Selecting Books for the Young Adult Collection in the Public Library

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For many years after the establishment and recognition of the children's department as a specialized service, the adolescent was a part of this pattern. At a certain arbitrary age, often the magic one of sixteen, or on completion of high school, he became an adult patron and was summarily released to the adult department with little or no knowledge of its collection or how to use it. Accustomed to the personal, warm relationship with the children's librarian, many of these adolescents became discouraged and ceased using the library. A recognition of their special needs had always been a part of the training of a children's librarian, and many, of course, had directed their young patrons to more mature reading. Equally, of course, there were adult librarians aware of the difficulties these young people had in transferring to the adult department and were helpful and sympathetic in their reading guidance.

From the first tentative recognition early in the twentieth century of the adolescent as a special person within the framework of library service, the selection of his books has presented problems and called forth varied solutions. Should he be treated as an adult, as a "large child," or as a different kind of patron?

The earliest systemized attempts at specialized service to adolescents were directed to the out-of-school youth, in particular, to those fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds who left school for economic reasons and went to work in factories, stores and offices. The Cleveland Public Library pioneered in this field, its Stevenson Room opening in 1925. The book selection for these young people of forty to forty-five years ago emphasized further education, vocational training, the classics as a part of an educated person's reading, how-to-do-it books, and popular fiction. Through the depression and the years immediately following, the reading interests of these young people shifted to a more constructive kind of literature. The library and the school system had done much to make the reading material of this group more varied and stimulating.

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before World War II, the pattern remained much the same, though perhaps marked with an increasing awareness of the world beyond the U.S.A. and, as an examination of booklists of the period will show, an attempt to supply books that would widen horizons and increase this awareness.

The years of World War II marked a change in the status of the thirteen- to nineteen-year-old person, both within the family and within the community. Because his labor was needed as older men and women went off to war and his increasing financial status made him one of a commercially exploitable group, he had, as never before, money to spend on himself—money not needed, as during the depression years, for general family support. Intellectually, his increasing participation in affairs outside the home made him ripe for the development of the whole teen-age sub-culture. Indications of this change appeared in the number of separate departments for teens, young adults, young people, and young moderns which developed in public libraries in the mid-forties and early fifties; examples include the New York Public Library’s Nathan Straus Branch, Newark’s Teen Corner, the Ella K. McClatchy Library of Sacramento, and rooms in the libraries of St. Paul, Minnesota, Baltimore and other cities large and small.

This is the period that marked the rise of the teen-age or junior novel, with its emphasis on middle-class life, on the high school student, on popularity, on boy-girl relationships, on high school sports, and of the career story which was more story than career. Betty Cavanna’s and John Tunis’s books were characteristic of the type widely purchased in multiple copies and avidly read. True, many of these stories were well-written and appealing, with good characterization and plot development, but they seldom dealt with problems beyond those of the average middle-class, middle-income, middle-sized-town boy or girl.

Exceptions published during this period were such books as Maureen Daly’s Seventeenth Summer in 1942 and J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye in 1951. The latter title, first adopted by the then current crop of college students, then by their younger brothers and sisters, is perhaps the archetypical problem book in the setting of standards of book selection for the young adult. Creating controversy by its use of vulgar language and its depiction of a young person in need of psychiatric help, it had violent partisans among young adult librarians and teachers, as well as equally violent and vocal opponents.
Meanwhile young people read the book and accepted or rejected it as it answered their needs. It finally arrived on the road to neglect by being accepted for class study. In retrospect and in light of the present day permissiveness the book seems a small coal to have generated so much heat.

The major emphasis in book selection in the early fifties was still on the recreational: fiction, lighter travel books, animal stories, sports stories, popular biographies, and hobby books. Historical novels and war books had their place, but the general young adult collection of the period, while it had more breadth, had little more depth than in the beginning years. School needs and reference materials might be available in young adult departments but were as often the province of the library’s reference department or adult department. Often the physical set-up of the particular library determined the extent of the collection in this direction.

