Synergy, Not Cause and Effect: The Library Profession and Its Literature

PAUL A. KOBASA

The literature of librarianship has been examined from a variety of perspectives. This interest in the literature is understandable on several counts. Librarians realize that the literature of a profession promotes and reports its evolution; it is in some ways the circulatory system of the profession, distributing information to all points and providing a basis for study and action. Bibliographic control is a prerequisite to accessing information, so librarians practice in their own field what they preach about the creation, organization, and dissemination of information in other fields. In examining their literature, then, librarians work from professional interest on at least two levels: they are applying their professional skills, and they are learning more about the theories behind and purposes and outcomes of the application of those skills.

The nature of the literature as it has changed over time and in terms of national emphases has been described:

The Anglo-American attitude toward the library has been, until recently, highly concentrated on formulating efficient methodology—the Americans possibly contributing mostly to cataloguing and classification practice, with the British emphasizing routine processes; then, after 1950, British theoreticians in classification came greatly into prominence and the Americans turned more towards investigating subject-bibliography and the evaluation of library service to readers....Literature from...[France and Germany] has tended to be heavily weighted towards bibliophily, but there is...
now to be found much valuable work on computer applications to
information retrieval, studies in semantics, and a considerable
volume of detail concerning new buildings.¹

In volume one of Library Science Annual, Norman Stevens outlined the history of library publishing in the United States and provided profiles of twenty-three present-day publishers of professional material.² In that same volume, Claire England reviewed the library press of Canada.³ And the January and June 1979 issues of the Drexel Library Quarterly, edited by George S. Bobinski, treated in some detail each of these aspects of library publishing.⁴ Nine articles and one appendix examine the periodical literature and nonprint material, publishers, authors, bibliographic control, library science libraries, and library publishing outside the United States.

There has been debate on the balance between practical and theoretical literature and the style of writing appropriate to the literature of librarianship. In an informative article published more than a decade ago, J. Periam Danton cited Mary Lou Westerling who studied the contents of fifteen journals for the year 1969 and found that 61 articles were of a philosophical nature and 398 were of a practical nature. Danton commented:

No one will argue that the profession does not need information and guidance of a practical or procedural nature, but the proportion here seems excessive. The frontiers of the profession will not be advanced, its fundamental problems will not be solved, and the many "whys" which it faces will not be answered by "how-we-do-it-good-in-our-library" articles....⁵

Joe Rader made a plea for "eloquence in library literature." He claimed that professional literature

suffers from the slavish imitation of research report literature. With the hegemony of science and technology in our society, we all try to be as "scientific" as possible....We have adopted a form of article writing...like lab reports. This is marked by "sanitized," de-humanized, de-personalized, and BORING [Rader's emphasis] language...laden with statistical devices to strengthen its legitimacy as research.⁶

Lock previously had called for a more strenuous adherence to research discipline, if not to research report style:

A further weakness common to the monographs and to the journals is the frequent absence of disciplined fundamental research....Clearly, experiments cannot be conducted in libraries with the same freedom and detachment as in the physics laboratory, but the research attitude-of-mind is lacking.⁷
But positive reactions do emerge. "Library literature is essential to all of us," wrote Judy Card, "and especially to those working in smaller libraries, in maintaining our professional attitudes and in keeping us from becoming bogged down in day-to-day problems." Danton closed his article cited earlier by writing that "it may still categorically be said that the library press has made a great deal of progress." Where progress leads, however, is unclear. The amount of attention shown library literature and the library press appears not to have resulted in a common understanding of this aspect of the library professional scene. Kathryn McChesney recently asked:

What is library science literature? This seemingly innocuous question does not have an equally innocuous answer. Several attempts have been made in recent years to define the term, but often the conclusion is made that it cannot be defined until librarianship clearly defines the term library science. The scope of the problem can be seen in the literature used in a typical library school curriculum, which ranges from material on the theory and practice of library science / information science to that of the content of subject disciplines and special formats in all the disciplines.

