Responsibilities of Young Adult Librarians

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While many book lists exist, a diligent search of the literature has turned up very little on the responsibilities of the librarian in regard to the science collection. This may be partly due to the fact that, at the time when educational funds on a federal level were largely available, only the beginnings of the problem of the science collection were tackled. Later the funds had dried, and science itself had become a dirty word.

Who are young adults? AAAS Science Book List (formerly "for young adults") considers them to be junior high school students through college undergraduates. While many young adult librarians might limit the range to the high school senior, experience has shown me that the Book List's range is probably more realistic, chiefly because of the spread of knowledge and background existing among young people interested in science.

For what reasons does the young adult come to the library for science materials?

1. As a student he comes to the library for help with an assignment or a term paper, or for wider or deeper understanding of what he has learned in class. The usual feeling among librarians not concerned with school libraries is that textbooks are not a responsibility of the general library collection. Or, at best, textbooks should be included only on a token basis. Yet, certainly on beginning level, sometimes the textbook is the only source in which the science student can find the answers or the directions he wants, and to disregard the young adult's needs as a student is to fail his needs in the library. This is not to imply that the furnishing of textbooks is the main responsibility the librarian has for the science student. However, the furnishing of textbooks in variety and at all levels is, in science, a very important responsibility owed to the young adult as student, and librarians too often forget. The student also needs books which will

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arouse his interests, which will help him to explore and understand the physical world and himself, and which will help him to see how he can organize and use this world into which he was born. While most lists are soon outdated, they do give an idea of the kind and proportion of materials that a good collection should contain, and a list like the AAAS book list should be examined carefully for these purposes.

2. The young adult is a curious person who wants to know what makes his universe tick. He is not limited by old-hat ideas and is open to all kinds of suggestions. That is why he is such an avid reader of science fiction, why he is fascinated by UFOs, why the mysteries of the "Bermuda Triangle" engross him. He needs all kinds of scientific speculation to hone his growing knowledge and to satisfy his avid appetite, and he is going to ask for this kind of material.

3. The young adult is a doer—he wants to prove things for himself. That is one of the reasons science projects are so interesting to him. Another reason is that science projects are a means to financial aid and recognition through such scholarship programs as those of Westinghouse and the National Science Foundation. The library must satisfy his needs on these levels.

4. He comes to the library to find answers to specific questions, to learn how to use material with which he is not familiar and to seek guidance in his reading. It is easy enough for a librarian to build a science book collection. There are general and specific lists. If the librarian's knowledge in either the general or any specific field of science is lacking, there are subject specialists available in the form of teachers, professors, or librarians of special collections who are usually glad to offer assistance. But how does the librarian fill the need of the young adult seeking reference answers, reading guidance, and interpretation of materials? Where does a teacher's responsibility end and a librarian's begin? How can a nonsubject specialist help a young person who wants to know about a specific field? How, after building a collection, can the librarian keep that collection up to date? Just how much is a librarian supposed to know?

These are the questions the literature does not probe, and yet they are the questions I have found most pertinent to my own experience both as a general librarian and as a science librarian working at all levels, and the answers are ones developed through my experience.

It is clear that no librarian can know the whole field of science and that very few librarians know even a single area. It is frequently
possible, however, to answer even difficult reference questions by knowing the usual general reference tools and using them with imagination. Encyclopedias, unabridged dictionaries, particularly Webster's Third New International Dictionary, and handy compendia like the World Almanac will supply many complete or partial answers and point out to the librarian or the young adult the direction in which to search further. This means, however, a real knowledge of the tools, and a thorough understanding of what they contain. The dividend is the ability to use these tools in disciplines other than science when there is need. The librarian should also know some good specific tools such as specialized dictionaries. And in science, more than in most disciplines, it is necessary to know what the collection contains, circulating as well as reference, and how to consult the indices of individual books. Beyond everything, it is important to know when to confess ignorance and to ask the youngster for further explanation of his problem and to inquire of the teacher, when appropriate, what he had in mind. As in all reference work, analyzing the question and defining it as exactly as possible is the first step.

The problem of the teacher's responsibility vis-à-vis the librarian is more subtle. It is rather hard to know if one is guiding a youngster or performing his assignment. It is even harder to distinguish between offering advice on where to look for term paper materials and suggesting the term paper topics. The thing to keep in mind is that the librarian supplies the materials needed, may make suggestions on how to use the material itself, and leaves the rest to both the youngster and the teacher.

One of the concepts which all librarians have by instinct is that a literature specialist is not necessarily a subject specialist. For some reason librarians tend to forget this when dealing with the literature of science. The idea still is to guide the young adult to the materials, but not through the materials. At even a very technical level, one can recognize a book on Galois algebra without knowing what Galois algebra is. In many ways I have found that in dealing with young adults a general librarian can be more helpful than one with deep knowledge of a specific subject area. (This does not apply at the levels where the student or scholar is, himself, specializing or engaging in research.) This is because the general librarian can meet the student's interest with an interest of his own as new and as novel, and they start their mutual quest from the same point.

Keeping a collection up to date requires the usual two sides of book selection: when and what to purchase and when and what to throw
away. More than any branch of knowledge, science moves. What is published today is almost outdated and what was published yesterday is sometimes already invalid. It is important to keep up with the publications that review books, and the librarian should constantly scan periodicals such as *Scientific American*, *Science, Sky and Telescope*, *Natural History*, *Chemistry*, *Physics Today*, *Mathematics Teacher* and *Science Teacher*. These magazines not only review current books, but usually make comparisons in their reviews that are excellent guides in discarding. *Science Books* comes out quarterly and reviews books in all fields for just the young adult reader. In building both the branch collection for which I was responsible and the more complete science collection at the Mid-Manhattan Library, *Science Books* was invaluable. *Choice* usually reviews books at a more advanced level. However, where possible, and when time allows, it is probably good to look through the publication, particularly with the beginning college students in mind. An excellent feature in *Choice* reviews is the mention of books, which though not new, are still useful and valid.

More important than reading reviews is knowing what is happening in the field of science by reading at least one newspaper with a good science section, such as the *New York Times*, and at least one magazine that keeps the current picture in view, probably *Science News*. The young adult usually picks up the latter in school and gets a lot of ideas from it. A teacher meets groups of students, is responsible for their performance, and is accountable both to his superiors and to the children's parents. A librarian usually meets young adults singly or in small cliques. The librarian can therefore listen to what the youngster has to say and find out what he really wants to know more easily than the teacher can. He can assess whether the young adult is interested only in completing an assigned stint or is interested in reading and learning further, and he can and should assist the young adult with either aim. Science, to use a cliche, really is a great adventure, especially for the young. It is a marvelous experience to know that one can ask a definite question and get a definite answer when so much else is amorphous. The librarian who is interested can not only maintain and increase the eagerness of the youngster, but can share the adventure each time the quest begins.

**Reference**

SELECTED REFERENCES

I could find no literature completely relevant to the subject of this paper; however, the items listed below were helpful.


