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"Do You Have Any Books On . . ."

An Examination of Public Library Holdings

John M. Budd and Cynthia Wyatt

Public librarians have long debated the question of whether quality or popularity should drive collection decisions. A survey of the selected holdings of twenty medium-sized public libraries indicates that both quality and popularity may be determining factors in whether to acquire particular titles. Furthermore, the study suggests that the existence and content of reviews may also influence the likelihood of libraries to select particular titles, as may the selectors' perception of the diversity of their community.

For many years there have been discussions, even debates, about the content of public library collections and the process of title selection. One strain of the discussion focuses on particular ideas about the nature of the books in public library collections. All librarians recognize and accept that there is no way for an individual library to acquire everything published. Furthermore, almost all librarians would accept that a public library acquiring everything published is not desirable; such a library would not actually have a collection in the sense of a body of intentionally selected materials that fit with the needs and wants of a community. Given that there are inevitable constraints on selection, it is still an open question as to what specific items are included in collections.

Background

A place to start when considering the sometimes contentious debate surrounding public library holdings is the exchange (nearly twenty years ago) between Nora Rawlinson and Murray L. Bob. Rawlinson touted the strategy employed at the Baltimore County Public Library of using such sources as circulation as a means of gauging the potential demand for available books.¹ For example, if works by an author have a record of high circulation, then a new work by that author should be purchased. Rawlinson admitted that application of this strategy had led to fewer unique titles being purchased by the library (and more copies of many of the selected titles acquired). A strategy based on demand has also been defended by Robinson, former director of the

Baltimore County Public Library. His argument centered on a public library's inherent inability to be all things to all people.² The demand-based approach has found supporters among some library managers. Michael Sullivan applied the strategy to the small library environment and states that the library should provide a "concentration of resources on what most people want."³ Apparently the demand approach is an argument that many find compelling.

Bob has taken issue with title selection based so strongly on demand. He wrote, "If we fetishize the current and popular . . . then we are not attending to our business. . . . If there are good books and libraries don't buy them, who will?"⁴ His argument questioned the nature of popular demand, which necessitates people being aware of works so that they can, in fact, demand them. He further stated, "The notion of consumer sovereignty also overlooks the question of consumer competence and education, or the lack thereof, and the fact that there are vested interests hyping—which is to say lying—about products in order to sell more."⁵ An element of any argument that transcends demand is the state of the publishing business today. There have been numerous acquisitions and consolidations in the industry, so that fewer corporations now own more imprints.⁶ The business of publishing has an impact on advertising (making readers, as well as librarians, aware of what is available); distribution (what items may be most readily available); discounts (who can afford to reduce prices on titles); and other aspects of book buying. The world of publishing and book selling is more complex than it ever has been; demand is not a simple, or simply defined, phenomenon.

There can be no denying that public libraries respond to demand, and should do so. Bob acknowledged this. Other writers, such as Debra Shaw, have conducted some research into specific aspects of the dynamics of demand. Shaw investigated the possible connection between the appearance of book reviews and holdings by libraries. She found a significant correlation between the number of reviews and the number of holding libraries.⁷ This is certainly not to say that reviews cause holdings, but the appearance of reviews could signal that some books may be featured prominently in stores, advertising

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may appear in magazines and elsewhere, and authors may embark on book-signing tours or appear on television. These factors could have a marked impact on demand and could help librarians anticipate that demand. Those books that, for whatever reason, are not widely reviewed may not reach the notice of readers and librarians. In response to such possibilities, some libraries adopt a demand-based approach while also being sensitive to surprises, such as the unexpected popularity of seemingly esoteric works. Catherine Gibson reports that at the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library they found a centralized selection structure (that is, an organizational structure in which selection decisions for all branches are made in the central library) proved to be most responsive to demand and the more specialized needs of readers. The idiosyncrasies of individual selectors, she claims, are effectively eliminated by centralizing processes and involving more people in decision making.⁸

The Present Study

Given that there has been some debate over how library materials should be selected, an empirical examination of the content of library collections might shed some light on what kinds of collection decisions public librarians are making. To that end, this study includes an investigation of the holdings of both high-demand and high-quality works by a set of libraries. A purposive sample of twenty medium-sized public libraries was selected for this investigation of holdings. A list of the names of these libraries appears in appendix A. Particular libraries were selected to represent geographic distribution across the country. Medium-sized libraries were chosen as those libraries would likely have sufficient resources to acquire a number of titles each year, but are not so large as to have a research mission. All but one of the selected libraries have online public-access catalogs that are accessible via the Web (one library's catalog was only available via telnet). The catalogs were searched from February through April of 2001. The size of this sample does not allow for sophisticated statistical analysis, but that is not the purpose of this study. The goal is to examine the holdings of a set of libraries to determine if they acquire popular general-interest titles as well as titles in more specialized areas.