In an effort to provide another perspective on the question, this author will describe what is discovered about library literature through an examination of the catalogs of library publishers and the sales profiles of one library publisher, the American Library Association (ALA). The question of what library literature is or ought to be probably cannot be conclusively answered. Practice and theory within the profession change and so call forth new publications to explain and instruct and draw on the literature of related fields (for example, personnel management and computer science) for collateral support. Library education changes and has an impact on what is published for use in teaching. (The closing of some library schools and changes in enrollment patterns doubtless have an effect on the publishing of material intended to have a strictly curricular purpose.) Alternative formats such as videocassettes and optical disks permit publishers to produce material in the most appropriate form (for example, storytelling techniques on a videocassette rather than in a book) and so change the overall nature of the library publishing program. Examining catalogs and sales patterns will disclose where we are now in terms of what is available and what is being bought. ALA's sales patterns may not be typical for all the library press and are offered only as samples of personal experience rather than as benchmarks for the press as a whole.
It is necessary to be mindful that a publisher of specialized material, especially one which uses the imprint of the national professional association in the field, in deciding what to publish, raises a question similar to the one library materials selectors ask of themselves. Are we to monitor what our library patrons (customers) are borrowing (buying) and then buy (publish) more of the same? Or, in addition to reacting to identified patron (customer) interests, should the librarian (publisher) also select (publish) new materials that will challenge or extend the reader’s interest or knowledge?

The question is of particular importance to the publisher of the national professional association because members and nonmembers alike rely on the association to set standards and provide leadership in matters of fundamental professional policy and practice. The association’s publisher, in considering evident information needs and sales history and in developing projects and authors, needs to reflect in its decision making the association’s roles of reacting to and guiding the profession. There also is a good strategic marketing reason for looking and planning beyond the information needs apparent at the moment. Given the time it takes to conceive, design, develop, produce, promote, and distribute a book or video or database, the marketplace already may be crowded with competitors or the audience may have shifted its attention to another topic. There must be a balance between publishing to satisfy present needs and in anticipation of future needs. Such a balance mitigates the risks inherent in either publishing only what we know people are buying or only what we forecast they will be buying in the future.

To determine in general the nature of materials being produced by the library press, recent catalogs of eighteen publishers were examined (the publishers are listed in appendix A). Publishers named in both Norman Stevens’s essay in Library Science Annual and in Patricia Brauch’s survey in Librarian/Author were selected. Books were grouped in three categories. For each of the categories, several sample titles are given to demonstrate selection criteria.


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In addition to books in these categories, most of the publishers considered here also issue bibliographies and general reference works. These titles are not included in the analysis which follows because their end-user is the library patron, though a librarian frequently will intermediate. The focus of this study is books intended principally for use by the library school student or library professional.

A total of 273 titles was identified in the catalogs. Of this total, 58 (21 percent) are philosophical or theoretical works; 118 (43 percent) are practical or procedural works; 97 (36 percent) are professional reference sources (percentages are rounded). Twice as many books of a practical or procedural nature were published as books of a philosophical or theoretical nature. If professional reference sources are added to practical and procedural works, the total of 215 represents 79 percent, more than three-quarters of the publishing output of the library press intended for practicing or student librarians in an approximately eighteen-month period.

Although direct comparison is not possible, it is nevertheless interesting to point out that the earlier noted study of periodical literature cited by Danton showed that 13 percent of the articles were on philosophical or theoretical concerns, the remaining 87 percent treated practical or procedural matters. The analyses of publisher catalog entries confirms that the emphasis on materials of a practical or procedural bent remains.

Since this simple general overview does not reveal any change in direction, what more can be learned about the nature of the professional press from an examination of the sales activity recorded by one library science publisher? To answer this question, unit sales for the period September 1986 through August 1987 for approximately 300 titles available from ALA were examined. One thousand copies or more were sold of thirty (hereafter referred to as best-sellers) of those 300 titles (the thirty titles are listed in appendix B and ranked according to the number of copies sold during the period).
The 1000-copy number is an arbitrary one because it is difficult to define what is a best-seller in a profession characterized by many well-defined specialties. Selling fewer than 1000 copies of a book to a small segment of the profession probably would qualify that book as a best-seller. For example, consider ALA’s Guide to the Publications of Interstate Agencies and Authorities, published in February 1986, of which 230 copies were sold during the period under study. Even considering its total sales of 765 copies since publication six months before the period under study, this title doesn’t meet the mark—or does it?

As a measure of whether the sales volume in this case is satisfactory, we can work from the number of ALA members belonging to its Government Documents Roundtable (GODORT). GODORT has approximately 1330 members. This rough measure of the potential market for the book provides a frame of reference for assessing its sales performance. At 765 copies sold, the book approaches 58 percent “market penetration” of the GODORT membership—satisfactory performance at fewer than 1000 copies.

