BACKSTORY

“I was there on a more exciting mission: the discovery of the world.” - Pete Hamill

When children begin wondering about everything from tiniest of organisms to the infinite universe, it is vital that they recognize that the library is a gateway to all of their information needs. Historically, systematic children’s book evaluation and librarian-created bibliographies of recommended books became prevalent in 1882 with Caroline M. Hewin’s Books for the Young: A Guide for Parents and Children (Jenkins 548). In this spirit, I have selected ten books and parceled them into five separate approaches to library history. With each of these titles, I provide a summary and justification for the incorporation of the materials into an engaging extracurricular program that would introduce children to the history of libraries. Furthermore, I identify which of the three types of library history each of these works falls under – namely, the categories of general purpose reporting or subject-specific biographies of everyday heroes in the field. On the other hand, perhaps my own investigation can be viewed as the third type, to the extent that the method I employ is the utilization of children’s books, both nonfiction and historical fiction, to describe library history to a young audience. Ideally, this leisurely course would impel the young group to grasp their own crucial place within this long lineage. I am inspired by a passage in “The History of Youth Services Librarianship,” which contends,

Histories of children and childhood are beginning to be written. Few of these histories include any mention of children in libraries, while histories of libraries, from Ditzion’s time to our own, pay scant attention to youth services. We know children were there. The work of historians can make them visible” (Jenkins 129).

My unique approach is rooted in the ethos of Margaret Alexander Edwards, a pioneer in the field of YA librarianship. Essentially, the future of libraries hinges on the recognition of and engagement with children as patrons, in their own right. This philosophy has been interpreted to mean that the expansion of children’s services within the public library is a broader indication of the efficacy of the public library as a whole. It is impossible to endorse a public library that does cater to children’s needs by supplying suitable services, resources and programming.
Similarly, I find direct support for my proposal in the IFLA’s Guidelines for Children’s Library Services, which is predicated on the assumption that children’s libraries are essential to children and their families worldwide. By familiarizing young readers of the future to a stimulating, vast, and wide-ranging resource, libraries frequently function as the initial point of contact with lifelong learning. Insofar as all children should be acquainted and at ease with their local library, regardless of regional variations, there are underlying principles that all children’s library professionals can comply with. Significantly, one of the goals for services for children is “to facilitate the basic library principle of the right of every individual to information, literacy, cultural development, lifelong learning and creative programmes in leisure time” (The Background Text to the Guidelines for Children’s Library Services).

The process through which I selected these titles was fairly straightforward. I wanted them to be pulled from a singular, actual public library’s collection to ensure the practicality that such a curriculum might exist in that given library’s children’s programming. As Christine Jenkins describes, over the years, librarians have devised countless lists of recommended reading for children’s collections, but “what books were actually in the library collection? What books and other materials were excluded?” (Jenkins 124). To this end, I exclusively searched the Louisville Free Public Library’s OPAC for books cataloged under the following subject headings such as: Libraries -- History -- Juvenile literature, Traveling libraries -- Juvenile literature, High school librarians -- Biography --Juvenile literature, Packhorse librarians -- Juvenile fiction, Libraries -- Pictorial works -- Juvenile literature. While the strength of my approach lies in its realistic nature and the ease with which it could be reproduced within a typical public library, the limitation of only checking out books owned by this one library is that the list of titles is far from comprehensive and it could even be viewed as a bit random in that I simply used what I had immediate access to. Due to the finite number of children’s books written on library history, another inherent weakness of my list is that it is quite broad in the age range that it is geared towards.

