

Jeffrey Makala and Rebecca Gettys

Making exhibits out of nothing at all

Special collections, information literacy, and a curious incident in the library

To create a special collections exhibition, a curator traditionally begins either with a group of materials or a topical idea that is then explored, refined, and edited. Exhibits can highlight new or unique items, showcase collections, or explore an idea or subject with depth and rigor, depending upon the occasion. In our rare book and special collections exhibits, we create introductory text, item labels, and display text that together form an argument demonstrating why the items included in the exhibit are interesting, should be known (or better known), and, ideally, used by the students, faculty, and library supporters who are our main audiences.

So what happens, then, when one is asked to create an entire exhibit around a newly published book by a first-time novelist? This was the situation we were confronted with last summer as we prepared for the University of South Carolina's (USC) First-Year Reading Experience at the beginning of the fall semester. All incoming students at USC are required to read the same book over the summer, part of an increasingly popular trend at universities across the country. During their first week on campus at the end of August, all new students and a group of faculty members participate in a series of events about the book, together and in smaller discussion groups.

In previous years, the works chosen were primarily a series of literary classics by William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, and *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, each of which was the subject of an exhibit drawing on the resources of Rare Books and Special Collections. For Fall

2005, the book chosen was Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, a novel published in 2003. Haddon's book, which was first sold in the United Kingdom as both a young adult novel and an adult trade fiction title, is a first-person account of a 14-year-old English boy with Asperger's Syndrome and his experiences discovering the killer of his neighbor's dog. A series of events and adventures follow where he learns some startling news about his own family.

The challenge

To create a corresponding library exhibit that would thoroughly explore the book, clearly a different approach was needed. Fortunately (for us), Haddon had written several children's books and worked for a time as a freelance illustrator for British periodicals. Examples of this earlier work could be found and included, but the bulk of the exhibit still needed to be fleshed out.

Beyond the book itself (we purchased both states of the first edition) and some reviews, where else could one turn for exhibit fodder? Were there any intellectual debates surrounding the book's publication, any backstory, or other interesting publication history? Was there a way to draw upon other resources in Rare Books and Special Collections to round out the

Jeffrey Makala is assistant librarian in rare books and special collections, e-mail: makalaj@gwm.sc.edu, and Rebecca Gettys is reference librarian, e-mail: gettysr@gwm.sc.edu, in the Thomas Cooper Library at the University of South Carolina

© 2006 Jeffrey Makala and Rebecca Gettys

story? And, more importantly, how could one find supporting material to fill six exhibit cases and still remain on topic in an interesting way? The exhibit's target audience, which was more narrow than usual for us, had to be carefully considered, as well. For incoming students, how could we make the exhibit relevant and useful, above all else?

Incorporating information literacy

Seeing an opportunity to foster information literacy skills, we decided to take a topical approach and use the exhibit as a way to introduce students to the university libraries and their holdings. Using key themes from the book that ranged across several disciplines, we ended up creating an exhibit centered on Haddon's novel that attempted to answer the following big question: Where would I turn (and what might I find) if I had to begin researching all of these topics in the library?

This tactic involved teaming up with other departments and libraries on campus to fully explore the major concepts found in the book. Each main topic was researched using a variety of sources from the library system: reference books, monographs, journal articles, maps, printouts from electronic databases, and microfilm. Each main topic was housed in a separate exhibit case or upright panel, and the case label included a photo of the library or department where the sources in it could be found: Science Library, Math Library, Reference Department, Government Information, Maps, Rare Books and Special Collections. While we have often worked with our colleagues to include loaned maps, government documents, and local and state history in our exhibits, this large group effort collaborating across the library system was a first for us.

Each case or panel reflected this wide-ranging collaboration. For example, the Science Library provided information on Asperger's Syndrome and supplied materials from its print collection along with screenshots from relevant electronic databases. The Government Information section of the library filled an entire case with statistical data on children's health and family divorce rates in the United States

and United Kingdom, together with congressional hearing transcripts on Autism Spectrum disorders. The Map Library provided us with maps of the London Underground and tourist maps tracing the route the main character took from his home in Swindon to his mother's flat in London. The Reference Department filled a case highlighting print and electronic resources for locating biographical and critical information on Haddon's work and pointed out incorrect information from several Web sites. The Math Library supplied information on prime numbers and number theory, one of the major themes in the novel.

