

Building and Assessing a Leisure Horror Collection in an Academic Library

Leisure collections in academic libraries may be difficult to justify as budgets stay flat or shrink and resource costs increase. To be sure, materials supporting curricular or research needs are of paramount importance in academic libraries. However, leisure collections have a place, too, particularly as universities look for opportunities to increase community and connectedness among students who are reporting high rates of loneliness, anxiety, and depression.¹

Research suggests a correlation between leisure reading, reduced stress, and increased empathy, which can in turn potentially contribute to improved academic success and provide tools for connection with others. Levine et al. conducted a longitudinal survey examining the benefits of recreational reading on the mental health of 231 students at a large Canadian university. They state, “Recreational reading was associated with decreased anxiety and depressive symptoms over the school year, when controlling for baseline anxiety and depressive symptoms.”² These results are further supported by Brookbank, who studied the leisure reading habits of undergraduates at 10 universities across the United States and United Kingdom. When asked why they read recreationally, 28 responses from 98 interviewees pertained to relaxation and mental

health, with alleviation of anxiety, depression, and stress addressed specifically.³ Thirty-six responses also noted self-improvement as a motivating factor for reading recreationally, and included in this category were perceived social benefits such as improving interactions with others and broadening perspectives.⁴ Dewan expands on the idea of leisure reading as an empathy-building mindfulness activity, positing that, through their engagement with literary characters, students can redirect thoughts from self to others, experience new ways of thinking, and gain awareness of challenges faced by others.⁵

Certainly, recreational reading is not the panacea for all stressors college students face. However, within those factors a student can control and in combination with other self-care activities, recreational reading has the potential to have a positive effect on students’ relationship with themselves and others, and on their college experience. To support students’ recreational reading habits so that they may realize the benefits of reading for pleasure, academic libraries with leisure collections can strategically develop collections that appeal to students. This article will discuss the leisure collection at Western Carolina University’s Hunter Library and will focus on my efforts to build and assess a horror subcollection. Al-

¹ American College Health Association, *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment III: Undergraduate Student Reference Group Data Report, Fall 2023* (Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association, 2024), https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-IIIb_FALL_2023_UNDERGRADUATE_REFERENCE_GROUP_DATA_REPORT.pdf.

² S. L. Levine et al., “For the Love of Reading: Recreational Reading Reduces Psychological Distress in College Students and Autonomous Motivation Is the Key,” *Journal of American College Health* 70, no. 1 (January 2022): 161, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1728280>.

³ Elizabeth Brookbank, “‘It Makes You Feel like More of a Person’: The Leisure Reading Habits of University Students in the US and UK and How Academic Libraries Can Support Them,” *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 30, no. 3 (July 2023): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2023.2261918>.

⁴ Brookbank, “‘It Makes You Feel like More of a Person’: The Leisure Reading Habits of University Students in the US and UK and How Academic Libraries Can Support Them,” 68.

⁵ Pauline Dewan, “Leisure Reading as a Mindfulness Activity: The Implications for Academic Reference Librarians,” *Reference Librarian* 64, no. 1 (January 2023): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763877.2022.2156968>.

though my assessment is specific to a small number of horror titles, the techniques can be adapted to any genre and can serve as a starting point for creating a demonstrably diverse and well-used leisure collection.

Hunter Library's Leisure Collection

While Hunter Library has long supported recreational reading, our leisure collection was formally established in 2002 as a means to combat aliteracy and to bring students into the building.⁶ The original leisure collection featured several genres with one member of the library faculty or staff responsible for selecting in each area. Hallyburton et al. write:

The collection included horror, mystery, romance, science fiction and fantasy, non-fiction, and westerns. Collectors included professional librarians and paraprofessionals, a departure from the library's traditional model in which only professional librarians collected materials. Each paraprofessional selector had special interest in their area of selection; for instance, the horror collector is a noted editor within the genre.⁷

The collection has evolved over the last two decades and continues to be popular with students and university employees. Currently, the collection includes approximately 1,600 fiction and non-fiction books (figure 1). Hunter Library has expanded its support for the recreational habits of our students, faculty, and staff with growing e-book and audiobook collections, a feature film DVD/Blu-ray collection, subscriptions to documentary and feature film streaming services, and a newly-established board game collection, although these materials are not formally part of the leisure collection.

