Programming for the Young Adult in the Public Library

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From their enthusiasm in reporting on recent programming in the public library, it is evident that young adult librarians have a strong belief in their role as out-of-school educators who serve the cultural needs of the teen-age community outside of and beyond formal classroom instruction. They appear to believe just as strongly in guiding the young people themselves to take an active part in carrying out such programs. Behind each successful book or film discussion, hootenanny or kinetic art show is a creative librarian in tune with the group. It is encouraging to see that so many future supporters of libraries are being trained to have a voice in determining what those libraries shall be like.

This article is based on forty-seven replies received in answer to letters of inquiry sent to eighty-five heads of young adult services in public libraries in the United States, and on reports from librarians who work with young adults in sixteen of the member countries of the International Federation of Library Associations.

The Book Talk

The book talk to school classes, usually eighth grade to high school, is still the most traditional form of group work for the young adult librarian. It is also the form of group work undertaken first by librarians working with young adults in countries where specialized services are just developing. "At its best, [the book talk] sounds informal and spontaneous and in such harmony with the group addressed that it seems like conversation or discussion rather than a monologue."¹ It should be short but inspiring and transmit the speaker's own pleasure in reading, and should take place, if possible, in the library. In

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the United States it is usually considered part of the young adult librarian's job.

Through the book talk, librarians can reach most of the young people in the community and get a chance to show them that the library may be the kind of place to which they will want to return. It is also the best way for the librarian to learn the range and span of his readers' interests and responses. Young adult librarians sometimes speak in city prisons and homes for delinquents, as well as in schools, and now are even invited to teen-age coffee houses.

There is a growing demand for student tours of headquarters of new public library systems and requests for special presentations of research and scholarship materials for the college bound, if such materials are not to be found in the high school library. Ingenuity has been shown in planning programs with slides to show all library services, or with films on contemporary authors and non-musical recordings to demonstrate new forms of primary source materials. In the New York Public Library's Library and Museum of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, young adult librarians present samplings of books, films and recordings to groups of young people or adults involved in the Center's student program.

Young people themselves may enjoy giving book talks. At the request of the school librarian, a young adult librarian coached a group of student library assistants for a fifteen-minute program of one-minute book talks given at their annual winter meeting and dance. This turned out to be a multi-media venture. Rehearsals were with tape recorder, as the talks were not to be memorized, and a well-paced program took place in the dark with colorful book jackets flashing on an opaque projector.

Book fairs, as developed by the Enoch Pratt Free Library, consist of five gaily colored carnival booths, each devoted to some teen-age interest, e.g., "A Man's World," "Art Cart," set up in a school library. Two or three classes are brought in at a time, greeted with lively music, and taken on a tour of the fair with young adult specialists introducing the books in each booth and telling how they can be used. After the guided tour the young people browse and select books which they may borrow while the librarians circulate freely. Originally designed for the twelfth grades, the fairs have stepped down as students are becoming more sophisticated; currently Pratt is bringing them chiefly to the tenth grades—still reaching a large segment of Baltimore youth and circulating thousands of books after the fast-
moving, entertaining presentations. The Dallas Public Library reports that its strongest program of planned activity consists of book fairs on this model as well as book talks for senior high schools.

Librarians active in planning programs for teenagers who attend voluntarily, rather than in class groups, seem nowhere to be required to plan such programs, although their supervisors may be responsible for encouraging them. Individual reader service, book selection and work with classes come first. Then the enthusiastic librarian may do whatever time, staff and his own talent permit. He is cautioned that poorly planned programs are worse than no programs at all. He may work on these activities with the assistance of a branch librarian, a coordinator of young adult services, the person in charge of young adult work at the central library, or with the head of community services, who coordinates programs. The pattern is extremely flexible.

Administrators frequently observe that the greatest problem is obtaining staff capable of carrying out the voluntary programs. There is a widespread feeling that more training is necessary. Interlibrary loan of talented staff to work on such programs may be one answer, and there are an increasing number of workshops held by specialized systems consultants to promote young adult services. In some places the young adult office may plan subject programs to be used in a number of branches or regional centers of a large system.

