Check It Out: Diverse Images of the Library Experience in Children’s Literature

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This article provides an exploration of children’s literature featuring contemporary and historical images of libraries as settings for empowering diversity and influencing reading attitudes and behaviors. The featured selections focus on personal, family, community, and international library experiences and events. The protagonists represented include individuals of racial, ethnic, and language diversity. Both women and men are featured as librarians and both girls and boys as library patrons. The featured selections, representing a variety of genres, provide empowering images and positive messages about the love of reading, specifically in the context of the library community.

Introduction

Reflecting on my own midwestern childhood of the 1950s, I can relate to the importance of the library in my personal life. In our small town, the local Andrew Carnegie Public Library was just down the street from the elementary school and around the corner from the main-street bank and drugstore. It was an easy two-block walk from school and an inviting stop on the way home.

With the continual encouragement of my mother, an avid reader herself, I would regularly stop at our local library to browse the shelves, hoping to discover new adventures in a book. Our local librarian, who had considerable life experience and an unlimited knowledge of books, was a model of intellectual curiosity and an enthusiastic mentor for all readers, often recommending books to match our evolving interests and abilities. This early bonding with a librarian and the library experience allowed me to feel nurtured and intellectually stimulated in the public libraries of my youth as well as the many research libraries of my adult future.

During the past two decades, the themes of trade books have changed significantly, among these an increase in the quantity and quality of children’s literature about libraries and librarians. In each of these selections, the authors and illustrators promote the power of books and love of reading, all in the context of the library experience. Seasoned library patrons may recognize themselves and others between the pages of these books. One hopes that young and developing readers will be encouraged to identify with empowered protagonists who enjoy stories, read and write books, visit the library, and regularly use their library cards.
The following selections focus on personal, family, community, and global library events and experiences. Representation includes protagonists of racial, ethnic, and language diversity; and family contexts range from single-parent to extended families. Images are included of both male and female protagonists as librarians and library patrons. The publications also represent a variety of genres: nonfiction, biographical and informational, historical fiction, realistic fiction, modern fantasy, and poetry. These diverse selections of children’s literature also provide strong messages about discrimination of marginalized populations with regard to access to books and libraries as well as empowering images that have emerged with ensuing social change. Each of these unique publications promotes positive images of reading in the context of the library experience.

Some Remarkable Librarians
A unique nonfiction picture book is *The Librarian Who Measured the Earth* by Kathryn Lasky (1994). For this biography, the author completed research on the life of Eratosthenes, a Greek student of mathematics, science, and philosophy, who later became a chronologist and author. Eratosthenes was appointed chief librarian of the Alexandria Library in Egypt, where he helped readers and writers with their research while supervising 40 librarians who organized and maintained 700,000 papyrus scrolls. Double-spread illustrations by Kevin Hawkes extend Lasky’s imaginative text, lending credibility to the images of larger-than-life libraries of the ancient world.

An outstanding global and historical perspective through nonfiction is *A Library for Juana: The World of Sor Juana Ines* by Pat Mora (2002) and illustrated by Beatriz Vidal. This is a wonderful biography of a 17th-century child prodigy born in the village of San Miguel de Nepantla when colonial Mexico was ruled by a viceroy appointed by Spain. When she was 3 years old, Juana Ines followed her sister to school and peeked in the window, then begged the teacher to be allowed to stay so that she could learn how to read. Soon she was making up stories, songs, and poems—she loved learning and reading and could not wait to develop her own collection of books. Eventually, Juana Ines became a nun and academic, devoting her life to writing. Although she died in 1695, Sor Juana Ines is still considered one of the most brilliant writers in Mexico’s history. What an inspiring story about the influence of language, reading, writing, and libraries on an impressionable young woman.

A publication that describes the effect of books in the life of a librarian is *The Library*, a family collaboration by Sarah Stewart and David Small (1995). This unusual picture book is based on the biographical sketch of Elizabeth Brown, a librarian who bonded with books early in her life and relished the adventure of reading. Later, as an adult, Brown accumulated so many books that she ran out of storage space and eventually donated her entire collection to the local community library, which became known as the Elizabeth Brown Free Library. Small’s humorous and light-hearted illustrations are a perfect match for Stewart’s poetic format. The couple dedicated this creative work to the memory of “the real Mary Elizabeth Brown … Librarian, Reader, Friend … 1920-1991” (p. 1).

Speaking of remarkable women, a biography by Jeanette Winter (2005) features a librarian in a war zone. *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* is a powerful statement about one woman’s struggle to save her community’s priceless collection of books. With the help of friends and neighbors, Alia Muhammad Baker, chief librari-
an of Basra’s Central Library, managed to rescue 70% of the collection before the library was bombed and burned nine days later. Her foresight and courage are a testament to the character and commitment of librarians under life’s worst conditions. Soon after the library was destroyed, Alia suffered a stroke; she is now in recovery and is still determined to see the library rebuilt.

