

# PNLA Quarterly

The official journal of the Pacific Northwest Library Association



Paramount Theatre building detail, Oakland, California  
Highsmith, Carol M., 1946-, photographer  
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/highsm.04225/>

Creativity  
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## A Message from the President

Greetings,

Creativity is in so much of what we do as information professionals! Programming and services to youth come to mind quickly, but I find the most amazing creativity appears when we have to solve the larger challenges facing libraries today. Issues such as meeting the needs of our patrons and exploring ways to remain relevant in today's world require creativity and out-of-the-box thinking from all of us.

This issue of PNLA Quarterly looks at the face of creativity in our profession. Authors were encouraged to look at the many roles creativity plays in the life of our libraries. One of the benefits of this regional association is the opportunity we are given to network with our colleagues from outside our usual environs. As the new president of PNLA, I am looking forward to becoming better acquainted with our region in the coming months, and seeing your amazing creativity for myself firsthand!

*Jenny Grenfell*  
PNLA President

## Editor's Column

The PQ Editors chose creativity as the theme of this issue because it is central to our profession and particularly to writing about the work we do. In a sense, the theme of every issue of PQ is creativity. How else do we all come up with new programs, better ways of doing things, inventive outreach plans, or collections that serve the needs of so many diverse communities? The creative spark is behind all we do whether we recognize or name it as such.

Catherine Claveau Berner's "Best Job in the World" is a wonderful expression of creativity in librarianship expressed as reflections on her job as a bookmobile librarian in Fairbanks, Alaska. Berner gives us a glimpse into work that is creative, exciting, and meaningful by nature – in large part because Berner herself recognizes and celebrates its potential. We know she means it when she declares, "to me, the preparations for those Saturday runs are like getting ready for a party." On our best days, working in a library is an amazing celebration of potential and possibility.

Whether or not we feel that our librarianship is by nature creative, it is certainly true that many librarians are fortunate to promote the works of authors who exemplify the creative life and whose published works are so important to the imaginations of our readers. As Robbin Friedman writes in our "Beyond the Region" column in this issue, living in urban spaces like New York City (or Seattle!) often brings the mindful librarian into actual contact with an astounding array of creative authors. For those of us living in more rural or isolated places in the Pacific Northwest, our face to face interactions with authors may be quite infrequent. In any case it is always a thrill to hear details about our favorite authors' methods, the challenges they face, or the means they use to access their "creative well." Janet Fox, author of *Sirens*, *Forgiven*, *The Charmed Children of Rookskill Castle*, and other books for children and young adults, has contributed this issue's "The Author" column. It is a pleasure and a privilege to learn so much about the background and sources for this author's work.

Creativity in librarianship, as in many professions, is also often found in the process of discovering and recognizing problems, and then working to find solutions for them. Sometimes our jobs seem mainly focused on problem solving or on helping others develop creativity by providing options for adequate access. Stephanie Bailey-White and Roger Stewart write about this in "Improving Access to Books for Young School-age Children One Library at a Time." Their research into checkout policies for young readers in Idaho libraries laid the groundwork for a state-wide grant program that provided funds for collection development and greater access for children to those collections.

Underlying our creativity, however, a bedrock of authenticity is essential. The new librarian is entering our profession at a time of great change and, hence, great opportunity for creativity. In "The Mentor," Tracy Bicknell-Holmes, reminds the prospective job applicant that analytical skills are necessary to land that great job, that perhaps being too creative in describing your abilities may not be the best step: "In fact, the search committee will likely look for evidence that you have all the skills you claimed to have." While there are times when it's good to curb your creativity, "The Luddite Librarian" admonishes us to "be reflective and identify the moments when you are most creative." Then go for it!

Jan and Leila, editors





## The Luddite Librarian

*"I fear the day technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots."* **Albert Einstein**

Dear reader, you may deny this, but I know it is true! Every one of us has a bit of the Luddite within, and that means each of us has drawn a line in the sand, where technology goes too far for comfort or ethics, or perhaps its burden of expense upon our humanity is too great. Despite our reckonings, I admit, technology impacts our creativity, the true topic of this essay.

In an attempt to remove the grain from the chaff be reflective and identify the moments when you are most creative, and these may just be when you are rationalizing at work, that is, why you are late....again, or why your cubicle smells like Cheetos. The human mind has a grand capacity for spinning truths, for seeking gold from straw through spinning, and really, all this without technology.

There perhaps are two camps on this matter. If you are a creative individual, and you know you are if you have ever delivered your boss a lame excuse, you may prefer to do your imagining sans technology. I think of Beethoven walking in the Vienna woods for inspiration or Whitman lying in a glade or on a knoll simply listening and observing. Others must have the gadget to click.

All this tongue-in-cheek drivel is but a small hope that you will think on your dependence of tools and devices. The Luddite Librarian cannot hide behind words forever. I am, quite rightly, of multiple worlds. By day I am, as the moniker directs you to think, a librarian with limited passion and patience for innovation of any kind. But, when the clock has closed on the work day and I shed the cream colored sear sucker suit, my two tone shoes and ivory fedora, in times off

## The Technophile

Each of us has, at some point, had a dream. The nature of those dreams allows our minds to wander to creative, inventive, extraordinary places. Some of those places are real, some have yet to be built.

As we move through our days, technology can enable us (did you have to wind your alarm clock last night?), to propel us quite literally forward (cars, trains, boats, planes), and facilitate our imaginations (CAD programs, word processing, music production software, and so many more).

While there are clear limits to the usefulness of the human infatuation with technology, to be a luddite is to resist forward momentum. And some resistance is meaningful, to be sure: just walk down a retail aisle of kitchen utensils and think about the prospect that some things become more cumbersome as they specialize. But remember that technology that is currently considered commonplace sometimes felt terrifying, unnecessary, odd, or extravagant to previous generations when those objects were encountered as cutting edge technologies. Like anything, it is meaningful to be mindful, but we must not resist technologies, concepts or creations merely on the premise that they are new. And there may be a limit on the luddite desire—people want to buy records, not velum or phonographs. We lost some sound quality when we moved to the durability, then portability and now digitally based music, film and photography, and people long for the rich experience of the sound produced by a record.

Samuel Morse was motivated to develop a new technology, the story goes, by the slow arrival of a letter that informed him that his wife was very sick. By the time he returned home by carriage to

and on weekends, I am a land manager with dirty fingernails in tattered work clothes. The point of this is I prefer the smaller tool, and ideally, the quiet hand tool. No one hears the crow caw or the pine sigh in a wind when the chainsaw is whirling. Yes, the handsaw and pruner are tools and technology, but are minimal intrusions upon nature. With those tools I am able to look up, to smell the fir and the blackberry, to hear the squirrel scolding, like me now, chattering. In short, I commune with nature, which possesses a voice that inspires creativity.

One may rub up against creativity playing a video game or watching a movie. I profess that a child's play world ought to be a tree or meadow, or a corn field, which was one of my playgrounds and which taught me more of geometry and visual perspective than any textbook. It is an underprivileged rearing indeed that does not include trees to climb, trees in which to learn the rudiments of paltry carpentry, and yes, trees to fall from. Certainly gravity is most effectively taught when one learns first hand. That first treehouse crafts a kingdom, perhaps a universe in which a child shapes self with a minimal amount of technology. Would Bart Simpson beso imaginative if not for his treehouse?

There is time enough to learn the artificial, cyber qualities of human existence. Creativity's seed is planted more readily in the wild, not vicariously in a Stratolounger. We must cast aside the gewgaws of modern society in selecting the best toys for sane and sensitive child development. May all of us retain the childlike in our personal lives, and compartmentalize the geek as an indentured servant of Big Boss Man.

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New Haven from Washington DC, she was dead and buried. Frustrated at the speed of long distance communication, Morse worked to develop the telegraph. He witnessed a clear problem and worked to solve it with new technology. He dreamt of a world where communication with his sick wife could have been more efficient. With that dream Morse changed the way we communicate. Email, text messaging, the telephone and cellular telephone all owe a debt of imagination to the telegraph. These technologies may not enhance creativity or intelligence, but they do certainly allow easier communication between people who are far away from each other.

While these technologies do not think for us, or even necessarily inspire our creativity, we can communicate, to move from thought to action, much more quickly than our grandparents' generation. Have we lost some imagination? I, dear reader, am not sure. I do believe that technologies have the power to inspire, to increase the length and quality of life, and to enable the realization of those creative moments, whether they came to you in a dream, on a walk in the woods, or while captivated by a screen.