To see this in the obverse, consider a book which has a perhaps wider market among librarians—e.g., the Library Disaster Preparedness Handbook. Published in August 1986, 1903 copies of this title were sold during the period under study, ranking it twelfth in the list of thirty “best-sellers.”

About half of ALA’s members, some 22,000 persons, characterize themselves as managers or administrators. Assume that librarians in managerial and administrative positions concern themselves to some degree with the protection of library buildings, materials, staff, and patrons. Even allowing for overstatement of the potential audience, at lifetime sales of 2300 copies and therefore a “market penetration” of 10 percent, this book perhaps has not yet performed as well as could be expected.

These are extremely rough measures and a number of factors (e.g., price, competing titles) have not been taken into account. However, they do demonstrate the problems inherent in determining a best-seller in the library market.

When the 300 ALA titles are grouped according to the categories used in the catalog survey, the proportions parallel those which emerged in that survey: 20 percent of the ALA titles are in the philosophical/theoretical category (21 percent in the catalog survey), 41 percent are practical/procedural (43 percent), and 39 percent are professional reference (36 percent).
What pattern emerges when the subset of best-seller titles is grouped into the same three categories? Again, the overall proportions parallel those of the catalog survey and the survey of all ALA titles: most of the books fall into the practical/procedural category, followed by professional reference, then philosophical and theoretical foundations (the category for each title is indicated in appendix B). The percentages for professional reference are very close in all three groups: 36 percent in the catalog study, 39 percent in the overall ALA study, and 37 percent among the best-sellers. There is a shift, however, in the other two categories, practical/procedural and philosophical/theoretical foundations. Of ALA's best-sellers, 7 percent fall into the philosophical and theoretical foundations category; in contrast, approximately 21 percent of the catalog titles and 20 percent of ALA titles overall are in this category. Of ALA's best-sellers, 57 percent are in the practical and procedural category, while 43 percent of the catalog titles and 41 percent of ALA titles overall are so categorized. At this level of examination it appears that ALA's publishing program is not taking its direction solely from sales patterns. While its practical/procedural titles sell more copies, it matched its overall output with observable marketwide publishing trends.

In answer to the obvious question, Why continue to produce titles in a category that does not sell well? it can be said that a professional association publisher has a service motive in addition to that of profit. That is, it publishes according to criteria in addition to that of volume of consumer demand. This special situation of professional association publishing was alluded to earlier in this article.

It was not possible to analyze sales patterns of the for-profit publishers in the field to determine how well their philosophical/theoretical works sell. If their experience is similar to ALA's, then how does one explain parallel publishing program proportions of philosophical/theoretical works among for-profits and ALA alike? There may be a sense that philosophical/theoretical works—"serious" works, scholarly works—somehow legitimize a publishing program overall in the eyes of library professionals. These items position the publisher as a significant source of professional information. In other words, there is a value to pursue beyond that of numbers of copies sold—i.e., a wish to contribute to theory development in the profession in order to compete effectively for the attention of the profession in the marketplace of more lucrative products.

Since no strikingly different pattern emerges from an examination according to these general categories, what can be determined from a
closer look at the thirty best-seller ALA titles? Are there any commonalities as to price or market segment?

Prices run the gamut from $1.50 to $75. However, approximately 90 percent of the titles cost less than $30; 75 percent cost less than $20, with about the same number of books in the $10 or less range as in the $20 or less range. About half of the titles would appear to be useful in all types of libraries. It is not surprising, therefore, that books such as the Guide to Reference Books, ALA Filing Rules, or Great Library Promotion Ideas II are in the best-seller group as they have a broad audience. Some six titles have public libraries as their principal market (e.g., Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries), and another six are equally useful in public and school libraries (e.g., Museum of Science and Industry Basic List of Children’s Science Books 1986). Because of the relative numbers of school and public libraries, again it is not surprising that books intended for these markets sell well.

Between general purpose books, books for public libraries, and books for public or school libraries, about 90 percent of the best-seller titles are accounted for. By cross tabulating prices and market segments we discover that more than half of the general books cost $20 or less, and all of the public library books and the school/public library books cost $20 or less (with 75 percent in the $10 to $20 range in both groups). While the characterization of some books as general purpose, others as dual purpose, etc., can be debated, what does emerge from studying these books from a unit sales perspective is a price point—$20—and two identifiable segments by book type—books for public libraries and books for either public or school libraries.