Fiction is divided into five subcollections: science fiction and fantasy, romance, graphic novels, mystery and thriller, and general fiction. While the leisure subcollections have changed over the years, the collection model has remained the same. Two individuals share responsibility for leisure non-fiction, and each of the five subcollections within leisure fiction has a dedicated selector. Selectors include library faculty and staff.



Figure 1: Photograph of the leisure general fiction section of Hunter Library's leisure collection.

I became the selector for leisure general fiction in the 2018-2019 academic year. General fiction was a new subcollection in leisure fiction at that time; though genre fiction was well represented in the leisure collection, we did not have a subcollection for fiction outside those genres. In 2018, horror was its own subcollection in leisure, but due to its relatively small size, we decided to include it in general fiction. As a lifelong horror lover, I was excited to purchase for this area.

Breaking Down and Rebuilding Horror

When I assumed selection responsibilities for leisure general fiction, the horror subcollection already had been physically relocated into the new leisure general fiction area. Both to get my bearings as a new leisure selector and to establish a path forward for this new subcollection, my first order of business was to examine the existing titles that had been moved into leisure general fiction. I reviewed past purchases, looked at circulation statistics, and evaluated the condition of the materials. Because this was a newly established area within leisure fiction and because the horror collection that was absorbed into it was small, I weeded conservatively. Of 147 total horror titles, I withdrew 19 due to age, condition, and poor circulation history, and I transferred four to the general collection.

With a limited budget of approximately \$500 per year, I balanced the purchase of horror titles with the purchase of general fiction titles, prioritizing to the

⁶ Ann W. Hallyburton, Heidi E. Buchanan, and Timothy V. Carstens, "Serving the Whole Person: Popular Materials in Academic Libraries," *Collection Building* 30, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 109–10, <https://doi.org/10.1108/01604951111127498>.

⁷ Hallyburton, Buchanan, and Carstens, "Serving the Whole Person: Popular Materials in Academic Libraries," 110.

extent possible diverse purchases. From 2018-2023, I purchased 116 titles for leisure general fiction. Of these, 55 (approximately 47%) of the titles I purchased are classified as horror and 61 (approximately 53%) are classified more broadly as general fiction (figure 2). These numbers exclude 2020-2021 when leisure funds were suspended due to COVID-19 and worries about possible budget reversions.

Assessing Leisure Horror

After five years of selecting for leisure general fiction, I conducted a detailed analysis of circulation data,

particularly for the horror purchases. My reasons were threefold. I wanted to see if there were trends in circulation patterns, identify potential collection priority areas, and determine if a case could be made for re-establishing a horror subcollection. As a selector with a small annual budget, it has been difficult to balance the purchase of both horror and general fiction titles. Invariably, I have foregone the purchase of desirable titles in each area due to limited funds – a challenge I am sure is shared by my selector colleagues but is exacerbated by the dual collection priorities in leisure general fiction. Moreover, these