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## The Author: The Creative Wellspring

**Janet Fox:** Bozeman, MT

**Keywords:** *imagination, discovery, literature*

**Citation:** Fox, J. (2016). The Author: The Creative Wellspring. *PNLA Quarterly*, 80(3).

*Janet Fox is a Montana based author of books for young readers. Some of her books are set in mystical places. Her works include The Charmed Childern of Rookskill Castle (2016), and Sirens (2012). Find her at janetsfox.com.*

My grandmother was extremely well read. Deaf from age 12 as a result of a bout of scarlet fever, she could read lips and speak perfectly but she heard almost nothing. She considered her disability a gift. In the silent, serene world she inhabited she loved two things: reading, and watching baseball on television.

Of course, baseball is seasonal and television limited (even more so back in the day) and she was a voracious reader. When she was with us I would accompany my mother to the library each week to collect a new stack of books, as many as twenty at a time. The subject matter was not important, though she favored mysteries; what was important - except in rare circumstances when a story particularly touched her - was that she hadn't already read the books. My mother adopted a tactic for choosing. In light pencil, she wrote my grandmother's initials, KS, in the back corner of the book on the endpaper once my grandmother had read it. While my mother ran errands it was my job to search the library shelves for books without my grandmother's initials.

Those library visits when I searched for literature across genres were windows into worlds of discovery.

I was drawn to the mysteries, with their shadowy cover art, that Grandma loved. I started with tamer fare, graduating from the Bobbsey Twins to Nancy Drew. I had a little book called *Minute Mysteries* that I adored - tiny logic puzzles that I parsed over and over. I discovered Agatha Christie; then I found Sherlock Holmes. In my mid-teens I uncovered a stash of Ian Fleming's Bond books hidden in my father's study and read them in wide-eyed secret.

And then there were the myths and legends and fairy tales. Big, fat books that I read again and again and again: D'Aulaire's of course, and Bulfinch's, and two collections of Greek, Roman, and Norse tales with striking illustrations. And Lang's *Fairy* books: Red, Blue, and Green. Grimm's and Andersen's fairy tales - especially Andersen's terrifying horrors (what little Karen suffered in *The Red Shoes!*).

My mother, a first generation American from an English mother and Irish father, introduced me early to British literature, especially fantasy. For several years beginning with my eighth birthday, she gave me one *Narnia* book for my birthday and one for Christmas. She brought me Tolkien when I was home with the flu, and I devoured the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy for the first - and not the last - time. She also gave me odd, lyrical books: *Green Mansions*, by W. H. Hudson; *The City Lies Four-Square*, by Edith Pargeter; *The Dean's Watch*, by Elizabeth Goudge.

She also loved poetry and took me to visit the home of Robert Frost, and gave me a collection of the poems of Emily Dickinson. She gave me a recording of Dylan Thomas reading his own work.

She was persuaded that I would become a writer. I loved writing, truthfully, but I did other things first. Some were exciting things: living on my own in New York City; diving to the sea floor in a submersible; living on a small boat in southern Patagonia for two months; living in France for a year; lobbying for a nonprofit. I married, became a mother, moved from New England to Texas and lived in a primitive Montana mountain cabin in the summers. I wrote off and on, without much success. I wrote for adults - short fiction, novels, poetry - but without much conviction. One poem won a regional contest. One short story was a contest finalist and another short story was accepted by a literary magazine that folded before publication - and the same happened to an essay, though at least I was paid for that one.

It felt in those years that the universe was not encouraging my creativity, and that I couldn't nurture my writing despite my mother's belief.

Then my mother died unexpectedly in her mid-seventies and, since I was a late child, she seemed far too young. Going through her things I discovered a foot-tall stack of stories she'd written, stories for children. Finding them made my loss feel less sharp. Reading through them I considered for the first time that there were stories for children, and that they were different from adult literature, that they were a "thing" (this was before *Harry Potter* changed the landscape, and children's books really did become a mainstream thing). Reading my mother's stories took me back to my early reading experiences: to those fantasies, mysteries, myths, fairy tales, and lyrical volumes my mother and grandmother had given me.

Reading my mother's stories allowed me to peer into my creative well once more.

When I teach creative writing, especially to children's writers, one of the exercises I use is to ask writers to list the books that they loved when they were in their early tween/teen years. Not the books they were made to read in school, but the books they curled up with on a rainy Saturday, or under the bed covers. What were they? I ask. What feelings did they evoke when you read them? What feelings do they evoke now?

Then I tell them, those are the kinds of stories you should write. Those are the stories that will tap the deep emotions that formed the person you are today. The best stories are those written from the heart, and your heart was being nurtured by the books you read when you were young. Even if you write for adults, tap that emotional well in order to write truthfully.

My first three novels are young adult historical fiction. They've been widely praised and I'm very proud of them, especially *Faithful*, about a girl's unexpected loss of her mother. My most recent novel draws even more deeply from my emotional well. *The Charmed Children of Rookskill Castle* is a mystery and fantasy novel set in Scotland during World War II, with a fairy tale at its core. My main character, Kat, is a logical girl with a gift for puzzles who must come to believe in and use magic. Her best friend is Peter (a nod to C.S. Lewis), she has a knack for fixing clocks (thank you, Nancy Drew), an antagonist she can't discover (Miss Christie)... and there are ghosts (*The City Lies Foursquare*) and children suffering terrors (Andersen) and Plato (oh, those Greeks!) and the harsh winds of war (Bond in dark moments.)

I write every book with the same acknowledgement to my creative wellspring, and through those deep emotional memories.

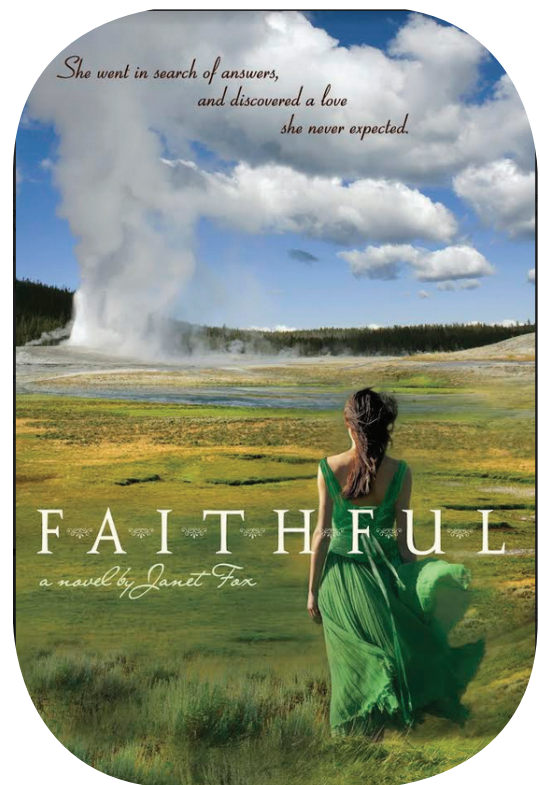
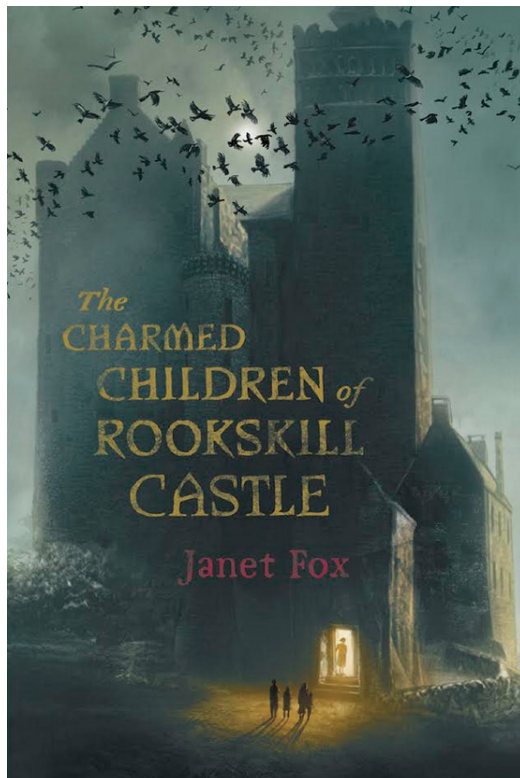
And what of the universe and what I thought were its fickle turns? I've come to believe that when I'm open to listening, the universe is ready and waiting to say yes. My winding life's path led me not to writing for adults, but to writing for children, and this was the right outcome, after all. My varied experiences have allowed me time to build my craft and gather



enough material to provide me a platform for storytelling. My mother's passing was both tragic and a gift, and gave me the push I needed in a direction I hadn't looked.

