



# INNOVATIONS

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## More than information: A popular exhibit shows the personal side of books and information

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The preparation of interesting, informative, eye-catching library exhibits is always a challenge. Especially in times of budgetary constraints and limited staff time, librarians need to find short-cuts for developing and organizing effective exhibits.

Lucy Caswell has described four possible goals for academic library exhibits: education, increased circulation, public relations, and collection development.<sup>1</sup> Jane Kemp discussed the application of exhibition strategy to smaller academic libraries which may not have extensive special collections to exhibit.<sup>2</sup>

At Millersville University we recently put together a very popular exhibit which met nearly all of the above criteria and much more. In recognition of 1987 as the Year of the Reader we planned a "My Favorite Book" exhibit. Early in the fall semester we distributed approximately 400 surveys to faculty and staff, asking them to name their "favorite" book and comment on their selection. We deliberately did not define the word "favorite," hoping to elicit some interesting and creative interpretations.

By mid-October we had received forty-five responses—most from faculty members—representing all of the academic units on campus. As might have been predicted, the English department had the most entries with six, but the history department and library were close behind with four entries each. Most surprising was the fact that there was not a single duplicate title among the

forty-five selections.

All but two of the respondents wrote comments, some of which were quite personal, almost confessional. Favorites included those books that had a significant impact on shaping an individual's philosophy of life or guiding someone in a career path, those books that were particularly meaningful at a specific stage of an individual's life, those that stand up to many readings and re-readings, and those books that provide an enjoyable escape from the realities of everyday life. Nearly half of the selected books were novels.

As expected, the Bible was represented among the entries. The biology professor who selected it wrote, "It may be deemed silly to cite the Bible as the most meaningful book one has read; nevertheless, I can do no other." Another professor of biology chose something a little more unpredictable—John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*—claiming that "these books started me out on a career as a marine biologist."

The history professor who named *Of Time and the River* as his favorite book admitted that he "can no longer read Thomas Wolfe without cringing." His reason for naming a book he would never want to read again was that it "simply bowled me over at a particularly impressionable time in my life." A mathematics professor recalled that he was "forced" to read Faulkner's "The Bear" in a freshman literature course. He confessed, after many readings, that the story still "virtually brings me to tears."

Examples of favorite children's books which contributed to the development of a philosophy of life included L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and Marguerite DeAngeli's *The Door in the Wall*. Other books,

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<sup>1</sup>Lucy S. Caswell, "Building a Strategy for Academic Library Exhibits," *C&RL News* 46 (April 1985): 165-68.

<sup>2</sup>Jane Kemp, "Creating Exhibits in the Smaller Academic Library," *C&RL News* 46 (July/August 1985): 344-46.

read for the first time very recently, were also named as having had a profound influence on an individual's way of thinking. Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* fit this category, as did Sohachi Yamaoka's 26-volume novel, *Tokugawa Ieyasu*. According to the professor of economics who selected the Japanese epic: "Compared to this major work of literature, *Don Quixote* and *War and Peace* are child's play."

Popular literature was also represented among the titles selected. Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October* and Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* were chosen as good recreational reading. A professor of industry and technology mentioned Ellis Peters' *The Raven in the Foregate*, confiding, "I save these until after grades are turned in each semester, then I go back in time to 12th-century England. Alternatively, I enjoy escaping into the 23d century with the *Star Trek* novels."

Such honest and provocative comments added life and warmth to our usually impersonal exhibit cases. So as not to lock up the library's copies of every work mentioned, we sought as many personal copies of books as possible. In this way, also, we collected quite a number of bright-colored paperbacks and books with dust jackets which helped to make the exhibit more attractive. Although some people were unwilling to part with their "favorite" books, even for a short time, most were very cooperative in lending materials for this project. Each book was exhibited with the individual's comments about it.

The exhibit was mounted in early December when students and faculty members, preoccupied by term papers and final exams, looked forward to vacation. Many who stopped to look at the exhibit

commented that they were going to read a particular book over the holidays, when they would have time. In addition, the exhibit attracted the attention of the outside community when the local newspaper featured an article about it (complete with photograph) on the back page. We prepared a list of included titles which could be picked up by passersby near the exhibit cases.

Although library staff members did all of the typing and physical layout of the exhibit, this was a relatively easy project to coordinate. Aside from the initial distribution of the survey, no research was required; most of the text was prepared by the participants; and the materials exhibited were not limited to holdings within the library's collections.

While our primary goal in undertaking this project was to stimulate students' interest in books and reading, faculty enthusiasm for our plans was overwhelming. Those who participated encouraged their colleagues and students to visit the library, specifically to view the exhibit. Many who did not participate this time have asked when we are planning our next "My Favorite Book" exhibit. Others have suggested we poll students regarding their favorite books and one philosophy professor has already sent unsolicited information on his least favorite book.

Admittedly, we had asked a difficult, if not impossible, question. The comments we received, however, reflected the thoughtfulness with which people approached the assignment, sharing their feelings and personal experiences about something that was important and meaningful to them. What came through most clearly in the exhibit was the fact that books are much more than a means of transmitting information.

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## An automated finding aid for special collections

**By Lucy Shelton Caswell**

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You may recognize this common reference desk scenario: The caller has an urgent request, "The song is from an old movie and I think the words are something like 'You must remember this, a kiss is still a kiss...' Do you have the sheet music?" An alternate scene: The researcher is preparing a book

on the centennial of the Statue of Liberty. He asks to see all the editorial cartoons in the collection which depict this image. A third request: The professor stops by to say that her class needs to see several examples of historic photographs and she especially needs to have three or four cyanotypes on