The Young Adult Librarian

JANE MANTHORNE

Two recent novels, powerful evocations of youth almost trapped in a rough-tough society, show the influence of books and reading. In Warren Miller's *The Cool World*, Duke Custis survives sordid contact with murder, prostitution, drugs, and homosexuality, and—at last—meets books. With awesome respect for their promised magic he says, "Readin. . . . That the beginnin of evry thing. . . . When you can read an write why you can do any thing. Be any thing."¹

In S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, gang member Johnny dies with his new-found delight in a book adding a moment of wonder to his brief, violent life.² Duke Custis and Johnny are characters in fiction who find their way to books without the aid of librarians; but they have real-life counterparts who need librarians, librarians who will seek them out in their book starvation and offer them a wider world. The librarians best equipped and motivated to serve the disadvantaged Dukes and their advantaged contemporaries are young adult librarians.

What is a young adult librarian? Does he have special abilities, special attributes? Obviously he has special background and understanding of adolescence, of the American subculture known as the teenager. In addition he needs vitality and humor, and is buttressed by imagination and creativity. He is shock-proof and open-minded. He is a reader, a writer, a speaker. At times he bears the marks of a visionary and a missionary.

Sample portraits of this specialist, this young adult librarian, are vividly offered by Irmgard Hormann, Young Adult Consultant for the Hawaii State Library. "As I think back over the years to try to recall the characteristics of the young adult librarians I have supervised, it occurs to me that they all had some attributes which if combined and blended would yield a superb specialist in the young adult field. One held reluctant or retarded readers spellbound with her book

Jane Manthorne is Coordinator of Young Adult Services, Boston Public Library.
The Young Adult Librarian

talks, another captured the interest of accelerated classes with talks about mature books of ideas; one wrote catchy annotations, another was a skilled moderator of book discussions; one gained the respect of high school patrons because of her approach to reference questions, another drew young people like bees to honey because of her gay spirit and her enthusiasm. From Miss Hormann's views of young adult librarians we can conclude that they possess no single special attribute, but many. Certainly the first quality they require is a rapport, an empathy, and a comfortableness with young people.

Alice Aiello, former Coordinator of Young Adult Services for the Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Library System, once asked a regional branch librarian if he really needed a young adult librarian. His answer was: "We do not need to have a young adult librarian if it means just another staff member who will wait on patrons. If, however, it is a librarian with a special empathy for young adults, who knows the books they like, who enjoys getting to know teenage patrons as individuals, and who shows a genuine enthusiasm for discussing books with them—then, yes, we do need her!"

The young adult librarian should be fully educated in all the attributes of adolescence, first by a formal course or courses in adolescent psychology, followed by an informed awareness of the research done by Kenneth Keniston, Robert Coles, Edgar Friedenberg, Paul Goodman and by any and all psychologists, sociologists, educators, and medical men who direct their attention to young people. In addition, the young adult librarian learns from his own first-hand observations of teenagers in his community.

Margaret Scoggin once characterized the young adult librarian as a hunter and the young adult as his quarry. She explained the modus operandi of the librarian-hunter as follows: "As any sane hunter studies the object of his search before he goes into the field, our first task is to know our young adults, their interests, their needs, their reading potential, their general characteristics as a group, and their special characteristics as individuals. They are not hard to know. We can easily identify their general characteristics if we draw upon our own experience (we have all been young adults) or if we heed authors who have portrayed them so clearly."

Young adult librarians, then, know the generalities about adolescence, but they remain most dedicated to serving teenagers as individuals, with individual names and interests and aspirations. As Jane A. Ellstrom phrased it, "You are serving all segments of your
community, your total public, and when you see that gang in front of the drugstore, they don't look sinister to you because you know Bill, Pete, Jim, George as individuals and—as library borrowers.” And young adult librarians will understand why Bill and Pete and their buddies are members of a gang, but they will want to reinforce the boys’ chances to be individuals unfettered by easy, dull, unthinking conformity.

The young adult librarian accepts with fierce conviction the power of books—or more accurately, the ideas and visions in books—to perpetuate individuals. In the words of reporter Nancy Lynch, describing the career of the young adult librarian in a Mademoiselle vocational interview, the power of books may not be measurable but books can “quicken dissatisfaction with herdsmanship and provoke the boiling up of individuality.”

