

## Bookstore/Library Comparison Paper

For this assignment, I visited the Seattle Public Library's University Branch and the University Bookstore. I chose these locations primarily because of their geographical convenience; I would have gone to All for Kids if I could, but I have no car, and it is all but impossible to get to the University Village by bus from the direction of Ballard.

### ***Description***

I stopped by the library in the mid-morning on a Friday, when the children's section was bustling with both children and parents. Luckily the children were occupied with storytelling (the story was *Where the Wild Things Are*; I listened in pleasure as well), so I had the opportunity to examine the shelves around the walls without tripping over small bodies at every step. The children's area at the University Branch is around a wall to the right of the entrance, fitted into a corner but taking up most of the space in its room. Young-adult, non-fiction, and biography sections curl timidly around the edges of the crowded children's section. Low bookcases with deep shelves for over-sized picture books surround a central area with chairs and a child-sized table. Taller shelves filled with chapter books line the walls behind. Next to the entrance to the room is a small section for new children's books, then videos, then audio books. Nearby are CDs and easy readers. I assume that picture books lined the low bookshelves on the inside of the central space, but I was not able to get close enough to see what they were, because of story-time. Holiday-related and Christmas-related picture books took up two sections behind the low bookcases, and folk and fairy tales were also segregated. Parenting books also lined the back of one of the low bookcases, on the non-fiction side.

The University Bookstore's children's section could not have been more different. Brightly colored and modern, it sprawled lengthwise along most of the western wall on the store's upper floor. As many books as possible were aesthetically laid out on tables and displays or positioned face-out on shelves. I noticed special displays for Caldecott winners as well as for children's music and poetry, coloring books, and paper dolls. All the books were neatly arranged, shiny, and new. There was a child-sized table with matching chairs in a corner near the Caldecott winners, but there were no children around, and no adults either. The displays were beautiful but sterile and obviously not

meant to be disturbed by children. It looked to me like a display for adults buying books for children.

The floor layout of the University Bookstore and of the library reflect their different purposes. The low shelves in the library formed a friendly, squarish rectangle around a central story-telling space, whereas in the bookstore, the shelves and other furniture re-partitioned a long rectangle of floor into separate compartments. The bookstore not only has more space but uses its layout to fit in as many bookshelves and therefore as many attractive, front-facing books as possible. The library, in its small historical building, has a limited amount of space to dedicate to a children's area with two purposes: book storage/presentation and children's gathering place. The library could hold more books and display them more attractively if the open area held bookshelves instead, but the demands of shelf space must be balanced against the value of story-time and other services which are made possible by the open children's space. Therefore, books are crammed as well as they will fit into the surrounding bookshelves, and only a few books are displayed attractively on top of the standing shelves.

The books themselves are another difference. The bookstore's volumes are bright, shiny, and attractive, whereas all but the newest of the library's holdings are battered and well-loved. In contrast to the brightly aesthetic bookstore displays, the library is tired and dreary.

There were either one or two adult staff in the children's area of the library while I was there, and they were fully occupied the whole time, so I was unable to ask them about their collection. The bookstore had one staff person at an information desk in the center of the children's section, but my impression was that it was a general information desk rather than children-specific.

### ***Analysis***

The library could learn something from the bookstore's attractive displays. Although the library cannot hope to match the freshness and crispness of the bookstore's wares, it could choose as many books as possible to display front-out, either on top of bookcases or in the space at the right hand of many of the shelves. A book whose cover can be seen is much more inviting and attractive than the same book seen spine-on, especially with children's picture books, many of whose spines are half an inch wide or less. The purpose of these displays would be to draw readers to that section of bookshelf and

hopefully lead them to inspect spine-out books as well. For example, a particularly beautifully-illustrated folk tale, placed face-out, might make the whole folk and fairy-tale section look more interesting and inviting.

The bookstore is undoubtedly more brilliantly attractive than the dusty old library which was built in 1910 and has seemingly not been modernized since then. The colorful cutouts and other decorations that grace most children's spaces are absent, although I hesitate to call their absence "conspicuous" since it is only with reflection that I note, in my memory, the bare white walls of the library. On the other hand, the bare space which could be covered with posters is five or six feet off the floor, much too high for a child to see without craning its head, so perhaps the omission was intentional and a "design feature" rather than a bug.

I hesitate to say that the library should attempt to mimic the bookstore's bright and decorated appearance, perhaps because I have some nostalgia in my heart for the dog-ears, worn corners, and century-old bookcases of my childhood library experiences. To me, a too-attractive library looks like the books are only for display and no one is checking them out. On the other hand, an active children's program will soon destroy the serenity of any book display.

Unfortunately, this leads to the next problem with attempting to create attractive displays. Once you display a book, it will be more visible and more attractive, and kids will want to read it. Great, that was the purpose! But when the first kid comes along and picks the book off the shelf, that display space will now be vacant, and someone will need to choose another book to put in its place. If displaying books is successful in getting kids to read them, there will be a constant flow of books through the displays. While picking a fun-looking book from the shelf and putting it in a stand might not be more than ten seconds' work, it is yet another task on the children's librarians' plates and yet another thing to remember to do. As such, it might go neglected in favor of more important and personal services such as story-time, which is perhaps the reason that there are not currently more displays.

The University Bookstore appeared to have more "thematic" sections of books than the library. While the library had a section for holiday and Christmas books and another for folk and fairy tales, the bookstore had Caldecott winners in one corner and poetry on one whole side of a bookshelf, just to name a couple. I understand the severe limitations of space, but it might be desirable and useful to designate one shelf for

special, thematic collections of books that could be periodically rotated to another theme or topic. This would be a lot of work for library staff, not only in selecting and rearranging books but in labeling them somehow, so that they would get reshelfed in the appropriate place, but I believe that it would also be interesting for kids to see familiar books in new and meaningful arrangements. If the library doesn't have room to create additional permanent subdivisions, this could be the next-best solution.

### ***Conclusion***

The University Bookstore and the SPL's University Branch are similar in that they contain and display children's books in order to make them available to customers/patrons. However, their purposes are different; whereas the bookstore's goal is to make a one-time sale, the library aims to create interested and intelligent readers through a variety of services and media, including but not limited to traditional books. This goal is much more complex and leads to the allocation of free space for use in story-time and other activities—a worthy choice but one which decreases the amount of space available for holding books. Unlike the bookstore, the library is constantly having to balance one part of its mission against another, in order to provide its patrons with the best service possible.