The titles were purposely selected. The general-interest titles are those listed in "PW's Best Books 99."⁹ These titles are aimed at a broad audience; the publication date of 1999 allows sufficient time for the libraries to have acquired them based on reviews or other rationales. While the term "best" appears in this list, these are popular titles and the list is used here as a source of recommended popular works. Additional categories of books were also searched: works in religion (selected by the editors of *Publishers Weekly*); titles aimed at an African-American audience (as appearing in *Essence*); the most frequently challenged titles of 1999 (listed on the ALA Web site); popular works on the democratic process (appearing in an insert of *American Libraries*); and a list of the best academic books of the 1990s (selected by the editors of *Lingua Franca*).¹⁰ These were chosen to represent a cross section of titles likely to be of interest to substantial portions of the populations served by the libraries. The lists were compiled by mainstream sources, so the titles are not likely to be very esoteric or specialized. The titles in all of the above categories are listed in appendix B.

Each title was searched in each library's catalog, and holdings were recorded. If a library indicated owning a title—defined for this study by providing a record for the title in the catalog—then it was assumed that the title was selected by the library. It should be noted that reasons for selection are not readily apparent from holdings; a specific title may have been selected in a library because of patron demand or perceived quality. However, an analysis of titles from the lists that were not widely selected might give us some indication of the factors that may have been considered in selection decisions.

Findings

As might be expected, relying solely on numbers does not completely explain something as complex as the selection decisions of public librarians. The authors take the point of view, however, that examining some aggregate data on holdings can help us understand the collection development phenomenon a bit more clearly. A total of seventy-nine titles from all of the previously mentioned categories were searched in the libraries' catalogs. All of the libraries, in

fact, own a majority of these titles, which indicates that both quality and popularity are important factors in collection development.

It happens that there is a break in the holdings data at 70 percent. Fifteen titles are held by less than 70 percent of the libraries (translating to fewer than fourteen of the libraries owning the titles). These titles are marked with asterisks in appendix B. The problematic titles tend to occur more frequently in some of the categories. Six of the less frequently held titles are in the academic books category; five titles are in the democratic-process category; and three titles are in the religion category. Only one title in the *Publishers Weekly* best books of 1999 category, and no titles in the most frequently banned or African-American categories, were held by less than 70 percent of the libraries. As it happens, the titles in the most frequently banned category were held by all of the libraries. That bit of data should not be surprising for two reasons: (1) if libraries commit to the free access of information, then the banning of books will not lead to their absence in collections; and (2) these frequently banned books are also likely to be in demand by members of the libraries' communities.

An examination of the fifteen titles that are not held to the same extent as the others may provide some clues about what factors are considered in selection decisions. Of these fifteen titles, six have no reviews listed in *Book Review Digest*. If there are no reviews of the titles it may be more difficult for selectors to gain awareness of them. It may also be that, if there are no reviews, there is little advertising and less likelihood of major book jobbers having copies readily at hand. Since the less frequently held titles might not be classified as mainstream, they are less likely to be acquired through such automatic mechanisms as standing orders or approval plans. Of the six titles with no reviews, two are in the religion category, two are in the democratic process category, and two are in the academic category (these titles are marked with a dagger in appendix B). The absence of reviews may be one factor contributing to the lack of holdings of these titles. Three of the six titles are held by only 5 percent of the libraries.

Nine of the problematic titles were reviewed, however. Two of the titles, *The Little Book of Campaign Etiquette* and *Epistemology of the Closet*, were reviewed in publications that may not be

regularly consulted by selectors. *The Little Book of Campaign Etiquette* was reviewed in the *Columbia Journalism Review* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. *Epistemology of the Closet* was reviewed in the *New Republic* and the *Nation*. Perhaps not surprisingly, these books are held by 45 percent and 5 percent of the libraries, respectively. With somewhat limited review exposure these titles might not have been selected unless there was some luxury of time for the librarians or a direct request from community members.

