

## **“You have kids’ books?!” Promoting children’s literature in an academic library**

**By Elaine Gass Hirsch**

### **Abstract:**

*The appeal of children’s literature is large, encompassing college students and adults in addition to children, young adults, and literary scholars. The genre’s literary sophistication and cultural significance is becoming more apparent to a wide variety of readers. Children’s literature, however, is still often overlooked and underappreciated in academic libraries. There may be a lack of awareness surrounding the collection’s existence, as well as questions surrounding why and for whom it’s being collected. This paper addresses how academic librarians can better promote children’s literature collections to all library patrons.*

In 1974 *Choice* journal published a two-part bibliographic feature on building children’s literature collections in academic libraries. Authored by three professors of library science, it was re-published as monograph the following year in the journal’s *Bibliographic Essay Series*. This work was among the first contributions to address children’s collections in academic libraries, and was written in part to respond to the need of librarians to better support the study of children’s literature at all levels in colleges and universities (Quimby, Jackson, & Weber, 1975, p. 1). Since then recognition of the genre’s literary quality and historical significance has grown, and thirty years later the appeal of the literature is quite large, encompassing college students and adults who are not studying it as part of their academic pursuits. While most students and faculty in a college’s education and library science programs understand the role of children’s literature in literacy development and the importance of integrating literature into the lives of children, many other clientele of academic libraries are likely not regular users of the collection, although they could enjoy and benefit from it. This often leads to the collection being underutilized and under appreciated in academic libraries. There may be a lack of awareness surrounding the collection’s existence, as well as questions about why and for whom it’s being collected.

To the extreme, there may be questions surrounding its necessity at the local institution. While there are always those who seek out this literature for study or pleasure, there are sure to be additional library patrons who would appreciate the collection and are not currently using it.

There are few publications in the library literature that directly address the role of academic libraries in the promotion of children’s literature collections. Some of

these include the fine chapter focused on public relations and programming for Special Collections in *Building a Special Collection of Children’s Literature in Your Library* (Murphy & Dunhouse, 1998) and an article focusing on readers’ advisory and the academic library’s children’s collection. (Rice-Lively & Immroth, 1993). This paper attempts to further the professional discussion by outlining various approaches academic librarians can consider to better promote a circulating children’s literature collection in academic communities, where the primary audience for readership is not the patron base.

### **Collection Quality and Access**

To perhaps state the obvious, the best preparation for promoting children’s literature is to become more knowledgeable about the existing collection. It is important to consider the collection’s strengths and weaknesses by reviewing development policy, circulation statistics, and determining the average age of the materials. A review of the collection’s physical integrity is important as well. It’s not worth the time and effort to promote an outdated collection in need of attention and repair to the entire campus community, no matter the historical value it may hold for a few. The collection’s age and vitality should be apparent.

**Children’s literature has grown tremendously in quality and esteem in recent decades and now has a wide variety of readers. The academic library has an important role in collecting and disseminating this literature for the education department and for other departments and programs.**

Children’s nonfiction is a particular area that may need to be weeded and updated. While picture books and young adult fiction get a majority of worthy attention, nonfiction materials for children and young adults have become extraordinary

in recent years with many contemporary titles documenting original research and including archival photographs, bibliographies, and suggestions for further reading. Nonfiction is also promotion-friendly as the information contained is useful for gathering

background material for readers of any age and may be especially appreciated in an academic library with constituencies that include readers for whom English is their second language (ESL).

The location and cataloging of the collection are additional items to consider. Is the physical location apparent to patrons or in an unfamiliar area of the library? Is the cataloging system different from the majority of the library's collection? Answers to these questions may necessitate user education in promotional efforts.

Accessibility through the library's online catalog and webpages is of key importance in promoting the collection. Make sure the catalog includes juvenile literature subject headings on records to ease the online retrieval of these items. *Cataloging Correctly for Kids: An Introduction to the Tools*, edited by Sheila S. Intner, Joanna F. Fountain, and Jane E. Gilchrist, offers guidance in this area. If the catalog is able to limit results to particular locations in the library, the children's collection is an important location to include. Many libraries today maintain up-to-date lists of new additions, which are accessible to patrons through the library's website and may contain images of the book jackets to enhance appeal. Including a category for children's literature on the website is highly recommended..

### Displays and Exhibits

The visual attractiveness of children's literature is a wonderful asset to aid its promotion. The literature should be included on the library's display shelves of recent acquisitions and new materials, which allows patrons to regularly view the titles and to spark their interest in their availability. The color and illustration catch the eye and will draw patrons to the display, even if they are not perusing the children's works.

If the library has additional display and exhibit areas, consider themes within the literature and associated events, which could be developed to showcase the collection. The Children's Book Council (<http://www.cbcbooks.org/>) sponsors Children's Book Week, which is an excellent promotion opportunity. Since 1919, Children's Book Week has traditionally been held the week before Thanksgiving, however,

beginning in 2008 it will be held in May rather than November (The Children's Book Council, 2008). CBC offers ideas for promoting this event and supporting materials on their website.

If there are especially unique titles or themes in the collection, as well as the inclination and the time to do so, a larger exhibit complete with an exhibit catalog and an opening reception or program on a related topic can attract additional attention to the collection and the library. Murphy and Dunhouse (1998) address exhibits and receptions for research collections of children's literature in more detail, which can be adapted for circulating collections.