The Many Faces and Places of the Library Experience
Now considered a classic, one of the first picture books focusing on the library experience in the United States was Check It Out! The Book about Libraries by Gail Gibbons (1985). Using simple and concise text supported by colorful illustrations, Gibbons provided an overview of library resources and a navigation guide for using the facilities and requesting help from library professionals. It has frequently served as an orientation and guidebook for many teachers and parents in preparing young children for a visit to the library. And for many years this was one of the few picture books explaining the library experience to very young children.

The Inside-Out Book of Libraries by Julie Cummins (1996) includes informational text and large, colorful illustrations by Roxie Munro. The author highlights the variety of collections in bookmobiles, school and public libraries, and the vast public holdings of the Library of Congress and the more unconventional collections at Folsom State Prison and aboard US naval carriers.

In Librarians, author Dee Ready (1998) provides younger readers with informative and colorful photographs accompanied by simple text, a glossary, suggested Web sites, and related picture book selections. Ready describes these librarians as community helpers in school libraries, public libraries, and bookmobiles and includes images of men and women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds as librarians.

Two nonfiction publications designed for emergent readers are We Need Librarians by Jane Scoggins Bauld and A Day With a Librarian by Jan Kottke (2000). In the first selection by Bauld, the text is formatted in single sentences on each page with an adjacent photograph of male or female librarians of diverse backgrounds. This selection may be easily held by small hands and includes an index and word list, a simple glossary, related book titles, and a list of suggested Web sites. In the second selection by Kottke, the text is simple with a maximum of three sentences per page and photographs of a local school librarian. This small book includes an index, a glossary of new words, recommended Web sites, and a list of related titles.

A unique picture book about the global and international effect of libraries is My Librarian Is a Camel: How Books are Brought to Children Around the World by Margriet Ruurs (2005). This writer and editor contacted librarians around the world and asked them to share stories and photographs of their libraries. The result is an inspiring photo essay celebrating books, readers, and librarians. Many of these libraries are mobile, some moving from place to place in the most remarkable ways: by bus, boat, camel, elephant, donkey, train, and even wheelbarrow. These unusual means are often the only way that books can be brought to people in remote areas such as the mountains of Thailand, the Gobi Desert of Mongolia, or isolated rural areas of Zimbabwe, Indonesia, or Peru. In such places, the arrival of libraries and librarians is a much anticipated event. This publication provides wonderful examples of local ingenuity and community collaborations: an inspiring read.
Historical Perspectives and Changing Images in Nonfiction
In *Books and Libraries*, Jack Knowlton (1991) provides a historical overview of symbol systems, technology, and storage as related to the development of writing, books, and libraries. He describes books and libraries in the context of various cultures: Babylon, Egypt, China, Greece, the Roman Empire, Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Germany, colonial America, and the American western frontier. Each historical sketch is complemented by a colorful illustration of the period. Knowlton concludes with this reflection.

From the clay tablets of ancient Sumeria to the computers in modern libraries, the purpose of books and libraries hasn’t changed at all. Books and libraries are the memory of mankind. They are the storehouses of human thought and imagination. Nothing is hidden from you in the library. Books contain wisdom and wit, facts and fantasy, for young and old alike. With a book in your hand you can look into the past and even catch glimpses of the future. (p. 36)

The inspiration for *The House of Wisdom* by Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland (1999) was the landmark learning institution built in 830 AD in Baghdad, at that time the capital of the Islamic Empire. In this library, thousands of scholars from all over the world came to read, to exchange ideas, and to translate dusty manuscripts that arrived by camel or by sea. Lyrical prose by the author-collaborators and Mary GrandPre’s luminous and lushly colored illustrations capture the splendor of Baghdad during a time of dramatic academic and cultural growth.


*Down Cut Shin Creek: The Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky* by Kathi Appelt and Jeanne Cannella Schmitzer (2001) is a tribute to the traveling librarians of the Cumberland mountains. Among the many challenges of this WPA-funded project of the Great Depression were scarcity of books and magazines, the rigors of riding alone over rugged terrain, and inclement weather. This fascinating young-adult nonfiction publication includes biosketches of individual librarians supported by archival black and white photographs of Kentucky’s most impoverished families.