Beyond a rich understanding of adolescence in general and of individual teenagers, what else is essential for the young adult librarian? Certainly a sustained vitality is required, an inexhaustible reservoir of physical energy and intellectual enthusiasm. There is little solitude or quiescence in bringing books and young people together. Note the suggestions made by Amelia Munson almost twenty years ago as she encouraged youth librarians to project the excitement of books. The following are the ways, she says, “by which a natural scoffer or an indifferent or callous onlooker may be brought to participate in the enjoyment of books: displays, exhibits, readings, book talks, book reviews, film forums, discussion groups, dramatics, quiz shows, broadcasting, storytelling, book games, impersonations, special collections, clubrooms, lounges, bookbinding, illustration, printing, recordings”; a young adult librarian of the 1970’s will contribute additional activities which demand, above all, vitality.

Vitality is important, but the “ability never to be annoyed or shocked” is paramount in Helen E. Wilmott’s work with teenagers in the Freeport (New York) Memorial Library, and many a youth librarian agrees with her. In their liberation or alienation from adults, teenagers sometimes try to find the “shock level” of adults. They like to sample nonconformist attitudes or speak forbidden words. They like, in short, by word or deed to trample down adult-created taboos. The young adult librarian should be able to respond, as Mrs. Wilmott suggests, without annoyance or shock and with stability and humor. He should be reminded that young adults are trying on for size, as one tries on clothes, many personalities, many attitudes and many
The Young Adult Librarian

values. The young adult nuisance today may be a devoted helpmate tomorrow.

A Roxbury (Massachusetts) librarian laughingly describes how her Negro teenage council members called her a “white bigot” in the midst of a discussion, but were back in full force at her next meeting, planning a program on race prejudice. They were, she readily understood, mouthing the “in” phrase of certain black Americans against certain white Americans. A Roslindale (Massachusetts) librarian was alerted one day to the fact that a group of teenagers were congregated outside the library and that one young man was doing the unthinkable: burning his library card! Shock-free and with humor she realized that in his mimicry of draft-card burners her teenage patron had just elevated the library to the same important level as the United States government! She also realized that this was his way of making a complaint against the library, a complaint which should be investigated.

A Milton (Massachusetts) librarian tells how she disbelieved a rambunctious young man when he claimed that he really, truly, honestly needed a book. Like an arrow he went directly to the shelf and pulled off a book on—of all things—falconry. The librarian felt that he was in the library to “raise Cain,” a charming nuisance to serious readers. She will never forget the moment a few weeks later when he reappeared at the library. Resting on the young man’s finger, controlled and well-mannered, was a fully trained hawk!

Surely no greater rapport can be achieved in the library setting than that between a relaxed, interested young adult specialist and his teenage patrons. The librarian is perceptive enough to know when the young adult wants to be believed and when he is trying out words and ideas for their shock effect. And the librarian knows that next week, or the week after, this same young adult will have changed, will have moved on to new fads, new tricks, new causes.

Before we proceed with this examination of the young adult librarian, we would do well to consider the ideal age or appearance of this specialist. Certainly age and appearance are relevant to the careers of an airline stewardess, a model, or an actor; but in the success of a young adult librarian these two factors are of slight concern. Irmgard Hormann calls them “inconsequential.” “Of far greater importance,” she says, “are a warm personality, a youthful spirit, and a lively interest in what’s happening in the community, the nation and the world.” In her guidelines to young adult librarians spelled out in “You—The Librarian Working with Young Adults,” Pauline Winnick
likewise discounts age. "What matters more to the young adult than the age of the young adult librarian is his/her competence, vitality, and responsiveness." The librarian then may be bearded or clean-shaven, willowy or buxom; the teenager, ever demanding honesty and respect from adults, will not be easily won or repelled by appearance. He will see before him an adult with (or without) sincere interest in his problems, his reading, and his world.