Films

The rapidly accelerating use of non-print materials is evident in all reports on programming. Film, particularly, speaks to the young. In the last decade there has been a spectacular growth of services in public libraries, with film librarians doing more than any other group to keep the good, short film alive. These audio-visual librarians promote the community use of outstanding documentary, informational and experimental films of a non-commercial, non-instructional nature, and young adult librarians seems to be working closely with them. In the larger libraries and systems, or in smaller libraries on a film circuit, young adult librarians frequently have the opportunity to preview and select films for the collections. One coordinator expresses what many other young adult librarians have experienced:

"With the enthusiasm of the film librarian and a remark from the Branch Supervisor to 'do something creative' at branches, I was activated to begin. There were three things needed: cooperation from the Administration to let us explore; branch staff to encourage and
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assist us; young adults eager to get involved. . . . Fortunately I had
led a book discussion group previously at this branch in which a
strong nucleus had been formed, and we had a film librarian who
overwhelmed us with provocative films concerning topics of current
interest."²

A group of films, like a basic booklist of titles generally owned by
libraries, is emerging as having been tested and found to be sure-fire
with young adults. Mentioned many times in programs reported are
the films of Norman McLaren, Two Men and a Wardrobe, An Occur-
rence at Owl Creek Bridge, Story of a Writer, Dance Squared, and the
film that probably more teenagers have seen than any other in li-
braries within the past two years—Phoebe, which deals creatively and
dramatically with the mental and emotional strain of a teen-age girl
who discovers that she is pregnant.

Film libraries are just beginning to acquire feature films, but one
senses that there will be rapid development in this area. Raisin in the
Sun, Lilies of the Field and the films of Laurel and Hardy and the
Marx Brothers are often mentioned.

According to the most recent public libraries act in Denmark, public
libraries in the future must make audio-visual materials available on
an equal basis with books, and the young adult consultant in the
Danish State Library is also acting as the audio-visual consultant at
the moment. Films have long been used in Swedish libraries, and are
currently used with young people in many of the eastern European
countries. After a pilot year of young adult services in the National
Library of Singapore, book talks have been established successfully
and the librarian is eager to go on to films, which have special po-
tential in a country with five official languages.

Two types of film programs are being shown by young adult li-
brarians in the United States, those that entertain and are good
examples of film art to be enjoyed for themselves and those that tend
to arouse discussion. Sometimes the same film may be used in several
different ways: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was shown as a “film classic
starring John Barrymore” in one library, as a “free movie” in another,
and with a lively discussion about monster/horror movies and film
techniques in a third.

With so many teenagers making their own films and almost no film
societies at the secondary school level (in comparison with England
where there are many) the public library would seem to be the best
place for young people to acquire a background of film literacy. One

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library reported plans to show a film made by a group in a local high school. Discussions and demonstrations by local film makers with student groups would seem to be a natural next step in public library film programming.

Subject Programs

The usual formula for subject programs are films and/or guest speakers as a point of departure for questions and discussions. Topics are chosen as an alert librarian comes to know his readers and his neighborhood. In one community there may be an overwhelming preference for jazz, folk music or karate while in another a drama group flourishes. The librarians who enjoy producing programs do not hesitate to mention their failures. Book discussion groups can prove embarrassing and a chore to the unmotivated reader unfamiliar with the library, unless the book is an outstanding one with which he happens to identify, such as Two Blocks Apart. And who could have predicted that young people in a community at the edge of a desert would turn out in unprecedented numbers for a program on skiing?

There is no question of what topics are “hot” right now: narcotics, physical fitness and self-defense, sex education, Negro history and culture, and current problems of inter-group relations. The guest speaker, expert or resource person should act as a sounding board for questions and opinions rather than give a formal talk. It is most important to invite as speakers people who relate well to this age group, are interested in them and willing to enjoy spending the time and energy in answering their questions. Those who are popular with teenagers are not necessarily “stars.” Directors of beauty schools, doctors, social service workers, a pet shop owner who sends his customers to the library for information, a teacher formerly on an Olympics team, a knowledgeable record salesman, a local newspaper reporter or TV commentator, all have excellent potential as guests. Younger teenagers also enjoy hearing seniors in high school, or college students who are successful in science, photography, theatre or music tell them about requirements for entrance into specialized schools and seeing them demonstrate techniques. Department chairmen in schools can usually recommend articulate speakers. It is a good idea to keep additional films available in case speakers disappoint.