Nevertheless, according to Betty Carter, a SLIS professor at Texas Woman’s University, the appropriateness of selected library books can be gauged by how the audience’s appreciation for literature is impacted, in her statement that “if they lead more people to a first understanding of the pleasures and profits to be found in print, they have a place in the reading program” (Edwards 63). As an extension of the 1940s and 50s realization that librarians are an integral resource for children learning to read, the need for my project can be justified through its ability to instill interest in and enjoyment of books as well as library services in a way that is more subject-specific than the traditional storybook hour. While I thoroughly enjoyed learning about this subject matter in S580, the fact that I did not have the benefit of exposure to the history of libraries before taking my very last SLIS class ever is a travesty that my young audience-specific plan aims to rectify for future generations. Through the very act of reading, itself, the following eleven books - in topic and in format - undoubtedly promote an awareness of the magnitude of libraries.
SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR A CHILDREN’S READING PROGRAM ON LIBRARY HISTORY

I. GENERAL OVERVIEW OF LIBRARY HISTORY

*The Library Book: The Story of Libraries from Camels to Computers*
Written by Maureen Sawa & Illustrated by Bill Slavin

This book is a children’s version of our required S580 textbook, Matthew Battles’ *Library: An Unquiet History*. Curiously, although *School Library Journal* recommends it for children in grades 3-5, the LFPL shelves this title in the Adult Nonfiction Collection. From discussing the ancient Library of Alexandria to the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie, Sawa’s book accomplishes the impressive task of retaining the historical integrity of libraries without “dumbing it down” for younger audiences, while balancing the content with a great deal of Slavin’s telling illustrations. The five chapters cover The Beginning, The Darkest Ages, A Golden Age, Into the New World, and Back to the Future. Admittedly, this book is a bit more bland and tedious than the others, but it provides a good foundation to the subject matter. Sawa does an excellent job of reporting key events in library history and contextualizing them within larger issues of their times, including Humanism or the notion of women as “the fairer sex” in the 19th century. Therefore, without a doubt this book falls under the general purpose category. There is something to be learned by children and adults alike, and perhaps the most captivating elements here are the anecdotes such as “how the Gutenberg Printing Press Worked” or in promoting contemporary digital resources like the African Digital Library. Convincingly, Sawa drives home the point that “libraries link people who live today with those who came before and those who are yet to be. They are places where ideas take flight” (7).

*The History of the Library*
Written by Barbara A. Somervill

While the aforementioned text could be too dense for younger children, Somervill’s historical outline is perfect for those under age 8 and she makes library history a participatory experience in referring to an inquiry into it as “a trip around the world” (4). Beginning in 3000 BCE, every page of this book includes a pictorial, twofold running timeline that puts in perspective what occurred in library history and the broader and often unrelated accomplishments that took place around the same time. For example, in 730 CE, the Chinese developed a simple process of printing when corn became a common crop raised by North American cultures; as the Great Depression began, so too did the production of Braille. This text also represents a contribution to the general history of libraries. Even though it concludes that tomorrow’s libraries will be entirely digital, it harkens back to a childhood favorite and the reassurance that story time will prevail. A hundred years from now, a librarian will still open young minds with four simple words: *Once upon a time...*
II. THE HISTORY OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF LIBRARIES

* The Inside-Out Book of Libraries
Written by Julie Cummins and Illustrated by Roxie Munro

Recommended for grades 1-4, this book operates as a very effective tour guide through thirteen prototypes of libraries nationwide. I must say, I discovered a much about specific libraries important dates and services that I never considered before. Accompained by Munro’s soothing yet vibrant architectural watercolor paintings, Cummins first shows us the children’s room of NYC’s Chatham Square Library, which serves a predominantly Chinese population. Then we visit the one-room facility that is the Ocracoke Library on a secluded island off the coast of North Carolina, at which point the author reminds us that “the value of a library is measured not by floor space or number of books but by its usefulness to the community it serves.” Of course there is the Library of Congress, but also less famous, equally important buildings like the Andrew Heiskell Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. An illustration of a young boy reading Braille becomes an educational, tactile encounter for the reader, because there are actual, upraised dots on the page with instructions on how to decipher it. Also explored are libraries in homes, prisons, on Navy ships, and online. The neatest one that I learned about was Berkley’s Tool Lending Library, which was established in 1979. This library lends over 2,000 home repair and gardening tools such as a ladder or cement mixer! This book falls under the general purpose category, as it aims to introduce young readers to key library types.