As long as there are teenagers who have not found their way to the library or to books, the intangible quality, creativity, will be necessary to the young adult librarian. This creativity may propel him far beyond tools and services traditional to the public library. In her global contacts with librarians contributing to the recent publication of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) book, *Library Service to Young Adults*, co-editor Emma Cohn notes the creativity of youth librarians. She points out that "behind each one of the articles in our IFLA collection, there is a librarian who has somehow managed to go beyond the pattern of established organization and administration to make an original, and often extremely creative contribution to his library's service."

Without diminishing his support of the printed word, the young adult librarian must become an experimenter and innovator in the use of all modes of communication. Since his concern for books lies mainly in their contents rather than their age or graphic design, he must be ready to investigate and try out the potential uses of other sources of ideas and inspiration: films and tapes, pictures and sound, realia, field trips, and people. One of the finest booklists directed to teenagers in the past few years is the Nioga Library System's "College Preparatory Reading List." Contributing to the excellence of this list is the admission that pictures such as Picasso's "Guernica" and music such as Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony* are linked with printed matter in stretching the wisdom of teenagers.

Publishers were years ahead of lagging librarians in seeing the value of inexpensively made, easily portable paperback books. Now we are witnessing a felicitous wedding of education to multi-media materials and of school instructional centers and producers of such items as 8m.m. films and filmstrips. So successful and profitable is this wedding that the applications of multi-media to public libraries have been scarcely explored. The young adult librarian, with the backing of his administrator, is a likely staff member to conduct such exploration. Is the book increasingly outmoded? Should the public library be a media
The Young Adult Librarian

center? The young adult librarian should ask these questions and track down the answers.

No manufacturer markets a product for long without an analysis of his product users and the impact of his publicity. This need for evaluation should be applied to the young adult librarian's innovative efforts to serve teenagers. Coupled with his experiments in seeking out new means of involving young people with books and other media should be subsequent evaluations of these experiments. Education has methods of measurement and comparison to analyse the results of innovative systems. With a growing sophistication in techniques of individual interview and mass polls, it seems strange that little has been attempted in determining the impact of books, reading, and public libraries on users. Surely a young adult librarian might be instrumental in providing some professional pioneering in this area.

The young adult librarian might be described as a futurist never content to remain complacently with the ideas or values of the present. With a clientele which contemplates telekinesis or teleportation as possible and probable, the librarian can do no less than look into the future, too. Such future-watching may unfold new powers of the psyche, new mastery of machines scarce dreamed of, or—on the doom side—new ways for mankind to destroy itself. When teenagers seek a sounding board for their thoughts on sleep machines or anti-gravity devices or time travel, they should find a listener in a fellow futurist, the young adult librarian. This does not mean that the librarian must be a science fiction buff (although it helps) or a technologist; he must be merely an open-minded witness of historical advances, present experiments and the ineluctability of change and fresh discovery. Any thoughtful contemplator of the past twenty years need only admit that the next twenty will provide equal changes. Alvin Toffler, in a provocative article, has this to say about education: "We train our Peace Corps volunteers by attempting to give them advance knowledge . . . of the country to which they are assigned. In doing so, we minimize culture shock. Why not devise an education designed to minimize future shock?" The course, he suggests, might be called Future 1 and will be as essential as English 1 or History 1. The young adult librarian should be the first enrollee in Future 1!

More than anything else the young adult librarian should read, read, read—everything from pop poetry to psychic experiences, from children's books to sophisticated adult novels. He should read with such hunger and comprehensiveness that he almost forgets his own tastes.
—and builds new ones. The librarian’s reading, enthusiastically conveyed to young people, may prove contagious and may invite conclusions similar to Duke Custis’ “Readin. . . . That the beginnin of evry thing.”

With all his enthusiasm for books the librarian must beware of imposing his tastes on young people. As Thomas Alford, Head of the Young Adult Department of the Flint (Michigan) Public Library, says, “Guide, don’t tell; suggest, don’t insist.” In her work with teenagers Hermia Davis, Senior Young Adult Specialist associated with the Federal project of the Los Angeles Public Library, sees the necessity for the librarian to offer reading guidance to teens with intelligent restraint. She warns, “The young adult librarian should be able to respect the rights of privacy [of] teenagers in regard to their choice of reading.”