Book displays and booklists were mentioned in almost all of the reports on subject programs and certainly books are available for
borrowing. However, the tendency is not to talk formally about books on these occasions, but to tempt the non-user by mentioning them casually, making sure that the titles are pertinent to the program subject.

**Live Music, Drama, and Poetry**

Live music programs were described by ten librarians. Folk music may be on its way out commercially, but to young people it continues to be a consuming interest. Group improvisation with solos on guitars, dulcimers, autoharps and banjos is enjoyed in one library, with books coming in handy for brushing up on lyrics. Records and a phonograph are available, but the records are usually checked out rather than played during the evening. Folk music may be an annual event for some libraries when music departments in schools are contacted and asked to suggest young performers. Or a talented staff member may play the guitar and lead a group. Auditions and rehearsals, with staff present to make final decisions on programming, are recommended before scheduling a hootenanny.

Jazz concerts take place on one library’s terrace during the summer, courtesy of the local musicians’ union. The Pasadena Public Library sponsored a Jazz Festival at La Pintoresca Branch under the direction of the fine arts librarian. This event was held for the community as family entertainment in the library’s park. While films about jazz and with jazz backgrounds were being shown to teenagers and adults, there was instant mural painting by the audience going on at the same time. Nationally known musicians appeared through the courtesy of the recording industry and a library display on the musical history of jazz was arranged.

There are not yet many library programs of folk rock, although some librarians look forward to using this music which is so important to today’s teenagers. In a recent *Top of the News* Greta Renborg of Sweden writes on “Pop in the Library,” including jazz and folk rock events.³

There are some unusual activities reported which might all come under the heading of “experience programs,” using activities rather than media. In the area of the Cuyahoga County Public Library, a group of boys interested in community problems and projects, formed an organization called SEARCH—Seeking, Educating, Asking, Researching, Challenging, Helping—which found a home in the library. They began by reading and discussing, then, among other projects,
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put their ideas into action by taking retarded children to the zoo, reading to the aged and just talking to them.

Live drama is another kind of experience program reported by three libraries. Notable were the productions of one-act plays by Edward Albee and Harold Pinter put on by a group of young people directed by a young library aide in the North Point Branch of the Baltimore County Public Library. The productions have brought many people to the library, and the group still holds together with the adults now clamoring for parts. A highly-developed young people's theater in the Tampere Public Library in Finland is described by Maija-Liisa Peltonen in Library Service to Young Adults.4

The experience of being Librarian for a Day has been an annual event for public, parochial and private high school students in the Queens Borough Public Library in New York for many years. Each student is assigned to a particular public service position and does a day's work with the guidance of his regular staff counterpart.

A kinetic art show in the Albany, New York, Public Library came about because a teacher of mechanical drawing in a rural school believed that her students should have the chance to show their unusual talents to a wider audience. Not only was their op art displayed in the library's central lobby, but a program called "An Evening of Far Out Art for Teenagers" was arranged so that they could demonstrate their creations, and three art films were shown.

Poetry programs have surprised some young adult librarians. In "Poetry Evenings in Harlem," Lydia Lafleur says, "The idea for such a program was a long time coming to me, because I did not know how much young people like poetry, nor did I know when I first began working in Harlem how much poetry meant to its young adults as a means of self-expression."5 Another such occasion in the Augusta, Georgia, Public Library, started with a guarded response but grew into open enjoyment as the boys read poems singly and together from a hand-out sheet of poetry which they took home. The program ended with the playing of a recording of "The Creation" from James Weldon Johnson's God's Trombones.