The shift in emphasis in the school curriculum which is generally dated from the shock engendered by the launching of Sputnik on October 4, 1957, the arrival at high school age of the first crop of World War II babies, and the enormously increased number of young people staying on in high school and going on to college or some form of further education marked the changing pattern of book selection in the late fifties.

With the accelerated pace of the sixties, the basic problem of what books should be included in or excluded from a collection for young people became the subject for discussion, debate, argument and personal conviction at innumerable library meetings large and small. The two meetings of the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association at which Robert Carlsen was the keynote speaker and which culminated in 1967 with the publication of Carlsen’s book, *Books and the Teen-Age Reader,* focused attention within and without the profession on this function of young adult service.

This article will attempt to present some guidelines to current practices in book selection for young adults indicating for whom and by whom selection is made, as well as what is selected. Before discussion of actual book selection practices, it seems useful to identify the users of such collections. Generally speaking the fourteen- to seventeen-year-old group is the chief user, although individual libraries will find variations at both ends of the scale. Certain factors influence this group and point up an increasing change in patterns of library usage. Factors influencing the problems of book selection for adoles-
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cents are the obviously greater number of young people; the increasing urbanization of our population; the sophistication brought about by instant exposure via TV and radio to local and world situations, good and bad; the social unrest of the times in which movements are today blown up by publicity to enormous proportions and tomorrow displaced by new movements; the mobility of our population; the wide contrast between the affluent young person and the underprivileged; and the phenomenal growth of the paperback industry helped, no doubt, by the purchasing power of the affluent young people.

The economic and social problems of the day have a more direct effect on the current crop of young people because of our changing patterns of communication. This generation is geared to the audio-visual presentation more often than to the book, yet no young adult librarian, no matter how much he or she uses and approves films, records, and all the other audio-visual tools, can forget that the book is his primary responsibility. A brief questionnaire sent out to young adult departments across the United States as an indication of book selection practices included a request for information on the following points:

Who is responsible for young adult book selection?
Do you have a written book selection policy?

Twenty questionnaires were sent out to libraries having young adult departments. The selection was a random one with the intention of including a variety of size and service patterns from Baltimore’s Enoch Pratt Free Library to Milton, Massachusetts’ Public Library. In addition copies of book selection policies available in the office of the coordinator of young adult services in the Boston Public Library were consulted, and some discussion was held with individual local librarians.

The possibilities suggested under “Who is responsible for young adult book selection?” were:

- Young Adult Supervisor
- Adult Supervisor
- Committee of Young Adult Librarians
- Committee of Adult Librarians
- Combined Committee
- Other
Of the twenty, none indicated that the adult supervisor or a committee of adult librarians was responsible for selecting the young adult book collection. In libraries located in towns and small cities in which the young adult department had only one professional librarian (for example, Manchester, New Hampshire), that person was entirely responsible for the young adult book selection. In most larger systems book selection is the responsibility of a committee of young adult librarians with the coordinator or supervisor having the final authority within the book selection policy of the individual library.

The position of young adult coordinator or supervisor within the administrative pattern differs from institution to institution, some being more structured than others. The young adult coordinator may be directly responsible to the head librarian or under a supervisor of home services, circulation librarian, or similar supervisor. In the final analysis young adult book selection is the responsibility of those staff members working directly with the young people themselves, within the framework of the general policy of the individual library. Suggestions and recommendations may come (and should be encouraged) from other departments. For example, the children's department would be consulted on those titles that have a broader age range or that are customarily originally reviewed and purchased by juvenile departments but have uses with younger or less mature young adults. In institutions with departmental or divisional libraries, librarians of these are consulted for recommendation in their specific fields, i.e., music, art, science, etc.

Of the twenty libraries (all responded), four had no written book selection policy; one librarian commented that the staff felt a greater freedom in selection since they were not confined by particulars. The general policy is to operate within the over-all adult book selection policy with a specific definition of young adult books, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

A synthesis of the answers shows these book selection definitions to cover the following points: (1) proportion of adult to teen-age and juvenile titles, (2) description of an adolescent, (3) reading preferences of adolescents, (4) style preferences of adolescents, (5) reading purposes or values of adolescents, (6) reading abilities of adolescents, (7) the physical properties of the book, (8) place and need for ephemeral material, and (9) identification of sensitive areas. Individual libraries have some minor additions but these are the major
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points covered in all written policies, though not necessarily in this order or in these terms.