The Possibilities in Realistic and Historical Fiction
Realistic fiction refers to stories that are within the realm of possibility. The protagonists of these stories are fictitious characters created by the author, but their actions and reactions are quite believable. In some instances, the fictional characters are based on a real person or event. Cari Best (1995) provides an urban setting for a contemporary African-American protagonist in *Red Light, Green Light, Mama and Me*. In this delightful picture book, Lizzie accompanies her mother, a children’s librarian, to her place of employment: the public library. Illustrator Niki Daly extends the text
with colorful depictions of reading events and experiences both inside and outside the library. The young protagonist reflects,

Inside Mama’s library there is a Reading Room ... And there are millions of books. High, low and in the middle, too ... If I had Mama’s job, I’d look at books all day, smell them, and take home all the ones with new covers. (p. 14)

In The Library Card, author Jerry Spinelli (1997) includes four provocative stories about the influence of a library card in the lives of young adults who become belatedly hooked on reading. One of the protagonists in this chapter book is April Mendez, unwillingly transplanted from New York City to the country. She acknowledges the importance of a library card in her life.

I loved my library card. It was all creased and smudged and spilled on, and the corners were rounded and furry. But it was the only official card I have ever had, and the reason it was so beat-up was because I carried it with me everywhere, because I never knew when I might need it ... I still have the card. (pp. 125-126)

Newbery Award winner Richard Peck (2006) has recently created a colorful piece of historical fiction in Here Lies the Librarian. In this humorous and fast-paced young-adult novel, Peck provides snapshots of Depression-era readers and the influence of innovative librarians on a rural community and its enlightened citizens young and old.

**Fantastic Librarians and Libraries**

In contrast to the probable stories in realistic and historical fiction, here are several highly improbable modern fantasies that will capture the reader’s imagination.

In Nicholas at the Library, author Hazel Hutchins (1990) portrays an imaginative boy who encounters a chimpanzee hiding behind some books in the children’s collection. Nicholas requests assistance from the head librarian, who joins him in the fantasy world of children’s literature. Together they search for a book that will provide the best home for the chimpanzee. This novel adventure through the fantasy world of children’s books is enhanced by delightful illustrations by Ruth Ohi.

In a fantasy about life without libraries, Aunt Chip and the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair by Patricia Polacco (1996) creates a future world where books are used as “doorstops, to hold up roofs, to sit on, to eat off, to sleep under, to mend fences, to stuff potholes, to prop up sagging buildings, and even to shore up the dam” (p. 9), but never to be read. Protagonist Eli and his reclusive Aunt Chip visit almost every day. He loves going to her home and listening to her great stories. One day in conversation, Eli discovers from his aunt that the town once had a library. It had been closed long ago and replaced by television in every home.

“Books are a treasure. All you need is the key.”
“Books?” Eli asked.
“The key! Knowin’ these words and their meanings,” she answered softly.
“It’s called readin’.”(p. 11)

The wild contemporary tall tale of Library Lil was written by Suzanne Williams (1997), veteran children’s librarian for 20 years, and illustrated by Steven Kellogg. Reminiscent of Polacco’s protagonist, “Aunt Chip,” William’s “Library Lil” has her
work cut out for her. In Chesterville, as in Triple Creek, people prefer watching television to reading. But one stormy night, the wind blows down all the power lines and cuts off the usual television viewing. Lil finally has her chance to turn the townsfolk and a visiting motorcycle gang into readers.

In the category of animal fantasy, Laura Numeroff (2004) has recently revised an earlier text, *Beatrice Doesn’t Want To*, now formatted with endearing pictures by Lynn Munsinger. In this engaging picture book, the author and illustrator bring the story to life through Beatrice’s unique character and resistant behavior. Beatrice does not like books or reading, nor does she enjoy accompanying her older brother Henry to the library. After several visits, however, she is won over by a responsive librarian who invites her to participate in story time. This fantasy is especially appealing because of the unique facial expressions of the various animal patrons.

Another selection of animal fantasy is *Library Lion* by Michelle Knudson (2006; delicate and expressive acrylic and pencil illustrations are the masterful work of Kevin Hawkes). Miss Merriweather, the head librarian, is very particular about rules in the library: no running allowed, and visitors must be quiet. But when a lion comes into the library one day, no one is sure what to do. As it turns out, this lion seems well suited to library visiting as his large feet are quiet on the library floor and he hardly ever roars while in the library. He seems to be a model patron, doing many helpful things without being asked. Eventually, when the librarian falls and sustains injury, the library lion comes to the rescue by breaking the rules but saving the day.

*Exploring the Library Through Poetry*

*At the Library* features rhyming text by Christine Loomis (1993) and colorful illustrations by Nancy Poydar. A wonderful world of science, poetry, and fantasy opens up before three visiting children. Accompanied by their grandmother, they participate in story time, make new friends, and enlist the help of a librarian to find special books to check out for reading at home.