I tell beginning writers - and my young readers when I speak to kids - that we each have a unique story to tell and that no one else can ever tell our story. It's simply a matter of finding the well's source, the wellspring, and relating the truth of it.

I like to think that my grandmother, reading any of my novels, would say, No, don't put my initials in that one. I want to read it again.





## ***The Mentor: the all Important Application Letter***

**Tracy Bicknell-Holmes:** Dean, Albertsons Library, Boise State University

**Keywords:** *librarianship, career development, opportunities*

**Citation:** Bicknell-Holmes, T. (2016). The Mentor: the all Important Application Letter. *PNLA Quarterly*, 80(3).

*Editor's note: The Mentor column is a place for advice, storytelling, introspection and professional growth.*

So, there it is. Your dream job. It's the right job in the right place and at the perfect time. As you read the advertisement and look into it, your interest rises. This is it. This is the one. Other than a well-crafted resume/vitae, how do you make yourself stand out from the crowd? How do you ensure that you've done your best to pass the first review and land a spot in the top of the candidate pool?

If this is the type of job that allows you to submit a cover letter with your application, this is your chance to shine. A cover letter (sometimes called a letter of application) is your chance to make your case. If the job is popular, and the search committee receives a lot of applications, your cover letter is the key to making yourself stand out. You'll need a campaign strategy to help you craft your message. Simply taking an old cover letter and changing the position title or institutional address will not be enough.

Before you even sit down to write, analyze the position advertisement itself. *Every word* in an announcement has been carefully drafted with intent by those looking to hire. Use it like a street map with directions to the job itself. Start by closely reviewing the requirements or qualifications sections. Many position announcements will have a section that is labeled "required" or "minimum" and one that is "preferred." You must have the minimums to get past the first stage review. Preferred qualities are like bonus points. The more you rack up, the higher you rise in the pool.

As you read through these areas, highlight key words and jot down notes in the margins (or add comments electronically) about how your background fits each one. If spreadsheets are a useful way to organize your thoughts, set one up with the advertisement requirements in one column and your skills in the next. Try to note something in your background that fits each one or that explains how you might go about learning this new area. Often these sections are listed as bullet points, so consider using them as a checklist when you write your letter.

Next, if there is a section on knowledge, skills and abilities, do the same with that section. Then go on to the sections on job duties and the opening description of the advertisement and record your notes. Pay attention to overlap or areas that seem to be mentioned more than once. You may want to count instances of critical words. Overlap is particularly noteworthy as these areas offer clues to the important aspects of the candidate that may go beyond the job duties themselves. Make note of descriptive words.

Finally, are there requirements in the "to apply" section? What documents do you need to include when you submit your application? Do you need to answer specific questions as part of the application letter? Responding to specific application questions is often an excellent place to weave in references to the minimum and preferred requirements too.

For example, a paragraph from a recent job ad reads:

*"The ideal candidate is passionate about providing excellent library service to tweens and teens (11-17), with an emphasis on outcomes driven, project-based program planning, outreach, STEM, reader's advisory, teen volunteer supervision and relationship building with families and community stakeholders. This position works in collaboration with our [named location team] as well as the library system's Youth Services Team. Knowledge of emerging technologies, education, and trends in youth development and/or libraries are strongly recommended. Being "fresh, fun and fearless" and "relentlessly resourceful" are core values of [library name] and essential to this position."*

From this job ad, you might list key aspects of the position as:

- passionate about excellent library service
- outcomes driven
- project-based program planning
- outreach
- STEM
- reader's advisory
- teen volunteer supervision
- relationship building with stakeholders
- knowledge of emerging technologies, education, trends in youth development/libraries (emphasized)
- essential Core Values = "fresh, fun and fearless" and "relentlessly resourceful"

As you write your application letter, refer to each one of these items. Don't be shy about using key terminology from the ad such as passionate, fearless, and resourceful to describe your own successes and experiences.

Here are some additional tips that will help you improve your chances of rising to the top:

- Spell it out explicitly. Draw a direct line from statements in the job advertisement to your qualifications. Don't assume that your qualifications will be obvious from your resume/vitae and don't make the search committee hunt for them! If you have a friend or acquaintance on the search committee, this also protects them by making your qualifications obvious to everyone.
- Double check application requirements and minimums. If a search committee is faced with a pool of 75 or more applications, the first review will be to check if you've included everything and have all the minimums – yes/no. If you missed something, your application may well be eliminated in the first pass even if you are a good candidate. Missing items are often seen as a lack of interest in the position, inability to follow instructions or a lack of attention to detail.
- Use an editor. Find a friend or colleague who will read the job ad, read your draft letter and help you craft a better message. This is particularly important if you're shy about self-promotion.
- Try to address everything in the job announcement. Is there something in your background, in your pre-library work history or personal life that might apply? If not how would you address this gap?
- Electronic application systems enhance the search process, though they are not a substitute for a good application letter. Even if the hiring institution uses an electronic system that quizzes you on the minimum and preferred items as you apply, you still should address each of these in your application

letter. In fact, the search committee will likely look for evidence that you have all the skills you claimed to have in answering the application questions.

- If the announcement requires an MLS/MLIS degree by a particular date or requires a particular number of years of post MLS/MLIS experience, make sure you note the year and month of your degree if needed.
- Be very selective about what you choose not to address directly in your cover letter (see paragraph 3). There may be items that will be answered via the process itself, such as your ability to pass a criminal background check, that may be skipped. As general rule, you should mention nearly everything in the job announcement.

If you treat the position announcement as a document to dissect and analyze and spend the time to really figure out how to fit yourself as closely as possible to the needs of the hiring institution, you will have done your best to pass the first few reviews and land a spot in the top of the candidate pool.

Good luck!

*Want to share your experience finding or preparing to find your first job? Write us at [pqeditors@gmail.com](mailto:pqeditors@gmail.com)!*

**Tracy Bicknell-Holmes** has more than 25 years of experience working in academic libraries in positions with progressively greater responsibility. She currently serves as Dean of Albertsons Library at Boise State University. She has been an active member of the Library Leadership Advisory Committee (LiLAC), a collaborative effort between the Idaho Commission for Libraries and the Idaho Library Association that has been appointed and charged with developing a framework for leadership development for all members of the Idaho library community. Her current work in this area involves mentoring.





## ***Beyond the Region: New York City***

**Robbin Friedman**, Children's Librarian, Chappaqua Public Library, Chappaqua NY

**Keywords:** *New York, literature, imagination*

**Citation:** Friedman, R. (2016). *Beyond the Region: New York City*. *PNLA Quarterly*, 80(3).

*PQ Editorial Note: This is a series of regular columns in PNLA Quarterly focused on ideas or travel outside the PNLA region.*

As fall approaches--the New York City streets finally calming from the summer swelter and the parks grown a little raggedy with use--my home borough of Brooklyn ramps up for one of my favorite weekends of the year. More than 250 authors and thousands of fans cram into municipal buildings, lecture halls, bars, and bookstores (and synagogues and museums, and just about anywhere else you can accommodate a pack of glasses-wearing book lovers) for the Brooklyn Book Festival, a yearly celebration of literature for all ages. Events range from a panel discussion of the legacy of science fiction writer Octavia Butler to multimedia flash fiction workshops to an hour of readings by poets laureate past and present. For the sprawling subject matter, the unbridled enthusiasm, and the opportunity to hear authors and other literary types (including librarians!) speak on carefully curated panels, I anticipate this overwhelming weekend for months. In truth, though, it requires no major event or annual festival to catch a glimpse of a favorite author or illustrator. The reality of living in New York is high-density literati, an urban stomping ground, breeding ground and graveyard of generations of writers.

The concentration of creators stretches outside the city limits. One week after the Brooklyn Book festival, kids, parents, and other fans of literature for young people will flock to the Chappaqua Children's Book Festival, an annual event in the small Westchester County town north of New York City where I work as a public children's librarian. For six hours on a Saturday, more than 90 writers and artists--ranging from around-the-block locals to those driving in from an hour away--will read and sign books and answer questions. These two free festivals take up only a portion of the space in New York's expansive literary calendar, a schedule dominated by events like Book Expo America (mostly, but not always in the city) and New York Comic Con.