It is informative to look at the top seller in units for the period in each of the basic categories used elsewhere in this article (philosophical/theoretical, practical/procedural, professional reference) to determine if any special circumstances contributed to its sales performance.

The top selling philosophical/theoretical book is The Failure of Resource Sharing in Public Libraries and Alternative Strategies for Service. It is followed closely by the only other book so categorized—i.e., Art and Design in Children’s Picture Books. At $20 and $19.95 respectively and with the former directed to public libraries and the latter of interest to children’s librarians regardless of type of library, these books fit the price point and market segment criteria established earlier.

This pattern partially explains why the top selling practical/procedural book is Stories, Songs, and Poetry to Teach Reading and Writ-
What also made this book a top seller is its applicability to the classroom in addition to the library. Indeed, the National Education Association copublished this book with ALA and more than half the sales are to educators via NEA.

The top seller overall is also the top selling professional reference title: *Guide to Reference Books*. Its position on the list is not fully explained by its having a broad market; at $50 it is one of the few best-seller titles costing substantially more than most of the books in the group. The sales performance of *Guide to Reference Books* is the result of its being the tenth edition of this established and respected reference title (high “brand name” recognition), concerted marketing support (direct mail and display advertising over and above standard ALA treatment), and a modest price relative to the information provided (good value).

Another revealing criterion to be applied in examining the best-seller titles is the age of the individual titles; in other words, which books are perennial “best-sellers”? Pre-1986-87 best-seller titles ranked by publication date are found in appendix C. Note that among books available for five years or more and selling 1000+ copies or more in 1986-87, three have to do with cataloging rules or catalog maintenance. The oldest strong seller, *Handbook for Storytellers*, has applications outside the library (day-care facilities, classrooms) which helps it achieve its rank. This subset of the best-seller titles corroborates some findings stated earlier. Those older titles still selling well are almost without exception modestly priced and are of broad general interest to the profession or of interest in public and/or school libraries. (The three titles with an August 1986 publication date qualify only technically as “older” titles and can be removed from consideration without affecting this conclusion.)

This article opened with a review of some of what has been written about library literature in terms of its overall nature and scope and its function in the profession at large. Examination of the literature frequently focuses on the relative proportion of practical and procedural works to philosophical and theoretical works. There followed analyses of what has been produced recently by the library press based on examination of publishers' catalogs and the sales activity recorded by one publisher. Practical and procedural works continue to dominate the monographic output. The examination of ALA’s backlist and unit sales history corroborated the overall findings of the catalog examination while providing some additional information as to price points and market segments in relation to sales patterns.
This article has shown what library publishing, at least the monographic side of it, is rather than what it ought to be. It is arguable that a content analysis of some of the titles relegated to the practical and procedural class could reveal that they deal in philosophical principles and theoretical issues in tandem with describing how to perform library service: the descriptions of service are based on those principles and are within the frame of reference of those issues.

However that may be, librarians read what they need. Publishers "read" those needs through analyses of their own sales, examinations of their competitors' lists, and an awareness of developing issues in the profession, and then the publishers produce materials to satisfy those needs. Establishing cause and effect conclusively (is professional literature supposed to be reactive or proactive?) may finally be counterproductive. There is synergy between the profession and its literature rather than cause and effect. The interdependence of synergy, out of which evolution and progress come, is of greater benefit to the profession than deciding once and for all what its literature ought to be.

Doubtless, publishers would welcome a formula that unerringly predicts what the profession needs. Librarians would welcome such a formula also, assuming it would stem the flow of unnecessary material. There indeed are indicators—elements of such a formula—to be found in analyses of sales activity, etc. But the nature of the profession itself—i.e., its variety and dynamism—prevents the ordering of these elements into a fail-safe formula. Sagacity in producing and in judging what is produced is required of publishers and librarians alike, and therein lies part of the art of publishing for librarianship and part of the professionalism of librarianship.