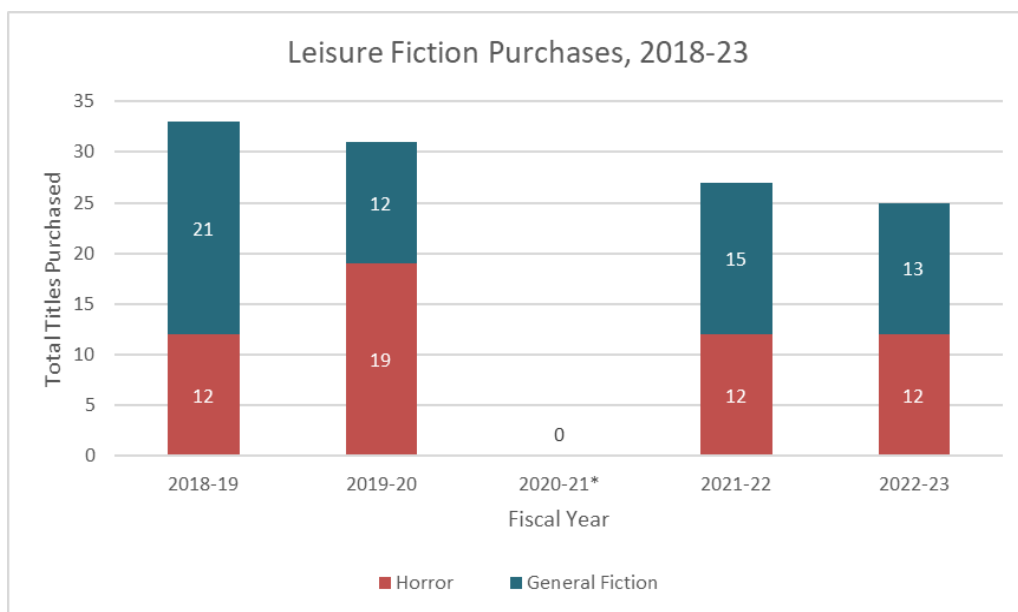


Figure 2: Leisure fiction purchases, 2018-23. Note: Leisure purchases were suspended in 2020-21.

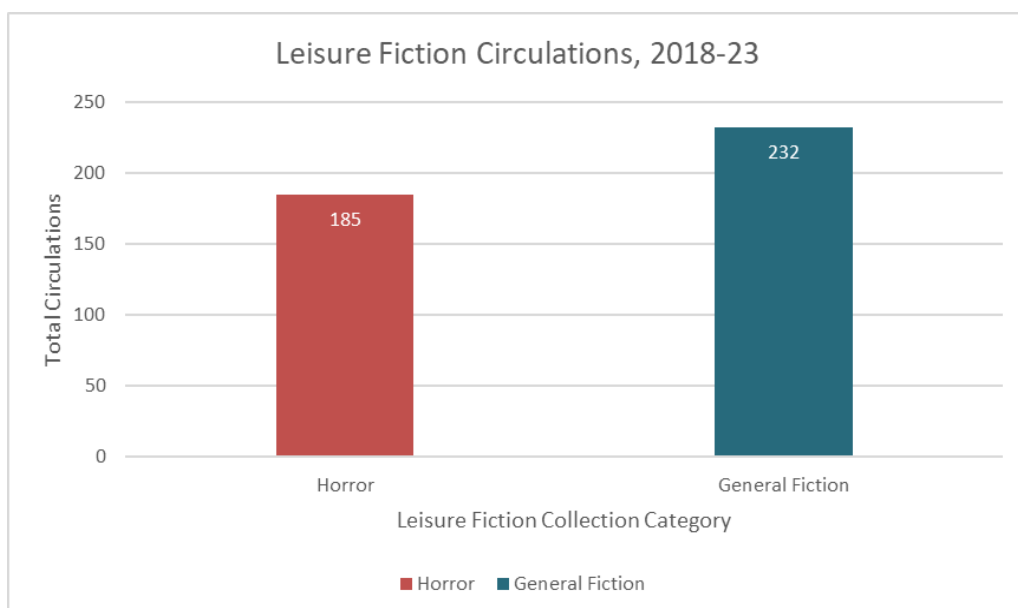


Figure 3: Leisure fiction circulations, 2018-23.

