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# Developing Your Fiction Collection— Realistically Speaking

Frances Bryant Bradburn

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As a school media coordinator attempting to develop an adequate, up-to-date collection for grades six through twelve, I usually have little trouble determining which nonfiction books to select and then justifying their purchase. The school's curriculum, student information needs, and my library budget tend to make these decisions moot points. Naturally, there will always be the weighing of one department's needs against another's, one grade or reading level over another, middle school materials as opposed to upper school materials. But the basic academic and information requirements are outlined for me, waiting only for money and appropriate materials before their purchase.

But what of the fiction collection, that nebulous area of the book collection so often overlooked when budgets tighten and censors, real or imagined, rear their inhibiting heads? Are fiction books worth the price, both in real dollars and in that grayer area of selection: one book over another? To this question I must answer a most resounding *yes!* But how do we justify fiction purchases? In exactly the same manner we justify nonfiction purchases—academic and information requirements—with the wonderfully aesthetic addition: a good story.

Selection of any material obviously begins with a comprehensive selection policy which encompasses the school and its media center's reading and viewing philosophy. From there it is, in all honesty, no small matter to continually research selection tools to find what titles really fit your special needs. I personally use a variety of selection tools, from the more traditional periodicals such as *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *Library Journal*, and *Top of the News* to the more YA-directed *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)*, the *ALAN Review*, and the various YASD Best Books lists. In attempting to develop a current and retrospective sixth grade collection this year, I have found the *Elementary School Library Collection* an invaluable resource. I also peruse the local

newspapers, *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and various national magazines in my search for materials which serve the academic and developmental needs of sixth through twelfth graders and the faculty who teach them.

One of the most satisfactory means of justifying fiction purchases is by linking them to the curriculum. Take for example the obvious juxtaposition of history and historical fiction. Few history textbooks or class discussions can bring to life the women's suffrage movement as successfully as does Irene Hunt's book *Claws of a Young Century*. The quiet desperation and determination which ultimately gave birth to the Underground Railroad in Marcy Heidish's *A Woman Called Moses* and the graphic step back into time in Belinda Hurmance's book *A Girl Called Boy* force young people to relive the bonds of slavery if only in their minds.

History teachers often complain that students fail to see the relevance of the curriculum to their lives. Some of these complaints can be answered by units such as the World War II/Holocaust unit that the Middle School English and History teachers used last year. After reading as a class *The Summer of My German Soldier* by Bette Greene, students chose a book from a World War II/Holocaust bibliography of both fiction and nonfiction books. (See Appendix A.) As each student read his book, he selected one area of the war or the Holocaust in which he was especially interested. This specific topic was developed into a research unit from which a final research paper was the ultimate product.

Fiction integration is not limited only to the English or history curriculum. An equally successful unit was conceived with the upper school science department entitled "Nuclear War as an Environmental Issue." Titles such as O'Brian's *Z for Zachariah*, Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* and *Dead-eye Dick*, Frank's *Alas, Babylon*, Maruki's *Hiroshima No Pika*, and Golding's *Lord of the Flies* were combined with such nonfiction selections as Schell's *The Fate of the Earth*, Powers's *Thinking about the Next War*, Hersey's *Hiroshima*, and Ground Zero's *Nuclear War: What's in It for You?*

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Both fiction and nonfiction titles were used to stimulate students to think of the effects nuclear war has had and would have on the environment as we know it.

Ah, but those are the easy fiction purchases, you say. What about the other ones, especially those books on teenage life style—those “dirty” books—that someone is bound to complain about? You’re right, of course. There are no easy answers; but there are suggestions.

No one is immune to questions about book choice. In this library, which serves grades six through twelve, I often have parents come to me with legitimate concerns about what they view as potential reading problems within our fiction collection. Most worry that their sixth or seventh grade child will read something written for an eleventh or twelfth grader, which he will not understand—or worse yet, which he *will* understand and then want to do something about!

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In talking with these parents, I very seriously discuss my philosophy of a young person’s right to read—of everyone’s right to read—and how it especially relates to choosing fiction books. It is important to me that all students be able to find books that help them make intelligent, knowledgeable decisions about how they wish to conduct their lives. Non-fiction materials are extremely useful in helping to formulate these decisions, but fiction books can offer a unique perspective. Fiction, particularly that genre we label “realistic fiction,” places characters in a multitude of situations that young people potentially face. The key word here is *potentially*. Just because a student is reading about a particular issue or behavior does not necessarily mean that he or she is actively involved in it. But it does mean that he or she is at least thinking about the issue and consequently deserves the chance to make an informed choice. Children rarely read books *voluntarily* before they are ready for the subject matter contained therein. There are just too many things to do and read. Many times I have had students return a book with the comment “I didn’t like this” or “I didn’t understand this” or “I would rather read another book” or the insightfully honest “I’m not ready for this.” But the student who *is* ready should have access to the

book. Books allow teenagers a variety of contemporary role models and true-to-life situations that can help them in shaping their own lives. Adolescents certainly do not need, and do not necessarily desire, *first-hand* experience with various situations, problems, or emotions—but they do want to know about them. Books offer an ideal medium for vicariously facing a situation, watching how someone else handles it, and deciding whether or not that experience is worth incorporating into one’s life pattern and, if so, when. As I assured one parent, “At least it gives them a few good lines to use.”

right to expect some reading guidance from the librarian/media specialist for his child. This is why I have no guilt when I tell an immature sixth grader that I feel she will enjoy Harry Mazer’s *I Love You, Stupid!* when she gets a little older, even though I have just booktalked the same book for ninth grade English classes. That is why I will fight to keep Aidan Chambers’ *Dance on My Grave* and Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* accessible on these library shelves even though I will steer most younger students in other directions. That is why I schedule afternoon and evening booktalks for parents’ groups as well as using them for regularly scheduled student classes. Reading guidance lends credence to all book selections but especially in that subjective area of fiction selection.

