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The Role of Stories in Public Libraries

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### Abstract

Stories can be found in libraries in practically every department because humans have told stories since the beginning of time. Before there was written language, different cultures had been passing down, generation after generation, the same stories by word of mouth. With the invention of the printing press, stories became written and had the ability to be mass produced. Libraries have been instrumental in providing a place where stories can be gathered and preserved. The availability of the stories enables the public to connect with the experiences of the characters, gain knowledge from these stories, obtain moral guidance, and build their literacy from a young age.

### The Role of Stories in Public Libraries

Stories have been told and written in all cultures for centuries. These stories provide a basis for life lessons, whether they are moral examples or a learning tool. Robert Coles, author of *The Call of Stories*, makes readers aware that stories provide a fundamental tool for humanity. Coles' idea is accepted by librarians around the world who have recognized that stories are an essential part of public libraries because they connect with human experience, promote knowledge, provide moral guidance, and are literacy builders. To name a few examples, different types of stories include fiction and non-fiction, fables, tales, short stories, novellas, and satires.

In *The Call of Stories*, Coles gives an example of how stories intertwine with readers lives. The mention of the Mississippi River in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* takes Coles to memories of time spent with his mother's family in Sioux City, Iowa, which is located on the Missouri River. Just imagining the Mississippi River was enough for Coles to envision his grandfather standing on the banks of the Missouri, talking with him about what rivers empty into the ocean. Coles (1989), states he remembers his grandfather saying, "[t]hose rivers are the arteries of the American heartland" (p. 32). Picturing events or places that have occurred in reader's lives can connect them to what is taking place in the story they are reading.

Stories are loved by readers of all ages because they engage the reader's thoughts, as well as emotions. Stories can make readers imagine characters and places in books to fit with their real life experiences. As Coles (1989) explains, a novel can "insinuate itself into a remembering, daydreaming, wonderful life; can prompt laughter or tears; can inspire moments of amused reflection with respect to one's nature, accomplishments, flaws" (p. 128). Stories often have characters that we, as readers, can remember long after the book is read; the same can be said

about settings of books. As Kurkjian and Livingston (2007) indicate in their article, a “story can take us on a journey to imaginary or real, internal or external landscapes. Settings can help us vicariously experience times and places different from our own” (p. 494). This idea leads us back to engaging the reader’s thoughts and emotions. When readers visit the library, the tradition of picking out books which connect their imagination to stories is prevalent. Reading is an activity that endorses our imagination to become part of the story we are reading.

Readers are drawn to stories because of the knowledge each page holds. Stories are effective educators to school age persons, but also to readers of any age, because they can teach us so much about the world around us. Wass Van Ausdall (1994) tells us that “[s]tories of many cultures help students broaden their knowledge of the world and learn more about themselves in the process” (p. 32). Readers are made up of different religions, ethnic backgrounds, age groups, race, and gender, so it would seem appropriate for them to be learning from stories about their own culture, and also others.

Libraries should be considered sources of information because they house an infinite number of stories, as well as other examples of literature which teach us about other cultures and history. These pieces of literature help readers to understand the world around them. In Wass Van Ausdall’s (1994) article, she gives examples of students comparing characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* to real life events that are taking place in the world. One conclusion that the students garnered was a correlation from “Dr. Mannette’s 18-year secret imprisonment” and “the disappearance of children in Argentina” (p. 33). The ability to connect historical stories and current events provides an excellent way for readers to become involved with the story.

Coles (1989) also speaks about stories being “reservoirs of wisdom” (p. xii) from which his parents were drinking. The stories the parents ruminated upon can be compared with libraries

because they contain the knowledge which is available to obtain. Just as stories are essential to communicating life lessons and history, libraries are essential to assist with the preservation of such knowledge.

It is also known, as Rubin (2004) relates, that “[m]uch of what we think about the world is what we have second hand from others” (p. 56). Young readers use storybooks as a way of learning skills, the differences in people, and various conditions they can relate to their own lives. Older readers might use stories as a way to escape to a natural and relaxing learning environment in order to explore the human condition and give them knowledge of their own world.

Stories can also provide moral guidance to readers, because within the pages of some, ethical principles are woven into the text. Because storybooks are enjoyed by most children as an introduction to reading, the possibility of moral guidance is especially important for children to encounter. Aesop’s fables and Native American folklore are just two examples of stories which can help teach young readers important life lessons.

Good stories include characters that have all the strengths and weaknesses of real people and real life. Without these characters, readers would have nothing with which to identify. Moral themes that run throughout stories have qualities we can emulate, as they provide assistance explaining how to deal with situations in our own lives. As Coles (1989) relays, “[i]t is not a bad start for someone trying to find a good way to live this life: a person’s moral conduct responding to the moral imagination of writers and the moral imperative of fellow human beings in need” (p. 205). This is why stories are so important in providing moral guidance. Some stories can help provide the beginnings of our moral conduct for living the rest of our lives.

While fables have been perceived as providing moral guidance, popular novels were originally challenged in public libraries. As Rubin (2004) states, “concerns were raised by others that popular novels would lower morals” (p. 291). Even though most librarians did not like these novels on the shelves, they were needed to keep young people interested in coming to the libraries (Rubin, 2004). This shows us even though popular novels do not always have moral guidance, librarians have been continually concerned with the content which children are reading and learning.

Stories have also been supported as literacy builders because they entice young people to read. Picture and story books are relevant to children because they use pictures and language to engage the reader in characters, settings, and occurrences that relate to their level of knowledge. Bellon and Ogletree (2000) tell us that picture books “provide a meaningful context for establishing appropriate language and literacy skills” (p. 75). Even for young adults, stories are important because they read what is considered fun and relaxing for them, and, in turn, build on the knowledge they already have about grammar and the nature of language.

Providing services for children in libraries has become a challenge because of electronic resources and publishers who product mass quantities of literature. Librarians have had to gain a better understanding of what children need in order to build their literacy levels. Rubin (2004) explains that it “is important for the library to provide story hours and other children’s programming” (p. 386). Story books can help children with the skills necessary for continued advancement in reading.

Libraries are active in providing a relaxing environment to further young people’s interest in reading. For librarians, the act of reading is central to the place of libraries in society. Literacy is important for people to not only do daily tasks, but also to provide the skills required for

researching information and writing papers in school. As Rubin (2004) points out, “[i]f reading is considered critical, then the materials and services of libraries are likely to reflect this value” (p. 300). Libraries have many obstacles to overcome in order to keep books on the shelves with the onslaught of electronic resources, but even these still have to be read.

Stories have a way of staying with readers because of elements within the pages, whether that would be the characters, settings, or events that take place. Librarians have recognized the need for stories within libraries because some of the fundamental building blocks of early childhood learning take place with children reading. Libraries perform a special function for this learning because stories are entertaining for children to read and are found throughout these institutions.

The past, present, and future would be very bleak in terms of learning, exploring, and imagining if libraries were not free and open to the public. Libraries hold a wealth of information within their walls, even if those walls are extending to electronic resources. It is vital for libraries to continue to provide access to stories, because they offer so much diversity for young and adult readers. Stories will continue to be written, and it is up to the reader to gather as much information as they can from these stories to gain knowledge, visualize their own experiences, emulate moral situations, and build on their level of literacy.

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