The remaining seven titles were reviewed in publications usually consulted by selectors (including *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*). The mere appearance of reviews in these sources, however, does not seem to guarantee their selection by public libraries. The content of the reviews also appears to be a factor that influences selection decisions. Some of the problematic books did not receive particularly positive reviews. A review of *A New Kind of Party Animal* in *Booklist* stated, "Much of Mitchell's analysis seems sound, but her work is weakened by sloppy editing . . . and an often sneering tone."¹¹ This title is held by 65 percent of the libraries. *The Heart and Stomach of a King* is "recommended for larger academic history collections only" in *Library Journal*, and is assessed in the *Times Literary Supplement* in this way: "The timing of this carefully researched but in some ways naive book is unfortunate, appearing a matter of weeks before Helen Hackett's more spare, disciplined and critical study."¹² This book is held by 20 percent of the libraries. The writing in *Gender Trouble* is described in a *Times Literary Supplement* review as being intentionally difficult and opaque.¹³ It is owned by only 10 percent of the libraries. Selectors who read these reviews may have been reluctant to purchase the books without some more positive evidence.

The remaining four titles received positive reviews, but there are still clues in the reviews themselves that may indicate rationales for nonselection. *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* (PW's best of '99—held by 40 percent), *A Heart of Many Rooms* (religion—held by 55 percent), *The Web of Politics* (the democratic process—held by 15 percent), and *Gay New York* (academic—held by 65 percent) were all favorably reviewed, but the reviews indicate that the books are aimed at particular, specialized audiences. As is

evident, these four titles represent four different categories of works that may appeal to some segments of libraries' service populations more than others.

Discussion

The fact that most of the titles are held by at least 70 percent of the twenty libraries seems to indicate that public libraries (if we may be allowed to extrapolate for purposes of exposition) consider both quality and popularity when making selection decisions. The libraries examined in this study appear to have diverse collections and are open to publications in a variety of subject areas expressing a variety of positions. The universal holding of banned books provides some boost for that conclusion. Some of the individual titles that are widely held also provide evidence for an assumption of openness on the parts of libraries. For example, Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*, which presents challenging views on many topics, and Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, which offers a pro-evolution argument, are held by 95 percent and 100 percent, respectively, of the libraries. The almost universal holding of the titles intended mainly for an African-American audience also supports a claim that public libraries aim their collections at serving the public at large.

On the other hand, some titles on more specialized interests were not as widely held by these libraries. One of the favorably reviewed titles, held by only 55 percent of the libraries, focuses on Judaism and Jewish social and religious history. The other titles in the religion category (with broader holdings) tend to focus on Christianity. Some of the books with limited holdings deal with the subjects of sexuality and sexual preference. As was previously mentioned, two of these titles received favorable reviews in sources that are commonly consulted by book selectors in public libraries. The fact that these titles were not as widely selected for library holdings may indicate the assumptions that selectors had about the cultural makeup and perceived interests of community members. The number of titles in these subject areas is too small to draw general conclusions about public library selection, but they remind us to be alert to potential issues of personal bias in book selection.

As most librarians know, the complex act of book selection is guided by many factors. The library holdings that

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we examined included popular titles as well as those that have received recognition in particular subject areas, which indicates that both patron demand and critical acclaim are considered in the collection development process. Not only is the presence of reviews an influential element in selection and acquisition, as has been suggested by some researchers, but the content of reviews also appears to affect selection decisions. Although most libraries seem to offer materials on a wide variety of perspectives, those items selected less frequently despite favorable reviews tend to have a topic of specialized interest. It is vital that librarians ensure that materials are available to meet the needs and interests of all segments of their communities by guarding against personal bias in their assumptions about what topics might appeal to their patrons. A more comprehensive analysis of individual library collections may be helpful in determining what subject areas are lacking in particular libraries.

Future studies could focus on additional categories of published works to further investigate the breadth of public library collections. Also, libraries serving

smaller and larger communities could be studied in the future.

