

The Same, But Different

Children's librarians have changed significantly over the years. But has anyone noticed?

By Virginia A. Walter

I was 11 years old in 1954 and a faithful user of the Saint Paul (MN) Public Library's central children's room. My best friend, Cathie, and I rode the streetcar downtown

once a week to check out books and enjoy a dish of mint-chip ice cream at Bridgeman's. The day was all about books... and ice cream. Della MacGregor, the head of the children's room, knew her collection, and she knew her regulars. She showed me where to find the fairy tales and introduced me to books by Kate Seredy, Eleanor Estes, and Lois Lenski. She encouraged me to become a librarian when I grew up and even gave me a brochure that listed all of the American Library Association-accredited library schools. She invited me to puppet shows and author teas; and when I was in eighth grade, she walked me to the young adult room and introduced me to the librarian.

How has the work of children's librarians changed over the past 50 years? How does the public perceive them? The first question is a snap to answer; the second, a bear. In my book *Children & Libraries: Getting It Right* (ALA, 2000), I argued that today's children's librarians continue

to do what they've always done best. One hundred years ago, librarians like Anne Carroll Moore and Frances Jenkins Olcott were defining the profession's essential values and services. They designed inviting spaces that featured child-sized tables and chairs, low shelving, book displays, and puppet shows. They greatly elevated the state of collection development and readers' advisory services. They created summer reading programs that motivated students to read during the months they were out of school. They revived the traditional art of storytelling. A half century later, MacGregor was doing much the same thing. And today, children's librarians nationwide still pride themselves on their collections and their ability to connect children and books. Children's librarians also continue to promote summer reading and offer storytimes. Even the appearance of the children's room has remained substantially unchanged—only the computers are new.

Does that mean the profession is stagnant? I think not. I believe that children's librarians have identified the core values and services that have withstood the test of time. However, they have also responded to changes in the lives of children, society, and the institution of the public library itself—and their work

has grown accordingly. Let me briefly identify the new skills and services that are now part of most librarians' repertoires:

Children's librarians help kids access information technology. Librarians have integrated digital information resources into their thinking about collection development and reference services, and they help kids acquire the information-literacy skills needed to use those resources effectively.

Children's librarians educate parents. Fifty years ago, children became eligible for library services after they turned three and were able to attend preschool storyhours without their mothers. Now children's librarians provide storytimes and books for infants who are too young to walk or talk. Librarians help parents and caregivers acquire the knowledge and confidence to teach their kids the early literacy skills that are necessary to succeed in school.