Wonderful authors and illustrators live in and write about communities throughout the US; smaller publishing houses produce fantastic works from cities all over the country (and many more across the globe). But New York still has a lock on the nation's literary imagination and creators still gravitate toward the city with laptops and sketchpads in tow. The proximity means that librarians here often get opportunities to meet writers and artists--to learn about a new illustration technique or get an inside look at a research process--and gush, complain, beg for a sequel, whatever. And it's not only the names on the book jackets we see out here. With the five largest publishing companies in the United States headquartered in New York, the city teems with book people: editors, designers, and publicity mavens.

Librarian previews, a regular activity for some in the New York area, mark one major point of access to publishers. Two or three times a year, publishing houses throw open the doors for librarians to examine upcoming titles, hear pitches from editors and grab advance reader copies. Some companies showcase original artwork from picture books



and most invite an author or two to deliver a talk about their writing, research, or inspiration. Many librarians have learned to look beyond the headlining creators to the editors and marketing folk to seek information or put in a plea; previews also provide the chance to describe the holes we find in our collections, the books we'd love to buy, if only someone would publish them. Editors can answer questions about the evolution of a story, the fact-checking in a text or new books appearing even farther on the horizon. Marketers have insight into social media efforts and book tours.

And those book tours always include New York, giving enthusiasts an opportunity to see many authors and illustrators who make their home in another part of the world. Within walking distance of my apartment, I can reach half a dozen independent bookstores, each with regular author readings and book talks. A ten minute stroll in another direction takes me to the Central Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, with its own calendar of Pulitzer Prize winners, poetry scholars, science writers, and more. Watching a movie at a local theater recently, I realized I had sat down next to a couple of well-known graphic novelists; I just barely avoided collision with a Caldecott Award winner on my block the other day. Proximity often leads to interaction and the connections between academics, writers, artists, book industry folk and us, the librarians, contribute a literary foundation to the whole city and help spark the production of ever more material in, around, and about New York. This town brims with creators, book professionals, and dedicated readers of all kinds--making it one of many wonderful places to be a librarian.



## Best Job in the World

**Catherine Claveau Berner**, Fairbanks, AK

**Keywords:** *book mobile, careers, outreach, community*

**Citation:** Berner, C.C. (2016). Best Job in the World. *PNLA Quarterly*, 80(3).

In August 2014, I was in Duluth, Minnesota - my home town. On one particular morning I was seated in a family lounge at St Mary's Hospital. I had just spent a long night at my father's bedside and both of my brothers and my sister had arrived to bring breakfast to me and to spend time with dad themselves.

One of dad's nurses came in to tell us we were free to return to his room if we liked. She began to make small talk and soon was asking questions:

"Had we grown up in Duluth?"

"Where did we live now?"

I left that conversation to them, content to sit off to the side with my own thoughts, my coffee, and the glazed cranberry-orange scone they had brought for me.

Before long though, the sound of my name pulled my attention from that scone as I heard my brother say, "Kitty's the one with the best job."

Then my sister followed up immediately with "Yeah. She's got *my* dream job!"

Both brothers nodded and looked at me.

The nurse looked at me.

Then my other brother threw in that it's his wife's dream job too.

I had just been awake for the entire night and this was a little much for me to take in. I narrowed my eyes a bit and continued to chew until someone said, "Well, tell her what you do Kitty".

They were all very enthusiastic and I may have rolled my eyes as I pulled them from that scone because I could see in the nurse's eyes that she was imagining the possibilities. She was looking at me and thinking, "What job could possibly be so cool that this quiet scone-obsessed person could even do?"

Her expectations were high and I didn't know exactly how to frame a response to honor such a build-up. So I swallowed and simply came out with it: "I'm a bookmobile librarian in Fairbanks, Alaska."

I could tell by her silence and *her* now-narrowed eyes that she was trying hard to find the cool in that. She looked from me to my siblings. They tried to help by informing her that my department had acquired a shiny new Extreme Arctic Bookmobile just the month before. It had HEAT!

She asked a few questions, nodded, said "oh" and returned to her own important work and the reason we were gathered in that lounge.

I know that understanding the cool of my job takes time; it can't be summed up in one sentence, a job description, or a quick look at its surface. But I'll give you a glimpse at the surface anyway so maybe you will understand.

Bookmobile and Homebound services are combined into one department at our library in Fairbanks. My co-worker Karen and I do it all using that Bookmobile. Our office is lined with shelves that are labelled with the names of each Homebound patron or each Saturday run and they are stacked with a variety of materials we've chosen and checked out for each.

The office is adjacent to the garage for easy access to the vehicle. My daughter has described us as superhero librarians along the lines of Batman. She imagines that we hear of a book-need out in the community, look at each other dramatically and say, "To the Bookmobile!" before jumping into our tricked-out arctic wheels to fill the pressing need vanquishing boredom and listlessness everywhere.

We work Tuesday through Saturday. On some weekdays, we load carts onto the vehicle with bags of books and other treasure to make individual door-to-door deliveries to Homebound people. On other days we set up mini-libraries in two State Housing Apartment buildings or visit our Pioneer Home, which is a State-run nursing home. We make door-to-door delivery there and also bring a bagful to the Activities Staff so they have something fresh to share with residents who can't use and acquire their own materials because of Alzheimer's or Dementia.

Between the weekday runs, we are often out pulling items from Noel Wien's full collection to deliver to patrons, stock those mini-libraries, and stock the Bookmobile itself for Saturdays when we drive it to outlying areas of our Borough.

To me, the preparations for those Saturday runs are like getting ready for a party. We clean and organize our space, fill it with things our guests will like, drive, park, and then sit back and wait for them to arrive looking for all the world like we have not lifted a finger to make it happen. We're glad to welcome them and they're always happy they came to our party.

One Saturday in Two Rivers, a patron stopped before leaving and observed, "your job must be a little like being a kindergarden teacher. I bet everyone loves you and is just excited to have you around."

We nodded, "Yup, that's a little bit how this is."

My co-worker at the time, Jeanie, considered and said, "Yeah, everybody loves us."

And I said, "Sometimes they bake for us!"

"And the older people call us *girls*," added Jeanie.

And sometimes when you're fifty—or older—it's nice to be a girl.

While the three of us still basked in the warm fuzziness of those thoughts, the door opened wide. A patron stood outside with a gift bag and a smile.

She held the gift out and said, "I'm so glad you're here. I don't know what I would do without library. I would have baked for you but my oven is broken. So have some candy instead." She then turned to the departing patron to say, "I just love these girls."

And that patron turned to us with a knowing wink before departing.

We've got a regular schedule for those Saturday runs. First Saturdays it's north on the Eliot Highway to Haystack Mountain. On the second, we drive northwest up to Becker Ridge before later moving down the hill to the Ester Post Office. Third Saturdays take us southeast past North Pole and Eielson Air Force Base to Salcha and then on the fourth it's east to Two Rivers or alternatively, Pleasant Valley, depending upon who you're talking to there.

Sometimes as we drive along on those Saturdays, I'll say to Karen, "Can you believe we get to do this?" because we see our part of Alaska in what I can only describe as a sort of time-lapsed photographic panorama. Each month, the lighting, the fully-leafed or fully-bared branches, the sky, the views of the distant mountains, the greens of leaves and grasses, the oranges and yellows as they change, and the whites and blues of snow are just a little different. We watch the seasons change over the same terrain month after month driving our regular routes.

On December 21, sunrise in Fairbanks is at 10:57 am. Sunset is 2:39pm. Our trip to Salcha is always very close to or even on that shortest day. The sun doesn't actually rise or set, it just slowly appears hovering along the horizon and coloring the sky with its glow and creating long shadows before disappearing again. We drive toward an ever-changing sky as the low-lying sun illuminates the Alaska Range that is sometimes visible in the southern distance. That time of year, tree branches are almost always frosted icy white and the sky displays various shades of periwinkle, blue, and violet. Shadows shift constantly. We stay for the two-hour stop and then drive back with the effects of the hovering sunset leading the way.

In Salcha, we currently park in the lot of a general store with convenient indoor plumbing. But when I first began on the Bookmobile, when we had the one without heat, we parked further down the road on a pull-out just off the highway. There was an outhouse there for our use. Oddly, I now miss that more remote spot.