* Libraries Take Us Far
Written by Lee Sullivan Hill

Geared toward children ages 5 and up, Hill’s book emphasizes that despite their varied physical structures, libraries are united in the shared mission of helping “you to find answers to questions” (23). Although this work touches on historical elements such as how the free Salisbury Library opened in the 1800s due to donations from Caleb Bingham or detailing the 1731 establishment of the Library Company of Philadelphia, this book is most precious in the way it encourages children to visit their libraries and engage in all that they have to offer. Coincidentally, it bears a decal inside the front cover that states that the book itself was purchased with donation funds through the Library Foundation, so we see evidence that library history and awareness is able to be transmitted through the goodwill of local donors. Rather than illustrations, the text is accompanied by actual photographs of people and buildings, and it also falls under the general purpose category.
III. EVERYDAY HEROES IN LIBRARY HISTORY

* Librarian on the Roof! A True Story
Written by M.G. King and Illustrated by Stephen Gilpin

With a target audience of first through third-graders, this just might be one of the most entertaining and inspirational books on the great lengths that librarians go to on behalf their libraries’ survival. The unconventional nature of this tale along with Gilpin’s expressive and cartoonish illustrations make the book read like fiction, but in reality it tells the true story of RoseAleta Laurell, a librarian who, for one whole week, literally lived on the roof of the Dr. Eugene Clark Library in Lockheart, Texas. Sadly, when RoseAleta began as the Library Director, the facility lacked a children’s department. She took desperate measures to guarantee that there was “enough money for the children’s section.” Ultimately camping out on the roof paid off, as she raised $39,000 through local support. The story has a happy ending, as the Eugene Clark Library is full of children’s books and resources and “best of all, you will always find crowds of children who love to read and learn inside the walls of the oldest library in Texas.” Dispelling the myth that libraries are for adults only, this book does a spectacular job of highlighting the value of library services for children as well as depicting the how the ingenuity of librarians can unite communities. It falls under the second category, because it is subject-specific and biographical.

* Michael L. Printz and the Story of the Michael L. Printz Award
Written by John Bankston

This biography was shelved in the juvenile nonfiction section of the LFPL, but it is written at a level of maturity that could easily include adults. Like the aforementioned story about RoseAleta, this book also qualifies as one that is written in terms of a specific person and it is entirely biographical about a visionary man who loved books and authors. Looking at its historic value, it is quite advantageous how Bankston includes three chronologies on the Michael L. Printz Award, Printz’s life timeline of events, and a timeline of unrelated, world events that took place during his lifetime. As a high school librarian for 30 years, the biggest challenge Micheal faced was the school’s poverty (20). He was renowned for the Oral History Program that he developed for Topeka students, which “gave kids a sense of their place in history” (24). Similarly, this is the very sentiment that I hope children would derive after reading all of the books on this list. Something I find thought-provoking and sad, which could easily be overlooked by children, is the sense that his personal life was not as cheerful as his professional contributions. For instance, after his death, one of his colleagues noted, “The ache I feel is my wish that he could have accepted for himself what he so readily gave to us, readers and writers alike. A place to stand in the circle of joy and heartache that is storytelling” (40). In acknowledging young adults as “mature and sensitive,” perhaps his greatest gift was in exemplifying an attitude that all children’s librarians should attain.
IV. Narratives of Children Touched by Libraries Throughout History

*Goin’ Someplace Special*
Written by Patricia C. McKissack and Illustrated by Stephen Gilpin