Never force books on teenagers; and certainly, never censor. Give the young adult full access to adult books and respect his emerging adult tastes. Harriett Covey, Coordinator of Young Adult Services for the County of Los Angeles Public Library, points out forcefully that the “old concepts of ‘suitability’ for young adults no longer are valid. . . . On the whole, the Y.A. reads more widely and more maturely than the average adult. . . . Socially and technologically, the average young adult is far more sophisticated than most of the librarians who serve him.”

In addition to being a reading specialist, a young adult librarian fares best when he has an ability too often limited to actors and politicians, namely, stage presence, poise, and the capacity to address groups. True, he must deal articulately in the one-to-one relationship of individual reading guidance, but beyond this he will be expected to address assemblies, clubs, and even television audiences on books, young people, and libraries. He will find himself called upon repeatedly as a spokesman for his institution and, in order to transcend amateur status, he will do well to study voice and public speaking.

To be completely effective in his service to young people the young adult librarian must build and maintain constant communication and cooperation with the total library staff. He cannot operate from lonely isolation, counting himself unique in his understanding of teens and his capacity to serve them. He may go on vacation or transfer to another field of librarianship, but the philosophy and methods of his specialty should have other supporters, other successors. In the words of the American Library Association, “As work with young adults
The Young Adult Librarian
cuts across many functions and services of the library, it is of para-
mount importance that there should be complete understanding of
the objectives of this service and wholehearted co-operation of the
entire staff [and trustees] in fulfilling them. Both the quality and the
amount of service to young adults will depend to a great extent on
the organization and integration of the work in the library as a whole.
Conviction of the importance of work with young adults by the chief
librarian is essential. 21

This spirit of cooperation and communication should reach beyond
the perimeters of the library to the total community. The young adult
librarian should be the liaison between library and schools, between
library and all youth-serving agencies, groups, and institutions. To
these groups the young adult librarian interprets the range of library
services and demonstrates how programs, exhibits, and special deposits
are supportive of agency activities. A sizeable segment of the young
adult librarian’s time belongs to community functions, whether they
are an awards luncheon of the National Conference of Christians and
Jews, a products exhibit of Junior Achievement, an agricultural show
of the 4-H club, a championship high school basketball game, or a
meeting of volunteer tutors. The young adult librarian’s working
ground cannot be limited to a building, but must encompass meetings
and events in which young adults are the focal point.

Probably because of their constant exposure to youth and youth’s
ceaseless questing, young adult librarians are invariably activists, prime
movers, highly motivated spokesmen, and defenders of books and
ideas. Young adult librarians are always in motion, zealous mission-
aries who manage to cloak their inner zeal in the outward shape of
professionally planned and executed activities. But the zeal is none-
theless there. Cordelia T. Smith, Director of Work with Young People
of the Lucas County (Ohio) Library, has shaped this sense of mis-
sion into a credo:

I believe in the reading of books,
I believe in the sincerity and worth of young people, and I
believe in my commitment to get these two together.22

In her guidelines to young adult workers, An Ample Field, Amelia
Munson caught the essence of the youth librarian’s purposiveness.
The real satisfactions, she said, “lie in our awareness that we are part
of the great concourse of workers who are moved by a profound belief
in three important factors: the power of the book to inject ideas, to

October, 1968

[ 147 ]
stir the reader to thought and action, and to demonstrate anew the blessed relief of communication to the ineluctable loneliness of man; the power of the individual to dominate his material and so to free himself to develop, in his own best way, the innate capacities of his nature; and the power of democracy to seek its highest expression in the free circulation of ideas and the greatest possible liberation of individual endowments.”

From an eminent author comes the most moving expression of a young adult librarian’s professional mission. In an address to librarians in Washington, D.C., in 1959, Harriette Arnow spelled out the commitment this way: “You cannot say, ‘I raised the earning power of Podunk.’ Nor can you say, ‘I decreased the juvenile delinquency rate; I checked divorce.’ But I think you can say: My books helped make reasoning, thinking human beings more aware of their immediate worlds because they have looked into others.”

References

The Young Adult Librarian