One Saturday in summer we were parked there and a couple of German bike-riders who had just spent days riding the three hundred and twenty-five miles from Valdez were stunned to see our little library truck parked in what to them was the middle of absolutely nowhere. They browsed our shelves asking questions and saying over and over how unusual and wonderful it was to find such a library in the Alaska woods. Though I know there are mobile libraries in Europe, those two had never seen one and I'm sure they still talk about us today. I wonder if they ever think that I talk about them.

Each Saturday stop has its own character and Karen and I get to know the niche interests so that in addition to keeping a wide variety on the Bookmobile, we put items on that will appeal to those interests. Do-it yourself is very popular among our patrons; they want everything from raising poultry and pigs to building sheds and homes. For some stops, we are always on the watch for new crochet books. For others, knitting and sewing, aviation, the American Civil War, fashion, aliens, or art are the things that fly off the shelves. Gardening books are univer-sally popular as are those that speak of the harvest and food preservation at summer's end. And cookbooks. There are always cookbooks and we make sure there are books with recipes for any bakers who might be inspired by them to make something to share.

Maybe it's clear then that there are a quite few reasons on the surface why my siblings would have told that nurse that mine is the best and coolest job. Some are directly related to the fact I do it in what is literally the coolest state.

But for me, the bottom-line of why this is a fabulous job relates back to the reason we were gathered that morning in the hospital's lounge. It was a lounge on St. Mary's Palliative care floor and my dad was in the next room, and he was dying.

I had been traveling from Alaska to Duluth about four times each year for the previous three years to visit and help care for my aging parents. As they became more and more homebound, I drove for them to get them out of the house and I always brought books along to share.

One day after a home health aid had come, clipped dad's toenails, massaged his legs and gone, dad said a simple thing to me.

"It's nice if they look you in the eye." This one had not.

His plaintive comment stays with me and infuses meaning into the very simple things I'm privileged to do everyday. I don't just deliver books and library materials to people; I look them in the eye and have found that when I do, an old cliché rings true: I receive more than I can give.

I receive inspiration. The reality here is that I'm only twenty or thirty years behind some of the homebound folks I visit. The older I get, the faster it seems those twenty or thirty years will go. Some people simply inspire me with how they handle aging and the loss of their abilities with grace.

When I first began doing this five years ago, we delivered to a woman I recognized as a former library volunteer. She had been a presence in the library for years and I had seen her there as I walked through the building on my way to my job in the children's room. She always had a smile for me and I had one for her but we never spoke.

I was surprised to see her face in our round of deliveries. Her cabin was the final stop on the third Wednesday run. That first time, she smiled her hello from the hospital bed she now inhabited almost full time. It was the main piece of furniture in her living room and sat next to a large wood stove that welcomed us in winter. Two comfortable chairs were near it. We sat in them and I learned her name was Norma.

Norma had broad interests and we brought two full bags for her with books, audiobooks and DVDs from both fiction and non-fiction—science, travel, animals, mysteries, humor. There was a routine to this visit.



We would sit at her bedside chatting about the previous month's items, learning what she had liked and what memories had been triggered before the monthly unpacking-of-the-book-bags ritual began.

She liked us to unpack things one by one and would look at each item, delighting in it. Then she would set it down next to or even on top of herself and take the next item from our hands. When everything was unpacked, she was covered with what we had brought and always declined our offer to put things away.

She would spend the remaining afternoon looking it all over at her leisure and putting each item away at her own pace on the tables and shelves she kept near her bed.

Though her abilities were diminishing, Norma did what she could with what she had and though I know there were difficult days, she continued to smile and to reach out. She sewed when she could, making blankets to donate to a charity, and she read and sought to stay connected. She inspired me. I am seemingly far from that part of my life's road but I may get there someday and I'd like to be able to navigate it with such grace if I do.

I also receive moments of unexpected delight. I delivered books at our Pioneer Home to a man who turned 100 while I knew him. He passed away last year at 102—and a half. He was sharp and funny and appreciative. He liked ancient Greek and Roman history as well as Alaska history though he claimed he already knew most of that. His father had come to Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush and he himself had been a rugged gold miner when he was a young man.

One day I went to his room and saw he had a very new, very large flat screen TV mounted on the wall. He and his young friend who was probably only like, 89, were sitting side by side in chairs in front of it. He got up to talk to me about his books and we began the monthly hunt around the room for his returns. When we finished, he sat back down next to his friend and I noticed that the two of them were playing a Wii game! They picked up their controllers and looked to me like two little six-year-old boys just playing their games. I decided not to worry about them rotting their minds with those games and quietly left thinking that when those guys were six-year-olds, they could not have even conceived of a Wii.

Once, I received an F-. Had it been written at the top of a paper it would have been a large slashing red letter. An elfish woman with a gravelly smoker's voice who had never been a coffee and cookies kind of a gal but had always been friendly and happy enough with our picks, opened her door to us one day, thrust the return bag into the hall and said, "Which one of you girls is pickin' these books?" Karen and I stood silent. We were almost completely inexperienced at responding to hostility. I thought about just pointing at Karen but then, thought better of it; it had been both of us and we would stand together and take it. What we figured out was that there had simply been an unfortunate misunderstanding about the fact that she had liked a particular Sandra Dallas book. Once we got it through our thick heads that she didn't want any more of them "EFF-IN women's books" all was right again and we steadily received better grades with only one or two D+'s showing up on future reports.

Some more welcome things I receive are expressions of gratitude. Lots of them. A visitor to the Ester Bookmobile says she feels like a rich woman as she leaves each month, her bags filled with new treasure. She calls on the phone to tell us again. Others tell us it's like Christmas every time we bring a bag to them and they unpack it. A Two Rivers family of four say that they go home from Bookmobile each month and sit for a couple of hours pouring over their books, deciding what to read or do first. One homebound man says he doesn't know what he could have possibly done to deserve this service and asks how he can make a donation to our library.

A homebound person's world can become so very small and we have the privilege of connecting them back to the larger one and sometimes even to the person they used to be.

One woman made a point of serving tea to us each month. She used her best teapot and arranged cookies on a beautiful plate. She no longer had much to dress for on any day but until the day she couldn't be, she was dressed and ready for us to take our places at her table so we could chat briefly about the books and about her very interesting history and about ourselves. It was obvious she valued not only the books but the opportunity to serve visitors in her tiny apartment home, to give back, doing what she could with what she had.

We visit a woman who is 86 and has lost her eyesight. She inspires me with her will to stay connected and with her courage. She brings moments of delight with the stories of her very interesting life of traveling, teaching, and raising a family. And she expresses her gratitude simply and directly saying that we have saved her life. She says it just about every month after we visit, pet her dog Sophie, and read the descriptions on the audio books we have chosen for her. Once as we were leaving, she ramped that sentiment up several notches by saying instead, "You keep me alive, you know."

Her husband stood by her side, nodding.

I was stunned but I laughed and told them that now when people ask what I do for a living, I'll just say "Oh me? I keep people alive."

It is a hyperbolic statement for sure. I do understand my limits and know that I cannot keep anyone alive. What I can do though and what I do, is help to keep them in life while they still live it. I do what I can with what I have.

One of the more difficult parts of this job is the fact that particularly our elderly patrons can, do and will die at a higher and more predictable rate than you will see in other departments.

One day they may lie in Palliative care. My hope is that they will have a nurse as skilled and loving as ours was when she cared for my father in his dying days. Her job was to usher him out with love and peace and to hold our family up as we gathered around him. But my job, arguably the best job, is to come in much earlier bearing library treasure.

We offer a necessary connection to life even when a world has been made small. We give a smile and a touch and establish important eye contact, a kind that can connect even with a person who is blind. It is contact that says, "Your heart still beats. Your mind still hungers, and we're here to fill that need."

**Kitty Berner** has worked at the Noel Wien Public Library in Fairbanks, Alaska for 17 years. Eleven were spent in Youth Services; the past six have been in Outreach with the Bookmobile. In the fall, 2016, she began work for her Master of Information Degree through Rutgers University, concentrating in Library and Information Science.



## Rainbow Round My Shelves

**Edna Gillespie**, Blackfoot Public Library, Blackfoot, ID

**\*Originally printed in PNLQ Quarterly 7:3 (April 1943), pp 156-7.**

**Keywords:** *Idaho libraries; public library history; World War II; Vardis Fisher; Blackfoot, Idaho*

*Editor's Note: We decided to reprint this article, to share the fantastic detailed account of the Blackfoot Public Library. We hope you enjoy it as much as we do.*

Libraries, like Isabella's basil plant, may thrive on dead men's brains – but why sustain a mordant atmosphere?