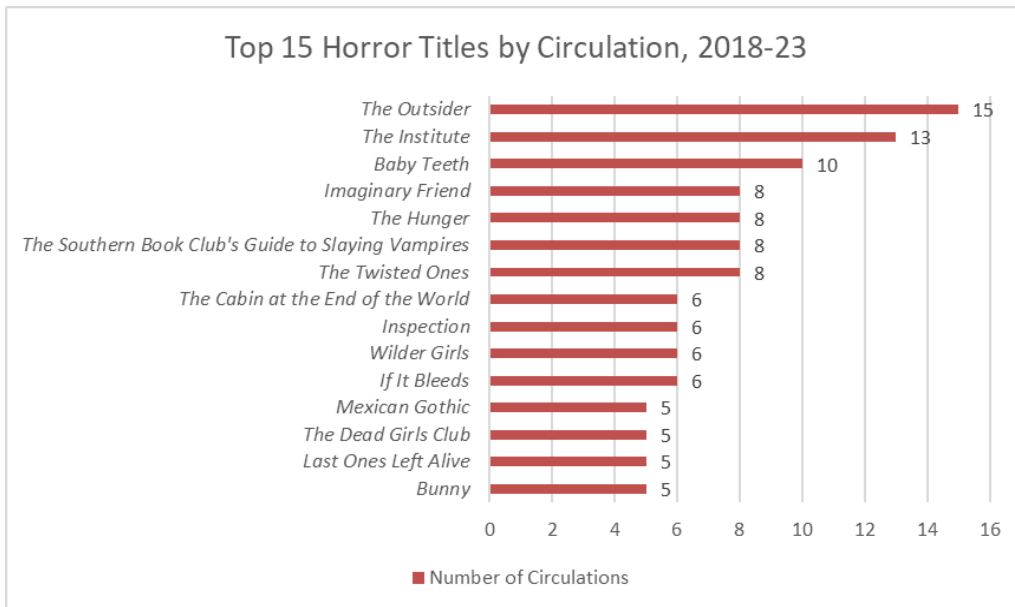


Figure 4: Top 15 horror titles by circulation, 2018-23.

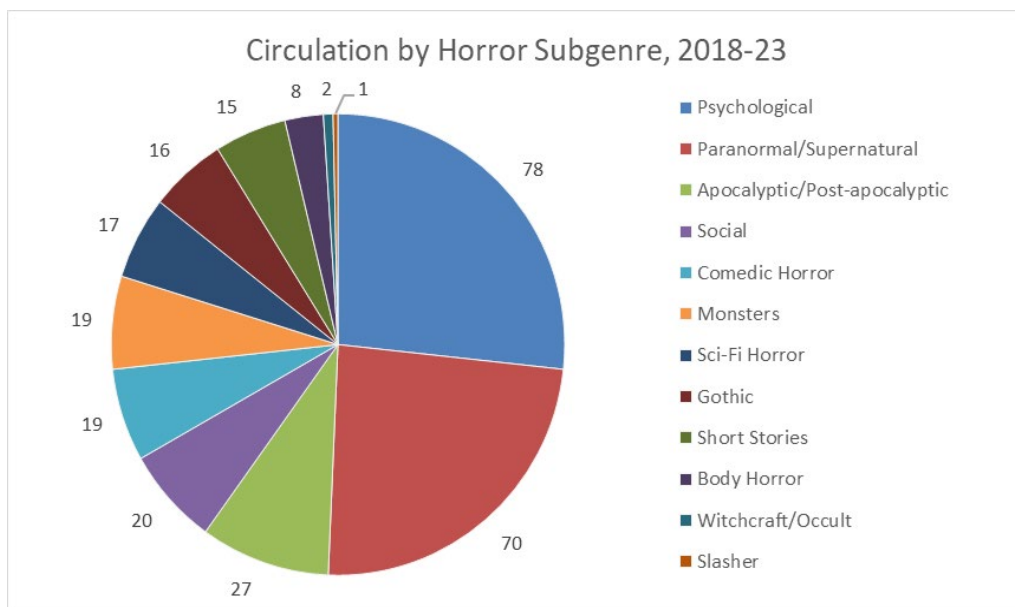


Figure 5: Circulation by horror subgenre, 2018-23.

dual collection priorities have resulted in a dichotomous subcollection with a rather disjointed feel.

Using circulation data from August 2018 through September 2023 for leisure general fiction purchases I made from the 2018-19 academic year through the 2022-23 academic year, I conducted an analysis of circulation trends of horror titles. I looked at several variables in my analysis, including total circulations, top 15 titles by circulation numbers, circulation by horror subgenre, circulation by diverse author/character, and circulation by media adaptation.

Total circulation (figure 3) numbers for horror were promising. Of the 417 circulations 2018-23 purchases received, horror purchases received 185 (approximately 44%) of those. The top 15 highest circulating titles from the 2018-23 purchases (figure 4) revealed a pleasing mix of high-profile authors (e.g., Stephen King and Paul Tremblay) sharing space with perhaps less well-known but talented authors whose books have received critical praise (e.g., Mona Awad, Silvia Moreno-Garcia, and Alma Katsu).