*Wild About Books*, a Judy Sierra and Marc Brown (2004) collaboration, is a rollicking story of bookmobile librarian Molly McGrew, who mistakenly drives into the zoo. Although the female protagonist is human, this book of poetry could also appropriately be classified as animal fantasy. Molly introduces birds and beasts to this new adventure called reading, finding the perfect book for each animal: tall books for giraffes, small books for crickets, and joke books for hyenas. She even hires beavers, a stork, and a gnu to build a branch library at the zoo. She essentially transforms this experience with a wide variety of books and has a “captive” audience of readers.

When you visit the zoo now, you surely won’t mind
If the animals seem just a bit hard to find—
They are snug in their niches, their nests, and their nooks,
Going wild, simply wild, about wonderful books. (p. 30)

Another delightful book of poetry is entitled *Please Bury Me in the Library* by J. Patrick Lewis (2005). All the included poems are by the author and are supported by the unique illustrations of artist Kyle Stone. The poems have a wide variety of formats, but all follow the same theme: readers who appreciate language, books, and libraries.
Portrayal of Marginalized Patrons

Also emphasizing the empowerment possible with a library card is Richard Wright and the Library Card by William Miller (1997). This picture book addresses one of the social issues of the 1920s in the still-segregated South: free access to books. Although a fictionalized account, the story is based on an important personal event in the life of Richard Wright, who was born in Mississippi and later moved to Memphis, where he gained access to the library and use of a library card only through the assistance of a white co-worker. Wright read many books during his years in Memphis and was inspired to become a writer himself, becoming internationally famous for his publications of the 1940s. Haunting illustrations by Gregory Christie extend the mood of fear and limitation perpetuated by racism and exclusion in the South prior to the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement. Wright used books, libraries, and reading as his ticket to freedom.

Another example of empowerment through reading is the story of an Iowa librarian and patron advocate in Tomas and the Library Lady by Pat Mora (1997). In this picture-book selection, the author has re-created the early library experiences of the late Tomas Rivera. Growing up in a Mexican-American family of migrant workers, Rivera later became an established writer, college professor, and Chancellor of the University of California at Riverside. This wonderful story supports the idea that individual librarians do influence young readers through their influence on reading values and abilities. During a summer in Iowa, Tomas is encouraged by a local librarian to read, obtain a library card, and check out books. In exchange, he tutors the librarian in Spanish. Mora’s narrative, enhanced by the warm and imaginative illustrations of Raul Colon, portrays the power of books and love of reading in the life of a child, a family, and a community.

Patricia McKissack’s (2001) Someplace Special is one of the most outstanding examples of the influence and effect of a positive library experience on young and developing readers. According to McKissack, prolific author of both fiction and non-fiction, the Andrew Carnegie Library in Nashville, Tennessee provided intellectual stimulation as well as a safe haven from the 1950s world of segregation and discrimination. Through her poignant and expressive text, with beautiful illustrations by equally prolific and well-known illustrator Jerry Pinkney, McKissack suggests the power and influence of the public library in the life of a young African-American living in a southern town in the 1950s. There is a place in this town where all are welcome, no matter what their skin color; and protagonist Tricia Ann knows exactly how to get there. To her, it is someplace special and she’s bursting to go by herself. She hurries to catch the bus heading downtown, but unlike the white passengers, she must sit in the back behind the Jim Crow sign wondering why life is so unfair. In her Author’s Note, McKissack explains,

Nashville, like most southern cities in the 1950s, was segregated. The doors of hotels, restaurants, churches and amusement parks were posted with Jim Crow segregation signs that barred African Americans, who also had to endure the further indignities of riding in the backs of buses, attending separate schools, sitting in the last rows of the balcony, and drinking from separate water fountains. But, in the late 1950s, Nashville’s public library board of directors quietly voted to integrate all their facilities. The downtown branch was one of the few places where there were no Jim Crow signs and blacks were treated with some respect.
I was almost twelve when my parents trusted me to make the trek to the library by myself ... Along the way, I had to face all kinds of racial bigotry and discrimination. But, for me, the library was always filled with a specialness that made the effort worthwhile. Since I felt welcome there, I checked out books more often. And the more I read, the better I understood why my grandmother believed the library was someplace more exciting, more interesting, and more informative than hotels, movies, restaurants, and amusement parks. She, like Andrew Carnegie, whose great wealth helped to build the library, knew that “reading is the door to freedom.” (p. 32)

Conclusion
With consistent exposure to positive images of protagonists who have been influenced by librarians and libraries, impressionable young readers may be encouraged to discover the library experience for themselves. Developing authors and illustrators will continue to share their unique perspectives of the library experience; and parents, teachers, and librarians can help to ensure that children have access to these wonderful creations. What better return on these investments than a new generation of enthusiastic readers, writers, and librarians who would all agree that indeed the library is “someplace special”?

References
Author Note

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