For years the Blackfoot Public Library lay buried under ground. Yet the ghosts that haunted our shelves and aisles were blithe spirits and they dispensed gaiety throughout the community. How could they help it? The floor was orange, the walls primrose, the chairs vermilion, the tables topped with jade green. I think that many patrons still think regretfully of those days when we could reach right out from the desk and pick a book asked for, or by rising reach in behind the doubled row to get out an obscure volume that we had fondly hoped no one would be demanding for ages.

The farm wife would stop to tell us about the trouble she was having with her obstreperous turkey flock while little Peter clutched the corner of the desk with grubby hands sticky with an all day sucker.

Those were the days – ten thousand books, magazines by the hundreds, pamphlets innumerable, and a rather stout librarian all trying to find room in a space 17x44x8! The patient readers would have to be moved frequently so that we could get around the tables to the shelves behind, and I chose the high school girls who assisted me according to their poundage.

The summer before we moved into our new quarters brought me the most anxious moments of my life. A patron who weighed two hundred pounds (an expectant mother, too) found her favorite material in the floor stacks which were just about a foot and a half apart. Fortunately the fire department was next door; we reflected that firemen were handy with the axe; our anxiety subsided somewhat, but wasn't completely relieved until an announcement came from the hospital.

Vardis Fisher spent practically an afternoon owlshly viewing our life in this subterranean sphere, and I still think that when he chose his latest title, *Darkness and the Deep*, he was remembering his hours submerged in the Blackfoot Library.

Oh. yes, before emerging from the mushroom to the sunflower days, I must mention the black widow and her offspring that a terrified assistant and I swept out of the dirty web in a dark corner and crushed on the cement floor; the cats that crept through the open transoms (our only source of ventilation) to seek warm naps on the top shelves close to the ceiling – we have picked off as many as six at closing time; the drunks that we shoved from our polite environs to the police quarters on the other side of the building.

And then came Oscar! Oscar was a black sprite of a mouse who showed no fear but seemed to love the library, and even the librarians. He would scoot across the floor almost to the desk, then sit back on his haunches, cock his head impudently, and practically demand *What every young mouse should know*. We returned Oscar's interest

and affection until that fatal day when he trotted out with Oscaretta and we found a file of Harper's chewed up for a nest. Sadly we brought the poison. R. I. P.

Now, above ground, we flourish in the golden light of the morning coming in from over Mount Putnam's snowy height and in the evening glow reflected from the Three Buttes as they purple on the western desert. Night brings man's fluorescent to the gleam from the Early American maple of the furniture. The floor stacks are properly three feet apart, and the most callipygian of mortals can stoop to the lower shelf without disarranging the stack to the rear.

We have an honest-to-goodness children's room in a well-lighted basement. I throttled my yen for wild, barbaric colors, and the room stands out in buttercup yellow and cream and tan. However, I still hanker for crimson and turquoise and gold. I am violent woman, and, by Dewey, I am going to have the sunset scheme some day!

Our library is part of the business district. Men barge in from the street to settle a furious argument, not by fists but by statistics; the tired housewife leaves the groceries at the desk while she glances through *Good Housekeeping* or copies a recipe from *Sunset*. An old pioneer drifts in with his wide-backed *café au lait* spaniel at his heels. I do not protest; the little dog lies so quietly by the chair, blending with the brown and yellow floor as his master thumbs through a book of Idaho lore; a dark, handsome sailor with a retinue of admiring girls stalks in to find out whether Pocahontas did have a son (she did, and the sailor clinches his statement that he is a descendant). Can you blame me if I maintain that a library in the center of a town becomes its heart and throbs with its life?

Our library does not dodge controversial issues. The policy of the library board is to let the librarian function uncensored and unhung. The dictates of good taste and reputable publishing govern the choice of books. A wrong book to the right person may sometimes do more good than the right book to the right person – the usual library slogan. Shock treatments are frequently beneficial to the sane also.

Wartime in our small library has not upset the usual schedule to a noticeable degree. We are in the midst of a farming community. The farmers take their problems to the county agent or to some of the numerous organizations set up to help them. What they ask of the library is a refuge, a bit of peace in the demoralization of a world.

The demand for technical books is light. I add a few new volumes to this division each year. Eagerly some months ago I began to build up a shelf on post-war planning; now a jaundiced eye examines the date slips to find that but two have gone out. Our people are just too tired to read and form philosophies. The books that circulate are books that tell of the lands where our merry-faced boys of yesterday have gone; a picture of the jungles where maybe "my son lay down to die"; a sketch of the fog-bound Aleutians where the earth seeps ice and the fire drops from the sky; the story of dynamite cargo and the sailor on an earth-girdling voyage – "My son is a first class torpedo man on the Wahoo."

Yes, the librarian sees pride and tears, hears the faltering voice and the brave words, and glimpses at her desk the sum of man's courage. Books have told the story; book will tell the story again; that's what books and libraries are for.

\*Vardis Fisher had this to say about Edna Gillespie and the Blackfoot Public Library – "If a town can be summarized by a single quality then perhaps the most notable characteristic of Blackfoot is the fact that its indefatigable librarian has made of this city not only probably the most book-conscious one in the State but has also lifted its taste in reading far above the usual levels. This circumstance is all the more remarkable when the books in this small library are compared with those in other public libraries in Idaho, and when it is remembered that all the books in all the public libraries in the State do not add to more than half a million. So awakened has this town become to the cultural possibilities to be found in a good library that it recently made an extensive drive to enlarge its resources in reading." Idaho: a guide in word and pictures, p. 211. (Vardis Fisher was the state director and editor for Idaho in the Federal Writers' Project). – Ed. (Ruth Hale, University of Washington Library, Seattle, WA)



# Improving Access to Books for Young School-age Children One Library at a Time

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## Abstract

Johnson and Donham (2012) found that Iowa elementary school library check out policies for young children did not always support early literacy development because of their being overly restrictive concerning the number of books children could borrow each week. A state-wide survey of Idaho elementary school library staff revealed similar challenges. Preschoolers, kindergarteners, and 1<sup>st</sup> graders were not being given adequate access to books. A state-wide grant program was developed and implemented that provided funds for collection development while stipulating the implementation of less restrictive check out policies for young children. Results from the grant program are reported along with future plans and recommendations for others wanting to implement similar programs.

## Introduction

We had a hunch based on anecdotal evidence that young children attending public elementary schools in Idaho were experiencing limited access to books because of overly restrictive school library check out policies specifically targeted at this age group of students. Thus we set about to explore the validity of our hunch. To do so we surveyed all Idaho elementary school library staff about their check out policies and practices concerning preschoolers, kindergarteners, and 1st graders. Our survey was a precursor to and provided a rationale for a subsequent grant program focused on helping elementary school libraries augment their collections for young children while also implementing less restrictive check out policies. The remainder of this report provides additional information about our efforts.

Interestingly, about the time we began our work, Johnson and Donham (2012) were concluding and writing-up for publication a similar study to ours. They surveyed 75 Iowa public elementary school librarians representing 92 schools and 32 districts about kindergarten circulation policies and practices. Of the 42 librarians who responded, 71% reported kindergarteners only being allowed to check out one book per visit at the beginning of the school year. Although daily visits in 11 schools and flexible visits in 13 schools partially compensated for this, four of the 42 libraries only allowed two visits each week and 11 allowed only one. Johnson and Donham state, "Of greatest concern were those students who came to their library once or twice a week and were limited to one book per visit. These children, representing 43 percent of responding schools, had the opportunity to borrow—at most—two books per week" (p.9). Only 36% said they raised the borrowing limits for kindergarteners as the year progressed. When these results are taken in aggregate, it is clear that in a significant portion of these libraries access to books by kindergarteners was severely restricted. This is not a positive finding for early literacy advocates, nor a positive finding concerning the important role that school libraries should play in helping children develop their early literacy skills, habits, and attitudes. Our results directly parallel those of Johnson and Donham, and the remainder of this report provides more detail about them and also describes a subsequent grant program that began addressing the challenges that were found to exist in Idaho.



## **Early Literacy and Elementary School Libraries in Idaho**

In 1999 the State of Idaho passed the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Act (ICLA) that focused on improving children's literacy in kindergarten through 3rd grade. The act required additional early literacy training for all inservice and newly certified elementary teachers. The cornerstone of the act, however, was implementation of a state-wide early literacy screener called the Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI). All kindergarten through 3rd grade students were required to take the screener at least twice each school year. Since its inception, the IRI has significantly influenced primary grade literacy curricula and instruction, and although the IRI and the ICLA have not achieved all of their intended outcomes, they should be seen as positive and forwarding thinking steps for early literacy education in Idaho.