Radio and Television

Book-based radio programs for teenagers have been broadcast for more than two decades by the Detroit Public Library and the New York Public Library. Young people continue to enjoy radio and there is no difficulty attracting participants. Therefore, radio is an excellent

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way of reaching teenagers. In New York, “Teen Age Book Talk” is an unrehearsed discussion of a wide variety of books with the authors and others from the publishing field as guests. Detroit’s “Young America Looks at Books” is similarly unrehearsed and emanates from a different neighborhood each week, with an effort made to choose a book close to the interest of the young people involved.

In Baltimore the Enoch Pratt Free Library is responsible for a fifteen-minute radio program sandwiched in between two popular rock and roll programs on Saturday morning. There are books on a theme, then general discussion with students talking extemporaneously on subjects from foreign policy to dating.

The Denver Public Library has had an experimental series of spot announcements on their young adult services, some which were taped by the young people themselves. The Mideastern Michigan Library Cooperative sponsors a five-minute weekly program on a local station called “Spotlight—Young Americans” which focuses on the teen-age viewpoint on world issues and invites young people ages 14 to 19 to participate.

Little television activity was reported, although New York’s Teen Age Book Talk has been on television for five years, and Detroit’s Young America Looks at Books has been on a TV series for the past 14 years.

Alert librarians who work with young people often meet readers with a real interest in creative writing, and this may result in a wide variety of group activities, from a typed collection of poetry in a scrapbook to an active young community council willing to work hard on all kinds of library programs.

There are a number of review publications edited by young people, usually produced by a high school editorial board under the supervision of a young adult librarian, which include original art work, poetry and film reviews along with book reviews. Copies are made available in the libraries and sent to high schools, thus delighting the contributors and providing impressive recommendations to their peers. The editorial boards can provide a very lively core group for beginning new activities and may form the nucleus for a library’s radio or television venture.

Each year on the occasion of the annual publication of the New York Public Library’s Books for the Teen Age, young people who have been active in the library’s radio and television program, as well as interested young people from the branches, come to the Nathan Straus
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Young Adult Library to meet with public and school librarians, authors whose books are on the list, and editors from local publishing houses.

Another annual event for the literary young at this same library is the meeting of local winners of the Scholastic Magazine Writing Awards with teachers and judges who live in the area. They hear one of the awards' alumni speak and then meet informally with other students, teachers and judges to talk about the art and craft of writing. Refreshments are served on both occasions.

Book Discussion Groups

Young people of above-average reading ability particularly enjoy book discussion groups, and 13 were described by those who contributed for this article. Heart of Darkness, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, The Fixer, The Medium is the Massage are among some of the titles used by the groups, along with A Separate Peace, 50 Poems by E. E. Cummings and Are You Running With Me, Jesus?

One such group has been meeting for nine summers, with the young people attending one year used as the planning committee for the next. Although student leaders and adult leaders from outside the library have been tried, the young people prefer that the librarian lead “so that we can all get into the argument.” There is no doubt that watching such young people grow, become at ease with each other, discuss freely, and defend their views is a special kind of experience for the librarian involved.

Teen-age panel discussions at meetings of librarians may be an excellent way for librarians to learn more about their public. In one such discussion, each librarian of a system's member library was asked to find a young panelist. Thus the presentation included rural, suburban and city areas. Moderators were a branch librarian, a young adult librarian from a suburban area and a young adult librarian from the central library.

Within the past five years book clubs have become increasingly active in Hungary. “In fact,” states Aranka Racz-Nagy of the Ministry of Culture, “book clubs in our country may be rightly regarded as preliminary training schools for librarianship concerned with services for young adults because it is in these clubs that first experience is gained by those who may become devoted specialists. . .”

Where youth councils exist they can give young adult librarians real assistance. A little more formal than book discussion groups, they
resemble them in many ways. The members are likely to be student leaders or members of national honor societies. They attract young people especially interested in reading and writing, full of ideas and willing to work. A typical youth council is formed at the beginning of the school year through representatives sent from guidance counselors and English teachers, e.g., two students from each of seven high schools, preferably a junior and a senior and a boy and a girl. They meet monthly, plan programs, suggest speakers, consider publicity and provide a sounding board for booklists and librarians’ meetings. They often receive community service credit towards college in return for their participation.