When looking at circulation by horror subgenres (figure 5), things became murkier. I developed a list of common horror subgenres from my own reading experience and in consultation with sources such as NoveList Plus, Book Riot, and Edmonton Public Library’s “Exploring the Diverse Subgenres of Horror Literature,” among others. I categorized each horror purchase into a genre or genres (very few fell neatly into a single subgenre), and for each checkout a title received, I counted circulation for the correspond-

ing genre(s). For example, I coded Kira Jane Buxton’s *Hollow Kingdom* as Apocalyptic/Post-apocalyptic, Monsters, and Comedic Horror, and a checkout of *Hollow Kingdom* was counted as a circulation in each of those three subgenres.

is valuable information for a selector. As representation in those smaller subgenres grows, an analysis of this nature may prove more fruitful. I also reviewed circulation trends by author and character diversity (figure 6) since diversity is a priority in my collection development for the area. For the purposes of this analysis, I included race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation of both author and major characters. Examples include Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Mexican Gothic*, Ste-

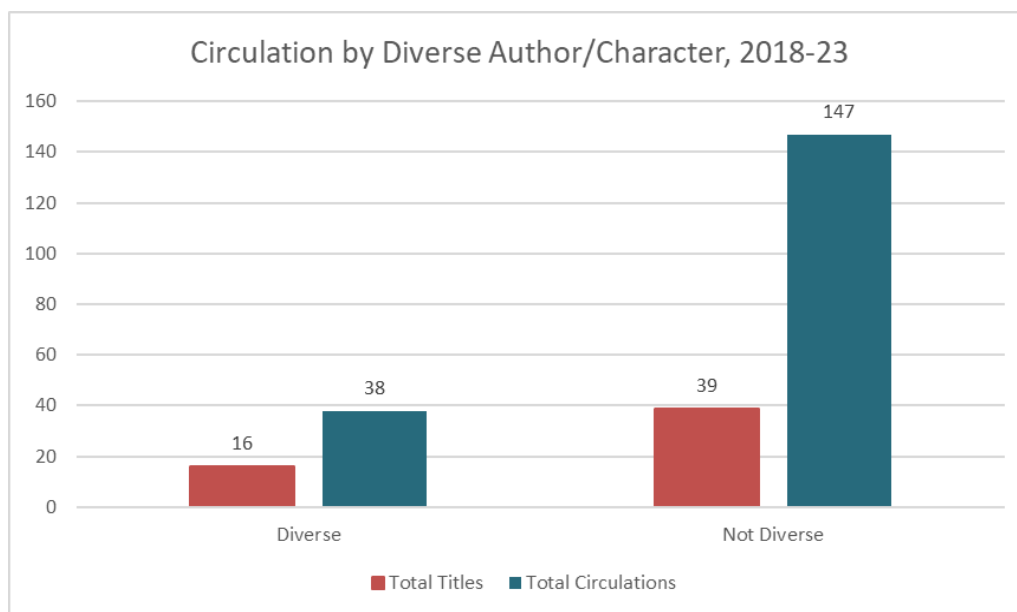


Figure 6: Circulation by diverse author/character, 2018-23.

phen Graham Jones’s *My Heart Is a Chainsaw*, and Gretchen Felker-Martin’s *Manhunt*.

Horror novels written by diverse authors and/or featuring diverse characters represented 16 of 55 (approximately 29%) of horror purchases and 38 of 185 (approximately 21%) of horror circulations. The circulation statistics are compelling. Hunter Library is committed to offering a collection that is representative and reflective of our university population, and purchasing diverse titles will remain a priority for me.