Although some growth has occurred in IRI scores during the intervening years, dramatic growth has eluded the state. This is corroborated by Idaho's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for reading at the 4th grade level where average scale scores and percentages of students at the three performance levels (i.e., basic, proficient, and advanced) have remained relatively stable since the 1990's (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). One possible shortcoming of the ICLA was that it did not focus enough on increasing the amount of reading young children do. The act did not, for example, increase funding for school libraries to improve and enhance collections and it did not systematically increase access to books for young children. Interestingly, Idaho had another opportunity in the mid-2000's to address such shortcomings when the state rewrote its content standards. At that time, Idaho 4th graders performed less well on the NAEP on nonfiction reading when compared to performance on fiction, so as the standards were revised more emphasis was placed on primary grade nonfiction (Stoneberg, 2009). Regrettably, however, when the revised standards were approved, no additional resources were included for enhancing curricular materials, library collections, or providing additional relevant teacher professional development to reflect the increased emphasis on nonfiction.

Further complicating matters, Idaho does not require elementary school librarians to be certified teachers nor librarians. Thus, most Idaho public elementary school libraries are staffed by paraprofessionals, most of whom have limited training in library sciences. These paraprofessionals also oftentimes have other assigned duties in the school thus making their work in libraries less than full time. Additionally, elementary school library budgets are seldom if ever at recommended per pupil levels and were essentially decimated during the "Great Recession" beginning in 2008. For example, state-wide data reveal that 28% of elementary school libraries in Idaho receive \$100 or less per year for book purchases and 44% receive \$500 or less. Granted, Idaho is a rural state with many small elementary schools but even with small enrollments these funding amounts are woefully inadequate. Some schools in Idaho have not been able to purchase books for their libraries for some years. Given all of the above, the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) decided to explore what might be done to address these issues. This paper reports the results of some initial efforts. The ICfL is an agency located in the Executive Branch of Idaho state government. Its mission is to assist "libraries to build the capacity to better serve their clientele" (<http://www.libraries.idaho.gov/landing/about-us>).

## **State-wide Survey of Elementary School Libraries**

We first administered to all elementary library staff a survey targeted at check out policies for young children (see Appendix A for the survey). Several other topics were explored in the survey including library staff experience and library funding. The survey was sent to all of the approximately 375 elementary schools in Idaho. Two hundred forty-seven valid surveys were returned: a 66% response rate.

Specifically, the survey asked about check out policies and practices for preschool, kindergarten, and 1st grade children. Idaho does not publically fund preschools but the state still has a number of such programs funded by federal dollars. Respondents were asked how many books per week children at the various grade levels were allowed to check out both fall and spring semesters.

Table 1

Percentage of Respondents at Each Level of Book Checkout by Grade and Semester

Number of Books	Pre Fall (n=107)	Pre Spring (n=104)	K Fall (n=243)	K Spring (n=245)	1 <sup>st</sup> Fall (n=247)	1 <sup>st</sup> Spring (n=246)
0	74	75	29	16	2	2
1	13	13	47	55	48	37
2	3	3	10	15	30	38
3-5	0	0	5	5	7	9
>5	1	0	3	4	9	10
Don't know	9	9	6	5	4	4

Results revealed that if a child is in a preschool program, the likelihood of their being allowed to check out books from the school library is very low. Only about 16% of preschoolers can check out one or two books per week during the school year. Nearly three quarters of preschoolers can not check out books any time during the school year. In kindergarten, 29% can not check out books during the fall semester and 16% can not during the spring semester. About one half of kindergarteners can check out one book per week during the school year, and about 20% of kindergarteners can check out two or more books per week during the school year. This is definitely an improvement over the preschool level, but when you put it into the context of what adequate access for kindergarten children should be, the check out policies are still not supportive of early literacy. Most all 1st graders can check out one or more books from the beginning of the school year, but only 16-19% can check out more than two. Again, first graders need continual access to many books and this goal is not being achieved in most Idaho elementary school libraries (Krashen, 2004, 2007; Neuman, 2001).

Questions were also asked about library staff experience and library funding. Results showed that libraries, for the most part, have experienced staff. When asked about years of experience in their current position, 22% had 6-10 years of experience and 33% had greater than 10 years. This was a positive finding since it had been hypothesized that library positions might experience high turnover since the jobs are almost always low on the wage scale. But such was not the case. Instead, there is a significant degree of stability and experience in elementary school libraries, and we believe this is an excellent and important foundation upon which to build future work since well-trained, experienced librarians have been shown to positively impact student achievement (Lance & Hofschire, 2012).

We also asked about formal training received since the library staff assumed their current positions. Thirty-six percent reported receiving no training, but 21% had taken formal library courses, 10% WebJunction courses, and 11% ICfL Alternative Basic Library Education (ABLE)/Supplemental Alternative Basic Library Education (SABLE) courses. WebJunction is a program of OCLC research and provides professional development to the library community. ABLE/SABLE courses were developed by the Idaho Commission for Libraries and provide basic library knowledge and skills for staff with no formal training in library science. Although over a third of respondents had not received training, we had hypothesized that the number would be even greater so the results were again seen as a positive foundation upon which to build.

Idaho public school per pupil expenditure is one of the lowest in the nation so library budgets are an ongoing concern. Respondents were asked "What is the total dollar amount of your book budget from your school this year?" A dollar range was to be checked. These findings were not as positive but were not unexpected. Twenty-eight percent checked 0-100 dollars, 16% 200-500 dollars, 19% 600-1,000 dollars, and 30% 1,000-5,000 dollars. Only two respondents, less than 1%, checked over \$5,000, and 7% said they didn't know. Granted, Idaho is a rural state with a number of small elementary schools, but having so many schools report such low amounts underscores the significance of the problem. Nearly two thirds of all elementary libraries received \$1,000 or less for the year.

In summary, survey results revealed deficits in library services being offered young children at school in Idaho. Although staff at the ICfL had been aware of these problems, the survey provided much needed empirical evidence that served as the basis for planning and funding acquisition. Based on student and library needs identified in the survey, ICfL staff developed and then acquired state funding for a new program called *School Library Access Grants*. We now turn to a discussion of it.

### **School Library Access Grants**

Initially, the ICfL acquired \$100,000 of state funding for 20 elementary school libraries to purchase books. Awards ranged from \$1,000 to \$5,000. Applications were sent to all elementary schools in Idaho. Primary stipulations were that all funds be spent on age-appropriate fiction and nonfiction for kindergarten-2nd grade students. If the school had a preschool program, then that group also had to be included. Additional stipulations were at least 40% of the funds had to be expended on age-appropriate nonfiction and all preK-1st grade students be allowed to check out at least two books per week from the beginning of the school year. Recipients also agreed to complete midterm and final reports/evaluations of the program. The program has been running for five years and 186 libraries have participated.

The program has been quite successful. Library staff, teachers, principals, and parents have been highly enthusiastic about having increased access to high-quality, age-appropriate fiction and nonfiction. Library staff report increased circulation. Teachers report students being enthusiastic about going to the library and being able to check out books. And both teachers and library staff report that it has been a positive change to have preschoolers check out books. The nonfiction has been especially popular with library staff, teachers, and children since collections were particularly weak in this area. Overall, respondents articulate many successes and positives about the program and few challenges.

At the conclusion of the first year of grants, a survey was sent home to preK-1 parents. Over 600 completed surveys were returned which represented a 45% response rate. Some of the questions asked about changes in home literacy behaviors. Seventy-one percent of respondents said that as a result of receiving books from the school library they spent more time reading with their child. Only 1% said no to this question and the remaining 28% responded that they already did this regularly before the school year so there had been no change in behavior. Similar results occurred when parents were asked if they spent more time talking with their child about the books they read to them as a consequence of getting books from the school library. Seventy-three percent said yes, 4% no, and the remaining responded that they already did this regularly before the school year. These are positive findings showing that increased access to books resulted in increased reading and discussion at home.

