in dealing with children and not play favorites.

All librarians should have logical, well-organized minds and public speaking ability, and this is absolutely essential in the children's librarian. Between 25 and 50 percent of one's working hours may be given to storytelling and talking to children and adults about the resources of the library. Public speaking requires poise and good judgment concerning one's approach, personal appearance and timing.

Where does this paragon gain the background required for a full performance on the job? With the explosion of knowledge and expansion of technology, both a college education and a graduate degree in library science are essential, as is continuing education. In addition to the regular courses in English, literature, history, science, psychology, sociology and public speaking, persons interested in children's work should have at least one course in child psychology and courses in as many languages as possible. The United States is still the melting pot of the world, but no longer are the immigrants eager to shed their language and culture to assimilate American ways. Today the librarian, social worker and teacher must often take the initial step in relating to and communicating with the immigrant.

It is during graduate study that the librarian should acquire the necessary training in reference and bibliography, interviewing techniques, use of technical equipment, principles of management, bases of work with community groups, and knowledge of children's books and folk literature. To become a storyteller, an individual must spend years selecting, learning and telling stories. However, the basics should be learned in library school. A course in storytelling is a valuable asset to every librarian in developing the ability to select, prepare and present a talk on any subject for any group.

The children's librarian needs an in-depth knowledge of materials (print and nonprint) and the ability to select and maintain collections that will provide information and advisory services for the community. Secondly, the children's librarian is expected to make an effort to help the child develop to his or her fullest potential. Service to the patron has top priority; it must take precedence over reports and meetings. The librarian

who provides quality service to the individual will find this the best public relations policy for the library.

Creative programming within the library follows closely on the heels of service to the individual. In Philadelphia, the Vacation Reading Club is the only program required to be held in all children's libraries. During July and August, the librarian must meet regularly with small groups of children to discuss the books they have read and to entice them to broaden their reading interests. This arrangement gives the librarian an opportunity to get to know the child's individual preferences and abilities.

Storytelling programs for all ages, from nursery school through junior high, are encouraged. Weekly story hours may be too time-consuming, but any librarian can plan for a series of four to six story hours based on a particular theme or centered around a holiday. Once learned, stories can be used many times for assembly programs, at recreation centers, and with adults. The demand for preschool story hours has grown by leaps and bounds in the past thirty years. There is no problem getting an audience; the problem is finding time and limiting the registration. A common arrangement is a series of six weekly story hours of thirty to forty-five minutes each for children three to five years old.

Puppet shows, talks by authors or illustrators, special clubs, films and filmstrip programs are ways in which the librarian can also promote the services and materials of the library, as well as provide enjoyment and help to children in developing their imaginations. One of the most popular programs in Philadelphia is the Potpourri Hour, during which stories may be told, films or filmstrips shown, games played and/or a brief introduction to creative dramatics given.

Programming is not the only method of publicizing materials. Displays and exhibits are important. The librarian who is not artistic but has a good working relationship with other members of the staff may call upon someone with artistic talents for help, or encourage exhibits from members of the community. A display of arts and crafts by a Girl Scout or Boy Scout troop will not only provide a means of publicizing library materials, but will also serve as good community relations.

In a world where advertising is ubiquitous it is essential for the librarian to go out into the community. Schools are usually the first point of contact. Here the librarian can use common sense, enthusiasm, warmth of personality, and knowledge of library services, materials and educational needs in developing plans with the principal, librarian and teacher. Flexibility is essential in working with groups outside the library.

Next to the schools, high priority can be placed on work with the handicapped child, much of which must be done outside the library. Storytelling can be the first (and may be the only) communication with

the child who is physically, mentally or emotionally handicapped. Often, the librarian's real job is to provide guidance in selecting materials and to suggest techniques for presenting materials to those who work with these children.

Working with the adults who work with children is the other aspect of the children's librarian's responsibilities. No individual can relate directly to every child, but every librarian should make contacts with the adults in the community who deal directly with children — parents, teachers, social workers, and friends. Talks to PTA groups, faculty meetings and community organizations must be planned along with programs for children. In order to work intelligently with these groups, the librarian must know about reading levels and methods and about the prevailing philosophy and methods of operation of the organizations concerned. Finally, the children's librarian must be an active participant in local, regional, state and national professional library organizations and, if possible, in related organizations such as National Council of Teachers of English, International Reading Association, booksellers' associations and others.

As experts in the field of service to children, children's librarians are committed to excellence and cannot operate in isolation. If the librarian can time guidance well, so that the child can be offered the proper material — whether it be folk or fairy tales, songs, science or adventure stories, or even handicrafts or games — to satisfy his or her curiosity just when that faculty is awakening, the children's librarian can maintain the child's curiosity and eagerness all through childhood. This is the best service that can be provided to a child.

#### REFERENCES

1. De La Mare, Walter. *Bells and Grass*. New York, Viking, 1942, p. 9.
2. Hazeltine, Alice. "What is a Children's Librarian?" *Public Libraries* 26:513, Nov. 1921.