Enlarging on the first point above, the American Library Association's Young Adult Services Division recommends as a norm that young adult collections should be 80 percent adult titles and 20 percent juvenile and/or teen-age titles.

Respondents describe a young adult as: idealistic, curious, searching for identity, enthusiastic, sensitive, ambivalent towards adults, youth- and self-centered, rebellious, and fad-following. Adolescent reading preferences are identified (not necessarily in this order) as: action, humor, love, science fiction, mystery, vocations and hobbies, and preparation for adult life. These preferences influence young adults' preferences of writing styles which are direct and active rather than contemplative and reminiscent; they also illuminate the needs and purposes for which they read. These can be identified as information (school needs, job needs, how-to-do-it), entertainment, and preparation for adult life (how does one grow up?).

The needs of the average adolescent should not obscure a librarian's awareness of the needs and preferences of the exceptional individual; the collection geared to this type of young adult must include some books not necessarily widely read—poetry, philosophy, religion, and fine writing. Books should be selected not only to fill the adolescent's current needs for recreational reading, for his own inner drives and interests, but also to encourage him to become an adult user of libraries, firmly convinced of the value of lifetime reading.

Some cognizance must be taken of the adolescent as a student simply because of his numbers. Book selection policies recognize this by delegating the major part of the selection of such materials to the reference or adult departments. This is feasible in the large systems, but in the middle-sized and smaller systems the young adult department must take over at least some of the reference functions. In so doing, the policy conforms to the adult standards of selection for reference materials. Federal money for school libraries is already influencing book buying by public libraries. No clear policies have as yet appeared, but the direction seems to reinforce the young adult policy of a recreational, personal, immediate collection, leaving to the schools those books essentially the tools of formal learning and information.

The physical properties to be considered by those purchasing books
for young adults are those always considered in good library practice: binding, print, illustrations, and price as against content. Since the young adult collection must be current, lively and by its nature transitional, spiral bindings, paperbacks and similar material, less substantial from the physical standpoint, have a place. These books must be judged on their immediacy and the relevance of their contents rather than on the durability of their bindings.

Paperbacks are widely used in young adult collections and are judged on the content, as is a hard cover book. They are also used to supply multiple copies of a title in demand and for additional material in special fields, mystery and science fiction for example, with the question of durability being subordinate to usefulness.

The advantage of a written book selection policy can be seen most readily in the selection of books in sensitive areas—broadly speaking, religion, politics and sex. The New York Public Library says, “The library judges a book on its positive values and merits. When the library finds few or no redeeming qualities, it excludes books which contain: racial, national, or religious stereotypes; alleged pornographic material; political or religious views expressed in a violent or inflammatory manner; sectarian instructional material; and material of dubious authority in the fields of medicine, law, health, etc.”

The Enoch Pratt Free Library expresses the principles of book selection in sensitive areas this way: “While our aims are clearly stated, the rules for selection cannot be written out ahead of time except in general terms, for each book must be considered separately. In other words, books have both faults and virtues, and if the virtues far overbalance a fault, a book may be included. With this in mind the so-called ‘touchy’ areas in book selection for teen-agers are handled as follows:”

(a) The use of profanity or of frankness in dealing with sex may be controversial, but when a book opens a clearer vision of life, develops an understanding of other people, or breaks down intolerance, these virtues must be weighed against the possible harm to be done by some shocking word or passage in the book, particularly where taste rather than morals is offended.