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Fiction deserves to take its rightful place among the competition for book-buying dollars. Yet it must be evaluated, like its nonfiction counterpart, within the framework of its relationship to the curriculum and to student information/developmental needs.

### Appendix A

#### World War II/Holocaust Bibliography

- Beach, Edward. *Run Silent, Run Deep*. New York: Pocket Books, 1956.
- Beaty, David. *The White Sea Bird*. New York: Morrow, 1979.
- Bethancourt, T. E. *Tune in Yesterday*. New York: Holiday, 1978.
- Brancato, Robin. *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree*. New York: Knopf, 1975.
- Davis, Daniel. *Behind Barbed Wire*. New York: Dutton, 1982.

- Dolan, Edward. *Adolf Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981.
- Ferry, Charles. *Raspberry One*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983.
- Frank, Anne. *Anne Frank's Tales from the Secret Annex*. New York: Pocket Books, 1983.
- Frank, Anne. *Diary of a Young Girl*. New York: Pocket Books, 1958.
- Greene, Bette. *Summer of My German Soldier*. New York: Dial Press, 1973.
- Haas, Gerta. *These Do I Remember: Fragments of the Holocaust*. New York: Cumberland, 1982.
- Hersey, John. *Hiroshima*. New York: Knopf, 1946.
- Hersh, Gizelle. *Gizelle, Save the Children*. New York: Everest House, 1980.
- Hirschfeld, Bert. *A Cloud Over Hiroshima*. New York: Messner, 1967.
- Koehn, Ilse. *Mischling, Second Degree: My Childhood in Nazi Germany*. New York: Greenwillow, 1977.
- Koehn, Ilse. *Tilla*. New York: Greenwillow, 1981.
- Korschunow, Irina. *A Night in Distant Motion*. New York: Godene, 1982.
- Magorian, Michelle. *Good Night, Mr. Tom*. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.
- Marrin, Albert. *The Airman's War*. New York: Atheneum, 1982.
- Maruki, Toshi. *Hiroshima No Pika*. Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1980.
- McKay, Ernest. *Undersea Terror: U-Boat Wolf-Packs in W. W. II*. New York: Messner, 1982.
- Reiss, Johann. *The Upstairs Room*. New York: Crowell, 1972.
- Richter, Hans Peter. *Friedrich*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
- Richter, Hans Peter. *I Was There*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972.
- Siegal, Aranka. *Upon the Head of the Goat*. New York: VAL, 1983.
- Takashima. *A Child in Prison Camp*. New York: Morrow, 1974.
- Westall, Robert. *Fathom Five*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1979.
- Westall, Robert. *The Machine Gunners*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1975.

#### Nuclear War as an Environmental Issue Bibliography

- Briggs, Raymond. *When the Wind Blows*. New York: Schocken Books, 1982.
- Frank, Pat. *Alas, Babylon*. New York: Lippincott, 1959.
- Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. New York: Coward-McCain, 1962.
- Groueff, Stepane. *Manhattan Project*. New York: Little Brown, 1967.
- Ground Zero. *Nuclear War: What's In It for You?* New York: Pocket Books, 1982.
- Harvard Nuclear Study Group. *Living with Nuclear Weapons*. New York: Bantam Books, 1983.
- Hersey, John. *Hiroshima*. New York: Knopf, 1946.
- Hilgartner, Stephen. *Nukespeak*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982.
- Hirschfeld, Bert. *A Cloud Over Hiroshima*. New York: Messner, 1967.
- Kunetka, James W. *Oppenheimer: The Years of Risk*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1982.
- Maruki, Toshi. *Hiroshima No Pika*. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1980.
- O'Brien, Robert C. *Z for Zachariah*. New York: Atheneum, 1975.
- Powers, Thomas. *Thinking About the Next War*. New York: Knopf, 1982.
- Schell, Jonathan. *The Fate of the Earth*. New York: Knopf, 1982.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Dell, 1963.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Deadeye Dick*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982.

## RTSS Grant for the NCLA Biennial Conference

The purposes of the grant are to encourage (1) membership in NCLA and RTSS, (2) attendance at NCLA Biennial Conferences, and (3) participation in RTSS activities.

The grant will be for \$250.00 to finance attendance at the next Biennial Conference of NCLA. Membership in NCLA and RTSS are required upon acceptance of the grant.

The grant will be awarded without regard to sex, age, or type of library.

### Criteria for Selection

1. At least part of the applicant's current work must involve an aspect of technical services: acquisitions, cataloging, classification, resources, collection development, preservation of library materials, or related activities.
2. The applicant must not have attended an NCLA Biennial Conference previously.
3. The applicant must work in North Carolina.
4. The applicant must demonstrate financial need.
5. The completed application form must be neat and intelligible.
6. The applicant must secure work leave approval as appropriate.

### Conditions of Grant Acceptance

1. The recipient must provide confirmation of acceptance in writing to the chairperson of the Resources and Technical Services Section.
2. The recipient must be a member of, or join, NCLA and RTSS.
3. The recipient must attend the entire Biennial Conference and all RTSS functions and will assist with RTSS programs if requested by the Executive Committee.
4. The recipient must notify the chairperson of the section, and return the grant funds if the terms of the grant cannot be met.

The selection of the grant recipient will rest solely with the RTSS Executive Committee. In the absence of qualified applicants, no grant will be awarded.

For application forms, write to: Joline Ezzell, Head, Serials Department, Duke University Library, Durham, N.C. 27706. Deadline for applying: July 1, 1985.