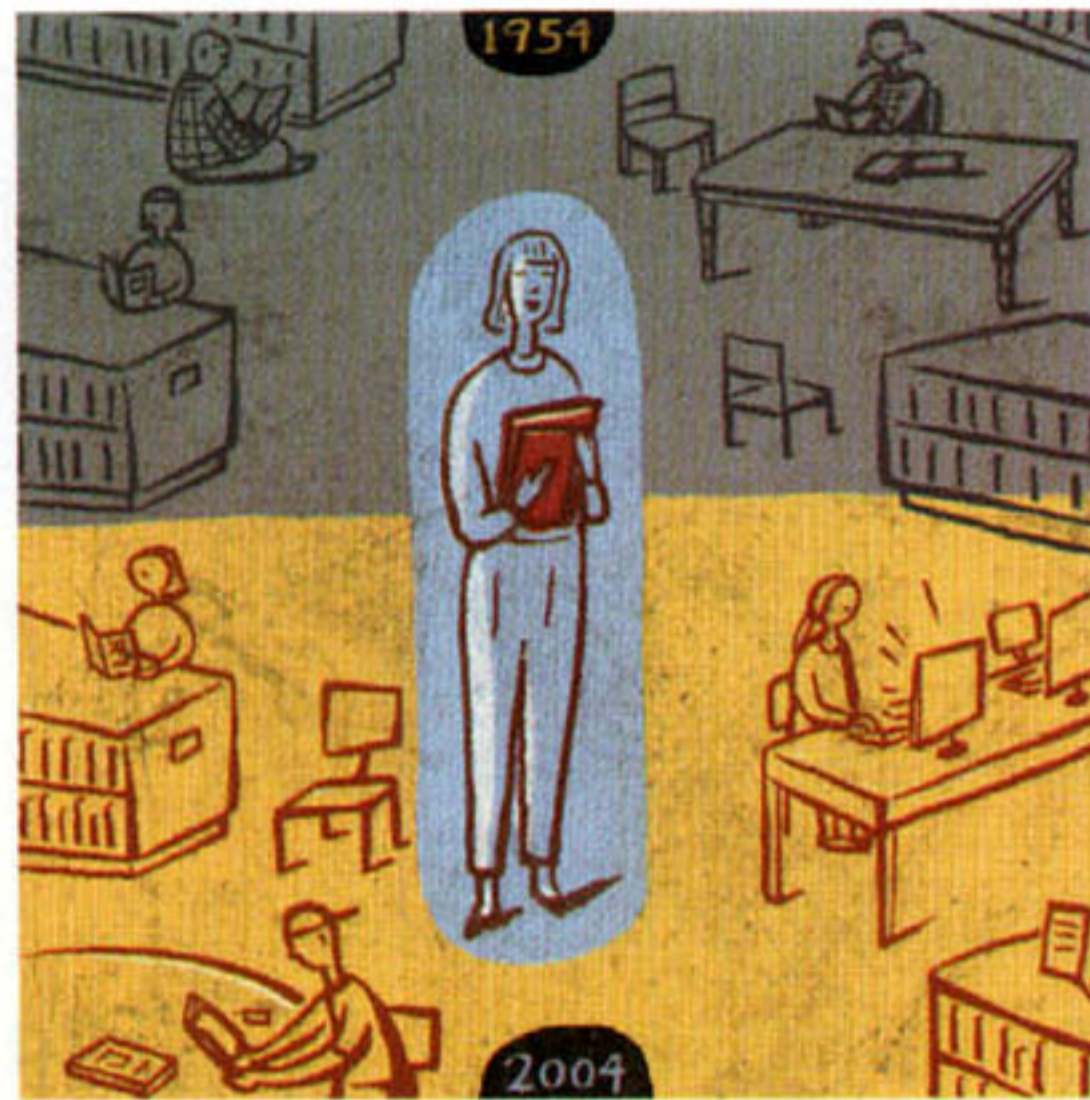
Children's librarians provide after-school programs and homework assistance. These services are not substitutes for good child care and parenting, but they fill in the gaps in some kids' lives and contribute to a community support network.

Children's librarians are accountable for the effectiveness of the services they provide. They are responsible for ensuring that their work produces desirable outcomes and sufficient results.

Children's librarians are advocates for both children and families. Outreach programs are no longer considered to be special activities; rather, it's a given that librarians will reach out to meet the needs of children and communities.

The work of children's librarians has indeed changed significantly over the last half century. The job has expanded from traditional book-related activities to include advanced technologies, programs that meet the needs of young children and families, and an approach that is much more community minded.

What has the public made of these changes? For starters, many people are very conflicted and, in fundamental ways, uninformed about the role of information technology in children's lives. On the one hand, parents want their kids to have the computer skills they need to excel in school and eventually land good jobs. But many parents worry about the well-publicized dangers that lurk on the Internet. Remember the flap that Dr. Laura Schlessinger, the talk-show host, made over



the American Library Association's opposition to installing Internet filters in children's rooms? For the first time in our history, children's librarians were seen by some as partners with pornographers and hate-mongers, aiming to corrupt innocent children. Of course, many Americans are puzzled by librarians' passionate defense of First Amendment rights; and children's books are among the titles that are most frequently challenged. This is just the latest chapter in a long story.

The public has also noticed that children's librarians are active partners with many community agencies—schools, of course, but also with recreation centers, social service agencies, child care providers, federal Women, Infants, and Children programs, and many others. The various professionals who serve young people now see children's librarians as essential players in the community. And children's librarians' growing involvement with early literacy programs (such as those sponsored by the Public Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children) has convinced the public that librarians are important contributors to the healthy development of children.

MacGregor would find herself right at home in today's children's room—once she figured out what those gizmos with monitors and keyboards were all about. She would be pleased to see that children's librarians are still pairing young readers with books that they will love. She would be astonished, however, at the broad array of new services those children's librarians now provide. She would be surprised to see babies crawling toward baskets of board books and parents gathering to learn how the latest brain research affects their children's development. Yes, the job of the children's librarian has changed dramatically. Hopefully, our public knows it, and appreciates it, too.

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