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Elaine Gass Hirsch
Lewis and Clark College

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On Becoming a Children's Literature Librarian in an Academic Library

by Elaine Gass Hirsch
Aubrey R. Watzek Library
Lewis & Clark College

As with most of my fellow students on the academic librarian track in library school, I did not take any courses on children's literature. While I certainly grew up reading and enjoying the literature and have always held an appreciation of the genre, at the time classes in the field did not seem to be particularly useful for a future in academic libraries. For whatever reason there was a general assumption that the courses were designed for students working towards careers in public libraries, and were not encouraged or even mentioned by advising faculty.

The usefulness of such course work quickly became apparent when I began my position at Lewis & Clark College as the library's liaison to the Graduate School of Education. In this position I provide library services to the students, faculty and staff of the graduate education programs. Additionally, I am responsible for the library's collection development in the field of education, including the children's literature collection. Serving as the curator of the children's materials has become my favorite responsibility as a librarian, as I endeavor to support the College's teacher education programs by collecting relevant and interesting children's books that can be taken into public school classrooms by student teachers. The exciting reality is that the collection is also used by undergraduate faculty teaching child development in disciplines such as psychology, by children and other family members of the College's faculty and staff, and by undergraduates looking for alternatives to course-related reading.

When I arrived at the College in 1998, the library's children's collection had not seen much professional attention in a number of years. The collection had unintentionally become dated and somewhat historic in nature, with only the Newbery and Caldecott Award winners and a few selections recommended by education faculty regularly added. The children's materials were organized in a locally created classification schedule which did not help to familiarize patrons with standard classification

schemes and required original cataloging in technical services.

I spent my first two years becoming acquainted with the existing collection, the education programs it primarily supports, and, most significantly, the field of children's literature. Relatively straightforward aspects of children's librarianship, such as determining respected sources for book reviews, were areas where I was a novice. Reference books such as *Best Books for Children: Pre-school through Grade 6* and *A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books* were unfamiliar to me, as was *School Library Journal*, to which my library didn't subscribe. Slowly, through reading the library literature, talking to children's librarians, education librarians, and faculty, and developing the habit of regularly reading children's books, the pieces started to come together.

Beginning in 2001 I felt prepared to embark on an evaluation and weeding project of the collection, which took two years to complete. The entire collection was reviewed book by book in an effort to increase the currency and vitality of the children's materials. Factors under consideration included the age of the material, circulation statistics, significance of the author, whether the book was an award winner or otherwise important and recommended, and whether the material supported the current curriculum, including historical aspects that may be addressed in coursework or associated research. I found that examining the collection at this level of detail, although recognizably not always possible due to the amount of time it takes and the size of the collection under review, was the key to developing my confidence as a collection specialist. As of 2003 I had touched every book in the children's collection as part of my review and was much more familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the collection as a whole. I was also actively selecting new titles to enhance the existing collection and fill the notable gaps, which were largely in nonfiction.

The books that were retained were reclassified in Dewey Decimal Classification



(DDC), as it is the system education students will be using as teachers in their school and public libraries. Although the library literature indicates that many academic libraries classify their children's materials using some form of Library of Congress Classification (Frierson-Adams, 2001), it is my hope that familiarizing students with DDC will be beneficial to their teaching careers. This conversion needed support from library administrators and the cataloger, and was readily agreed upon.

After the assessment and improvement project was complete, my interest in children's literature had really been whetted. I began to research the historical development of children's literature in different thematic areas and have taken college courses in children's literature as continuing education. My pleasure reading now includes history and criticism of the literature as well as books for children and young adults.

Promoting the collection is an area where I am again learning as I go along. The library has a display area in the entry that has highlighted the children's materials on various occasions. I provide some form of readers' advisory for the collection, often to education students developing curriculum units or to undergraduates who stop by the reference desk before leaving for vacation periods. I meet with the graduate students in small groups as they begin the teacher education program and discuss the children's collection, while highlighting national and regional book awards, as well as handbooks and directories to the literature.

While I don't believe the disregard of children's literature courses for those not on the public librarian track was unique to the library school I attended (Bay, 2001), I think it may be indicative of a larger issue that is often overlooked in library education. Students move quickly through their professional programs focusing on academic or public librarianship or information technology, for example, without the time or encouragement to explore the breadth of the profession and the literature and informatics it supports. Perhaps library education

should place more value on the variety of ideas a more diversified approach offers future librarians and their patrons. In any case, it is the responsibility of professionals in any field to educate themselves in areas of assignment, and certainly the lessons learned "on the job" carry a lot of meaning. I hope others are as fortunate to discover a niche that appeals to them as much as an academic approach to children's literature does to me.

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