Library staff submitted midterm and end-of-year reports. These contained many positive outcomes but only a few will be explored here. First, there were limited problems with increased lost or damaged books. A few libraries reported problems, but most did not. Given the limited resources provided elementary school libraries in Idaho, it is understandable that the issue of lost and damaged books was a salient concern of library staff and teachers before the grants

started. So when the problem did not arise in most locations, library staff and teachers were pleasantly surprised, adding to the enthusiasm about the grants. Second, some teachers at the outset of the grants expressed reluctance to participate because of loss and damage concerns, concerns about increased workloads associated with monitoring the books and children, or concerns about taking time away from instructional routines to attend the library. But most changed their minds as the school year progressed. Change occurred because of superb diplomacy by library staff, pressure from principals, or seeing the children become excited about the library and books.

Interestingly, not many but some parents manifested the same reluctance as teachers. They did not want their child bringing home books or at least not more than one because of the fear of loss or damage and the possibility of costs associated with the books. Keisa Williams (2013), an elementary librarian in California, reported similar experiences when she took a risk and radically changed her kindergarten check-out policies. She went from allowing four books per month to be checked out to over 40. As a consequence, she had "several families who would not allow students to take home books from the library for fear of their child losing books" (p. 17) and she had other families who were reluctant to have their child bring home so many books for the same reason. Most of our families, however, changed over time. It was a variety of things that caused the change. Teachers talked at parent-teacher conferences about the importance of the program, parents experienced their child coming home excited about the new books, or other parents talked positively about the program and the reluctant parents were swayed to give it a try.

And finally, changing check out policies represented a significant cultural shift at some schools (Williams, 2013). Parents and teachers believed that the changes would release a wave of problems stemming mostly from concerns about young children lacking the maturity and thus the responsibility to take care of and keep track of books. Of course, the library staff who submitted their grant applications did not share these concerns, but recall that elementary library staff in Idaho are not certificated, so power differentials between them and teachers can be quite pronounced. Power differentials between certified librarians and classroom teachers have been previously reported and discussed in the literature (e.g., Kimmel, 2011; Wallace & Husid, 2012). For example, Kimmel (2011) found through discourse analysis that elementary school teachers positioned a school librarian in stereotypical ways such as "a helper, a story lady whispering "shhhh," and a specialist providing release time for teachers" (p. 12). Kimmel asserts that librarians "have much more work to do (and noise to make) to gain recognition for "real school librarians"" as defined in recent professional literature (p. 12). Thus, the grants served in a number of cases to empower library staff, and for that matter principals also, to make changes in check out policies, the need for which had been recognized for some time.

The *School Library Access Grants* are for one year so after the first year of implementation, we decided it was important to assess the degree to which recipients retained the two books per week minimum requirement. If libraries immediately reverted back to their former policies, the grants would have provided much needed new books but the program would have failed at its primary goal of changing borrowing policies. To find out we surveyed all of the first year recipients during the spring of the following academic year. Seventeen of 20 grant recipients returned surveys and all said that they had retained the policies. Many expressed appreciation for the grants having had this stipulation since for some time they had wanted to increase access for young children in their schools but did not know how to go about accomplishing it given the poor condition of collections and the long history of restrictive check out policies. For others, the call for grant applications to be submitted had stimulated them to think in new ways. They had never thought about increasing access or the need for more nonfiction for young children and reading the grant application stimulated them to pursue a course of action that they might not have otherwise pursued.



Finally, a comparison was conducted of Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) scores of grant recipient schools in the first group of grantees to a group of comparable schools. Comparison schools were similar to grant recipients in student demographics and IRI performance prior to grant implementation. The IRI is administered in the fall and spring of each year, so growth during the implementation year at participating schools was compared to growth in comparison schools. Preschoolers are not administered the IRI so they are not included in these analyses. And although 2nd and 3rd grades were not a focus of these grants, they were included in these analyses since many library staff reported older children enjoying the new books. IRI data is available through a public data base so scores for two years prior to grant implementation, the year of implementation, and the following year after implementation were analyzed. Results showed no differences at any of the grade levels between the two groups of schools at the conclusion of the implementation year. These results, of course, disappointed us, but upon further reflection it was conjectured that perhaps increased access was not achieved early enough in the school year for it to have had an effect. For some libraries it took up to 3 months to order, catalog, and shelve the new books. And a number of the libraries slowly instituted the two book per week check out policy over the first semester so that students, teachers, and parents could acclimate to the changes. It was thus hypothesized that IRI scores might not be impacted the first year of implementation because of these delays. When the follow-up survey results showed all of the respondents continuing the check out policies after their grants ended, it was decided to monitor these schools' IRI scores for a second year, thinking that after the second year the implementing schools might experience effects. But again, such was not the case. No differences occurred. We do not wish to "explain away" these nonsignificant findings, but we feel it important to properly contextualize them. Two books per week is insufficient access for young children (Krashen, 2004, 2007; Neuman, 2001), so perhaps with much greater access results would be different. But for Idaho, given the weakness in collections and the overly restrictive check out policies, starting with a minimum of two books per week represents a reasonable first step but one that is perhaps inadequate to impact reading achievement. In the future, we need to continue working to further enhance collections and to liberalize check out policies to ascertain effects on standardized measures of reading development.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The Idaho State Legislature increased funding for the *School Library Access Grant Program* in its second year from \$100,000 to \$200,000. The increase was due to the empirically based evidence of need documented by the original survey and also the positive outcomes from the first year of implementation. We hope to continue these grants for many years and to continue working on how to better explore effects on reading development. The IRI is a quick screener that may not be a valid measure of the effects of this program. Therefore, in the future we would like to apply more sophisticated assessment models in a subgroup of recipients to more thoroughly measure effects, including such important outcomes as reading attitude and reading motivation. Additionally, we have tried to collect circulation statistics but have run into difficulty acquiring consistent data from all sites. We hope to work more closely with sites in the future to collect this important data.

For others interested in starting similar programs, we recommend careful selection of participating libraries. Selection criteria that we found important might include refraining from awarding grants to inexperienced library staff or those hired after the grant was awarded to a previous staff member who subsequently left the position. Additionally, even the most experienced library staff can underestimate the amount of time these grants can take, so discussing with potential grantees the time involved and where that time will be carved from already overloaded work days becomes important. And making sure the principal is fully on board is critically important so that all teachers are scheduled into the library at least once each week, and teachers know they will be held accountable to support the new check out policies.

In summary, our results corroborate those of Johnson and Donham (2012)—circulation policies



do not support early reading. And in Idaho most collections do not provide adequate support either, especially in the area of primary grade nonfiction. But because of credible, timely information provided by the ICfL in the form of a state-wide survey and forward-thinking legislators willing to act on the information, Idaho implemented the *School Library Access Grant Program* to address these issues. This paper provided the preliminary results of our work and they have thus far been quite positive, but much remains to be done. For example, we believe it imperative that school boards review their check out policies and immediately revise them so that all children, no matter their age, have extensive access to books. Such policies should not be left up to individual schools but instead should be codified at the district level so no matter the particular personnel in a school building, the policy is clear that all children will have appropriate access.

Finally, our research and grant implementation work revealed that elementary school library staff in Idaho are a wonderful group of dedicated people who work hard each day to provide quality access to students. But given the constraints outlined in this paper, we see the *School Library Access Grant Program* as just the beginning of a series of programs that are needed to realize the vision of vibrant libraries in all Idaho elementary schools where children, no matter their age, check out as many books as they wish as often as they wish from collections of such quality that even the most avid readers never exhaust the choices. And library staff need support from teachers and principals so they see themselves being rewarded and appreciated for their hard work. The reports contained numerous anecdotes about how excited children became about the new books and how they looked forward to their visits to the library, and library staff expressed sincere pleasure in these results. If principals and teachers also recognize these results, library staff will receive the positive support they deserve.

In closing, the *School Library Access Grant Program* represents an important first step for Idaho. Given the weak primary grade collections in many Idaho elementary school libraries and the fact that most were allowing only minimal if any access for young children, providing money devoted to collection improvement and prodding the schools to increase access were significant first steps for many of them. If collections continue to improve, other programs like book bags home (Williams, 2013; Zeece & Wallace, 2009) and rotating classroom collections (Gniewek, 2000) could become next steps for these libraries. Best practices such as these are currently occurring in some Idaho public school libraries, but such practices need to become more universal. And given our finding that many elementary library staff have been in their positions for some time, additional training for them about new roles they can assume within the school such as co-teaching models (Loertscher, 2014) would be another avenue for further growth towards a best practices model. But as was discussed before, most elementary library staff have additional duties outside their libraries, many are only part time in their libraries, so in order to expand library programming and the role of the librarian in many Idaho elementary schools additional resources will be needed. This is the primary challenge for the future.

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