Appendix A
Publishers' Catalogs Studied

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<tr>
<th>ABC-Clio</th>
<th>Libraries Unlimited</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ablex Publishing Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Library Association</td>
<td>Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publishing Services</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.R. Bowker Co.</td>
<td>Pergamon Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcel Dekker, Inc.</td>
<td>Scarecrow Press</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greenwood Press</td>
<td>The Shoe String Press</td>
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<tr>
<td>JAI Press, Inc.</td>
<td>Special Libraries Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexington Books</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

704 LIBRARY TRENDS
Appendix B

The Thirty Best-Sellers Ranked by Category
[Rank/title/publication date/price/86-87 units/category]

1. Guide to Reference Books 11-86/50.00 7,615 R
2. Stories, Songs, and Poetry to Teach Reading and Writing 1-87/12.95 4,562 P
3. Copyright Primer for Librarians and Educators 6-87/7.95 4,309 R
4. Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2d ed., paperback 4-78/20.00 4,036 P
5. Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries: A Manual... 6-87/14.00 4,003 P
6. Output Measures for Public Libraries: A Manual... 6-87/12.50 3,971 P
7. ALA Filing Rules 12-80/5.50 3,014 P
8. Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2d ed., 1985 revisions 1-86/4.00 2,236 P
9. Guidelines for Using AACR2 C.9 for Cataloging Microcomputer Software 4-87/4.25 2,069 P
10. Museum of Science & Industry Basic List of Children's Science Books 11-86/6.95 1,975 R
11. Effective On-the-Job Training 11-86/15.95 1,949 P
12. Library Disaster Preparedness 8-86/20.00 1,903 P
13. 101 Software Packages to Use in Your Library 3-87/17.95 1,648 R
14. Handbook for Storytellers 4-77/17.50 1,567 P
15. Technical Services in the Small Library 1-87/1.95 1,547 P
16. Popular Reading for Children II 5-86/5.00 1,512 R
17. Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings 8-86/60.00 1,407 P
18. Instruction in School Library Media Center Use (K-12) 10-84/12.50 1,306 R
19. Trustee of a Small Public Library 1-86/1.50 1,208 P
20. Great Library Promotion Ideas II 5-86/8.95 1,175 R
21. Easy Access to Information in United States Government Documents 8-86/12.95 1,132 R
22. Reference Service in the Small Library 12-85/1.95 1,120 P
23. ALA Yearbook of Library and Information Services 1987 6-87/75.00 1,085 R
24. Sources of Information in the Social Sciences 6-86/70.00 1,083 R

SPRING 1988
The Thirty Best-Sellers Ranked by Category
[Rank/title/publication date/price/1986-87 units/category]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publication Date</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Units</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Failure of Resource Sharing in Public Libraries and Alternative Strategies for Service</td>
<td>11-86/20.00</td>
<td>1,075</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Art and Design in Children's Picture Books: An Analysis of Caldecott Award-Winning Illustrations</td>
<td>6-86/19.95</td>
<td>1,044</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>Notable Children's Books 1976-80</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Concise AACR2</td>
<td>6-81/10.00</td>
<td>1,029</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>Personnel Administration in the Small Public Library</td>
<td>1-83/1.50</td>
<td>1,026</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Steps to Service: Handbook of Procedures for the School Library Media Center</td>
<td>8-84/9.95</td>
<td>1,007</td>
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Key:

- **P** Practical/procedural
- **R** Professional reference
- **T** Philosophical/theoretical
## Appendix C

Pre-1986-87 Best-Sellers Ranked by Publication Date

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Price</th>
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<tr>
<td>4-77</td>
<td>Handbook for Storytellers</td>
<td>17.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>4-78</td>
<td>Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2d ed.</td>
<td>20.00</td>
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<td>12-80</td>
<td>ALA Filing Rules</td>
<td>5.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-81</td>
<td>Concise AACR2</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-83</td>
<td>Trustee of a Small Public Library</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-83</td>
<td>Personnel Administration in the Small Public Library</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-84</td>
<td>Steps to Service</td>
<td>9.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-84</td>
<td>Instruction in School Library Media Center Use (K-12)</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-85</td>
<td>Reference Service in the Small Library</td>
<td>1.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>1-86</td>
<td>AACR2 Revisions 1985</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-86</td>
<td>Popular Reading for Children II</td>
<td>5.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-86</td>
<td>Great Library Promotion Ideas II</td>
<td>8.95</td>
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<td>5-86</td>
<td>Notable Children's Books 1976-80</td>
<td>6.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-86</td>
<td>Sources of Information in the Social Sciences</td>
<td>70.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-86</td>
<td>Art and Design in Children's Picture Books</td>
<td>19.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>8-86</td>
<td>Library Disaster Preparedness Handbook</td>
<td>20.00</td>
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<td>8-86</td>
<td>Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings</td>
<td>60.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>8-86</td>
<td>Easy Access to Information in United States</td>
<td>12.95</td>
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<td>Government Documents</td>
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References


