

# Getting to know your subject specialty

## Add a little romance (literature) to your life

by Heather E. Ward

When I began work as a subject specialist in the Romance languages and history I had a master's degree in history, so I felt much more confident in my knowledge of the latter than the former. Having minored in French as an undergraduate and having studied Latin in graduate school, I had a grounding in the Romance languages, but I knew little of the literature. My subject assignment included the literatures not only of France, Spain and Italy, but also those of other Spanish- and French-speaking countries. (One small blessing was that our collection focused on the three major Romance languages. So, at least I wasn't responsible for selecting Portuguese and Romanian titles, as well.) I needed to get to know the subject area, the collection, and patron expectations and needs, but where to begin?

I searched the library literature for relevant articles hoping to find a discussion of practical methods to use in order to become proficient in an unfamiliar subject area, literary or otherwise. I found that very little general information had been published on the topic, so I struck out on my own. As I studied these areas further, I realized that the methods I had used might be of interest to other librarians new to Romance literatures or to collection development in general. And so, this article was born.

### The starting point

I began by meeting with other University of Oregon librarians with experience in collection de-

velopment and the humanities to learn about their approaches to selection and about the sources they used to stay up-to-date in their subject specialties. I bookmarked the Web sites of library vendors my library used, so that I could easily find out whether a title was available and could pass the most accurate information on to our acquisitions department when ordering. I also spoke with individual professors and explored the Romance languages department Web pages to find out about the curriculum and specific faculty interests. I requested graduate student reading lists and syllabi from the professors and searched the library catalog for the titles listed. But to gain a better understanding of my collection areas I needed a foundation in the literature. Finding a general overview of national and regional literatures in the Romance languages provided an excellent starting point.

Regional or literary encyclopedias often include articles that describe the whole body of a national literature. They provide a base of knowledge to build on such as names of authors, titles, and historical themes, as well as bibliographies for further reading. Some of them also provide a timeline of literature that can help deepen your understanding of literary development for that region or language. Keeping a file with copies of these articles for future reference is a good idea. Among the sources I used were the *Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*, which is divided into chapters on literature by country or region, the *Cambridge En-*

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*cyclopedia of Latin America & the Caribbean* for extensive articles on Spanish American and French Caribbean literatures, and *The Canadian Encyclopedia* for a brief review of Canadian literature in French. Don't limit yourself to literary encyclopedias, historical and cultural dictionaries frequently include articles on literature as well.

Next, an informal assessment of the collection is a good way to familiarize yourself with your library's holdings. To do this, choose a specific area on which to concentrate. I chose to begin with Latin American literature because that is a strong focus in our Spanish department. Ask other librarians and search the literature for suggestions to find a bibliography of important works or core titles in the selected area. Your own reference collection is a rich source of information and there may be authoritative Web sources as well.<sup>1</sup>

Not every bibliography was created equal, but you have to start somewhere. Use your judgment. You might start with the bibliographies gleaned from the encyclopedia articles before moving on to those with more comprehensive coverage. The standard *Books for College Libraries (BCL)* is now almost 15 years old, so you will not find the latest literature or current literary themes among its pages. Literary scholars, however, do not limit their research to the most recent books and may be interested in titles that have been added to your collection over time. Therefore *BCL* can be an appropriate measure with which to compare the overall strength of your collection. In early 2002 Best Books, Inc. published *Best Books for University Libraries*, which sounds similar to *BCL*, but I have not examined a copy or found a review of it in order to be able to recommend it.

Search your library catalog to compare your holdings with the bibliography. You can do this comprehensively or by searching a sample of entries. Not only will this process familiarize you with your holdings, but it will also highlight the strengths and gaps in your collection. In this way, the names of major authors and literary movements will take root, as well.

If you wish to fill in gaps and you are using an older bibliography to gauge your collection, many of the titles may be out of print. The web has made it much easier to find out-of-print books with sites such as AddALL that allow you to search multiple book dealers' inventories simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, locating foreign language books is still more challenging than locating English language materials. One reason is that the smaller print runs produced in many countries result in

fewer available copies on the market in the first place. In addition, international used booksellers still have a smaller online presence than American book dealers have.

If you are unable to find an out-of-print title, a more recent imprint may serve in its place. Search *Books In Print* and WorldCat by author and/or title to identify reprinted or revised editions of classic works. If WorldCat only retrieves records for the out-of-print edition of the work, search by the same subject heading to find recent publications that provide similar coverage. Don't forget to speak to colleagues with similar subject responsibilities at other libraries. Library discussion lists can be a good place to post such a query—search ACRL's Web pages for a section relevant to your subject specialty.<sup>3</sup>

Another option is to start with a smaller project, such as searching your catalog for major authors and their works. The phrase "major authors" is somewhat subjective, but a writer's name appearing again and again in different bibliographies is a good sign that scholars consider him or her important and that your patrons will expect to find these works in your library. To learn about priorities specific to your collection, review the list of classes being taught on individual authors and find out whether your faculty members specialize in one particular author or school of literature.