(b) Books of sex information for teen-agers belong on the open shelves of young adult collections. It is important that young adults gain sound information on this subject. If [such] books are treated as are interesting books on other subjects, much can be done to give teen-agers a healthful attitude toward sex.
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(c) Religious books of an obviously denominational nature whose primary purpose is to present one sect as superior to another are not purchased for young adult collections, nor are books that belittle any faith. Only well-written books that make no attempt to sway the emotions of the adolescent toward or against any one faith should be included in the collections for young adults.\(^6\)

In the Boston Public Library’s working sheets for its revision of book selection policies, its statement on politics is as follows: “Realizing that politics is an integral part of American life and that it is an appropriate responsibility of the library to awaken and deepen the interest of young people in the areas of government and politics the Library considers material on the history, processes, personalities, institutions, and ideologies of this country, other countries, and worldwide organizations. Selectors should be especially alert to prejudiced partisanship, often characterized by inaccuracies in books on national or international politics, as well as opinions presented as facts.” \(^7\) Individual libraries may use different and less detailed terms but the three statements above contain the basic principles and guidelines for book selection in difficult areas.

The so-called “teen-age” story, the junior novel, the career book, and simple non-fiction aimed at younger teens or the less able readers of this age group have their place in the young adult collection. The Onondaga Library System’s book selection policy has this to say on teen-age romances: “Keeping in mind that the collection serves all types of readers, a certain amount of easier books will be needed to lure the reluctant readers and younger teen-agers. There is a definite place for teen romances which help ease them into adult reading. In these books the problems presented are more important than literary merit—that they may be true to life and the method of their solution is a possibility, not a miracle. Credible characters and wholesome, realistic values are among the qualities to look for when purchasing.” \(^8\)

In career books the accuracy of the information is most important. The young person depicted should not achieve an unrealistic amount of success with too little effort. The present trend seems to be to the more factual book with specific information rather than to the sugar-coated “career story”; this trend is in line with a more mature approach to living and the general pressures on young people for early decisions in choosing a field for study. Non-fiction written especially for young people is evaluated as is adult non-fiction, for its accuracy, style, illustrations and general appeal.
No book selection is done in a vacuum. Various aids to selection are available and are used by young adult librarians. The following listing constitutes a part of a professional library of book selection tools. The Booklist and Subscription Books Bulletin, The Horn Book Magazine, Library Journal (including the School Library Journal), The Kirkus Service, Books for You, A Basic Book Collection for High Schools, Publishers' Weekly, Book Buyer's Guide, Books for the Teen Age by the New York Public Library, and Book Reviews by the Young Adult Cooperative Book Review Group of Massachusetts. Publishers' catalogs and jobbers' lists can be used to keep librarians informed of forthcoming books and older titles still available. Librarians working with young adults find their most useful tool the actual reviewing and discussion of titles.

The development of a sound book selection policy within the framework of an individual library's goals should be the aim of all librarians working with young adults. Communities differ, functions vary, but those books in the young adult collection should amuse, stimulate, satisfy and widen the experience of young adults in a complicated, difficult, and fascinating world; they should satisfy young adults' immediate needs, should take into consideration their increasing sophistication and maturity, but should also help them to grow to the best of their abilities into the adult world.

That concern for library service to young adults is not confined to the U.S.A. was indicated by Emma Cohn in her talk to the young adult librarians of the Boston Public Library staff in 1967. Her talk was based on the publication she co-edited with Brita Olsson entitled Library Service to Young Adults. Booklists received by the authors indicate how universal are the problems and the solutions. "In subject categories repeated again and again they movingly reveal how many interests the young people of the world have in common: electronics, modern poetry, photography, Africa, films, sports and mathematics. And the young people are the ones who keep alive the names of such universally favorite authors as Albert Camus, J. D. Salinger, Conan Doyle, Ernest Hemingway, Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, and J. R. R. Tolkien." The trend in book selection for young adults is to place the responsibility for that selection on those staff members working most closely with the young people—the young adult librarians—and for them to perform their function with the over-all book selection policies
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of the particular library, considering the specific interests, growth, and reading abilities of a particular clientele, the young adult.

References

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   The Horn Book Magazine. Boston, published six times a year, February, April, June, August, October, December.
12. Cohn, op. cit.