Public library book selectors have the power of determining what information will be made available to the members of their communities. Such decisions must be made on the basis of many factors in order to create a collection that will reflect the diversity of the community itself. ■

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References

1. Nora Rawlinson, "Give 'em What They Want," *Library Journal* 106 (Nov. 15, 1981): 2188-90.
2. Charles Robinson, "Can We Save the Public's Library?" *Library Journal* 114 (Sept. 1, 1989): 147-52.
3. Michael Sullivan, "Giving Them What They Want in Small Public Libraries," *Public Libraries* 39, no. 3 (May/June 2000): 154.
4. Murray L. Bob, "The Case for Quality Book Selection," *Library Journal* 121 (June 15, 1996): S2.
5. *Ibid.*, S1.
6. André Schiffrin, *The Business of Books* (London: Verso, 2000).
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10. "Religion Bestsellers," *Publishers Weekly* 247 (Apr. 17, 2000): 39; "Best-Selling Books," *Essence* 29, no. 3 (July 1998): 142; "Harry Potter Series Tops List of Most Challenged Books of 1999," Accessed Jan. 24, 2002, ALA, www.ala.org; Insert in *American Libraries* 31, no. 7 (August 2000); "Survivors: Best Books of the '90s," *Lingua Franca* 10, no. 7 (Oct. 2000): 14.
11. *Booklist* 94 (June 1 and 15, 1998): 1684.
12. *Library Journal* 119 (Aug. 1994): 100; *Times Literary Supplement* (March 10, 1995): 11.
13. Liam Hudson, "The Same but Different," *Times Literary Supplement*, June 1, 1990, p. 588.

Appendix A Survey Libraries

Akron, Ohio (Akron-Summit County Public Library)
 Albuquerque, New Mexico (Rio Grande Valley Library System)
 Baton Rouge, Louisiana (East Baton Rouge Parish Library)
 Birmingham, Alabama (Birmingham Public Library)
 Buffalo, New York (Buffalo and Erie County Public Library)
 Charlotte, North Carolina (Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County)
 Chattanooga, Tennessee (Chattanooga

Hamilton County Bicentennial Library)
 Cincinnati, Ohio (Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
 Grand Rapids, Michigan (Grand Rapids Public Library)
 Hartford, Connecticut (Hartford Public Library)
 Louisville, Kentucky (Louisville Free Public Library)
 Norfolk, Virginia (Norfolk Public Library)
 Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (Metropolitan Library System)

Omaha, Nebraska (Omaha Public Library)
 Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh)
 Portland, Oregon (Multnomah County Public Library)
 Sacramento, California (Sacramento Public Library)
 St. Paul, Minnesota (St. Paul Public Library)
 Springfield, Massachusetts (Springfield Library)
 Syracuse, New York (Onondaga County Public Library)

Appendix B Selected Titles

"PW's Best Books 99"
 Angier, Natalie. *Woman: An Intimate Geography*.
 Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Henry Louis Gates. *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African-American Experience*.
 Bagemihl, Bruce. *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*.

Bowden, Mark. *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War*.
 Carter-Scott, Cherie. *If Love Is a Game, These Are the Rules: Ten Rules for Finding Love and Creating Long-Lasting Authentic Relationships*.
 Cook, Blanche Wiesen. *Eleanor Roosevelt: 1933-1938*.
 Damasio, Antonio. *The Feeling of*

What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness.
 *Delaney, Samuel R. *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.
 Dillard, Annie. *For the Time Being*.
 Gibson, Gregory. *Gone Boy: A Walk-about*.
 Gleick, James. *Faster: The Acceleration of Just about Everything*.
 Goodall, Jane. *Reason for Hope: A*

Spiritual Journey.

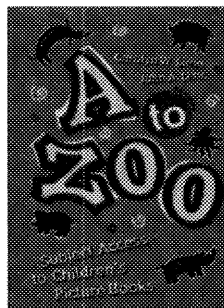
- Grunwald, Lisa and Stephen Adler. *Letters of the Century: America, 1900-1999.*
- Guralnick, Peter. *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley.*
- Holmes, Richard. *Coleridge: Darker Reflections (vol. 2).*
- Hardy, Sarah Blaffer. *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection.*
- Keegan, John. *The First World War.*
- Kissinger, Henry. *Years of Renewal.*
- Korda, Michael. *Another Life: A Memoir of Other People.*
- Kurlansky, Mark. *The Basque History of the World.*
- Lemann, Nicholas. *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy.*
- McCourt, Frank. *'Tis.*
- Said, Edward. *Out of Place: A Memoir.*
- Santos, John Phillip. *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation.*
- Strouse, Jean. *Morgan: American Financier.*
- Supplee, Curt. *Physics in the Twentieth Century.*
- Vernon, John. *A Book of Reasons: A Memoir.*
- Weiner, Jonathan. *Time, Love, Memory: A Great Biologist and His Search for the Origins of Behavior.*
- Welsome, Eileen. *The Plutonium Files: America's Secret Medical Experiments in the Cold War.*
- Wills, Garry. *A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government.*

