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SELECTING BOOKS FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN



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This article stems from several requests by teachers and librarians, following our April article (Vol. 6 No. 2) for information about books that are popular with Aboriginal children who use the facilities of the Oodnadatta School library.

In our two and a half years of operating this library, we have gained a reasonably clear insight into the likes and dislikes of our readers. While the supply of lists is useful because, obviously, books successful in one library are usually popular in another library, the librarian must take into account the local factors which will probably influence the type of book the borrower will favour. While I don't wish to labour this point for the readers who may be well aware of these factors, there are several people

who have written to me, who would be interested.

Most factors are inter-related and readily fit the socio-economic situation of the borrower. For example, the Aboriginal people of Oodnadatta are very much fringe dwellers with respect to western society, although they easily outnumber the non-Aboriginal members of the community. Their mother tongue is a version of Pitjantjatjara (Yankuntjatjara), though most speak sufficient English to be able to communicate with Europeans. The school teaches only in English with an emphasis, in the lower classes, on standardizing grammar, using the Queensland Van Leer Foundation Language Project.

Let's look at the major features of the socio-economic background of these borrowers as an example of a procedure you could undertake in your library to develop an interest in books and subsequently stimulate the whole person's educational outlook and expectations. Primarily our customers are Aboriginal children who tend to like books featuring their dreamtime stories, cattle and sheep station life (American Westerns included), native fauna and dark-coloured children of any race. This is because, like anybody else, they can readily identify with the subject matter.

Secondly, our borrowers tend to be deficient in reading skills, due mainly to their multilingual backgrounds of Pitjantjatjara, Aboriginal English and Standard English; but also due to other social and economic factors, such as lack of motivation to do well at school, chronic illness, or even hunger. Thus our children prefer books with little text, or at least a controlled text, together with useful illustrations, to help put over the story.

Next, we prefer books that have a vivid presentation. Books that sell themselves because of excellence in the illustrations are a useful means of motivating an interest in books. This is especially so in our relatively depressed community with its problems of alcohol, unemployment, poor housing and bleak future. Colourful books help brighten up an otherwise dull existence.

Finally, if you have a policy which allows borrowers to take home material from the library, you have to be prepared to accept loss and damage as an integral part of the program and budget accordingly. Not that responsibility for the book should not be on the borrower's shoulders, but books are often not a normal household item in most camp situations, and protection of the book from the hazards of damage and loss are often beyond the control of the

individual borrower. If your budget cannot stand these losses - and at Oodnadatta, incidentally, these are less than those experienced by the State Library in Adelaide, due largely to the program developed by the library to instil in all the love for books - then maybe cheaper books are your answer. However, never sacrifice quality and your other criteria just for the sake of saving a few dollars.

By relating these above factors the librarian has clear guidelines on the type of material to place in the library. Clearly to fit all the criteria would mean a very limited selection of material but the teacher/librarian should endeavour to be reasonably selective according to the criteria laid down by the circumstances of the borrowers. By having a reasonable collection of suitable books for your potential borrowers, that you are fairly certain will be popular, you will soon find the demand for books generally will increase.

While Oodnadatta School still has a reasonable collection of books on subjects preferred by Aborigines, we have branched out into much broader fields of fiction and non-fiction. We still, however, take into account the basic fact that our readers are still developing their skills in reading; but we are working at that too.

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DEVELOPING A SET OF READERS FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

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Most teachers of Aboriginal children are well aware of the difficulties they have in identifying with the characters of most classroom readers. Obviously, publishing companies have to consider their market when preparing series of readers on a viable commercial basis, and hence the characters and their situations reflect the life-styles of the bulk of Australian citizens who live in large urban sprawls, and enjoy a reasonable standard of living which is reflected in their material possessions.

A different language background also makes the task of using the conventional classroom reader difficult. Children with an