University of South Carolina dissertations and theses from Education, Psychology, and Speech Pathology showed a range of recent autism scholarship being done locally. Items from Special Collections included Arthur Conan Doyle editions, bibliographies, and the first appearance of the Sherlock Holmes story (*The Adventure of Silver Blaze*) where a critical line of dialogue gave Haddon his novel's title. The wide spectrum of the general print collection was highlighted as well with materials addressing popular culture references throughout the novel.

Familiarizing the students

Students reading *The Curious Incident* as part of their First-Year Reading Experience could then use their familiarity with the novel when viewing the exhibit. The exhibit allowed them to better understand the types of resources available in the university libraries and begin to see how they could explore a topic from many varied sources and disciplines in their future college coursework. Many of the collections and library locations would not be immediately familiar to incoming students, nor would they be aware of the vast variety of resources available to them when investigating topics for their own research. By providing a description of the collection along with a photo of the department itself on the exhibit label, students were given a visual cue to locations and hopefully a more lasting introduction to the university libraries. Ultimately, we think the exhibit succeeded

in providing students with a framework for developing information literacy skills. At the very least, we helped familiarize them with the variety, location, and types of resources offered by the university libraries.

The exhibit was well-received, and we created an exhibit with a similar framework for this

year's book Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Could Cure the World*. It touched on contemporary public health education, Haitian history, medical services to the poor, the history of medical missionaries, and global development, among other topics. //

(*"A librarian's awareness," cont. from page 674*)

advice to librarians about ways that they could work most effectively with college/university administration. The advice I would give would be:

first, the obvious . . . realize that no two college/university administrations or administrators are the same, and

second, align the library with institutional goals. (No, I don't mean find ways to align your goals to the university/college goals. I mean set the library goals as an outgrowth of the campus goals.)

So, why the title "The Librarian's Awareness"?

Well, the simple answer is that I believe that librarians are uniquely prepared to be successful with university/college administrations. We have an awareness that few others on campus have, yet, we haven't tapped into it fully. Why? Perhaps librarians feel the pressure to make sure they give every ounce of attention they can get to the library. Perhaps it's that we just get too caught up in our own issues. Perhaps it's our sense of needing to position ourselves rather than the library. My experience says the more I talk about the issues that are important to my peers around me and to those higher in the organization than me, the more likely they are to listen to and support my issues.

Writing this has given me the chance to think about academic libraries and academic librarians. It seems a bit presumptuous of me to be providing advice to anyone on this topic. I haven't worked in an academic library for five years. I'm also over 50, which means I need to start questioning if I'm assuming that too many of the things I learned years ago

still apply. Or if it's time for me to let someone with new answers try to address the old questions. Nevertheless, I offer the above in good faith and with good intentions.

Finally, I used to roll my eyes when university administrators would talk with library staff and indicate how they loved libraries, loved to read, and how both changed their lives. I now know that many of them meant it. And I feel tempted to say the same thing. Because I do love libraries. I do love to read. And libraries and reading have transformed my life from being a farmboy in central Illinois to being a very fulfilled staff member at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. //

**BOOKS & PERIODICALS
ONLINE**

law, business & news publications
editor • Christine Nabari

**JUST A
CLICK
AWAY!**

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE YOU
TO FIND YOUR SOURCES ONLINE?

- 14,700+ sources online
- 41,500+ fulltext
- An authoritative, comprehensive one stop directory at your fingertips

AVAILABLE ONLINE AT
www.BooksandPeriodicals.com

FULLTEXT • ABSTRACTS • CITATIONS

LIBRARY TECHNOLOGY ALLIANCE, INC.
300 WASHINGTON AVENUE
HAWAII, HI 96814
808 955 2100

LIBRARY TECHNOLOGY ALLIANCE, LTD.
PO BOX 1000
PORTLAND, OR 97208