Religion

- Cahill, Thomas. *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World before and after Jesus.*
- *Cymbala, Jim. *Fresh Faith: What Happens When Real Faith Ignites God's People.*
- De la Huerta, Christian. *Coming Out Spiritually: The Next Step.*
- *Hartman, David. *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices within Judaism.*
- Huyler, Stephan P. *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion.*
- *†Kurs, Katherine. *Searching for Your Soul: Writers of Many Faiths Share Their Personal Stories of Spiritual Discovery.*
- Price, Reynolds. *Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?*

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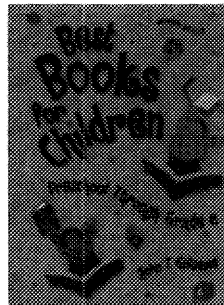
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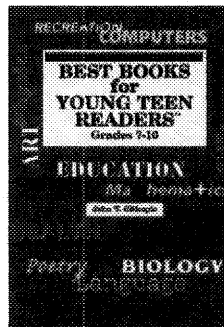
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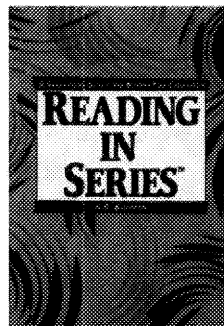
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- Winston, Diane. *Red-Hot and Righteous: The Urban Religion of the Salvation Army.*

Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1999 (in order of frequency)

- Rowling, J. K. Harry Potter series.
- Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. Alice series.
- Cormier, Robert. *The Chocolate War.*
- Blume, Judy. *Blubber.*
- Myers, Walter Dean. *Fallen Angels.*
- Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men.*
- Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.*
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale.*
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple.*
- Gutterson, David. *Snow Falling on Cedars.*

Democratic Process

- *†Cook, Rhodes. *How the Congress Gets Elected.*
- *Davis, Richard. *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System.*
- De Toqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America.*
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Democracy on Trial.*

Hightower, Jim. *If the Gods Had Meant Us to Vote, They Would Have Given Us Candidates.*

- *Hess, Stephen. *The Little Book of Campaign Etiquette: For Everyone with a Stake in Politicians and Journalists.*
- *Mitchell, Michele. *A New Kind of Party Animal: How the Young Are Tearing Up the American Political Landscape.*
- Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard A. Cloward. *Why Americans Don't Vote.*
- *†Richie, Robert. *Electing the People's House, 1998: A Collection of Statistical and Written Analyses.*

African-American Bestsellers

- Campbell, Bebe Moore. *Singing in the Comeback Choir.*
- Dickey, Eric Jerome. *Friends and Lovers.*
- Files, Lolita. *Scenes from a Sista.*
- Fraser, George. *Race for Success: The Ten Best Business Opportunities for Blacks in America.*
- Hunter, Karen and LL Cool J. *I Make My Own Rules.*
- McCall, Nathan. *What's Going On: Personal Essays.*
- McKinney-Whetstone, Diane. *Tempest Rising.*
- Morrison, Toni. *Paradise.*
- Vanzant, Iyanla. *In the Meantime: Finding Yourself and the Love You Want.*
- . *One Day My Soul Just Opened Up: Forty Days and Forty*

Nights towards Spiritual Strength and Personal Growth.

Best Academic Books of the '90s

- *Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.*
- *Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940.*
- Dennett, Daniel C. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life.*
- *†Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation.*
- *Levin, Carole. *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power.*
- *†Linkon, Sherry Lee, ed. *Teaching Working Class.*
- Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson.*
- *Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet.*
- Williams, Patricia J. *The Alchemy of Race and Rights.*
- Wood, Gordon S. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution.*

* Titles owned by less than 70 percent of the libraries.

† Titles with no reviews listed.

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