If your child only reads one of the titles on this list, be sure it is McKissack’s Coretta Scott King Award winning book, which represents the second type of library history by depicting the role of the library within the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Although the setting has been fictionalized, the events are extracted from the author’s childhood experiences in Nashville, Tennessee. The story takes us alongside the 12-year-old protagonist, ‘Tricia Ann, as she goes on her first journey alone, toward “someplace special.” We get a real sense of the discrimination she faces as she is forced to stand in the Colored Section of the bus and when she accidentally sits on the Whites Only park bench. After a humiliating experience along the way, she scorns Jim Crowe and almost gives up and goes home. However, ‘Trisha Ann hears her grandmother’s wisdom in her head, “You are somebody, a human being – no better, no worse than anybody else in this world. Getting’ someplace special is not an easy route. But don’t study on quittin’, just keep walking straight ahead – and you’ll make it.” Finally, we learn that the destination she was seeking is the Public Library, whose stone exterior reads, “All are welcome.” This message combines historical elements with the timeless importance of the library as a “doorway to freedom,” for everyone. I challenge anyone to read the story without crying!

*Tomas and the Library Lady*
Written by Pat Mora and Illustrated by Raul Colon

Written for grades 2-4, this book could be classified as specific subject-orient because it is autobiographical, based on the childhood experience of Dr. Tomas Rivera, a former chancellor of UC-Riverside. Although he, himself, was not a librarian, he attributed his love for education to the librarian who encouraged him to read as a young boy in Iowa. Raul Colon’s artistic imagery plays just as important of a role in narrating this story as Pat Mora’s words, which describe Tomas and his Hispanic family moving from Texas to Iowa. Tomas’ insatiable love for stories led him to visit the library, where the librarian took him under her wing and started letting him check out books in her name. Pictorially, we see how books enable his imagination to run rampant with dinosaurs and wild horses and he brings the family together through the act of storytelling. The beautiful friendship that forms between the boy and his librarian, as they teach each other English and Spanish, comes to an end when Tomas moves back to Texas. The “library lady” gave him a book as a gift, which can be read symbolically as the literacy tools with which she equipped him throughout the rest of his life. This book presents a realistic and heartwarming take on the power of librarians throughout history to spur lifelong success by planting seeds of interest in young readers.
V. THE HISTORY OF TRAVELLING LIBRARIES

*That Book Woman*
Written by Heather Henson and Illustrated by David Small

Henson’s book is historical fiction, because it portrays made-up family during the real circumstances in the Appalachian Mountains after WWII, when librarians were commissioned by the government to deliver books on horseback. The young male narrator, Cal, lives out in the hills of Kentucky with his family. Initially, he is perplexed by the “lady wearing britches,” who delivers books for free and won’t accept any compensation. Cal is less than enthusiastic about the strange Book Woman, who rides through the rain, snow, and fog. Until, that is, he asks his sister to “teach [him] what it says.” Next spring, when the Book Woman arrives for a visit, Cal’s mother thanks her “for making two readers outta one.” This book for 2nd through 5th graders aptly complimented my previous investigation this very topic for an actio, when I learned that the biggest contribution made by the Book Women was that they inspired a love for reading among the thousands of Appalachian people, who were previously illiterate. Cal himself embodies that very individual who would not have come to know the pleasures of reading but for the Book Woman. Henson stays right on point with historical accuracy and she encourages children to identify a connection that has transcended the ages, between libraries, books, and sheer joy.

*My Librarian is a Camel*
Written by Margriet Ruurs

I consider this book among those that fall under the general library history type, because it is not specific to one region or person. On the other hand, it could be argued that it is specific because it exclusively pertains to how books are delivered to children around the world. The author explains her motivation to discover “how far people would go to put books into the hands of young readers.” She takes us on a journey through Australia, Azerbaijan, Canada, Kenya, Mongolia and Thailand to name a few. For instance, we are graced with vivid photos of mobile libraries and children travelling by sled to pick up books that we sent to the post office via the Borrower-by-Mail program. In Indonesia, a bicycle delivery service is the most economical and environmentally-friendly method. Donkey carts full of books are delivered to Peruvian families by the bagful. Another helpful geographical element of Ruurs book is that each country’s demographics are discussed in a side box, which situates the delivery method within that particular culture. This is an essential component of teaching library history to children because it forces them to see themselves as part of a larger reading community and to “think of how lucky you are to be able to choose from all those free books and take home as many as you wish” upon visiting their local libraries.
Works Cited