### Reference and Library Instruction

The reference desk and library instruction sessions offer a direct way for librarians to let patrons know about the collection and the variety and opportunities it offers. Patrons who are looking for visual resources and pictorial examples may be quite pleased by what is available in the illustrated children's collection. Patrons can be encouraged to consider items from this collection when searching the online catalog. Although uncommon at academic reference desks, students and others occasionally ask for readers' advisory assistance and recommendations of popular materials, particularly prior to extended breaks during the school year. Young adult materials may be of particular interest to traditional-age undergraduates when inquiring about recreational reading. Reference bibliographies of literature for youth can help guide these patrons to titles on specific topics (Rice-Lively & Immroth, p. 64). The library's display of recent acquisitions in this collection can also aid the advisory process.

Children's literature can readily be included in library instruction in an appropriate manner. When discussing the library's collections and services during general library tours and orientations, the literature can be mentioned as an alternative to course related reading and a possible source of background information. This especially holds true when meeting with particular groups of students who may benefit from the collection, such as readers for whom English is their second language (ESL), as the literature is quite viable and should be publicized. Teacher education students may be most appreciative of information regarding the literature during



instruction sessions. The inclusion of important children's book awards and prizes and book selection bibliographies that arrange titles by subject and the age of the reader or grade level are appropriate even if children's literature is not the focus of the instruction session. Pre-service teachers will likely appreciate this information now or have a recollection of it in the future, when they are in their own classrooms. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the breadth of contemporary children's literature is being covered in their teacher preparation coursework, which can lead to collaborative opportunities for librarians and education faculty if this is indeed the case.

### Faculty and Staff Promotion

It is important to become knowledgeable about those on campus who are personally and professionally interested in the genre, as partnerships can grow which will allow the collection to reach a wider audience. As with so many other resources, collections, and services, the library can reach a larger number of students through faculty who are aware of the collection and discuss it with their students or incorporate it into their courses year after year. In reviewing the academic catalog, Education and Library Science departments are the most apparent, however, English, Art, and Theatre departments, as well as Child Psychology and Development, Counseling, and English as a Second Language programs are all possibilities.

Librarians who serve as liaisons to these departments or programs should first identify particular courses and faculty who might be most interested in the literature, and may promote the collection with their students or be interested in collaborative instructional opportunities. An initial step can be to e-mail individual faculty or the department periodically with new acquisitions or important announcements in the field, such as the annual presentation of the Newbery and Caldecott Awards by the American Library Association (<http://www.ala.org/>) in January. There is an opportunity for connections to be established when interested faculty members respond.

There are likely to be faculty and staff members who borrow the materials for use with their children and grandchildren. This may be for various needs, from

recreational reading to preparation for science projects and other class assignments, to reviewing the books for gift purchases (Rice-Lively & Immroth, P. 64). Staff members in particular may view the library's collections and services as a benefit of their employment at the institution, as there is not a double-digit queue for popular titles and the latest release as there may be at the public library.

### Assessment

It is worthwhile to regularly review the children's materials with an eye to the collection's use. Are the shelves so orderly that it's clear that books aren't being pulled out and considered by patrons? Or has a stacks maintenance worker recently passed through to tidy the collection from regular use? It is difficult to determine collection use in this manner, but coupled with conversations with stacks workers, regular perusal can offer a sense of the collection's vitality on campus. After a year or two of applying multiple promotional efforts, take the time to compare current circulation statistics and internal use counts with statistics gathered before the project was undertaken. This will help to assess whether use of the collection is increasing and possibly reaching a wider audience.



### Conclusion

Children's literature has grown tremendously in quality and esteem in recent decades and now has a wide variety of readers. The academic library has an important role in collecting and disseminating this literature for the education department and for other departments and programs that can benefit from it, as well as for the recreational reading of students, faculty, and staff. Evaluating and improving the quality of the collection and providing easy access to the materials through the online catalog and library website are important first steps in the promotion process. Developing displays and exhibits and including information about the materials in reference desk transactions and during library tours and instruction classes further promote the collection. Collaborative work with faculty can be very beneficial when opportunities arise. Promoting a vibrant children's collection can be both enjoyable and much appreciated within academic communities.



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Elaine Gass Hirsch is the Education Librarian and Library Advancement Coordinator at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. She has worked in academic libraries for 15 years and with children's literature for the past 10 years. She enjoys

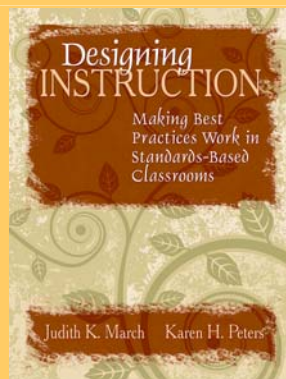
promoting the library's children's materials to patrons, especially when they haven't considered using the collection. Her scholarly interests include the historical and socio-cultural development of American children's literature. She is a member of the Children's Literature Association and appreciates the thoughtful articles and reviews in *Education Libraries*.

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## Books in Brief - By Jacqueline Snider Book Review & Liaison Editor

### Designing Instruction: Making Best Practices Work in Standards-Based Classrooms

March, J.K., & Peters, K.H. (2008). *Designing Instruction: Making Best Practices Work in Standards-Based Classrooms*. Thousand Oaks: CA: Corwin Press. 337 p. ISBN: 978-1-4129-3884-6 (cloth) \$80.95; 978-1-4129-3885-3 (pbk.) \$40.95.



The authors outline instructional design within the context of school reform. The design process breaks down into the following stages; performance indicators, curriculum mapping, unit planning, monitoring, benchmark assessments, and annual revision of the process. By presenting each

stage comprehensively, the authors make an excellent case for adopting these procedures. In addition to describing the theory behind the concepts, the book includes best practices, and concrete lessons for example, a unit on "Discovering Africa." There are suggestions on motivation techniques, as well as activities for disseminating information. The authors explain how to use note-taking, advance organizers, and graphic organizers with students. By presenting the material in an accessible way, the book combines theory with practical applications.