Usually they pay no dues, and expenses are absorbed in the library budget. However, one librarian reported that a used-paperback sale held for this group brought in as much money as she cared to handle.

Such groups are particularly interested in talks by foreign visitors or older exchange students, programs on testing or speed reading, or librarianship—although they balance the strictly intellectual with the strictly entertaining.

Publicity Techniques

Publicity for all group programs must be aimed inside as well as outside the library. It is of utmost importance, if programs are to be popular with the library staff, that the young adult librarian look ahead and foresee all of the major problems. Dates and time should be discussed with supervisors in the light of all the library’s activities. Staff should be kept informed as the program takes shape so that they may answer inquiries intelligently. Staff should be carefully scheduled on the day of the program so that all service points will be covered and someone will direct the audience to the meeting room while the librarian responsible for the program is occupied with last-minute preparations.

The librarians reporting on programs do not aim for capacity crowds. Thirty, twenty, or even a dozen people can find these programs rewarding if the content is good and the presentation lively.

A selective mailing list from among the teenagers and community leaders may be built up, but it should not be depended upon. The librarian himself must reach out and make personal, direct contacts. A printed flier can be prepared for distribution about two weeks before the program and sent to those on the mailing list not more than a week before the date. A note to teachers may be added to say the
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attendance at the program should not be made a class assignment or used for extra credit if there is limited meeting room space. Spot announcements on local radio or television station—particularly those which are teen-age favorites—should be prepared along with news releases.

School newspapers are usually glad to get news of programs and a meeting may be held each fall with their editors because of the annual turnover in staff. Summer schools usually have a new group of teachers, and contacts with them should be made when the summer term begins.

A large bulletin board in the area of the young adult collection in the library is still one of the most attention-getting types of publicity. Along with school newspapers, it may contain poems, cartoons, news of programs, any current news of interest to high school students, and invitations to bring in their own work to exhibit.

Contests mentioned by several libraries may also come under the head of publicity techniques. In Ohio the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County encourages the personal ownership of books with the Bertrand L. Smith Contest. The library may be built around any subject interest—horses, history, sports, etc.—which the owner may have. The judging is based on the wisdom shown in choosing the books and how well the collection serves its purpose. The Scarborough Public Library in Ontario sponsors a contest called “Impression,” in which the entrant discusses, in 500 words or less, “The most influential book, play, recording, painting or film in my life.”

In the booklists and fliers prepared to accompany their programs, young adult librarians show great creativity in working with whatever means are at their disposal, from the simple mimeograph to the most elaborate multi-color silk-screen processes. The style and art work are spirited and contemporary, with some evidence of determination to create a new image with such themes as “Happenings,” “God is for Real, Man!” “Love, Love, Love,” and “Grabbers—Books Coldly Calculated to Turn You On.”

Books may be noted or short booklists printed on the fliers. There are often special bibliographies to support individual programs, which are printed separately so that they may be used with future programs and book talks. The printed publicity materials from Scandinavia are particularly noteworthy for their elegant, modern style interpreting subjects of interest to young people. They are usually produced centrally for the use of librarians in the whole country.
Programming for the young adult in the public library has special appeal for librarians interested in the new media, new materials and concepts of library service. It is also a challenge to those who are trying to answer the question, “What can literature do?” or the question asked by Sir Frank Francis, president of the International Federation of Library Associations, when he spoke at ALA’s midwinter 1968 meeting: “What can the written word do better than any form of communication?”

Although library work is essentially work with the individual, group work is a way of reaching more individuals. It helps us dramatize the library’s services, introduce all of its materials, and break down the barriers that keep young people from wanting to use the library. The Youth Committee of the London, Ontario, Public Library and Art Museum, made up of younger staff members ranging from age eighteen to twenty-seven, stated: “The staff should attempt to make the library an exciting centre for cultural and educational development rather than a place where youth must struggle to communicate with librarians.”

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