Sometimes reference works will include a convenient list of major authors, such as the one I used from *Latin American Writers*. Cataloging rules have changed over the years, limiting an author search by the title "works" may not always meet with success. In order to search a catalog for complete works it is useful to know the equivalent phrase in the original language in which the author wrote (e.g., *obras completas*, *oeuvres complètes*, *opera completa*).

As you search for works in the library catalog, open a second window in your browser and look up the authors in a general encyclopedia such as *Britannica Online* or literary reference work such as *Contemporary Authors*. This gives a nice brief profile of each person, the basic background on their period and influence, and sometimes a list of the author's works. It can help you draw the connection between your collection and the body of literature itself. Of course other literary guides, such as the *Oxford Companion* series or the *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*, serve a similar purpose and, by using these sources, you get to know your print reference collection. An electronic source can help if you are short on time.

A fun part of collection development is simply browsing books. Browsing familiarizes you with current authors and topics, with faculty interests and curricula, and with the types of books produced by different publishers. This information will help you make more informed selection decisions. Start by browsing new textbooks in the university bookstore as well as books that arrive on approval plans or on the “new book” shelves at your library.

In addition to their use as a current awareness tool through browsing, approval plans that closely reflect your collection needs can also help you formulate a collection development policy in your subject area. If such a policy already exists for your area, read it—this will help you understand the scope of your collection and set parameters for selection decisions. If a policy has not been written or recently updated, reviewing the approval plan and consulting with faculty members will help you articulate collecting priorities.

In meeting with faculty members, the first question is usually about their specific areas of research, but it is also useful to delve into current and upcoming classes or curriculum changes so that you can plan ahead and minimize last-minute rush orders. They will have more confidence in your abilities if you think to order relevant materials before they ask for them. Faculty members can also be helpful in suggesting the names of other universities with strong collections in their specialty areas. You can follow up by checking out the new acquisitions at these libraries or by comparing your holdings to those of the suggested collection using WorldCat.<sup>4</sup> Searching a particularly strong collection by subject allows a quick, if not comprehensive, way to assess your collection against that of another library.

If you have the time, audit a class or attend an institute or workshop to further strengthen your subject knowledge and collection skills. Taking an intensive Spanish class gave me needed reading skills and allowed me to get to know some of the departmental faculty members better. I also attended a Collection Development and Management Institute presented by the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS), which not only familiarized me with current collection issues, but also helped me connect with other librarians with similar responsibilities. I have picked up information about specific resources by taking part in the Western European Studies Section (WESS) Romance Languages list, as well.

Much of what I have learned about my subject area and about collecting in general has been from communicating with other librarians and faculty members directly.

I am fortunate in having complementary responsibilities. Reference work and instruction have strengthened my collection development skills and vice versa. I have learned a lot by using the reference collection in assisting patrons, preparing to teach classes, and creating research guides. Often, working on a patron's question has brought up an issue that has led me to investigate an area of literature I had not researched before. A patron once asked me a question about Provençale literature that led me to browse several previously unfamiliar reference books. The next time I had a question on the subject, I knew right where to begin. Each interaction leads me to use different resources, and it is gratifying to apply this new knowledge when the subject is raised again.

Building my subject knowledge has been a gradual process, but the work has paid off through good faculty relations and more self-confidence in my liaison work and selection skills. It has helped to build this study into my professional goals so I can look back and see my progress. As I become comfortable with one subject, I find that there are always new ones to explore. After all, part of the appeal of working in libraries is that we are encouraged to pursue our never-ending quest for new knowledge.

## Notes

1. For an excellent list of core titles in French Canadian literature. Bernard Andrès, *La Littérature Québécoise en 600 Titres*, 9 September 1996, <http://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/clicnet/litterature/litterature.quebecoise/andres.sommaire.html> (15 July 2002).
2. *AddALL: Used and Out of Print Search*, <http://www.addall.com/Used/> (15 July 2002).
3. *ACRL Sections*, 1 May 2002, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/secthp.html> (15 July 2002).
4. The FirstSearch interface of WorldCat indicates whether your library owns a book. You can also limit your search by the library code—provided by WorldCat—of the other university. Thus you can see what titles the other library owns on a certain topic and whether your library owns a copy, too. Multiple records for one title can throw off your results, but it is still a useful tool. ■



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