I was also curious whether a media adaptation affected a title’s circulation (figure 7). I looked at circulation data for titles that had an existing movie, television, or podcast adaptation. I excluded titles for which there was a forthcoming adaptation as the state of the adaptation (for example, in development versus in post-production) can play a role in the amount of attention a title receives. The sample size

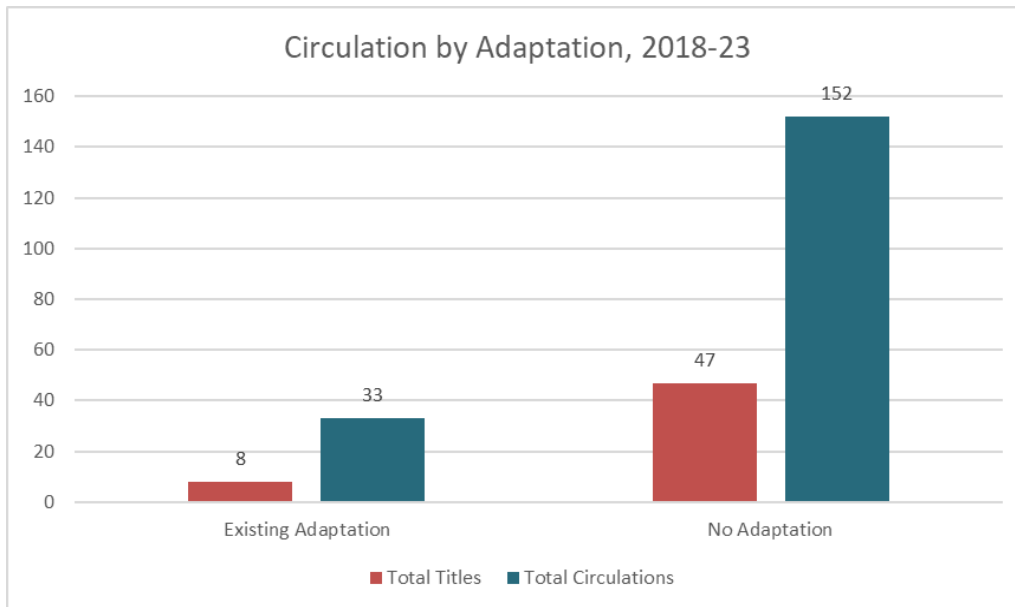


Figure 7: Circulation by media adaptation, 2018-23.

here was small, with only eight (approximately 15%) purchased horror titles having an existing adaptation. These titles received 33 (approximately 18%) total circulations.

Future Directions

Through this collection assessment, I have distilled several ideas to promote awareness and use of horror, general fiction, and the entire leisure collection. The first, and an impetus for this assessment, is a reconfiguration of the leisure collection to include a discrete horror section again. Overall, the horror circulation numbers are promising and indicate patron interest in the genre. While current physical space constraints make it difficult to create new leisure subcollections, the numbers support re-establishing a discrete horror subcollection in leisure fiction once space becomes available. There may be a need for additional subcollections as well (e.g., historical fiction) to meet our patrons' reading preferences if and when the space dedicated to our leisure collection grows.

The second idea – though not novel – is to actively solicit requests from patrons. The circulation by subgenres analysis revealed areas where the collection can be improved. Increased representation in these subgenres is a priority and will allow better assessment of circulation trends in the future. To grow these areas, soliciting requests from patrons will create a collection by and for those who use it. Colleagues in the library have had success using whiteboards to

solicit information from students about services and resources, and I hope to follow their example and do something similar for leisure general fiction, and especially those underrepresented horror subgenres.

Finally, building on Hunter Library's successful non-curricular programming (that has included game nights and drag queen story hours) and burgeoning involvement with recognized student organizations, I would like to explore creating a horror book club. As with the other non-curricular programming efforts, this book club would foster community among our band of horror readers and strengthen the Hunter Library's growing reputation as a community hub on campus.

Conclusion

While leisure collections in academic libraries may not carry the same weight as collections supporting student and faculty research and teaching needs, they can be vitally important to the campus population. Collection and circulation analyses such as those undertaken for the horror titles in Hunter Library's leisure general fiction subcollection can be adapted to any genre. These analyses can reveal trends in readership, identify areas that need attention, and offer ideas for marketing and promotion, all of which can contribute to a collection that is widely used and can demonstrate the value of leisure collections to stakeholders.

Note

This article expands on the author's poster presentation, entitled *Something Wicked This Way Comes: Building, Assessing, and Marketing a Leisure Horror Collection*, delivered at the 65th Biennial North Carolina Library Association Conference in October 2023, and the author's contributions to the April 2024 NC LIVE Spring Marketing Series panel *Page Turners: Promoting Leisure Reading in Academic Libraries*.

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